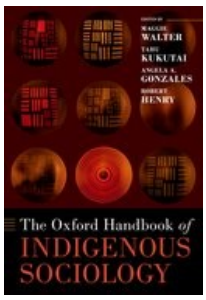

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CHAPTER

Social Class and the Indigenous Lifeworld

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Abstract

The concept of social class (class) is intricately entwined into the discipline of sociology. Both the discipline and societal concern with class emerged from disruption of the Industrial, American, and French Revolutions in the 18th and 19th centuries. All noted sociological scholars since those times have addressed class as a core aspect of their work. Yet the literature on the class position of Indigenous Peoples is scant to the point of nonexistence. This chapter examines the place and conceptualizations of class as understood within the Western sociological literature. These conceptualizations are then interrogated on their applicability and their usefulness for Indigenous Peoples living in Anglo-colonized nation-states. The concept of class is then re-envisioned through the theoretical lens of the Indigenous lifeworld. The chapter concludes that the Indigenous class position cannot be understood unless it is placed and analyzed within its present and past social-structural context of colonization.

Keywords: class, social class, lifeworld, colonization, Indigenous lifeworlds

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Introduction

C48.S1

Sociology is concerned with the study of human society, seeking to identify, explain, and measure how societies operate, how they are maintained, and how they change. Within this, social class (class) is a central, if not the central, concept. Major sociological theorists, from the discipline's beginnings in the 18th and 19th centuries to the present, inclusive of Comte, Durkheim, Spencer, Marx, Weber, Parsons, Bourdieu, Giddens, and Bauman, all address class within their work. Western sociological literature, therefore, positions class as an overarching conceptual framework in its analyses and explanations of social life.

C48.P1

This chapter provides an overview of class as it is understood within the sociological literature. These conceptualizations are then interrogated for their applicability to Indigenous Peoples living in Anglo-colonized nation-states. Finally, the concept of class is re-envisioned within the Indigenous lifeworld. Examples come mainly from Australian society, as this is the society I sociologically know. But the similarity of the second intersubjectivity of the Indigenous lifeworld—as colonized, dispossessed, marginalized peoples—gives the discussion salience to the lifeworlds of Indigenous peoples from other Anglo-colonized nation-states. C48.P2

Class as a Central Sociological Concept C48.S2

The predominance of class as the key social force energizing the sociological endeavor is unsurprising. The emergence of class as a social concern and the emergence of sociology are intricately entwined. As explained in chapter 1, sociology, as a discipline, arose in response to the severe social disruptions occurring in Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. The convergence of the French, the American, and the Industrial Revolutions rapidly, and in many cases violently, overturned long-established patterns of social life. The abandonment of the divine order of kings, the wholesale disruption of the feudal way of life, and the large-scale movement of previously rural populations to urban centers combined to almost completely remake long-held notions of the social order (Habibis & Walter, 2014). Explanations of this new social order revolved around the concept of class, its various divisions, and the links between class and social inequality. C48.P3

While the concept is variously defined, all theorizations point to class as related to the hierarchy of a given society's access to power, income, wealth, and status (Germov, 2009, p. 86). The central tenet is that the class position(s) an individual occupies, especially the class into which they are born, shapes the trajectory of their life chances. As such, class has been empirically linked to the likelihood of a healthy birth weight and first year of life, attaining higher-level educational qualifications, interactions with the justice system, access to financial resources, housing type and location, social networks, health, and many other life outcomes (Gerth & Mills, 1948; Walter & Saggers, 2007). With a rough division format of working, middle, and upper class, Western sociologists have long sought to map the size and boundaries of the difference social classes and explore the connections between class, social movements, and social change (Van Krieken et al., 2010). C48.P4

The subjective dimensions of class have also been studied. In what the White Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell (1977, p. 33) refers to as the "lived reality of class," an individual's class position is an outward projection of that person's class identity, inclusive of our accent and vocabulary, clothing choices, and "knowing" how to behave in certain social settings or situations. Sociological explorations of the subjectivity of class are often linked to examinations of power and class conflict. The White British researcher Paul Willis's (1977) classic *Learning to Labour*, for example, demonstrated how the education system, in concert with the broader social and cultural milieu, reproduces the position of working-class children in the class-structured labor market. C48.P5

Sociological Theories of Class C48.S3

While there are many theories of class, most are derived from, or developed in opposition to, those of the 19th-century White German philosopher Karl Marx and the White German sociologist Max Weber. In this section these influential frames are briefly explained, alongside the more recent work of the White French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. These explanations are not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the sociological theoretical on class. To do so is beyond the remit of this chapter, and such broader explanations can be found in any first-year sociology text. Rather, the aim is to provide a base for the later critique of class as a concept applicable to the Indigenous lifeworld. C48.P6

Karl Marx (1818–1883) lived during a period of major social chaos emanating from industrialization. In his quest for understanding, Marx applied the principles of natural science to the social world. These analyses led to the theorization that societies were dominated by two classes: those who own the means of production (the bourgeoisie) and those whose only asset is their labor (the proletariat). In Marx's time the proletariat were those working in the factories, but they also included professional and other workers who drew a wage. Marx also applied his theories beyond his own society, situating inequality as an almost unavoidable outcome for any society that moves beyond subsistence to surplus. Surplus activates interest groups (classes) to garner the surplus for themselves, to the exclusion of other societal members. This unequal system, Marx further theorized, meant that the bourgeoisie would always seek to dominate the proletariat in all domains of life, with economic power translating to political, social, and cultural domination. The result was social stability. The constant struggle of the proletariat against this domination could also result in social change, with social progress achievable via class conflict (Bottomore & Rubel, 1963). C48.P7

Max Weber (1864–1920) also recognized the stark power differentials between different societal groups, but he did not automatically attribute these to class alone. Rather, for Weber, inequality was related to three different sources of power: status (social standing), party (political organization and influence), and class. Weber drew on these concepts to understand how different groups came to occupy different positions in a market economy and how this similarity of class position translated into social behaviors. While Weber recognized the interdependence of these three attributes, he also theorized that they could and did operate independently. Weber expanded Marx's property ownership base to also include an individual's skills and credentials. For Weber, class was divided into four main groups: the bourgeoisie (similar to Marx's property owners), the petty bourgeoisie (self-employed small business owners), skilled workers (professionals and managers), and manual workers (relying solely on their labor) (Gerth & Mills, 1948). C48.P8

Pierre Bourdieu's (1930–2002) work during the 1980s and 1990s drew on the work of Marx and Weber, but also signaled a newer conceptualization. In Bourdieu's (1984) approach, class is determined by an individual's or group's relationship to four forms of capital: economic capital (income and wealth), cultural capital (cultural knowledge, education), social capital (social connections and networks), and symbolic capital (reputation, respect, social honor). Bourdieu theorized that groups sharing a similar relationship to these forms of capital constitute a social class, and that it is the various combinations of different levels of capital that designate where an individual or group fits into the social class hierarchy. C48.P9

Bourdieu also subdivided the three base categories of working, middle, and upper class into divisions, dependent on their combinations of different capital levels. Thus, the upper class tends to have high levels of economic capital but lower levels of cultural capital. Conversely, intellectuals such as writers and academics are also deemed members of the upper class, based on their higher levels of cultural capital and likely lower levels of economic capital. The working class, on the other hand, tends to have low levels of all capitals. Bourdieu (1984) theorized that surplus of one type of capital, such as economic capital, could be converted into other types, such as cultural capital. This ability to convert excess capitals to other forms C48.P10

gives rise to the notion of social mobility, or the ability of an individual to move up (or down) a given society's class hierarchy. Using a Bourdieu-influenced frame, social theorists argue that upward social mobility requires all four forms of capital, with conversions of excess capital from one area raising the requisite level of capital in another area to complete a class transition (Portes, 1998).

Measuring Class

C48.S4

Class is a complex concept, but its operationalization for measurement and analysis processes has tended to be relatively simple. In Australia, as in most other Western countries, most class analysis has measured socioeconomic status (SES) as a proxy for class. Based on a ranked stratification system based on education, occupation, and income, such information is routinely gathered in surveys or administrative collections. For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) generates what are termed Social Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). Under SEIFA, households are divided into deciles, by counting area, according to the level of household income reported in the national Census of Population and Housing, which occurs every five years. This ranking allows comparisons of relative income across areas (ABS 2018b). Similarly, the ABS combines data on income, education, unemployment, and occupation to produce a relative disadvantage score. Scores are then ranked from lowest to highest and divided to create groups with scores at similar levels (Burdess, 2004, p. 176). This relative disadvantage score takes account of Weber's concept of status via the inclusion of occupation as a proxy for social standing. It might be argued that Bourdieu's concepts of economic and cultural capital are also captured, at least in part. Measuring other aspects of social class, such as Weber's concepts of prestige or status, Marx's divisions of proletariat or bourgeoisie, or symbolic capita and social capital, as per Bourdieu, are less easy to measure at the population level (Germov, 2002).

C48.P11

Indigenous Peoples and Class

C48.S5

There are two key questions to be drawn from this overview of Western sociological conceptualizations and operationalizations of class: (1) How applicable are these understandings of class, sociologically, to Indigenous Peoples and populations? (2) How useful are these understandings of class for Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous sociology? These two questions are explored here within the broader framework of the dual intersubjectivities of the Indigenous lifeworld (Walter & Suina, 2018), as outlined in chapter 1:

C48.P12

1. Intersubjectivity within peoplehood and the ways of being and doing of those peoples, inclusive of traditional and ongoing culture, belief systems, practices, identity and ways of understanding the world and our place within it.

C48.P13

2. Intersubjectivity as colonized, dispossessed, marginalized peoples whose everyday life is framed through and directly impacted by our historical and ongoing relationship and interactions with the colonizing nation-state.

C48.P14

How Applicable?

C48.S6

Indigeneity occupies an ambiguous position within studies of class (Tyler 1990) and this location is evident from even a cursory examination of how the two concepts are linked in mainstream sociological thought. Because, while the disadvantaged position of Indigenous Peoples is well documented in sociological texts, there is, intriguingly, almost no commentary on the Indigenous class position. I use a bestselling Australian sociology text as my example, a weighty tome of 488 pages and 14 chapters. I won't name this text and have chosen it primarily because it is available on my bookshelf. But it matters little. I know from my years of teaching first-year sociology that the pattern of content I describe here is typical.

C48.P15

This text, as is standard, has a full chapter devoted to the topic of Class and Inequality. Within this, Indigenous Peoples are mentioned only once, in a sentence discussing the concept of absolute poverty. Indigenous Peoples do feature in another chapter, titled "Identities: Indigenous National, Ethnic and Racial," getting 7 of the chapter's 26 pages. Of these, one discusses patterns of inequality since colonization; 2.5 are given over to discussions of cultural survival, with four vignettes on cultural practices (all written by non-Indigenous researchers); 1.5 pages are on land rights legislation; and 2.5 pages are on Indigenous social disadvantage. In the rest of the text there are just two further Indigenous mentions, a part page in the health chapter and another part page in the criminology section. The term "class" does not feature in any of these pages. The clear conclusion is that the concepts of Class and Indigeneity remain largely unlinked within Western sociological thought. C48.P16

Why? It is well documented, within sociology texts and more broadly, that Aboriginal populations are unremittingly poor, with that poverty evident across all socioeconomic indicators. For example, data from the 2016 Census finds that the mean gross weekly income for the Australian Indigenous population is $802, compared with $1,096 for the non-Indigenous population. Moreover, the size of this income gap has not shifted over the last 20 years. Similarly, 60% of the Indigenous population record incomes in the lowest two income quintiles, compared to 20% of the non-Indigenous population. At the other end of the scale, 10% of the Indigenous population record incomes in the top quintile, compared to 21% of the non-Indigenous population. The pattern of high Indigenous proportions with incomes in the lowest quintile persists across the six Australian states. Geographic area divisions show some variation, but rates of Indigenous income in the lowest quintile are still disproportionate. For example, in major cities, 27% of the Indigenous population have income in the lowest quintile, compared to 18% of the non-Indigenous population (AIHW, 2021). The takeaway from these data is that the Aboriginal populations in Australia are the poorest of the poor, nationally, by state, and by geographic region. C48.P17

So, is Australian sociology's lack of exploration of Indigenous social class explained by an implicit assumption that a low income level equals working class? Are Indigenous populations just another category of the poor, along with other traditionally disadvantaged groups such as migrants and single parents? This would mean, by income, a smaller but still substantive group of perhaps 30% categorized as middle class, with around 10% categorized as upper class. A Marxist analysis would see a much lower proportion of the Indigenous population classified as bourgeoisie, given the very low ownership by Indigenous peoples of businesses or assets that could be deemed means of production. If a Weberian-based occupational status model is used instead, then the question is whether those 22% of Indigenous employees in professional, associate-professional, or managerial type jobs (ABS, 2018a) could be designated as middle class. Using Bourdieu's four categories, it is easy to see that Aboriginal populations record low levels of economic capital. The Indigenous position on the other three forms of capital (cultural, social, and symbolic) is less clear-cut. It depends on who is doing the measuring. But if non-Indigenous norms are the measure, then Indigenous populations likely score low on all three. C48.P18

A measure of the applicability of standard class classifications is to examine levels of income from an Indigenous perspective. Research in this area, admittedly limited, demonstrates that as well as being unequivocally poor by any of the standard measures, Indigenous disadvantage is different, operating outside the usual theoretical understandings of class stratification. For example, the White Australian scholar Boyd Hunter (1999) finds that poverty in nonmonetary spheres is endemic in Indigenous households, even among those who might be deemed to be relatively well off in income terms. In Hunter's analysis, overcrowding in housing was an issue for relatively advantaged Indigenous families, as well as those on lower incomes, and the usual correlation between income level and health was not found. Indigenous people had poor health across all income distributions, and high-income Indigenous families were nearly as likely to experience long-term health problems as low-income Indigenous families. In other research, educational data reveal that while the mean score of Indigenous students is lower in all categories, C48.P19

unlike non-Indigenous students, there is no clear association between Indigenous parental socioeconomic position and student results (Walter 2007). Negative interactions with the criminal justice system are also found to be a common feature, regardless of household income, with members of high-income Indigenous households much more likely to have been arrested in the past year than their non-Indigenous counterparts (Weatherburn et al., 2003). The reasonable interpretation of all this evidence is that higher income does not translate into better life chances and outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in the way it does for non-Indigenous Australians. Other research has also found that even the panacea for inequality, social mobility, likely operates differently for Indigenous Peoples than for dominant, non-Indigenous populations (Walter, 2015).

C48.P20 Income-related class proxies also presume a relative stability of an individual's position. For the non-Indigenous population, positioning in income rankings tends to link to position in the labor market, which in turn indicates an intergenerational link. Those in manual occupations tend to come from families who work(ed) in manual positions. Similarly, those from professionally employed families tend to also gain the requisite credentials to gain employment in professional roles. For Indigenous Peoples, however, labor market position has Indigenous-specific links. While the evidence is again limited, not only are Indigenous individuals less likely to have intergenerational advantages, they are also more likely to be in Indigenous-specific professional employment (Walter, 2015). Receipt of income in higher quintiles, therefore, may only be a temporary phenomenon and not an indication of life-course advantage, or as a proxy for other middle-class attributes such as better health or educational outcomes. Without longitudinal data it is impossible to estimate what proportion of Aboriginal households retain their higher income status over data collection periods.

How Useful?

C48.S7

C48.P21 Does the different nature of Indigenous disadvantage mean that the concept of class has no relevance? It certainly may have only limited usefulness because of the different nature of Indigenous lived reality. Indigenous lives are negotiated within distinctive Indigenous circumstances. These vary across First Nations and geographic settings, but all have culturally specific and social-positioning elements that do not mirror non-Indigenous life points. The shape and timing of life events, for example, such as achieving adulthood, family formation, or elder status, have distinctive patterns, and how these are negotiated at individual, family, and community level differs across location (urban, regional, remote). The Quandamooka scholar, Karen Martin (2005) points out that for Aboriginal people, the life course is not linear but circular, with the passage through childhood, for instance, not just about a physical growing up but also about engaging with the world in ever-increasing circles of relatedness—to family and community, but also to land, waters, skies, animals, plants, and spirits. Similarly, Martin and Mirraboopa (2003, p. 6) observes that to be an elder is not just to be older, but to have "grown up" in the law. Indigenous disadvantage in areas beyond income also have an impact. In addition, the physicality of lived experience varies from the non-Indigenous norm. Aging prematurely via the earlier onset of chronic disease is a common experience for Indigenous Peoples (Broe & Jackson-Pulver 2010; Cotter et al., 2007).

C48.P22 There are also considerable conceptual problems in applying standard measures of class to Indigenous Peoples. First, there are methodological problems such as the role nonmarket work plays in many Indigenous lives. Additionally, many of the variables used within SEIFA do not fit easily into Indigenous ways of being (Gray & Auld, 2000). For example, while equivalence scales are commonly used to compare different households, these are based on presumptions of the Western nuclear family form, with parents and offspring residing in the same household. Indigenous family forms such as multiple family households, or families where members are mobile and may reside in different households, do not fit these scales. Further, as Hunter et al. (2002) discovered, the choice of equivalence scale can significantly reduce or increase the comparative level of Indigenous poverty. Attempts to reduce the confounding impact of

Indigenous lived reality have not been successful to date. Gray and Auld (2000), for example, after attempting to construct a composite *Index of Relative Indigenous Socio-Economic Disadvantage*, concluded its usefulness was of limited value. The changeability of outcome by included variables made the index unreliable. Again the conclusion is that proxy measures for class, as currently used in Australian sociology, are not very useful in measuring a class position of Indigenous populations, or for those peoples themselves.

The Indigenous Lifeworld and the Indigenous Class Position

C48.S8

That Aboriginal Peoples are poor is taken as a given in Australia. But social givens have social origins, they do not just exist. Just like socioeconomic advantage, socioeconomic deprivation accrues and accumulates across and into the life chances of individuals, families, and communities. And these social origins are uniquely Indigenous. Indigenous class positions cannot be understood unless they are placed and analyzed within their present and past social-structural context. Moreover, the then and the now are connected. The historical and contemporary consequences of being an Aboriginal person in Australian society impacted, and impacts, an individual's or a family's ability to access economic, social, cultural, and human capital resources. The overall message is that Indigenous disadvantage is a phenomenon in its in own right, and it is a phenomenon that can be linked directly to colonization, past and present.

C48.P23

The Indigenous lifeworld is the crux of Indigenous socioeconomic positioning and, subsequently, the Indigenous class position. Viewed through the perspective of the dual lifeworld intersubjectivities: within peoplehood; and as colonized, dispossessed, marginalized peoples, being Indigenous of itself is a structural component of class position. Being an Indigenous person consistently impacts an individual's life chances in an Indigenous patterned way. This proposition does not mean that factors such as income, educational attainment, or employment options are not important. They are—but they are factors that must be understood within a framework of Indigeneity and the Indigenous lifeworld, not explanations in of themselves. From this perspective, Indigenous people constitute a class category of their own. This class position in Anglo-colonized nation-states sits on its own, firmly wedged at the bottom of society (Walter, 2007).

C48.P24

There is a critical and specific imbalance in the relationship between the nation-state, its non-Indigenous populations, and the Indigenous Peoples of the lands the nation-state now occupies. Colonization—and the silences around colonization, then and now, that are necessary for legitimating the narrative of origins and contemporary reality the nation wants to tell itself—powers this imbalance. Again, our sociology text example reflects this non-Indigenous social reality. In the entire text, the word "colonization" is mentioned five times. The most prominent mention is on the one page on patterns of Indigenous inequality since colonization, but with the term colonization included as a marker of a time period. There is also a mention in relation to the link between colonization and poor Aboriginal health, another in relation to the especially disadvantaged position of Aboriginal women, another to masculinities, and another in relation to the export of Western values to colonized nations as part of modernity. All of these further four mentions are very brief, mostly just the word "colonization" in a sentence. More tellingly, all mentions situate colonization as being in the historical past, and all except the one on modernity only talk about colonization in relation to Indigenous Peoples. There is no section explaining colonization as a historical and social phenomenon, no operationalization of this phenomenon in the Australian context, and no mention of the impact of colonization on the lived realities of non-Indigenous Australian populations. In a nation-state where everything about that society, including its class and inequality dimensions, have links to colonization, this absence in a major sociology text produced for teaching the students of a society how to understand their society, is extraordinary. Yet it is the norm.

C48.P25

Class in This Handbook C48.S9

In this Handbook, seven chapters, inclusive of this chapter, are grouped into the section under the label of "Class." Yet, as per the argument made above, class as conceptualized in mainstream Western sociology is not very applicable or very useful for Indigenous sociology. For Indigenous Peoples' class position is irretrievably linked to the Indigenous lifeworld, and the contributions included this section all reflect aspects of this uniquely Indigenous class position. C48.P26

In chapter 17, Randall Akee interrogates the concepts of earnings as usually understood within the inequality literature. His focus is that Western approaches miss significant sources of resource exchange, transfer, and provision common to many Indigenous communities. The non-inclusion of non–market-based environmental and natural resources, Akee argues, distorts understandings of community well-being and resilience. Bindi Bennett, in chapter 7 takes a different tack through her exploration of the potential benefits of animal-based therapy for Aboriginal Peoples in Australia. Explaining the nontranslatability of Western definitions of disability in Aboriginal communities, Bennett nevertheless points to the very high incidence of disability in Aboriginal populations and the subsequent greater experience of intersectional discrimination. Writing on how working with dogs can improve social health and well-being, Bennett further explains its potential for addressing social inequality. The social and emotional support provided can alleviate the effects of the systemic racism common in institutional practices of disability care. In chapter 9, Matthew Wynyard applies an Indigenous critical theory lens to Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. Via this innovation, Marx's theory can provide a useful, Indigenous-framed account of colonization. Wynyard then deploys this Indigenized theory to explain the accumulation processes deployed in Aotearoa New Zealand of land via the dispossession and attempted elimination of Māori from ancestral lands. C48.P27

Arapera Blank-Penetito, Juan Tauri, and Robert Webb, in chapter 16, add to the explication of the Indigenous social position via their early findings from research on Māori and Samoan experiences of youth justice. This chapter foregrounds Māori community narratives on the experience of state justice practices. Critically, the authors demonstrate that it is the marginalization of rangatahi and whānau, two central aspects of the Māori and Samoan lifeworlds, by state authorities that forms the central themes in these narratives. Vanessa Watts, in chapter 14, offers an Indigenous understanding of social hierarchies. Sociological notions of "society" and "culture," Watts argues, are largely defined by the interrelations between humans only. This exclusivity limits considerations of other-than-human relations on societal formations and dynamics. Via an exploration of epistemology, ontology, and other-than-human relations, Watts demonstrates the way that Indigenous worlds conceive of societal formations and articulate social events. Finally in chapter 42, Melissa Watkinson positions decolonization, via the reacquiring of tribal lands, as a climate-change adaptation tool. Indigenous Peoples, via their marginalized social positioning, are particularly exposed to early and adverse climate change. Through an Indigenous worldview and drawing on findings from her research partnership with a coastal tribe in Washington State, Watts demonstrates the effectiveness of reacquiring fractionated land on tribes' ability to adapt to climate impacts. C48.P28

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