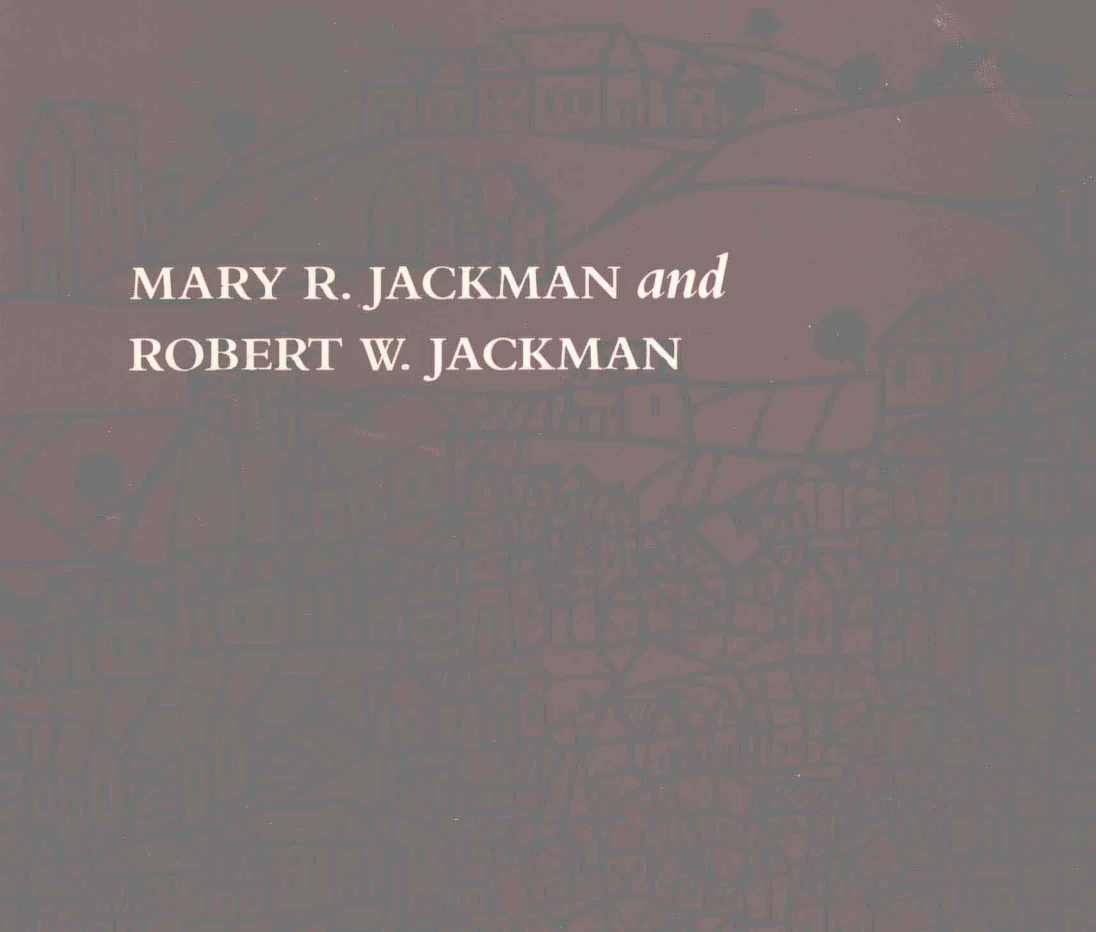


Class Awareness in the United States

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and Robert W. Jackman

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*In loving memory of
Betty and Roy*

Acknowledgments

Some years ago, we wrote a paper on class identification in the United States. For a variety of reasons—most notably, the constraints imposed by secondary analysis of data collected by others—the focus of that paper was relatively narrow, and did not fully represent our concerns. Hence this book.

The data for this book were gathered as part of a larger project by Mary Jackman on intergroup attitudes and group consciousness. This larger project was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (MH-26433) and the National Science Foundation (SOC 75-00405 and SOC 78-16857). Several people provided critical support and encouragement at the initial stages, which ensured that the project got off the ground. We are especially grateful to Joyce Lazar (of the National Institute of Mental Health), Gerald Gurin and Patricia Gurin (of the University of Michigan), Donald R. Ploch (then of the National Science Foundation), Sheldon Stryker (of Indiana University), and William J. Wilson (of the University of Chicago).

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February, 1982

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1

The Issues

Is class meaningful in the United States? The imperfection of the pure Marxist model of class has spawned a variety of answers to this question, answers that range from neo-Marxist modifications of the original model to arguments denying the contemporary relevance of class. The debate triggered by these analyses has been marked by two broad features. To begin with, class has been regarded by both its proponents and its detractors as something that must be simple and clear-cut. Along with this, most attention has centered on the structural aspects of class, while its subjective elements have been relatively neglected.

This book is an attempt to reorient the analysis of social class. First, we seek to break away from the restrictive assumptions on which much of the debate about class has been predicated. Second, we redirect attention to the subjective interpretation of social class: the meaning and reality of class cannot be evaluated without attention to its place in the public consciousness.

The lines of debate about class were set by the nature of the disagreement between Karl Marx and Max Weber. It hardly needs mentioning here that for Marx, classes were fundamentally and simply determined by relationship to the means of production, with the defining distinction being between owners and nonowners of capital. From this distinction arose clearly bounded groups with mutually opposed economic interests. These groups gradually evolved into distinctive social and political communities locked in conflict.

Weber (1946) disputed the simplicity of this model and introduced a series of supplementary considerations with which he sought to undercut the import of class. These modifications took two main forms. First, he argued that relationship to the means of production was not the only source of economic differentiation, and instead pointed less deterministically to a variety of market relations that can produce classes. Second, he relegated class narrowly to the economic sphere and questioned the inevitability of any relationship between economic and social standing, stressing instead the multiple bases or dimensions of stratification. Weber conceived of authority hierarchies as a formidable stratifying force, and he introduced the concept of status groups as something quite distinct from economic classes. Whereas class represents a group of people with similar economic life chances, status groups are social communities with which people identify. Weber argued that status groups frequently have a cultural base, and, indeed, he went so far as to assert that they "hinder the strict carrying through of the sheer market principle. *In the present context, they are of interest to us only from this one point of view [italics added]*" (Weber 1946:185). The legacy of Weber's general challenge to Marx has been that complications are typically treated as factors that undermine, rather than elaborate on, the idea of class.

The most prevalent expression of this legacy is that those who have found any single differentiating characteristic to be unsatisfactory have eschewed any conception of social class as too simplistic. At the same time, advocates of social class have generally felt it necessary to identify social classes according to a single defining characteristic: relationship to the means of production, authority relations, type of work. Thus, the legacy of Weber's dispute with Marx is a false distinction between class as something simple and clearly defined and social stratification as a multi-dimensional and complicated phenomenon.

This difference has been further widened by the pronounced preference of class theorists for portraying class systems as dichotomous: owners versus workers (Marx), those with authority and those without it (Dahrendorf 1959:165-73), or manual versus nonmanual labor (Goldthorpe et al. 1969; Vanneman and Pampel 1977; Gagliani 1981). At times, the desire to create a two-class system based on a single differentiating characteristic has become somewhat strained. For example, Wright identifies the main rift between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; after naming the petty bourgeoisie as a distinct group that does not exhibit the full characteristics of either side, he proceeds to identify three "contradictory class locations" that by his own estimates account for between 41 and 53 percent of the population (1979:42). It is ironic that approximately half of the population is thus forced to inhabit what Parkin (1979:22) has called

"the Marxist no-man's-land between bourgeoisie and proletariat." A similar predicament has been identified, by Robinson and Kelley (1979), in the authority/no-authority dichotomy. While it may be intuitively pleasing to divide the world into "command" and "obey" classes, closer inspection reveals important differences in degree of authority that make the demarcation of the boundary between those who command and those who obey somewhat arbitrary. Finally, the manual/nonmanual dichotomy has been subject to the criticism that it is an insensitive indicator of occupational differences in educational level, skill, autonomy, income, or feelings of social distance between occupations (Duncan 1966:83-90; Laumann 1966:59).

On the other side of the debate, those who are dissatisfied with the single-criterion, dichotomous class model have moved to the opposite extreme and conceived of social inequality in terms of multiple hierarchies. These hierarchies are not regarded as forming any clear clusters, but instead are taken to identify unbroken continua. For example, degrees of occupational status or prestige replace the idea of discrete classes. In addition, the sensitivity of analysts in this school to the idea of multiple criteria for stratification has often led them to emphasize the nonequivalence of various criteria. This, of course, leads directly to the common view that social life is organized around a plurality of crosscutting status hierarchies. The intersecting nature of these hierarchies works to discourage further the formation of clear-cut social groups or the emergence of group conflict.

Some analysts have pointed to the multiple dimensions of stratification—educational attainment, occupational prestige, earnings, capital assets—and argued that their intersecting nature and the lack of popular consensus about how to "count" these various factors results in popular confusion about social class (e.g., Hartmann and Newcomb 1939; Hodge and Treiman 1968; Nisbet 1970). Because there is no single economic criterion to which people attach overwhelming significance, so it is argued, class cannot become a stimulus around which people's identities are formed. The salience of class is pushed farther toward oblivion by the presence of other bases of affiliation—race, ethnicity, religion, voluntary associations, and so on. These factors are added to the multiple economic dimensions to form a giant web of crosscutting axes that divide and redivide the population into a constantly shifting series of specialized interest groups (see, e.g., Coser 1956:77; Lipset and Bendix 1959:64 ff.; Nisbet 1970; Parsons 1970; Polsby 1980:chap. 6). According to this pluralist view of industrial society, the multiple group memberships of all individuals inhibit the emergence of any single profound line of cleavage. In this

fluid context, economic differentiation is seen as an especially improbable candidate for such a role.

The idea that economic distinctions have only passing significance has commonly been reinforced by allusion to other factors, especially in the United States. Among these, de Tocqueville's (1969) emphasis on civic equality, the lack of a landed aristocracy, and the opportunities for mobility is well known and has had considerable influence (see also Bryce 1899:vol. 2). In this spirit, some have argued more recently that the increased affluence and mobility associated with advanced industrial society weakens class awareness (e.g., Lipset 1960:253; Wilensky 1966). Others have even suggested that the tendency toward greater affluence represents a movement toward a "post-industrial" society where traditional class distinctions are of dwindling relevance (e.g., Bell 1973).

Thus, students of social stratification are presented with a choice. On the one hand is a society that is divided according to one powerful criterion into discrete class categories that are conceptually zero-sum and that form the basis for conflict. On the other hand is a pluralist society that arranges individuals harmoniously along a series of intersecting hierarchies. The ideas on both sides of the debate are premised on the assumption that economic differentiation must create a single clear-cut distinction in order to become the basis for the formation of meaningful social groups. This assumption is a false one.

There is nothing intrinsic to the notion of social groups that requires a single identifying criterion for membership. To be sure, the existence of such a criterion would increase the clarity of differentiation, but it is hardly essential. In this respect, it is helpful to compare groups based on race with those based on ethnicity. Racial groups are based on ascriptive physical characteristics that are readily visible. Even here, people must assemble a configuration of characteristics (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair type) to define group membership, but since all the characteristics are physical, their configuration becomes so routine that they are processed as a single criterion (e.g., "black" versus "white"). The definition of ethnic groups is somewhat more complex, since it involves a configuration of different kinds of criteria. These include physical characteristics, language, religious affiliation, cultural values, and (not least) subjective identification. People usually assemble these criteria almost as effortlessly as racial criteria to form an image of what distinguishes, say, Italians from Irish. At the same time, the fact that multiple criteria are involved introduces a little more ambiguity around the edges of group membership. In most cases, assignment to groups is straightforward, but group boundaries are less sharply defined because the various relevant factors are not equally visible or equally weighted by all observers.

The difference between racial and ethnic groups is one of degree rather than one of kind. Even assignment to racial groups is sometimes ambiguous, but less often than with ethnicity because the criteria are fewer and more straightforward. The physical criteria for racial group membership are sufficiently delineated so that in most cases individuals can be readily assigned to groups whether or not they personally identify with a group. On the other hand, neither race nor ethnicity can become the basis for meaningful social communities (Weberian "status groups") unless the relevant criteria assume subjective significance for substantial portions of the population. In this regard, it is important to remember that Weber did not view the haziness or clarity of group boundaries as problematic to the formation of status groups. On the contrary, he argued that status groups are "often of an amorphous kind" (1946:186), and he directed attention to variation in the permeability of status group boundaries in his comparison of caste relations with looser, more informal patterns of differentiation. Ultimately, it is the subjective interpretation of the relevant criteria for group membership (regardless of the number of criteria involved) that lends the resulting groups their character and social significance.

How do these considerations bear on our conception of social classes? They indicate that classes do not have to be based on a single criterion, such as production or authority relations, in order to acquire social significance. Nor do the boundaries between classes have to be precisely drawn or impermeable before people can recognize these classes as meaningful social groups.

If the assumption that classes must be based on a single criterion is a false one, so too is the common view that classes are of necessity based on a zero-sum dichotomy. The preference for dichotomous conceptions of class doubtless stems from the conflict view of society that class theorists have generally espoused (see the discussion on this point in Ossowski 1963:chap. 2). Violent revolutionary conflict is intuitively more comprehensible when considered in terms of two contending parties. Few revolutionary situations, however, actually do involve only two parties. The frequent appearance of only two sides does not reflect the underlying structure of relationships, but rather results from the formation of transitory coalitions among multiple contenders for power. Furthermore, it is important to remember that violent revolutionary conflict is hardly the sole (or even principal) form that class conflict may take, and current patterns in Western societies do not suggest that violent revolution is imminent.

Ironically, although the fascination with a dichotomous conception of class clearly stems from the Marxist link between class and revolution, few contemporary class theorists explicitly build revolution into their

models. Even among neo-Marxists, the modifications introduced into Marx's class model are such as to minimize the potential for revolutionary change. Mandel's (1973) conception of the welfare state as a tool of the bourgeoisie that turns crises of overproduction into mere recessions envisions a greatly reduced opportunity for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Wright's (1979) class scheme, which tacitly recognizes the managerial role and places about half of the population in a class position that knows not which side it is on, undercuts the clear and forceful notion of mutual conflict between two opposed camps found in Marx's model. Among non-Marxists, of course, the most popular dichotomy is the manual/nonmanual distinction, and this is often taken to have conflict implications (for example, the "us versus them" view suggested by Goldthorpe et al. [1969] and Vanneman and Pampel [1977]). There is nothing inherent, however, in the blue-collar/white-collar distinction that implies the kind of dominance/subordination relationship productive of zero-sum conflict (Parkin 1979:11-15). In fact, the theoretical underpinnings of the manual/nonmanual scheme run no deeper than a crude representation of occupational standing. Users of the authority dichotomy have also implicitly abandoned revolution as a pivotal idea. The command versus obey distinction (Dahrendorf 1959) may be found in any economic order, and is thus impervious to revolutionary change. Weber (who introduced the concept of authority) was at great pains to point this out, and, indeed, he conceived of bureaucratic authority in hierarchical rather than dichotomous terms.

More fundamentally, any conflict between classes implies the existence of a relationship between them. Some class theorists (e.g., Wright 1979:6-8) have assumed that dichotomous class models correspond exclusively with a relational portrayal of classes, and that gradational schemes preclude the idea that classes are related to one another. But while analyses using dichotomous class schemes have usually been more sensitive to the relational aspects of class, they are not immune from the portrayal of classes as neutrally ordered (see especially many analyses using the blue-collar/white-collar split). Nor are relational models the exclusive prerogative of dichotomous schemes. It needs to be emphasized that *no system of inequality can neutrally order people according to their position. Inequality, by definition, implies a relationship between the parties involved: one person's privilege rests inevitably on another's loss. Consider inequalities of income and wealth: the standard of living of those at the top depends on the availability of people lower down to provide labor for goods and services at a rate that is cheaper than the rate received by the wealthy (Jencks et al. 1972:chap. 1; Gans 1974:chap. 4). The same principle holds for concepts like status and power. The high status of*

one group automatically implies the withdrawal of privilege from lower-status groups. Similarly, one group's power depends intrinsically on the subordination of others (Weber 1946:180). In other words, one group cannot be at a relative advantage without taking something from another group.

In light of these considerations, the theoretical imperative for a two-class model is not compelling. First, those who have persevered with the two-class format seem to have backed away from the idea of inevitable revolutionary change, which was the most persuasive (if flawed) rationale for the original two-class model. Second, while it might be easier to conceive of conflict as involving only two sides, it is clear that intergroup conflict can and does occur in situations involving more than two groups. While this argument may seem novel in the class context (but see Westergaard and Resler 1975:368), it has long been clear to students of comparative ethnic relations. Thus, while we readily concede that the conception of social stratification purely in terms of unbroken continua virtually rules out focused conflict,¹ a dichotomous class scheme is not the sole logical alternative.

How then are classes best conceived? Our discussion to this point allows us to eliminate two false leads. Classes do not have to be based on a single criterion in order to become meaningful social groups, and a dichotomous division of groups is not required for conflict to take place. Once we break free of these restrictive assumptions, we can begin to view social classes in a way that is not dictated by the terms of debate originally set by Marx and Weber.

If ethnic groups can be status groups, so too can classes. Notwithstanding Weber's determined effort to separate the concept of status groups from that of classes, there is nothing in his definition of status groups that logically precludes considering classes as social communities. Indeed, rather than undercutting the social significance of class, the substance (as opposed to the spirit) of Weber's discussion of status groups would seem to suggest classes as perfect candidates for social communities.

Like ethnic groups, these communities are loosely bounded and are based on multiple interrelated criteria. For classes, these involve configurations of economic and derivative cultural factors. Economic factors that enter the configuration include level of education, occupational prestige, job skill, security, autonomy and authority, earned income, and capital assets. These interrelated economic factors, in turn, produce variations in life styles that are expressed in patterns of consumption and cultural

¹A recent example of such a conception can be found in Coleman and Rainwater (1978:119), who treat the terms *social position*, *social status*, *social standing*, and *social class* as synonymous.

values. Because the definition of classes involves multiple criteria, many of which fall on continua, complete consensus about the position of group boundaries is unlikely. Nonetheless, configurations of characteristics are assembled to form coherent social groups.

That classes are based on economic distinctions gives them a more powerful impetus for the formation of social identities than groups relying more exclusively on cultural factors for their definition (for example, ethnic groups). Economic distinctions routinely produce social differences that are readily visible and keenly experienced. Even Weber conceded that "of course, material monopolies provide the most effective motives for the exclusiveness of a status group; although in themselves they are rarely sufficient, almost always they come into play to some extent" (1946:191). Any social system that involves economic inequality will generate social classes. In social systems that exacerbate economic inequality, classes will be defined with greater sharpness and clarity, but economic distinctions are a sufficiently sensitive matter to produce social classes even when those distinctions are relatively attenuated.²

If classes are social groups, then they must exist in the public consciousness. The subjective definition and interpretation of social class is an empirical problem that is critical to any theoretical approach to class. Indeed, it is this issue, more than any other, that points to the inherent limitations of traditional conceptions of class. While those conceptions have provided abstract analyses that illuminate particular features of the social structure, even casual observation of social life reveals that the population has not divided itself up neatly into owners and workers, or into those who have authority and those who do not, and so on. On the other hand, we believe that the portrayal of society as lacking altogether in class awareness represents a distortion of reality that contributes little to our understanding of the dynamics of social inequality.

Observation of social life indicates that class labels are frequently used in popular discourse. These labels—poor, working class, middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class—bear no direct correspondence to traditional conceptions of class, and yet their widespread popular use suggests that they do have an empirical basis. We believe that the empirical referents for these terms are a graded series of status groups linked to one another in a relationship of inequality.

As we have already argued, this relationship is not manifested as a zero-sum dichotomy between those who have and those who do not have

²Thus, we are emphasizing inequality as the source of class formation, regardless of the absolute level of affluence. This, of course, runs counter to the assumption implicit in the *embourgeoisement* thesis (e.g., Lipset 1960:253; Wilensky 1966).

any single attribute. Instead, we believe that people are sensitive to the distribution of a variety of economic attributes that affect their overall socioeconomic position. Various economic characteristics cluster to form a graded series of social classes, each class with a unique set of interests bound up with its share of socioeconomic rewards. While the specific mix of ingredients that defines, say, working-class membership may vary across individuals, members of the working class do share an overall socioeconomic position that sets their interests apart from those of other classes. Insofar as classes are interest groups, relationships among them are inherently conflictual. It is for this reason that economic distinctions provide such a forceful basis for the development of social communities.

The identification of interest groups as a product of social inequality has been made in the past, especially in work dealing with social stratification and political attitudes. Yet the loose school of thought that we might term the interest-group approach to stratification has had only skeletal theoretical articulation. In general, this approach emerged as a response to the functionalist view that inequality is based on complementary rather than conflictual interests, and that inequality thus enjoys widespread consensual support. The principal purpose of the interest-group approach was to draw attention to inequality as a source of conflict. There has been little concern with trying to define explicitly the nature of the resulting interest groups. Instead, interest groups have been identified in a variety of empirical ways, and they have rarely been linked to the concept of social class. The only major exception is Centers's (1949) innovative study of subjective social class in the United States, in which he outlined an interest-group theory of classes:

This theory implies that a person's status and role with respect to the economic process of society imposes upon him certain attitudes, values and interests relating to his role and status in the political and economic sphere. It holds, further, that the status and role of the individual in relation to the means of production and exchange of goods and services gives rise in him to a consciousness of membership in some social class which shares those attitudes, values and interests. [1949:28-29]

Our book is an attempt to build on Centers's approach to social class.

Our view of classes as a graded series of status groups defined by economic interests follows the same vein of thought as that outlined by Centers. Such an approach puts an explicit emphasis on popular conceptions of class. In order to explore and delineate the place of class in the popular consciousness, what issues do we need to address?