Introduction

During the efflorescence of Marxist theory during the 1960s and 1970s, class analysis emerged as one of the central objects of debate and discussion. Those years were among the most fecund in the twentieth century for the development of scholarship around class issues. It was certainly the only time in Western academia that the concept came to occupy a central place across the disciplinary divide. This was a direct expression of the growth of interest in Marxism among a new generation of students coming out of the many social movements of the 1960s. As student interest in exploring Marxism exploded across the academic spectrum, so did an interest in the concept most centrally associated with that tradition. By the 1990s, this interest had either ebbed significantly, or had transmuted into a shift away from the Marxist variant of class analysis, toward more fashionable avatars steeped in cultural and discursive commitments. To the extent that an interest in class analysis, of a recognisably Marxist kind, can be found in Anglo-American academia, it exists in somewhat small and isolated pockets. Perhaps the one discipline where scholarship concerned with
class has maintained a significant foothold is in Sociology, though here too, it is nowhere near as popular as it was a generation ago.

We will examine developments in class analysis along three dimensions central to its deployment as an analytical and political category: class structure, the labour process, and class formation/class struggle. Class structure refers to the location of social agents in the basic property relations, or production relations of an economic system. The labour process refers to the organisation of production, in which is produced the surplus that the dominant class appropriates from the direct producers. Class formation refers to the process through which agents located in differed classes organised around their interests. Class struggle is what happens when agents engage in the contentious pursuit of their interests.

**Class structure**

The concept of class structure has always been at the very heart of Marxist theory. Even though Marx was not alone in seeing class as critical to the basic dynamic of capitalism, he is the only modern thinker to build his social theory around the concept. It is therefore somewhat surprising that careful interrogations of its basic properties and its internal coherence as a concept were hard to find among twentieth-century Marxists before the New Left. Debates at the time of the Second and Third Internationals revolved far more tightly around empirical and political issues. The concern with unpacking what class denotes, at a fairly high level of generality, was simply not very visible among Lenin’s contemporaries. Its prominence among late twentieth-century theorists is undoubtedly a product of their environment: the fact that they were typically housed in universities, where the mainstream opinion regarding class concepts ranged from scepticism to outright hostility. The development of class theory in this setting required a simultaneous clarification and defense of the concept against its critics.

In this newer generation of theorists, there is little doubt that the most significant stream of work has been produced by the American sociologist, Erik Olin Wright. Starting with the publication of *Class, Crisis, and the State* in 1978, Wright has produced a steady outpouring of scholarship on the logic of class as a concept, as well as an extremely ambitious cross-national survey of class structure. The project has been remarkable not only for its ambition, but for