

# Class Counts

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Student Edition

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## 10. A general framework for studying class consciousness and class formation

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In one way or another, most class analysts believe that at the core of class analysis is a relatively simple causal structure that looks something like the diagram in Figure 10.1. There is, of course, much disagreement about precisely how to conceptualize the arrows in this causal stream. Do they mean “determines” or “shapes” or “imposes limits upon”? Is there a clear sense in which the horizontal causal stream in this structure is “more important” or “more fundamental” than the unspecified “other causes”? At one extreme, orthodox historical materialism claimed that one can broadly read off patterns of class struggle directly from the class structure, and these, in turn, determine the fundamental course of history; in the long run, at least, class structures are thought to determine class struggle and class struggles (in conjunction with the development of the forces of production) to determine trajectories of social change. At the other extreme, most non-Marxist class analysts as well as some Marxists view the class structure as at most providing us with the vocabulary for identifying potential actors in class struggles; class structure does not, however, necessarily have a more powerful role in determining actual patterns of class struggle than many other mechanisms (ideology, the state, ethnicity, etc.), and class struggles are only one among a host of change-producing factors.

In this chapter we will explore the elements on the left hand side of Figure 10.1: “Class structure → class struggle.” I will propose a general model of the relationship between class structure and class struggle which captures both the core traditional Marxist intuition that class structures are in some sense the fundamental determinant of class struggles, but nevertheless allows other causal factors considerable potential weight in explaining concrete variations across time and place. The core of the model is an attempt to link a micro-conception of the

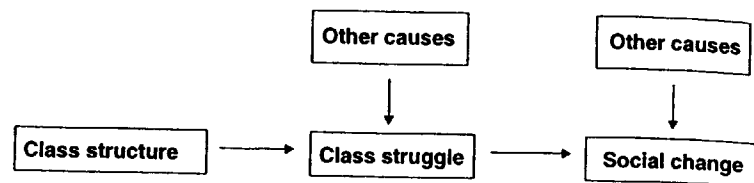


Figure 10.1 Simple core model of class analysis.

relationship between class *location* and class *consciousness* with a more macro-level understanding of the relationship between class *structure* and class *formation*.

In section 10.1 of this chapter we will set the stage for this model by briefly elaborating the contrast between micro- and macro-levels of analysis. Section 10.2 will discuss the definitions of a number of the core concepts which we will use, especially class formation and class consciousness. This will be followed in section 10.3 by a discussion of the micro-model, the macro-model and their interconnection.

### 10.1 Micro- and macro-levels of analysis

The contrast between micro- and macro-levels of analysis is often invoked in sociology, and much is made about the necessity of “moving” back and forth between these levels, but frequently the precise conceptual status of the distinction is muddled. I will use the terms to designate different units of analysis, in which macro-levels of analysis are always to be understood as “aggregations” of relevant micro-units of analysis. The paradigm for this usage is biology: organisms are aggregations of interconnected organs; organs are aggregations of interconnected cells; cells are aggregations of interconnected cellular structures; cellular structures are aggregations of interconnected molecules. The expression “are aggregations of” in these statements, of course, does not simply mean, “haphazard collections of,” but rather “structurally interconnected sets of.” A given macro-level always consists of *relations* among the relevant constituent micro-units.

What precisely do we mean by “relations” among micro units? This term is often imbued with arcane meanings. I will use it in a fairly straightforward way to designate any systematic pattern of interactions among the micro-units. Relations can thus be strong, well ordered and systematic, involving intensive and repeated interactions among constituent micro-elements, or weak and rather chaotic, involving few and

Table 10.1 Logic of micro- and macro-levels of social analysis

Levels of analysis	Constituent sub-units	Nature of relations	Examples of relations
Micro-social level	individuals	inter-individual relations	friendships, point-of-production class relations
Meso-social level	inter-individual relations	bounded organizations and networks (relations among inter-individual relations)	firms, families, unions, schools
Macro-social level	organizations	relations among organizations	nations, economies

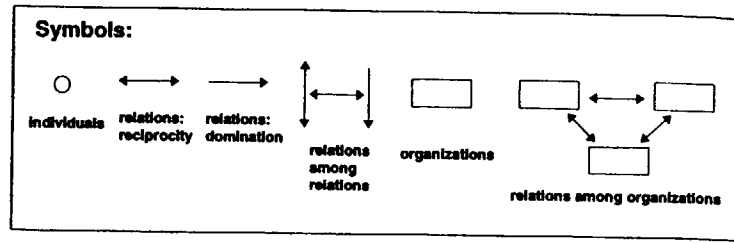
erratic interactions among those elements. To analyze any unit of analysis, therefore, is to investigate the nature and consequences of these relations among its sub-units.

In specifying any hierarchy of nested micro- to macro-levels, therefore, we need to define the relevant subunits and the nature of the relations among them. One way of understanding the hierarchy of units of analysis in sociology is represented in Table 10.1 and Figure 10.2

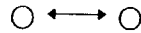
The micro-level of sociological analysis consists of the study of the relations among individuals. Individuals are the constituent elements within these relations, but it is the relations as such that are the object of study of micro-level sociological analysis. The study of interactions among siblings or between bosses and workers are thus both micro-level social phenomena.

The individuals within these relations, of course, can also be considered “units of analysis,” and the relations among *their* constituent “parts” can also be studied. The study of such *intra*-individual relations is the proper object of human biology and psychology. The analysis of individuals-qua-individuals is thus at the interface between sociology – in which the individual is the unit within micro-relations – and psychology – in which the individual is the macro-level within which relations of various sorts are studied.

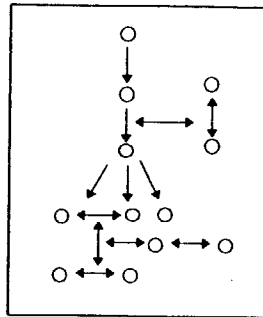
The meso-level of social analysis consists of the investigation of relations among interindividual relations. The units characteristic of such relations-among-relations are normally what we call “organizations,” although looser units such as social networks would also consti-



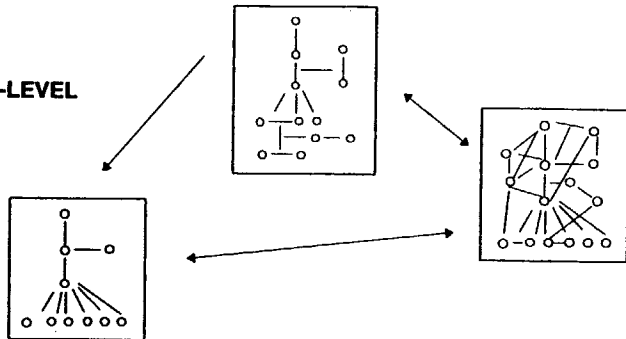
**MICRO-LEVEL**



**MESO-LEVEL**



**MACRO-LEVEL**



Dividing up the units of sociological analysis in this way is, of course, highly stylized and oversimplified. Depending upon one's theoretical purposes, one can add many intermediate levels of analysis to this simple schema. Organizations, for example, can be analyzed in terms of the relations among a series of suborganizational units – offices, branches, departments – and each of these, in turn, can be analyzed in terms of the relations among sets of inter-individual relations.

The micro-macro distinction understood in this way should not be confused with the abstract-concrete distinction. While it often seems that micro-analysis is more concrete than macro-analysis – since it deals with apparently concrete entities, “individuals” – one can perfectly well develop very abstract concepts for dealing with micro-analyses (as is often done in rational-actor models) or quite concrete concepts for dealing with macro-analyses (as occurs in many historical analyses of institutional development). Individuals are not inherently more concrete than firms or societies, any more than cells are more concrete than organisms.

In terms of class analysis, the concept of “class location” is a preeminently micro-level concept. Individuals, at least in capitalism, are the typical units that occupy the class locations defined by class structures (although in special cases families may be the relevant units). The “capitalist-class location” and the “working-class location” are defined by the social relations of production that link individuals in these locations together. The micro-analysis of class *locations*, therefore, should not be seen as an alternative to the analysis of class *relations*: locations are always specified within relations.

To be “in” a class location is to be subjected to a set of mechanisms that impinge directly on the lives of individuals as they make choices and act in the world. There is some debate, as we will see in section 10.2 below, over what is most salient about these micro-mechanisms attached to the locations within class structures: should they primarily be thought of as determining the material interests of individuals? Or shaping their subjective understandings of the world? Or determining the basic resources they have available to pursue their interests? In any event, to develop a concept of class at the micro-level of analysis is to elaborate the concept in terms of the mechanisms that directly affect individuals within class locations.

The term “class structure,” then, is the way of designating the set of class relations and locations within different units of analysis. One can speak, for example, of the class structure of a firm. Some firms are run by

Figure 10.2 *Micro-, meso- and macro-units of analysis.*

tute a meso-level of analysis. The macro-social level of analysis, then, consists of relations among organizations and other forms of meso-level units. At the most macro-level, the “world system” consists of relations among nations and economic regions.

a single capitalist entrepreneur who hires a few managers and a homogeneous set of workers. Such a firm has a quite different class structure from a large corporation, with a hierarchically differentiated managerial structure, an external board of directors representing rentier capitalist stockholders and a segmented working class. One can also speak of the class structure of a country, or even, perhaps, of the class structure of the world capitalist system. Some capitalist societies, for example, will have a huge middle class, others a small middle class. The size of the middle class is an attribute of the society itself and depends upon the specific way in which all of the firms of that society are organized and interconnected. All capitalist societies will have state apparatuses and private firms, and among private firms some will be small and some large. The size of the "middle class" in the society as a whole will depend upon the specific mix of these kinds of meso-level employment organizations.

## 10.2 Basic concepts

The models we will be discussing revolve around a number of interconnected concepts of class analysis: class structure, class location, class interests, class experiences, class consciousness, class formation, class practices and class struggles. Some of these concepts, especially class structure, have been given considerable discussion in previous chapters, so we will not discuss all of them in detail here.

### *Class structure and class location*

I will use the term "class location" as a micro-level concept referring to the location of individuals (and sometimes families) within the structure of class relations, whereas I will use the term "class structure" as concept referring to the overall organization of class relations in some more macro-level of analysis, typically an entire society. To say that someone is "in" a managerial class location is to claim that they are embedded in a set of interindividual interactions (relations) in which they are empowered to give various kinds of commands either directly to their subordinates (i.e. supervisory powers) or indirectly via their control over production decisions. Class structures are aggregations of all of the relations among these micro-level class locations at some more macro-level of analysis.

### *Class formation*

I will use the expression "class formation" either to designate a process (the process of class formation) or an outcome (*a* class formation). In both cases the expression refers to the formation of *collectively organized social forces within class structures in pursuit of class interests*. If class structures are defined by the *antagonistic* social relations *between* class locations, class formations are defined by *cooperative* social relations *within* class structures. Strong, solidaristic relations in which individuals are prepared to make significant sacrifices for collective goals would be one form of class formation, but class formation can also be more narrowly instrumental, without strong solidarities binding people together.

Class formations are important because they constitute a crucial link between class structure and class struggles. Of course, class struggles may also involve various kinds of conflict between people acting strictly as individuals in uncoordinated ways, but, since the capacity of individuals, especially those in exploited classes, to pursue their class interests is so weak when they act alone, people constantly attempt to forge various kinds of collectivities to enhance their capacity for struggle. In these terms, class *formations* are important above all because of the ways in which they shape class *capacities* and thus the balance of power within class struggles.

Understood in this way, the contrast between class structure and class formation is similar to the traditional Marxist distinction between a class *in itself* and a class *for itself*. The class in itself/for itself distinction, however, was linked to a teleological notion of the inevitable trajectory of class struggle within capitalism towards the full, revolutionary formation of the proletariat. The expression "class formation," in contrast, does not imply that the collectively organized social forces within a class structure have any inherent tendency to develop towards revolutionary organization around "fundamental" class interests. "Class formation" is thus a descriptive category which encompasses a wide range of potential variations. For any given class or group of class locations one can speak of "strong" or "weak" class formations; unitary or fragmented class formations; revolutionary, counterrevolutionary or reformist class formations.

Typically, class formations involve creating *formal* organizations (especially political parties and unions) which link together the people within and across different locations in a class structure, but class formation is by no means limited to formal organization. Any form of collectively constituted social relations which facilitate solidaristic action in pursuit

of class interests is an instance of class formation. Informal social networks, social clubs, neighborhood associations, even churches, could under appropriate circumstances be elements of class formations. The extensive research on the role of social clubs in coordinating the interests of the ruling class, for example, should be regarded as documenting one aspect of bourgeois class formation.

Class formations should not be thought of as simply in terms of the forming social relations among people within homogeneous class locations in a class structure. The forging of solidaristic relations *across* the boundaries of the locations within a class structure are equally instances of the formation of collectively organized social forces within class structures. Class formation thus includes the formation of class *alliances* as well as the internal organization of classes as such. For example, "populism," to the extent that it provides a context for the pursuit of certain class interests, can be viewed as a form of class formation that forges solidaristic ties between the working class and certain other class locations, typically the petty bourgeoisie (especially small farmers in the American case).

#### *Class practices*

Class practices are activities engaged in by members of a class using class capacities in order to realize at least some of their class interests. "Practice" in these terms implies that the activity is *intentional* (i.e. it has a conscious goal); "class" practices implies that the goal is the realization of class-based interests. Class practices include such mundane activities as a worker selling labor on a labor market, a foreman disciplining a worker for poor performance or a stockholder buying stocks or voting in a stockholders' meeting. But class practices also include such things as participating in a strike or busting a union.

#### *Class struggle*

The term "class struggle" refers to organized forms of *antagonistic* class practices, i.e. practices that are directed *against* each other. While in the limiting case one might refer to a class struggle involving a single worker and a single capitalist, more generally class struggles involve collectivities of various sorts. Class formations, not atomized individuals, are the characteristic vehicles for class struggles. Class struggles, therefore, generally refer to relatively macro-phenomena. Given the antago-

nistic nature of the interests determined by class structures, class practices of individuals will have a strong tendency to develop into collective class struggles since the realization of the interests of members of one class generally imply confrontation against the interests of members of other classes.

#### *Class consciousness*

I will use the concept of class consciousness to refer to particular aspects of the subjectivity of individuals. Consciousness will thus be used as a strictly micro-concept. When it figures in macro-social explanations it does so by virtue of the ways it helps to explain individual choices and actions. Collectivities, in particular class formations, do not "have" consciousness in the literal sense, since they are not the kind of entities which have minds, which think, weigh alternatives, have preferences, etc. When the term "class consciousness" is applied to collectivities or organizations, therefore, it either refers to the patterned distribution of individual consciousnesses within the relevant aggregate, or it is a way of characterizing central tendencies. This is not to imply, of course, that supra-individual social mechanisms are unimportant, but simply that they should not be conceptualized within the category "consciousness." And it is also not to imply that the actual distribution of individual consciousnesses in a society is not of social significance and causal importance. It may well be; but a distribution of consciousnesses is not "consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

Understood in this way, to study "consciousness" is to study a particular aspect of the mental life of individuals, namely, those elements of a person's subjectivity which are *discursively accessible to the individual's own awareness*. Consciousness is thus counterposed to "unconsciousness" – the discursively inaccessible aspects of mental life. The elements of consciousness – beliefs, ideas, observations, information, theories, preferences – may not continually be in a person's awareness, but they are accessible to that awareness.

This conceptualization of consciousness is closely bound up with the problem of *will* and *intentionality*. To say that something is discursively

<sup>1</sup> This is by no means the only way that class consciousness has been understood in the Marxist tradition. In particular, Lukács (1971 [1922]) seems to attribute the category "class consciousness" to the class of workers as a collectivity, not to the empirical individuals who make up that class. For a discussion of Lukács' views on this see Wright (1985: 242).

accessible is to say that by an act of will people can make themselves aware of it. When people make choices over alternative courses of action, the resulting action is, at least in part, to be explained by the particular conscious elements that entered into the intentions of the actor making the choice. While the problem of consciousness is not reducible to the problem of intentionality, from the point of view of social theory one of the most important ways in which consciousness figures in social explanations is via the way it is implicated in the intentions and resulting choices of actions by actors.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the only way *subjectivity* is consequential is via intentional choices. A wide range of psychological mechanisms may directly influence behavior without passing through conscious intentions. Nor does the linkage of consciousness to intentionality and choice imply that in every social situation the most important determinants of outcomes operate through consciousness; it may well be that the crucial determinants are to be found in the processes which determine the range of possible courses of action open to actors rather than the conscious processes implicated in the choice among those alternatives. What is being claimed is that in order to fully understand the real mechanisms that link social structures to social practices, the subjective basis of the intentional choices made by the actors who live within those structures and engage in those practices must be investigated, and this implies studying consciousness.

Given this definition of "consciousness," "class" consciousness can be viewed as those aspects of consciousness *which have a distinctive class character*. To speak of the class "character" of consciousness implies two things. First, it means that the beliefs in question have a substantive class content – in one way or another, the beliefs are about class issues. For example, private ownership of means of production is a distinctive structural feature of capitalist class relations; the belief in the desirability of private ownership, therefore, could be viewed as having a class content. Secondly, the class character of consciousness refers to those aspects of consciousness which have effects on how individuals actually operate within a given structure of class relations and effects on those relations themselves. The class dimensions of consciousness are implicated in the intentions, choices and practices which have what might be termed "class-pertinent effects" in the world.

Both of these aspects of the "class character" of consciousness – the content of the beliefs and the effects of beliefs – are necessary if one is to describe something as "class consciousness." Beliefs about gender rela-

tions, for example, could have class pertinent effects if, for example, stereotypical beliefs about masculinity undermined solidarity between men and women in class struggles. Yet it would not be useful to describe gender ideologies as *aspects* of class consciousness, although they might certainly be relevant for explaining aspects of class consciousness and class struggle. To count as an aspect of class consciousness, then, the belief in question must *both* have a class content and have class-pertinent effects. If class structure is understood as a terrain of social relations that determine objective material interests of actors, and class struggle is understood as the forms of social practices which attempt to realize those interests, then class consciousness can be understood as the subjective processes with a class content that shape intentional choices with respect to those interests and struggles.

A potential point of terminological confusion needs to be clarified at this point. It is common in Marxist discussions to distinguish between workers who "are class conscious" from those that "are not class conscious." The generic expression "class consciousness" in such usage is being identified with a particular *type* of class consciousness. In the usage of the term I am proposing, this would be a form of class consciousness in which individuals have a relatively "true" and "consistent" understanding of their class interests. I am thus using the term class consciousness in a more general way to designate all forms of consciousness with a class content and class-pertinent effects, regardless of their faithfulness to real or objective interests. In order to specifically indicate the presence of a particular type of class consciousness, therefore, it will be necessary to employ suitable adjectives: proworking-class consciousness, anticapitalist class consciousness, revolutionary working-class consciousness and so forth. When I use the unmodified expression "class consciousness" it will always refer to the general domain of consciousness with a class content relevant to class practices. There will be no implication that such consciousness can always be evaluated as "true" or "false."

This way of understanding class consciousness suggests that the concept can be decomposed into several elements. Whenever people make conscious choices, three dimensions of subjectivity are implicated:<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Perceptions and observations

In one way or another, conscious choice involves processing information about the world. "Facts," however, are always filtered through categories

<sup>2</sup> These three dimensions are derived from Therborn's (1982) analysis of ideology as answers to three questions: what exists? What is possible? What is good?

and beliefs about "what exists." Some workers believe that their employers worry about the welfare of employees, while others believe that employers are only interested in their own profits. Such beliefs about the motivations of employers are an aspect of class consciousness because they are implicated in the way workers are likely to respond to various kinds of class practices of their employers. "Class consciousness," in these terms, involves the ways in which the perceptions of the facts of a situation have a class content and are thus consequential for class actions.

## 2. Theories of Consequences

Perceptions of the facts by themselves are insufficient to make choices; people also must have some understanding of the expected consequences of given choices of action. This implies that choices involve theories. These may be "practical" theories rather than abstractly formalized theories, they may have the character of "rules of thumb" rather than explanatory principles. One particularly important aspect of such theories is conceptions of what is possible. Workers may decide that there is no point in struggling to establish a union because it is impossible for such a struggle to succeed. "Impossible" does not mean, of course, that one could not try to form a union, but simply that the consequence of such an attempt would not be the desired outcome. Historically, working-class rejections of socialism and communism have as much to do with the belief that such radical alternatives to capitalism would never work or that they are unachievable because of the power of the dominant classes, as with the belief that alternatives to capitalism are undesirable.

## 3. Preferences

Knowing a person's perceptions and theories is still not enough to explain a particular conscious choice; in addition, of course, it is necessary to know preferences, that is, the evaluation of the desirability of those consequences. "Desirability," in this context, can mean desirable in terms of the material benefits to the person, but there is no necessary restriction of preferences to selfish or egotistical evaluations. Preferences can also involve deep commitment to the welfare of others based on a sense of shared identity and meaning. "Class identity" may therefore figure as a salient aspect of class consciousness insofar as it shapes the extent to which an individual's preferences include a concern for the well-being of other members of a class.

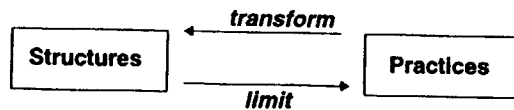
With this understanding of class consciousness, one can begin to develop fairly complex typologies of qualitatively distinct forms of class consciousness in terms of the ways in which perceptions, theories and preferences held by individuals advance or impede the pursuit of class interests. It is possible, for example, to distinguish between "hegemonic," "reformist," "oppositional" and "revolutionary" working-class consciousness in terms of particular combinations of perceptions, theories and preferences. This is essentially what the more sophisticated typologies of class consciousness have tried to do.

In the present study I will not attempt to elaborate a nuanced typology of forms of class consciousness. The data that we will employ could potentially be stretched to operationalize such typologies, but my general feeling is that the limitations of survey research methodology make it preferable to adopt relatively simple and straightforward variables. The measures of class consciousness which we will use, therefore, are designed to tap in a general way the extent to which individuals have attitudes that are consistent with working-class or capitalist-class interests.

### *Limitation, selection and transformation*

In elaborating a micro-model of class consciousness and a macro-model of class formation we will describe the causal relations among the various elements of the models in terms of three different "modes of determination": limitation, selection and transformation. Let me first explain limitation and transformation.

Figure 10.3 illustrates the general abstract relation between limitation and transformation: structures impose limits on practices; practices transform the structures that so limit them. *Limits*, in this context, does not simply mean that given the existence of the social structure in question certain practices are absolutely impossible, i.e. they are "outside" of the limits. In the extreme case, certain forms of practice may become virtually impossible given the existence of a particular structure, but the concept of limits is meant to refer to the effects of the structure on the probabilities of all types of relevant practices occurring. The substantive claim being made when it is said that structures — *limit* → practices is that the structures impose on the actors within those structures various kinds of obstacles and facilitations, sanctions and incentives, risky options and easy opportunities, which make certain kinds of

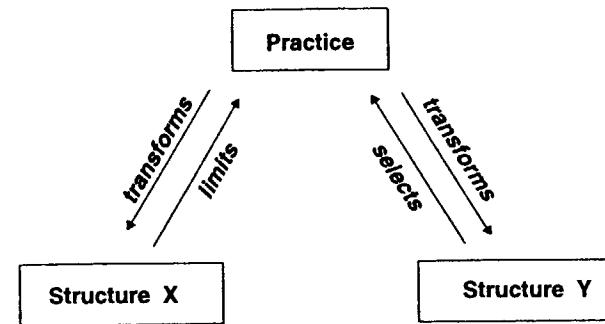
Figure 10.3 *The dialectic of structure and practice.*

practices much more likely and sustainable than others, and some simply impossible.

*Transformation* refers to the impact of practices on structures. Structures are objects of human intervention. Precisely because they limit action, people either try to change or to maintain them depending upon the effects of those structures on their interests. The structures in question may be embedded in the most macro-settings of social life such as the state or the more micro-settings of families and workplaces. The feminist aphorism "the personal is political" is precisely a claim that practices can transform structures in the mundane, micro-arenas of everyday life.

The reciprocal effects "structures  $\rightarrow$  limit  $\rightarrow$  practices" and "practices  $\rightarrow$  transform  $\rightarrow$  structures" is one way of understanding the basic "dialectic" of structure and agency. To paraphrase Marx, human beings make history (practices transform structures), but not just as they please (structures limit practices). This way of thinking about structure and agency is thus neither a form of structuralism that marginalizes the human agent, nor a form of voluntarism that marginalizes structural constraints. The limits of social structures are real, but they are transformable by the conscious action of human agents.

What about "selection," the third mode of determination? Selection should be understood as "limits within limits." Selection enters the analysis when we are concerned with the interaction of more than one kind of structure with practices. This is illustrated in a general, abstract form in Figure 10.4. We now have two structures, X and Y. Structure X imposes *limits* on practices while structure Y *selects* practices within those limits. In the extreme case, structure Y may narrow the alternatives to the point where only one type of practice is possible. In such a case, we can say that structure Y *determines* the practice within the limits established by structure X. More typically, selection refers to a narrowing of possibilities. With these concepts in hand, we can turn to the problem of the causal models of class consciousness and class formation.

Figure 10.4 *Forms of determination: limits, selects, transforms.*

### 10.3 The micro-model

If class consciousness is understood in terms of the content of the perceptions, theories and preferences that shape intentional choices relevant to class interests, then the explanatory problem in the analysis of class consciousness is to elaborate the processes which shape the variability in the class content of consciousness. The theory of commodity fetishism in classical Marxism is precisely such a theory: it is an account of how the perceptions and theories of actors are imbued with a particular class content by virtue of the operation of commodity relations. The immediate lived experience of producers in a commodity producing society, the story goes, represents the social relations between people as relations between things (commodities), and this in turn generates the mental structures characterized as "fetishized consciousness." Such consciousness in turn, it is argued, plays an important role in conveying a sense of the permanence and naturalness of capitalism, thus impeding revolutionary projects for the transformation of capitalist society.

The micro-causal model of consciousness formation which we will discuss in this chapter is deliberately simple. Its purpose is to try to capture the most pervasive and systematic determinants at work, rather than to map the full range of complexities that may enter into the class consciousness formation process of any given individual. This bare-bones model is illustrated in Figure 10.5.

The model should be read as follows: class locations impose limits on the consciousness of individuals within those locations and on their class practices. Class consciousness, in turn, selects specific forms of practice within the limits imposed by class locations. Class practices, then, trans-



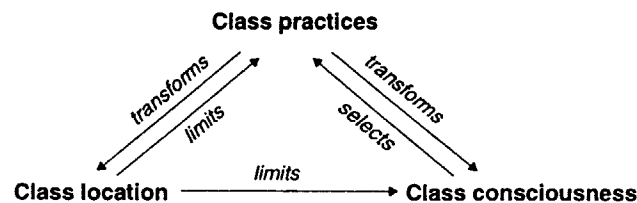


Figure 10.5 *Micro-model of class location, class consciousness and class practice.*

form both class consciousness and class locations. Let me explain each of these causal connections:

### 1. Class locations – *limits* → class consciousness

Incumbency in a given class location renders certain forms of class consciousness much more likely than others. In the extreme case, certain forms of consciousness may become virtually impossible to sustain for individuals in certain class locations, but the concept of limits need not imply any absolute barrier to any form of consciousness. Capitalists are much more likely to believe in the virtues of unfettered capitalism than are workers, but some capitalists (Frederick Engels, for example) do become revolutionary communists; industrial workers are more likely than capitalists to believe in the desirability of strong unions and workplace participation of workers in management decisions, but some workers believe that nonmanagement employees have no business interfering with the functioning of free markets and the powers of employers. Living within a given class location increases the probability that certain perceptions, certain theories of how society works and certain values will seem more immediately credible than others, but a wide range of other causal factors can intervene to counter these probabilities. Forms of consciousness which seem unlikely by virtue of the class location – *limits* → class consciousness may thus become much more likely because of presence of other, contingent, causal processes.

### 2. Class locations – *limits* → individual class practices

In a fairly straightforward way, class locations significantly shape the feasible set of what individuals in those locations can do to satisfy their material interests. The crucial mechanism through which being in a class location limits the feasible set of practices is through access to the resources needed to pursue specific courses of action. Being in a

working-class location, and thus being deprived of ownership of means of production, means that in order to obtain subsistence both in the present and in the future it is generally necessary to look for paid employment. Certain other options may be relatively easy, at least for some people in working-class locations in some countries. Criminal activities may be an option, or living off welfare. Other options may be more difficult, but still not absolutely impossible. It is generally quite difficult for a worker to get loans to start a business, and most workers are not in a position to save sufficient income to be able to acquire future subsistence in the form of returns on investments, but both of the options are possible under unusual circumstances. More frequently, some workers can invest in various kinds of training which has the potential of enhancing their material interests. And of course, workers may have the option of joining unions and engaging in various kinds of collective practices in pursuit of class interests. The relative ease and difficulty of these alternative courses of action is what is meant by “limits” in the expression: class location – *limits* → class practices.

### 3. Class consciousness – *selects* → individual class practices

While class locations may shape the feasible set of class practices, the actual choice of specific practices still depends upon the perceptions, theories and values of individuals. In this sense class consciousness selects practices within limits imposed by class locations.

### 4. Individual class practices – *transforms* → class locations

The most obvious sense in which an individual’s class practices can transform that individual’s class location is through class mobility. But class practices can also transform various concrete class-pertinent features of jobs – the degree of authority, autonomy, pay – without generating class mobility in the usual sense. When an individual worker engages in various forms of resistance to the domination of a boss, that worker transforms aspects of his or her class location. When employers introduce new technologies and work organization which enhance their capacity to monitor the labor process and extract labor effort from workers, they have engaged in a class practice which transforms a specific property of the class relation to their employees.

### 5. Individual class practices – *transforms* → class consciousness

One of the classic themes in Marxist theories of consciousness is the idea that in the capitalist labor process workers are constantly producing

themselves while they are producing commodities. This is one of the central themes of Michael Burawoy's numerous studies of workers on the shopfloor (Burawoy 1979, 1985, 1992; Burawoy and Wright 1990). The norms and values of workers, he argues, are not mainly the result of deep socialization outside of the sphere of work, but are generated within production by the practices workers adopt in their efforts to cope with the dilemmas of their situation. Of particular salience in these terms are the ways in which individual participation in class struggles of various sorts contributes to the formation of solidaristic preferences. More generally the claim is that the perceptions of alternatives, theories, and values held by individuals situated in different class locations is not just shaped by where they are but by what they do.

Our empirical objectives in the next chapter are particularly concerned with the relationship between class location and class consciousness. In this micro-model, class location affects class consciousness through two routes: one via the direct impact of being in a class location on consciousness, and the other via the way class locations affect class practices which in turn affect consciousness. One way of thinking about these two causal streams is that in the former concerns things that *happen to people* and the latter concerns things *people do*.

By virtue of being in a class location (understood both as direct and mediated locations in the sense discussed in chapter 7) a person is subjected to certain experiences with greater or lesser probability. Insofar as class location determines access to material resources, being in a class location shapes the mundane material conditions of existence – how comfortable is daily life, how physically and mentally taxing is work, how hungry one is. Class location significantly determines the probability of being the victim of different kinds of crime. Class locations shape the kind of neighborhood one is likely to live in and the nature of the social networks in which one is embedded, and all of these may have an impact on class consciousness. Above all, class locations impose on people a set of trade-offs and dilemmas they face in the pursuit of their material interests. Capitalists have to worry about challenges from competitors, how to extract the maximum labor from their employees, and alternative uses of their investment resources. Workers have to worry about finding a job, about unemployment and job security, about skill obsolescence and job injury, about making ends meet with a paycheck. To say that members of a class share common class interests means that they objectively face similar strategic choices for advancing

their material welfare. Such a strategic environment continually generates experiences which shape a person's beliefs about the world.

People do not, however, simply live in a strategic environment; they also adopt specific strategies. And what they actually do also shapes their consciousness. Managers do not simply confront the problems of eliciting work effort from subordinates and impressing their superiors. They also issue orders, discipline subordinates and suck up to higher management and owners. Workers do not simply face the strategic problem of individually competing with fellow workers or solidaristically struggling for higher wages; they also join unions, cross picket lines and quit jobs to find better work. Class consciousness, then, is shaped, on the one hand, by the material conditions and *choices people face* (class location – *limits* → consciousness) and, on the other, by the *choices people actually make* (class location – *limits* → practices – *transform* → consciousness). Consciousness shapes choices; choices change consciousness.

Both of these causal paths have a crucial temporal dimension. Class consciousness is not the instantaneous product of one's present class location and class practices. At any given point in time, consciousness about anything is the result of a life-time history of things that happen to people and things they do, of both choices faced and choices made, of interests and experiences. Most obviously, there is the life-time biographical trajectory of the individual's locations within the class structure (the classical sociological problem of inter- and intra-generational class mobility), but other experiences such as unemployment or strikes are also relevant.

A fully developed theory of consciousness formation would also include an account of the psychological mechanisms through which interests and experiences actually shape perceptions of alternatives, theories and preferences. It is not enough to identify a salient set of experiences and interests through which class locations limit class consciousness; it is also necessary to understand how these limits work through psychological processes within the individual. Jon Elster's (1985: ch. 8) accounts of such cognitive mechanisms as wishful thinking and adaptive preference formation (cognitive dissonance) would be examples.

I will not attempt to elaborate an account of these psychological mechanisms; they will thus remain largely a "black box." Implicitly in my arguments, however, is a fairly naïve form of learning theory which underlies most sociological accounts of the effects of social conditions on consciousness. The basic assumption is that the probability that people

will hold beliefs congruent with their class location depends upon the extent to which their life experiences reinforce or undermine such beliefs. All other things being equal, the more a person's life is bound up with a single, coherent set of class experiences, the more likely it is that this person's consciousness will be imbued with a corresponding class content. Perceptions, theories and preferences are the result of learning from experiences, and, to the extent that one's class experiences all push in the same direction, class consciousness will tend to develop a coherent class content.<sup>3</sup>

But, it might be objected, a set of class experiences, no matter how consistent, is not enough to predict a form of consciousness. Experiences are not translated directly into consciousness; they must first be *interpreted*, and interpretations always presuppose some kind of political and cultural context. The same micro-class experiences and interests with the same psychological mechanisms could generate different forms of consciousness depending upon the broader historical context of politics and culture. To understand these issues we must now turn to the macro-model and then to the interaction between the macro- and micro-levels of analysis.

#### 10.4 The macro-model

In the macro-model our object of investigation is no longer individual class consciousness as such, but collective forms of class formation and class struggle. The model is illustrated in Figure 10.6. As in the micro-model, the causal logic revolves around the way structures impose limits on practices and practices in turn transform structures. In the macro-model class structures impose limits on class formations and class struggles. Within those limits, class formations select specific forms of

<sup>3</sup> This implicit learning theory of the black-box of consciousness formation is quite similar to Therborn's (1982) view that "ideological interpellation" is the result of the patterns of subjection and qualification which an individual experiences by virtue of the affirmations and sanctions connected to different social positions. It is also close to Bourdieu's (1985) view that daily lived experiences constitute a set of common conditions that generate common conditionings, although Bourdieu is more concerned with the formation of *nonconscious* dimensions of subjectivity ("dispositions") than consciousness as such. Bourdieu's concept of *class habitus* is meant to encompass the full range of nonconscious subjective effects on actors that result from such common conditionings/experiences. A class habitus is defined as a common set of dispositions to act in particular ways that are shaped by a common set of conditionings (subject-forming experiences) rooted in a class structure.

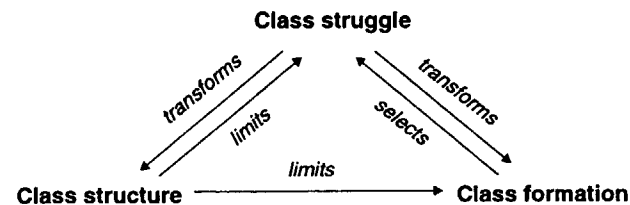


Figure 10.6 Macro-model of class structure, class formation and class struggle.

class struggle. Class struggles transform both class formations and class structures. Let us look at each of these connections.

#### 1. Class structure – *limits* → class formation

To say that class structures impose limits on class formations means that the class structure imposes obstacles and opportunities with which any agent attempting to forge class formations must contend. Within any given class structure, certain class formations will thus be relatively easy to create and are likely to be stable once created, others will be more difficult and unstable, and certain class formations may be virtually impossible. As Przeworski (1985: 47) puts it: "Processes of formation of workers into a class are inextricably fused with the processes of organization of surplus labor. As a result, a number of alternative organizations of classes is possible at any moment of history."

Three kinds of mechanisms are central to this limiting process: (1) the nature of the *material interests* generated by class structures, (2) the patterns of *identities* that emerge from the lived experiences of people in different locations in the class structure and (3) the nature of the resources distributed in the class structure which make certain potential alliances across locations in the class structure more or less attractive. The first two of these are closely tied to the micro-analysis of class locations while the third is more strictly macro- in character.

*Material interests.* The argument about material interests is the most straightforward. The central thesis of the Marxist theory of class structure is that the underlying mechanisms of exploitation in an economic structure powerfully shape the material interests of people in that structure. Consider the matrix of locations within the class structure which we have adopted in this book. This matrix can be viewed as a map of the degree of inherent antagonism of material interests of people located in different places in the structure: locations relatively "close" to

each other will have relatively overlapping material interests whereas more distant locations will have more antagonistic interests. All things being equal, class formations that link locations with relatively similar material interests are thus easier to create than class formations that link locations with quite disparate interests. From the vantage point of working-class locations in the class structure (the lower right-hand corner of the matrix), as you move towards the upper left-hand corner of the matrix (expert managers among employees, and capitalists among property owners) class interests become progressively more antagonistic, and thus class formations joining workers with such locations more and more difficult to forge. This does not mean, it must be emphasized, that material interests alone determine class formations; but they do define a set of obstacles with which parties, unions and other agents of class formation have to contend in their efforts to consolidate and reproduce particular patterns of class formation.

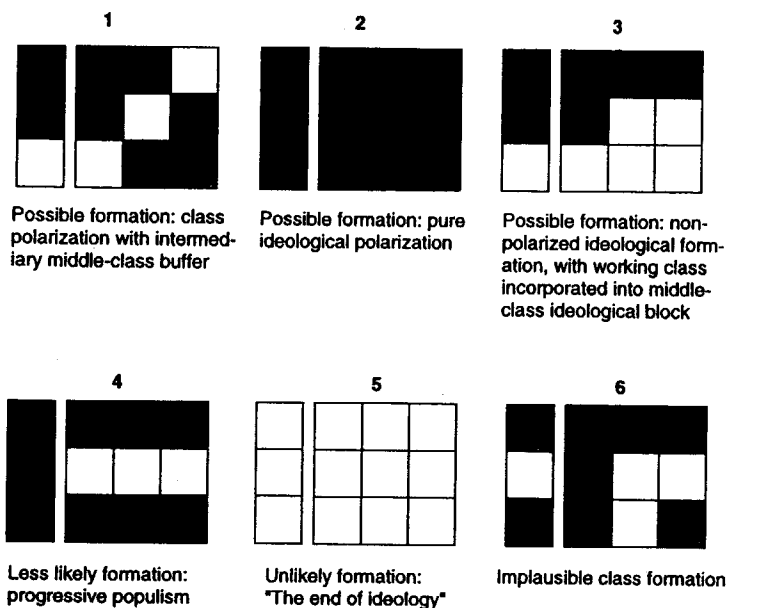
*Identities.* The second mechanism through which class structures shape the possibilities of class formations centers on the ways class affects the class identities of people, the ways people define who is similar to and who is different from themselves, who are their potential friends and potential enemies within the economic system. As in the case of material interests, it would be expected that class formations that attempt to bind people together with similar identities are likely to be easier to accomplish and more stable than class formations which combine highly disparate and potentially conflicting identities. All things being equal, it would be predicted that class identities would more or less follow the same contours as class interests, and thus common identity would reinforce common interests as a basis for forging class formations.

However, it is rarely the case that all things are equal. Class identities are heavily shaped by idiosyncrasies of personal biographies and by historical patterns of struggles, as well as by the intersection of class with other forms of social collectivity (ethnicity, religion, language, region, etc.). Thus, while it is plausible to argue that there should be some rough association between the objectively given material interests of actors and the kinds of class identities they develop, there is no reason for these two aspects of class to be isomorphic. Class interests and class identities, therefore, may not reinforce each other in linking class structures to class formations.

*Resources.* The third mechanism that underlies the ways in which class structures limit class formations centers on the effects of the macro-attributes of class structures, in particular the distribution of resources across classes which are relevant for class formations and class struggles. For working-class formations, probably the most important resource is sheer numbers of people, although organizational and financial resources may also be important. As Przeworski (1985, ch. 3) and Przeworski and Sprague (1986) have stressed, in deciding which potential alliances to nourish, the leadership of working-class electoral parties pays particular attention to the potential gains in electoral strength posed by forging different sorts of alliances. The attractiveness of worker-peasant alliances in revolutionary movements in Third World countries or of worker-petty bourgeois alliances in nineteenth-century North American populism is significantly shaped by the power of numbers.

Numbers, however, are not the whole story. Financial resources may also be crucial to the strategies of actors attempting to build class formations. The financial resources available to the middle class give them considerable leverage in forging particular kinds of alliances and coalitions. One of the reasons why working-class parties may put more energy into attracting progressive elements of the middle class than in mobilizing the poorest and most marginalized segments of the population is that the former can potentially make greater contributions.

The combination of these three class-based mechanisms – exploitation → material interests; lived experiences in a class structure → class identities; distribution of class resources → attractiveness of potential alliances – determines the underlying probabilities that different potential class formations will occur. Figure 10.7 illustrates a range of possible class formations that might be constructed on the same basic class structure. The first two of these follow the contours of the central tendencies generated by the class structure itself: class formations directly mirror the exploitation generated interest configuration. In the first model, a middle-class formation is a buffer between working-class and bourgeois-class formations; in the second model, a pure polarization exists between two “camps.” In the third model, the structural division between workers and contradictory locations has been severely muted in the process of class formation: workers have been incorporated into a middle-class ideological block. The fourth and fifth models are perhaps



**Basic class typology**

**Types of class formations**

- Bourgeois coalition
- "Middle-class" coalition
- Working-class coalition

1 Capitalists	4 Expert managers	7 Skilled managers	10 Nonskilled managers
2 Small employers	5 Expert supervisors	8 Skilled supervisors	11 Nonskilled supervisors
3 Petty bourgeoisie	6 Experts	9 Skilled workers	12 Nonskilled workers

Figure 10.7 Formable and unformable class formations.

less likely, but still consistent with the underlying class structure: in model 4 one class formation of capitalists and managers confronts a "populist coalition" of workers, intellectuals (nonmanagerial experts and semi-experts) and petty bourgeois, with a weak intermediary formation; in model 5 a broad cross-class ideological consensus has been forged in which no clear ideological class coalitions appear. Finally,

model 6 represents a structurally very improbable class formation: workers, managers and capitalists collectively organized into a working class coalition while experts and petty bourgeois are organized into a bourgeois coalition.

**2. Class structure – limits → class struggle**

The simplest sense in which class structure limits class struggles is that without the existence of certain kinds of class relations, the relevant actors for certain kinds of class struggles simply do not exist. You cannot have struggles between workers and capitalists without the existence of capitalist class relations. But class structures shape the probabilities of different forms of class struggles in more subtle ways as well. As we discussed in chapter 5, different class structures are characterized by different degrees of permeability of class boundaries, and this will affect the plausibility of people in exploited classes of individualistic strategies pursuing material interests. Where individualistic strategies are closed off (i.e. boundaries are highly impermeable), collective organization and collective struggle become more likely. Class structures also vary in the degree of polarization of material conditions associated with the various dimensions of exploitation. Again, it would be expected that militant forms of struggle are more likely under relatively polarized material conditions than under relatively egalitarian conditions. In these and other ways class structures limit class struggles.

**3. Class formation – selects → class struggle**

Class structures may set limits on class struggles via the ways in which class structures determine the interests and opportunities of actors, but actual struggles depend heavily upon the collective organizations available for contending actors. It is a telling fact about repressive right-wing political regimes that they are concerned above all with repressing collective organization, especially unions and parties. When such organizations are destroyed, struggles of all sorts are themselves much more easily controlled. It is not, however, merely the sheer existence of organizations of class formation that matter; the specific form of those organizations also has systematic effects on patterns of class struggle. As Joel Rogers (1990) has argued, the degree of centralization or decentralization, unity or fragmentation of the organizational structures of the labor movement has profound consequences for the kinds of working-class struggles in capitalist societies.

#### 4. Class struggles – *transforms* → class structure

One of the central objects of class struggle is the class structure itself. In the extreme case, this constitutes an object of revolutionary transformation, when particular forms of class relation are destroyed. More commonly, class struggles transform class structures by transforming particular properties of class relations – the degree of exploitation and polarization of material conditions, the range of powers freely exercised by owners and managers, and the barriers to permeability of boundaries, to name only a few examples. Struggles over the redistributive practices of the state, over the right of capitalists to pollute, or over the representation of workers on the boards of directors of firms are, in this sense, struggles to transform class structures since they bear on the class powers of capitalists and workers.

#### 5. Class struggles – *transforms* → class formations

Class struggles are not simply over the material interests rooted in class structures. Class struggles are also directed at the organizational and political conditions which facilitate or impede the struggles themselves. This is the central theme of Przeworski's (1985: 71) analysis of classes when he writes:

(1) classes are formed as an effect of struggles; (2) the process of class formation is a perpetual one: classes are continually organized, disorganized, and reorganized; (3) class formation is an effect of the totality of struggles in which multiple historical actors attempt to organize the same people as class members, as members of collectivities defined in other terms, sometimes simply as members of "the society."

Working-class struggles to organize unions and state repression of the labor movement are both instances of class struggles transforming class formations.

### 10.5 Putting the micro- and macro-models together

At several points we have already touched on the interconnection between the micro- and macro-levels of analysis. The claim that class structure limits class formation, for example, depends in part on the arguments about how the material interests and experiences of individuals are shaped at the micro-level by their class locations. Equally, the micro-level claim that class locations limit class practices depends in part on the argument that individuals in different locations face different opportunities and dilemmas in deciding how best to pursue their

material interests. Opportunities and dilemmas, however, are not strictly micro-concepts; they depend crucially on properties of the social structure as a whole.

There is a tradition in social theory, sometimes marching under the banner of "methodological individualism," that insists that macro-phenomena are *reducible* to micro-phenomena. Elster (1985: 11) defends this claim explicitly when he defines methodological individualism as "the doctrine that all social phenomena – their structure and their change – are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals – their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions. To go from social institutions and aggregate patterns of behavior to individuals is the same kind of operation as going from cells to molecules." While it may be necessary for pragmatic reasons to continue to use macro-concepts like "class structure," in principle, methodological individualists believe, these could be replaced with purely micro-concepts.

Most sociologists reject this kind of reductionism, preferring instead to talk loosely of the "interaction" of macro- and micro-levels of analysis. Macro-social phenomena are seen as imposing real constraints of various sorts on individuals, constraints which cannot be simply dissolved into the actions of individuals; but individuals are seen as nevertheless making real choices that have real consequences, including consequences for the stability and transformation of the macro-phenomena themselves.

One way of thinking about this micro/macro interaction is illustrated in Figure 10.8: micro-level processes constitute what can be called the *micro-foundations* of the macro-phenomena while macro-level processes *mediate* the micro-processes.

One of the standard ways in which social theorists defend holism against attempts at individualistic reductionism is to state that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts." The whole, sociologists are fond of saying, has "emergent properties" which cannot be identified with the parts taken one by one and added up. If this were not true, then an adequate description of each part taken separately would be sufficient to generate an adequate description of the whole. Yet it is also true that, without the parts, there would be no whole, and this suggests that in some sense the parts taken together do constitute the whole. These two observations – that the whole is greater than the *sum* of the parts and yet the parts *collectively constitute* the whole – can be reconciled by stating that "the whole equals the sum of the parts *plus* all of the interactions among the parts." The "emergent properties" of

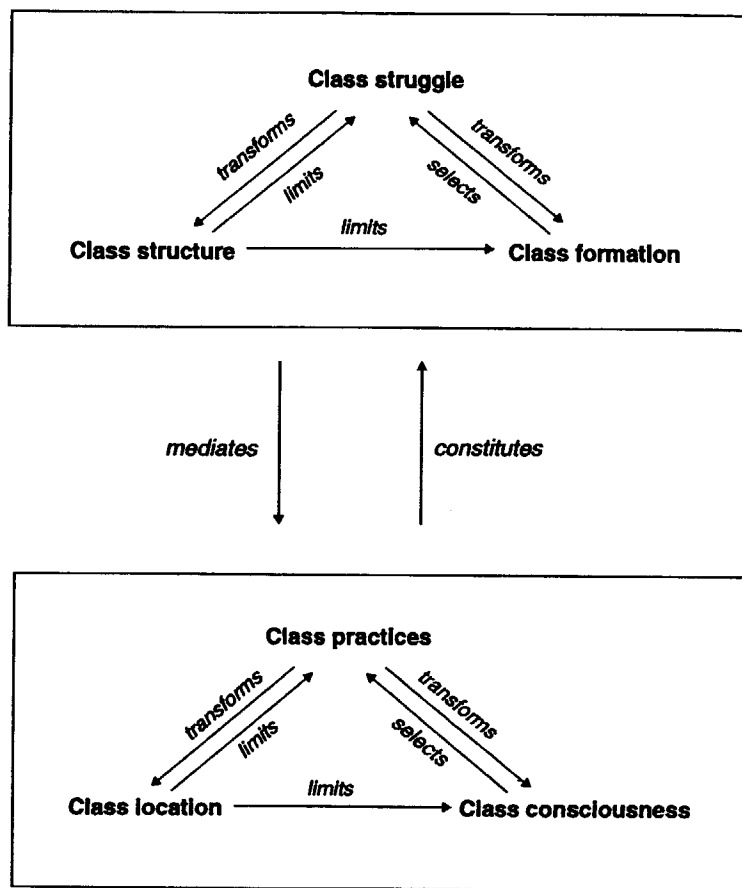


Figure 10.8 *Macro-micro linkage in class analysis.*

the whole can then be identified as properties resulting from the interaction of the parts, not simply their serially aggregated individual properties.

To study the micro-foundations of macro-phenomena is thus to study the ways in which wholes are constituted by the sum and interactions of their parts. Consider class structure. Class structures are constituted by individuals-in-class-locations and all of the interactions among those individuals by virtue of the locations they occupy. To study the micro-foundations of the class structure, therefore, is to explore the ways in which attributes of individuals, their choices and actions, help explain

the nature of these locations and interconnections. Workers do not own means of production and thus seek employment in order to obtain subsistence; capitalists own means of production and thus seek employees to use those means of production in order to obtain profits. The class relation between worker and capitalist is constituted by the actions of individuals with these attributes (owning only labor power and owning capital) and these preferences (seeking subsistence and seeking profits). The totality of such relations, resulting from these interconnected individual attributes and choices, constitutes the macro-phenomenon we call "class structure."

In a similar way, class formations are constituted by the participation of individuals with varying forms of class consciousness in collective associations organized to realize class interests. Studying the micro-foundations of such collective organization involves understanding the process by which solidarities, built around different forms of consciousness, are forged among individuals, and the ways in which this facilitates their cooperation in the collective pursuit of class interests. Different kinds of class formations are grounded in different forms of individual consciousness and solidaristic interdependency.

Finally, to study the micro-foundations of class struggles is to explore the ways in which the attributes, choices and actions of individuals, occupying specific class locations and participating in specific class formations, constitute the collective actions that are the hallmark of class struggle. Take a prototypical example of a class struggle, a strike by a union. The search for micro-foundations insists that it is never satisfactory to restrict the analysis to the "union" as a collective entity making choices and engaging in practices directed at "capitalists" or "management." Since the union as an organized social force (an instance of class formation) is constituted by its members and their interactions, to understand the actions of a union – the decision to call a strike for example – we must understand the attributes, choices and interactions of the individuals constituting that union. This would involve discussions of such things as the free rider problem within unions, the conditions for solidarity to emerge within the membership, the relationship between rank-and-file members and leadership in shaping the decisions of the union, and so on. Class struggles can thus be said to be constituted by the class practices of the individuals within class formations and class structures and all of the interactions among those class practices.

Exploring the micro-foundations of macro-phenomena is only one half

of the micro/macro linkage in Figure 10.8. The other half consists of the ways in which macro-phenomena can be said to mediate the effects of micro-processes. To say that the macro- mediates the micro- means that the specific effects of micro-processes depend upon the macro-setting within which they take place. For example, at the core of the micro-model of consciousness formation in Figure 10.5 is the claim that the class consciousness of individuals is shaped by their class location. These micro-level effects, however, are significantly shaped in various ways by macro-level conditions and processes. Occupying a working-class location in a class structure within which the working class is collectively disorganized has different consequences for the likely consciousness of individuals than occupying the same class location under conditions of the cohesive political formation of the class. This is more than the simple claim that macro-conditions of class formation themselves have effects on consciousness; it implies that the causal impact of individual class location on consciousness is enhanced or weakened depending upon the macro-conditions.

In formal terms, this means that the model argues for the interactive effects of micro- and macro-factors rather than simply additive effects. Suppose, for example, we wanted to represent in a simple equation the effects of class location and class formation on class consciousness. The simple additive model would like this:

$$\text{Consciousness} = a + B_1[\text{Class Location}] + B_2[\text{Class formation}]$$

where  $B_1$  and  $B_2$  are coefficients which measure the linear effects of these variables on consciousness. The interactive model – the model of macro-mediation of the micro – adds a multiplicative term:

$$\text{Consciousness} = a + B_1[\text{Class Location}] + B_2[\text{Class formation}] + B_3[\text{Location} \times \text{formation}]$$

where  $B_3$  indicates the extent to which the effects of class locations vary under different macro-conditions of class formation. It could happen, of course, in a specific empirical setting that  $B_3$  is insignificant, indicating that the effects of class location are invariant under different forms of class formation.

### 10.6 Using the models in empirical research

The model laid out in Figure 10.8 is incomplete in a variety of ways. First, the model is highly underelaborated in terms of the specification of

the relevant range of variation of some of the elements in the model. Thus, while I have proposed a detailed account of the variations in “class locations” in the micro-model that are relevant for explaining class consciousness, the discussions of the relevant range of variation of “individual class practices” in the micro-model or of “class formation” or even “class structure” in the macro-model are quite underdeveloped. Even more significantly, there is no specification of the actual magnitudes of the causal relations included in the model. For example, class location is said to impose “limits” on individual class consciousness, but the model itself leaves open the nature and scope of these limits. The macro-processes of class formation are said to mediate the micro-processes of consciousness formation, yet the model is silent on the precise form and magnitude of these interactive effects. There is thus nothing in the model which would indicate what the relative probabilities of procapitalist or anticapitalist consciousness would be for people in different class locations, nor how these probabilities would themselves vary under different macro-conditions of class formation. Finally, the model is incomplete because it restricts itself to class-related determinants of the elements in the model. A complete theory of class consciousness and class formation would have to include a wide range of other causal processes – from the nature of various nonclass forms of social division (race, ethnicity, gender), to religion, to geopolitics.

Given these limitations, these models should not be seen as defining a general *theory* of class consciousness and class formation, but rather as a *framework for defining an agenda* of problems for empirical research within class analysis. In the multivariate empirical studies of class consciousness and class formation in chapter 11, therefore, we will not directly “test” the models as such. The models constitute a framework within which a range of alternative hypotheses can be formulated and tested, but the framework itself will not be subjected to any direct tests.