CHAPTER THREE

SECT APPEAL: RETHINKING THE CLASS-SECT LINK

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In *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) lamented the fact that American denominationalism reflected the social structure in society. Class, race, ethnicity and regionalism shaped religious subcultures and were the primary source of divisions in American Christianity. Niebuhr found that society’s “disinherited” were overrepresented among sectarian religious groups, just as the wealthy populated the established religious groups. Following Niebuhr, but also others like Weber (1963) and Troeltsch (1931), class explanations have been foundational to sociological theories of sectarian affiliation and formation (Demerath 1965; Dynes 1955; Hunter 1983; Kosmin and Lachman 1993; Lazerwitz 1961; Lenski 1961; Montgomery 1996; Pope 1942, 1953; Roof and McKinney 1987; Shibley 1996; Stark 1972; Stark & Bainbridge 1985; Stark and Glock 1968; Wilson 1959).

Historically, theorists evinced a rigid class-sect link based on the intrinsic qualities of the sects themselves. Sects were understood to be attractive to the lower classes and the poor because of their other-worldly beliefs, strict moral codes, austere practices, etc. While these historic explanations are a necessary part of our theoretical repertoire, they are not sufficient. They are insufficient partly because the link between class and religious affiliation is weakening over time. It is also because the class-sect correlation is more complex than direct links with the (orthodox) doctrine and (austere) practices of the group themselves, and probably always has been. There is growing empirical evidence of a looser coupling or weaker correlation between class and sects, even if the sect does not show evidence of accommodation. This evidence requires additional linkages, some of which I briefly outline below. I begin with a short recounting of some established theories, and then cite some recent studies that suggest a weakening class-sect link in the U.S. Finally, I draw from other sociological theory to suggest alternative explanations of the enduring class-sect link. Since these class-based explanations have been best articulated by Stark and
Bainbridge (1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1985), I use their definition of a sect, which is a schismatic religious group that is in relatively high tension with its surrounding society. Of course, the degree of tension varies over time and with groups, but the denominations coded as sects here match those groups coded as sects by Stark and Bainbridge. These groups include Churches of God, Churches of Christ, Nazarenes, Assemblies of God, Seventh-Day Adventists and other smaller conservative Protestant denominations.¹

Established Theories of the Class-Sect Link

Since Weber, Troeltsch, and Niebuhr, sociological explanations of sectarian formation and affiliation have emphasized class explanations. These class-based explanations are widely cited and seem to have a unique explanatory legitimacy. Sometimes these theories are stated in rigid form (as I show below), which assumes a strong and fairly invariant correlation between certain sectarian characteristics—distinctive beliefs and practices that tend to be otherworldly, moral strictures that promote separation from the dominant culture, and the like—and a lower class constituency. While it is often not clearly stated how strong or invariant this correlation is, the fact that there have been few competing explanations (until recently) has added to its perceived sufficiency and rigidity.

Theories of compensation for deprivation are not as widely accepted today (Sherkat 2000, Iannaccone 1988), even if there is still scholarly deference to them. In the sixties, Glock (1964; Glock and Stark 1965) argued that people who face economic, social, organismic, ethical and/or psychic deprivation often seek religious ways to compensate for these perceived deficiencies. Sects are more likely to be spawned by economic deprivation, while churches often stem from social deprivation and

¹ The data discussed below have a variety of sources, but are most commonly based on the 1972–2004 General Social Survey with 39,085 White respondents, of which 2206 are coded “sectarian” Protestant based on denominational criteria. Sectarian denominations with more than five respondents include: Independent Bible, Chr. & Missionary Alliance, Advent Christian, Assemblies of God, Free Methodist, Free Will Baptist, Holiness (Nazarene), Brethren Church, Church of Christ, Churches of God, Full Gospel, Four Square Gospel, Mennonite, Nazarene, Pentecostal Assembly of God, Pentecostal Church of God, Pentecostal, Holiness Pentecostal, Salvation Army, Seventh-Day Adventist, Wesleyan, Missionary Baptist, Other Fundamentalist, Charismatic, and Missionary Church.