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THE PROMISING FUTURE OF CLASS ANALYSIS: A RESPONSE TO RECENT CRITIQUES

JOHN H. GOLDTHORPE AND GORDON MARSHALL

Abstract Class analysis has recently been criticised from a variety of standpoints. In this paper we argue that much of this criticism is misplaced and that, as a research programme, the promise of class analysis is far from exhausted. The first part of the paper clarifies the nature and purpose of class analysis, as we would understand it, and in particular distinguishes it from the class analysis of Marxist sociology. The second part then makes the case for the continuing relevance of class analysis, in our conception of it, by reviewing findings from three central areas of current research.

Keywords: class analysis, social mobility, education, politics.

Introduction

What are the prospects for class analysis? Of late, the enterprise has been widely dismissed as unconvincing and unproductive by prominent critics writing from a variety of different standpoints. Our own work has been a frequent target. In the present paper, however, our primary aim is not to reply to such charges on our own behalf, but rather to uphold the kind of class analysis that our work can be taken to represent – since it is our contention that its promise is far from exhausted.

The paper comprises two parts. In the first, we seek to clarify the nature and purpose of class analysis as we would understand it, and in particular to distinguish it from the class analysis of Marxist sociology. This is necessary because some critics – including Hindess (1987), Holton and Turner (1989), and Sørensen (1991) – have not, in our view, made this distinction adequately, while others, most notably Pahl (1989), have failed to make it at all. In addition, several instances can be noted of authors who, having lost faith in the Marxist class analysis that had once commanded their allegiance, or at least sympathy, now find evident difficulty in envisaging any other kind. Gorz (1982), Hobsbawm (1981), Bauman (1982), Lukes (1984), and Offe (1985) are obvious examples.

In the second part of the paper we then go on to make the case for the continuing relevance of class analysis, in our own conception of it, by reviewing findings from three central areas of current research. Here we seek to take issue more specifically with the assertions made by Pahl (1989:710) that, in modern societies, ‘class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology’, and by Holton and Turner (1989:196) that we are now ‘in a situation where the persistence of the class idiom is explicable more in terms of the metaphorical character of class rhetoric than any clear intellectual persuasiveness.’

Class Analysis as a Research Programme

Class analysis, in our sense, has as its central concern the study of relationships among class structures, class mobility, class-based inequalities, and class-based action. More specifically, it explores the interconnections between positions defined by employment relations in labour markets and production units in different sectors of national economies; the processes through which individuals and families are distributed and redistributed among these positions over time; and the consequences thereof for their life-chances and for the social identities that they adopt and the social values and interests that they pursue. Understood in this way, class analysis does not entail a commitment to any particular theory of class but, rather, to a *research programme* – in, broadly, the sense of Lakatos (1970) – within which different, and indeed rival, theories may be formulated and then assessed in terms of their heuristic and explanatory performance.

It may be asked, and critics have indeed done so (see, for example, Holton and Turner 1989:173), why such a programme should be pursued in the first place. We would think the answer obvious enough. The programme is attractive in that it represents a specific way of investigating interconnections of the kind that have always engaged the sociological imagination: that is, between historically formed macrosocial structures, on the one hand, and, on the other, the everyday experience of individuals within their particular social milieux, together with the patterns of action that follow from this experience. These are precisely the sort of interconnections that, in Wright Mills' (1959) words, allow one to relate biography to history and 'personal troubles' to 'public issues'. From an analytical standpoint, the programme also promises economy of explanation: the ability to use a few well-defined concepts such as class position, class origins, class mobility or immobility, in order to explain a good deal both of what happens, or does not happen, to individuals across different aspects of their social lives and of how they subsequently respond.

But *a priori* there is only attraction and promise. Whether the research programme of class analysis proves worthwhile – is progressive rather than degenerative – must be decided by the results it produces. No *assumption* of the pre-eminence of class is involved. To the contrary, it is integral to the research programme that specific consideration should also be given to theories holding that class relations are in fact of diminishing importance for life-chances and social action or that other relations and attributes – defined, for example, by income or consumption, status or lifestyle, ethnicity or gender – are, or are becoming, of greater consequence.

It ought to be readily apparent that class analysis, thus conceived, differs significantly from the class analysis of Marxist sociology. Nevertheless, in polemicalising against – or despairing of – the latter, several critics have evidently supposed that they were providing the quietus of class analysis *tout court*. Before proceeding further, therefore, we think it important to spell out

four elements, in particular, that class analysis as we would understand it does *not* entail – although they are found in most Marxist versions.

First, our conception of class analysis entails no theory of history according to which class conflict serves as the engine of social change, so that at the crisis point of successive developmental stages a particular class (under capitalism the working class) takes on its ‘mission’ of transforming society through revolutionary action.¹ In fact, among those sociologists who have been actively engaged in what we would regard as the research programme of class analysis,² a strong opposition to all such historicism, whether of a Marxist or a liberal inspiration, can be found (see, for example, Goldthorpe 1971, 1979, 1992; Korpi 1978; Marshall *et al.* 1988:ch. 10; Esping-Andersen 1990:ch. 1; Haller 1990). The emphasis is, rather, on the diversity of the developmental paths that nations have followed to modernity and on the very variable – because essentially contingent – nature of the part played in this respect by class formation and action.

Secondly, class analysis as we understand it implies no theory of class exploitation, according to which all class relations must be necessarily and exclusively antagonistic, and from which the objective basis for a ‘critical’ economics and sociology can be directly obtained. Although exponents of class analysis in our sense would certainly see conflict as being inherent within class relations, this does not require them to adhere to a labour theory of value, or indeed any other doctrine entailing exploitation as understood in Marxist discourse. Nor must they suppose, as is suggested by Sørensen (1991:73), that what is to the advantage of one class must *always* and *entirely* be to the disadvantage of another. In fact, much interest has of late centred on theoretical discussion of the conditions under which class relations may be better understood as a positive-sum (or negative-sum) rather than as a simple zero-sum game. And this interest has then been reflected in substantive studies in a concern with the part that may be played by ‘class compromises’ in, for example, labour relations or the development of national political economies and welfare states (*cf.* the papers collected in Goldthorpe (ed.) 1984).

Furthermore, arguments advanced from a liberal standpoint, whether by functionalist sociologists or neo-classical economists, to the effect that class inequalities are, through various mechanisms, conducive to the greater welfare of all would be seen as calling for empirical investigation rather than mere ideological rejection. And, in turn, the results of such investigation would be recognised as directly relevant to any moral evaluation of class inequalities that might be made. In this regard, the influence of Marxist theories of exploitation would be surely far less than that of the ‘difference principle’, as formulated by Rawls (1972).³

Thirdly, the version of class analysis that we would endorse takes in no theory of class-based collective action, according to which individuals holding similar positions within the class structure will thereby automatically develop a shared consciousness of their situation and will, in turn, be prompted to act together in the pursuit of their common class interests. In fact, awareness of developments in the general theory of collective action, from the time of

Olson's (1965) crucial study onwards, has led those engaged in class analysis as a research programme effectively to reverse the traditional Marxist perspective. Instead of expecting class-based collective action to occur (and then having to resort to 'false consciousness' arguments when it does not), they have concentrated on establishing the quite special conditions that must apply before such action can be thought probable – because rational for the individuals concerned – *even where* shared interests are in fact recognised. Thus, when Pahl (1989:711) represents class analysts as mindlessly repeating the 'mantra' of 'structure-consciousness-agency', with the links in the chain being 'rarely seen as problematic', this is in fact essentially the opposite of what has happened over the last decade or more.

In turn, we may add, the models of class-based collective action with which critics such as Pahl or Holton and Turner operate are ones that recent work has largely transcended: that is, either the revolutionary 'storming-of-the-Winter-Palace' model, or the *gemeinschaftlich* model of working-class action based on the local solidarities of workplace or community. If a paradigm case of collective class action for 'post-Olson' analysis were to be given, it would surely have to be that of working classes under neo-corporatist political economies – for example the Swedish – which takes on a quite different, and indeed contrasting, character. Essentially, such action (or, some might wish to say, inaction) consists in workers accepting the participation of their union confederations in governmental policies of wage regulation, and in showing a class-wide solidarity by *abstaining* from the use of localised or sectional bargaining power, so that their leaders may better pursue the more generalised working-class goals of full employment and redistributive social welfare policies, as a *quid pro quo* for wage restraint (see Pizzorno 1978; Stephens 1979; Korpi 1983; Goldthorpe 1984; Scharpf 1984). From this new standpoint, then, the consciousness-agency link at least is radically rethought: class consciousness, to quote Elster's (1985:347) formulation, is 'the ability to overcome the free-rider problem in realising class interests.'

Finally, class analysis as we understand it does not embrace a reductionist theory of political action – collective or individual – according to which such action can be understood simply as the unmediated expression of class relations and the pursuit of structurally-given class interests. At the same time as they have come to a much changed understanding of the consciousness-agency link, so also have many class analysts sought to move to a new view of the relationship between consciousness (or at least consciousness of interests) and structure, again under the influence of more general theoretical developments (see, for example, Berger (ed.) 1981). What has been rejected is, precisely, the idea that an awareness of and concern with class interests follows directly and 'objectively' from class position. Rather, the occupancy of class positions is seen as creating only potential interests, such as may also arise from various other structural locations. Whether, then, it is class, rather than other, interests that individuals do in fact seek to realise, will depend in the first place on the social identities that they take up, since – to quote

a maxim attributed to Pizzorno – ‘identity precedes interest’. And although in the formation of such identities various social processes, for example those of mobility, will be important, it is emphasised that for class interests to become the basis of political mobilisation, a crucial role must be played by political movements and parties themselves, through their ideologies, programmes and strategies (see Pizzorno 1978; Korpi 1983; Esping-Andersen 1985; Marshall *et al.* 1988:ch. 7; Heath *et al.* 1991: ch. 5).

Hindess (1987:ch. 6) has insisted, with reference to some of the authors cited above, that non-Marxist, no less than Marxist, class analysis remains beset with problems of reductionism in its treatment of politics. However, his case is hardly convincing, since he merely asserts that the authors in question are led into reductionist positions, without anywhere attempting to demonstrate this either by quotation or specific reference. And, further, he offers no reason why non-Marxists, who have no theory of history as class struggle to defend, should be at all attracted to reductionism or have any difficulty in rejecting it outright. Although particular analyses may focus on the part that is played in class formation – or decomposition – by social rather than political processes, this in no way implies that the relevance of the latter is denied. Indeed, the authors to whom Hindess refers have all had occasion to emphasise the autonomy – even the primacy – of the political, as against what they would regard as an undue ‘sociologism’.⁴

In the light of the foregoing disclaimers, class analysis in our sense may well then appear as a far more limited project, intellectually as well as politically, than in its Marxist form. And indeed in certain respects it is, most obviously in not deriving from or being directed by any one general theory of class, or in turn aspiring to form the basis of yet wider theories of society or history.⁵ However, class analysis as we would wish to defend it has ambitions that lie in a different direction. While its proponents may adhere to different concepts and theories of class, they aim to put these to the test by pursuing issues of the kind posed at the start of this paper and through research of a methodological standard generally more adequate to their inherent difficulty than that previously undertaken. More specifically, if in the research programme of class analysis the leading concerns are those of examining the importance of class (relative to that of other factors) in shaping life-chances and patterns of social action, and of seeking to trace any shifts in this respect that may occur over time, then a number of requirements in conceptualisation, data analysis and data collection alike must be met. Three such requirements at least call for attention here, both because of their inherent importance and because this would appear to have been often insufficiently appreciated by critics.

First, class concepts must be as sharply defined as is operationally feasible, in order to avoid any confounding of class with other factors of possible relevance. Holton and Turner argue (1989:172) that ‘status elements’ often enter into ‘class discourse’, but they give little attention to efforts made over the last decade or so (from both Marxist and non-Marxist standpoints) to produce class concepts and

categorisations of an analytically more satisfactory kind. Pahl (1989:712-3) notes such efforts on the part of Wright and of Goldthorpe but then seeks to devalue them since 'sadly, they do not appear to be congruent'. That this should be the case is, however, in itself neither surprising nor disturbing. What Pahl fails to recognise is that it is precisely a concern of class analysts to evaluate rival conceptual approaches, and that there are indeed sound procedures for so doing (see Marsh 1986; Marshall 1988; Marshall *et al.* 1988; Marshall and Rose 1990). Class analysts have an obvious interest in determining which categorisations are the most effective in displaying variation in dependent variables under examination – and in part because those who have sought to play down class effects have often drawn on results derived from categorisations that are *least* satisfactory in analytical and empirical terms alike. Pahl himself (1989:714) here provides a good example, while also suggesting (1991:128), quite erroneously, that it makes little difference which approach is followed.⁶

A second requirement is that analyses should be undertaken that are of a genuinely multivariate character and that questions of causal 'texture' should be given careful consideration. For example, if it is contended that the explanatory power of class is waning and has been overtaken by that of, say, differences in consumption patterns or lifestyles, then such a claim obviously calls for multivariate analysis as the basis for its empirical assessment. It is notable, however, that although both Pahl (1989:714) and Holton and Turner (1989:185-92) address this issue – and, in Pahl's case, as if it were in fact already decided against class analysis – neither gives any serious consideration to results from studies in which relevant multivariate analyses have figured.

Again, Pahl in particular sets great store on the argument that the simple demonstration that associations exist between class and dependent variables 'is probably conflating a number of quite distinct processes that should be kept analytically distinct' (1989:716). But here he merely opens up a range of issues with which he is, apparently, not very familiar. One is that of just how far in any particular case it can actually be shown – as, say, by causal path analysis – that the effects of class are mediated through specified intervening variables. Another is that of the theoretical significance that should in any event be given to causal factors of a less and a more proximate kind. Contrary to what Pahl (1991:128) appears to believe, even the completely successful 'unpacking' of class in the way he envisages would not necessarily reduce its sociological importance. Thus, no one would suppose that the *immediate* causes of, for example, low educational attainment, voting Labour, and suffering from chronic bronchitis are all the same. But, in so far as a linkage can be traced back from each of the different sets of immediate causes involved to the location of individuals or families in (let us say) unskilled working-class positions, then the importance of class is enhanced rather than diminished. The pervasiveness of the influence of class is underlined.

A final requirement is that class analyses, and in turn the data on which they draw, must in some way or other incorporate a time dimension. Pahl (1989:

715–6) and Holton and Turner (1989:176–7) both seek to argue that class is losing its explanatory force in consequence of various current trends of economic and social change: the decline of heavy and manufacturing industry and the rise of services, the break-up of ‘traditional’ working-class communities, the growth of ‘household privatism’, and so on. But in so doing they move on from some changes that are reasonably well-documented to others that are not; and, as regards class effects *per se*, they make no reference whatever to findings from cohort analyses or longitudinal or panel studies of the kind that would be necessary to give their position adequate empirical support. Rather, they could be said to provide a good illustration of ‘the tendency towards dualistic historical thinking’ against which Marshall *et al.* (1988:206) have explicitly warned: that is, a tendency ‘whereby a communitarian and solidaristic proletariat of some bygone heyday of class antagonism is set against the atomised and consumer-oriented working class of today’ – in a manner, however, that has little basis in either sociological or historical research.

Some Illustrative Results

In this second part of our paper we draw attention, albeit in a very summary way, to findings from three areas within the research programme of class analysis which, we would argue, any serious critique would need to address – and especially if its ultimate aim were to establish that class analysis no longer has a useful part to play in the study of modern societies. We will discuss in turn class mobility; class and education; and class and political partisanship.

Class Mobility

To study social mobility within the context of a class structure, rather than, say, that of a status hierarchy, is a conceptual choice that must be made *a priori* (Goldthorpe 1985). However, where this perspective has been taken, results have been produced that are of no little sociological significance.

For present purposes, what may chiefly be stressed is that, across diverse national settings, classes have been shown to display rather distinctive ‘mobility characteristics’: that is, in inflow perspective, in the homogeneity of the class origins of those individuals who make up their current membership; and in outflow perspective, in their degree of retentiveness or ‘holding power’, both over individual lifetimes and intergenerationally (Featherman and Selbee 1988; Featherman, Selbee and Mayer 1989; Mayer *et al.* 1989; Jonsson 1991b; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992:ch. 6). Thus, for example, the service classes, or salarieds, of modern societies tend to be highly heterogeneous in their composition but tend also to have great retentiveness both intra- and intergenerationally. In comparison, working classes are more homogeneous in composition, and farm classes far more so, but both these classes reveal lower

holding power, especially in intergenerational terms. In other classes, such as among the petty bourgeoisie and routine nonmanual employees, the combinations of homogeneity and of worklife and intergenerational retentiveness are different again.

Such mobility characteristics can be shown to have a twofold origin. First, they reflect the fact that classes – defined in terms of employment relations within different sectors of national economies – tend to follow rather distinctive trajectories, or ‘natural histories’, of growth or decline in relation to the structural development of these economies (in a way that strata defined in terms of status or prestige do not).⁷ And secondly, they reflect the fact that different classes tend to be associated with specific ‘propensities’ for immobility or mobility independently of all structural effects. This last finding, it may be noted, is one made possible only by technical advances in the analysis of mobility tables, which have allowed the crucial conceptual distinction between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ rates to be drawn (*cf.* Hauser *et al.* 1975; Hauser 1978; Goldthorpe 1980/1987).

That classes can be shown to display such distinctive mobility characteristics would then in itself suggest that they are capable of being defined in a way that is more than merely arbitrary, and that the ‘boundary problems’ which some critics have sought to highlight are a good deal more tractable than they seek to imply. Certainly, one may question the grounds of assertions such as that made by Holton and Turner (1989:174), that it is ‘very hard to aggregate the multiplicity of class positions into categories, without having recourse to evaluative cultural criteria.’⁸

Furthermore, it is in terms of such mobility characteristics that class formation can be assessed at its basic ‘demographic’ level (Goldthorpe 1980/ 1987); that is, in terms of the extent and the nature of the association that exists between individuals or families and particular class positions over time. And this in turn may be seen as determining the potential for classes, as collectivities, also to develop distinctive subcultures and a ‘capacity for socialisation’, which are themselves the key prerequisites for class identities to be created (Featherman and Spenner 1990).⁹ In other words, an approach is here provided, and is being actively pursued, for investigating processes of class formation, or decomposition, through systematic empirical inquiry. It is not supposed, in the manner of dogmatic Marxism, that class formation is in some way historically scheduled. But neither, in the manner of Pahl or Holton and Turner is it assumed that in modern societies class decomposition is a quite generalised phenomenon. And, as we have indicated, the evidence thus far produced does indeed point to the existence of a situation of a clearly more complex kind.

Class and Education

The countervailing force that has most often been cited in arguments claiming that the influence of class on individual life-chances is in decline is that

of education. According to those theories of industrial society which could, in Holton and Turner's phrase, be seen as posing 'the challenge of liberalism' to class analysis, the very 'logic' of industrialism requires both that the provision of, and access to, education should steadily widen, and further that educational attainment should become the key determinant of success in economic life. In turn, then, it is expected that the association between class origins and educational attainment will weaken, while that between educational attainment and class destinations strengthens, and itself mediates (and legitimates) most of whatever association between class origins and destinations may continue to exist (see, for example, Kerr *et al.* 1960; Blau and Duncan 1967; Treiman 1970; Kerr 1983). In other words, there is a progressive movement away from a 'closed' class society towards a meritocratic society of a supposedly far more 'open' kind.

However, in the light of the research results that have so far accumulated, support for this liberal scenario can scarcely be thought impressive. Long-term changes in the interrelations between class and education of the kind envisaged turn out in most national societies to be scarcely, if at all, detectable (see especially Blossfeld and Shavit (eds.) 1992). Moreover, a further major problem is raised by another cross-nationally robust finding from the side of mobility research: namely, that relative rates of intergenerational class mobility typically show a high degree of temporal stability (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992:ch. 3). In the case of Britain, for example, at least four independent analyses have revealed little change at all in such rates over the course of the present century – and certainly none in the direction of greater fluidity (Goldthorpe 1980/1987:chs. 3 and 9; Hope 1981; Macdonald and Ridge 1987; Marshall *et al.* 1988:ch. 5). Thus, even if it could be established that social selection has become more meritocratic, there is little indication of this having had any effect in producing more equal class mobility chances.

In the British case, where research on this issue has been perhaps more extensive than elsewhere, it was initially suggested by Halsey (1977) that although some evidence of a 'tightening bond' between education and worklife success was apparent over the middle decades of the century, this had been offset by widening class differentials in educational attainment, accompanied by little or no reduction in the strength of the 'direct' effects (those not mediated via education) of class origins on class destinations. In the light of subsequent research based on more extensive longitudinal data and more refined analytical techniques, the claim of actually widening class differentials in education would seem difficult to uphold; and the issue has rather become that of whether these differentials have remained essentially unaltered or have in some respects shown a degree of narrowing (Heath and Clifford 1990; Jonsson and Mills 1991).¹⁰ But what then also emerges is greater doubt about the supposed secular tendency for educational attainment to become more important as a determinant of destination class. Increasing occupational selection by merit, at least in so far as this is defined by educational credentials, is not easy to discern (see

Heath, Mills and Roberts 1991; and Jonsson 1991a, for similar results for Sweden).

In sum, the evidence for education operating as a force of 'class abatement' remains slight. Rather, what is suggested by the research to which we have referred is that a high degree of resistance can be expected to any tendency favouring a reduction of class inequalities via 'meritocracy'. If education does become somewhat more important in determining worklife chances, then members of relatively advantaged classes will seek to use their superior resources in order to ensure that their children maintain a competitive edge in educational attainment; or, as Halsey (1977:184) puts it, 'ascriptive forces find ways of expressing themselves as "achievement".' Alternatively, and as seems perhaps the more likely occurrence, if class differentials in educational attainment are to some extent diminished, then within more advantaged classes family resources can be applied through *other* channels, in order to help children preserve their class prospects against the threat of meritocratic selection (see Marshall and Swift 1992). We do not, we would stress, seek to argue here that class inequalities can *never* be mitigated through changes in educational systems and their functioning: only that there is no reason to suppose, as liberal theorists would wish to do, that this is likely to occur as the automatic and benign outcome of social processes that are in some way inherent in the development of industrial societies.¹¹

Class and Political Partisanship

For those who believe that in modern societies the impact of class on life-chances is in decline, there is a natural progression to the further claim that class is also of reduced importance in shaping the response of individuals to their social situation, in particular through political action. During the 1950s and 1960s liberal sociologists were pleased to describe the participation of citizens in the electoral politics of western nations as representing 'the democratic translation of the class struggle' (Lipset 1960:ch. 7). However, under the influence of political as much as of social developments from the later 1970s onwards, a much stronger position was taken up. Class, it was now held, was (finally) dissolving as the basis of political partisanship, and this was most evident in the declining support from the working class for parties of the Left (see, for example, Lipset 1981; Clark and Lipset 1991). Moreover, such a diagnosis has also come to be accepted by many of the former leaders of *marxisant* social commentary, in their despairing *adieux* to the working class in particular and to class analysis in general.

In the British case, the thesis of 'class dealignment' in party politics has perhaps a longer history than elsewhere, and following the Conservative electoral triumphs of 1979 and 1983 it was enthusiastically revived by a series of authors (for example, Butler and Kavanagh 1984; Robertson 1984; Crewe 1984;

Franklin 1985; Rose and McAllister 1986).¹² Among the latter it was widely believed that the counterpart to the declining effect of class on vote was a tendency for party political conflicts to become organised more around 'issues' than socially structured 'interests' of any kind. However, in the view of certain other commentators, class was giving way to new structural cleavages as the basis of party support – in particular, cleavages which divided individuals and families, considered as either producers or consumers, according to their location in the public or the private sector of the economy (see Dunleavy 1979, 1980; Dunleavy and Husbands 1985; Saunders 1984; Duke and Edgell, 1984).

Critics of class analysis such as Pahl and Holton and Turner have, apparently, looked little beyond this range of literature. They write as if the thesis of class dealignment were securely established within electoral sociology and the 'new structuralism' now provides the paradigm to be reckoned with (Pahl 1989:713; Holton and Turner 1989:177, 186–90). What they quite fail to recognise, however, is the extent to which both the 'new structuralism' and the underlying claim of class dealignment have in fact been empirically challenged, and on the basis of research and analysis that has significantly raised technical standards in the field.

Most importantly, Heath and his associates have shown the necessity of introducing into the debate on dealignment a distinction between absolute and relative rates of class voting, analogous to that between absolute and relative rates of social mobility (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985; Heath *et al.* 1991; Evans, Heath and Payne 1991). Applying this distinction to data on voting in British elections from 1964 to 1987, they are able to show that changes in absolute (or, that is, actually observed) class voting patterns are almost entirely attributable to two factors: on the one hand, changes in the 'shape' of the class structure, most importantly the growth of the service class or salariat and the decline in size of the industrial working class; and, on the other hand, changes in the number of political parties contesting elections and in their general effectiveness (that is, in their capacity to win support 'across the board', in equal degree from members of all classes alike). In contrast, changes in relative class voting – or, in other words, in the *net* association between class membership and vote – turn out to be rather slight. Moreover, in so far as such changes can be detected, they show no secular tendency for the class-vote association to decline, and appear more open to explanation in political than sociological terms (see especially Heath *et al.* 1991:ch. 5). Although, for some, these findings have proved disturbingly counter-intuitive, it is important to note that they are confirmed in their essentials by those of a number of quite independent, if more restricted, analyses (see Hibbs 1982; Marshall *et al.* 1988:ch. 9; Weakliem 1989).¹³

As Heath and his colleagues then go on to argue, their results bring out clearly the dangers of 'dualistic historical thinking' on the issue of class formation, of the kind in which critics of class analysis have tended to engage. So far at least as the evidence of political partisanship is concerned, there is in

fact no reason to suppose that over recent decades, classes in Britain – the working class included – have shown any weakening in either their social cohesion or their ideological distinctiveness. This conclusion is also consistent with a variety of other findings on, for example, trends (or their absence) in patterns of class mobility, in levels of class identification, and in class differences in political attitudes and values (Heath *et al.* 1991:chs. 5, 6; *cf.* also Heath 1990).¹⁴

Furthermore, at the same time as the thesis of class dealignment has been called into question, so too have the claims of the ‘new structuralism’, at least in their more ambitious versions. It is important to recognise here that the argument that political partisanship may be influenced, over and above the effects of class, by such factors as whether an individual is employed in the public or private sector of the economy, or is a home-owner or council tenant, is in itself far from new and, in any event, creates no problem whatever for exponents of class analysis. For the latter have never supposed that class alone determines vote; and sources of differentiation in political orientations and action *within* classes have always been of interest to them. Class analysis is only challenged in so far as it is maintained that sectoral cleavages have by now superseded those of class in providing the major structural basis of partisanship across the electorate as a whole. It is, however, exactly this kind of argument that has been empirically undermined by the studies cited above (see especially Heath *et al.* 1991:chs. 6 and 7; also Marshall *et al.* 1988:248–54).

Thus, for example, as regards ‘production’ cleavages, some effect on vote may be discerned within the salariat, according to whether individuals are employed in the private or different branches of the public sector – although it is likely that this reflects in part at least more specific *occupational* factors and also self-selection processes. But, for the present purposes, the important point is that no comparable effect is to be found within the working class. Conversely, as regards ‘consumption’ cleavages as represented by housing tenure, some effect on vote can be seen within the working class – though with the direction of causal influence being again questionable – but no such effect is apparent within the salariat.

In other words, there are two quite different features of sectoral cleavage being proposed, neither of which turns out to exert an influence on partisanship that has anything like the generality or the overall strength of that of class. Recently, one may observe, the weight of the empirical evidence would appear to have led some proponents of sectoral cleavage arguments to modify positions they earlier adopted. Thus, for example, Saunders (1990:234) states that his most recent research:

would seem to confirm previous studies which claim that the electoral significance of housing tenure is secondary to that of social class and that its effects may be more pronounced in some strata . . . than in others.¹⁵

From the standpoint of the research programme of class analysis, the relative weakness of sectoral effects is not in fact difficult to understand, especially in

regard to consumption. For one thing, 'boundary problems' are here truly formidable, since many if not most individuals will be extensively engaged in both the public and the private sectors simultaneously. For another, the mobility regimes determining the degree of association over time between individuals or families and different sectoral locations would appear to be far more fluid than those that apply in the case of class.¹⁶ Thus, one may point out, doubts of the kind that Pahl and Holton and Turner express concerning the formation of collective identities and a perceived commonality of interests on the basis of class should apply *a fortiori* so far as consumption cleavages are concerned – though this is in fact a point that they pass over in silence.

Conclusion

We have sought in this paper to respond to recent critiques of class analysis on two principal grounds. First, we argued that critics have not adequately distinguished between class analysis in its Marxist versions and class analysis understood and engaged in as a research programme. Various objections that may be powerfully raised against the former simply do not apply to the latter. This is scarcely surprising, given the extent to which class analysis viewed as a field of empirical sociological inquiry freed from entanglements with the philosophy of history and 'critical theory' did in fact develop as a reaction against Marxism. Secondly, we have attempted to show, by reference to three central topics, that the research programme of class analysis has in fact yielded results permitting a flat rejection of the claims of Pahl and of Holton and Turner that class as a concept no longer does useful work, and retains only a rhetorical and not a scientific value.¹⁷

Finally, we may note that the two main lines of argument that we have pursued, do in a sense converge. For Marxists, class analysis was the key to the understanding of long-term social change: class relations and specifically class conflict provided the engine of this change, and the study of their dynamics was crucial to obtaining the desired cognitive grasp on the movement of history. However, class analysis as a research programme is not only a quite different kind of intellectual undertaking from the class analysis of Marxism, but also generates results which give a new perspective on the substantive significance of class relations in contemporary society. A common theme in the research findings now accumulating is, as we have seen, that of the *stability* rather than the dynamism of class relations. What is revealed is a remarkable persistence of class-linked inequalities and of class-differentiated patterns of social action, even within periods of rapid change at the level of economic structure, social institutions, and political conjunctures. The disclosure of such stability – made possible largely by the advances in techniques of data analysis and in the construction of data sets to which we have referred – would in turn appear to

carry two major implications. Most obviously, problems are created for liberal theorists of industrial society who would anticipate the more or less spontaneous 'withering away' of class, and of class analysis likewise. But at the same time the need is indicated for the theoretical concerns of proponents of class analysis to be radically reoriented. They must focus, not on the explanation of social change via class relations, but rather on understanding the processes that underlie the profound resistance to change that such relations offer.

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Notes

1. Pahl can only be read as supposing that such a theory is involved in *any* kind of class analysis. Sørensen argues (1991:73) that such a theory is integral to Marxist class analysis and *may* be present in 'Weberian' versions. Hindess (1987:2-4) claims to find a historicist position in Goldthorpe (1980/1987:28-9) which he contrasts with that of Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985). The contrast is not, however, apparent either to Goldthorpe or to Heath and his associates (*cf.* Heath *et al.* 1991:ch. 5), and would appear to derive from a complete misreading by Hindess of the passage from Goldthorpe that he cites.
2. We should make it clear here that we do not wish to suggest that this programme is one of a formally organised kind. Rather, it is undertaken by a loosely textured network of quite independent researchers, with some institutional underpinning being provided by bodies such as ISA Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility. It should moreover again be said that a shared interest in the programme is no way implies consensus on theoretical, or for that matter, substantive issues. The idea of such a programme indeed implies significant areas of controversy.
3. Sørensen (1991:73) argues that while the class schema developed by Goldthorpe and others – unlike that advanced by Marxists such as Wright – does not explicitly claim relations of exploitation between the classes distinguished, the idea of exploitation cannot be avoided by those using the schema, since Goldthorpe's analysis assumes 'a class theory of inequality that would seem to need an exploitation concept at its basis.' To this, we must respond that Sørensen nowhere shows just why this argument should hold. In fact, he subsequently shifts his ground to making a quite different criticism: namely that Goldthorpe and others have advanced no theory of the general relationship between class position and differential rewards. This, we would accept, is the case, and the relationship is one that undoubtedly calls for more systematic investigation – even though more of a start has perhaps been made than Sørensen acknowledges. Thus, for example, the idea of the 'efficiency wage' is not only prefigured in Wright's 'loyalty wage' concept, as Sørensen recognises, but also, and more fully, in Renner's (1953) argument on the essential distinction between the 'service relationship' and the labour contract, which is developed in Goldthorpe (1982) and provides a key element in the class schema that he and his associates have developed (*cf.* Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992:ch. 2).

4. Thus, for example, Hindess contends, with respect to Esping-Andersen and Korpi (1984), that 'class interests are seen as objectively given in the structure of capitalist relations' (1987:99). There is simply no warrant for this statement, and indeed a diametrically opposing view is central to the argument of Esping-Andersen (1985).
5. To this extent, we would in fact concur with the conclusions reached by Wright (1989:313–23) in the course of providing a comparison of Marxist and non-Marxist class analysis from the Marxist side.
6. For another instance, see Saunders (1990:221). One good illustration of the way in which the use of different class categorisations can produce results differing in their substantive implications – but also in their validity – is provided in note 14 below.
7. Prestige or status scales tend to bring together – quite properly on their own terms – occupational or other groupings that have widely disparate locations within labour markets, production units and economic sectors; and these groupings are then likely to be set on quite different trajectories of growth or decline (*cf.* Westergaard and Resler 1975:287; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992:ch. 6). Thus, where a prestige or status hierarchy is taken as the conceptual context for the study of mobility, the full extent of effects deriving from structural change in the economy is likely to be obscured.
8. Note that we are *not* here arguing in favour of the procedure, advocated by Breiger (1981) and others as essentially 'Weberian', whereby class boundaries are *actually determined* on the basis of mobility analyses. Whether or not this approach can claim any serious endorsement in Weber's work, it is, in our view, excessively empiricist and likely to lead to major interpretive problems.
9. To repeat, however, the importance of political factors in this process must always be recognised. Note also that the mobility characteristics to which we here refer are defined in terms of *absolute* rates (though relative rates of course play a part in their determination).
10. Much seems to turn here (and also in analogous debates in the US) on just how educational attainment is measured: that is, by reference simply to the number of years spent in education or via more or less refined classifications of educational careers or of qualifications obtained.
11. Even among those who still believe that some association can be shown between industrialism and growing equality in educational attainment and relative mobility chances, the connection is now regarded as deriving not from developmental necessity but rather as the more contingent outcome of a variety of factors, including political ones. See, for example, Treiman and Yip (1989), Ganzeboom, Luijkx and Treiman (1989). Critical commentary on the data and analyses of these studies can be found in Müller and Karle (1990), Jones (1991) and Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992).
12. The main emphasis was of course on factors tending to reduce support for Labour among the working-class – just as it was in the period after the third successive electoral defeat suffered by Labour in 1959. However, the 1970s version of 'class dealignment' concentrated, rather, on the causes of declining middle-class support for the Conservatives.
13. Critiques of the work of Heath and his associates on the class-vote association (e.g. Crewe 1987; Dunleavy 1987) have not, to say the least, been impressive, and have been given short shrift (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1987a, 1987b). Some subsequent commentaries on the debate (e.g. Edgell and Duke 1991:55–8) show a disturbing lack of comprehension of the procedures followed by Heath and his associates and of the issues involved. Also disturbing is the continuing use of the 'Alford Index' as a measure of 'class voting', as, for example, by Clark and Lipset

(1991:Fig. 1), when the grave deficiencies of this have for long been known (see, e.g. Korpi 1983:87–9; Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985:40–1). One may set against the results reported by Clark and Lipset those presented by Weakliem (1991), which derive from far more appropriate analysis and show that a more or less stable class-vote association is by no means a British peculiarity.

14. What was taken – at the level of Sunday newspaper sociology – to be the most obvious example of working-class decomposition was the distinctive propensity for ‘skilled workers’ to desert Labour for the Conservatives. However, evidence cited to support this claim would seem likely to be an artefact of the changing composition of the MRS ‘C2’ category. Although usually referred to as that of skilled workers, the category is, in class terms, quite heterogeneous, comprising, in addition to rank-and-file wage-workers, manual supervisory grades and self-employed artisans. These latter groupings have always had a higher rate of Conservative voting than the former and, from the late 1970s on, would have been a growing component of the category as a whole. If a more adequately defined skilled working class category is adopted, no clear tendency emerges for its members to become more likely than members of other classes to vote Conservative rather than Labour (*cf.* Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1986).
15. When undertaking appropriate multivariate analyses, Saunders is in fact unable to detect *any* significant effect of housing tenure on vote within his (very small) sample (1990: Table 4.12). He argues that some more specific effects are indicated within the collapsed ‘intermediate’ classes of the Goldthorpe schema. However, it is extremely ill-advised to make such a collapse in any analysis concerning voting behaviour, since the voting patterns of the members of these classes are so different. Again, Edgell and Duke (1991:69), after taking the ‘new structuralism’ with great seriousness, are obliged to acknowledge that ‘class dealignment is a myth’, and the most they can say for sectoral factors is that they influence variation in voting behaviour from one election to another ‘depending on particular historical circumstances.’ Moreover, even this conclusion does not follow in any compelling way from the analyses they report, which are quite inadequate to the issues they address.
16. That this is indeed so with housing has been shown by Savage, Watt and Arber (1990) for an area of South-East England, and their results are confirmed by preliminary analyses of nation-wide data currently being undertaken by Mairead Reidy at Nuffield College, Oxford.
17. In this connection it is worth noting that we have cited over a score of recent books, monographs and research papers, exemplifying class analysis as we would understand it, which, for whatever reasons, received virtually no mention from these critics.

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