BOOK REVIEW

Approaches to Class Analysis.

While class as an analytical concept probably remains most strongly associated with Marxist theory, this volume shows that other approaches to class analysis also possess great vitality. The six main chapters in this book each discuss class from a different analytical viewpoint. The last of these chapters makes the argument for a ‘post-class analysis’ wherein the traditional category of class is no longer seen as useful in understanding social change. Introductory and concluding chapters by the editor tie together the themes of the volume.

In his Introduction, editor Wright notes that, “The central objective of this book is to clarify the complex array of alternative conceptualizations of class rooted in different theoretical traditions of class analysis” (p. 2). This objective is amply achieved and one wishes that there were more books with this type of structure wherein a range of experts present different viewpoints on a particular concept. All of the six chapters go back to basics in the sense that they are all titled ‘Foundations of X class analysis’. At the same time, the book as a whole preaches largely to the converted—readers who already accept that class is an important social and historical concept.

In the Marxist tradition, class is not just an analytical concept but a central element of a whole theory of history. In Chapter 1, Erik Olin Wright defends the importance of class in Marxist theory and Marxist sociology in particular. This is an excellent first chapter that cuts straight to the heart of the debate over class. Chapter 2, by Richard Breen, develops a neo-Weberian perspective while noting that his approach ‘may not be the only one to which Weber’s own rather unsystematic remarks on class could give rise’ (p. 34). Neo-Durkheimian class analysis is the subject of Chapter 3 by David Grusky in collaboration with Gabriela Galescu. In Chapter 4, Elliot B. Weininger looks at Pierre Bourdieu, noting that although class is an important aspect in Bourdieu’s work, his use of class analysis is often difficult to understand. Bourdieu can be said to have placed particular emphasis on the symbolic aspects of class formation, a perspective that, despite its fundamental importance, can sometimes lead to a lack of concreteness in explaining class dynamics. Aage Sørensen’s Chapter 5, which appears posthumously, develops a rent-based class analysis that builds on Marxist approaches while attempting to engage the problems of contemporary wealth distribution. Finally, in Chapter 6, Jan Pakulski argues that the importance of class varies with historical stage and that while it reached its peak of importance in the industrial age, it has since been declining in explanatory value.

In summary, this is a very useful book on the sociology of class. Despite its broad, textbook-like coverage, Approaches to Class Analysis does assume a basic working knowledge of the phenomenon of class. The excellent introductory and concluding chapters by the editor, however, make the volume more accessible to a range of readers.

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Published online 10 August 2006 in J-STAGE (www.jstage.jst.go.jp) DOI: 10.1537/ase.06br03 © 2006 The Anthropological Society of Nippon