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THE PERSISTENCE OF CLASSES IN POST-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETIES*

Mike Hout, Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza

Abstract Class structures have undergone important changes in recent decades with the rise of post-industrial societies. Clark and Lipset have recently interpreted these changes as evidence that class is fragmenting and losing its importance. We reject their analysis. The birth of new sources of inequality does not imply the death of the old ones. We review empirical evidence that shows how class-based stratification continues to be a central factor in social stratification. Clark and Lipset also argue that class affects politics, the economy and the family less than it used to. Their conclusion is based on a selective reading of the empirical literature. We discuss the countervailing evidence and conclude that class effects persist.

Rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated.
(Mark Twain on hearing that his obituary had been published).

At the 1958 meetings of the American Sociological Association, Robert Nisbet announced the ‘decline and fall of social class’ (Nisbet 1959). While the concept of social class was still ‘useful in historical sociology [and] comparative or folk sociology’, according to Nisbet, it is ‘nearly useless for the clarification of data of wealth, power, and social status in contemporary United States and much of Western society in general’ (ibid. : 11). Nisbet argued that class was no longer significant in the political sphere because ‘political power is spread in an unstratified way among voters’, and in the economic sphere because of a ‘massive change from an economy based preponderantly upon primary and secondary sectors to one based increasingly upon tertiary occupations’ in which ‘it is too obvious that the majority of jobs falling within the tertiary sector in modern times are not easily subsumed under any class system’ (ibid. : 15). Finally, Nisbet argued that ‘the general elevation of level of consumption and the disappearance of clear and distinct strata of consumption’ makes it ‘unlikely that self-conscious and mutually antagonistic groups will arise’ (ibid. : 16). As a result of such trends, he concluded that ‘class lines are exceedingly difficult to discover in modern economic society except in backwater areas’ (ibid.). A key piece of empirical evidence in support of these theses offered by Nisbet was an apparent decline in the use of class themes in popular novels (ibid. : 11, 16).

The suggestion that class is declining in importance has been an oft-

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repeated theme in social science literature in the years since Nisbet’s essay. Many scholars have claimed to discover, yet again, the disappearance (or impending disappearance) of classes in the years since Nisbet’s essay (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992). Theorists of post-industrial society emphasised the decline of class in the emerging social structures of modern societies in their writings (Bell 1973; Lipset 1981; Touraine 1971; see also the ‘post-materialist’ analysis of Inglehart 1990). Functionalist theories of social stratification deny the relevance of inequality in the ownership of property for the division of society into groups (Davis and Moore 1945; Parsons 1968, 1970; Sørensen 1991). Theorists of the ‘new social movements’ have also rejected the use of class in understanding the social and political dynamics of contemporary societies (Cohen 1982; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hall and Jacques 1989).

The recent paper by Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset (1991) in this journal brings together a number of these arguments to offer an updated version of the declining significance of class argument. They give an unequivocal ‘yes’ to the question in the title of their essay, ‘Are Social Classes Dying?’ They echo Nisbet’s claim that class analysis is strictly for historians in asserting that class ‘is an increasingly outmoded concept’ (ibid. : 397), and that new forms of stratification are replacing class. They support these large claims with data selected to indicate that class has less of an effect on political, economic and family outcomes than it used to, and go beyond routine reports that some of the parameters of social stratification are changing to announce the decline of classes and the fragmentation of social stratification. They lament that, 30 years after Nisbet’s essay, ‘class remains salient in sociologists’ theories and commentaries’ (ibid. : 401), and they seek to bring this state of affairs to an end.

Clark and Lipset have joined with other writers past and present who leap from data on trends to conjectures about the future. The death and dying metaphors suggest more finality than the data will support. For, while we would be contradicting our own results if we were to deny that there have been trends toward a diminished effect of class on important social indicators, e.g., the openness in mobility (Hout 1988), we see those trends as the outcome of a class-political process that is neither immutable nor irreversible. The past 25 years of class research reveal a mix of upward and downward trends in the effects of class. The mix is confusing for those who view them through the lens of Marxist and functionalist theories that specify the economy as cause and politics as consequence in the political economy of class. The empirical record is becoming clearer and clearer, however, that the causal arrow needs to be reversed. The mix of increasing, unchanging and decreasing class effects reflect the important role of politics in determining such mainstays of class analysis as the class structure itself, the mobility regime and class voting in a society (Esping-Anderson 1990; Heath et al. 1991; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992).

Coming from Seymour Martin Lipset, whose earlier work taught us much about the link between class and political life, this latest challenge to class analysis should not be ignored. Unlike Nisbet, who explicitly dismissed empirical research, arguing that ‘statistical techniques have had to become

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ever more ingenious to keep the vision of class from fading away altogether’ (1959: 12), Clark and Lipset summarise a wealth of empirical data to make their case. On closer examination, however, we find that much of the evidence they cite is highly selective and cannot withstand critical scrutiny. We are especially troubled by their complete neglect of other evidence which shows the continuing—and even rising—importance of class. Altogether, we believe it is impossible to sustain their conclusion, and in the discussion which follows we seek to show that, while class may be defined and used by social scientists in a number of different ways, the concept remains indispensable. Be it as an independent or dependent variable, sociologists will turn away from class at their own peril.

The persistence of classes

Sociologists did not invent the concept of class. But we have made more out of it than others have, mainly by emphasising the point that it is how one makes a living the determines life chances and material interests. We differ from economists’ nearly exclusive focus on the quantity of income or wealth and commonsense conceptions that blend life-style and morality with economic and sociological considerations (Jencks 1991).2 The part-time school teacher, the semi-skilled factory worker and the struggling shopkeeper may all report the same income on their tax returns, but we recognise that as salaried, hourly and self-employed workers, they have different sources of income and, consequently, different life chances.

At various points in their paper, Clark and Lipset (1991: 397, 401–2, 405) seem to equate class and hierarchy, but they are separate dimensions. Hierarchy, in sociological usage, could refer to any rankable distinctions. Class refers to a person’s relationship to the means of production and/or labour markets, and it is an important determinant of an individual’s income, wealth and social standing.3 Hierarchy or related concepts might be used as an explanation of stratification processes, as in Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) or Hout and Hauser (1992), but to use the concepts as explanandum and explanans they must be defined independently and the relationship must be spelled out.

Class is an indispensable concept for sociology because: (1) class is a key determinate of material interests; (2) structurally defined classes give rise to—or influence the formation of—collective actors seeking to bring about social change; and (3) class membership affects the life chances and behaviour of individuals. The first concern refers to the intrinsic importance of class. The other two are relevant for ‘class analysis’—the investigation of how class affects other aspects of social life. Clark and Lipset state their case—which refers to all three of these concerns—without acknowledging that each raises different sets of issues. As a result of these confusions, Clark and Lipset’s argument collapses analytically distinct processes.

Clark and Lipset also confuse trends in society with trends in writing about society. To be sure, our conceptions of class have grown more complex over the years. Marx’s initial codification of the importance of whether one
works for a living or expropriates a profit from the sale of goods produced by others has been supplemented over the years by additional distinctions, most of which are ignored by Clark and Lipset. In addition to workers and capitalists, contemporary Marxist accounts of class structure recognise professionals and crafts persons, who extract rents on their expertise, and managers and supervisors, who extract rents on their organisational assets (Wright 1985). These are not mere status distinctions, as Clark and Lipset would have it. They are class distinctions because they specify economic roles with respect to labour markets and material interests. Contemporary Weberian theories of class also admit to complexity without negating the existence of classes. Weberians focus on the closure strategies that professionals and skilled workers use to influence labour markets to their collective advantage (Parkin 1979; Goldthorpe 1980: 39–46; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992: 42–3; Manza 1992) and the internal labour markets that select managers and supervisors (Parkin 1979; Kalleberg and Berg 1987). While sociologists’ models of class are a lot more complicated than they used to be, complexity alone does not imply that class is dead or dying.

Clark and Lipset’s conclusions about the decline of class in post-industrial societies hinge on the claim that ‘traditional hierarchies are declining; economic and family hierarchies determine much less than just a generation or two ago’ (1991: 401). However, hierarchy is never defined and the assumed link between hierarchy and class in their formulation is at best vague. In moving back and forth between a materialist analysis of class to the vaguer concept of ‘hierarchy’, Clark and Lipset are tacitly shifting the terrain of debate away from class per se. This conceptual slippage makes it easier for them to conclude that classes are dying. Their emphasis on hierarchy is also potentially misleading in that forms of hierarchy could decline without any change in class structure or the general importance of class for systems of stratification or political behaviour. They persistently conflate class-based inequalities with non-class forms of stratification. Perhaps as a consequence, Clark and Lipset conveniently ignore some of the most salient aspects of class inequalities in contemporary capitalist societies. First, they completely ignore the remarkable persistence in the high levels of wealth controlled by the bourgeoisie in these societies. Further, they ignore the capacity of wealth-holders to influence political processes, either directly through financial contributions, intra-class organisational and political networks and government agencies, or indirectly through control over investment decisions (Clawson, Neustadt and Scott 1992; Domhoff 1990; Useem 1984; and Bottomore and Brym 1989 on direct control; and Block 1987, 1992; Lindblom 1977 on indirect control).

Private fortunes are still predicated on ownership of the means of production. During the 1980s when inequality of wealth and earnings was growing in the United States and elsewhere, the private fortunes at the forefront of resurgent inequality were in almost all cases built through ownership. High-tech champions like Gates, merchandisers like Walton and developers like Trump got rich because they owned the means of production. Arbitragers collected high fees and executives were ‘overcompensated’, but
they gained more from ownership of shares of stock than from their wages and salaries (Crystal 1991).

One important test for class analysis is the demonstration that some classes have material advantages over others. If classes are dying, then we would expect incumbents of different classes to earn similar amounts, i.e., all of the income or earnings inequality should be within classes. Table 1 shows previously unpublished evidence regarding the relationship between class and earnings in the United States in late 1991. The two leading class schemes in the current literature – Wright (1985) and Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) – are used. We are confident that other carefully crafted class schemes would also show significant variation in earnings levels.

The class differences in earnings are statistically and substantively significant. Wright’s capitalist class are at the top of the earnings distribution and his bottom class – workers – are at the bottom. The ratio of earnings from top to bottom is 4.2 : 1 for men and 2.5 : 1 for women. Wright’s class scheme explains 20 per cent of the variance in earnings. Adjusting for sex, education, age and hours worked mediates some of the class differences, but the adjusted means show significant variation. The Erikson–Goldthorpe scheme also shows a pattern of significant variation. The ratio of the top class’s earnings to the earnings of their lowest class is 4.9 : 1 among men and 3.6 : 1 among women. The ratio of between class variance to total variance in the Erikson–Goldthorpe schema is .17. From both class schemes it is clear that changes in the class structure have not eroded the important effects of class on earnings.

The growth of the proportion of the population that is middle-class and the proliferation of middle classes has also not negated the persistence of income inequality (Smeeding 1991) and the growing proportions of the populations of industrial societies that are living in extreme poverty. The broad outlines of this ‘new poverty’ (Markland 1990) are becoming increasingly clear (Wacquant 1993). The existence of long-term joblessness or occupational marginality among sectors of the populations of these societies, and the growth of low-income areas characterised by multiple sources of deprivation for residents (Massey 1990; Massey and Eggers 1990) does not fit very well with Clark and Lipset’s claims about the decline of ‘traditional hierarchies’.

In general, the persistence of wealth and power at the top and growing poverty and degradation at the bottom of contemporary class structures suggests that Clark and Lipset’s conclusions about the impending death of classes is premature. In the United States, the country which we know best, it is becoming increasingly common in urban communities for privileged professionals and managers to live in secluded enclaves and suburbs (often behind locked gates) or in secured high-rise condominiums, while marginalised sectors of the population are crowded into increasingly dangerous inner-city areas (a trend discussed at length by the new Secretary of Labor in the United States, Robert Reich, in a recent book – Reich 1991; Davis 1991). As long as such conditions prevail, we are sceptical that sociologists would be wise to abandon the concept of class, whatever other evidence might be adduced to show that the importance of class is declining.

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### Table 1: Earnings by Class: United States, 1991 ($n = 1,557$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Annual earnings(^a)</th>
<th>Annual earnings (adjusted)(^b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wright Schema</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more employees</td>
<td>$71,300</td>
<td>$27,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–9 employees</td>
<td>$34,400</td>
<td>$23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No employees (petty bourgeoisie)</td>
<td>$20,800</td>
<td>$9,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert managers</td>
<td>$46,500</td>
<td>$30,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert supervisors</td>
<td>$44,900</td>
<td>$26,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert nonmanagers</td>
<td>$32,500</td>
<td>$24,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-credentialled managers</td>
<td>$32,300</td>
<td>$22,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-credentialled supervisors</td>
<td>$20,800</td>
<td>$19,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-credentialled nonmanagers</td>
<td>$25,800</td>
<td>$17,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncredentialled managers</td>
<td>$22,200</td>
<td>$14,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncredentialled supervisors</td>
<td>$23,100</td>
<td>$16,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>$16,800</td>
<td>$11,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Erikson-Goldthorpe Schema</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper professional (Ia)</td>
<td>$39,200</td>
<td>$28,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper manager (Ib)</td>
<td>$56,200</td>
<td>$27,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower professional (Iia)</td>
<td>$24,400</td>
<td>$18,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower manager (Iib)</td>
<td>$33,400</td>
<td>$18,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerk or sales worker (IIIb)</td>
<td>$22,800</td>
<td>$13,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service worker (IIIb)</td>
<td>$14,500</td>
<td>$7,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer (IVA)</td>
<td>$41,800</td>
<td>$21,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty bourgeoisie (IVb)</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
<td>$9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technician or supervisor (V)</td>
<td>$24,700</td>
<td>$17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled worker (VI)</td>
<td>$22,600</td>
<td>$15,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiskilled worker (VIIIs)</td>
<td>$19,100</td>
<td>$13,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled worker (VIIus)</td>
<td>$11,500</td>
<td>$10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer w/employees (IVc)</td>
<td>$27,400</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmer, no employees (IVd)</td>
<td>$26,600</td>
<td>$4,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm labourer (VIIf)</td>
<td>$16,700</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) We calculated the geometric mean instead of the usual arithmetic mean because of the well-known positive skew of the earnings distribution.

\(^b\) We adjusted the geometric mean for the effects of education, age (including a term for age-squared), hours worked and class (dummy variables) by regressing the log of earnings on these variables for men and women separately. The adjusted means are the antilog of the value expected for a 40-year-old person with a high school diploma who worked 40 hours per week for a full year.

\(^c\) Fewer than five cases.
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Are social classes dying? No

The evidence presented above should be enough to sustain our thesis that class divisions persist in post-industrial societies. But Clark and Lipset base their critique less on the existence of class divisions than on the supposed decline in the effects of class in three ‘situuses’ (politics, the economy and the family) in these societies. We shall show that, even on their own terms, Clark and Lipset’s empirical evidence cannot support their conclusions about the declining significance of class.

Politics. To demonstrate the declining significance of class in the political arena, Clark and Lipset attempt to show that class voting has declined. Their evidence is based on the claim that ‘the Alford Index [of class voting] has declined in every country for which data are available’ (1991: 403).12 Four observations about their data undermine these assertions, however.

First, their reliance on the Alford Index as the proper measure of class voting is highly dubious. That index is based on a two-class model of society. It is computed by simply subtracting the percentage of non-manual occupations voting for left parties from the percentage of persons in manual occupations voting for left parties (Alford 1963: 79–80). By lumping together all persons employed in non-manual occupations in one ‘class’, and all persons working in manual occupations into the other ‘class’, the Alford Index creates artificially high levels of cross-class voting among both groups. For example, secretaries, low-level clerks and service-sector employees, who may have very similar class interests to manual workers, are counted as deviant if they vote for left parties. It has been apparent for some time that the two-class model used in the Alford Index is overly simplistic, and does not capture the full complexity of class voting (Korpi 1972; Robertson 1984). The two ‘classes’ invoked by Alford have no relation to Marxist class categories and are far too crude for Weberian or functionalist approaches (Blau and Duncan 1967: 432–3), so it is useless for testing hypotheses.

It will come as no surprise, then, to learn that the crude two-class model significantly underestimates the extent of class voting. By constructing a much more careful conception of the class structure than that employed by Clark and Lipset, Przeworski and Sprague (1986) derived very different estimates of both the cross-sectional differences and trends in class voting. They found that class voting between 1900 and 1975 was relatively stable in three countries (Germany, Norway and Finland), declined in one country (Denmark), and increased in the other three countries (Sweden, Belgium and France) (Przeworski and Sprague 1986: Ch. 5).13 Przeworski and Sprague’s evidence is not above criticism, but it leads us to reject Clark and Lipset’s generalisation about a monotonic decline in class voting in advanced capitalist societies.

Second, there are important technical limitations of the Alford Index which have substantive implications for our ability to understand trends in class voting (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1987). The Alford Index is subject to sampling error, yet Clark and Lipset use it uncritically without testing for significance. As Heath and his colleagues have pointed out, ‘it is a
straightforward matter to test whether changes in that index are statistically significant, and therefore ‘scholars who use it should surely be expected to carry out such tests’ (1987 : 265). More serious than this lapse of scientific practice is the fact that the range of values that the Alford Index can take on is constrained by the marginal totals. This means that whenever the marginals change, for example when new parties or candidates enter the electoral arena or the electoral balance among parties shifts significantly, the index can fluctuate wildly, even if the overall logic of class voting remains unchanged. Simple models for assessing association controlling for changes in the marginal distributions have been available to social scientists for 20 years (Goodman 1972) and are part of all widely disseminated computer packages, so there is no need to rely on the potentially misleading Alford Index.

Third, the cross-national differences among the five countries they consider raise serious doubts about their proposition that ‘hierarchy generates and maintains rigid class relations’ (Clark and Lipset 1991 : 402). Problems with the Alford Index notwithstanding, reasonable estimates of class voting are likely to show Sweden as the nation with the strongest association between class and voting (among the five countries considered by Clark and Lipset) and the United States as the weakest. And yet, with respect to income inequality, Sweden is the most egalitarian country among the five by most indicators and the United States the least among the five (Esping-Anderson 1990). Parkin (1971), Korpi (1983) and Esping-Anderson (1990), among others, have advanced the converse proposition that Sweden’s class politics have produced the social policies responsible for Sweden’s low levels of inequality. Not only are the data inconsistent, but the causal order between egalitarianism and class voting is reversed.

Fourth, Clark and Lipset seem to assume an unmediated connection between class and voting, ignoring completely the decisive role of unions, social movement organisations and political parties in shaping the conditions under which voters make choices. When parties and other political organisations are organised around class, high levels of class voting can be expected. Przeworski and Sprague’s (1986) analysis of the dynamics of social democratic parties based originally on working-class votes suggests that the strategic decision of these parties to weaken their class-based appeals to seek middle-class votes – a trend celebrated in Lipset (1990) – has had a profound effect on the social bases of their political support. If workers’ parties abandon or compromise their specific interests, does it mean those interests no longer exist? We say ‘no’. Class interests may remain latent in the political arena, but this does not mean they do not exist.

Clark and Lipset flesh out their case for the declining significance of class for politics by arguing that the traditional left/right cleavages characteristic of democratic capitalist societies have increasingly given way to more complex, multidimensional political ideologies. Such a claim shifts the focus from class as a determinant of political views to class or class inequalities as an object of public opinion. Clark and Lipset repeat the assertion that there are now ‘two lefts’, one based on the economic demands of subordinate classes, the other stressing ‘social issues’ (1991 : 403; Lipset 1981 : 510-1). From this
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disjuncture of economy and society, they wish to infer that the class content of political struggles and public debate is declining. However, this contention is not supported by either the data they cite or by the existing research literature. For example, Weakliem’s (1991) research on the dimensionality of class and voting casts doubt on the empirical adequacy of Clark and Lipset’s interpretation of political trends. Weakliem finds that, while a second (plausibly post-materialist) dimension of politics is necessary to explain the relationship between class and party identification, it applies equally well to older and younger cohorts. The similarity of cohorts contradicts the claim that complexity is new, and Weakliem’s crucial finding that ‘all classes have been moving toward the postmaterialist left’ in his analysis of voting trends in Italy, the Netherlands and France (1991:1350) leads us to reject Clark and Lipset’s assertions about the ‘two lefts’.15

The complexities of political strategies and tactics make the distinction between class as a causal agent and class or inequality as an object of discussion absolutely critical. Merely because an issue is not directly couched in terms of class or traditional left-right politics does not mean that class is irrelevant to understanding it. Luker’s (1984) research on the world-views of pro-choice and pro-life activists exemplifies an issue which – while not ostensibly about class – turns in part on the contrasting class interests and experiences of the activists. What if some ‘new’ social issues have become the object of political struggles and public debate in part because they resonate with peoples’ traditional left–right political heuristics (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991)? Could it be that controversies over affirmative action or the extension of rights to new categories of citizens (such as the disabled) gain their ideological strength from being about ‘old’ (class) issues, such as equality or social democracy?

Finally, we note that Clark and Lipset supplement their arguments about the declining significance of class in politics with an analysis of the political attitudes of French and American mayors. They argue that the ‘traditional class-political association between fiscal and social liberalism’ (1991:403) is true for older French mayors, but not for younger French mayors or American mayors of any age. We are not sure what to make of this evidence. It is not immediately clear what relationship ‘social liberalism’ (defined by the authors as issues such as ‘abortion’ and ‘tolerance towards minorities’) has ever had to class politics. The pattern they predict seems to hold for the French mayors (younger generations being significantly less ‘traditional’ in the terms defined by Clark and Lipset), but not for the American mayors (where the data shows that there is no association between age and traditional liberalism).

Even if these data somehow did tell us something useful about the ideologies of mayors, we are unconvinced that it is relevant for their thesis that ‘younger, more educated and more affluent persons in more affluent and less hierarchical societies should move furthest from traditional class politics’ (ibid.). First, it is not self-evident that younger mayors are more affluent (than older mayors are? than younger mayors used to be?). More importantly, generalising from elites to the mass public is extremely risky. Elites have consistently been found to have more coherent, stable, comprehensive

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political belief systems than non-elite actors (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964). In this particular case, mayors’ views are likely to have been forged under more pressure than the average citizen experiences, as mayors are caught between the rock of fiscal constraint and the hard place of public opinion (Clark and Ferguson 1983). While elites’ attitudes might be interesting in their own right, they cannot be generalised to the views of the publics they represent (McClosky and Brill 1983: 418–9).

In short, Clark and Lipset’s evidence on class politics is incomplete and unconvincing. They have failed to make the case that class is declining in importance for politics. Class never was the all-powerful explanatory variable that some intellectual traditions assumed in earlier periods; class was always only one source of political identity and action alongside race, religion, nationality, gender and others. To say that class matters less now than it used to requires that one exaggerate its importance in the past and underestimate its importance at present. Class is important for politics to the extent that political organisations actively organise around class themes. Hence, in some periods the political consequences of class may appear latent, even if the underlying logic of class is unchanged. We believe that on balance, however, the evidence shows that class remains important, and that Clark and Lipset fail to demonstrate that class voting and traditional political values have declined.

Post-industrial economic trends. Clark and Lipset argue that ‘economic growth undermines hierarchical class stratification’ (1991: 405). They argue markets are growing in relevance as a consequence of rising incomes, and that ‘decentralised, demand-sensitive decision-making’ is growing to meet ever more complex consumer demand (ibid.). While huge firms are in relative decline and smaller niche-oriented ventures are increasing in at least some countries (Sabel 1982; Piore and Sabel 1984), we question whether any of the other claims they make in this section can stand up to critical scrutiny.

We first note that Clark and Lipset’s claims about the growing ‘marketness’ of capitalist societies in comparison to earlier periods is very difficult to sustain empirically (Block 1990: 56–66), and no substantial evidence is provided by these authors. Further, it ignores completely the steady and spectacular growth of the state throughout the course of the twentieth century in all industrial societies (Esping-Anderson 1990).

Even if Clark and Lipset’s claims about growing marketness were true, there is good reason to question their analysis of how this affects class-based stratification. For example, they note that most job growth in recent years has taken place in small firms (1991: 405, citing Birch 1979). But they fail to point out that smaller firms are rarely able to offer their employees all of the income, benefits and job security of larger firms and that most unstable, low-paying jobs are located in small firms (Gordon, Edwards and Reich 1982; Edwards 1988; O’Connor 1973; Stolzenberg 1978).

Clark and Lipset then argue that more advanced technologies make it ‘harder . . . to plan in advance and control administratively’ and that these economic changes are leading to a ‘decline in traditional authority, hierarchy
and class relations' (1991: 406; emphasis in the original). Their discussion of technology takes the most optimistic conceivable scenarios as reality, ignoring the more complex institutional patterns actually emerging in post-industrial societies. The use of new management styles in response to the appearance of high technology is heavily dependent on the context in which it is embedded (Zuboff 1988; Shaiken 1984). In many firms, managers resist any transfer of authority to lower-level employees, even if the new 'smart machines' make possible a democratisation of decision-making within firms (Zuboff 1988). Far from eliminating class struggle, the introduction of new technology and management styles often creates new forms of class conflict. The jury is still out on the fate of hierarchy in post-industrial firms.

Finally, Clark and Lipset argue that economic growth is undermining 'local stratification hierarchies as markets grow – regionally, nationally, internationally' (1991: 406). Mills (1946) effectively countered such observations nearly half a century ago by arguing that the gulf between decision centres in metropolitan skyscrapers and the dispersed loci of production and consumption was yet another layer of stratification, not a pattern that 'combine[s] to undermine the familialistic-quasi-monopolistic tradition of business hierarchy and class stratification patterns' (1991: 407), as Clark and Lipset would have it.18

*Family.* Clark and Lipset argue that the ‘slimmed’ family in post-industrial society has ‘increasingly become characterised by more egalitarian relations . . . [as] hierarchical stratification has weakened’ (ibid.). While the patterns they refer to in support of these arguments (greater freedom of marriage and divorce, greater opportunities for women to work in the paid labour force, and the decline of extended family arrangements) are clearly important, they provide no evidence that the ‘slimmed’ family is a more egalitarian one. The modern family is a good deal more complex than Clark and Lipset imply (Connell 1987: 120–5). Research on contemporary family life suggests that while egalitarian beliefs are more widespread than in earlier periods, a clear gender division of labour remains in place in most families (Hochschild 1989). In the United States, for example, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that the rise in female-headed ‘slimmed’ families with the liberalisation of divorce law has led to rising rates of poverty in female-headed families (Thistle 1992: Ch. 4; Weizman 1985). For the urban poor, the ‘slimmed family’ celebrated by Clark and Lipset is a major source of poverty and inequality (Wilson 1987). This is attributable in part to the positive association between husbands’ and wives’ occupations that increases differences among families even as differences within families decrease (Bianchi 1981; Hout 1982).

Under ‘family’, Clark and Lipset also address recent changes in social mobility, arguing that ‘the slimmer family determines less the education and jobs of individual family members’ and that ‘social mobility studies show decreasing effects of parents’ education and income in explaining children’s occupational success’ (citing Featherman and Hauser 1978 and Hout 1988). However, Clark and Lipset fail to take due note of the sources of those changes. It is true that class origin affects students’ progress through the
educational systems of most industrial societies less than it used to, but the cause of diminished educational stratification is not less class-based selection but less selection of any kind at the early transitions where class matters most (Mare 1980, 1981). Replications of Mare’s results for the United States in 15 industrial societies show that only Sweden, Hungary and the former Czechoslovakia had real declines in class-based selection (Shavit and Blossfeld 1992; Raftery and Hout 1993). In Hungary and Czechoslovakia political party tests replaced class selection; only Sweden saw a real growth in the openness of the educational stratification process.

Likewise, falling class barriers to social mobility cannot be attributed to ‘affluence’ or other indirect forces. The expansion of higher education in the United States – a class-conscious policy designed to benefit youth of lower-middle and working-class origins – has brought down class barriers to achievement (Hout 1988). It works because throughout this century a college diploma served to cancel the effect of social origins on occupational success. By making college accessible to working-class youth, the expansion of higher education in the United States removed class barriers for those who took advantage. Elsewhere, different mechanisms affected mobility. In Sweden, the social democratic welfare state assured more equal access not only to universities but also to jobs in desirable occupations (Esping-Anderson 1990: 144–161). In Hungary, political tests for professions and managerial positions guaranteed a dramatic weakening of class barriers during the first generation of communist rule; it slackened after the first generation (Wong and Hauser 1992). Where class-conscious action does not organise opportunity, as in Ireland (Hout 1989: Ch. 11), class barriers are unshaken – even by industrialisation on a scale that might be said to lead to an increase in ‘affluence’.

Conclusion: classes are not dying

Class structures have undergone important changes in recent decades, with the rise of post-industrial societies. The birth of new sources of inequality does not imply the death of the old ones. In arguing that Clark and Lipset have failed to show that social classes are dying, we do not wish to imply that there have been no changes in the class structures of advanced capitalist societies, or in the association between class and other social phenomena. The manual working class has declined in size in recent decades in most countries, while the proportion of the labour force working in the service sector has increased. Such changes are important; they tell us that nineteenth-century models of class are no longer adequate. Yet moving to more complex, multidimensional models of class does not imply that classes are dying. The persistence of class-based inequalities in capitalist societies suggests that in the foreseeable future the concept of class will – and should – play an important role in sociological research.

While the research evidence on the persistence of class as a factor in life chances and politics is abundant and convincing, explanations for that persistence are not. As a profession we have documented the parameters of
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class relations to a high degree of precision, while simultaneously demolishing the older theories that framed our work. We have discovered that class structures are more complex than Marxist and other theories that assign class structure a causal role in the evolution of societies and less subject to the calming effects of affluence than modernisation theories posit. The theoretical question for the next decade is ‘Why is class so complex and why is it dependent on politics instead of determinative of politics?’ As citizens and sociologists we would very much like to live in a world in which class inequalities have disappeared. But – to paraphrase Gramsci – class society is not yet dying, and truly classless societies have not yet been born.

Notes

1. Clark and Lipset do say at one point in their paper that their goal is not to ‘suggest that it [i.e. class] be abandoned altogether, but complemented by other factors’ (1991 : 401). The general thrust of their argument, however, is to throw out class altogether. For example, they never indicate in what concrete ways they believe the concept of class remains relevant. It is this general thrust to which we respond.

2. We note, however, that Clark and Lipset (1991 : 400) put great stock in lifestyle when they cite Parkin’s contention that ‘the absence of clearly visible and unambiguous marks of inferior status has made the enforcement of an all-pervasive deference system almost impossible to sustain outside the immediate work situation. It would take an unusually sharp eye to detect the social class of Saturday morning shoppers in the High Street, whereas to any earlier generation it would have been the most elementary task’ (Parkin 1979 : 69; our emphasis). To our minds, this is evidence of waning status distinctions, not waning class distinctions. Thus it counts Clark and Lipset’s general point that status distinctions are on the rise as class is on the wane. See Manza (1992) for a discussion of the class themes latent in Parkin’s ‘closure theory’.

3. In this essay we adopt a generic definition of class that we hope is compatible with the contemporary versions of both neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian concepts. We wish to avoid distracting from our main point that class continues to affect social stratification and politics by discussing the ongoing debates among class theorists over how best to understand both the concept of class and the ways in which classes have importance in contemporary societies. Scholars who infer that class has become irrelevant just because class analysts disagree on the best way to codify their structure or measure their effects fall into the same logical error as the creationists who infer that evolution does not describe natural history because biologists disagree about sequences and causes.

4. We must note the misreading of Wright’s work by Clark and Lipset. They argue that even a ‘self-described Marxist’ such as Wright is forced to ‘incorporate[s] so much post-Weberian multidimensionality’ in his models of class structure (1991 : 400). They imply that Wright (and other contemporary class analysts) are implicitly abandoning the concept of class in their work, ignoring the underlying class logic of Wright’s analysis of the mechanisms of exploitation.

5. For example, one could imagine a class society in which traditional hierarchies based on gender or race had completely disappeared, if one’s life chances were completely uninfluenced by one’s gender or race. Wright (1990) compares the logic of classless versus genderless societies.

6. The pattern of the amount of wealth controlled by the richest 1 per cent of the populations of different capitalist societies seems to be remarkably consistent and seems to hold across different societies. Wolff’s (1991) careful reconstruction of trends in the distribution of household wealth in Sweden, Britain and the United States shows a common decline from the early 1920s to the early 1970s, and no change or actual increases in bourgeois wealth over the last two decades (see also Levy 1987 and Phillips 1991 on the United States; Sharrocks 1987 on Britain; and Spänt 1987 on Sweden). Including an augmented measure of household wealth which includes retirement benefits, Wolff concludes that the top 1 per cent in all three societies control more than 20 per cent of all household wealth. The essays contained in Bottomore and Brym (1989) provide useful overviews of the persistence of the economic power controlled by the capitalist class in
seven countries. Maurice Zeitlin's (1989) provocative essays have influenced our thinking on these issues.

7. We would further note that elite educational institutions play an important role in transmitting privilege from one generation to another. For a discussion of these issues, see Baltzell (1958) and Domhoff (1970) on the general mechanisms of transmission of privilege, and Useem and Karabel (1986) on the way such privileges operate in pathways to corporate hierarchies in the United States; see Marceau (1977) on France; and the essays in Bottomore and Brym (1989) on capital class privileges in seven leading countries. Finally, Marceau (1989) discusses the making of an international capitalist elite.

8. The data from a national telephone survey of American adults over 18 years old conducted by the UC Berkeley Survey Research Center under the direction of Michael Hout, Erik Olin Wright and Martin Sánchez-Jankowski (1992). A portable, self-documenting SPSS file is available via anonymous ftp at eunice.ssc.wisc.edu in directory /pub/usa92. A raw data file is available on 3.5" or 5.25" floppy disc for a $10 charge to cover the cost of the disc and postage from Hout, c/o UC Berkeley Survey Research Center, 2538 Channing Way, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA. The data will soon be archived at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, at the University of Michigan.

9. The well-known positive skew of earnings data is controlled by taking the geometric mean instead of the usual arithmetic mean, i.e., by logging earnings, taking the means of the logs, and then reporting the antilog of the mean of the logs. Class differences in earnings are shown in gross and adjusted form. The gross earnings are the observed data. The adjusted means are the earnings expected for a 40-year old person who has 12 years of schooling and worked 40 hours per week for the full year based on a regression of logged earnings on education, age, age squared and hours worked for men and women separately.

10. The classes on the top and bottom differ by gender. For men the top class is upper-level managers and the bottom is unskilled workers; among women the top and bottom classes are upper-level professionals and service workers, respectively.

11. For discussions of the new poverty in the United States, England, Italy and the Netherlands respectively, see Jencks and Peterson (1991); Townsend et al. (1987); Mingione (1991); Engbersen (1989). See also Wacquant (1993) for an excellent analysis of some of the similarities and differences of the new poverty in France and the United States.

12. The amateurish presentation of this data in their paper makes it difficult to assess due to the lack of technical details, but we will suspend disbelief and take them at face value here. We would note, however, that the title of the graph reporting these data misleadingly claims class voting has declined in all Western democracies, when the authors in fact only have data for five countries.

13. We would point out that the magnitude of the increase in France, Belgium and Sweden is substantial: from 0 and 9 in 1900 and 1914 in Belgium to 27 in 1975, from 32 in 1914 to 69 in 1975 in Sweden, and from negative levels of class voting in the period before the 1930s in France to 34 in 1975.

14. The much greater analytical power of such techniques and their importance in estimating class voting is demonstrated in the lively debates over class voting in Britain. The use of the Alford Index and related measures by Sarlvik and Crewe (1983) to show a purported decline in class voting has been decisively refuted by the more nuanced analysis of Heath and his colleagues (1985, 1987, 1991) who find 'trendless fluctuation' but no concrete evidence of declining class voting in Britain (see also Marshall et al. 1988: Ch. 9; Weikliem 1989). Halle and Romo (1991) apply some of these techniques in an effective analysis of class voting in the United States.

15. To be sure, there may be new political issues, or at least older issues which have once again become the object of increased ideological conflict, such as gender or the environment in the post-1960s period. But this does not mean that the re-emergence or politicisation of these issues is sufficient to either displace or reconstitute fundamental dimensions such as the left-right continuum in politics. This point is indirectly supported by a recent strand of theorising in public opinion research (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991), which demonstrates the centrality of heuristics for understanding the political reasoning of the average citizen. In the context of class analysis, we want to propose that in so far as class and left-right identification operate as heuristics, they provide people with a source of readily comprehensible likes and dislikes, as well as attitudes and values. This means that, in contrast to Clark and Lipset's argument, there is reason to expect left-right world-views to be quite robust, providing a framework for
incorporating new issues of conflicts. It is also reasonable to infer that class issues and left–right political identification are ideological resources which political parties or social movements have at their strategic disposal. This point is relevant when considering how the class-voting relationship is mediated by parties and other organisations. Strategic actors may, on the one hand, attempt to mitigate the effect of class differences by making cross-class appeals. But they may also choose to actively make use of class-based appeals as well. Both these strategies underscore the latent power of class.

16. We echo Duncan (1959 : 28) here: ‘It is therefore entirely possible that the confidence with which one sets forth an account of class structure in 18th or 19th century England is partly a function of a paucity of the data on occupational differentiation, income levels, budget patterns, public attitudes, styles of life, and the like that the investigator of contemporary society demands’.

17. We would suggest that the same is true of other sources of social inequality and differentiation. Race and gender, for example, have always been important to the social fabric of American society, but they have not always been central loci of political organisation and struggle.


19. The policies that expanded equality of educational opportunity have been eroded by ‘taxpayers’ revolts’ and diminished economic growth. If the argument in Hout (1988) is correct, such developments should eventually lead to a re-emergence of class barriers to mobility. An updating of the analysis through to 1992 shows no change in mobility patterns since 1982, but it is likely that not enough time has passed for the effects of reduction in spending for education to be felt.

References

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