1. Class analysis and social surveys

Building upon his doctoral thesis on class and income distribution, Erik Olin Wright launched a research project using questionnaire social surveys, which eventually mushroomed into a series of comparative studies involving more than fifteen countries over two decades. *Class Counts* summarises this work in a more accessible form than articles in academic journals, although it is sometimes necessary to turn to the original publication for a full exposition and in order to find out details of the research procedures. The project has been a massive enterprise and Wright has been extraordinarily energetic, creative, reflective and responsive to critics. Within academic sociology, Wright's class analysis is now treated by virtually all its supporters, critics (and textbook writers) as the intellectually respectable reconstruction of Marx's account of class. Surely, then, he deserves congratulation for making Marxism salient at least within this field. Although this review is highly critical of Wright's class analysis, it is certainly not intended to be dismissive, but rather a critical engagement with a serious body of intellectual work.

Wright himself has remarked that he would have been horrified if he had known how extensive the project would become and he has expressed serious doubts as to whether the findings justify all the effort (p. xxx). He nevertheless concludes that it has been worthwhile since it has impelled him progressively to improve his theorisation of such notions as exploitation and the middle class — and it is certainly true that his conceptualisation of class structure has shifted significantly over time. This might be an effective defence of the project, if indeed these theoretical reflections were productive. However, it is the burden of this review that the theory has developed along broadly Weberian lines and thus the project is fundamentally flawed from the point of view of Marxism.

In circumstances where this cannot always have been comfortable, Wright has consistently and explicitly identified himself as a Marxist and declared his aim as promoting and developing

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1 Wright 1979a.
Historical Materialism

Marxism. He has recalled that in the mid-1970s he had decided that quantitative research in sociology 'had the greatest chance of making a difference in the intellectual space Marxists could occupy within the academy'. Moreover, there were reasonable prospects of obtaining grants and publication outlets for survey research! Unfortunately, survey research has an obvious drawback in depicting the class structure; any affordable sample size will include very few owners of large concentrations of capital. As Wright admits at the outset of Class Counts (p. xxx), he is unable to give any empirical analysis of major owner-capitalists since they are lumped in with the much more numerous small and medium-sized employers (ten or more employees [p.317]), whom he refers to simply as 'capitalists'. Although – significantly, as we shall see – Wright does not make an issue of it in this context, neither are corporate executives distinguished from other managers above the level of supervisor. In short, Wright committed himself to a research strategy for class analysis which cannot attend specifically to the core of the capitalist class.

2. The Weberian temptation

The class analysis project was originally presented, at least for the purpose of attracting research grants, as an attempt to provide an empirical basis for resolving disputes between Marxist and Weberian theories of class. In Class Counts, Weberian class analysis is understood as tracing out how differential control over resources, manifested in differential market capacities (class situations), produces differential life chances and thereby distributional conflict. Accordingly, a Weberian research programme would first of all require aggregating the multiplicity of class situations into 'classes' and then exploring permeability across their boundaries and variations within and between them in matters such as income, health, attitudes and behaviour. This is precisely the sort of research that has been carried out by mainstream sociologists – and, as I shall argue, by Wright himself.

2 Wright 1994, p. 10.
3 However, see Wright 1997, p. xxviii. He states that posing the issue in terms of the Marx/Weber debate was an artificial way of justifying the project and did not reflect why he wished to do it.