

# Introduction: Taking Stock of Class

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**S**OCIAL CLASS has an odd place in sociology. On the one hand, class is prominently featured in many core aspects of the discipline. Its centrality has a long lineage: the theoretical foundations for studying social class were established by many of the leading figures of sociology, including Marx and Weber (Wright 2005). Comparing and contrasting these theoretical perspectives is a time-honored tradition in graduate education. Similarly, some sociology professors report that their favorite moments in the classroom involve contesting young people's presumption of the viability of the American Dream. From dramatic charts showing that the "wealthiest 1 percent of all Americans accounted for 38 percent of the nation's total net worth" to pictures taken with hidden cameras showing how elites gather for summer leisure in exclusive enclaves such as the Bohemian Grove, sociology professors routinely suggest in lectures that classes exist in the United States (Giddens, Duneier, and Appelbaum 2007; Domhoff 2006).<sup>1</sup> They also demonstrate that, ideological support to the contrary, there is a limited amount of mobility in American society (McNamee and Miller 2004; see also Alvarez and Kolker 2001).

On the other hand, few contemporary empirical studies that use the concept of class find their way into academic journals. This is inconsistent with the "pride of place" that class occupies in sociology's theoretical traditions. Rather than measure and analyze "class," studies often use the terms "inequality," "stratification," "family background," or specific indicators (such as education, wealth, income, or occupation)—sometimes

interchangeably. As a result, considerable murkiness swirls around the empirical study of social class. As shown in this chapter, reasonable people disagree about the best way to define the concept of social class, and many, leery of conceptual ambiguity and confusion, avoid the term altogether.

There are other troubles. For example, the debate about whether the concept of class is even worth retaining in empirical research remains unresolved. Fifty years ago, Robert Nisbet (1959) proclaimed that “the term social class . . . is nearly valueless for the clarification of the data of wealth, power, and social status” (11). Somewhat later, Terry Nichols Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset (1991) asserted that social classes were “dying.” In their 1996 book *The Death of Class*, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters continued to challenge the viability of the concept of social class in the study of politics:

Class has collapsed and is decomposing, leaving only the merest traces of its effects. If it ever was real and salient, and we are certainly prepared to admit that class was a sturdy historical reality, it is no longer. . . . Classes are dissolving . . . the most advanced societies are no longer class societies. (Pakulski and Waters 1996, 7)<sup>2</sup>

Building on these studies, Paul Kingston, in *The Classless Society* (2001), launches a full-scale assault on the value of the concept of class in the American context. He argues that “groups of people sharing common economic positions—what are commonly designated as ‘classes’—do not share distinct similar, life-defining experiences.” He suggests that “class theories misrepresent the structure of inequality in contemporary American society.” Kingston is particularly concerned with the lack of empirical evidence: “Class theory has not only been developed with little empirical validation, but has been advanced in the face of much disconfirming research” (Kingston 2001, 1, 3). These resounding critiques suggest that the empirical evidence does not support the continued salience of the concept of social class.

Are these critiques of the concept of social class correct? One way to address this issue is to examine the significance of class across different spheres of social life. Indeed, as the field has become increasingly specialized, many researchers are knowledgeable about a relatively specific topic. Within sociology, subfields (for example, the sociology of education) are divided into further subfields. In this climate, it is hard to perceive common themes in the research spanning the discipline. It is particularly difficult to discern whether “class” is a viable concept that has empirical meaning across a variety of subfields. Thus, to take stock of the viability of the concept of social class, an assessment would surely benefit by a broader perspective—one that looks not simply at a single dimension of social life but “horizontally” across many.

In addition, the studies that do exist often appear to be orthogonal to one other. Exchanges among scholars taking stock of the state of empirical research on class are rare.<sup>3</sup> The field could fruitfully be moved forward by more conversation about the various definitions of class, an assessment of critical decision-points in empirical research, and the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches. Such a conversation would advance our understanding of the various conceptions of social class in sociology, the ways in which social class is presented and discussed in the media and public life, and the range of definitions that are being used today in empirical research.

This book addresses these issues. It seeks to determine whether there is evidence to support the viability of the concept of social class across a number of spheres: identity, education, politics, health, family life, and urban communities. In addition, the volume seeks to assess the varying definitions of social class that are used in empirical work and to elucidate important challenges facing the researchers doing empirical work. In fact, the project was conceived as an effort to bring together scholars who share an interest in analyzing social class but who also offer differing approaches to the topic. It grew out of a conference on the topic that took place at New York University in April 2006. The conference was a lively gathering with a vibrancy of intellectual exchange.<sup>4</sup> This was partly due to the fact that the conference brought together a relatively small group of faculty and graduate students—eighty persons—who shared common interests but were not used to such a gathering of qualitative and quantitative scholars as well as scholars working in a diversity of subfields. The conference, like this volume, also sought to cast a broad net. The conference organizers stressed the importance of being inclusive in the conception of class, pushing the boundaries of efforts to examine class empirically, and facilitating a critical conversation on the limits as well as the strengths of various approaches to class. Hence, the editors also asked journalists from leading national publications (the *New York Times*, television's *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, and *Harper's* magazine) to share their thoughts on the meaning and use of the concept of class in the public sphere. Their thoughtful essays, which are included here as an epilogue to the chapters by sociologists, clearly convey the confusion surrounding the concept of class in American society.

For example, Janny Scott, a reporter who took a leadership role in the *New York Times* series on social class, reflects on the difficulty in getting others to understand what they were doing (*New York Times* 2005). She recounts an early meeting with a senior editor concerning the project:

I said I had been thinking, was there [a way] to make a beat out of writing about class. It seemed to me that class difference was out in the open in New York City in a way that was maybe less so in other places. Once you got tuned into it for whatever reason, class assumptions and dynamics seemed to permeate

nearly every encounter. Class was the subtext in our daily lives, I suggested. But we rarely looked at it squarely. Maybe I could write about that.

He looked at me across the table. He was really smart. He cocked his head. "I think that you are saying something important but I don't know what."

Unlike the comparable series carried out by *New York Times* reporters on "How Race Is Lived in America" (*New York Times* 2002), other reporters and editors did not quite understand what they were studying. Scott had to keep explaining it and trying to convince others that there was a story to be written. In the six-part series, one headline used the term "shadowy divides" to highlight the place that class holds in the lives of ordinary Americans.

This ambiguity was not simply in the eyes of the public. Janny Scott and other *New York Times* reporters spoke to dozens of sociologists and other social scientists doing research on inequality. They were struck by the lack of consensus about the appropriate definition of social class, as Scott relays in her chapter: "Some of the people we were interviewing told us class was defined by income. Some said it was more about education or about wealth. Some said occupation was the key. We were ruthless; we had a deadline; we decided, almost for the sake of argument, that class was the product of a combination of all four."

In her chapter, she calls for social scientists to make progress on this issue: "It would be helpful if there were more agreement about what we mean when we use the word 'class.' "

## The Chapters: What Do They Show?

The chapters tour many important realms of social life: identity, health, politics, education, family, and urban life. Of course, this list is not complete. It is striking, however, that there are similar results across all of the spheres in that birth into a specific class, even broadly conceived, does shape life chances. Those raised in the middle class and upper middle class (to use terminology that is, admittedly, contested) have strikingly more favorable life chances than those raised in the working class (Beller and Hout 2006; Conley 1999). For example, there is universal agreement that good health and a longer life expectancy are highly desirable. Richard Carpiano, Bruce Link, and Jo Phelan show in chapter 8 that there is a clear consensus on the importance of social position in achieving good health and a long life (see also Conley, Strully, and Bennett 2003; House et al. 1994). Jeff Manza and Clem Brooks's look in chapter 7 at active citizenship, in the form of political participation, also leaves little doubt about the class patterns there. In chapter 3, John Goldthorpe and Michelle Jackson show that, as a result of their class origins, some British youth who do not perform well on a crucial educational exam have more favorable outcomes than their performance would

lead one to expect. In the United States, enrollment in and graduation from college play a pivotal role in shaping future class destinations. In chapter 4, Elliot Weininger and I show that working class youth depend heavily on educational institutions in this transition, while middle class youth get the benefit of additional “concerted cultivation” and “customization” in the transition to college. Parents’ informal knowledge of how colleges work and their deployment of class-based resources can make a crucial difference.

Still, the power of class can vary. As Michael Hout shows in chapter 1, class-based patterns are clearest at the ends of the distribution. There is more “churning” in the middle, he asserts. Nevertheless, he demonstrates, when prompted, only 3 percent of Americans fail to self-identify with a social class. In most cases, their self-identifications reflect objective circumstances. But circumstances do not necessarily coalesce to send a clear class signal. The Ivy League professional with a six-figure income and the high school dropout with a succession of low-wage jobs have no trouble naming their class position. In contrast, underpaid social workers with a master’s degree and the affluent shopkeeper with the high school diploma have a harder time choosing between middle and working class. Overall, however, Hout’s evidence challenges the “death of class” argument.

As the chapters in this book make clear, some authors believe it is a mistake to study class without taking into account other powerful social forces, including race. From this perspective, Mary Pattillo suggests in chapter 9 that race “inflects” class and that the dynamics of social exclusion cannot be fully understood without attention to race. In chapter 5, Karyn Lacy and Angel Harris argue that there is considerable variation within the black middle class; they also find that income and education have a differential impact on the identity of adolescents.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between gender and class is another complex topic. Early studies tended to focus exclusively on men, ignoring the issue of gender altogether (Acker 1973). With the dramatic increase in women’s labor force participation in recent decades, and particularly the participation of married women with young children, this approach has become much more problematic (Crompton 1993, 93–97; Leiulfsrud and Woodward 1987). Efforts to resolve it have faced many challenges (for a review of the issues, see Zipp and Plutzer 1996, 2000). The chapter in this volume by Leslie McCall weighs in on part of this issue. She finds that between 1970 and 2000, “evidence . . . support[s] the claim that inequalities among men and women are qualitatively different if quantitatively similar, suggesting that we do need to examine gender and class inequalities simultaneously.”<sup>6</sup> McCall and many others believe that class studies would be improved by a fuller reckoning with gender dynamics in empirical research.

The significance of contingency also surfaces in other areas. As Dalton Conley makes clear in chapter 6, there are important variations among siblings raised in the same family. But this variability among siblings, Conley

suggests, is not an indication that social structure is unimportant. Rather, it suggests the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the impact of the social structural forces shaping each individual's life course. Rather than having a global impact on children's destinations, family background and familial class position may have a *contingent* impact.

In the remaining portion of this introduction, I discuss three cross-cutting themes in the volume: the degree to which empirical research is directly linked to a conceptual model, the degree of specificity in the definition of class, and the kinds of questions that the research intends to illuminate. The chapters do not agree on the proper approach to class research on these key issues.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Linkages in Class Research

Of course, theoretical models of social class have provided more or less clearly definable approaches: for example Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu all offer an analysis of how class works (Weininger 2002; Wright 2005). According to sociological theory and methodology books, these conceptual models should provide a pathway for guiding our empirical analyses of social class. In this textbook model, any effort to understand the mechanisms through which social class position has an impact on daily life would begin by focusing on translating the broader conceptual model into a researchable question. The conceptual issues would be the driving force.

This model is rarely followed. Rather than being nurtured by theoretical questions, empirical research is often heavily influenced by methodological issues. For example, the accessibility of secondary data sets, available methodological approaches to analyzing data, and pressures to develop one's career by publishing frequently and rapidly (among other factors) frequently play a defining role in shaping the research process. Many critical questions cannot be answered with existing data. Nationally representative data sets are expensive to collect—to say nothing of data that would facilitate cross-national comparisons. Few data include key variables that correspond to our conceptual models. For example, we seldom have access to detailed measures of authority relations in the workplace, the amount of job-specific expertise required by particular jobs, the informal cultural knowledge used in the workplace, or current conditions in the regional labor market. Nor do data sets typically provide details about the small group of people who are extremely privileged in their wealth or in their very high-level managerial authority.<sup>7</sup> Yet detailed information would be very helpful in differentiating empirical support for, say, the approaches developed by Marx, Weber, and Bourdieu (Breen 2005; Weininger 2005; Wright 2005). Absent such data, scholars with very different theoretical beliefs must

sometimes make use of similar, if not identical, measures. In the realm of qualitative research, the labor-intensive character of research restricts the analysis to a small number of cases. As a result, it is most common for researchers to study one social class; studies comparing different social class and racial groups are rare. All research is incomplete. But the gap between the richness of the theoretical concepts of social class and the available empirical studies in both quantitative and qualitative research is striking indeed.

Given the emphasis in graduate training on the role of theory in driving empirical work, most researchers discuss in a perfunctory fashion the critical role that theory should play in the formulation of studies. It is striking, then, how the authors of a chapter in this book, David Grusky and Kim Weeden, discuss this approach. "We . . . reject the standard presumption . . . that measurement choices may be justified by simply proffering a definition that appears to motivate such choices." They believe that definitions of class should be subject to an empirical test:

Our goal is . . . to develop methods that make it possible to subject class models of all kinds to convincing empirical test. . . . The conventional definition-based legitimation of measurement decisions should be replaced, we will argue, with an empirical legitimation that requires analysts to demonstrate that their preferred measure in fact adequately captures the structure of inequality.

Instead of stating a definition and then defending a choice by referring to a conceptual argument, Grusky and Weeden prefer "empirical legitimation" of a measure. This drive for an empirically based definition of class presumes, of course, that current data provide accurate, detailed, and comprehensive measures of critical factors. This seems unlikely.

In addition, there are reasons to believe that whole swaths of social life that are probably associated with social class are missing from nationally representative data sets. Indeed, some topics are well worn, while others are virtually absent from discussion.<sup>8</sup> To mention just one example, our understanding of the feelings of pain and exclusion that can be connected to upward mobility is not particularly deep. Although Bourdieu clearly writes about the importance of self-exclusion and the withdrawal from interaction, it is hard for surveys to be sufficiently nuanced on this point. Some journalists, such as Alfred Lubrano in his book *Limbo* (2003), have shown that upwardly mobile individuals—"straddlers" of two different worlds—report uneasiness in negotiating the cultural aspects of middle class life, even after spending years in middle class jobs. Yet few studies capture these feelings of unease in a sophisticated fashion. At the conference, after a long discussion on the relative merits of the gradational and relational approaches to class (discussed later in the chapter), Michèle Lamont called

for researchers “to broaden the agenda” to ensure the “long-term health” of the field:

The field of class analysis [is] always coming back [to] these questions that have, I think, to some extent paralyzed the field for a long time: “Is it A or B?” . . . Why do we go back to these questions as opposed to asking ourselves to look at the very wide range of questions that have not been asked yet? The field would be more vital, I think, if we moved toward thinking about new questions as opposed to working toward digging a deeper and deeper hole around issues that are belabored.<sup>9</sup>

## How Specific a Definition of Class Do We Need?

In the literature, there is significant variability in the degree of generality or precision in definitions of class. This can be due to the particular conception of class that researchers make use of in their work. For example, scholars influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu deploy an encompassing concept that includes economic capital and cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1984). In other cases, however, differences in specificity grow out of methodological commitments. Researchers using ethnographic methods, for example, do not examine one variable while controlling for others; rather, they study people who come into their purview bearing an intersecting web of class “variables.” Hence, most work using ethnographic methods also assumes a more general conception of class rather than a specific one.

Some approach the topic of social class with a desire for greater precision. As David Grusky reflected after the conference:

I [was] struck that some of the participants quite cavalierly used “class” to refer to variables I would never label as such (for example, education, income)—a revelation of sorts because some of us obsess endlessly about how class might be defined in contradistinction to measures of education, income, and the like. It was striking that a field that has been so built around the concept of class has evidently made so little headway and that so much dissensus could still prevail. Is the concept of income equally poorly specified in economics? I suspect not. Why, by contrast, is the concept of class still so ambiguously defined in our field? Does that speak to the peculiar social organization of sociology? Or to inherent problems with the class concept itself?

One debate concerns the use of a synthetic definition of class (such as the socioeconomic index) compared to a strategy of using individual variables (such as education or occupation). Over the years there have been many debates in the literature about the proper methodological approach to the measurement of socioeconomic status (Haug 1977; Haug and Sussman 1971; Hollingshead 1971; Mueller and Parcel 1981). Recently, in a series of papers, Robert Hauser, John Robert Warren, and their colleagues have taken stock

of socioeconomic indices (Hauser and Logan 1992; Hauser and Warren 1997; Warren and Hauser 1997; Warren, Sheridan, and Hauser 1998). In a long paper in *Sociological Methodology*, Warren and Hauser (1997, 177) emphatically state their position: “We conclude that composite indexes of occupational socioeconomic status [SES] are scientifically obsolete.” While some scholars may consider this matter to be long settled, the use of SES measures continues in the field. In addition, others continue to see value in a combined measure of class position (Marsh et al. 2007).

At the conference, there was a discussion of the value of a synthetic index of social class. As the transcript of his comments makes clear, John Goldthorpe of Nuffield College, Oxford, vehemently objected to a global concept of class:

[Some see] class as some kind of *umbrella concept* that aims to capture all the various aspects of social inequality that we know exist in contemporary societies. It may perhaps exclude racial and ethnic inequalities or gender inequalities, but it still covers a pretty broad swath of other inequalities. That’s the umbrella concept of class, and it’s not one for which I have very much sympathy: it just leads to muddled and confused thinking. What I would favor in place of that—and I think others here share this view, including Erik Olin Wright [2005; see also chapter 11]—is that it is better to have a *fairly specific, narrowly defined concept of class* [Goldthorpe 2007], which one can then use along with other concepts that try to capture other aspects of structured social inequality.

The fact that many of those present at the conference shared Goldthorpe’s view became clear as participants discussed the Blau and Duncan (1978) socioeconomic index. Bart Landry of the University of Maryland also vigorously objected to the SES approach:

I think that SES is just an abomination. . . . I encouraged one of my students to look at different measures of class, and he went through the literature on SES and tried to find out how people use it. Well, lo and behold, most people who use SES don’t tell you how they combine those variables. And so you are left completely in the dark about what they have there. . . . I think that it would be nice if some of us would try to get beyond that.

Perhaps because of the power of the American ideology of individualism, American sociological researchers have been more likely to rely on SES than have their European counterparts. John Goldthorpe expressed puzzlement about the ubiquitous use of SES here:

I share the dislike of SES. I’ve never really understood its popularity in American sociology. But it’s not the gradational aspect of it that worries me. Maybe there is something in . . . this gradational approach. It is the more synthetic aspect—putting together, as if [it] usually happens, income and education—[that troubles me].

Goldthorpe also pointed out that the index was developed before the advent of multivariate analysis. In addition, the original intent of the index was quite different from the use to which it is put today:

I think it's worth remembering that the most important SES measure that is used in American sociology, the Duncan SEI index, began as an attempt [to achieve] a proxy measure for occupational prestige. That was the original idea, to get an occupational prestige scale for all occupations. So it didn't really begin as a synthetic measure. It began as a measure of occupational prestige. But then it kind of took [on a life of] its own.

He saw it as unnecessary: "What I find very odd about synthetic measures, in this age when we can do multivariate analysis . . . with great ease, [is that] if you think that income and education are important, then just put them in the analysis separately. Why put them in on some rather arbitrary combination?"

But others disagree with the drive for as specific a measure of social class as possible. Dalton Conley also sees debate over definitions of social class as ultimately fruitless. He emphasizes that research on class fails to offer powerful equations that predict behavior (that is, equations that explain a great deal of the variance in behavior). In chapter 16, he offers a reflection on what is missing in our current studies of social class. Given his concern that available measures cannot capture the subtle nature of class, he openly embraces an umbrella or "kitchen sink" approach:

Rather than spend more time and effort in trying to refine lofty conceptual apparatuses, I would argue for a "kitchen sink" approach: even when we include every form of social hierarchy we can measure, our empirical models do rather poorly in explaining meaningful outcomes. . . . What's more . . . when we measure any social hierarchy—class included—we tend to point to, but never name precisely, exactly what we mean. As a result, I argue that we should embrace a folk-concept of class and include in our models all forms of social hierarchy that appear to hold empirical weight, ascriptive or achieved. These may range from social networks to income flows and wealth stocks to physical appearance. Especially in an age when cultural, social, human, bodily, and financial capital are fluid and exchangeable, this would appear to be the most robust strategy.<sup>10</sup>

Other researchers concur.<sup>11</sup> Thus, there is a real disagreement among scholars in the field on the level of precision that is needed for high-quality research.

In addition to the disagreements about the degree of precision necessary in studies of class and the best kinds of indicators to rely on, there is also confusion and a lack of clarity around the very word "class" and the more frequently used term "inequality." At present, the strengths and weaknesses

attached to these two terms remain unclear in the sociological literature. In my view, however, the term “class” has significant advantages over the term “inequality.” Specifically, “class” does evoke a notion of *groups* or collectivities; this means that implicit in the term “class” is a notion of a form of social structure.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the term “inequality” typically does not evoke a notion of groups or social structure in a similar way. Indeed, the term “inequality,” with the emphasis on the ranking of the amount of a resource that is held, is easily compatible with a focus on individuals and, in some cases, individualism. This is an important distinction, since sociology is the study of groups and social institutions. Indeed, there is a risk that, in focusing on individuals, attention to social structure can be downplayed or lost, as Erik Olin Wright worries about in his chapter.<sup>13</sup>

## Why Do Researchers Study Class?

In this final section, we turn to an issue other than the degree to which researchers have conceptually infused definitions of class or the level of precision they expect. Instead, we look at the overall purpose of the research. Erik Olin Wright delineates six distinct approaches to the study of class.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that most of the chapters in the volume fall into one of them: “Nearly all of the chapters in this volume revolve around the third of the six class analysis questions: how can we explain variations in life chances in contemporary American society?” He terms this approach a *gradational* one, according to which researchers examine variations in individuals’ objective circumstances. His image here is one of studying individuals on the “rungs on the ladder”:

How are people *objectively located* in distributions of material inequality? In this case, class is defined in terms of material standards of living, usually indexed by income or, possibly, wealth. Class, in this agenda, is a *gradational* concept; the standard image is of rungs on a ladder, and the names for locations are accordingly such things as upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class, lower class, under class.

Wright objects to the disproportionate attention to how people obtain “the cultural, motivational, and educational resources they use to acquire their position in the system of stratification, mainly through the way these resources affect their entry into jobs.” This line of research, which he believes continues to dominate quantitative inequality research, says “little . . . about the determinants of the inequalities in the positions themselves that people occupied.” Wright prefers what he terms a *relational approach*. Rather than focus on individual life chances, this approach, for example, focuses on “the nature of . . . the positions themselves.” He sees the relational approach as a

“more complex and demanding” approach to the study of class. In this approach, he asks:

What *explains* inequalities in life chances and material standards of living? This question [focuses on] identifying causal mechanisms that help determine salient features of that system. When class is used to explain inequality, [class is defined] by *the relationship of people to income-generating resources or assets of various sorts.*

Wright includes opportunity hoarding as one example of this approach (Tilly 1998). This concept is meant to draw the eye of the investigator beyond the individual to look at collective patterns of exclusion and inclusion. The chapter by Mary Pattillo, for example, takes up opportunity hoarding in neighborhood politics. Her examination of a Chicago neighborhood clearly illustrates a concerted effort by middle- and upper-income residents to exclude poor potential neighbors. Even as the racial demographics of the neighborhood changed from all-white to all-black, the rhetoric of “protecting and preserving” the neighborhood as a middle class place continued. As part of their effort to keep the neighborhood “up to their standard,” some residents fought to exclude residents they defined as undesirable.<sup>15</sup>

In the discussion at the conference, others suggested that opportunity hoarding is not the only structural dynamic that needs to be incorporated into class analysis. Hannah Bruckner of Yale University, for example, argued that we must also consider the consequences of cumulative advantage:

The [papers are], in my point of view, somewhat truncated in terms of relational concepts of class that are a little bit broader than just opportunity hoarding. What I am referring to is the concentration of advantage and disadvantage in communities and schools and workplaces that have cumulative effects. It is not just individuals that have a certain class, it’s being an individual of a certain class and an *environment* where class members are concentrated or not concentrated. I think Mary Pattillo’s paper was an exception, and you could read the health paper [by Richard Carpiano, Bruce Link, and Jo Phelan] [in this way] as well, but this kind of contextualization of social class, I think, would give us a robust handle on class effects.<sup>16</sup>

Efforts to surpass the preoccupation with the allocation of individuals would also need, however, to differentiate between opportunity hoarding and other approaches. Indeed, Wright takes the view that the analysis of opportunity hoarding is also flawed. To be sure, he approvingly points out that opportunity hoarding captures one of the central mechanisms of social exclusion: there is “causal interdependence between the advantages of one group and the disadvantages of another, and thus improvements in the latter are a threat to the former.” However, he considers this approach to be incomplete, for it ignores an “additional causal process that generates inequality”—exploitation.<sup>17</sup> As he writes: “This is a stronger form of relational interdependency than in a relation of simple exclusion, for here

there is an ongoing relationship between the *activities* of the advantaged and disadvantaged persons, not just a relationship between their *conditions*. Exploitation and domination are forms of structured inequality that simultaneously require the continual active cooperation between exploiters and exploited, dominators and dominated, and generates systematic antagonisms of their interests."<sup>18</sup> In chapter 11, Wright draws a contrast between opportunity hoarding and studies of domination and exploitation. According to Wright, employers' goal of producing cost-effective products is dependent on the availability of a low-cost labor supply. He calls for research that engages more directly with the relations of production, particularly exploitation.

There are many ways in which we could describe the state of empirical research on social class, but "conceptually coherent" would not be one of them. The field is turbulent, chaotic, conflicted, and broken into a number of sub-areas where researchers have very different methodological approaches. As a result, many researchers never engage one another or talk to one another. It can also be hard to see the overlap in studies that use different methodological approaches; studies sometimes seem orthogonal to one another.

In gathering these chapters together, we have sought to take stock of where things stand on empirical research on class. As this introduction suggests, the chapters in this volume do provide evidence of the importance of social class, particularly at key points in the class structure. The authors also offer, however, differing, and conflicting, assessments of how to define social class. Thus, the book reflects some of the turbulence and liveliness of the field. The field may never reach a complete consensus around a single, "standard" definition of class. In addition, the impact of social class may be contingent, and a sophisticated analysis of class may need to be interwoven with an analysis of other factors, including gender and race. But if we could improve the detail and empirical richness of the data as well as the conceptual coherence, then the field might be able to move forward. This is an important goal.

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## Notes

1. Most of the grids, tables, and portraits of the American class structure are in books designed for teaching; see, for example, Gilbert (2002), Kerbo (2005), and Thompson and Hickey (2007). Also, we would like to note that although this book does include one chapter on Britain, all of the others deal with American society; to make the discussion less cumbersome we simply use the term "American society."

2. There have been numerous pieces of writing in this academic battle. Michael Hout (2007, personal communication) succinctly summarized the various skirmishes: “Clark and Lipset (1991) argued that social classes were ‘dying’ as a widespread anti-authority/anti-hierarchy strand in Western civilization undercut the privileges of achievement. Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992) and Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1993) shot back noting the growth of inequality, the persistence of social origins as a factor in mobility, the prevalence and, it seemed, significant increase in health disparities, the rising role of money in electoral politics, and rising residential segregation. Clark and Lipset retorted that they meant politics—class was less of a factor than it used to be. That prompted the Hout, Brooks, and Manza piece (1995) that showed its persistence in American elections and the Evans (1999) volume that showed persistence in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany, where class was one factor among many, but decline in Scandinavia, where class used to be the only factor in voting. Then came Pakulski and Waters on class identity waning. Wright’s book, *Class Counts* (1997a), was, among many things, Wright’s counter to Clark and Lipset (2001) and Pakulski and Waters (1996). Kingston [weighed in and] brought [in] American Exceptionalism. All the while Grusky and Weeden were asking how many classes are there and are they rooted in broad and deep distinctions or functional ones?” See also Manza and Brooks (1996), Evans (1999), Clark (2003), Wright (1996), and Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992), among others.
3. There have been some important collections on the topic, but some are older, including Hall (1997) and McNall, Levine, and Fantasia (1991). Erik Olin Wright has published extensively on the topic (1989, 1997a, 1997b, 2005). See also Crompton (1993), Perrucci and Wysong (1999), and Wysong and Perrucci (2007). For edited collections on inequality, see, among others, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (1997), Neckerman (2004), and Grusky and Szélenyi (2007). See also the *New York Times* series, “Class Matters” (*New York Times* 2005).
4. The conference was taped. The discussion in the last session was transcribed. Portions of the transcription are included in this volume (with the permission of the speakers). This transcription is the basis of the Goldthorpe epilogue as well as for some of the points made later in this introduction.
5. The intersection of class and race remains challenging. Some have called for the development of intersectionality (that is, “an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organization”; Collins 1998, 278; see also Collins and Anderson 1995). Others have focused more on comparing the experience of different racial and ethnic groups on class issues. For example, there is a voluminous literature comparing the experience of African Americans and whites on key elements of class—for example, studies of race and wealth (Conley 1999; Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Shapiro 2004), education (Bowen and Bok 1998; Jencks and Phillips 1998; Weis 2007; Wells and Crain 1997); and occupational experiences (Moss and Tilly 1995; Pager 2007; Royster 2003; Smith 2005; Young 2006), to name only a few. The black middle class has clearly grown in recent decades, and racial segregation in housing has profoundly shaped key aspects of the

experiences of black middle class families (Massey and Denton 1996; Pattillo-McCoy 1999). In addition, there is increasing attention to variations within the black middle class (Lacy 2007).

6. McCall reports that this gender difference was stronger in the earlier period than the later one. There is evidence that marriage patterns are becoming more homogenous (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Schwartz and Mare 2005), which would mean that husbands and wives would be more like one another in their class positions than less alike. But women continue to make less money than men; gender segregation remains powerful in many occupations (Charles and Grusky 2004).
7. In a nationally representative sample, the number of individuals in this category will be extremely small. Data requirements call for a minimum number of cases per cell. The rarity of this group precludes the production of data sets with sufficient cases for analysis. Although it is theoretically possible that survey researchers could oversample this population, the high expense, combined with the difficulties of gaining access effectively, precludes this option. There have been a few studies based on interviews with or observations of upper class families. The classic ones were by Digby Baltzell (1958/1971), but there have been a few more recent studies of upper class women (Ostrander 1984) and boarding schools for the upper class (Cookson and Persell 1985). Journalistic studies are much more common (Chernov 1998; Lundberg 1969). The most common studies of the upper class are the studies of the composition of boards of directors of major corporations and the interlocking web of social connections in this group (Allen 1987; Allen and Broyles 1989, 1991; Burris 2000, 2007; Domhoff 2006; see also Mills 1956).
8. Ethnographic studies often raise important questions that are either not taken up by survey research or addressed with measures that lack nuance and sophistication. The range of topics is enormous and includes class and family life (Hansen 2005; Lareau 2003; Rubin 1976), downward mobility (Newman 1988, 1993), the insecurity of the labor market (Newman 2006; Rubin 1976; Weis 2004), the black middle class (Lacy 2007; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Shapiro 2004), the labor process and family life (Halle 1984), moral boundaries by class and race (Lamont 1992, 2000), class and art taste (Halle 1993), class and kinship (Bott 1971; Fischer 1982; Hansen 2005), and class and education (Bernstein 1971; Heath 1983; Lareau 2003; Weis 2007). See also the classic studies of class and community, including Lynd and Lynd (1934, 1982), Warner (1960), Hoggart (1957), and Hollingshead (1949, 1953), as well as classic studies by C. Wright Mills (1956, 1956/1999). See also the PBS documentary *People Like Us: Social Class in America* (Alvarez and Kolker 2001) and the documentary *Born Rich* (Johnson 2003).
9. When asked the kinds of examples she had in mind, Lamont wrote: "How people think of themselves as advantaged or penalized; the relationship they have with this self-concept—shame, pride, guilt, etc.; how class differences are negotiated at the micro level, including the work we do to help people of other groups save face and feel comfortable across the class divide."
10. In Conley's view, the gross inadequacy of current measures should not, however, stop researchers from doing empirical work. In his chapter, he uses

18 Social Class: How Does it Work?

maternal education as a “proxy” for his measure of social class, to examine sibling differences in key life outcomes. The varying outcomes for brothers and sisters in the same family, however, are not a basis for rejecting the value of the ideas of social class. But it does raise important ambiguities.

11. As noted earlier, particularly for those using comparative historical methods or ethnographic methods, the analytic process is also not very conducive to the kind of specificity that Goldthorpe champions. If one works closely with only six or twelve cases (such as families), it is much more reasonable to take a broader (“umbrella”) approach to defining social class than a specific one (Lareau 2003).
12. This difference can be seen in the origins of the terms cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 1971) (see also Williams 1985). The term “class” first appeared in the 1600s in English but originated in ancient Rome: “Class: *Roman History*. Each of the six divisions or orders of the Roman people in the constitution assembly ascribed to Servius Tullius. 1. A division or order of society according to status; a rank or grade of society.” By contrast, “inequality”—the “state or condition of being unequal” (“want of equality”)—highlights the notion of a ranking, of having more or less than someone of something. “1. Want of equality between persons or things; disparity
  - a. In respect to magnitude, quantity, number, intensity, or other physical quality
  - b. In respect of dignity, rank, or circumstances; Social disparity; the fact of occupying a more or less advantageous position
  - c. In respect of excellence, power, or adequacy.”
13. One conference participant, Julia Wrigley of CUNY Graduate Center, commented on the lack of attention to the role of the state in the chapters in the book: “There is remarkably little discussion of the state, yet surely there is some kind of power structure, which is maintaining [and] supporting different classes, promoting other classes, the interests of them all in various ways. . . . And that wasn’t part of the analysis here. It seems as if that has moved into comparative historical sociology in a very major way, where it’s easier to see the actions of workings of states when you are looking over long time spans, different kinds of societies, different entities. . . . [But] it is so absolutely fundamental to . . . class analysis.”
14. Wright’s questions are: “(1) How are people objectively located in distributions of material inequality? (2) What explains how people, individually and collectively, subjectively locate themselves and others within a structure of inequality? (3) What explains inequalities in life changes and material standards of living? (4) What social cleavages systematically shape overt conflicts? (5) How should we characterize and explain the variations across history in the social organization of inequalities? (6) What sorts of transformations are needed to eliminate oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies?”
15. This study of opportunity hoarding, with its emphasis on the stockpiling of scarce resources by some individuals, is a theme developed by others. Pamela Barnhouse Walters, for example, stresses the “zero-sum” nature of American education. She notes that there are limited numbers of openings at elite univer-

- sities, which provide access to high-level “good jobs,” and that privileged parents’ attempts to secure a seat at one of those elite universities for their own children constitute, at the same time, an effort to exclude others (Walters 2007).
16. Bruckner’s point about the importance of studying the environment was echoed by others. For example, Bruce Link, co-author of chapter 8 (on health), noted: “In the health field one of the angles is to sort of blame people for their bad behavior. And at the contextual level . . . I get benefits because of the neighborhood that I live in, there are parks where I can exercise . . . [there is] my occupation where they [provide] health benefits, or my marriage where my wife bugs me. . . . Hannah Bruckner’s point about contextual effects as opposed to individual effects [is] really critical.”
  17. Goldthorpe sees the issue of exploitation as the crucial difference between his work and Wright’s: “I think over the years, in the way in which Erik’s thinking and mine have developed, we’ve come a lot closer together than we once were. And I have never actually liked the label put on my approaches—neo-Weberian. I have always said that [my work] certainly takes something from Weber; it also takes something from Marx, perhaps even more from the Austrian Marxists of the early twentieth century, such as Karl Renner, who introduces this idea of the service relationship. So I think it is pretty eclectic. But I think ideas should be judged by their consequences, not by their providence. I think the remaining area of disagreement between Erik and myself turns, as he said, on the concept of exploitation. I can see that [that] is a useful concept [in] political rhetoric, but it does not do much for me as an analytical concept in sociology.”
  18. Goldthorpe, among others, faulted Wright for the normative and moral dimension of his sixth question. Wright rejected the complaint: “I don’t consider the sixth question as a normative question. . . . The sixth one said: What sorts of transformations are necessary in capitalist society in order to eliminate oppression and exploitation? Now, the question is motivated by a commitment, a particular set of value commitments. But the question asks a causal question: what sort of changes would have these effects? It is refutable. . . . When we ask questions—What sorts of chances would reduce the inequalities of opportunity of young black men and white men?—that is not a normatively driven question. . . . So I am not evoking the notion of exploitation primarily as a moral concern when I do so analytically. It’s a particular claim about the character of interconnections of interests of actors, which is stronger than just the exclusionary interest-conflicts. There is a form of interdependence between advantaged and disadvantaged, privileged and underprivileged—you can use various terms—in which the privileged need the underprivileged. That’s why the immigration debate is so interesting in these terms. It is incorrect that elites just want them to disappear. It would not be in the interests of elites for the illegal immigrants to disappear, because they provide all of these cheap services. That is a different kind of relationship from one which is just opportunity hoarding. And you need a language for talking about that. I use a charged language for reasons which you might object to, but the concept itself I don’t think is one that there should be any objections to.”

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