

CHAPTER 3

FOUNDATIONS OF A NEO-DURKHEIMIAN CLASS ANALYSIS'

By DAVID GRUSKY in collaboration with GABRIELA GALESCU

The class analytic tradition has come under increasing attack from postmodernists, anti-Marxists, and other commentators who argue that the concept of class is an antiquated construction of declining utility in understanding modern or postmodern inequality.² In large part, this state of affairs might be blamed on class analysts themselves, as they have invariably represented the class structure with highly aggregate categories that, for all their academic popularity, have never been deeply institutionalized in the world outside academia and hence fail the realist test. By defaulting to nominalism, the class analytic tradition becomes especially vulnerable to critique, with postmodernists in particular arguing that academics have resorted to increasingly arcane and complicated representations of the class structure because the site of production no longer generates well-organized classes that academics and others can easily discern.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline a neo-Durkheimian alternative to such postmodernism that points to the persistence of class-like structuration at a more disaggregate level than class analysts have typically appreciated. It follows that class analysis is well worth salvaging; that is, rather than abandoning the site of production and concentrating exclusively on other sources of attitudes and behavior (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender), one should recognize that the labor market is indeed organized into classes, albeit at a more detailed level than is conventionally allowed. The great virtue of disaggregating is that the nominal categories of conventional class analysis can be replaced by *gemeinschaftlich* “micro-classes” that are embedded in the very fabric of society and are thereby meaningful not merely to sociologists but to the lay public as well.

As shall be evident, our neo-Durkheimian approach motivates us to come out foursquare in favor of realist classifications, where these are defined as schemes in which the constituent categories are institutionalized in the labor market.³ By contrast, scholars working within a nominalist tradition seek to construct class categories that reflect social processes, forces, or distinctions that are regarded as *analytically* fundamental, even though the categories implied by such approaches may be only shallowly institutionalized. In some cases, a theory of history has been grafted onto such nominalist models, thus generating the side-claim that currently “latent” (but analytically fundamental) class categories may ultimately come to be appreciated by actors, serve as bases for collective action, or become institutionalized groupings that bargain collectively on behalf of their members. There is of course much variability across scholars in the particular processes or forces (e.g., exploitation, authority relations, terms of employment, life chances) that are regarded as fundamental and hence generative of classes that may in the future become more deeply institutionalized. As is well-known, it can be extremely difficult to adjudicate between these competing models, especially

when they are grounded in a theory of history that requires scholars to withhold judgement until some (potentially) distant future. It is high time, we think, to attend to the empirically more viable task of characterizing such structure at the site of production as can currently be found.⁴

This line of argumentation has distinctly Durkheimian roots that have not been adequately drawn out in our prior work.⁵ In some of this work, we have duly acknowledged our intellectual debt to Durkheim (especially Grusky and Sørensen 1998, pp. 1192, 1196, 1219), but the relationship between our micro-class approach and the developmental arguments of Durkheim might still be usefully elaborated. There is good reason to take on this task now. After all, few scholars have so far rushed in to offer a retooled Durkheimian approach to class analysis, even though many Marxian models have fallen out of favor and Durkheimian ones arguably offer an alternative that captures much of the institutional reality of contemporary class systems (see Parkin 1992, p. 1; Pearce 1989, p. 1; Müller 1993, p. 106; cf. Lee 1994; Fenton 1980; Lehmann 1995). This is obviously not to suggest that theorists have ignored Durkheim altogether; however, contemporary exegesis focuses increasingly on *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, providing as it does the requisite classical source for the cultural turn in sociology (see Smith and Alexander 1996; Meštrović 1992). Moreover, when contemporary class analysts *have* engaged with *The Division of Labor in Society*, it has often been for the negative purpose of refuting Durkheimian or neo-Marxian class models rather than advancing some positive analysis.⁶

This state of affairs may seem puzzling given the long and venerable tradition of stratification scholarship treating occupations as the “backbone” of the class system (esp. Parkin 1971; Featherman, Jones, and Hauser 1975; Duncan 1968, pp. 689-690; Parsons 1954, pp. 326-329). In understanding why Durkheim has nonetheless been ignored, it bears noting that stratification scholars have typically preferred to scale occupations in terms of a socioeconomic gradient, and the work of Durkheim does not provide any obvious justification for such a procedure. If mention of Durkheim is, then, conspicuously absent from present-day commentary on class, it is largely because his project cannot be seen as presaging any conventional class analytic approaches, including those that map occupations or jobs into aggregate classes as well as those that map them into socioeconomic scales.

We will develop a class analytic approach that rests explicitly on the technical division of labor and thus has a more distinctly Durkheimian heritage. In this regard, it is striking that class analysts have not only ignored the *Division of Labor*, but have more generally eschewed *any* analysis of the technical division of labor, even a non-Durkheimian one. Indeed, Wright (1979) commented nearly 25 years ago on the “relatively few sustained theoretical reflections on the logic of linking class to positions within the technical division of labor” (p. 12), and the same conclusion probably holds with equal force today (also, see Kemper 1972, p. 739). We will seek to repair this state of affairs by discussing (a) how Durkheim developed, rather unwittingly, a class analysis grounded in the technical division of labor, (b) how this class analytic approach might be modified to address developments that Durkheim did not fully anticipate, and (c) how the

resulting approach, while arguably an advance over conventional forms of class analysis, nonetheless leaves important problems unresolved.

Durkheim and the Class Structure: A Selective Exegesis

We begin, then, by considering how Durkheim approached issues of class and occupation, relying not only on his famous preface to the *Division of Labor* but also on related commentary in *Suicide* and elsewhere (see, esp., Hawkins 1994 for a comprehensive treatment). In the secondary literature on such matters, it is often noted with some disapproval that Durkheim treated class conflict as a purely transitory feature of early industrialism, thereby “ignoring ... the [enduring] implications of class cleavages” (Zeitlin 1968, p. 235; also, see Lockwood 1992, p. 78; Bottomore 1981). As is well-known, Durkheim indeed argued that class conflict in the early industrial period would ultimately dissipate because (a) the growth of state and occupational regulation should impose moral control on the conflict of interests (i.e., the “institutionalization” of conflict), and (b) the rise of achievement-based mobility should legitimate inequalities of outcome by making them increasingly attributable to differential talent, capacities, and investments rather than differential opportunities (i.e., the rise of “equal opportunity”). In light of current developments, it is not altogether clear that such emphases within the work of Durkheim should still be regarded as an outright defect, foreshadowing as they do important developments in the transition to advanced industrialism. The twin forces of normative regulation and meritocratic allocation have, in fact, been featured in much subsequent discussion about the “institutionalization” of class conflict (e.g., Dahrendorf 1959), even though the early work of Durkheim has not always been accorded a properly deferential place in this commentary.

This institutionalization of conflict has motivated contemporary class theorists to de-emphasize macro-level theories of history and related developmental narratives (see Holton and Turner 1989), preferring instead to deploy class categories for the more modest academic task of explaining micro-level behavior in the present day (e.g., voting behavior, lifestyles). The obvious question that then arises is whether the class categories devised by Marx and others for macro-level purposes are also optimal for this more limited micro-level explanatory agenda (Grusky and Weeden 2001). For the most part, scholars of contemporary class relations have concluded that they are not, leading to all manner of attempts to increase the explanatory power of class models by introducing further distinctions within the category of labor. The main failing, however, of such efforts is that the posited categories have been only shallowly institutionalized, with scholars seeking to defend their competing schemes with all imaginable criteria save the seemingly obvious one that the posited categories should have some institutional veracity.

In this context, the scholarship of Durkheim is again instructive, as it refocuses attention on the types of intermediary groups that have emerged in past labor markets and will likely characterize future ones. This is to suggest, then, that Durkheim contributed to class analysis on two fronts, simultaneously providing (a) a negative macro-level story about the social forces (e.g., institutionalization of conflict) that render big classes

unviable in the long run, and (b) a positive micro-level story about the “small classes” (i.e., *gemeinschaftlich* occupations) that are destined to emerge at the site of production and shape individual values, life chances, and lifestyles. The latter micro-level story, which is typically dismissed as irrelevant to class analysis, is the focus of our commentary here. We feature this story because small classes can be shown to take on properties that class analysts have conventionally (but mistakenly) ascribed to big classes.

In laying out this micro-level story, it has to be conceded that Durkheim is (famously) silent on the proximate mechanisms by which occupational associations will emerge, as he simply presumes, by functionalist fiat, that outcomes that putatively serve system ends will ultimately win out. This approach leads Durkheim to equate “the normal, the ideal, and the about-to-happen” (Lukes 1973, p. 177). By contrast, Marx and most neo-Marxians put forward analyses that are mechanism-rich, relying on such forces as exploitation, opposed interests, and conflict as proximate sources bringing about the postulated end-states. In some of his writings, Durkheim does hint at proximate mechanisms, but for the most part he is correctly taken to task for failing to “proceed to an investigation of causes” (Bottomore 1981, p. 911). It is nonetheless worth asking whether the end state that Durkheim describes captures some of the developmental tendencies within contemporary systems of inequality.

How, then, might one characterize Durkheim’s view of the “normal, ideal, and about-to-happen” (Lukes 1973, p. 177)? We take on this question below by describing the three forms of micro-level organization that, according to Durkheim, are destined to emerge at the site of production.

The Rise of Occupational Associations

The *Division of Labor* is most instructively read as an extended discourse on the level (i.e., class or “micro-class”) at which the site of production will come to be organized.⁷ When class analysts summarize this work, they typically emphasize the argument that big classes are purely transitory and will fade away as “normal” forms of adaptation emerge (i.e., the “negative macro-level story”), while the predicted rise of social organization at the local occupational level (i.e., the “positive micro-level story”) is disregarded or viewed as irrelevant. By contrast, we think that the micro-level story in Durkheim is worth considering more carefully, not merely because local organization can take on class-like properties (as argued below), but also because it can crowd out or substitute for class formation of a more aggregate sort. Indeed, Durkheim argued that occupational associations are destined to become the main organizational form “intercalated between the state and the individual” (1960 [1893], p. 28), supplanting both Marxian classes and other forms of intermediary organization (e.g., the family). Although Durkheim emphasized the informal ties and bonds that were cultivated in occupational associations, he also laid out a variety of formal functions that such associations were likely to assume, including (a) establishing and administering a system of occupational ethics, (b) resolving conflicts among members and with other associations, and (c) serving as elemental representative bodies in political governance

(see Durkheim 1960 [1893], pp. 26-27; also, see Durkheim 1970a [1897], pp. 372-82). The foregoing functions are best carried out at the local level because an “activity can be efficaciously regulated only by a group intimate enough with it to know its functioning [and] feel all its needs” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 5).

These associations find their historical precedent in medieval guilds and bear some resemblance to the professional and craft associations that are now so ubiquitous. For Durkheim, it is revealing that occupational associations have a long history that extends well into ancient times, with early forms evidently appearing “as soon as there are trades” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 7). If occupational associations have surfaced throughout recent history, Durkheim reasoned that they must have a “timeless authenticity” (Parkin 1992, p. 77) suggestive of important underlying functions. Among these functions, Durkheim particularly stressed that occupations can reign in excessive ambition and aspirations, if only by inducing workers to calibrate their aspirations for remuneration to the occupational norm rather than some less attainable standard. The egoism unleashed by the breakdown of the traditional social order can therefore be contained by subjecting workers to a new form of extra-individual authority at the occupational level (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 10). By implication, the macro-level and micro-level stories in the *Division of Labor* are closely linked, with the declining fortunes of big classes reflecting, in part, the institutionalization of occupations and the consequent legitimation of inequalities that both (a) undermine the unity of the working class, and (b) convince workers to regard occupational differences in remuneration (including those between big classes) as appropriate and acceptable. If there is a class-analytic theory of history in Durkheim, it is clearly one that emphasizes the role of occupations in justifying inequality, making it palatable, and hence undermining the more spectacular theories of history that Marx and various neo-Marxians have advanced.

The “Localization” of the Collective Conscience

The rise of occupational associations is also relevant to the “problem of order” and Durkheim’s putative solution to it.⁸ As traditional forms of organization wither away, there has been much concern in sociology (see Parsons 1967, 1968) that the forces of differentiation and specialization might prove to be maladaptive, leading to excessive egoism, unrestrained individual action, and a diminished commitment to collective ends. This concern has, in turn, set off a search for countervailing processes that might contain or at least offset these individuating forces. When Durkheim is invoked in this literature, he is frequently credited with recognizing that the modern collective conscience has been transformed to encompass increasingly abstract and generalized sentiments, especially those stressing the dignity of individuals (i.e., the “cult of the individual”) and their right to freely pursue opportunities unhampered by circumstances of birth (i.e., “equal opportunity”). In content, these beliefs form a deeply individualistic “religion” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 172), but they are nonetheless shared across individuals and, as such, constitute the modern-day collective conscience.

The latter story remains, however, partial and incomplete without a parallel discussion of the rise of occupation-specific beliefs and how these also operate to

suppress egoism, bind workers to an extra-individual community, and thereby counteract the forces of individuation.⁹ To be sure, Durkheim appreciated that modern occupations will not develop the total, all-encompassing morality of traditional social systems (see Pope and Johnson 1983, p. 684; Hawkins 1994, p. 464), yet he was still impressed with how “imperative” (1960 [1893], p. 227) the rules of occupational morality have been in the past and would likely come to be in the future. This new form of solidarity of course links individuals to local subgroupings (i.e., occupations) rather than the larger society itself; and, consequently, the modern tendency is to move toward “moral polymorphism” (Durkheim (1958, p. 7), where this refers to the rise of multiple, occupation-specific “centers of moral life” (p. 7; also, see Hall [1993]). At the level of values, the Durkheimian solution thus references not only the integrative effects of highly abstract system-wide sentiments, but also the “mechanical solidarity” that persists as more concrete and specialized sentiments are ratcheted down and reexpress themselves within occupational groupings (see Parsons 1968, p. 339).¹⁰

This line of argument has of course been carried forward by subsequent generations of French sociologists. For example, Bouglé (1971 [1927]) treated the Indian caste system as an extreme case of “moral polymorphism” in which the occupational communities are organized in deeply hierarchical terms, are especially well-protected against “polluting” interaction (e.g., intermarriage), and are self-reproducing to an unusual degree (i.e., hereditary closure). Although the Indian case represents, for Bouglé, the purest form of the caste system, it is but a “unique dilation of universal tendencies” (Bouglé 1971 [1926], p. 28) that generate profound occupational differentiation in all societies. Likewise, Halbwachs (e.g., 1992 [1945]) argued that occupations tend to breed distinctive traditions and forms of consciousness, with his examples of such polymorphism often drawing on detailed occupations (e.g., general, legislator, judge) as well as big classes (also, see Halbwachs 1958; Coser 1992, pp. 18-20). The Durkheimian imagery of “moral polymorphism” emerges yet more clearly in the (comparatively) recent work of Bourdieu (1984). In *Distinctions of Taste*, Bourdieu (1984) characterized the habitus and the distinctive lifestyles it generates in terms of quite detailed occupations (e.g., professors, nurses), albeit with the proviso that such occupations provide only imperfect signals of “homogeneous conditions of existence” (1984, p. 101).

For class analysts, the practical implication of this Durkheimian formulation is that detailed occupations, more so than big classes, become the main site at which distinctive attitudes and styles of life are generated. As Durkheim puts it, occupations have their own cultures comprising “certain ideas, certain usages, and certain ways of seeing things” (1956 [1911], p. 68), and workers participate in them as naturally and inevitably as they “breathe the air” around them (1970b [1905], p. 286, translated in Watts Miller 1996, p. 125). These specialized cultures arise because (a) the forces of self-selection operate to bring similar workers into the same occupation (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 229), (b) the resulting social interaction with coworkers tends to reinforce and elaborate these shared tastes and sentiments (Durkheim 1960 [1893], pp. 228-29, 361), and (c) the incumbents of occupations have common interests that may be pursued, in part, by aligning themselves with their occupation and pursuing collective ends (Durkheim 1960

[1893], p. 212-13). If communities of practice indeed become localized in this fashion, then the conventional micro-level objective of explaining class outcomes of all kinds (i.e., attitudes, behaviors, lifestyles) is best pursued at the local occupational level. In effect, Durkheim is describing a unification of class and *Stand* that, according to Weber (1968 [1922]), occurs only rarely in the context of conventional aggregate classes.

Occupations and Organic Solidarity

The Durkheimian solution to the problem of order comes in two parts, the first involving the emergence of occupation-specific sentiments that generate mechanical solidarity (as described above), and the second involving the rise of occupational interdependencies that generate organic solidarity. We turn to a consideration of the second part of the story and its implications for class analysis. As before, we shall find that detailed occupations play a central role in the Durkheimian vision, but now as the elementary units of interdependence (i.e., “organic solidarity”) rather than as repositories of shared moral sentiments (i.e., “mechanical solidarity”).

The natural starting point here is the long-standing concern (e.g., Smith 1991 [1776]; Comte 1988 [1830]) that the forces of occupational specialization and differentiation may be alienating because they render work increasingly routine and repetitive. By way of response, Durkheim (1960 [1893]) suggests that such alienating effects can be countered when workers are in “constant relations with neighboring functions” (p. 372), thereby sensitizing them to their larger role within the division of labor and convincing them that their “actions have an aim beyond themselves” (pp. 372-73). In this sense, extreme specialization need not be intrinsically alienating, as individuals will come to recognize and appreciate their contribution to the collective enterprise, no matter how humble, repetitive, or mundane that contribution happens to be.¹¹ It bears emphasizing that Durkheim again has local organization working to undermine aggregate class formation; that is, constant contact with “neighboring functions” (p. 372) allows workers to appreciate interdependencies and to infuse their own work with some larger meaning, thus undermining any competing Marxian interpretation of work as exploitative and alienating. In the language of class analysis, Durkheim clearly has workers attending to the “relational features” of intermediary groupings, yet the relations of interest are those of visible cooperation and coordination at the micro-level rather than hidden exploitation at the macro-level.

For Durkheim, organic solidarity is also normatively expressed through the rise of occupational regulation that institutionalizes industrial conflict, most notably that between labor and capital. As before, the claim here is that occupational groupings will be the main impetus and carriers of normative regulation, since they are close enough to the activity being administered to “know its functioning, feel all its needs, and [understand its] variations” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 5). It follows that occupational associations will increasingly devise codes of conduct and specify the terms under which labor is divided. In early industrial systems, such regulation is either lacking altogether (i.e., the “anomic division of labor”) or is enforced without full consent of all parties (i.e., the “forced division of labor”), and conflict therefore remains unchecked and

revolutionary ideologies become appealing. As the division of labor advances, Durkheim expects regulation to develop spontaneously through social intercourse and to become embodied in formal industrial law, with the initial appeal of socialist and other revolutionary programs accordingly undermined. The resulting normative regulation may again be seen as a form of micro-level organization that works to impede class development at the macro-level.

Was Durkheim Right?

It is useful at this point to consider whether the Durkheimian story about the rise of local organization has any contemporary relevance. Although class analysts routinely consider whether Marxian and Weberian formulations have been “borne out,” the class analytic arguments of Durkheim have not typically been put to similar test. To the contrary, the *Division of Labor* is usually regarded as a quaint piece of disciplinary “prehistory” (Barnes 1990, p. 170), and class analysts have accordingly felt no real need to engage with it.

This fixation with Marx, Weber, and their followers is not especially sensible given the course of recent history. In many ways, the labor market has become increasingly “Durkheimianized,” not merely because industrial conflict at the macro-class level has come to be regulated and contained, but also because occupational groupings have emerged as the elementary building blocks of modern and postmodern labor markets. As Treiman (1977) notes, contemporary workers routinely represent their career aspirations in occupational terms, while professional and vocational schools are organized to train workers for occupationally-defined skills, and employers construct and advertise jobs in terms of corresponding occupational designations (also, see Parsons 1954; Wilensky 1966). This “occupationalization” of the labor market has been fueled by (a) a long-term growth in the size of the professional sector (with its characteristically strong occupational associations), (b) the rise of new quasi-professional occupations and associations built around emerging abstract skills in the division of labor, (c) the growing application of such devices as licensing, registration, and certification for the purposes of effecting (partial) closure around occupational boundaries, and (d) the strengthening of local labor unions (e.g., the American Federation of Teachers) as more encompassing visions of the labor movement unravel and “sectional self-interest ... becomes the order of the day” (Marshall et al. 1988, p. 7; also, Visser 1988, p. 167).¹² These considerations led Krause (1971) to conclude long ago that “there has historically been more occupation-specific consciousness and action than cross-occupational combination” (p. 87; also, see Freidson 1994, pp. 75-91; Van Maanen and Barley 1984, pp. 331-33; Dahrendorf 1959). Indeed, when the history of guilds, unions and related production-based associations is reevaluated from the long view, it becomes clear that true classwide organization emerged for only a brief historical moment and that postmodern forms are reverting back to localism and sectionalism. The foregoing interpretation is consistent with the Durkheimian formula that micro-level organization crowds out and substitutes for class formation of a more aggregate sort.

This is not to suggest, of course, that the site of production has evolved entirely as Durkheim envisaged. As we see it, Durkheim was remarkably prescient in discerning the occupationalizing forces at work, but he clearly overstated the power of these forces and the consequent speed with which they might possibly play out. The Durkheimian formula is especially vulnerable on the three counts reviewed below.

Multifunctionalism and Competing Associational Forms

In most of his relevant essays, Durkheim has occupational associations taking on a wide variety of functions, such as (a) regulating the labor market through norms governing pay, working conditions, and inter-occupational relations, (b) providing a *gemeinschaftlich* setting in which workers can “lead the same moral life together” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 15), and (c) serving as an “essential organ of public life” charged with electing parliamentary delegates (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 27). Relative to these expectations, contemporary occupational associations might well seem poorly developed, especially with respect to the political functions served. There is, to be sure, much political action at the detailed occupational level (see, e.g., Abbott 1988), but nowhere have occupations achieved the central, direct, and formal role in political governance that Durkheim outlined. Rather, occupations are typically consigned to the role of lobbying the state for highly specialized benefits, most notably the right to train and certify members and to otherwise establish control over the supply of labor. Even in this limited domain, occupational associations continue to compete with alternative associational forms, including most obviously labor unions. As Durkheim anticipated, the conflict between labor and capital has indeed been tamed and contained, but this has occurred as much by institutionalizing large unions as by replacing them with occupational associations or local craft unions. The resulting web of associational forms is inconsistent with the Durkheimian imagery of all-purpose associations that divide the work force into mutually exclusive groups, squeeze out all competing organization, and accordingly become the *sole* intermediary between the individual and the state.¹³

Incomplete Occupationalization

In some sectors of the class structure, occupational associations have simply failed to emerge, either because they have been overrun by competing forms (e.g., unions) or because social organization of all forms has proven unviable. For example, occupationalization has not yet taken hold in the lower manual sector, presumably due to low skill levels, limited investments in training, and relatively rapid changes in manufacturing process. It is unclear whether these poorly organized sectors will remain unorganized, will ultimately develop strategies allowing for some form of closure and occupationalization, or will continue to decline in size and eventually wither away. Although skill upgrading works to diminish the proportion of the workforce in poorly organized sectors, this process has of course played out only fitfully and may have reached its limit (e.g., Spenner 1995).¹⁴ The contemporary class structure is best viewed, then, as a complex patchwork of moral communities and realist occupations interspersed

with large regions of purely nominal categories in which occupationalization has yet to play out, if ever it will.¹⁵

Cross-National Variation

There is also much cross-national variation in the extent to which the labor market has become occupationalized (see Table 1; also, see Grusky and Weeden 2001, p. 210; Grusky and Sørensen 1998, pp. 1220-22). The German labor market, for example, is built directly on institutionalized occupational groupings and may therefore be seen as an especially successful realization of the Durkheimian formula.¹⁶ As scholars have long stressed, Germany has well-developed systems of vocational training and apprenticeship, both of which serve to encourage occupation-specific investments and promote professional commitment and craftsmanship (e.g., Blossfeld 1992). In systems of this sort, workers must invest in a single trade early in their careers, and the correspondingly high costs of retraining produce relatively closed occupational groupings. The case of Japan reveals, to the contrary, the extent to which local structuration can be institutionally suppressed. The standard characterization of Japan emphasizes such distinguishing features as an educational curriculum that is generalist in orientation rather than functionally differentiated, a vocational training system that cultivates firm-specific “nenko skills” (Dore 1973) through teamwork and continuous job rotation, an organizational commitment to lifetime employment that further strengthens firm-specific ties at the expense of more purely occupational ones, and a weakly developed system of enterprise unions that cuts across functional specializations and hence eliminates any residual craft-based loyalties (Ishida 1993; Cole 1979; Dore 1973). This conjunction of forces thus produces a “post-occupational system” that some commentators (e.g., Casey 1995) might well regard as prototypically postmodern. Finally, the Swedish case is equally problematic for Durkheim, not merely because occupational solidarities have been suppressed through “active labor market” programs (Esping-Andersen 1988, pp. 47-53), but also because aggregate classes have become corporate actors in ways that Durkheim explicitly ruled out as developmentally abnormal. Arguably, Sweden provides the textbook case of class formation of the aggregate variety, given that craft unionism and guild organization have long been supplanted by classwide forms of collective bargaining. It follows that “abnormal” organizational forms have, at least in Sweden, had rather more staying power than Durkheim allowed.

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The occupationalizing forces that Durkheim emphasizes have therefore been suppressed in some countries and sectors of the labor force. The main question that emerges is whether these zones of resistance (a) will ultimately be overcome by the forces for occupationalization, (b) will live on in current form as testimony to the diversity of solutions to contemporary organizational problems, or (c) are best regarded as signaling some fundamental defect in the Durkheimian formula that will ultimately reveal itself more widely and reverse previously dominant tendencies toward

sectionalism, localism, and occupationalization. Although there is clearly much room here for debate and speculation, we are of course inclined toward (a) and (b) as the most plausible interpretations, all the more so because the distinctive institutional arrangements of Sweden and Japan are under increasing threat and are no longer as frequently held up by class analysts as alternatives to be emulated.

Contemporary Class Analysis

We have so far argued that Durkheim deserves some credit for anticipating both the demise of aggregate classes (i.e., the negative macro-level story) and the rise of local organization at the site of production (i.e., the positive micro-level story). If this Durkheimian interpretation of the course of recent history is accepted, it raises the question of how class analysis might now be pursued. We suggest that two changes in contemporary practice are warranted: (a) the search for big classes and the sociological principles underlying them should no longer be treated as the *sine qua non* of the class analytic enterprise, and (b) the focus of class analysis might usefully shift to a local level that has heretofore been dismissed as irrelevant to research and theorizing on social class. We develop below the case for each of these arguments.

The Virtues of a Realist Account

As for the first point, our concern is that class analysis has become disconnected from the institutional realities of contemporary labor markets, with scholars positing class mappings that are represented as *analytically* meaningful even though they have no legal or institutional standing and are not salient to employers, workers, or anyone else (save a small cadre of academics). This criticism applies, for example, to such standard sociological categories as “semicredentialed supervisors” (Wright 1997), “operatives” (Featherman and Hauser 1978), “professionals and managers” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977), and “routine non-manuals” (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Although class categories of this conventional sort are only shallowly institutionalized in the labor market, the class analyst nonetheless attempts to build a case for them (a) by claiming that they are consistent with the class analytic “logic” of some revered theorist (i.e., the “exegetical” justification), (b) by arguing that such categories, while currently latent, will nonetheless reveal themselves in the future and ultimately become classes “für sich” (i.e., the “latency” claim), or (c) by suggesting that these categories capture much of the important variability in life chances, political behavior, or other outcomes of interest (i.e., the “explained variance” justification). The latter claim has at least the virtue of being testable, yet in practice the proffered tests have involved little more than demonstrating that the preferred class mapping has *some* explanatory value, leaving open the question of whether other mappings might perform yet better (e.g., Mills and Evans 1998; Marshall et al. 1988; Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1993; cf. Halaby and Weakliem 1993).

This conventional “analytic” approach often rests on the logic that scholars should look beyond surface appearances and somehow discern more fundamental forces at work. It is no accident, we suspect, that surface appearances came to be seen as misleading just

as aggregate categories began to wither away. After all, the modern analyst who continues to serve up aggregate schemes in the modern context has no choice but to justify them via some deeper logic, thereby converting what would appear to be a defect (i.e., shallow institutionalization) into a virtue. This approach, while now dominant, is of course peculiarly modern. In characterizing stratification systems of the past, sociologists have typically relied on categories that were deeply institutionalized (e.g., estates, castes), thus rendering them sensible and meaningful to intellectuals and the lay public alike.

If sociologists were to return to this strategy today, it would lead them directly to the micro-level of production, where Durkheim presciently argued that deeply institutionalized categories will be found. The starting point for a modern Durkheimian analysis is accordingly the “unit occupation,” which may be defined as a grouping of technically similar jobs that is institutionalized in the labor market through such means as (a) an association or union, (b) licensing or certification requirements, or (c) widely diffused understandings (among employers, workers, and others) regarding efficient or otherwise preferred ways of organizing production and dividing labor. The unit occupations so defined are often generated through jurisdictional struggles between competing groups over functional niches in the division of labor (e.g., Abbott 1988). As Granovetter and Tilly (1988) note, “Our encrusted and reified sense that one task is for orderlies, another for nurses, and yet another for doctors ... is the result of legal, political, and economic struggles, just as are the names of the professions themselves” (p. 190). We have thus defined unit occupations in terms of the social boundaries that are constructed through closure-generating devices of various kinds. By contrast, statisticians often describe the task of constructing occupational classifications in narrowly technical terms, as if the categories defined in such schemes were merely aggregates of positions sharing “general functions and principal duties and tasks” (International Labour Office 1990 [1968], p. 5; also, Hauser and Warren 1997, p. 180). Although all unit occupations do indeed comprise technically similar tasks, this constraint hardly suffices in itself to account for the classification decisions that are embodied in conventional occupational schemes, given that the criterion of technical similarity could justify an infinity of possible combinations and aggregations of jobs. This is not to imply, of course, that socially constructed boundaries are always to be found; to the contrary, the technical division of labor is clearly “occupationalized” to varying degrees, with some sectors remaining disorganized because of minimal skill barriers or other impediments (see “Incomplete Occupationalization” above). In these sectors, the task of defining unit occupations is perforce difficult, involving as it does the identification of social boundaries that are, at best, in incipient form and may never come to be well-defended.¹⁷

Should Class Analysts Care About Local Organization?

The preceding hopefully makes the case that scholars have over-invested in the search for aggregate classes and under-invested in the study of more deeply institutionalized groupings at the disaggregate level. The critic might well counter,

however, that the study of local organization is perfectly suitable for scholars of occupations and professions, but is hardly the heady stuff deserving of attention of class analysts proper (see Goldthorpe 2002; Kingston 2000). This reaction, while understandable, nonetheless fails to appreciate the class-like behavior that emerges at the local level. We have argued elsewhere (Grusky and Sørensen 1998, pp. 1196-1212) that occupations act collectively on behalf of their members, extract rent and exploit non-members, shape life chances and lifestyles, and otherwise behave precisely as class theorists have long thought aggregate classes should. If class analysts wish to demonstrate that advanced economies are “lumpy” amalgams of competing groups (rather than seamless neoclassical markets), they would accordingly do well to turn to the local level and analyze the occupational associations that emerge around functional niches in the division of labor. The purpose of this section is to elaborate the above argument for each of the social organizational processes (i.e., identification, closure, collective action, proximate structuration) that class analysts have sought, largely unsuccessfully, to uncover at the aggregate level.

Identification and Awareness: It is natural to begin by considering the subjective domain of class systems. Although both Marx and Durkheim anticipated a great clearing operation in which solidarities outside the productive realm (e.g., ethnic or regional ties) would wither away, they differed on whether aggregate or disaggregate groupings would be the main beneficiaries of this development. The aggregate account appears, of course, to have lost out. To be sure, some sociologists remain convinced that contemporary identities are strongly shaped by aggregate affiliations (e.g., Marshall et al. 1988), but the prevailing post-Marxist position is that big classes now have only a weak hold over workers. For example, Emmison and Western (1990) report that only 7 percent of all Australians choose a big class as a “very important” identity, while other commentators (e.g., Saunders 1989) have stressed that open-ended queries about class identification tend to yield confused responses, refusals to answer, and even explicit denials that classes exist. This evidence has led many sociologists to conclude that class is now a “passive identity” (Bradley 1996, p. 72) and that the realm of production is no longer the dominant or principal locus of identity formation (e.g., Hall 1988; Pakulski and Waters 1996). As we see it, the latter conclusion is overstated and fails to appreciate the continuing power of class analysis, at least in the expanded form that we are proposing here. The Emmison-Western results are again revealing on this point, since they indicate that detailed occupational groupings continue to be one of the main social identities for contemporary workers (Emmison and Western 1990, pp. 247-48). Likewise, there is much qualitative research suggesting that individual identities and self-definitions are strongly affected by occupational affiliations, almost to the point of bearing out a Durkheimian “essentialist” view that such ties provide a master identity.¹⁸ These results are hardly surprising given that occupational affiliations are so routinely solicited in everyday interactions. For example, firms often request occupational information from clients and customers, while individuals proceed likewise in their opening gambits at parties, business meetings, and other social gatherings. The state also collects detailed occupational information when marriages, births, or deaths occur, when state benefits are

requested and taxes collected, when censuses and labor force surveys are administered, and when immigrants, citizens, and jurors are admitted or selected. The disaggregate “language of occupation” is accordingly well-developed and widely diffused, whereas the aggregate language of class is spoken almost exclusively in academic institutions. This state of affairs, while perhaps too obvious to interest class analysts searching for deeper truths, is also too important to ignore when attention turns to the social organization of the labor market and subjective understandings of this organization.

Social Closure: If subjectivist models of class were once dominant in sociology (e.g., Warner et al. 1949), they have now been superseded by approaches that focus on the social processes by which class membership is restricted to qualified eligibles.¹⁹ These models emphasize not only the institutionalized means by which closure is secured (e.g., private property, credentials, licenses) but also the efforts of excluded parties to challenge these institutions and the inequality that they maintain. While closure theory provides, then, a new sociological language for understanding inter-class relations, the actual class mappings posited by closure theorists have proven to be standard aggregate fare. The two-class solution proposed, for example, by Parkin (1979, p. 58) features an exclusionary class comprising those who control productive capital or professional services and a subordinate class comprising all those who are excluded from these positions of control. This tendency to default to aggregate mappings reveals the hegemony of big-class formulations and the consequent inability of class analysts, even those armed with closure theory, to imagine any alternatives. Indeed, if closure theory were somehow reinvented without the coloration of class analytic convention, its authors would likely emphasize that the real working institutions of closure (e.g., professional associations, craft unions) are largely local associations “representing the credential-holders themselves” (Murphy 1988, p. 174). In most cases, the underlying mechanisms of closure (e.g., licensing, credentialing, apprenticeships) do not govern entry to aggregate classes, but instead serve only to control entry (and exit) at the more detailed occupational level. By contrast, there are no analogous organizations that represent aggregate classes, nor are there jurisdictional settlements or closure devices that are truly aggregate in scope.²⁰

Collective Action: For most neo-Marxists, social closure is of interest not because it provides a vehicle for pursuing purely local interests (e.g., “trade union consciousness”), but rather because it allegedly facilitates the development of classwide interests and grander forms of inter-class conflict. The aggregate classes identified by contemporary sociologists have so far shown a decided reluctance to act in accord with such theorizing. This quiescence at the aggregate level initially prompted various neo-Marxian salvage efforts (e.g., Poulantzas 1974; Wright 1985; Korpi 1983) and then provoked a more radical postmodernist reaction in which interests were held to be increasingly defined and established outside the realm of production (e.g., Laraña, Johnston, and Gusfield 1994). The latter form of postmodernism, popular as it is, overlooks the simple fact that much collective action flows unproblematically out of structurally defined groupings, albeit only when those groupings are defined in less aggregate terms than is conventionally the

case. The three principal types of collective action at the level of unit occupations are (a) downwardly directed closure strategies designed to restrict access to occupational positions, (b) lateral competitive struggles between occupational associations over functional niches in the division of labor, and (c) upwardly directed collective action oriented toward securing occupation-specific benefits (e.g., monopoly protection) from the state and from employers. This emphasis on instrumental action at the micro-level is not inconsistent with a Durkheimian formulation. To be sure, Durkheim glossed over all discussion of the instrumental pursuits of occupational associations, but this was largely because he took them for granted and sought to cast light on more subtle and complicated extra-economic functions (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 15). For Durkheim, the purely instrumental action of occupational associations had neither complicated nor profound effects, as it was oriented toward straightforward sectional interests (e.g., pay, working conditions) rather than transformative or revolutionary objectives.²¹ While we might conclude, then, that disaggregate class analysis is an intellectually modest project, it bears noting that aggregate class analysts have likewise scaled back their ambitions and effectively discarded comprehensive class-based theories of history (e.g., Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992, p. 385). As Holton and Turner (1989) have noted, such theories have by now been largely abandoned, with the typical fallback position being a “reconceptualization of class around non-organic *gesellschaftlich* relations or a historicization of class analysis around the few contingent moments when economic class has seemed to correspond to social class” (p. 175; also, Holton 1996; Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992, pp. 383-85).

Proximate Structuration: In this sense, the class analytic project has become more limited in its objectives, with most contemporary scholars now satisfied with merely documenting that class membership conditions individual-level outcomes of all kinds (e.g., attitudes, voting behavior, lifestyles). The resulting analyses of “proximate structuration” (Giddens 1973) proceed by examining either the categorical effects of aggregate classes or the gradational effects of variables that represent the many dimensions underlying jobs (e.g., “substantive complexity”) or detailed occupations (e.g., socioeconomic status). Although these approaches have yielded important results, it is nonetheless troubling that they ignore the *gemeinschaftlich* character of (some) disaggregate occupations. As argued above, modern closure is secured principally at the detailed occupational level, with the resulting restriction of social interaction generating occupational subcultures that are correspondingly disaggregate. These constraints on interaction serve to preserve and elaborate occupation-specific cultures of the sort that Durkheim (1960 [1893]) described long ago (also, see Caplow 1954). By contrast, aggregate classes have no comparable influence or authority over secondary socialization, and such aggregate cultures as emerge are accordingly more diffuse and abstract.²² The great failing, then, of conventional analyses of lifestyles, dispositions, and attitudes is that *gemeinschaftlich* occupations are regarded as nominal categories and are therefore blithely aggregated or dimensionalized. Indeed, when critics of class analysis complain that “class effects” tend to be weak (esp. Kingston 2000; also, Pakulski and Waters 1996), this argument likely capitalizes on the blunt and highly aggregate

operationalization of class more than any true weakness in the effects of the site of production (see Weeden and Grusky [2002] for substantiating evidence).

Where does this leave us? We have sought to establish that the social organizational processes that are often ascribed to big classes in fact emerge more clearly at a lower analytic level. We have emphasized, for example, the tendency of occupational groupings to act collectively on behalf of their interests, to defend their boundaries and thereby secure (partial) closure, to define lifestyles and consumption practices that are binding on members, and to become subjectively meaningful categories through which workers perceive themselves as well as others. To be sure, class analysts are free to claim that such processes are of interest only when revealed at aggregate levels, but doing so closes off an important route for revitalizing class analysis and protecting it from postmodernists who have exploited the characteristic weakness of big classes to (misleadingly) advance broader claims about the irrelevance of the site of production. If class analysts can see beyond their obsession with big groupings and own up to the rise of smaller class-like groupings, it may become possible to develop more powerful accounts of social behavior (e.g., Weeden and Grusky 2002), to build more realistic models of social mobility and social closure (e.g., Sørensen and Grusky 1996), and to otherwise tend to the micro-level business of class analysis in much more persuasive ways (see Weeden and Grusky [2001] for details).

Is There a Durkheimian Model of Exploitation and Rent?

The preceding discussion suggests that disaggregate occupations can be meaningful sociopolitical communities of precisely the sort that class analysts have long sought. By contrast, it has proven difficult to find equally well-developed sociopolitical communities at the aggregate level, and class analysts have accordingly adopted the more limited objective of mapping out aggregate “structural locations” that are alleged to have the potential to become such communities in the future. Under this formulation, much attention is conventionally focused on identifying the underlying axes of exploitation, since these are assumed to constitute the “objective bases of antagonistic interests” (see Wright 1985) that may ultimately come to be recognized and pursued through more established sociopolitical communities. The two objectives of the present section are to explore whether Durkheim anticipated such models of exploitation and to examine how they might be usefully adapted or modified in light of his work.

A Durkheimian Provenance?

For these objectives, the substantial literature on skill-based exploitation is especially relevant, and we shall therefore focus on it. In the context of this literature, Wright (1985) and others (Sørensen 1994, 2000) have equated skill-based exploitation with the extraction of rent, where the latter refers to the returns to skill that are secured by limiting opportunities for training and thus artificially restricting the supply of

qualified labor. If this definition is adopted, one can then test for exploitation by calculating whether the cumulated lifetime earnings of skilled labor exceeds that of unskilled labor by an amount larger than the implied training costs (e.g., school tuition, foregone earnings). In a perfectly competitive market, labor will presumably flow to the most rewarding occupations, thereby equalizing the lifetime earnings of workers and eliminating exploitative returns (after correcting for training costs).²³ However, when opportunities for mobility are limited by constructing barriers that preclude workers from freely assuming highly remunerative or otherwise desirable jobs, the equilibrating flow of labor is disrupted and the potential for rent-extraction and exploitation occurs. The relatively high pay of doctors, for example, may be understood as arising from “artificial” restrictions on the number of training positions offered through medical schools.

Although skill-based exploitation of this type is sometimes represented as a generalized form of classical Marxian exploitation, the concept also has a Durkheimian provenance that has gone largely unappreciated. This becomes apparent, for example, when Durkheim (1960 [1893], pp. 374-88) rails against the constraints on free mobility that emerge either because of (a) norms or laws placing restrictions on the occupations that certain individuals may assume (e.g., caste systems, gender typing of occupations), or because of (b) economic barriers or entry costs that preclude lower-class workers from considering jobs that involve extended search or training time. The effect of both types of “forced mobility” is to reduce the bargaining power of the affected workers by eliminating or weakening their exit threat. As Durkheim (1960 [1893]) puts it, “If one class of society is obliged, in order to live, to take any price for its services, while another can abstain from such action thanks to resources at its disposal ..., the second has an unjust advantage over the first” (p. 384). The resulting potential for exploitation can be addressed by opening up mobility opportunities through direct or indirect interventions in the labor market. That is, Durkheim would have us equalize market opportunities not only by directly removing normative and legal restrictions on the free flow of labor (e.g., removing prohibitions on the mobility of caste members), but also by prohibiting parents from transmitting wealth and assets that indirectly advantage their children in the competition for desirable jobs (Durkheim 1960 [1893], pp. 30-31, 374-88).²⁴ This formulation anticipates contemporary understandings of exploitation insofar as it recognizes that the bargaining power of workers is a function of the supply and demand for labor within their occupations. At the same time, the modern conception of rent is only partly and imperfectly anticipated, not merely because Durkheim emphasized the unfairness and inefficiency of “forced mobility” more than the exploitative wage terms that it allowed, but also because he focused on the wages foregone by workers trapped in undesirable occupations more than the rent extracted when privileged workers act to restrict the supply of competitors.

Improving Contemporary Models of Skill-Based Exploitation

Although Durkheim thus fell well short of anticipating a systematic model of rent, his emphasis on local organization is nonetheless instructive when considering how contemporary models of skill-based exploitation might be improved. Indeed, given that

modern institutions of closure (e.g., professional associations, craft unions) generate local rather than classwide restrictions on labor supply, the logic of the Durkheimian position suggests that rent is principally extracted at the local level. As we have stressed, Durkheim was especially interested in the extra-economic functions of occupational associations, yet he appreciated that such associations also provided their members with the “force needed to safeguard their common interests” (Durkheim 1960 [1893], p. 11). This force may be used to restrict the number of new entrants to an occupation, to prohibit competing occupations from performing similar functions, and to otherwise generate pockets of monopoly control within the division of labor. For the most part, neo-Marxians have instead argued for big “exploitation classes” that encompass and cut across many occupations, with the rationale for such aggregation being the usual analytic one that workers in structurally similar positions are equivalently exploited, have interests that are accordingly shared, and may ultimately come to form solidary cross-cutting groups to press such shared interests. This approach is problematic because the posited classes typically have no institutional or social organizational standing; that is, the working institutions of closure are organized largely at the occupational level (see “Social Closure” above), and the potential for rent therefore emerges at that level. As a result, the elementary units of skill-based exploitation are occupations themselves, while neo-Marxian classes are heterogeneous aggregations of jobs and occupations that have structurally similar capacities for exploitation. It is always possible, of course, that rent-extracting exploiters with “structurally similar” capacities will ultimately band together to protect the credentialing institutions that make closure and rent possible (see Grusky and Sørensen 1998, pp. 1211-12). In this sense, disaggregate class mappings serve to characterize the contemporary structure of rent-extraction, whereas conventional big-class mappings serve as hypotheses about how that structure might simplify in the future.

The more fundamental question, of course, is whether the underlying structure of rent-extraction will come to shape how interests are understood and pressed. From a neo-Durkheimian standpoint, the conventional definition of skill-based rent might well be critiqued as too arcane and academic to become widely diffused, especially given that countervailing stories about the appropriateness and legitimacy of occupational wage differentials are so widely accepted. As Durkheim saw it, consensual beliefs about the “level of reward ... appropriate to the various occupational groups” (Parkin 1992, p. 62) will inevitably emerge in all societies, with such beliefs holding sway even when forced mobility and exploitation account for the observed differentials (see, esp., Durkheim 1951 [1897], p. 126). The occupational structure should be regarded, then, as a double-edged sword that works simultaneously to create closure and extract rent (i.e., the “rent-extraction” side) and to legitimate that rent and convince us that it is appropriate and unproblematic (i.e., the “rent-legitimation” side). The latter legitimating efforts may rest on beliefs about the importance of filling the most important occupations with the best workers (i.e., “functionalism”), about the sacredness or inviolability of market-determined rewards (i.e., “market legitimation”), or about the appropriateness of compensating workers for completing difficult or unpleasant tasks (i.e., “compensating differentials”).

Whatever the story, the result is that inter-occupational differentials in earnings are typically regarded as acceptable, whereas intra-occupational differentials are closely scrutinized and are sometimes taken as evidence of discrimination (especially when correlated with race, gender, or ethnicity). It is no accident, for example, that anti-discrimination legislation has flourished just as comparable worth legislation has languished. In explaining this outcome, we need only appreciate that anti-discrimination legislation seeks to outlaw intra-occupational disparities in wages, whereas comparable worth legislation seeks to prohibit entrenched inter-occupational disparities that are legitimated with cultural stories about functional importance, market forces, and compensating differentials (see Nelson and Bridges 1999). The institutionalization of an occupational classification scheme thus trains us to regard between-category disparities as appropriate and legitimate. Indeed, there is much rhetoric in Durkheim (1951 [1897]) about the importance of developing well-legitimated “classification schemes,” precisely because they reign in potentially disruptive aspirations and prevent the weakest from “endlessly multiplying their protests” (p. 383; also, see Zeitlin 1968, p. 275). For many sociologists, a more palatable value-free position is simply that these legitimating forces are exceedingly well-developed, thus calling into question any theory of rent suggesting that rent-extraction will ultimately become exposed and activate antagonistic interests that were previously latent.

The upshot, then, of our commentary is that big-class formulations cannot be salvaged by simply shifting over to rent-based definitions of class. When conventional definitions of skill-based rent are applied, a neo-Durkheimian should immediately point out that (a) such rent is extracted at a more local level than most class analysts appreciate, and (b) the very institutionalization of occupational classification schemes works to legitimate occupational wage differentials and to suppress the development of antagonistic interests. It follows that the categories of a micro-class scheme may never come to be invested with those antagonistic properties that class analysts have long sought.

Is More Disaggregation Always Better?

In arguing for our neo-Durkheimian approach, we have referred to all competing class analytic models in quite generic terms, labeling them variously as “big class,” aggregate, or gradational approaches. Although it has been convenient to treat conventional approaches as a whole, it is worth considering at this point whether all class models are equally vulnerable to the criticisms that we have been advancing. As indicated in Table 2, six general types of categorical schemes and scales may be usefully distinguished, each combining a particular level of measurement (i.e., continuous, categorical) with a preferred unit of analysis (i.e., unit occupation, occupational aggregate, job-level aggregate). In the foregoing sections, we have principally focused on models that either scale occupations (i.e., Type A and C models) or aggregate them (i.e., Type D models), making it possible to pitch our critique in terms of the heterogeneity that is suppressed when “similar” unit occupations are coded into a single class or into similar levels on a gradational scale. This emphasis is justifiable given that

most sociologists default to class models of these general types (i.e., Types A, C, and D).²⁵ At the same time, some analysts have of course sought to understand the social organization of production by treating jobs (rather than occupations) as the elementary unit of analysis, thus raising the question of whether our concerns and arguments apply equally to such alternative approaches.

Insert Table 2 About Here

We may define a job as the “specific and sometimes unique bundle of activities carried out by a person in the expectation of economic remuneration” (Hauser and Warren 1997, p. 180). In conventional labor markets, there are at least as many jobs as there are workers, and analysts of job-level data can therefore choose to disaggregate even more radically than we have been advocating. We might usefully ask whether a neo-Durkheimian should be attracted to the possibility of such extreme disaggregation. In addressing this question, it should be recalled that unit occupations are socially constructed through various closure-generating mechanisms, such as associations, unions, and licensing or certification. It is this “social clothing” worn by functionally-similar jobs that makes unit occupations relatively homogeneous categories. The sources of such homogeneity are threefold: (a) unit occupations select for workers who are consistent with preexisting occupational “stereotypes” (e.g., sociology attracts left-leaning recruits); (b) explicit training regimens introduce further homogeneity in the attitudes, behaviors, and worldviews of prospective incumbents (e.g., graduate school, vocational training, apprenticeships); and (c) social interaction occurs disproportionately within occupational boundaries and thus reinforces occupation-specific attitudes, values, and lifestyles. At some point, the explanatory returns to disaggregation should accordingly diminish, as the inveterate splitter disaggregates beyond the occupational boundaries that are institutionalized in the labor market and that generate homogeneity.

The class analysts advocating for Type E or F models will concede that some aggregation or dimensionalizing of jobs is required, but they of course opt against aggregating up to socially constructed occupational boundaries. Instead, an “analytical” approach is again preferred, with the objective thus being to identify the technical conditions of work (e.g., substantive complexity, autonomy) that structure interests, affect processes of social interaction, or otherwise condition the outcomes of interest. This approach has obviously yielded important results. However, because jobs that share the same abstract technical conditions (e.g., substantive complexity) are not socially organized into meaningful groups, such homogeneity as is found arises from the direct effects of technical conditions rather than the additional socially-induced effects of selection, shared training, and interactional closure. The explanatory losses involved in foregoing these social effects may be substantial.

The limitations of analytic approaches can be more closely examined by considering the familiar case of sociologists and their seemingly distinctive “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984). In seeking, for example, to account for the humanist, antimaterialist, and otherwise left-leaning culture and lifestyle of sociologists, a neo-Durkheimian would emphasize (a) the left-leaning reputation of sociology and the consequent self-selection of left-leaning recruits, (b) the liberalizing effects of lengthy professional training and

socialization into the sociological worldview, and (c) the reinforcing effects of social interaction with like-minded colleagues. To be sure, sociologists also labor under distinctive working conditions (e.g., high autonomy, high complexity), but the effects of such abstract technical conditions would appear to be swamped by the foregoing social forces. The case of economists provides an instructive contrast here; after all, economists labor under quite similar job conditions (e.g., high autonomy, high complexity), yet are nonetheless comparatively conservative in their politics and lifestyles. It would be difficult to account for such conservatism without recognizing that economists are self-selected for conservatism, that their graduate training in neoclassical approaches only reinforces this pre-existing affinity for conservatism, and that their subsequent interaction with fellow economists further protects against any ideological “straying.” The conservatism of economists would appear, then, to be socially produced rather than attributable to the technical conditions under which they labor.

The purely analytic approach of Type E and F models is thus weakened because the posited class categories are not held together by the homogenizing effects of selection, socialization, and interactional closure. This line of argumentation is of course identical to that earlier advanced against Type A, C, and D models. Although our preferred micro-classes are not nested within job-level class categories (and hence the rhetoric of “disaggregation” cannot be strictly applied), this in no way alters or affects our larger argument about the virtues of sociological realism.

Conclusions

In his celebrated preface to the *Division of Labor*, Durkheim (1960 [1893], p. 28) predicted that corporate occupations would gradually become “intercalated between the state and the individual,” thereby solving the problem of order by regulating and institutionalizing industrial conflict and by creating new forms of solidarity at the detailed occupational level. This account is ritually rehearsed by scholars of Durkheim but has never been treated as a credible developmental model by class analysts. As neo-Marxian class models are subjected to increasing attack, class analysts have typically fallen back to some version of neo-Weberianism or postmodernism, neither of which pays much attention to the occupation-level structuration that Durkheim emphasized. There is, then, much room for exploring a neo-Durkheimian third road that refocuses attention on local organization within the division of labor.

This “third road” involves opening up new research questions more than providing ready or stock answers. As a sampling of such research, we list below five empirical questions of interest, each of which speaks to standard areas of inquiry within the class analytic tradition (see Grusky and Weeden [2001] for more details).

Are the effects of social class adequately captured by big-class categories? Although we have suggested that conventional classes fail to exploit the explanatory power available at the site of production, we have not provided any empirical evidence on behalf of this claim; and the burden of proof necessarily rests with scholars who seek to improve on existing approaches. In many conventional class schemes, the posited categories are merely aggregations of detailed occupations (see Table 2), and it becomes

possible to test such aggregations by examining whether much explanatory power is lost by imposing them (see Weeden and Grusky 2002). These tests should of course be carried out for “class correlates” of all kinds (e.g., attitudes, consumption practices, life chances, life styles).

Is aggregation more defensible in some sectors of the class structure than in others?

The costs of aggregation may be especially high in some classes. For example, the lifestyles of nonmanual workers are likely to be quite heterogeneous, since occupations in the nonmanual sector are well-formed and their incumbents are accordingly exposed to distinctive cultures and socializing experiences. The lower manual sector, by contrast, is typically represented as a relatively homogeneous zone in which occupationalization is only weakly developed. As plausible as it is, this standard account has not been pitted against any number of alternatives, most notably the null hypothesis that academics are simply more sensitive to occupational distinctions in sectors of the class structure with which they are most familiar.

Are some occupations especially well-formed? The contours of disaggregate structuration are likewise of interest. The conventional story here is that craft occupations are paradigmatic in their fusing of work and lifestyle (Mills 1956, p. 223), but we suspect that well-developed lifestyles also exist elsewhere in the occupational structure. The available evidence, such as it is, suggests that disaggregate structuration will be most pronounced when (a) training is harsh or lengthy (e.g., doctors, professors), (b) workers are isolated or stigmatized (e.g., sanitation workers, loggers, carnival workers), or (c) recruitment is highly self-selective by virtue of social networks (e.g., actors), economic barriers to entry (e.g., capitalist), or the unusual tastes and skills that an occupation requires (e.g., morticians). These hypotheses can be pursued by examining the heterogeneity of lifestyles and behaviors within unit occupations.

Are social classes decomposing as postmodernists allege? In postmodern circles, the main debates of interest implicitly address issues of trend, with the most extreme accounts implying that all forms of structure at the site of production are withering away. The evidence amassed in support of this claim is nonetheless quite limited. Indeed, virtually all relevant research pertains to trends in aggregate structuration, and even here the available evidence refers principally to voting behavior (e.g., Evans 1997), life chances (e.g., Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), and a few other standard outcomes (see Grusky and Weeden 2001). The evidence thus falls well short of substantiating a “class destructuration” thesis in the broad and encompassing terms that it usually takes.

Is the underlying structure of social mobility misrepresented by big-class models? If social closure is secured mainly at the unit occupational level, then conventional aggregate analyses may underestimate the extent of rigidity and persistence in mobility regimes (Sørensen and Grusky 1996; Rytina 2000). Moreover, given that much of the cross-national variability in local structuration is concealed through aggregation, we may find that standard convergence hypotheses are no longer plausible once mobility data are disaggregated. The existing literature on social mobility, massive though it is, has been especially beholden to big-class formulations and is accordingly vulnerable when revisited at the micro-class level.

We are thus arguing that conventional research on “class effects” can be usefully revisited. Although big-class formulations will likely remain dominant, the discipline should at least consider the possibility that a wrong turn has been taken and that much explanatory action will be found within big classes. It is well to bear in mind that big-class models were initially devised to account for macro-level transformative events and large-scale social change (see Grusky, Weeden, and Sørensen 2000). As class conflict became institutionalized, class theorists have gradually de-emphasized these macro-level theories of history and related developmental narratives (Holton and Turner 1989), preferring instead to deploy class categories for the more modest academic task of explaining contemporary micro-level behavior (e.g., voting behavior, lifestyles). The contemporary fascination with tinkering, adapting, and revising big-class formulations may be understood as the flailing efforts of a subfield coming to terms with this new agenda. It is altogether possible, of course, that no amount of tinkering will suffice. If the contemporary micro-level agenda is taken seriously, it may require new micro-class models that go beyond big-class nominalism and exploit such local social organization as can be found.

Table 1. Countries Classified by Type and Amount of Class Structuration

Aggregate Structuration	Disaggregate Structuration	
	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>High</i>	Germany	Sweden
<i>Low</i>	U.S.	Japan

Table 2. Models of Social Organization at the Site of Production

Level of Measurement	Type of Aggregation or Disaggregation		
	<i>Unit Occupations</i>	<i>Occupational Aggregates</i>	<i>Job-Level Aggregates</i>
<i>Continuous</i>	<u>Type A Models</u> : Prestige, socioeconomic, and cultural capital scales (e.g., Hauser and Warren 1997; Bourdieu 1984)	<u>Type C Models</u> : Hollingshead occupational scale (e.g., Hollingshead and Redlich 1958)	<u>Type E Models</u> : Scales of working conditions and job desirability (e.g., Kohn and Slomczynski 1990; Jencks et al. 1988)
<i>Categorical</i>	<u>Type B Models</u> : Neo-Durkheimian micro-classes (Grusky and Sørensen 1998)	<u>Type D Models</u> : Neo-Weberian classes (e.g., Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Featherman and Hauser 1978)	<u>Type F Models</u> : Neo-Marxian “exploitation classes” (e.g., Wright 1985)

Notes

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² For examples, see Hall 2001; Pakulski and Waters 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Lee and Turner 1996; Clark 1996; Joyce 1995; Kingston 2000, 1994; Clark and Lipset 2001, 1991; Pahl 1989.

³ This definition glosses over a number of complications, including (a) the operational difficulty that analysts face in discerning institutionalized categories and the consequent inevitability of analyst-imposed “constructions” (even when the objective is to best represent institutionalized categories), and (b) the typical insistence of scholars working within the nominalist tradition that their preferred categories rest on causal forces or processes (e.g., exploitation) that are altogether “real” regardless of whether such categories are presently institutionalized in the labor market. We shall return to these complications in subsequent sections of this chapter.

⁴ The categories of a realist scheme will, by virtue of their institutionalization, tend to be recognized by the lay public and appreciated as meaningful. However, our formal definition of realist approaches relies entirely on the criterion of institutionalization, and the tendency for realist categories to become subjectively salient thus becomes a (possible) empirical result that falls outside the definition per se.

⁵ See, for instance, Grusky and Sørensen (1998, 2001), Grusky and Weeden (2002, 2001), Grusky, Weeden, and Sørensen (2000)

⁶ See, for instance, Mouzelis (1993), Bottomore (1981), Tiryakian (1975), Dahrendorf (1959, pp. 48-51), Zeitlin (1968), cf. Pope and Johnson (1983), Hawkins (1996, 1994), Müller (1993), Thompson (1982), Lukes (1973), Hall (1993), Nisbet (1952), Giddens (1971, 1972, 1978), Watts Miller (1996), Filloux (1993). The recent work of Lockwood (1992) is a notable exception to this claim. In his pathbreaking book, Lockwood (1992) shows that the Durkheimian model treats instrumental action as an unanalyzed residual, whereas the Marxian model conversely treats normative action as an unanalyzed residual. These models may therefore be regarded as incomplete in complementary ways.

⁷ The views of Durkheim on occupational associations evolved and changed throughout his career (see Hawkins [1994] for an excellent exegesis). In the early 1890s, Durkheim began to lay out the positive functions of occupational associations, but at that time he regarded them as a largely “temporary antidote to contemporary social problems” (Hawkins 1994, p. 473). It was not until the late 1890s that his full-fledged “theory” of occupational associations was formulated.

⁸ As is well known, Parsons (1949; 1967) sought to interpret all of classical sociology, including the *Division of Labor*, as engaging directly with issues of social order. By contrast, other scholars (esp. Giddens 1983) have argued that Parsons imposed his own idiosyncratic problematic on the work of others, especially that of Durkheim.

⁹ See Durkheim (1960 [1893], pp. 2, 4-5, 10), Pope and Johnson (1983, pp. 682-84), and also Hawkins [1994] for a review of other relevant pieces.

¹⁰ If the terminology of Durkheim is strictly applied, it is inappropriate to refer to “mechanical solidarity” in this context, as the latter term is reserved for traditional societies in which the collective conscience consists of beliefs and sentiments shared by all. We have appropriated the term here only because it clarifies that intra-occupational solidarity arises from similarities among individuals (see Pope and Johnson [1983]).

¹¹ Although the skeptic might reasonably ask whether the banal collective ends of everyday life are inspiring enough to infuse the most routine jobs with much meaning, the Durkheimian position does become easier to appreciate when collectivities are oriented to especially dramatic or uplifting objectives (e.g., fighting a war, building socialism) that could render even the smallest of contributions morally significant and rewarding.

¹² There is, to be sure, a contemporary literature on “post-occupationalism” that describes the gradual withering away of functionally-defined positions. This literature rests on the claim that contemporary organizations are relying increasingly on teamwork, cross-training, and multi-activity jobs that break down conventional occupation-based distinctions (e.g., Casey 1995). These changes, if indeed they are underway, should be regarded as a recent and modest setback for the occupationalizing forces that have dominated the post-Durkheim period. Moreover, the post-occupationalist account is not without its critics, some of whom have argued that the “pressures for an occupational logic of organizing may in fact be rising” (Barley 1995, p. 40).

¹³ Unlike Tocqueville (2000 [1835]), Durkheim regarded the proliferation of multiple and overlapping intermediary groupings as maladaptive, indicating “the absence or weakness of central authority” (see Hawkins 1994, p. 476).

¹⁴ Moreover, even in regions of the occupational structure that are well-organized, one often finds complex combinations of nested and overlapping occupational associations that belie the simpler structure that Durkheim seemed to anticipate.

¹⁵ In conventional class analyses, the site of production is represented in *either* nominalist or realist terms, and the fundamentally hybrid character of modern class systems has therefore gone unappreciated.

¹⁶ However, given that aggregate classes persist in Germany as well-developed and deeply institutionalized groupings, the correspondence with the Durkheimian formulation is imperfect at best (see Table 1).

¹⁷ The concept of “unit occupation” is further an artifice given that one typically finds complex webs of nested and overlapping boundaries that are not easily reducible to an exhaustive set of mutually exclusive occupations. It follows that sociologists do violence to the data by assuming that each worker must be mapped into one and only one occupation. However, insofar as such simplifying assumptions continue to be relied upon, our approach requires class analysts to identify the dominant jurisdictional settlements at the disaggregate level.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Zabusky and Barley (1996), Mortimer and Lorence (1995), Freidson (1994, pp. 89-91).

¹⁹ See Freidson (1994, pp. 80-84), Murphy (1988), Collins (1979), Parkin (1979), Weber (1968 [1922]).

²⁰ The forces for aggregate closure are arguably better developed outside the workplace. For example, post-secondary schools generate closure within a broadly defined professional-managerial class, both by virtue of (a) the generalist post-secondary degrees that are “redeemable” for positions throughout this class, and (b) the classwide constriction of interaction that occurs within campus settings. Similarly, residential segregation may be seen as a force for aggregate closure, as neighborhoods typically are segregated by race, ethnicity, and income rather than detailed occupation. We are simply arguing here that such closure

at the aggregate level produces boundaries that are blurrier, weaker, and less deeply institutionalized than those defining occupations and controlling entry into them.

²¹ Although occupational associations typically pursue sectional objectives, the spread of such associations nonetheless has unintended systemic effects, most notably the “squeezing out” of alternative classwide solidarities. We have sought to emphasize this linkage between Durkheim’s micro-level and macro-level stories throughout our essay.

²² See, for instance, Lamont (2000, 1992), Bourdieu (1984), Bernstein (1971), Kohn and Slomczynski (1990).

²³ We are ignoring here the inequality that arises by virtue of effort, native ability, and compensating differentials.

²⁴ It is conventional at this point to criticize Durkheim for failing to appreciate how upper-class parents also transmit social and cultural resources to their children. This critique clearly has merit, but also ought not be overstated. Although Durkheim does not emphasize non-economic inequalities to the extent that contemporary sociologists would, he does appreciate that some “illegitimate” inequalities would perforce persist even if economic inheritance were eliminated (see Lehmann [1995] for a relevant discussion).

²⁵ In their recent work, Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) have sought to motivate their class scheme with reference to job-level properties (i.e., terms of employment), even though the scheme itself has always been operationalized at the occupational level.