Reaction Paper #7: Social Class

"[C]ommon to all class theories," argues Kingston, "is the… implication that class creates 'interests'" (2000:101). As a result, in arguing for or against the continuing analytical usefulness of class, many scholars have appealed to the concept of common class interests and a group consciousness among people belonging to the same class. In this essay, I assess the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments proposed on both sides of this debate and present my case for why such a subjective basis for the definition of class can be problematic. I finally conclude that Parkin's neo-Weberian understanding of class is both a realistic and practical means of studying class today.

With respect to the issue of class consciousness, one of the reasons Grusky and Weeden have argued for an analytical disaggregation to the level of occupational groupings is because "conventional classes now have only a weak hold over workers" and "class is now a 'passive identity'" (2001:204). The authors suggest that by switching to occupational groupings, which are "one of the main social identities for contemporary workers" (204), scholars will be able to continue conducting class analyses. In addition, they write that attempts at social closure (which also speak to a recognition of group interests) are routinely conducted at the occupational rather than at the aggregate class level (204-5). But is it necessary to have a sense of class consciousness in order to be a member of a class? I would argue that it isn't. Wright and Perrone (1977), for instance, use objective measures of class membership to determine the independent effects of class on an individual's income returns to education. Whether or not that individual recognized their class membership was irrelevant to the effect their class might have on their life outcomes. There are other social categories – such as gender and race, which I would

argue are more socially constructed than class - where it might potentially be argued that a group consciousness is part-and-parcel of membership, but I am not at all certain if the same applies to *class* membership. Similarly, there are European countries – such as Sweden, according to Grusky and Weeden (2001:214) – where working class consciousness is much stronger than it is in the United States. Does this mean that classes and their effects are more "real" in some ways in Europe than they are in the United States?

On the other side of the debate, Wright (1997) argues that "the interests of workers and capitalists are deeply antagonistic, one of the core ideas of Marxist class analysis" (5). At the same time, Wright admits in a footnote that there is nothing stopping an individual capitalist from being an enthusiastic socialist. "But in supporting… socialism, capitalists are acting against their class interests" (9, see footnote 9), he adds. Here, Wright is over-simplifying the options available to the capitalist by implying that any action that improves the situation of workers would not be a rational decision for the capitalist (8-9). He does not entertain the possibility that the capitalist could act for his own *individual* competitive interests that turn out to be also in the best interests of the working class, or at least his workers. For instance, Costco, the warehouse shopping club provides significantly higher wages and better health insurance benefits to its employees than Wal-Mart; at the same time, it enjoys much lower worker turnover and higher productivity per worker than Wal-Mart[1]. Wright does not entertain the possibility of such a line of thinking on the part of the capitalist. In this way, he falls into the trap of the one-way, Marxian "economic determinism" that Parkin warns against (1979:26).

[1] See the Business Week article, "The Costco Way" from April 12, 2004. Accessed at http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_15/b3878084_mz021.htm on March 17, 2008.

Kingston (2000) runs toward the other extreme, arguing that since there is so much heterogeneity in the political interests and voting patterns of members of the same class (Chapter 6), there can be no "meaningful, realist conception of class" (1). But what if the objective, economic aspect of the definition of class is all that truly matters and that our decision whether or not to jettison class theory should be based on an investigation of the ability of these economically determined classifications to predict a consistent set of life experiences for each class stratum? But then we must ask if a class theory that is devoid of discussions of power differentials and exploitation is worth pursuing. Does it lend itself too easily to a functionalist perspective on society?

Parkin (1979) presents a way out when he writes that "there is no 'pure model' of ideological and political relations to complement the pure model of the capitalist mode of production" (27). By recognizing that power is unevenly distributed along many lines (not just class) and that political action could stem from any number of injustices in society (not just class exploitation), Parkin is able to explain behavior and attitudes that might not be representative of a particular class position. His neo-Weberian approach of using the dimension of authority in addition to property ownership to classify capitalists, laborers, and white-collar workers is still an objective measure of class. But, at the same time, he recognizes that there might be no common sense of solidarity between members of the same class because of divisions along gender, race, language, and sexuality lines, to name a few. There is even a distribution of power *within* any particular class for the same reason. This admission does not negate membership in a common class nor does it deny the independent existence of class. And it does move class analysis to a more realistic realm.