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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Class and historical explanation

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My concern as a sociologist is that sociologists and historians should become more involved in common projects and in serious intellectual cooperation. This concern recognises the problems and difficulties inherent in the conjunction of the two disciplines. Several years ago I remember one colleague asking contemptuously, 'But what *is* history?', and dismissing the work of historians as too empiricist and theoretically naive. Equally, I am sure, historians have registered their disquiet over sociology and what may be seen as its theoretical pretentions. I sense, however, that there is now more solid support for a common accord between historians and sociologists than there has been in the past. In the 1980s several sociologists produced books which dealt directly with the idea of a historical sociology.[1] As social historians have opened up debates which have made use of sociological and social anthropological writings, so too have sociologists produced books with a wide historical sweep.[2] This mutuality of interest has been aided by the development of journals like *History Workshop* and *Historical Sociology*. There seems to be every likelihood that this collective work will continue, and this view is supported by a reading of the chapters in this book. Most would, I think, sit easily in the proceedings of a sociological conference dedicated to questions of inequality, conflict and order in modern societies. All this supports the view of Philip Abrams that 'in terms of their fundamental preconceptions, history and sociology are, and always have been, the same'.[3]

[1] See e.g. P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology* (Shepton Mallet, 1982) and G. McLennan, *Marxism and the Methodologies of History* (London, 1981).

[2] See e.g. M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge, 1986).

[3] P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, p. x.

Abrams's book *Historical Sociology* has been extremely influential and it is worth quoting his views further. For him

> Historical sociology is not . . . a matter of imposing grand schemes of revolutionary development on the relationship of the past to the present. Nor is it merely a matter of recognising the historical background to the present. It is the attempt to understand the relationship of personal activity and experience on the one hand and social organisation on the other as something that is continually constructed in time [and therefore] there is no necessary difference between the sociologist and the historian. . . . Sociology which takes itself seriously must be historical sociology.[4]

I have always felt this to be true, and I became firmly convinced of it during the research I carried out with colleagues on the Durham coalfield in the 1980s. We were helped to this view by a meeting which took place in the city of Durham. It was described in the following way by a local reporter:

> Two of Britain's wealthiest families were joined by marriage in Durham Cathedral yesterday. Lady Isabella Lambton, the 21 year old youngest of five daughters of Mr and Mrs Tony Lambton of Lambton Park, Burnmoor, married banker Mr Philip Naylor-Leyland. The bridegroom, a 26 year old former Household Cavalry Officer, will inherit £20 million from the late Earl Fitzwilliam, his mother's step-father. His inheritance includes 13,000 acres and two stately homes, one of them with 365 rooms. A total of 300 guests, including staff from the Lambton Estates in Northumberland and Durham went on to a champagne reception and buffet in Durham Castle's Great Hall. Lady Isabella wore a dress of white slipper satin. Her silk veil was set off with a circle of yellow roses and she carried a single rose instead of a bouquet. The four bridesmaids wore silver grey, full length dresses with white bonnets and carried posies of yellow roses. All the dress designs were inspired by the painting of the 18th century artist Thomas Lawrence and made by Belville Sassoon, of London. The page boys wore colourful period suits in red and blue velvet with matching bows on their shoes.[5]

The father of the bride was the former Earl of Durham, who had relinquished his title to advance his career in the Commons. It was he who resigned from Heath's government in 1973 after a call-girl scandal, and outfaced a rather sheepish Robin Day in his resignation interview. The family survived the scandal, retaining their powerful presence in the area, and the family motto 'The Day Will Come'. It has been one of the most powerful families in Britain for two centuries. It developed its wealth in the coal trades in the nineteenth century, and its members have played a significant role in party

[4] Ibid., pp. 16 – 17.
[5] *The Sunderland Echo*, 19 March 1980.

politics in the nineteenth century as Liberals, more recently in the Tory party. Generally the family has provided personnel for the upper circles of the British state.[6] In the context of our researches into the social structure of the Durham coalfield the example of the Lambtons served to illustrate well the enduring nature of wealth and political power, and this led us to accentuate the historical aspects of our research into class formation.[7] Here it serves as an introduction to the question of social class and historical change.

The use of social class as the basis for a general conceptual framework through which to analyse society and social change has been the subject of detailed debate and discussion for over a century. This debate has taken place both *within* the Marxist tradition and between it and other schools of thought. Often the lines of disagreement have been more apparent than real; occasionally the opposite has been the case.[8] In reflecting on this it is hard to resist the view that the idea of class is, at one and the same time, the most useful and the most problematic of concepts employed by historians and social scientists. Its attractiveness lies initially in its potential for identifying coherent groups of people via their economic position within society. Furthermore, if these groups are seen as being in conflict or competition with each other, class position can be seen as a significant key to an exploration of people's motives and political action. The problems arise in different ways. To begin with it is not clear how and upon what basis groups can be located in the economic structure of a society. Furthermore, whichever scheme is chosen there is likely to be ambiguity and marginality. In Reddy's words, 'once the microscope is brought into focus neat class boundaries dissolve.[9] In addition, and perhaps most importantly, it is arguable that people, however located, will behave and think in ways which are not determined by their class position. Again in Reddy's view, it is difficult 'to speak of socially distinct sets of individuals, united by some identifiable trait or traits, [and] having shared intentions'.[10]

This problem can be understood as one involving classification (by some objective sets of criteria) and of interpreting the subjective

[6] See Sir John Colville, *Those Lamptons: a Most Unusual Family* (London, 1988).

[7] H. Beynon and T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants: Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation* (London, 1990).

[8] For an account which illustrates similarity see T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge, 1979); for a different view see E. Meiksins Wood, *The Retreat from Class: a New 'True' Socialism* (London, 1986).

[9] See W.M. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe: a Critique of Historical Understanding* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 9.

experiences and understandings of people in relation to the classificatory system chosen. The doubts and questions raised by Reddy are important ones. However, his conclusion that 'the whole notion of class as an explanatory principle in history is . . . brought into question' is, in my view, premature.[11]

In assessing these issues it is helpful to place them in historical context. Kolakowski has maintained that most of the significant issues and debates relevant to Marxist theory were fully discussed in the nineteenth century, and there is some support for this view.[12] Certainly the writings of Marx show a keen awareness of these problems, and while the judgement of recent authors that they are 'irrefutably ambiguous' on the question of linking the objective and subjective dimensions of class, may be over harsh, their contribution is helpful in drawing attention to the variety of different ways in which Marx addressed this central issue.[13]

On questions concerning the social basis of classes and class relationships, for example, Marx's writings occasionally establish the analysis with great clarity. Here class in capitalist society is related directly to property (or propertylessness) and the operation of the division of labour and the labour process produces a tendency toward polarisation and class conflict. In a much quoted passage he asserts:

> the owners merely of labour power, owners of capital and landowners whose respective source of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words wage labourers, capitalists and landowners, constitute the three big classes in modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.[14]

However, Marx observed that the social and technical division of labour had operated within these classes to produce an 'infinite fragmentation of interest and rank'.[15] Here, as all Marxologists inform us, 'the manuscript breaks off', leaving us with what has become known as 'the boundary problem'. It was this problem which was picked up by Weber in his detailed distillation of the variety of economic processes at work upon group formation in a market economy. As a result, the possibility emerged of Marx's 'three big classes' fragmenting into a greater number based not only upon position within the production process but through competition over

[11] Ibid., p. 9.

[12] L. Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism* (Oxford, 1978), vols 1 and 2.

[13] G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose and C. Vogler, *Social Class in Modern Britain* (London, 1988).

[14] K. Marx, *Capital* (Moscow, 1971), vol. 3, p. 885.

[15] Ibid., p. 886.

a range of marketable goods. Given this, Reddy's view that it is 'difficult to be precise about class boundaries and class membership' is undeniable (Woolf would call it a truism: see Chapter 10 in this volume); so too Reddy's observation that 'if one were to take singly a strict definition of "proletariat" and look across the globe today, we would find an awesome diversity of fates summed up in that word' (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Certainly the chapters in this book all illustrate the fact that within any broadly defined class of people a great variation exists, in both terms of economic rewards and interests and in sets of ideas and beliefs. Michael Bush's account of the European peasantry (see Chapter 8) is particularly helpful in outlining both the diversity of fates associated with pre-capitalist social relations, and their multiplicity of causes. Patterns of land utilisation and landholding, taxation policies as well as kinship and demographic factors all contributed to the fates of peasants. It was for these and other reasons that Shanin referred to the peasantry as 'the awkward class'.[16] They too severely taxed Marx's own conceptual scheme and drew from him an assessment of class in terms of their relationships. In France he wrote of 'small-holding' peasants' forming 'a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other'. From this he concluded generally:

> Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely local interconnection among these small-holding peasants and the identity of interest begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation amongst them, they do not form a class.[17]

This element of community is, in different ways, seen as critical by Reddy and Snell – 'class is a community issue' – (see Chapters 2 and 9) and is taken up forcefully by Patrick Joyce (see Chapter 11). His account of industrial workers in the nineteenth century reveals the extent to which the working class was made up of fragmented groups, often locally isolated and divided rather than united by their economic position as wage labourers. While aspects of this account can be questioned, it shows clearly that it is particularly difficult to establish evidence for a single coherent working class in Victorian

[16] T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class* (London, 1973).

[17] K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), pp.

England. This (via discussion of the 'labour aristocracy' and the 'reserve army') has been recognised for some time. Joyce's chapter takes us a further step along the road of deconstruction, and uncovers another awkward class.

To this problem of the internal variation within a class (and the related question of subjective class identity) can be added a further set of problems relating to class boundaries. Again Bush's account of the peasantry (see Chapter 8) is suggestive. He raises questions about the experiences of free peasants in relation to those of serfs, and suggests circumstances in which the latter status would be preferable to the former thereby raising the possibility of a severe disjuncture between analytical categories and everyday experience. Similar ideas have influenced the discussion of slavery in the Americas. Here attention has been drawn to the variability of slavery as an institutional form, and the similarity and difference between the experience of slaves and free workers in the industrialising USA.[18] These issues, of course, affected perceptions of the workers themselves – in the USA and in Europe. Marx's notion of a 'wage slave' flowed from a popular discourse that was influenced, in part, by the fact that significant numbers of workers were involved in a tied relationship to their employers. Of these, the coal-miners of Scotland and northern England were the most significant group. These workers were employed as bonded servants until 1872. As the first General Secretary of the Durham Miners' Association put it in 1871: 'When you felt the full weight of the burden you longed to be free; you looked around but found no means of escape; you were lashed to the PLACE by English law, and while there, constantly scorched by the employers' scorpion whip'.[19] In this way, perhaps, Snell's observations (see Chapter 9) on the blurring of distinctions between peasant and agricultural labourers in the English and Welsh countryside could be extended to a group of workers whose centrality to the working class has become almost legendary.[20]

The miners in the eighteenth and nineteenth century were employed under arrangements similar to those experienced by agricultural labourers. Equally, and in spite of an over-enthusiastic interpretation of industrialisation as an *urban* process, they lived in villages which were most often situated apart from the towns and

[18] See e.g. R.W. Fogel and S.L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross* (Boston, 1974) and H.G. Gutman, *Slavery and the Numbers Game* (Urbana, 1975).

[19] Quoted in Beynon and Austrin, *Masters and Servants*.

[20] For a discussion see R. Harrison (ed.) *Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered* (Sussex, 1978).

cities. As such John Campbell in his biography of Nye Bevan draws close attention to the link between solidarity and local chauvinism among mine-workers and how in any assessment of Bevan it is important to understand that

> he was in a real sense a country boy. The mining communities are not truly urban but *valleys* with open hillside in between them . . . the mountain – more accurately the bare heather moors – came almost literally to his doorstep.[21]

These problems of establishing clear class categories based upon forms of labour and production are exacerbated when we consider the vexed question of the middle class. Seed's historical dilemma (see Chapter 7) is to identify a class whose name denotes not a role or activity but 'a space, a between . . . a group that fails or refuses to fit the dominant social division between rich and poor'. This difficulty has been compounded by the rise of large-scale organisations and a growing non-capitalist salariat to form 'one of the most intractable issues in contemporary sociology'.[22] Here the problem is partly one of definition (why 'middle' class?) and sociologists have suggested new terms to handle modern conditions – the service class being the most common. More significant is the question of class boundaries and the allocative process whereby people are placed in the class categories.

This particular problem, of course, is a general one and not peculiar to sociology and history. One of the features of modern states has been their concern with classifying and collecting data about their populations. Timberlake (see Chapter 6) points to the elaborate devices developed by the Tsarist state in its attempt to retain an established system of classification in the face of an enduring and dynamic division of labour.[23] The activities of the British state were different in kind but no less problematic. The 1851 census, for example, located the royal family in the professional class. This classification system became refined in the twentieth century into the widely used Registrar General's scale. While more comprehensive, this outline of categories was not without its problems and idiosyncrasies. Its underlying theoretical assumptions were those of the

[21] See J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism* (London, 1987), p. 7.

[22] N. Abercrombie and J. Urry, *Capital, Labour and the Middle Classes* (London, 1983).

[23] See E.O. Wright, *Class Crisis and the State* (London, 1979); and E.O. Wright, *Classes* (London, 1985); J. Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility and the Class Structure in Northern Britain* (Oxford, 1980); Marshall *et al.*, *Social Class in Modern Britain*.

eugenicists and their view of superior and inferior types. It has frequently been pointed out that the scale is based on a range of intuitive and a priori assumptions, and Nichols has observed how, in this scheme of things, capitalists and inmates of mental hospitals are brought together in the same class.[24] Against this background, sociologists and historians have attempted to develop more refined classificatory systems. In his assessment of historical researches into the middle class, Seed (see Chapter 7) points to the 'limited value of using occupation as an index of social position'. Much contemporary sociological research bears this out. Elaborate and sophisticated attempts at establishing scales which link occupation to class have indicated the problematic nature of this exercise. They have also pointed to the critical role played by the evaluative judgements of the researchers themselves.[25] Even given these problems, however, empirical sociological researchers would argue that while class categories (like all categories) contain internal variation, they remain a powerful explanatory tool in accounting for people's attitudes at work, voting preferences, educational performance and so on. To go beyond this, many would argue, requires more detailed, ethnographic evidence and qualitative investigations into people's lives.[26]

It is, of course, at this broad level of subjectivity that the argument becomes most complex. Classificatory systems are all inherently difficult to establish and historians and sociologists recognise this as a necessary evil. For Reddy (see Chapter 2) the classificatory problem is a stalking horse for a greater enemy; that is, the view that classes themselves become agents in history, being ushered on and off the stage by historians to explain (or explain away) particular events and developments. Here too (as with the 'infinite fragmentation of interest and rank') the problem, the challenge and the crisis is not a new one. Certainly in their own empirical analyses it is possible to discern an awareness of this issue in the minds of Marx and Engels. Marx's reference to the peasantry has already been noted. To this could be added Engel's account of the religious views of the English middle classes in the 1850s. Engels makes clear that the class interest of this particular group had become effectively masked by the depths of their religious beliefs and could not, as such, be used as an explanation of their behaviour. In this he concludes that 'religious views and their

[24] T. Nichols, 'Social class: official, sociological and Marxist definitions', in J. Irvine, I. Miles and J. Evans (eds) *Demystifying Social Statistics* (London, 1979).

[25] See e.g. D. Rose (ed.) *Social Stratification and Economic Change* (London, 1988).

[26] See G. Marshall, 'Some remarks on the study of working class consciousness', *Politics and Society* 12 (1983): 263–301.

further development into systems of dogmas' in many cases predominate in determining the form and the course of historical struggles.[27] As Abrams has astutely observed, the problem here (and elsewhere) is *not* that the analysis

> too closely explains all historical events and developments in terms of the relations of production, ownership and class, but that it makes such generous provision for the *mediation* of these influences by political, cultural and ideological factors that the causal connection between economic relationships and historical change becomes extremely difficult to trace.[28]

These accounts leave us with a paradox. In one reading Marx's observations on the peasantry reinforced by the reference to 'potatoes in a sack' leads to the sharp dichotomy he draws between true and false consciousness, between reality and illusion. It is this framework which allows the interests of classes to lurk undetected for decades before finally emerging at critical moments in the agency of class action. This is the Marxism of the Third International and it shares many assumptions with more liberal and empiricist researchers. This is the object of Reddy's initial scepticism with class analysis. However, these same observations can also lead to a theorisation of class which sees economic and political classes (and the arena of class struggle) as non-reducible categories, a view which is compatible with a radical interpretation of Weber. In the 1960s E.P. Thompson entered the contest over the theory of class with the publication of his momentous study *The Making of the English Working Class* and a series of essays eventually published as *The Poverty of Theory*. Reddy extends his criticism of class analysis to encompass the solution suggested by Thompson (see Chapter 2).

Thompson's writings are well known. He has made clear his dislike of formulations of class which derived from Stalinist and structuralist schools of Marxism. He has extended his displeasure to styles of sociological investigation which had hitherto been obsessed with problems of classification and had 'stopped the time machine'. His project was to rescue the experiences of working people 'from the enormous condescension of posterity', thereby addressing the central problem of linking day-to-day experience and the meaningful worlds of workers to analyses of class relationships.[29] In this he asserted:

[27] F. Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (London, 1892).
[28] P. Abrams, *Historical Sociology*, p. 49.
[29] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), p. 13.

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> we cannot deduce class from a static 'section' (since it is becoming over time) nor as a function of a mode of production, since class formation and class consciousness (while subject to determinate pressures) evaluate in an open-ended process of relationships – of struggle with other classes – over time.[30]

Class for Thompson was a 'junction concept', a means of handling the intersection between structure and action. Its open-endedness eschewed versions of true and false consciousness:

> Class consciousness is the way these experiences are handled in cultural terms . . . If the experience appears as determined, class consciousness does not. We can see a logic . . . but we cannot predict any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.[31]

As such, it ushered in an investigation of the world of the worker as a central and necessary part of any class analysis. This view has greatly influenced social historians and sociologists and ironically (given Thompson's antipathy toward much sociological work) it has been instrumental in generating common approaches and questions between the two disciplines. The mark of Thompson's influence can be seen in this collection. Seed (see Chapter 7) writes of class as 'something more than a passive or static description based upon certain kinds of quantifiable information', and states that it is 'not a matter only of this or that aspect of a group – but a shifting totality of social relations'. He also points to the need to investigate the vocabulary of class used in popular discourse. This is important and is based upon the observation that, whatever the classification problems, people have used and continue to use a language which identifies other groups and classes in society. Often they have used the idea of class in imaginative and metaphysical ways. Snell (see Chapter 9) for example, recounts the term 'burglar class' as used in the fields of England and Wales in the nineteenth century. In contemporary society French car workers have described their managers as 'the grey suits' and British chemical workers refer to their superiors as 'the big books'.[32] Equally, Snell's emphasis on the 'phenomenology of class' fits well with studies which have attempted to relate the interpretative worlds of workers to an analysis of class relations. In his detailed study of Limerick, for example, McNabb examined the ways in

[30] E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London, 1978), p. 299.
[31] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 10.
[32] See R. Linhart, *The Assembly Line* (London, 1978); T. Nichols and H. Beynon, *Living with Capitalism* (London, 1978).

which 'the class structure is revealed in ordinary day to day life'. He observed how the cooperative organisation, Maintir na Tire, organised meetings in which the platform and the front-row seats were occupied by the farmers. In turn many farm labourers left because, in their view, the farmers 'wanted nobody to have a say but themselves'. In response the farmers were critical of the labourers arguing that 'they won't speak up when they're at a meeting, we do all their talking outside the door'. In his analysis McNabb demonstrates equally how 'the end to be achieved and towards which the society is organised . . . is the preservation of property'.[33] In this it is clear that the role of men as husbands and fathers is central to the social structure; and this points to some problems.

Many of the criticisms of Thompson are well known. His attack on the classifiers has made him vulnerable to the charge that his empirical material is too narrowly based to do justice to the title of his study.[34] Structuralists like Richard Johnson have criticised his culturalist approach for being too naively naturalistic and for having too little analysis of the dynamic of change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[35]

In his view, Thompson allows 'the economic' a place in his analysis but only 'through the category of experience': that is, economic relations existing in the feelings expressed by members of the class. Economic forces as a set of objectively present relations appear only in an attenuated form, *through* the cultural, *through* the 'inwardness of experience'. As such, argues Johnson, Thompson's solution makes it 'extremely difficult to employ economic categories in any very exact way', thereby robbing the historian of 'a powerful tool of analysis'. Johnson concludes with a restatement of the old problem:

> [Thompson's analysis] produces serious difficulties . . . when it is necessary to analyse moments in the history of classes when cultural and political fragmentations do actively prove, in political outcomes, to be more powerful than any sense of class unity. Do classes then not exist?

[33] P. McNabb 'Social structure', in J. Newman (ed.) *The Limerick Rural Survey 1958–1964* (Tipperary, 1964) p. 242.

[34] This criticism has been put in a forceful way by Perry Anderson: 'It comes as something of a shock, at the end of 900 pages, to realise that one has not been told such an elementary fact as the approximate size of the English working class, or its proportion within the population as a whole, at any date in the history of its "making".' See P. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), p. 33.

[35] Johnson, in particular, takes issue with Thompson's contention that, in his researches 'the material took command of one', seeing this as 'a tendency to prefer "experience" to "theory"'. See R. Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese and socialist-humanist history', *History Workshop* 6 (1978): 79 – 100.

> One might consider the question for the 1850s and 1860s in Britain and, for the present, of the 'disappearance' of class in . . . the 1950s.[36]

From another standpoint Perry Anderson has vigorously explored the variety of uses made by Thompson of the key ideas of 'agency' and 'experience'. In this he noted the passage:

> experience walks in without knocking at the door, and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide. People starve: their survivors think in new ways about the market. People are imprisoned: in prison they meditate in new ways about the law.

To this, Anderson adds the comment: 'Thompson clearly assumes that the lessons taught will be the correct ones' and concludes that this leaves the analysis in a vulnerable state, for 'what ensures that a particular experience of distress or disaster will inspire a particular (cognitive or morally appropriate) conclusion?'[37]

Patrick Joyce's contribution to this volume (see Chapter 11) develops this debate further in the context of Victorian England. His analysis of the capital – labour relation leads him to conclude that a 'diverse and fragmented labour force' existed in Britain and that the economic position of workers 'emerges as so ambiguous and so fractured that the very idea of class may itself be questioned'. By this route, political parties and organised forms of popular culture are seen to have more bearing than economics on the uniformities of sentiment uniting workers. There is no doubt that the emphasis given by Joyce to political parties and their mode of organisation, as well as to the imaginative realm, is of great importance, although it is possible that he has overemphasised the influence of non-class elements in popular culture. Undoubtedly the miners are an important case and the continuity of their liberal affiliations is of great significance to an analysis of the working class in Victorian England. In this, of course, John Wilson is a critical figure and Joyce's interpretation of him is quite meagre. Certainly Wilson's own accounts of his life and his involvement with the Durham miners and the Liberal party provide evidence of the enormous tensions that built up between the accommodating role played by the Durham Miners' Association, and other powerful understandings present among coal-miners.[38] These disjunc-

[36] Ibid., p. 97.

[37] P. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, p. 28. The quotation from Thompson comes from *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 201.

[38] See J. Wilson, *A History of the Durham Miners 1870–1904* (Durham 1907) and J. Wilson, *Memories of a Labour Leader* (London, 1910).

tures often became most clear in periods of industrial dispute or at election times: in 1874, for example, when, in the run-up to the election, feelings were running high among the miners as a consequence of Londonderry's attitude to the 1872 Miners Act and towards trade unionism in general. Wilson describes how riots were broken up by police who took several miners prisoner. While standing on a waggon in an attempt to keep order, he was told by two young men that he should take no notice: 'Just watch and you'll see some fun'. It seems that they were right:

> The police were returning from the lockup after securing their prisoners when they were met by a shower of whin stones. They were a very dangerous missile having very sharp edges . . . The officers were taken at a disadvantage for the attack was well concerted and the stones were delivered with precision. The officers retreated and were chased to the lockup.[39]

He then recounts how the lockup was attacked, the prisoners released, and how on that night 'considerable damage was done'. Similar incidents (too regular to be dismissed as sporadic outbursts of militancy) can be worked into a pattern which relates to a tension between different understandings of politics and action in relation to specific organisations, notably the trade union and the state. Something of this tension comes through in the work songs and ballads of Durham's 'pitman poet' Tommy Armstrong. These contain the populist and nationalist references to which Joyce refers, but they also contain strongly worked ideas of class antagonism and that sense of moral outrage which have become associated with mining as an occupation. Mine officials (like Maiden Law Joe) are violent and condemned ('born without feelings or shame'). In 1885, the year of the major strike in the county, he wrote *Oakeys Strike*. This like his poem *South Medomsley Strike* is a powerful attack on the masters and their henchmen, the candymen (the bailiffs). In it Armstrong raises the question: 'What would I do if I had the power myself?' His answer is clear: 'I'd hang the twenty candymen and Johney that carries the bell'.[40]

These accounts endorse Joyce's view that historians and sociologists should look beyond economic factors for sources of explanation, and consider cultural and political activities in their own right. In embracing this non-reductionist perspective, however, it is important to

[39] See Wilson, *A History of the Durham Miners*.

[40] See H. Beynon, 'Introduction', to R. Forbes (ed.) *Polis and Candymen* (Durham, 1985).

keep open the question of the relationship between these various levels – between class and culture and politics. There is a danger that in cleansing the analysis, the baby is being jettisoned with the bath water. This is an important point to make at a time when the debate about class is clearly going through an episodic crisis.

Reddy's contribution to this collection is significant in this context for he takes the criticism of Thompson a step further via a strict interpretation of the view that class should be understood as a social relationship. In this Reddy focuses on Thompson's view that a 'structure', not even a 'category' but . . . something which in fact happens . . . in human relationships,. . . . class entails the notion of a historical relationship . . . which evades analysis if we stop it dead at any given moment and atomise its structure'.[41] Clearly this formulation contains a strong element of polemic which was directed, significantly, at those who make use of the 'finest meshed sociological net'. The polemical element in Thompson's writings should always be kept in mind, and in this respect, the strictness of Reddy's approach may limit its helpfulness. It leads him to assert that, for Thompson, class must 'be seen, not as a group of individuals, but as a relationship', whereas at several points in his writings Thompson clearly writes of classes as groups. For example, he speaks of a class as 'a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value system, who have a disposition to behave as a class'.[42] This in many respects can be seen as a classic definition deriving from Marx's account of the French peasantry. It seems more pertinent to argue that the problem with Thompson is not that he sees class simply as a relationship, but that he tends, in developing his argument, to conflate what are, in fact, logically separate parts of the analysis. This problem is central to the critique developed by Johnson and, more recently, by Ira Katznelson.[43] Katznelson, for example, argues that Thompson 'moves much too quickly' between what might be termed 'levels of class'. Here Katznelson, like Johnson, argued for the need to identify structural aspects of class – associated with capitalist division of labour and labour process – as a preliminary part of a class analysis. This is not a simple process of classification (with all its recognised problems) but one which involves preliminary empirical and theoretical investi-

[41] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 9.

[42] E.P. Thompson, 'The peculiarities of the English', in R. Miliband and J. Saville (eds) *The Socialist Register 1965* (London, 1965), p. 357.

[43] I. Katznelson and A.R. Zolberg, *Working Class Formation* (Princeton, 1986).

gations into the nature of a society, and its component economic sectors. To this a further element is added – that of subjective understanding and this too requires detailed, interpretative investigations which examine the fireside worlds referred to by Snell (see Chapter 9) as well as the worlds of work. The arena of class struggle, of organised and motivated groups operating with a common purpose, involves an additional investigation. Clearly it is possible to identify classes at each of these levels. What is not clear is the closeness of fit that will operate between them.

Katznelson's framework is clearly helpful. Some might say that it reworks an old problem and that the question of determinacy is still left unresolved. Of greater concern, perhaps, is the absence of a detailed discussion of class *composition* and the processes whereby different groups of people (men and women; black people and brown people) are brought into a framework of labouring for capital. Furthermore, the approach (formally stated) allows for a sophisticated analysis at the level of the economic structure, but perhaps a less developed one at the subjective level. In this the growing literature on issues relating to domination and power is important, as it develops ways of cutting through the social structure and involving the personal experiences and day-to-day lives of its people. In this, of course, the work of the French theorists Foucault and Bordieu is well known.[44] Equally useful is Stephen Lukes's analysis of power which develops debates within American political science. Lukes draws attention to three levels of power: he identifies the process whereby people make decisions that affect others; where a 'mobilisation of bias' occurs limiting the choices open to decision-makers; and where there is a general *shaping* of people's wants and desires.[45] In developing this analysis, Lukes borrows from Gramsci's acute awareness of the 'profound contrast in a social historical order'. In this vein Gramsci wrote of a situation where

> the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; a conception which manifests itself in action, but occasionally and in flashes when the group is acting as an organic totality: But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception it

[44] See e.g. P. Bordieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984); M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London, 1979).

[45] S. Lukes, *Power – A Radical View* (London, 1974). See also S. Lukes (ed.) *Power* (Oxford, 1986).

> follows in 'normal times' – that is, when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate.[46]

This idea of a contrast between normal and abnormal times is potentially very helpful. For Lukes, the 'supreme and insidious exercise of power' is deeply related to the process whereby people can 'see or imagine' no alternative to the established order of things or because they see it as natural and unchangeable or because they value it as divinely ordained or beneficial.[47]

This analysis is schematic and suggestive rather than conclusive, but it has been developed by John Gaventa and others in ways which represent quite significant steps in our understanding of historical and social processes. John Gaventa's study of Appalachian coal-miners begins with the question:

> Why, in a social relationship involving the domination of a non-elite by an elite, does challenge to that domination not occur? What is there in certain situations of social deprivation that prevents issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, or interests from being reorganised? Why, in an oppressed community where one might intuitively expect upheaval, does one instead find, or appear to find, quiescence? Under what conditions and against what obstacles does rebellion begin to emerge?[48]

He writes of the importance of looking at periods when the normal state of affairs is broken or when power of the elite weakens for

> if the non-elite begin to assert latent challenges then one is provided with the demonstration of a 'relevant counter-factual'. This would suggest that the power situation has not been based on consensus but on something else – such as control.

The worry with Lukes's analysis was always that, beneath the talk of levels, there lurked the idea of 'real' interests and the associated idea of 'false consciousness'. In his detailed empirical investigations (which rest upon the expressed desires and choices of the coal-miners, in normal and abnormal times), Gaventa successfully escapes this trap and produces a highly persuasive account of how groups of people behave and understand themselves as classes at one time but not another.[49]

[46] A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London, 1971), p. 24.
[47] Lukes, *Power – A Radical View*.
[48] J. Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Urbana, 1980), p. 3.
[49] For criticism of Lukes see T. Benton, 'Objective interests and the sociology of power', *Sociology* 15 (1981): 161 – 84; B. Hindess, 'Power, interests and the outcomes of struggles', *Sociology* 16 (1982): 498 – 516; S. Clegg, *Frameworks of Power* (London, 1989).

This reference to empirical evidence is a helpful reminder of the fact that while some questions of class analysis can be settled by logical discussion, ultimately the efficacy of the concept relates to its ability to render intelligible human experience and produce credible explanations of historical change. In this we are drawn toward an issue which, in an understated way, is present throughout these chapters, and to which the question of orders and classes is central. This is, of course, the transformation of societies through processes of industrialisation, modernisation and the development of capitalist forms of production and exchange. This process has been a central concern of sociology which has its roots in the historical writings of Durkheim, Marx and Weber. It is in the context of this transformation of society that issues of state and class have their origin. Here Durkheim's developed sense of pre-capitalist society operating within 'a strong and defined . . . common conscience' has exerted a strong influence, and there is a generally accepted rubric which associates capitalism with the rise of individualism, the separation of economic forces from the constraint of other legal and political constraints and the ascendance of classes (that is economically based groupings) over groups based upon status, honour and legal protection.

A clear example of this process is provided by Snell (see Chapter 9) when he writes of 'a rural society of complex ladder-like stratification . . . based upon a general and enduring moral economy' changing in the south of England to a more polarised society dominated by 'simpler conceptions of station and clear cut lines of hostile class division'. He draws attention to the particular factors which influenced this development, implicitly contrasting them with a different pattern of change in the agrarian societies of northern England. In this way the idea of variation is introduced into the discussion and it is worth examining this further. It was in the North, of course, that coal-mining developed with the operation of a detailed system of bonded labour. Under this system miners were provided with housing and coal by the employers, and the annual bond detailed their respective obligations. Attention has been drawn to the iniquities associated with this system and its influence upon trade union development. However, it is important to note the degree to which the aristocratic capitalists were strongly committed to the ideas of paternalism and to a view of society based upon status and obligation. This came out clearly at times of conflict between Lord Londonderry and newly established joint stock companies. In 1844, for example, after a terrible disaster in the Haswell mine, the Haswell Coal Company issued a public appeal for the relief of the families of the

victims. To this Londonderry wrote of his 'extreme regret that the Company should appeal to the public'. In his view the mine-owners had a deep responsibility to the workers in their employ. It was in fact 'the bounden duty of all proprietors' to care for their work people in such circumstances, for

> as the collier or pitman devotes his labour and uses the risk of the mines for the benefit of his employer so is the latter in common duty, honesty and charity bound to provide for and protect those who are bereft of their protectors by any fatality that occurs.

It was, he concluded, the sacred duty of employers to 'support those left behind'.[50]

This view is reinforced by a reading of Timberlake's account of industrialisation in Tsarist Russia (see Chapter 6). Here we find a highly formalised system of orders being bent and amended to cope with an expanding division of labour as industrialists and bankers and others pressed for recognition within the *soslovie* system. It is possible to interpret this, as Timberlake does, as an emerging conflict between a society of orders and one based on classes. However, what is clear from his account is that the new class of capitalist (being propelled into the old society) were no automatic converts to ideas of liberalism, individuality and the free market-place. For them the operation of the system of ranks was no mere epiphenomenon over which class interests dominated. In this period individual businessmen (and Movozot is a good example) were both antagonistic to and deeply influenced by the assumptions and operations of the old estate system. It took the critical *event* of 1905 with all its attendant violence to create within the business community an understanding that the *soslovie* system was not the well-integrated ordered society that they had supposed, and that it could not shield Russia from the unrest that had been associated with capitalist development in western Europe.

If ideas relating to a world dominated by orders had influence among industrial employers, there is considerable evidence to suggest that similar processes were also present within the growing numbers of industrial workers. Much has been written about the dense occupational cultures of miners in Britain in the nineteenth century, and some play has been made of the way in which this group of workers defended its interests through the state. In Germany, for example Tenfelde has written of miners having a separate festive culture which derived from 'the singularity of mining as an occupa-

tion [and] the unifying force of its special legal status'. These factors together with the pattern of settlement combined, he argued, to produce a distinct occupational culture celebrated through festivals which were 'saturated with practices derived from religion, communal and courtly festivals'.[51]

A similar pattern can be observed in the UK. In Britain, after all, the miners won the right to a checkweighman by Act of Parliament before they had established trade union bargaining rights. All this is very reminiscent of the corporate groups that Woolf writes of within the *ancien régime* (see Chapter 10). It suggests a complex pattern of change, in the transitional process from the old society to the new. Perhaps it is helpful to see this as an amalgam of different forms of social organisation, in which orders are renegotiated in the context of a class society. Corrigan has written of the various ways in which 'relics' of the feudal order were maintained as 'capitalist monuments'.[52] In this, of course, the most significant groupings would be those based upon sex and gender. The earlier discussion of property rights in western Ireland pointed to the ways in which the position of men was central to the reproduction of the social structure. There has been much recent research which argues in a similar vein, and feminist writers have discussed the processes whereby capitalism and patriarchy established themselves as mutually supporting systems. It would be quite conceivable to rework these discussions through the framework of orders and class.

These examples further question any simple, unilinear account of the process of industrialisation and the rise of capitalist societies. They also point to a variety of possible ways in which sociologists and historians can cooperate together, in studying a social process which is more complex than the 'combined and uneven' development of economic forces. It suggests ways in which pre-capitalist forms (and orders) are maintained and reproduced during the process of capital accumulation. In particular it poses questions about Marx's use of England as a classic case of proletarianisation, suggesting its inadequacy both in the context of Britain as a whole and as a model for explaining this process globally. A similar point could be made in relation to the process of capital formation and its relation to state power.

[51] See K. Tenfelde, 'Mining festivals in the nineteenth century', *Journal of Contemporary History* 13 (1977); and also, H. Beynon and T. Austrin, 'The iconography of the Durham Miners' Gala', *Historical Sociology*, 2 (1989): 66 – 82.

[52] See P. Corrigan, 'Feudal relics or capitalist monuments', *Sociological Review* n.s.

There is clearly a need to understand class analysis in relation to a complex and variable pattern of historical change. In this, the question of whether all the critical features of this process are determined by, and are understandable through, the process of class formation is a moot point. Undoubtedly pre-capitalist relations such as those based around sex and gender are maintained to different degrees and give weight to the capitalist forms which are established. It is possible to see the labour process and the commodity markets operating in similar ways providing a context within which the fields of class relationships are established. Here the renewed interest in the writings of Polanyi (and his sense of economic relationships being 'embedded' in social relationships) is both helpful and illustrative of the ways in which a broad range of theoretical ideas is now being brought to bear on the enduring questions of order and change.[53] That, in this firmament, the debate over class rages anew is not surprising: for in this age-old concept is condensed a range of ideas and problems associated with understanding historical changes and contemporary society. It is, in its very nature, a contested and contestable concept and talk of its death is greatly exaggerated.

[53] See K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time* (Boston, 1944), and G. Dalton (ed.) *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies: Essays on Karl Polanyi* (Boston, 1971).