



Class Formation and Class Identity: Birth, Death, and Possibilities for Renewal

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Abstract

While social class served as a powerful organizing identity for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, many doubt its contemporary relevance. This article examines the formation and development of theories of class identity over the past century. From a debate largely among Marxists in the early 20th century about the conditions under which the working class will mobilize to defend its interests – moving from a “class in itself” to a “class for itself” – the question of the relationship between individuals’ class position, social interests, and political mobilization attracted greater attention among social scientists following World War II. However, postwar socioeconomic transformations led some to argue for the “death of class” as a central organizing principle for modern social and political life. While others countered that class identities remained relevant, the sharp decline in class-based organization in the late 20th century led scholars to develop more nuanced understandings of the relationship between individuals’ class position and collective identities. Although current scholarship shows that there is no natural translation of class identities into collective action, the reality of growing socioeconomic inequality, along with the resurgence of social and political mobilizations to contest that growth, suggests that class identities retain the capacity to unite.

Introduction

Class identity has long served as a key analytical concept for sociologists, going back to founders of the discipline including Karl Marx and Max Weber. The concept holds that individuals’ interests, tastes, attitudes, and dispositions are linked to their socioeconomic class position. This link in turn has important consequences for the shape of politics, culture, and social relations.

Scholars differ in their conceptions of class identity depending on their intellectual traditions. For those operating within a Marxian framework, class identity is intimately tied to the process of *class formation*, whereby individuals develop a shared sense of belonging to a given class based on their common experiences and relations in the workplace, and from there a sense of shared interests as a class. Key to this process is the development of *class consciousness*, individuals’ subjective understanding of belonging to a class (Marx [1847] 1973; Wright 1997, pp. 185–215). For those working within the Weberian tradition, economic class position creates certain life chances, which interact with social status groups and political parties to shape particular identities (Giddens 1973; Parkin 1971; Weber 1978).

While the importance of class identities for understanding society was once taken for granted, this is no longer the case. Today, many argue that class identities are the relic of a bygone age, supplanted by more individual lifestyle identities. As a result, they maintain that people’s class identities are increasingly less relevant for understanding contemporary society and politics (Beck 1992; Clark et al. 1993; Eder 1993; Inglehart 1997). As evidence, they point out that organizational expressions of class identity are in decline. Membership in labor unions has fallen across the industrialized world (Western 1997). Meanwhile, labor and socialist parties have de-emphasized their role as representatives of the working class. Instead, they have adopted a

broader rhetoric of progressivism to appeal to voters' multiple sets of identities, in some cases becoming more like the traditional "bourgeois" parties they once sought to replace (Callaghan 2000). And, according to these analysts, this is occurring within a context where "class voting," the tendency for political parties' electoral support to split along class lines,¹ is declining (Inglehart 1997).

Others counter that, even though class-based organization has declined, this does not mean that class is no longer important. These critics point to persistent and rising levels of socioeconomic inequality, declining class mobility, and the growth of low-wage, contingent jobs to argue that class still matters (Barker 2013). Additionally, they contend that the supposed decline in class voting is an artifact of measurement errors, not an actual trend (Evans 1999). Others note that significant protests have recently erupted around the world in recent years that have explicitly been organized around issues of economic inequality, from the Occupy movement in the United States, to anti-austerity protests in Europe, to popular mobilizations in Turkey, Brazil, and beyond (Mason 2013). Furthermore, researchers have found that, at an individual level, class position remains an important frame of reference for making sense of people's everyday lives (Bottero 2004; Devine 1992).

But even as what might traditionally have been considered "class issues" have remained relevant, class *identities* have certainly changed. How class issues are being raised, and the actors raising them, is quite different than in previous decades. Unions are certainly involved but are not the central players they once were. Certain types of labor and socialist parties are also involved in some places but more often are the target of protesters' ire. And the traditional language of class conflict, while still present in some quarters, has been replaced with a language of indignation in the face of what protesters perceive as precarious work and living conditions, combined with a ruling elite either out of touch or actively making matters worse (Kaldor and Selchow 2013). Meanwhile, ideas of what it means to belong to, or identify with, a given class remain complex and contested (Grusky and Sørensen 1998).

These contemporary conflicts illustrate the challenges that social scientists continue to face in discussing and analyzing class identities. On the one hand, there are broad socioeconomic forces that shape individuals' experience in the world. Today, as in the 19th and 20th centuries, factors such as growing or shrinking income inequality, changes in workplace organization, and macro-economic shifts in employment or inflation can all *potentially* generate grievances among segments of the population. On the other hand, the degree to which those grievances are identified as personal troubles related to individual failings or public issues related to systemic failings in policy and economic organization, whether or not they create common bonds between people based on a sense of shared experience, and whether or not those common bonds lead to social and political mobilization to address those grievances, remains a very difficult and open question.

This article focuses on understanding how and why economic relations do or do not translate into collective identities, and how and why those identities take the different shapes they do. The primary analytical focus will be on class identities in the advanced industrialized world. Also, given that debates surrounding class identity tend to center around the degree to which class serves as a salient *political* identity, much of the discussion will orient toward political dimensions of class, although social dimensions will also be addressed.

The article begins by offering a brief overview of the historical context surrounding the development of different theories of class identity amidst the political and economic tumult of the late 19th century. It then discusses the post-World War II "common sense" about class identity, and how that common sense has been challenged and transformed by contemporary economic and political dynamics. It then concludes with a consideration of how relevant these discussions remain for understanding socioeconomic and political conflict in 21st century.

Origins: the problem of class formation

Before we can begin to assess the extent to which class identities continue to be relevant today, it is important to review why they were considered to be important in the first place. Fundamentally, class identities have been important to social scientists because movements based on class identities have been viewed as central agents of historical and political change. For those operating within Marxian traditions, the working class is the key revolutionary subject. It is the actor which, by virtue of its structural position within capitalist production, is both best equipped to bring about the change necessary for a more equitable society and stands to gain the most from such a transformation (Marx and Engels [1848] 1969).

But even for non-Marxist social analysts, the working class remains critically important for understanding broad patterns of social, economic, and political development (Collier and Collier 1991; Esping-Andersen 1990; Luebbert 1991; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992). Although they argue that the working class has largely failed in its purported historical mission to be “the gravedigger of capitalism,” they point out that it “has very frequently been capable of successfully demanding its own political incorporation and an accommodation of at least some of its substantive interests” (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992, pp. 271–272). Whether by threatening the existing order through mass mobilization, implementing reforms through legislative means, or some combination thereof, both Marxists and non-Marxists agree that working-class movements have won important gains that have profoundly shaped the contemporary social and political landscape. Things such as the weekend, the 8-h day, wage and hour law, various forms of health and social security policy, and more all trace back to struggles led by working-class movements (Murolo and Chitty 2001).

Although the changes these movements have brought about are very real, the identities, allegiances, and imageries that animate them are considerably more abstract. What exactly does it mean to be part of something called “the working class”? How and why do people come to identify as members of such a group? After all, just because people work for wages does not necessarily mean that they will consider being a worker as a central part of their identity. Nor does it necessarily mean that workers in one workplace will feel a common bond with workers in another workplace, let alone in another industry. And just because people’s working conditions are bad, even oppressive, does not necessarily mean that they will organize collectively to address those working conditions.

In short, class identities do not just happen. They are the result of often contingent and unpredictable social and political processes. Understanding why and under what conditions class identities emerge is what social scientists call “the problem of class formation.”

Most current discussions of class formation are either implicitly or explicitly in dialogue with the model of class formation first put forth by Karl Marx. Looking at the organization of modern capitalist production of his time, particularly factory production bringing together large groups of people together to work on common tasks, Marx argued that this established a set of common experiences and social relations that created a class “in itself.” This is class in an *objective* sense, independent of any individual’s sense of belonging to that class or not. Put differently, an outside observer could group people into different “objective” classes based on their relationship to each other. For Marx, classes were fundamentally *relational*; they only took on meaning when brought into relation with other classes. The central arena that brought classes into relation with each other is what he called the “means of production,” the combination of raw materials, tools, and machines used to create goods for sale. He defined the “working class” as that group of people who do not own the means of production. With no other means to secure their livelihood, they were compelled to sell their labor power to those who do own the means of production – the capitalist class – in exchange for a wage. Out of this unequal relationship

emerged not only classes, but also class conflict that shaped social, economic, and political development (Marx and Engels [1848] 1969).

While this “objective” aspect of class might create conditions for the formation of class identities, it in no way guarantees it, nor does it determine the content of those identities. Again, class does not just happen. The formation of class identities also requires that members of a class recognize themselves as members of that class. In other words, it also requires a *subjective* element. Marx referred to this process as a class “in itself” becoming a class “for itself” (Marx [1847] 1973).

Although Marx was clearly aware of the problem of class formation, it is not something that he explored in his own writings in detail. The class “in itself/for itself” distinction upon which much of the class formation scholarship is based derives from a few passing lines in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a polemic directed against a prominent anarchist theorist of Marx’s day. It was not meant to flesh out Marx’s theory of class formation.

This is likely because it was not clear at the time just how problematic the problem of class formation was. Amidst the social ferment of the mid and late 19th century, it appeared that members of the working class would naturally recognize their common bond and organize together as a class to fight their capitalist enemy. Across Europe and North America, millions of workers in this period joined together to form trade unions, political parties, and other mutual associations based on a common class identity (Hobsbawm 1989; Kautsky [1892] 1910).

However, against 19th century socialists’ predictions of capitalism’s impending demise, capitalism proved instead to be quite resilient. And against theories that workers would naturally form bonds with each other based on a common working-class identity, workers often instead divided along competing national, religious, craft, or racial lines. By the early 20th century, this forced a recognition among many socialists of the disjuncture between the objective and subjective dimensions of class: class unity was not automatic, nor was its translation into the political sphere. The question of how to create a unified and mobilized class subject thus became a central problem for Marxism.

Much of the debate at the time focused on the role of political parties in shaping class identities. Challenging the orthodoxy laid out by Karl Kautsky ([1892] 1910, p. 189) that class identities would inevitably take shape and find expression in political parties, it was Lenin ([1902] 1961) who most forcefully argued that parties in fact play a critical role in unifying workers and forging class identities. For him, it was parties that articulated the subjective dimension of class, helping workers translate their everyday lives and experiences into a sense of shared interests and common identity. However, this focus on the party’s role in articulating class identities led Lenin to reject the possibility that the working class could develop this subjective understanding of its class identity on its own. Instead, he argued that it would have to be brought from the outside, from a party of intellectuals. A German contemporary of Lenin’s, Rosa Luxemburg ([1906] 1971), countered that, rather than coming from outside, the party must be composed of the most politically advanced sections of the class itself, which in turn organizes the rest of the class, particularly those already organized into trade unions.

Others took a much dimmer view of the role of parties in shaping class identities. For so-called “syndicalists” like Georges Sorel ([1908] 1999), parties were an obstacle to full expression of class identities. They argued that over time, parties as organizations could develop interests that were separate and in many cases opposed to class interests. This was because parties would shy away from engaging in activities that might advance perceived class interests, but at the expense of placing the party’s organizational existence in jeopardy. Instead, syndicalists focused on the importance of constant class activity in forging common identities, guided by the mythical, unifying image of the general strike.

The syndicalist critique of parties as obstacles to class identity formation proved prescient to some degree. Both revolutionary parties based on Leninist forms of organization and more

parliamentary reformist parties such as the Western European social democratic parties developed strong organizational interests that sometimes conflicted with their stated goals of representing working-class interests (Michels 1915). At the same time, the syndicalist vision of “constant class activity” proved easier to realize in theory than in practice. Moments of class activity would prove ephemeral, suggesting that class identities needed some form of organizational expression to last over time.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci wrestled with this tension between class identity as something developing organically among members of a class, and the need for class identity to find organizational expression. In line with Lenin and Luxemburg, Gramsci too focused on the role of parties in shaping class identities and expressing them politically (Gramsci [1926] 1978). However, Gramsci did not view class identity as something that had to come from within the class or could only be brought in from the outside. Rather, he focused on the role of intellectuals as intermediaries. He distinguished between “organic” intellectuals, leaders who emerged from within the class, and “traditional” intellectuals, those traditionally fulfilling intellectual roles, such as professors, lawyers, and other professionals (Gramsci 1972, pp. 4–16). For Gramsci, parties “weld together” these groups of organic and traditional intellectuals, thus providing an organizational structure within which class identity can take shape and find political expression.

While the problem of class formation was central to debates among European Marxists of the early 20th century, it also attracted attention from social scientists of the period. They too were interested in understanding the processes that gave rise to the working-class social and political movements that were transforming the world around them. Max Weber perceived the distinction between objective and subjective dimensions of class as well, although unlike Marx he did not see class as something constructed in relation to the means of production. Rather, he saw class as a function of individuals’ “market position.” He noted that although people may share a similar “class situation” based on their market position and the distribution of property in a given society, this in no way guaranteed that they would share a common identity. In fact, the degree to which those people identified as having shared interests, and the manner in which they pursued those interests, could vary widely (Weber 1978, pp. 928–930). Weber argued that it was “cultural conditions, especially ... those of an intellectual sort” (p. 929) that shape the specific forms that class identities take. In Weber’s formulation, these cultural distinctions created status hierarchies, based on the distribution of social honor or prestige. Status interacted with individuals’ class situation to create different class identities. As with Marxist approaches, Weber too understood the critical role of parties in translating different class identities into the political realm, although he only addressed this in passing in his writings. Also in keeping with Marxist approaches, Weber argued that class identities emerge not from actions between members of the same class, but from interactions with members of different classes. It was only in the relation between different classes that class identities became apparent (p. 930).²

Out of these early 20th century debates, some of the complexities at the heart of class identity become apparent. The first is that the concept of “class” has objective and subjective dimensions. The objective dimension refers to the material social and economic conditions that shape people’s everyday experience. The subjective dimension refers to how people understand the relation between their material conditions and their life situation.³ How people understand that relation in turn shapes the manner and degree to which people will organize collectively to improve their life situation. Thus, there is a close interaction between material conditions and subjective interpretation. Shared material situations may be necessary for class identities to take shape, but they are not sufficient by themselves. Ideas are necessary to provide an interpretive framework, and organization is necessary to translate ideas into action. For the analysts and

activists of the early 20th century, this led them to focus on the central role of parties and intellectuals in shaping class identities.

Postwar class identity: the new common sense

Although the idea of a politically organized working class seemed to pose a real threat to the existing social and political order when it emerged on the scene in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, by mid-century, it had been thoroughly incorporated into everyday political life. The insurgent socialist and labor parties of old had transformed themselves into large, bureaucratic, electorally focused machines, and trade unions negotiated at the bargaining table instead of in the streets (Przeworski and Sprague 1986; Western 1997).

Analysts viewed this political incorporation of the working class, what they termed the “democratic class struggle,” as a source of social stability. Class divisions were recognized but remained contained within institutional channels (Anderson and Davidson 1943; Dahrendorf 1959, p. 62; Giddens 1973, p. 202; Korpi 1983). And while individuals retained complex and multi-faceted identities, social scientists maintained that class divisions remained the most salient social and political cleavage. As Seymour Martin Lipset noted in the early 1960s, “the most impressive single fact about political party support is that in virtually every economically developed country the lower-income groups vote mainly for parties of the left, while the higher income groups vote mainly for parties of the right” (Lipset 1963, p. 234). For several decades following World War II, this became the “common sense” way of understanding conflict in advanced industrial societies.

While this postwar common sense viewed class divisions as essential features of modern society, it was based on a conception of class identity quite different from that of the early 20th century. For these scholars, “class” was largely an objective economic category, assigned based on gradations of income (note Lipset’s reference to “lower-income” and “higher-income” groups). Unlike in Marxian or Weberian accounts of class, class was not defined in relation to conflict between groups, and the notion of objective and subjective dimensions of class identity was largely absent. According to this perspective, the reason that the “democratic class struggle” fostered social stability was precisely because it separated and restrained political and economic conflict, forestalling the development of more “totalizing” class identities. It was these more total class identities, where economic cleavages overlapped with other social cleavages, that threatened the social order (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Instead, the democratic class struggle allowed for a shift over time from class politics to a more diffuse, pluralist, “mass politics” (Korpi 1983, pp. 1, 7–9).

Class identity and the “death of class”

Even as the theory of democratic class struggle held sway in the post-World War II period, there were those who questioned its validity. As early as 1959, the sociologist Robert Nisbet (1959) spoke of “the decline and fall of social class.” By this, he was arguing that the idea of class as an “understood reality” was largely fading away in contemporary society. Instead, he argued that the concept was being kept alive artificially by increasingly ingenious statistical techniques, without having any basis in social life (p. 12). Modern society, he argued, was divided more along lines of individual status distinction, not class divisions (p. 17).

Nisbet’s argument was tied into broader observations among social scientists regarding shifts in the structure of work. According to these theorists, society was moving toward a “post-industrial” phase, where service and knowledge sector jobs were replacing the industrial manufacturing jobs of old (Bell 1976; Touraine 1971). They argued that these types of jobs did not fit into existing class systems; by their very nature, they were “too fluctuant, too mobile

to allow classes to form” (Nisbet 1959, p. 15). At the same time, the increasing premium placed on knowledge and expertise meant that economic and political power was shifting from control over the means of production (in the Marxist sense) to control over knowledge production and bureaucratic administration (Bell 1976; Dahrendorf 1959).

At the same time, post-industrialist theorists argued that increasing postwar affluence was changing identities and political preferences. With economic interests largely taken care of, their day-to-day salience decreased. Meanwhile, a purported increase in geographic and social mobility⁴ decreased the sense of shared life situations and created more individualized life trajectories. As a result, they argued, the economic bases of social and political solidarity implied by traditional notions of class identity were now less relevant. Instead, attention was shifting to “post-materialist” concerns such as individual self-actualization and quality-of-life issues (Inglehart 1971, 1981, 1997; Inglehart and Rabier 1986; Savage 1985).

These changes in the postwar political economy also aroused concern among Marxist theorists. While remaining critical of the analysis and implications drawn by post-industrial theorists, they recognized that the proliferation of technical and professional jobs posed problems for traditional Marxist understandings of class structure. This led to discussions of how to make sense of what they called a “new middle class,” where it fit into existing class systems, and how its class position would shape their identity and ideology. For Nicos Poulantzas, the new middle class constituted a “new petty bourgeoisie,” with interests distinct from a shrinking working class, which he defined as almost exclusively composed of manual, blue-collar workers (Poulantzas 1975, [1978] 2000). Criticizing Poulantzas’ overly static conception of class divisions, Erik Olin Wright argued that much of this new middle class occupied “contradictory class locations” within the contemporary class structure (Wright 1978, 1985).

Beyond shifts in class structure, both post-industrial and Marxist theorists took an interest in understanding the political implications of these shifts. Most concretely, this took shape amidst debates around what analysts called “new social movements” (NSMs). This was a heterogeneous label encompassing movements that developed around individual identities (race, gender, sexuality, and religion), environmental issues, peace and opposition to war, and more. These movements were considered “new” as compared with the “old” class-based political movements that preceded them. NSM’s membership often crossed class lines or simply did not conform to traditional class divisions. They tended to be wary of formal organizations, such as political parties and trade unions, and often did not direct their activities toward the state. Instead, they sought to create new, non-hierarchical forms of organization, to the point where some analysts questioned whether or not some of these groups were even social movements. Regardless, many scholars argued that they called into question the continuing political relevance of class identities and the centrality of the working class in social change projects (Buechler 1995; Cohen 1985; Mann 1973).

These political and economic shifts posed particular challenges to Marxist theorists, as they raised fundamental questions about understanding not only social change but also socialist strategy. If, as Poulantzas argued, people objectively categorized as “working class” now constituted only a minority of the workforce, then any political strategy for improving working-class conditions would have to find ways of forging alliances with other classes to be successful. In such situations, class identities might be de-emphasized in favor of more encompassing identities. By contrast, Wright’s conception of contradictory class locations still maintained the centrality of the working class as the key agent of social change. Where those in contradictory locations would fall in a given political battle would depend on political and ideological struggles.

Extending Poulantzas’ analysis, some began to argue for the need to move beyond a Marxist framework. Key to this was a re-examination of Marx’s fundamental distinction between the

objective class “in itself” and the subjective class “for itself.” According to this approach, the subjective dimensions of class, that is, the political and ideological elements, took center stage. Criticizing “economistic” conceptions of class, they argued instead for a new socialist strategy based on subjective identities and alliances. Crucially, this involved a displacement of “the working class” as the central political identity in favor of a broader idea of “the people.” Ultimately, this analysis led many partisans of this approach to bid farewell to the working class as a key historical actor, as well as the socialist project, which was instead replaced with a vaguer goal of “radical democracy” (Cutler et al. 1977; Gorz 1982; Laclau and Mouffe [1985] 2001).

Without completely jettisoning the importance of class identities, others within the Marxist tradition nonetheless argued for a much more fluid conception of the relation between the objective and subjective dimensions of class. In a critical re-examination of the early 20th century debates about the problem of class formation, Adam Przeworski argued that “Classes are not a datum prior to political and ideological practice... Classes are organized and disorganized as outcomes of continuous struggles... The ideological struggle is first a struggle *about* class before it is a struggle *among* classes” (Przeworski 1985, p. 70).

Instead of proceeding from material conditions to subjective awareness, Przeworski argued that the material bases of class identity could only become apparent out of the process of collective struggle itself. In so doing, he was challenging both Poulantzas’ and Wright’s efforts to classify the “new middle class.” He contended that “the problem [of the new middle class] persists because such classifications ... are constantly tested by life, or more precisely, by political practice” (p. 65). Building on concepts earlier developed by Gramsci, Przeworski focused on the role of organizations in shaping the contours of class struggle, and the identities and practices that emerge from that struggle. Pursuing this idea within a non-Marxist framework, Giovanni Sartori argued that “it is the class that receives its identity from the party. Hence class behavior presupposes a party that not only feeds, incessantly, the ‘class image,’ but also a party that provides the structural cement of ‘class reality’” (Sartori 1969, p. 84).

At the same time, some scholars began to propose schemas of class identity that expanded beyond the classical Marxist two-dimensional objective/subjective approach. Ira Katznelson (1986) identified four interconnected “levels” of class: “those of structure, ways of life, dispositions, and collective action” (p. 14). This fourfold conception of class roughly disaggregated each of the classic objective and subjective dimensions into two sub-dimensions. At the objective level, “structure” referred to the basic structure of capitalist economic development, whose dynamics led to proletarianization, along with the possibility of capital and labor as collective actors. “Ways of life” referred to how those basic dynamics shaped social relations, both in and outside the workplace. At the more subjective level, “dispositions” referred to how those structures and social relations shaped individuals’ ways of seeing the world, while “collective action” referred to how individuals came to act together based on shared structural positions, ways of life, and dispositions. While this schema shared some analytical resemblance to Marxist conceptions of class identity, it differed in separating the process of class formation from the identification of any particular class as a “motor of history.” Rather, Katznelson’s typology aimed at understanding causes of variation in class formation across national cases.

Moving further away from the idea of class formation as the creation of collective actors, Pierre Bourdieu focused instead on how class identities are articulated and reproduced at the individual level through everyday practice and dispositions, as expressed in language, pastimes, and cultural tastes (Bourdieu 1984). The conception of class identity was still relational, as with Marx, but Bourdieu criticized Marxist approaches, which he argued mystified the relationship between the objective and subjective dimensions of class. The result, according to Bourdieu, was a logic linking the two dimensions that was either “totally determinist or totally voluntarist” (Bourdieu 1985, p. 726). Instead, he proposed a spatial conception of class relations, with actors

positioned vis-à-vis one another within different “fields” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). For Bourdieu, these spatial relations were inextricably tied to relations of power and domination. Different sets of practices did not simply embody different identities; rather, they served as the means both for the dominators to exercise their power over the dominated and for the dominated to absorb the psychic impact of those acts of domination. But Bourdieu’s analysis largely foreclosed possibilities for social transformation through the formation of collective actors. Rather, his focus on the everyday performance of class identities offered sophisticated tools for understanding the reproduction of relations of domination (Bourdieu 1991).

Amidst these challenges to the possibility of the working class as a collective actor, some argued for the continued relevance of the Marxian frame of analysis. Responding to the claim that new forms of work and the decline of industrial production had eroded traditional understandings of class and class divisions, Ralph Miliband (1985) countered that “the recomposition of the working class is not in the least synonymous with its disappearance as a class” (p. 9). As for the idea that the “new social movements” challenged the primacy of class-based political identities, he replied that “the working class includes very large numbers of people who are also members of ‘new social movements’, or who are part of the constituency which these movements seek to reach; and their membership of the working class constitutes a major element of their social identity” (p. 9). More broadly, Ellen Meiksins Wood ([1986] 1998) charged that the post-Marxist critique constituted a “retreat from class” that obscured rather than clarified the complex relations between changing economic structures and political forces. Despite its many shortcomings, she argued, “no one can seriously maintain that any other social movement has ever challenged the power of capital as has the working class” (p. 185).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes in the late 1980s and early 1990s shifted the terms of the debate around the relevance of class identities. Given the regimes’ status as the representatives of “actually existing socialism,” many argued that their demise heralded not only the end of these regimes, but the exhaustion of their underlying ideology, including the contention that class identities were the primary social dividing line, and class struggle the primary organizer of social and political conflict (Dahrendorf 1990). At the same time, others countered that the Communist regimes represented a distortion of socialist ideology and that their defeat paved the way for a new, more globally integrated capitalism. This in turn would accentuate class divides, making class identities all the more relevant (Callinicos 1991).

In sum, changes in the structure and nature of work in the postwar decades challenged existing understandings of class identities among both Marxist and non-Marxist scholars. While some argued that these changes signaled the “death of class” as a relevant category, others sought to re-interpret the relationship between economic class relations and individual identities. Although these efforts came to different conclusions, what they shared in common is their more fluid understanding of the inter-relationship between objective class structures and subjective class identities.

Class identity today: does it still matter?

After decades of debate about the death of class, what can we say about how relevant class identities continue to be? Here, it is useful to distinguish between the objective and subjective dimensions of class identity. On the one hand, to what extent do divisions between social classes continue to serve as a useful analytical tool for understanding social and political processes? On the other hand, to what extent do people continue to relate to class identities, both in politics and in everyday life?

For some, classes as both an analytical concept and a subjective political identity have lost their relevance. According to Ulrich Beck, processes of individualization that characterize modern society “deprive class distinctions of their social meaning” (Beck 1992, p. 100). For Beck, the very structures of modern work and society are creating such individualized personal situations that it no longer makes sense to speak of “classes” in the traditional sense of the term. Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters (1996) echo Beck’s position in declaring that the “class mechanism” – the translation from shared experience to group identity to the articulation and pursuit of common political interests – is now “radically dissolved” (p. 668). Given the lack of a social base, these theorists argue that class-based political identities are no longer relevant. Pakulski and Waters point out that “class discourse is no longer prominent and popular.” Instead, it is individual identities more associated with the NSMs that “are displacing the old class identities as ‘generators of political action’” (p. 682).

While arguing that class-based organizing remains relevant within the realm of capitalist relations in the economy, Anthony Giddens (1990) contends that this is but one facet of what he views as a fourfold conception of modernity. In this view, modernity is characterized not only by capitalism but also by industrialism, coordinated administrative power, and military power, with no realm reducible to another. Likewise, Giddens argues that each realm is characterized by a different mobilizing identity: class for capitalism, environmentalism for industrialism, civil and human rights for administrative power, and peace for military power. Far from being a primary identity then, class is subsumed within a much broader array of possible identities.

Similarly, Michael Hechter (2004) agrees that class has receded in social and political importance. He advances an institutional explanation for this change, arguing that the decline in class politics resulted from increasing state centralization – what he calls “direct rule” – which was a consequence of the redistributive social policies and institutions that class-based movements won. Hechter argues that direct rule’s ability to provide social benefits muted class-based political demands. At the same time, its encroachment into previously autonomous social realms, such as religion, the family, and education, created more political conflict over cultural issues, creating a shift in politics “from class to culture.” However, unlike other advocates of the death of class thesis, he leaves open the possibility that cutbacks in redistributive policies could pave the way for a revival of class politics.

Other researchers question the degree to which state policies have undermined the social importance of class divisions (Hout et al. 1993). At a basic level, they point to studies showing that people’s class situation, as measured in a variety of ways, continues to shape earnings, wealth, health, and educational outcomes (for a review, see Scott 2002, pp. 27–29). Furthermore, as Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme (2003) show, in spite of shifts in the class and occupational structure, actors’ position in the labor market still powerfully shapes not only their economic position but also their “prestige, status, and opportunities for self-actualization” (p. 443). As for how this translates into the electoral sphere, critics argue that economic differences continue to be associated with differences in support for left- or right-wing parties, even though other identities certainly condition party support as well (Manza et al. 1995).

Much of the argument between those who contend that objective class identity is no longer relevant and their critics hinges on how one defines class divisions, and how one measures the effect of those divisions. As many scholars are quick to point out, class can be a very slippery concept, and people analyzing the same phenomenon often use different languages and measures to describe it (Bottero 2004, pp. 991–992; Weakliem and Adams 2011, p. 3). Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the studies of “class voting,” or the relation between social class and voting behavior, such as those referenced above. Critics of the “death of class” thesis point out that studies showing a decline in class voting often use a restrictive model of class that

equates “working class” with “manual worker.” This by definition excludes huge numbers of clerical and service sector workers who likely have economic interests similar to their manual worker counterparts. By adjusting the data to include more service workers within the “working-class” category, what initially appears to be a decline in class voting turns out to be a relatively stable pattern over time (Hout et al. 1993).

While analysts may disagree on the continued relevance of class as an objective social dividing line, there is more consensus around the idea that class as a subjective identity has declined. Clearly, organizational expressions of class identity are much less pervasive than they were 50 years ago, when Nisbet first raised the idea of the decline of class. Labor unions’ membership has declined across the industrialized world, and with it their organizational strength (Visser 2006; Western 1995). Meanwhile, most of the socialist and labor parties that served as the political representatives of working-class identity for much of the 20th century have muted or completely jettisoned their claims to represent working-class interests. Instead, they have replaced class appeals with appeals to a vaguer “progressive” political identity (Callaghan 2000; Lemke and Marks 1992; Przeworski and Sprague 1986).

At an individual level, survey data collected in the 1970s and 1980s from Wright’s “Comparative Project on Class Structure and Consciousness” (Wright 1990, 1997) showed that levels of class consciousness, meaning respondents’ self-reported understanding of belonging to a specific social class, were low across the industrialized world, save for Sweden. While this initially seemed to lend credence to Pakulski and Waters’ contention that class discourses were no longer popular, Kluegel et al.’s (1995) survey data painted a more complicated picture. Their research showed that individuals have a sense of their social position and that this position influences how they perceive levels of socioeconomic inequality: wealthier, high-status people were more likely to see a large, undifferentiated “middle class,” whereas poorer, low-status people were more likely to see a larger group of poor people and a smaller middle class, suggesting greater social differentiation. Moreover, their respondents, particularly poorer respondents, were willing to attribute their economic situation to “social” factors such as lack of equal opportunity or the failure of the economic system. However, they also saw differences in wealth and poverty as a result of individual characteristics such as ability and motivation. These findings are consistent with a theory of “split consciousness” (Mann 1973), whereby workers hold ambivalent or contradictory understandings of social divisions and call upon individual or social understandings depending on the context.

Rick Fantasia’s (1995) work offers deeper insight into the idea of split consciousness. Noting that “class [within a Marxist framework] encompasses a historical relationship, not a position in a hierarchy,” he argues that class consciousness is best understood “as contingent, as a process, and as an interactional phenomenon” (p. 275). His own ethnographic study of factory workers in Massachusetts showed that workers who may well not exhibit much class consciousness as measured by survey questions may still *act* in very class-conscious ways at specific moments, in response to specific conflicts (Fantasia 1989).

But even to the extent that we accept the theory of split consciousness, along with Fantasia’s argument that consciousness emerges through conflict, there are now far fewer opportunities for subjective class consciousness to emerge than there once were. Strike rates, the best available measure of class conflict, have declined precipitously across the industrialized world since the 1980s (ILO 2013, Table 9B).

The crux of the debate about the decline of class as a subjective identity therefore centers not on the fact of its existence but on the question of why it is happening. Is it because social changes have actually reduced or irrevocably complicated objective class divisions? Or is it because the social and political context has shifted to de-emphasize class divisions that continue to exist?

Also, if the context has shifted, is that because other issues have simply “crowded out” class issues, or because class issues have been more actively pushed out?

Based on the research cited above on the continuing relevance of class for a variety of social outcomes, it would seem that shifts in class and occupational structures have changed how and where we work but have not inherently eroded the base for class identities. Additionally, macro-economic studies suggest that if anything, the material base for class politics may have increased in recent decades. Levels of socioeconomic inequality in advanced industrialized countries are higher than at any point in the past 40 years (Atkinson 2003). Meanwhile, the share of total income captured by the top 1 percent of earners has reached levels not seen since before the Great Depression, and wealth concentration is even more extreme (Piketty 2014; Piketty and Saez 2006).

Those advocating variants of the “death of class” thesis counter that growing inequality does not indicate a growing base for class politics. They contend that the postwar growth of welfare states created a world of “institutionalized individualization,” where individual citizens make claims on, and contributions to, states, instead of organized groups. This, they argue, has actually dissolved “the culture of classes,” even as inequality increases (Beck 2007, p. 682). Echoing Hechter, they argue that the very conditions created by the collective struggles of class-based political movements in the past century ended up severing the link between economic position and group identity. As a result, new political identities have developed around cultural values (family, environment, etc.) to displace old class identities.

Against arguments that class identities have simply been displaced by more relevant identities, others contend that they have been pushed out as a result of deliberate and successful attacks on the institutions that create and sustain class identities, namely left parties and unions. According to this approach, recent decades have been characterized less by the “decline” or “death” of class than by its *defeat*. Class identities remain relevant, but they are in retreat, as attacks on unions and strike defeats have created a “crisis of representation,” which has reduced opportunities for those identities to develop (Richards 2001). Simultaneously, legacies of defeat have created a stigmatized understanding of class, which is no longer viewed as a collective source of strength, but rather as a personalized source of shame (Sennett and Cobb 1972; Skeggs 1997). This in turn has created more space for “neoliberal” ideologies that emphasize the primacy of the individual and freedom of choice (Barker et al. 2013, pp. 1–37; Duggan 2003; Harvey 2007; Smith 2000).

These arguments stress the importance of understanding the relationship between identity and organization. Individuals hold a variety of different, often conflicting, identities and views about their place in the world. But it is only through organizations, where individuals are brought into groups and into relation with (and against) others, that certain identities gain salience over others. For example, Devine (1997) points to several studies emphasizing the role of weaker trade unions and a lack of a class-based political party in explaining differences in measured levels of class consciousness in the United States and Britain (pp. 75–101).

However, the influence of organization on class identity is not limited to parties and unions. Workplace organization is also important. Savage (2000, pp. 121–147) argues that new forms of work organization have fundamentally altered how workers and managers are linked to organizational positions within and among firms. The rise of more temporary, contingent forms of work, combined with the erosion of traditional “career ladders,” makes individuals see their work life trajectories as tied more to individual decisions rather than to organizational structures. While this seems consistent with Beck’s idea of greater individualization, Savage is careful to note that individualization and class identities can easily co-exist and should not be counterposed. His interviews with British respondents show several examples of how people can express class identities through individualized ideas of dignity, self-respect, personal autonomy, and more. While unions have traditionally defended such individual ideas, Savage

and others contend that new managerial cultures have appropriated these ideas, further undermining unions as a source of class identity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Savage 2001).

More broadly, scholars of social class have sought in recent years to reconceptualize class identity not as a process of forming subjective political actors, but rather as a process of producing and reproducing social inequality through everyday social and economic practices (Bottero 2004; Devine et al. 2005; Savage et al. 2000). They view class identities as taking shape within patterns of social relations both within and outside the workplace. Neighborhoods, churches, shopping malls, bars, and restaurants all create spaces where people interact based on shared understandings of group relations and hierarchies. Drawing heavily on Bourdieu's (1984) relational sociology, this "culturalist class analysis" seeks to reconnect the link between class location and social identity, which they argue both defenders of the "death of class" thesis and those who continue to argue for the relevance of social class have largely abandoned (Bottero 2004, pp. 987–989). While focusing on reproductions of social hierarchy through everyday interactions may succeed in reconnecting the link between the two, it remains unclear where, if at all, the relation between class location and *political* identities fits in this approach.

With class-based political identities in decline, whether due to defeat or disuse, do they still play a role in shaping politics? Or are contemporary scholars of social class right to shift their attention to how class identities shape social interactions at a more individual or day-to-day level? Alternatively, is there a way to integrate the study of class politics and everyday class practices?

The resurgent waves of global protest in recent years pose this question with a renewed urgency. From Occupy in the United States and anti-austerity movements in Europe, to the "Arab Spring," to uprisings in Turkey, Brazil, and beyond, millions of people have organized collectively to challenge existing socioeconomic relations and to improve their life situations. Although they have met with decidedly mixed results, these protests have attracted global attention, pushed new issues onto the political agenda, and in some cases have managed to reshape the political landscape in important ways (Berkhout and Jansen 2012; Hayduk 2012; Mason 2013; Shihade et al. 2012).

These movements have relied on powerful collective identities to rally support, from the idea of "the 99%" for Occupy or the "Indignados" in Spain, to the unifying – if fleeting – images of Tahrir Square in Egypt or Gezi Park in Turkey. But is it at all useful or even possible to think of these collective identities as *class* identities? On the one hand, many of these protests have been organized around explicitly economic issues: Wall Street malfeasance, growing economic inequality, fiscal austerity policies, bus fare hikes, privatization of public spaces, and more. On the other, these contemporary movements lack many of the trappings traditionally associated with class-based political movements. Most striking is their distance from established party structures, traditional vehicles for shaping political class identities. Many of the protests have been deeply ambivalent if not outright hostile toward established left parties (van Gent et al. 2013; Kaldor and Selchow 2013).

At the same time, labor unions, another traditional vehicle for class-based identities, have played key roles in protests in several countries, although relations with the larger movements have been complex and sometimes fraught (El-Mahdi 2011; Schwartz 2011; Shepard 2012). More broadly, as David McNally (2013) shows, these protests both shaped and are shaped by working-class recomposition. So for example, increasing casualization of employment relations may erode the traditional base for labor union membership, leading to a decline in class-based organization. Or, as in the case of Bolivia in the 1990s and 2000s, it may lead to a reconceptualization of what being "working class" and being a union member means, leading to a re-shaping and revitalization of class-based organization (pp. 403–409). Similarly, worker and indigenous identities can be constituted as opposed to each other or can mutually reinforce

each other, as happened not only in Bolivia but also in Oaxaca, Mexico, and elsewhere (pp. 412–414). This suggests that class identities still retain their ability to mobilize but also emphasizes that this is not a given. Class identities develop in dialogue and tension with competing groups and identities. There is no “natural” translation of class identities into political action.

How different then is the current situation from how class identities developed in the past? The history of efforts to grapple with the “problem of class formation” outlined earlier shows that the development of class identities has never been a straightforward process. As Bert Klandermans (2001) observes, “class as such never did unite... there are always additional identifiers involved that explain spells of unity” (p. 326). Economic class relations have always been woven into a web of overlapping and competing identities (Barker and Dale 1998; Calhoun 1993). While they may take different forms and mobilize in different ways, today’s movements – and the identities they generate – likely share more in common with past class-based movements than may be immediately apparent.

Conclusion: the future of class identities

Born out of the struggles of the Industrial Revolution, only to be pronounced dead in the latter 20th century on account of post-industrialism, class identities face an uncertain future. Regardless of whether one thinks that class is now living or dead, what is clear is that our understanding of class identities and how they take shape has become more nuanced and complex. If class once served as a taken-for-granted dividing line in society and politics, that is no longer the case. But the absence of an essential unifying class identity does not herald the death of class. Rather, it calls for rethinking what we mean by class identities.

This article has surveyed efforts to think through the link between class relations and political positions over the past century. Starting off in the late 19th and early 20th century as a problem for socialist strategists seeking to build large-scale, class-based movements, this question soon also attracted interest from social scientists. For these scholars, whatever their opinion of the politics underlying class-based movements, class cleavages were the fundamental dividing line of the period. That began to change in the postwar decades, as employment shifted toward service and knowledge sector jobs, leading to talk of a “post-industrial” society where class lines were no longer so firmly drawn. At the same time, scholars documented the rise of so-called “new social movements,” movements that seemed to differ from their “old” class-based forbears in their focus on “post-materialist” quality-of-life issues and more individualized identities. As a result, some began to argue that class identities were no longer relevant for understanding modern society. Even within some Marxist circles, the idea that a unified “working class” could serve as a key historical actor came under fire, with many abandoning the idea of the working class in favor of vaguer ideas of “the people,” Third Worldism, peasant insurgencies, or revolts by subjugated racial minorities.

Nonetheless, class continued to show signs of social and political relevance. In a world of sustained and even growing inequality, many people continued to recognize persistent economic divisions, and some recognized those divisions as class divisions, not simply individual differences in achievement. The key difference between now and past decades is that these individual sentiments lack an organizational vehicle. The powerful class-based social and political movements that shaped the early and mid-20th century are in disarray. Union membership is declining, as are strike rates, and socialist and labor parties have distanced themselves from their traditional class-based rhetoric.

The key question that scholars have been debating is whether this decline reflects underlying structural changes that have reduced the relevance of class-based organization, or if it is the result

of political changes that have weakened class-based organization without necessarily reducing its relevance. The current wave of global protests suggests that class retains its power to mobilize, although those mobilizations may take different forms than in the past and may be buttressed by other intersecting identities. But in this, current mobilizations do not differ that much from past eras. What we have learned is that, while economic divisions create *possibilities* for political mobilization, the specific forms those movements take are not pre-determined. There never has been an essential link between economic grievances and political movement. The formation of class identities has always been a process, one riven with conflict and contradictions. But it has been a process grounded in people's material conditions and experience.

In sum, the classical questions about class identity endure, although they have taken different forms. While research has moved beyond overly rigid "class in itself/for itself" distinctions, the tension between structure and organization as sources of class identity persists. As the structure of work and socioeconomic relations continues to change, researchers face important questions on both sides of this tension. On the structural side, will increasing globalization of production, casualization of work, and individualization of social life lead to greater social atomization, thus further eroding the basis for class identities? Or will cross-border linkages, declining work protections, and growing inequality draw people together, creating new possibilities for class identities? On the organizational side, is it still useful to think in terms of class organizations? If so, what kinds of organizations will mobilize and express class identities? Will traditional vehicles such as social democratic parties and trade unions change course and revitalize, or will new forms of class organization take hold amidst the decline of those old models? Taken together, these questions put forth a research program to animate future generations of scholarship.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ This is usually defined using voters' occupational and income data.

² As Wright (2002, pp. 833–34) notes, Weber's analysis often has a Marxian inflection when discussing questions of social class. Also, for a useful distinction between Weberian notions of class, status, and party, see Table 1 on p. 835.

³ As elaborated below, subsequent explorations of class identity expanded beyond the twofold distinction between objective and subjective dimensions of class.

⁴ I say purported because this is usually asserted in these texts without evidence. However, recent scholarship has challenged the idea of increasing mobility in the postwar years. For a United States-focused critique, see Fischer (2010).

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