5. More on Studies of Class and Nationalism

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Cuneo (1982) has taken us to task for alleged shortcomings in our paper on class and nationalism (Lambert and Curtis, 1979). Our purpose here is to comment on the two broad issues that trouble him and to set the record straight on five matters where he misinterprets us.

Do We Reject a Class Approach to Nationalism?

Cuneo’s first objection is to our alleged rejection of a class approach to the understanding of nationalism. What we focused on in the 1979 paper, and what Cuneo’s commentary manages to obscure, was (a) the low variance explained in na-
tionalist sentiment using the conventional social stratification measures (occupation, income and education) as predictors, (b) the greater importance of education in terms of variance explained, and (c) a general lack of consistency in the effects of the stratification measures (Lambert and Curtis, 1979: e.g., 188-189, 191-196). Unfortunately, nothing in Cuneo’s apologia has altered these facts or contributed to our understanding of them. For our part, we suggested a number of reasons why we might have obtained the results that we did. We speculated about how limitations in data from standard sample surveys, as in the three polls that we used, might help account for the findings. We also discussed how else we might conceptualize and measure explanatory social stratification variables. We were encouraged along these lines by an unsympathetic anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of the paper who derided the findings by saying “all of this for only five per cent of the variance?”

We have not abandoned social class as a source of explanatory variables for nationalism, but, as we said, our results led us to suspect that an adequate explanation will ultimately prove to be more complex than a “simplistic explanatory principle of class and class interests” indexed by income and occupation (Lambert and Curtis, 1979:196). We find the class theory of nationalism to be intuitively appealing, but the rub is to show its import empirically, in a compelling way. This theory cannot be made sound by exhortation alone. Nor can it gain anything except limited support from studies with the problems of design and conceptualization underscored in our 1979 piece. One of these problems is that educational status is difficult to justify as a measure of “class” and “class interests”. This point especially seems to have caused some confusion for Cuneo, so we must elaborate here.

In the course of his discussion of our approach to class and nationalism, Cuneo claims that we switched definitions of social class between the beginning and the end of the article. He states,

> in the early part of their paper ... they include education as one of several indicators of class... However, [i]n their concluding section ... they exclude education from class.... Therefore, their conclusion of nationalism’s classless nature seems partly an artifact of the shift in their definition of class so as to exclude education. (1982:255-56)

Contrast this with what we said. We began the paper by saying that researchers in the literature had used occupation, income and education as indicators of class, and that we, too, would correlate these social stratification variables with nationalist sentiment in the three polls, to assess their predictive import and to see if there were any time trends. We also said the following at the outset:

> There are ... alternative definitions of class, such as in the Marxist understanding that classes bear different relations to the means of production. For our own part, we would prefer to see the term reserved for these latter distinctions. (1979:177)

It was not by happenstance, therefore, that we titled our article, “Social stratification and ...”.

We went on to question the use of education as a surrogate measure for class and class interests (1979:181). The issue of class interests comes up because, as we discussed, theories of class and nationalist sentiment attribute relationships between the two variables to perceived economic class interests. We argued that,

> Education, occupation, and income ought not to be viewed as merely equivalent indicators of “class”, if by that term we mean economic advantages and perceived economic interests. Educational status may be understood, for instance, as a “non-economic” measure of a type and degree of socialization experience. (1979:181)