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# Constructing the (W)right Classes\*

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In *Classes* Erik Wright offers his second major contribution to neo-Marxist debate on social class.<sup>1</sup> In effect, this new text incorporates both an autocritique of his earlier theory of contradictory class locations, and a new theory of such locations, together with empirical investigations based on this new theory using data drawn from Wright's own survey of the American population and a similar one conducted in Sweden. While we have some reservations about Wright's new model, we wish at the outset to compliment him on producing a highly lucid account, not only of his own ideas but of those of others who have influenced him. We must also register an interest since we are colleagues of Wright's in the International Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness which he has organized in his usual indefatigable manner since 1978.

## 1

The last twenty years have seen not simply a resurgence of Marxist thought in academic sociology, to the benefit of all sociologists, but a major reevaluation of Marxism by its proponents. This reevaluation has aimed at filling in some of the lacunae left by Marx himself,<sup>2</sup> as well as attempting to fit the theory to the realities of late twentieth-century capitalist societies. Both these themes come through strongly in Wright's work. However, as sociologists of a non-Marxist persuasion it has often

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1. E.O. Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985).

2. See, for example, the comments of P. Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), and T. Benton, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

appeared to us that the revisions required in Marxist theory in order to fill in the gaps, and accommodate the theory to the contemporary situation, have involved such major departures from orthodox Marxism as to make it difficult to know what it is that is any longer distinctive about it. Again Wright's new book is an example of this.

Of course, debates in academic Marxism are always easy to decry from the outside.<sup>3</sup> However, we prefer to take the view that sociology progresses through debate between rival approaches. Hence, we intend to examine Wright's new class theory with a view to seeing more clearly what it is that is at issue between his theory and that of non-Marxists. We must stress that it is only Wright's version of Marxism which concerns us here, since some recent Marxist contributions make the point that both Marxists and non-Marxists alike have presented accounts of Marxism which are at considerable variance with what Marx himself said. For example, Rattansi has argued that the orthodox account of Marx relies too much on *The Communist Manifesto*, and too little on a careful reading of Marx's more considered analyses in *Capital* and *Theories of Surplus Value*.<sup>4</sup> According to this perspective the class polarization thesis has been overemphasized to the neglect of Marx's recognition of the importance of the emerging middle classes. Wright appears to take a more unreconstructed view than Rattansi and so our comments must address themselves to the former's version of Marxist theory.

## 2

Despite our involvement in Wright's international project we were never convinced by his original thesis of contradictory class locations.<sup>5</sup> Briefly, in the original theory, Wright argued that in each mode of production certain basic social classes are defined by being completely polarized within the relevant social relations of production. For example, under capitalism the working class is wholly dispossessed of the means of production, must therefore sell its labour power to the bourgeoisie and is hence both exploited and dominated by it. However, in the case of the

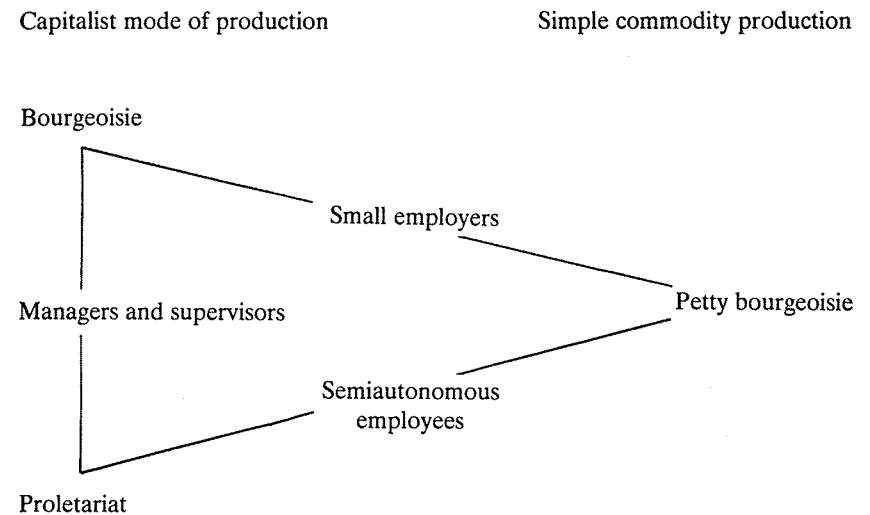
3. Witness, for example, the work of F. Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (London: Tavistock, 1979).

4. A. Rattansi, "End of an Orthodoxy? The Critique of Sociology's View of Marx on Class," *Sociological Review*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1986), pp. 641-69.

5. See E.O. Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1978), and G. Marshall et al., "Class, Citizenship and Distributional Conflict in Modern Britain," *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 2 (1985), pp. 259-84.

social formation rather than the mode of production, certain complications arise. In real capitalist societies there are subordinate modes of production, especially that of "petty commodity" production. This latter case accounts for the existence within capitalist societies of a petty bourgeoisie. Equally the processes which constitute capitalist societies do not wholly coincide. For example, not all the functions of capital are performed by capitalists. Managers may have effective control of capital assets whilst also being employees. In this sense managers can be seen as simultaneously occupying two class positions. Managers are, like workers, exploited by capital; but they also dominate workers. They occupy contradictory locations within class relations. Figure 1 summarizes the original model.

Figure 1 Wright's Original Class Model



Wright's new approach has the same starting point as the previous one: the need for Marxist theory to come to terms with the "middle classes." Unlike writers such as Rattansi, Wright takes the view that it was not only in the *Communist Manifesto* but also in his more considered analyses that Marx made clear his view concerning the increasing polarization of capitalist societies. Since the historical record has so far negated such a view, Marxists must therefore confront the issue of the "middle classes" or, as Wright euphemistically puts it, "it is no

longer assumed that history will eliminate the conceptual problem" (p. 9). In order to elucidate his argument, Wright notes first the distinction between class analyses which focus on class structure and those which focus on class formation; and, second, the different levels of abstraction used in class analysis. His definitions of class structure and class formation are themselves instructive. Class structure is defined as a "structure of social relations into which individuals (or in some cases, families) enter which determine their class interests" (p. 9); class formation of organized collectivities within that class structure on the basis of the interests shaped by that class structure' (p. 10). Class structure deals with relations between classes and class formation with relations within classes. The levels of abstraction used in class analysis are the familiar trinity of mode of production, social formation and conjuncture. Within all the possible forms of analysis available on these bases, Marx concentrated on class structure within the pure capitalist mode of production; class alliances in the social formation; and concrete class organizations in the conjuncture. Neo-Marxism has attempted to fill in the gaps by theorizing the social formation and the conjuncture, and by examining how class structure translates into the formation of collective actors. At this level neo-Marxist and non-Marxist class analysis share many features in common and hence debates have become more fruitful between them. Moreover they have reached similar conclusions. Marxists now know what non-Marxists have long known, namely that class formation is not "given" by the structure, but that there is a "complex and contingent . . . relation between class structure and class formation" (p. 14). Interestingly, Marxists such as Wright have arrived at these conclusions using their own version of the type of middle-range theories long used by neo-Weberians.

However, Wright is no longer satisfied that his first attempt at middle-range theory was adequate. In order to explain why this is so, Chapter 2 is devoted to an account of the development of the idea of contradictory locations, as well as an autocritique of this concept. Given Wright's desire to produce a middle-range form of Marxism, his first task was to identify what he saw as the irreducible elements of Marx's abstract theory of class, since any more concrete theory would need to be consistent with these. Six such elements were identified: the primacy of class structure over other class processes; the idea of class structure as the central organizing principle of societies; the notion that class is a relational concept and not a gradational one; that the social relations which define classes are antagonistic; that exploitation is the objective basis of antagonistic interests; and that exploitation is itself based in the social relations of production. Wright then reviews the process by which he arrived at the idea of some positions being simultaneously in two

classes and in that sense contradictory locations within class relations. It was this concept which he operationalized for his empirical work.

Wright now offers several criticisms of this initial conceptualization, although in effect, as he notes, they are all a part of the same problem. For those of us who believed that a major weakness of the original model was that it was too economic, Wright on the contrary believes it was not economic enough. The original concept of contradictory locations was underpinned by a theory of *domination* rather than one of *exploitation*. This resulted in class being merely one element rather than *the* element in social stratification. Hence Wright's self-appointed task is to return exploitation to centre stage. This he proceeds to do in Chapter 3 by way of an adaptation of the work of one of the leading rational choice Marxists, John Roemer.<sup>6</sup> Wright seeks to transform the concept of contradictory locations through a modification and extension of Roemer's work on exploitation. Having identified his failure to place exploitation at the centre of class analysis as the chief defect of the earlier model, Wright uses some of Roemer's insights on exploitation to rectify this. However, Wright does not thereby adopt a rational choice model, for unlike Roemer he is not prepared to abandon all aspects of the labor theory of value in favor of a game theoretic view of exploitation. Nevertheless, since Roemer's work is apparently central to Wright's new theory, it is necessary to consider the former before returning to the latter.

### 3

In common with older Marxist theorists, Roemer regards exploitation as involving a causal relationship between the incomes of different actors. However, his particular interpretation of exploitation is at odds with that of classical Marxism.<sup>7</sup> Roemer treats the organization of production as a game. His strategy is to ask whether particular players in the game

6. For recent critical discussions of game theoretic Marxism, see S. Lash and J. Urry, "The New Marxism of Collective Action," *Sociology*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1984), pp. 33-50; J. McCarney, "A New Marxist Paradigm?," *Radical Philosophy*, vol. 43 (1986), pp. 29-31; J. Holmwood, "The Games Marxists Play," *Network*, vol. 34 (1986), pp. 14-15.

7. In fact Roemer has produced two models of exploitation. The first was based on a labor transfer approach, but he found that he had to make too many simplifying assumptions for such a model to work. Hence he developed the game theoretic approach in order to overcome the problems which arise when the simplifying assumptions are relaxed. It is this second version of exploitation which Wright finds attractive (though in need of modification) because "it allows for a particularly elegant way of characterizing the different mechanisms of exploitation in different types of class structure" (*Classes*, p. 68).

would be better off if they were to withdraw from the game in favor of an alternative one. Hence, exploitation is a situation in which a coalition of actors have a hypothetically feasible alternative where they would be better off (and their complement, the exploiting coalition, would be worse off) if the former withdrew from the game. Four such situations of exploitation are identified by Roemer: feudal, capitalist, socialist, and status. Each form of exploitation is defined in terms of a withdrawal rule. Under feudalism peasants would be better off and lords worse off if the former withdrew with their personal assets, that is, were freed from feudal obligations. This rule is the test of whether feudal exploitation exists. The test of whether capitalist exploitation exists is a situation in which capitalists would be worse off, and workers better off, if the latter withdrew with their per capita share of society's productive assets. Under socialism exploitation exists where a "coalition" would be better off, and its "complement" worse off, if the former left the game with its per capita share of inalienable assets, for example, its skills. Finally, status exploitation exists where a coalition would be better off, and its complement worse off, if the former exempted itself from the dues to status. Here Roemer is thinking of exploitation through state bureaucracy.

What does such a game theoretic version of exploitation offer a more orthodox Marxist such as Wright in his attempt to rework the concept of contradictory locations in class relations? One obvious attraction is that Roemer's view of exploitation is materially grounded in property relations:

The asset-exploitation nexus depends in each case upon the capacity of asset holders to deprive others of equal access to that asset. . . . On the one hand, inequalities of assets are sufficient to account for transfers of surplus labor; on the other hand, different forms of asset inequality specify different systems of exploitation. Classes are then defined as positions within social relations of production derived from the property relations which determine the pattern of exploitation. (p. 72)

This argument presents a challenge to any definition of class based on domination within production, such as Wright's original model. For Roemer domination is subordinate to exploitation, so that "domination *within* the production process or within the labor process does not enter into the definition of class relations" (ibid.). This is an argument that Wright now accepts: domination is relevant to aspects of class formation but "the basis of the capital-labor relation should be identified with the relations of effective control (that is, real economic ownership) over productive assets as such" (ibid.). However, Wright clearly had some difficulties in accepting the thrust of Roemer's argument because

it seemed to blur the difference between Marxist definitions of class and Weberian definitions. Weberian definitions were "market-based" definitions of class, whereas Marxist definitions were "production-based." The reputed advantage of the latter was that production was more "fundamental" than exchange, and therefore production based concepts had more explanatory power than market based ones.

What now seems clear to me is that definitions of classes in terms of property relations should not be identified with strictly market based definitions. Property relations accounts of classes do not define classes by income shares, by the results of market transactions, but by the productive assets which classes control; which lead them to adopt certain strategies within exchange relations, and which in turn determine the outcome of those market transactions. (pp. 72-3)

Of course, as Wright acknowledges, this amounts to saying that the contrast between Marxist and Weberian definitions of class cannot be subsumed to the distinction between exchange and production. Having satisfied himself of this Wright is content to use Roemer's insights concerning exploitation as 'the basis for elaborating a comprehensive framework for analyzing class structure in general and for reconceptualizing the problem of the middle classes in particular' (p. 73).

However, Roemer's model does not satisfy Wright as it stands. He finds Roemer insufficiently economic—or faithful to classical Marxism—because of the way in which the latter has completely abandoned all aspects of the labor theory of value. According to Wright, Roemer's theory "allows us to assess inequalities that are the result of causal interconnections between actors [but] lacks the additional force of the view that the inequalities in question are produced by real transfers from one actor to another" (p. 74). Thus the first of three criticisms Wright has of Roemer is that the latter has mistaken exploitation for simple economic oppression. This Wright finds acceptable to the degree that it produces a class concept which defines a set of objective material interests, but unacceptable in so far as it does not make clear how "the welfare of the exploiting class depends upon the work of the exploited class" (p. 75). Whereas, for Roemer, it is the withdrawal rules which define exploitation, for Wright exploitation is a combination of economic oppression with appropriation.

Wright is also critical of Roemer's concept of feudal exploitation. Roemer considers only two types of productive asset, namely, physical or alienable assets and skill or inalienable assets. Wright, following Cohen,<sup>8</sup> wishes to include labor power as a productive asset too. In

8. G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

capitalism each person owns one unit of labor power, but under feudalism serfs have less than one unit and lords have more than one because of the existence of *corvée* labor. Hence, for Wright, the withdrawal rule for feudal exploitation involves leaving the game with one unit of labor power rather than with one's personal assets. It is not physical assets which are unequally distributed in feudal societies but labor power. This reformulation also allows Wright to produce a symmetrical analysis in which feudal exploitation derives from unequal distribution of assets in labor power and leads to the class relation between lords and serfs; capitalist exploitation is based on the unequal distribution of alienable assets and produces the class relation between bourgeoisie and proletariat; and socialist exploitation is based on the unequal distribution of inalienable assets (skills) and results in the class relation between experts and workers. In this recasting of feudal exploitation, therefore, Wright has removed the nonmaterialist basis of Roemer's withdrawal rule (freedom from obligations of personal bondage) and has replaced it with a materialist one (labor power as a productive asset). He proceeds in similar fashion when dealing with the concept of status exploitation.

Mention of the concept of status is somewhat akin to waving a red flag at a bull for most Marxists—and Wright is no exception. Wright argues that status “has no necessary relationship to production at all” (p. 79), and therefore is inadmissible to any Marxist account of class. His economic solution to the problem of the Roemerian concept of status exploitation is to replace it with one of organizational exploitation. He wishes to see organization as a particular type of productive asset and so arrives at the view that each type of class structure is precisely typified by the principal asset which is unequally distributed: under feudalism it is labor power; under capitalism, the means of production; under statism, organization; and under socialism, skills.

In this manner Wright is able to produce a typology of assets, forms of exploitation and class structure by which feudalism, capitalism, statism, and socialism can be defined in terms of the principal asset that is unequally distributed, the mechanism of exploitation involved and the polarized class system which results. At this level, with the modifications described above, Wright follows Roemer—the four forms of exploitation correspond to four modes of production. It is here, however, that Wright abandons the idea of an association between forms of exploitation and modes of production, in order to derive his new class model for contemporary capitalist societies. Just as the petty bourgeoisie were introduced into his earlier model as a class of a subsidiary mode of production to the CMP, so now Wright claims that the principal asset which is unequally distributed within any particular mode of production is not the *only* asset which is so distributed but merely the *prime* basis of

exploitation. In other words, within any given system, assets other than the primary one may be the basis of exploitation. For example, in capitalism the principal asset exploited by capitalists is ownership of the means of production, and this is the defining feature of the system. Nevertheless capitalists may also exploit workers through their control of organizational assets. Thus it makes sense to produce a class typology which incorporates all the assets which are unequally distributed in the four modes of production identified. As Wright observes, he is not concerned with delineating abstract mode of production concepts, but rather the class structure of contemporary capitalism, especially as far as nonpolarized positions are concerned:

Since concrete societies are rarely, if ever, characterized by a simple mode of production the actual class structures of given societies will be characterized by complex patterns of exploitation relations. There will therefore tend to be some positions which are exploiting along one dimension of exploitation relations, while on another are exploited. . . . Such positions are what are ‘typically referred to as the “new middle class” of a given system’. (p. 87)

Thus Wright has not only modified Roemer's analysis but has also shifted it from a concern for different modes of production to the idea that all the exploitation processes operate simultaneously within real capitalist societies. Indeed, when all Wright's amendments to the original theory are taken together, they seriously undermine Roemer's project. Certainly it is not clear to us why, in order to produce a theory based on exploitation, Wright needs Roemer's work at all. After all, exploitation within the labor theory of value (in the manner which Wright wishes to use it) has a long, if suspect, pedigree. Why introduce a new and controversial version of the concept simply in order to reject its novel elements in favor of some more orthodox version? Moreover, as another of his critics has observed, if we take Wright's arguments on their own terms, it is not clear how all exploitation processes “can be part of the same system—that there can be a constant tendency of the reduction of skilled to average labor (proletarianization) at the same time as a constant tendency of the creation of skills and social closure around them and a constant ideological factor in managerial incomes”.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we should not take Marxist economics any more seriously than Wright seems to have taken Roemer's game theory?

9. Holmwood, “The Games Marxists Play,” p. 15.



course, it has. Indeed Wright hardly bothers to contest the fact that there are similarities between aspects of his approach and that of the self-confessed bourgeois sociologist Frank Parkin. Wright searches for a way out of this embarrassment. He realizes he cannot maintain the view that Weber's theory of class is market based while that of Marx is production based, for he now accepts that both use production-based definitions. The real difference for Wright is more subtle than this. Weber makes the mistake of viewing production from the vantage point of the market because he fails to make the distinction between a mode of production and a social formation. This is, of course, because Weber and his followers resolutely refuse "to treat historical development as a trajectory of qualitatively distinct forms of class structure" (p. 108). However, by not accepting the historicism of Marxism Weberians avoid the kinds of problem Wright has to face when, later in the argument, he confronts his general framework with the Marxist Theory of History and has to proceed upon yet another rewrite of what the latter means. We are told that it is a "probabilistic statement," "a sequence of historical possibilities," but that "the actual transition from one form (of society) to another . . . may depend upon a whole range of contingent factors that are exogenous to the theory." Finally he challenges three traditional theses of historical materialism. According to Wright, Marxists must now question the view that "socialism is the immanent future to capitalism" (consistent with his "managerial revolution"); they must no longer assume that the proletariat is "the only bearer of a revolutionary mission within capitalism"; and it must be recognized that socialist societies involve exploitation, too. Despite such revisionism he tries to rescue the theory of history from these not inconsiderable problems by asserting that history remains progressive, so that "while capitalism may no longer be thought of as the last antagonistic form of society in the trajectory of human development (nevertheless) the progressive character of the trajectory is maintained" (pp. 114-18, *passim*). If the Marxist theory of history means nothing more than that history is "progressive," how then does it differ from the Whig theory?

Having thus emasculated the Marxist theory of history, Wright's comments on the relationship between class structure and class formation make interesting reading, for once again he is forced to concur with the long held opinions of neo-Weberian class theorists. Accepting that the relationship between class structure and class formation is not as straightforward as described in classical Marxism, Wright is forced to the conclusion that "the class structure may define the terrain of material interests upon which attempts at class formation occur, but it does not uniquely determine the outcome of those attempts" (p. 123). This seems to us a welcome concession to reality. Wright can see that his new model

provides "the material basis for a variety of *potential* class formations" and hence that "class structure does not generate a unique pattern of class formation." Thus, "it is only through the specific historical analysis of given societies that it is possible to explain what kind of actual formation is built on that foundation" (p. 124). Since these comments (and virtually all of his others) are addressed to fellow Marxists one can but wonder whether some of them have ever read or taken seriously the more sophisticated form of neo-Marxist class analysis.

Both feminist sociologists and more traditional theorists of stratification will be disappointed by Wright's short section on women in the class structure. While recognizing that Wright could not cover all the implications of his theory in detail, what he has to say in this section makes no real advance on the inadequate treatment given to gender and class in *Class, Crisis and the State*. In terms of his new model, gender can be seen as relevant to skill and organizational assets or as a part of feudal exploitation, but none of these possibilities is dealt with in depth. As in his previous book, Wright argues that the housewives of workers are in the working class in relation to capital and a variety of possible classes in respect of their husbands; and that women are not a social class simply by virtue of male oppression. This somewhat cursory consideration of class and gender does become surprising given the later empirical material in *Classes*. Jumping ahead in Wright's argument for a moment, we discover in later chapters that just over 60 percent of the working class in both Sweden and the United States are females; and that 52.8 percent of employed females in the United States and 59.6 percent in Sweden are classified as proletarian. As Wright notes, "the image which is still present in many Marxist accounts that the working class consists of male factory workers simply does not hold true any longer" (pp. 197-8). Further evidence provided by Wright shows the inferior mobility chances of working-class females. A cynic might be tempted to argue, after reading Wright's cursory treatment of gender and then examining his class and gender data, that all of these are not unconnected with his pessimism about the possibilities of working-class revolution.

With his discussions of the implications of the new approach to contradictory class locations Wright concludes the theoretical part of *Classes*. The second half of his book concerns empirical investigations using the new approach. There are three principal issues dealt with in Part 2. First, Wright attempts an empirical adjudication between his own theory and rival Marxist accounts, and especially that of Poulantzas.<sup>10</sup>

10. N. Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975).

Secondly, Wright uses his theory to make a comparison between the class structures of the United States and Sweden; and finally he examines the thorny problem of the relationship between class structure and class consciousness.

## 5

In the empirical adjudication of rival Marxist theories of class Wright is particularly concerned to examine the "boundary problem" between the middle classes and the working class. Any class model involves the claim that units in a given class should be more like one another than like units in any other class "*with respect to whatever it is class is meant to explain*" (p. 137). One of the key features that a Marxist theory is attempting to explain is, of course, class conflict, so that a definition of the working class in such a theory is a statement about a line of demarcation in class conflict. With such reasoning Wright arrives at a means for adjudicating between rival theories:

If definitions are propositions about lines of demarcation for homogeneous effects, then this suggests that the appropriate strategy . . . is to focus on those cases where one definition places two positions on different sides of the line of demarcation whereas the rival definition treats them as homogeneous. (pp. 137-8)

The data that Wright uses to make his adjudication are from his own national survey of class structure and class consciousness in the United States. As he points out, this survey was especially constructed to test rival Marxist accounts of social class and so is eminently suited to his purpose. Or is it?

Wright himself acknowledges the problems of using *individual level* survey data to compare rival Marxist *class* theories but in defending his strategy he is once again brought close to the type of reasoning long used by non-Marxist class theorists. By its very nature Marxist class theory has addressed itself to macro social processes, yet the dependent variables Wright is forced to use in his empirical analysis are at a micro level. Wright argues that this need not be considered an insuperable problem, if it is recognized that Marxism must relate its macro theory to a micro theory of individual outcomes, for example, to show that individual behavior is not random with respect to class. Moreover, it would be extremely difficult to produce the necessary data for an adjudication at the macro level. However, there remain some problems with the particular dependent variables Wright wishes to use. So far as class

consciousness is concerned, the available data from the survey is attitudinal, and therefore there are the usual caveats about the relationship between such data and class consciousness. Wright's view is that attitudes cannot be regarded as merely epiphenomenal but that they do have real consequences for class action. Indeed he uses neo-Weberian logic for this view in what sounds very like a restatement of the kind of theory of action used in much British social stratification research:

Class location is a basic determinant of the matrix of objective possibilities faced by individuals, the real alternatives people face in making decisions. At one level this concerns what Weber referred to as the individuals' "life chances," the overall trajectory of possibilities individuals face over the life cycle. In a more mundane way it concerns the daily choices people face about what to do and how to do it.

The objective alternatives faced by individuals, however, are not directly transformed into actual choices or practices. Those objective alternatives must be perceived, the consequences (both material and normative) of different choices assessed, and a specific alternative chosen in light of such assessments. . . . (Hence) subjectivity *mediates* the ways in which the objective conditions of class locations are translated into the active choices of class actions. While the objective social context of choice is clearly important in this explanation, I would argue that the subjective mediation of choices . . . is an essential part of the process as well. (pp. 144-5)

While we would wholeheartedly concur with this view, there still remains the question as to whether attitude items will yield valid information about this process. This is, in fact, the only type of information Wright has available. It takes the form of seven Likert items of a kind familiar from British surveys in the 1960s and 1970s (for example, "Corporations benefit owners at the expense of workers and consumers"); and one more complex item in which respondents were presented with the scenario of a strike over wages and working conditions and asked to say, without any other information being provided, which of four outcomes they would prefer. These ranged from total victory for the strikers to their total defeat. The problems of such items are well known. We cannot accept that they tell sociologists much about anything.<sup>11</sup>

11. See G. Marshall, "Some Remarks on the Study of Working-Class Consciousness," *Politics and Society*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1983), pp. 263-301. At this point we must declare an interest. During the period in which the American survey was being designed, we and others tried to persuade the American team not to use these items as a way of measuring class consciousness. However, they were retained. In the interests of comparative research we included them in the British pilot survey, but respondents were irritated by them. They found the Likert items too simplistic and the more complex item on the strike scenario impossible to answer without knowing more details than were offered.



Hence, we find ourselves in agreement with Wright's logic concerning the importance of subjectivity, but at odds concerning the measures of class consciousness used in the US survey.

The final operationalizations which Wright explains concern class structure variables, both his own and those of rival theories. His own theory involves finding measures for the three forms of asset which define the new class model. To measure assets in the means of production simply involves making a distinction between owners and nonowners and then differentiating within the category of owners. This is performed in what Wright admits is a crude way in terms of numbers of employees. Capitalists are defined as owners with ten or more employees; small employers have from two to nine employees; and the petty bourgeoisie one employee or none. Employees are then differentiated in terms of both of the other assets. Organizational assets are defined in terms of an individual's relation to supervision and decision making in his or her organization. Three categories emerge from this: managers, defined as people who have direct involvement in decision making and real authority over subordinates; supervisors, who lack decision-making powers but do have real authority over others; and nonmanagers, who have neither supervisory nor decision-making powers. Finally skill/credential assets are defined. This dimension caused Wright some problems, since a credential means nothing unless it is exploited. As Wright notes, a PhD in English is not exploiting his/her credentials if employed as a taxi driver. Simply to measure credentials is inadequate: they must be matched to jobs. Wright therefore includes job traits in the operationalization of this asset. This is done in terms of the use of both an aggregated occupational variable and, for certain occupations, a measure of job autonomy. The three categories in terms of skills/credentials which Wright produces are "experts," "skilled employees," and "non-skilled." The experts are all professionals, and managers and technicians with college degrees; skilled employees include teachers, craftworkers, managers, and technicians without degrees, and sales and clerical workers with both degrees and high autonomy; the nonskilled are all other sales and clerical workers and all manual and service workers. However, it is not clear why certain occupations are assigned to particular categories. Why, for example, are teachers not regarded as experts?

Without detailing Wright's subsequent analysis, he finds his own model superior to its rivals. Of course, he recognizes that many fellow Marxists will not accept the validity of the adjudication. Others might wish to reject its micro-individual basis. Once again, however, Wright's self defense brings out a logic which many non-Marxists would be happy to use:

even if the concept of class structure is centrally preoccupied with . . . macro historical and dynamic problems, there are, after all, real people who are systematically affected in various ways by virtue of being in one class rather than another. (p. 182)

Wright also recognizes the inherent problems of a strictly positional view of class structure and states his preference for a trajectory approach. Ironically, this is the very argument that has been used against Marxists by (among others) Stewart, Prandy, and Blackburn.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the example quoted by Wright is their very example, although this is insufficiently acknowledged: "Proletarianized white collar jobs that are really pre-managerial jobs should therefore not be considered in the same location within class relations as proletarianized jobs which are not part of such career trajectories" (pp. 185-6). In the end Wright accepts that class is a "probabilistic" concept, so that "a full account of class structure . . . has to include some kind of recognition of these probabilistic trajectories" (p. 186). In such ways Wright gives much ground to his non-Marxist critics and brings his analysis very close to theirs.

The final empirical chapters of *Classes* treat issues of class structure and the relationship between class structure and consciousness. Wright attempts to test the robustness of his new model for the problems under investigation. There is not the space here to examine these chapters in detail since this would require setting Wright's model against alternative concepts of class and class consciousness, something we are pursuing in forthcoming publications. However, his general purpose in Chapter 6 is mainly a descriptive one, involving a comparison of the similarities and differences between the class structures of Sweden and the United States in terms of the new exploitation-centered concept of class. Some attempt is made to account for the differences observed, although the main explanation offered—that similarities result from a similar economic system and differences from different political systems—is rather lame. Wright does make some speculative comments which go beyond this but he acknowledges that much detailed work remains to be done.

Wright's examination of class consciousness begins with an extended review of different approaches to the problem. He favors a definition of class consciousness which "identifies it as a particular aspect of the concrete subjectivity of human individuals . . . as an explanation of individual actions and choices" (p. 245). Such an approach is, of course, most suited to the survey data he has available. As previously noted,

12. A. Stewart, K. Prandy, and R.M. Blackburn, *Social Stratification and Occupations* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

however, the attitudinal items which are used to operationalize class consciousness are suspect. Hence, although Wright is able to show that "class attitudes are polarized in the ways predicted by the exploitation-centered concept" (p. 278), his model needs to be subjected to a more rigorous test than his data provide.

## 6

Obviously in a book of this range and ambition there are many points on which one is challenged to cross swords with the author. We can only here take up two general points and leave our more detailed analysis of Wright's model to our own future empirical analyses. Probably the major point of note is the extent to which Wright has produced a theory which yet again blurs the distinctions between neo-Weberian and Marxist analyses of class structure. Wright has effectively rejected a wholly structural account of class. The aim of his class analysis is not simply that of identifying class locations, as these are determined by relations of production, but to raise issues concerning class formation, and hence of agency and process. We have already offered a number of examples from *Classes* to illustrate this and we have noted his stated preference for a trajectory view of class. He has also opened up the whole issue of how far individuals do in fact share common interests and engage in collective action in a way unusual for a Marxist of his persuasion. All of this is to the good. However, it does produce some occasional strains in his arguments.

For example, his definitions of class structure and class formation tend to sit uneasily alongside the new approach developed in the text. Class structure is defined in terms of what needs to be demonstrated if Wright is to follow the logic of his own arguments: "a structure of social relations into which individuals . . . enter *which determine their class interests*" (p. 9, our emphasis) is surely a definition which begs the question. Whether class interests can ever be said to be determined by a structure of positions in an unmediated way is highly dubious. Moreover this definition would appear to leave aside the issue of the conditions under which class interests emerge. We would argue that definitions of class structure in terms of people's supposed real interests tend to ignore precisely the kinds of questions which Wright now wishes to open up for examination.

Similarly his definition of class formation is at odds with his subsequent comments concerning the relative openness of social processes. For Wright class formation is "the formation of organized collectivities within [the] class structure on the basis of the interests shaped by that

class structure" (p. 10). But how can this be consistent with a trajectory view of class? Surely the precise purpose of such a view is to ask *whether* classes are "identifiable as social collectivities with which individuals and families retain the same class positions over time."<sup>13</sup> Wright's implicit model of structure → interests → class formation is too crude to bear the weight of his own insights. As Goldthorpe has argued, class formation must be shown to exist at the demographic level before it can be expected to exist in any sociocultural sense, or provide a basis for collective action. To produce a model of class structure consistent with a set of theoretical propositions is only the first step in the process. It is for this reason that Goldthorpe has observed that "little value can attach to attempts, such as those of structural Marxists, to treat problems of class formation and class action without reference to the extent of class mobility."<sup>14</sup> Hence we would argue that Wright is only partially facing the problematic issues concerning classes as collectivities. In particular he must find a way of squaring his structural map with his preference for a trajectory view. Certainly he appears to see some of the problems, for shortly after offering his definitions of class structure and class formation he notes that "the process of class formation is decisively shaped by a variety of institutional mechanisms that are themselves 'relatively autonomous' from the class structure and which determine the ways in which class structures are translated into collective actors with specific ideologies and strategies" (p. 14). Thus it is not class structure alone which determines people's interests nor is it the only factor affecting class formation. It is precisely for this kind of reason that Lockwood<sup>15</sup> has pointed to the importance of the citizenship order of modern societies in his criticisms of Marxist class theories, yet nowhere does Wright refer to Lockwood in his text.

This brings us to our second general criticism of *Classes*. The book is largely addressed to a Marxist audience and this may, therefore, account for the irritating way in which Wright presents the long-held views of non-Marxist sociologists as if they were fresh insights. Some examples of this have already been offered but perhaps the most egregious concerns Wright's discovery of the importance of credentials and organizational position in any understanding of modern stratification systems. After all it was Weber who originally investigated the coincidence of these two

13. J.H. Goldthorpe, "Social Mobility and Class Formation: On the Renewal of a Tradition in Sociological Enquiry," paper presented to the ISA Research Committee on Social Stratification and Mobility, Amsterdam, 1983, p. 15.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

15. D. Lockwood, "The Weakest Link in the Chain? Some Comments on the Marxist Theory of Action," *Research in the Sociology of Work*, vol. 1 (1981).

factors in his writings on bureaucracy, and it is Goldthorpe and Stewart, Prandy, and Blackburn who have developed this approach more recently.<sup>16</sup> Not only did Weber refer to the "bureaucratization of capitalism, with its demand for expertly trained technicians, clerks, etc." but he also noted that:

If we hear from all sides demands for the introduction of regulated curricula culminating in specialized examinations, the reason behind this is, of course, not a suddenly awakened "thirst for education," but rather the desire to limit the supply of candidates for these positions.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed we are tempted to go further in our comparison of Wright and Weber. Surely Wright's use of credential and organizational assets to differentiate among the propertyless is not so different from Weber's view that the propertyless are differentiated from one another "according to the kind of services that can be offered on the market" and "that the kind of chance in the *märket* is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual's fate."<sup>18</sup> Or to put the matter more bluntly, organization assets and credential assets are aspects of work and market situations respectively.<sup>19</sup>

In the final analysis, however, we agree with Wright that the ultimate test of any class theory must be in terms of whatever it is that theory is trying to explain. We are not essentialists. Part of our future intention will be to subject this new theory to the same kinds of empirical adjudications which Wright himself uses, except that we shall make the comparison with non-Marxist theories. But this will not be without its problems, one of which is illustrated in Table 1. Wright has criticized Goldthorpe for the latter's inexplicit theorization of his class model and his over-reliance on occupational coding to operationalize it. However, the operationalization of Wright's model also requires the use of an aggregated occupational variable, derived from the American official classification system, in order to produce his credential assets variable. Before receiving from Wright details for constructing this variable, we assumed that we could use the OPCS definition of socioeconomic group as a proxy. This was because Wright's aggregated occupational variable

16. J.H. Goldthorpe, "On the Service Class: Its Formation and Future," in A. Giddens and G. MacKenzie (eds), *Social Class and the Division of Labour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Stewart, Prandy, and Blackburn, *Social Stratification and Occupations*.

17. M. Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), pp. 999-1000.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 927-8.

19. See D. Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958).

distinguishes similar groups of occupations to the OPCS socioeconomic variable. The American variable requires the grouping of professional occupations together, craftworkers together, clerical workers, and so on. Similarly socioeconomic group has categories for employed professionals, for skilled workers and junior nonmanual workers. With some careful recoding of our data, it appeared we could at least approximate the American variable. Indeed, we believed that in some respects SEG, in combination with our details of respondents' credentials, would allow the production of a credential assets variable which allowed for finer distinctions than the American equivalent. However, we did not anticipate that the differences between the use of SEG and of the American variable would be very large. Yet, as Table 1 shows, there is a marked difference in the resulting class maps of Britain according to which collapsed occupational variable is used.

It can be seen that there are considerable discrepancies across all categories of nonowners, and most especially for cells 9 and 12. Because we have not yet been able to examine the discrepancies in detail, we cannot say whether it is merely coincidence that Wright's measure produces a larger working class. However, Table 1 does point to the difficulties of assuming, as Wright seems to have done, that any occupational coding will be relatively neutral in its effects when applied to the derivation of a sociological model of class. We wonder how far Wright has considered this problem. While there are no simple solutions, given that all official measures of occupation have their own difficulties, Wright's approach does seem somewhat cavalier. When discussing the details of variable constructions in an appendix, Wright notes that "the coding of occupational title . . . [is] entirely conventional and straightforward and [does] not require any specific commentary" (p. 314). But this is hardly a satisfactory statement unless it is also shown that there are no problems with the American official scheme for coding occupations which might affect the production of a sociological model of class. It is certainly the case that Goldthorpe was able to use the British scheme in his model only after combining occupational title with a measure of employment status, following a prolonged study of the problem. Thus it is not occupational title which determines a person's Goldthorpe class, yet it *is* occupational title (along with qualifications, and in some classes job autonomy) which determines one dimension of Wright's model. Moreover, we discovered some very real problems when we tried to translate our occupational data into the American scheme, due to the national differences in classifications. When we add to this the number of occasions on which Wright has to concede the inadequacies of other key measures, much of his empirical argument must be subject to some reservations.

