

POLITICS

& CLASS

ANALYSIS

BARRY HINDESS

Politics and Class Analysis

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Basil Blackwell

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1

Introduction

The discussion of class has been one of the major preoccupations of modern social thought for many different reasons (see Calvert, 1982, and Furbank, 1985). Classes have been considered important in relation to politics in one or both of two ways. One is extremely complex and ambitious in its explanatory pretensions: classes are regarded as major social forces that arise out of fundamental structural features of society and they are supposed to have significant and wide-ranging social and political consequences. The other is relatively straightforward, and I will return to it in a moment. My interest in this book is mainly with the first position, and my approach is both expository and highly critical. The aim is to provide a clear account of what is involved in the claims of class analysis and to show why those claims are misleading. Rather than attempt a comprehensive survey of the literature of class analysis, I have concentrated on a relatively small number of representative texts in order to exhibit the structure of their arguments and the unresolved problems within them.

The following two chapters outline the main traditions of analysis that treat classes as social forces and explore some of the differences within and between them. The remainder of the book considers how these traditions have tried to cope with widely acknowledged areas of difficulty for class analysis: the problem of the 'new' middle classes; the position of women in class analysis; and the problems of reductionism. I conclude by arguing that much of the appeal of class analysis rests on an explanatory

promise that cannot be fulfilled. The analysis of politics in terms of classes as social forces is at best a kind of allegory, the treatment of a complex subject in the guise of something simple; at worst it is thoroughly misleading.

To see what is at stake in these claims, it may be best to introduce the idea of classes as social forces by way of contrast with the more straightforward approach to the relations between class and politics. Here, the relevance of class to politics is primarily a matter of voting behaviour: class is a feature of social structure that may have some bearing on the political attitudes or values of voters and on the behaviour of political parties. It is in this sense that British election studies have always treated class as one of the major determinants of voting behaviour. For example, the 1983 election study presents the significance of class as follows: 'Broadly speaking, wage-labourers have different interests from those of the self-employed or from those of the salaried managers and professionals. . . . It is the competitive position of different groups in the labour market which provides the basis for differing values and political principles' (Curtice, Heath and Jowell, 1985, p. 14). The claim here is not that class determines political values or voting behaviour, but rather 'that different positions in the division of labour will be fertile soil for distinct social and political values. These values may be inculcated in part by the political parties themselves' (p. 17). The clear implication is that class may be an important influence on political life, as it has been in Britain, or it may not. Other social differences (such as housing tenure, religion, language) may provide 'fertile soil' for distinct values of other kinds, and political parties may inculcate values unrelated to class. Class may be more important in some societies than in others, and its importance may vary over time: it is more important in Britain than in much of Western Europe (Robertson, 1984), and its importance in Britain has declined (Franklin, 1985). Rose and McAllister suggest that, in 1983, 'housing is *the* most important social characteristic influencing voting' (1986, p. 79). On this view, the relevance of class to the understanding of politics in Britain or any other society is a matter for empirical investigation.

Contrast this approach with the idea of classes as major social forces generated by the fundamental structure of capitalist society. In the one case, class is a feature of social structure that may have a more or less significant impact on how people vote, and therefore on the behaviour of parties. In the other, their relation to politics is an intrinsic feature of classes themselves. There are many versions of this position, but it is perhaps most forcefully expressed by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. . . in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight . . .' 1968, pp. 35–6). Here the importance of class is not primarily a matter of electoral behaviour. Class position may be closely related to voting behaviour or it may not – but in either case politics is ultimately a matter of class struggle. In Marx's view, classes are the main contending forces in society and they provide the key to the understanding of politics and to the identification of the forces promoting or resisting social change. Class struggle may be overt or it may be hidden, but it is always there.

Now, marxism is by no means the only theoretical tradition to stress the significance of classes as social forces. For an influential non-marxist example, consider the following passage from Goldthorpe's *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*:

The achievement of a genuinely open society would imply, it may be supposed, the decomposition or at all events the serious attenuation of classes in the sense of aggregates of individuals, or families, identifiable in the extent to which they occupy similar locations in the social division of labour over time. However, class structures are ones highly resistant to change: those groupings who enjoy positions of superior advantage and power cannot be expected to yield them up without a struggle, but will rather typically seek to exploit the resources that they can command in order to preserve their superiority. Change is therefore only likely to be brought about through collective action on the part of those in

inferior positions, relying on their numbers and above all on solidarity and organization. Hence, an interest in factors influencing their preparedness and capacity for such action – and likewise the strength of resistance on the part of those who are thereby threatened – must follow directly from an attachment to any ideal that is incompatible with a class society. To this extent at least we would agree with Marx: that *if* class society is to be ended – or even radically modified – this can only be through conflict between classes in one form or another. (1980, pp. 28–9)

We will return to Goldthorpe's arguments at several points throughout this book. For the moment notice that although he takes care to distance himself from marxism, Goldthorpe nevertheless insists on the importance of classes and struggles between them for the understanding of social change. Social mobility is important in Goldthorpe's argument precisely because it affects the development of class identification and ties of solidarity, which he regards as necessary for the formation of classes as collective actors.

Goldthorpe's book illustrates one non-marxist approach to class analysis, and I shall refer to several others in subsequent chapters. What the various forms of class analysis share is a common insistence on the importance of classes and the relations between them for the analysis of capitalist societies; they differ in their definitions of class and their accounts of how the idea of class struggle is to be understood. Their common concern with the importance of class analysis and their rather different understandings of what that involves form the principal subject matter of this book.

Following this short introduction are two chapters outlining the main contemporary forms of class analysis. Chapter 2 presents the basic features of marxist class analysis and some of the debates that occur within it. It is organized in three sections. The first introduces some of Marx's programmatic statements of his general approach and takes up an example of his class analysis of

French politics, while the other two sections consider some influential debates within marxism, in part to show that marxism is far from being a monolithic theoretical position. The second section looks at the debates between Lenin and Kautsky around the time of the Russian revolution concerning the class character of parliamentary democracy. The third considers differences between what might be called 'structuralist' and 'sociological' styles of marxist class analysis, taking as an illustration the debate between Poulantzas and Miliband. Despite the striking differences between them, these various positions all exhibit the characteristic promise of class analysis – that the key to the understanding of politics is to be found in class relations and the underlying structures which give rise to them.

Chapter 3 considers the main non-marxist approaches to the analysis of politics in class terms. These positions differ from marxism, and from each other, in their precise definitions of class. They share a common concern with the problem of the emergence of classes as socially significant collectivities out of a system of differentiated class positions. I begin with Weber's discussion in his essay 'Class, status groups, and parties' (1978), and proceed to consider more recent examples of non-marxist class analysis. It is often suggested, especially by marxists, that there is a clear and fundamental distinction between marxist and non-marxist class analysis, and that Weber is the key figure in the non-marxist camp. This chapter concludes with a comparison of marxist and weberian analyses, in order to show that that distinction is not without its problems.

The later chapters consider how class analysis has tried to cope with widely acknowledged areas of difficulty. Two chapters concern the membership of the collectivities, whose struggles are supposed to provide the key to the dynamics of class society. Chapter 4 looks at debates over the 'new' middle classes, that motley collection of more or less well-paid employees who are difficult to classify as capitalists or exploited wage-labourers: managerial and professional employees, teachers, social workers, civil servants and so on. I consider the main marxist and non-marxist

manoeuvres employed to conceptualize this group, and show how far it has blurred the distinctions between marxist and weberian class analysis. The second area of difficulty concerns the position of women in the class structure. The traditional approach has been to locate women according to the class position of the 'head' of the household, in most cases that of a husband or father, but this view has been strongly disputed in recent years by feminists and others. Chapter 5 considers the implications of that dispute for the claims of class analysis.

The final widely acknowledged area of difficulty to be considered here is the problem of reductionism, which is discussed in chapter 6. What is at issue is the question of how far politics, law and culture can be understood in terms of classes and the conflicts between them. This is often presented as if it were a distinctive feature of marxist class analysis, but that is misleading in two respects. First, we shall see that the problem also appears in the non-marxist alternatives. In this respect, what is distinctive about marxism is not so much the *existence* of reductionism as a problem, but rather that marxism has always seen it as a problem. Secondly, the reductionism of class analysis takes the form of a gesture rather than a serious programme of work. Marx presents a reductionist project in his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political economy* and at numerous other points in his work, but it is not systematically followed through; elsewhere he insists on the irreducibility of crucial political phenomena. Marxism has followed his lead in both respects. Reductionism has appeared as a recurrent problem within marxism because of the inconsistency between its insistence on the irreducibility of political life on the one hand and the gestural assertion of a reductionist programme on the other. This point is illustrated by reference to Hobsbawm's commentaries on the British Labour Party's electoral defeats in 1979 and 1983 (Hobsbawm, 1983, 1984, 1985), to an important comparative analysis of the development of social policy in the advanced capitalist societies, and to Przeworski's theoretically sophisticated analysis of socialist and labour movements in Western Europe (Przeworski, 1977). We shall see that similar

inconsistencies can be found in non-marxist attempts at the class analysis of politics.

The appeal of class analysis rests on its promise that crucial features of political life are to be understood in terms of relations between conflicting class forces. This usually involves some combination of two elements, both of which I dispute in chapter 7. The first is a notion of classes as collective actors; the second is a conception of the unity and objectivity of the class interests that are pursued by diverse actors in various sites of struggle. I argue that there are indeed actors other than human individuals, but that classes are not among them, and that interests are not objectively given. It follows that the analysis of politics in terms of struggle between classes must be regarded as highly problematic. Classes are not social forces, and the promise of class analysis is one that cannot be fulfilled. To introduce this general argument I return to the comparative analysis of social policy discussed in chapter 6, which claims to relate the development of social policy in the advanced capitalist societies to the balance of class forces in those societies. One implication of this argument is that the working class has more to gain from corporatist arrangements with government and capital than it would lose by agreeing to restrain its industrial militancy. In fact I have considerable sympathy with this general direction of argument. Unfortunately, to the extent that classes and their interests are assigned an explanatory role, the theory is either uninformative or seriously misleading.

However, to avoid possible misunderstandings it is important to be clear what is at stake in my proposition that the appeal of class analysis rests on a promise that cannot be fulfilled. First, it is an argument about class analysis as a general project, rather than some particular marxist or non-marxist version of it. We shall see in chapter 6 that marxist and non-marxist versions of class analysis share a number of problematic features. Secondly, the argument is not that class analysis is unsatisfactory because the world has changed since Marx and others developed their arguments in the nineteenth century. Of course the world has changed in important

respects (it would be most disturbing if it had not), but there have been numerous attempts to bring earlier forms of class analysis into line with the changes, some of which I discuss in this book. Thirdly, there is little point in arguing that class analysis is unsatisfactory merely on the grounds that it is incomplete. No serious exponent of class analysis maintains that class analysis tells us all we need to know about the political forces at work in the modern world. The assertion that we must avoid reductionism is commonplace in the literature and everyone now presents some version of Marx and Engels' insistence that other elements must be given their due.

Finally, there is the standard revisionist claim that classes are becoming less relevant. Towards the end of the nineteenth century Bernstein argued that the capitalist economic development had produced a situation in which 'the ideological, and especially the ethical factors [had] greater space for independent activity than was formerly the case' (1961, p. 15). Class, in other words, had been important in the earlier stages of capitalist development but it must now be displaced by a politics organized around the ethical appeal of socialist values. A related argument about the effects of economic growth was advanced in Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* (1956), the most substantial contribution to the 'revisionist' debates of the 1950s in the British Labour Party. Or again, the contemporary literature on 'new' social movements (see the surveys in Cohen, 1983, and 1985) suggests that class struggle has been displaced by other forms of politics in the more advanced societies of the modern world. These are more forceful versions of the claim that class analysis is not so much wrong as it is incomplete. They suggest, in rather different ways, that class analysis has become less informative as non-class forms of politics assume greater importance.

Now there is certainly much that class analysis cannot deal with in the modern world. But in contrast to the various forms of that argument, I make the stronger claim that classes are not social forces at all, and that they never have been. I have suggested that class analysis involves an inconsistent combination of gestural

reductionism on the one hand and treatment of crucial political phenomena as irreducible on the other. What is of value in Hobsbawm's discussions of contemporary British politics, or in the other examples of class analysis referred to above, is there in spite of the reference to classes as social forces rather than because of it. Where the idea of politics as class struggle is taken seriously it appears to bring together a wide range of particular conditions and struggles into a unified pattern. In effect, reference to the decisions, interests or other attributes of classes is supposed to perform an explanatory function: for example, where the development of social policy is 'explained' as the product of competing class forces. I argue that the invocation in this way of spurious actors, such as classes, or of objective interests is at best a rather uninformative allegory.

2

Marxist Class Analysis

This chapter presents an outline of the basic features of marxist class analysis and an indication of the range of theoretical and political differences that can occur within it. It is organized in three sections. The first introduces some of Marx's programmatic statements of his general approach and, by way of illustration, looks briefly at an example of his class analysis of French politics. The other two take up some influential debates within marxism to show that marxism is very far from being a monolithic theoretical position. One looks at the debates between Lenin and Kautsky, around the time of the Russian revolution, concerning the class character of parliamentary democracy; the other considers differences between 'structuralist' and 'sociological' styles of marxist class analysis, taking as an illustration the debate between Poulantzas and Miliband.

Marx's theory of history and class struggle

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on

which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure . . . (Marx, 1971, p. 21)

Two of the best known shorter excerpts from Marx's work are the passage just quoted from the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and the following two sentences from the first section of *The Communist Manifesto*:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx and Engels, 1968, pp. 35–6)

In other writings Marx and subsequent marxists have provided more sophisticated accounts of various aspects of their approach, but these passages nevertheless give a good concise statement of the most basic features of Marx's theory of history. The Preface gives a schematic outline of the structure of society and the