

Class Analysis and the Reorientation of Class Theory

The Case of Persisting Differentials in Educational Attainment*

In an essay published some years ago, Gordon Marshall and I set out the case for class analysis as a research programme. The aim of this programme could be summarised as that of enquiring into the interrelations that prevail among class structures, class mobility, class inequalities, and class formation (or decomposition). Viewed in this way, we argued, class analysis 'does not entail a commitment to any particular theory of class' but, rather, provides a context in which 'different and indeed rival theories' may be formulated and assessed (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992: 382).¹

It is specifically to such theoretical development and critique, within the research programme of class analysis, that I wish to turn in this chapter and those that follow. I take the development of theory to be a more ambitious and difficult enterprise than simply the elaboration of concepts. The key requirement of theory, as here understood, is that it should have *explanatory* force. A sociological theory is of value to the extent that it can provide an account of how established social regularities come to be as they are—and to the extent that, through the wider implications it carries, it remains open to further empirical test. Because, then, the prime purpose of theory is to explain, an exercise in theory development in any particular substantive area may appropriately start from a consideration of the relevant *explananda*: of just what it is that calls for explanation. In the present case, a historical perspective may perhaps best serve to clarify matters.

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Looking back over the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, two broad strands of theory can be distinguished, the Marxist and the liberal, which are addressed to obviously related yet significantly differing *explananda* regarding social class. Marxist theory, as Elster (1985: ch. 6 esp.) has well brought out, is primarily concerned with class formation and, in particular, with explaining the incidence and forms of collective class action. Such action was, of course, of key importance in Marx's overarching theory of history: all history was 'the history of class struggle' and was periodised by the revolutionary outcomes of such struggle. But all history was also the history of the development of the forces of production and of the contradictions thus created with established relations of production. For Marx, and for his followers, therefore, a crucial problem was that of how exactly these two lines of argument should be integrated and especially as they were applied to capitalist society (cf. Lockwood, 1981, 1992: parts 3 and 4). The abiding theoretical task was to explain just what were the processes through which intensifying internal contradictions would actually generate the degree of class consciousness and of class conflict necessary for the working class to act out its historically appointed role as the 'gravedigger' of capitalism.

Liberal theory emerged largely in reaction to its Marxist equivalent. Its starting point was the fading prospect of working-class revolution as the economic advance of capitalist societies proceeded without any sustained threat to their political stability. However, as elaborated in the context of a supposed 'logic' of industrialism, rather than of capitalism, it became in effect a theory of the general decline of class (see, e.g., for general statements Parsons, 1967, 1971; Kerr et al., 1973; Kerr, 1983; Bell, 1973, 1980; and for more specific application in the field of social stratification, Blau and Duncan, 1967; Treiman, 1970). What the liberal theory aims primarily to explain is how, in the course of development of industrial societies, class formation gives way to class decomposition as mobility between classes increases and as class-linked inequalities of opportunity are steadily reduced. These tendencies, it seeks to show, follow most importantly from the demand imposed by the logic of industrialism for an ever more efficient utilisation of human resources—as reflected in the expansion of educational provision, the egalitarian reform of educational institutions, and the progressive replacement of criteria of ascription by criteria of achievement in all processes of social selection.² Thus, it may be understood how, within an increasingly 'open' and

'meritocratic' form of society, conditions are created that at a political level first of all facilitate the 'democratic translation of the class struggle' (Lipset, 1960)—the abandonment by national working classes of revolutionary for civic, electoral politics—and then further undermine the connection between class membership and political action even in the individualised form of voting behaviour (cf. Goldthorpe, 2001).

However, while the *explananda* of Marxist and of liberal theory may in this way be contrasted, it is one feature they have in common that is here of main significance: namely, that of being essentially spurious. In both cases alike, major theoretical efforts have been made to elucidate the generative processes of something that has not in fact happened.

That this is so on the Marxist side is of course notorious. As Lockwood has bluntly put it (1992: 166): 'Nothing has been more disconcerting to Marxist theory than the massively awkward fact that no advanced capitalist society has produced anything resembling a revolutionary proletariat since the upsurges in working-class protest after the First World War.' Marxist sociologists have then had to resort to a variety of means of coming to terms with this fact, including, especially in recent years, that of ceasing to be Marxists. Indeed, if class analysis is conceived of in a Marxist or *marxisant* fashion, so that its ultimate purpose can only be the understanding of class formation and collective class action as key dynamic factors in long-term social change, then a sceptical view of its future might well be taken—or, at very least, its radical reconstruction be thought necessary (see further ch. 6, this volume). However, what chiefly serves to show that class analysis—in a quite different version to the Marxist—can still lay claim to a viable and important *problematik* is a further 'massively awkward fact': namely, that the general 'withering away' of class, to the explanation of which the liberal theory is addressed, is also a historical outcome that, while often scheduled, has yet to be observed.

In the decades following World War II, during which the liberal theory achieved its fullest expression, the economic development of industrial societies went ahead at a quite unprecedented rate. It would therefore seem reasonable to suppose that, over this period, any logic of industrialism with the potential to undermine the prevailing force of class within these societies should have initiated well-defined trends of change indicative of this potential. But such trends have proved remarkably hard to establish. Indeed, to

have shown that, in a number of key respects, they have simply not occurred might be regarded as the main achievement to date of—non-Marxist—class analysis as a research programme.

Thus, as Marshall and I sought to document, the available evidence from investigations into both educational attainment and social mobility is scarcely supportive of the idea of a generalised and decisive movement towards greater equality of life chances for individuals of differing class origins. Rather, class inequalities in these respects appear typically to display a surprising degree of stability. Further, studies that have purported to show a comprehensive decline in class politics within the advanced democracies have of late been called into doubt by results from more sophisticated analyses that reveal that class-party linkages are of a more enduring kind than has been supposed and that, insofar as changes are apparent, they are cross-nationally quite variable and often driven as much by party political strategies as by inexorable social change (see, e.g., Evans, ed., 1999; Evans, 2000; Brooks, Nieuwebeerta, and Manza, 2006; and the discussion in vol. I, ch. 5, pp. 107–13).

Research findings of the kind in question do then pose grave difficulties for the liberal theory. But this is not their only significance. For present purposes at least, the more important point is that such findings should themselves now be regarded as constituting the serious *explananda* to which class theory needs to be directed. Macrosocial regularities, expressing salient features of the class stratification of modern societies, have been empirically demonstrated. But, thus far, these regularities have been left opaque. The theoretical challenge that arises is, therefore, to develop some explanation of just how they are created and sustained. A major reorientation of class theory is here implied. Rather than such theory being, as in both its Marxist and liberal forms, concerned ultimately with explaining the dynamics of class, in regard either to class formation or decomposition, what would now appear of central importance is to account for the stability of class or, at all events, for the very powerful resistance to change that class relations and associated life chances and patterns of social action would appear to display.

In what follows, I will, first, outline what kind of theory appears to me most appropriate and promising for the task in hand. I will then seek to make a start in applying such theory by attempting an explanation of just one of the regularities referred to above: that of the persistence of class differentials in educational attainment. As noted, the widening of educational

opportunity and its supposed effects in weakening the influence of class on individual life chances plays a central role in the liberal theory, and an attempt to explain why liberal expectations in regard to class and education have not been met might in turn point the way to accounting for other failed expectations and, in particular, in regard to class mobility (see further ch. 7, this volume).

RATIONAL ACTION THEORY AND CLASS ANALYSIS

Both Marxist and liberal theories of class form part of larger theories of long-term societal change that are of a functionalist and also a teleological or historicist character. The inherent developmental logic of capitalism, on the one hand, and of industrialism, on the other, are seen as impelling societies on a particular course of change directed towards a particular end. However, the source of the failure of these theories may in large part be traced back to the fact that the functional exigencies that they envisage have not proved to be sufficiently powerful over the course of history to make social actors ‘follow the script’ that was written for them. Or, one could say, the supposition that macrosocial change could be understood in an essentially top-down fashion left both theories alike fatally lacking in micro-foundations.

Here, I seek to avoid any such difficulty by starting from an acceptance of methodological—though not ontological—individualism: that is, from the position that all social phenomena can and should be explained as resulting from the action and interaction of individuals.³ Thus, the theory that I shall try to develop will be one that aims to show how the macrosocial regularities that I take as *explananda* are the outcome of such action and interaction, whether in simple or complex, intended or unintended, or desired or undesired ways. In the course of providing such an account, I shall indeed make reference, without further elaboration, to institutions or other social structural features that, for the purposes in hand, I simply take as given. Nonetheless, the assumption remains that these features too are no more than the products of past action and its consequences and could, in principle, be shown to be such.

I shall, furthermore, opt for rational action theory. That is to say, I shall aim to give an account of how the *explananda* I treat derive from individual action that can itself be understood as rational. I take this option because, on grounds already set out in Volume I, I would see such an appeal to ra-

tionality as representing the most satisfactory terminus of any sociological analysis. As Coleman has put it (1986b: 1), rational action has 'a unique attractiveness' as a basis for theory in that it is a conception of action 'that we need ask no more questions about'. Or, in Hollis's words (1977: 21), 'rational action is its own explanation'.

The version of RAT that I take up implies, however, a conception of rationality that is of only intermediate strength or that, in other words, implies rationality of a subjective and bounded kind. I assume that actors have goals, have usually alternative means of pursuing these goals and, in choosing their courses of action, tend in some degree to assess probable costs and benefits rather than, say, consistently following social norms or giving unreflecting expression to cultural values. I also assume that actors are to a degree knowledgeable about their society and their situations within it—in particular, about opportunities and constraints relative to their goals—rather than, say, being quite uninformed or ideologically deluded. In sum, I take it that actors have both some possibility and some capacity for acting autonomously and for seeking their goals in ways that are more or less appropriate to the situations in which they find themselves.

At the same time, though, I would recognise that departures from the standard of objective rationality are very frequent. I make no assumption that actors are always entirely clear about their goals, always have the information or calculating power necessary to determine the optimal means of pursuing them, or in the end always follow the course of action that they believe to be rational. For present purposes at least, these latter assumptions are not in fact required in order to create the possibility of a viable RAT approach. Because the concern here is with explaining macrosocial—and probabilistic—regularities that result from the actions of large numbers of individuals, all that need be supposed is that the propensity of actors to act rationally as best they can in the circumstances that prevail is the most important *common* factor influencing them, even if perhaps relatively weak, while propensities to depart from rationality operate randomly in many different ways. The 'law of large numbers' will then ensure that it is the central, rational tendency that dominates in the overall outcome (cf. vol. I, ch. 6, pp. 128–30).

The focus of RAT is on how actors come to choose particular courses of action in pursuit of their goals, using the resources that they command

and adapting to the opportunities and constraints that characterise their situation. If, then, RAT is to be applied in the context of class analysis in the way envisaged, it will be essential to show not only how actors' goals are intelligible in relation to the class positions they hold but, further, how their actions directed towards these goals are conditioned by the distribution of resources and in turn of opportunities and constraints that the class structure as a whole entails.

In the following, class positions will be taken as defined by employment relations in labour markets and production units and, more specifically, by two main principles: first, that of employment status, which distinguishes among employer, self-employed, and employee positions; and, second, that of the regulation of employment, which distinguishes employee positions according to whether this regulation occurs via a 'labour contract' or a 'service relationship' (see further Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992: ch. 2 and, for a fuller discussion, ch. 5 this volume). Classes themselves will then be understood, in a minimal sense, as collectivities of individuals and families holding particular class positions over time. In elaborating the theoretical arguments that will be advanced, I shall concentrate, simply to keep the discussion within bounds, on the two employee classes that most clearly exemplify the second principle noted above: on the one hand, the 'service class', or salariat, of largely professional and managerial employees (cf. Goldthorpe, 1982, 1995)⁴ and, on the other hand, the working class of wage earners in routine, chiefly manual occupations. It should, however, be evident enough how the arguments in question might be appropriately extended.

As most class analysts have recognised, the differentiation of class positions in terms of the resources their incumbents command, the opportunities available to them and the constraints imposed on them does not imply that classes can be consistently ordered on any single dimension. This is so because the differences involved may be ones of kind as well as level, as, say, in the case of those that would set apart the class positions of self-employed workers and of employees (cf. Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006). Nonetheless, broad contrasts can of course still be made between what might be described as 'more advantaged' and 'less advantaged' classes. Thus, by virtue of the employment relations in which they are involved, members of the salariat are typically advantaged over members of the working class, not just in the level of their current incomes, but further through their more favourable

chances of maintaining continuity of employment, through the greater stability of their earnings, and through their generally more favourable economic prospects deriving from incremental salaries and career opportunities.

In trying to explain the persistence of class differentials in educational attainment, I shall invoke only such basic, or constitutive, features of class—that is, those that derive directly from employment relations—rather than ones of a more contingent kind. In particular, I shall avoid reference to distinctive class values, norms, ‘forms of consciousness’, and the like. For this would of course mean going beyond the minimal conception of classes earlier indicated: that is, it would be to imply that class formation was at a level at which a ‘capacity for socialisation’ (Featherman and Spenner, 1990) was present. And not only might such a claim, in some instances, prove difficult to justify empirically (cf. Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 217–27) but, as will emerge, explanations that rely on the existence of such systematic sub-cultural differences between classes do not in any event appear apt to the *explananda* in question.

Since I regard this essay as only a first step in theory development, I shall set out my arguments in a quite informal way. An attempt at formalisation is presented in Chapter 3. I shall, however, seek to clarify my position by contrasting wherever possible the empirical claims and implications that follow from it with those deriving from apparent alternatives.

CLASS DIFFERENTIALS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND THEIR EXPLANATION

I take the degree of temporal stability of class differentials in educational attainment to be a genuine rather than a spurious problem for class theory—or, to follow Merton (1987: 6), I take it to be a phenomenon that is ‘established’ in the sense that we have ‘enough of a regularity to require and allow explanation’. Nonetheless, the nature of the regularity should still be spelled out rather more exactly.

With the expansion of educational provision in economically advanced societies, primary and then secondary education, in some form or other, became universal, compulsory, and free; further, especially from the mid-twentieth century, growing numbers of young people have remained in education beyond the compulsory period and have also gone on into higher education, being often supported in this latter case by grants, soft loans,

or other forms of subsidy. Within national populations, the average level of educational attainment has thus risen substantially. However, across the western world, class differentials in educational attainment would seem to have changed surprisingly little, if considered net of the effects of expansion per se.⁵ More specifically, if educational careers are envisaged as comprising a series of transitions, or ‘branching points’, then, at each successive transition, children of less advantaged class origins have remained, to much the same extent, more likely than children of more advantaged origins to leave the educational system rather than to continue in it or, if they do continue, to follow courses leading to lower levels of qualification that in turn reduce their chances of continuing further (cf. Shavit and Blossfeld, eds., 1993). Moreover, in those national cases where declining class differentials have to some extent been found, these would appear for the most part to be rather episodic and also to be limited to particular transitions within the educational system—usually in fact to early transitions—while in later transitions as, say, in those to higher secondary or tertiary education, differentials remain rather little changed. What, in other words, is *not* found is any clear and compelling evidence of a *generalised, sustained, and substantial* decrease in class differentials in educational attainment, concomitant with the economic development of modern societies, of the kind that the liberal theory would lead one to expect.⁶

Why, then, should these differentials show such a degree of resistance to change? The explanatory approach that has thus far been most favoured is one that starts from a supposed connection of some kind between class and culture. In its weaker forms, this approach simply takes over earlier theories of the *famille educogène* (see, e.g., Halsey, Floud and Anderson, eds., 1961: part IV; Banks, 1971: chs. 4 and 5). The prevailing culture of more advantaged classes, it is held, leads to parents within these classes setting a higher value on education than parents in other classes and being better equipped to encourage and promote educational success on the part of their children. Such theories, one may accept, contribute significantly to the explanation of why class differentials in educational attainment should exist in some degree or other. However, they do not take one very far with the problem of their temporal stability. That is to say, they do not give any indication of why the cultural effects that they invoke should have maintained their differentiating force, virtually undiminished, over generations, and especially in the context of the social transformations engendered by advancing industrialism, in-

cluding major educational expansion and reform. All that is offered in this regard seems to be an essentially circular argument: the fact that differentials have not been reduced is itself the evidence that the influence of class cultures persists.⁷

In stronger versions of the approach, an attempt is made to meet the difficulty in question in that theories explicitly of 'cultural reproduction' are advanced (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970; Bourdieu, 1973; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). The educational system, as it functions within the totality of class relations, is seen not as means of utilising talent more effectively or of widening opportunities but rather as an agency of social control. Cultural reproduction, it is maintained, is necessary to social structural reproduction, and 'dominant' classes therefore use their power in order to ensure that schools operate in an essentially conservative way. This they do by imposing a pedagogy that requires of children an initial socialisation into the dominant culture as a condition of educational success. Class differentials in attainment are thus created via the unequal endowments of appropriate—though in large part arbitrarily defined—'cultural capital' that children bring with them into the educational system; and they are maintained because schools do not seek to offset, but rather to exploit, such inequalities, albeit in the name of recognising merit. Moreover, being thus debarred from educational success, children of working-class origins in particular are led to collude in their own disadvantage, whether through a passive acceptance of their 'failure' or through involvement in counter-school subcultures that enable them to express resistance to the established order even though at the same time reinforcing their position of subordination within it.

However, while theories of cultural reproduction do in this way offer an account of why class differentials persist, this account again still founders on the very facts of educational expansion. It is simply not the case that children from less advantaged class backgrounds have been excluded from, or have themselves rejected, the educational system to anything like the extent that these theories would suggest. As Halsey, Heath, and Ridge (1980: ch. 5 esp.) have argued, specifically against Bourdieu, educational expansion—in many respects *demand led*—implies not the reproduction of cultural capital but rather its very substantial growth. In Britain, as these authors show, and indeed elsewhere, the *majority* of children entering more selective and academic forms of secondary education during the postwar decades were 'first generation', and, by now, the same thing could also be said of those entering

higher education. In other words, proponents of theories of cultural reproduction would appear to be betrayed by their rather gross misunderstanding of the degree to which in modern societies' opportunities for upward educational—and also class—mobility between generations have indeed been enlarged *and* exploited.⁸

Although, then, theories of a culturalist inspiration, despite their currency, must be reckoned as for one reason or another unsatisfactory for the explanatory task in hand, the nature of the difficulties they encounter does at all events help clarify just what must be required of a theory of a more adequate kind. That is, it must be able to offer an explanation of why class differentials in educational attainment have persisted, but one that can at the same time accommodate the more or less continuous increase in the participation of young people in education and in their overall levels of attainment across all classes that has been the general experience of advanced societies.

To try to meet this requirement, I would suggest a theory that is in direct line of descent from that advanced by Boudon (1974). Although, as will be seen, I diverge from Boudon at a number of points—as well as in my definition of the problem to be addressed⁹—I follow him not only in his general RAT approach but further in two more specific respects: first, in starting from the 'structural' theory of aspirations of Keller and Zavalloni (1964) and, second, in regarding the processes that generate class differentials as operating in two different ways.

Keller and Zavalloni argue, in opposition chiefly to Hyman (1954), that rather than class differences in levels of aspiration, educational or occupational, being interpreted culturally—that is, as reflecting differing class values and related norms—they may be alternatively, and more parsimoniously, understood in structural terms. The aspirations individuals report, Keller and Zavalloni propose, should be assessed not by an absolute standard but *relatively*: that is, relative to the class positions in which the individuals are presently located. From this standpoint, for example, aspirations to attend university on the part of children of working-class and of salariat origins would not be treated as being on the same level; rather, the former would be regarded as having the *higher* aspirations. In turn, then, it need not be supposed that the tendency of children from working-class families to pursue in general less ambitious educational careers than children from salariat families derives from a poverty of aspiration: the patterns of choice made

could be more or less equivalent ones. It is simpler to assume that there is no systematic variation in levels of aspiration, or related values, among classes, and that variation in the courses of action that are actually taken arises from the fact that, in pursuing any given goal from different class origins, different 'social distances' will have to be traversed—or, as Boudon (1974: 23) more usefully puts it, different opportunities and constraints, and thus the evaluation of different sets of probable costs and benefits, will be involved.¹⁰

Such an assumption has, moreover, not just the virtue of parsimony but further that of being consistent with the experience of educational expansion. As greater opportunities for secondary and higher education have been created, children from less advantaged class backgrounds *have* proved ready to take these up and indeed to *a similar degree to children from more advantaged backgrounds*. That is to say—and the point is an important one—although class differentials appear in general to have been only very modestly if at all reduced, there is no evidence from any modern society that these differentials have appreciably *widened*—which is the consequence of expansion that theories invoking the reproduction of class cultural divergence would lead one to expect, as children from more advantaged backgrounds accept to the full the growing opportunities that working-class children spurn.

Boudon's adoption of the structural theory of aspirations is then related to the distinction that he proposes between the 'primary' and the 'secondary' effects that serve to stratify educational attainment. Primary effects are those that create class differentials in initial achievement or 'demonstrated ability' in school. It is at this level that Boudon would acknowledge the importance of class cultural influences—that is, in regard to actual performance rather than to values and aspirations, and to this extent he thus underwrites the idea of the *famille educogène*. However, it is on secondary effects that his attention is focussed: that is, on those effects that come into play as children reach the various transitions or branching points comprised by the educational system and that condition the choices they make. Some choices may of course be formally denied to some children simply on grounds of insufficient ability. Nonetheless, what is important to recognise is that most children do still have significant choices open to them: whether to leave school or to stay on, to take more vocational or more academic courses, to seek to enter higher education, and so on. And it is at this stage that considerations arising from the relationship between class origins and envisaged destinations—educational and in turn occupational—become crucial. That is to say, Boudon

sees the choices in question as being determined via the evaluations that children and their parents make of the costs and benefits of, and the chances of success in, the different options that they might pursue. Further stratification of educational attainment, he then argues, will result through the evaluation of more ambitious options tending to be the less favourable, the less advantaged the class position from which they are viewed and the greater, therefore, the *relative* level of aspiration that they entail. Thus, even among children who, through the operation of primary effects, reach similar educational standards early in their school careers, secondary effects will still produce class differentials in attainment insofar as these children start from—and view their prospective careers from—differing class origins.

Following this approach, Boudon's main concern is to establish that, as children's educational careers extend, it is the influence of secondary rather than of primary effects on attainment that becomes increasingly dominant—a claim that has in fact met with a good deal of opposition (see, e.g., Halsey, Heath, and Ridge, 1980: 128–33; Erikson and Jonsson, 1993). However, for my own purposes, I would wish to develop Boudon's theoretical approach towards a different end: that is, to show that it is on secondary rather than primary effects that attention must centre if the question of change, or absence of change, in class differentials under conditions of educational expansion is to be effectively addressed.

Primary effects can in fact be understood more broadly than by Boudon (cf. Halsey, Heath, and Ridge, 1980: 127) as comprising all those influences, whether cultural or genetic, that shape what is taken (arbitrarily or not) to be the distribution of ability in the earlier stages of schooling. These effects can be seen as establishing, together with the structure of the educational system, a *potential* range of educational outcomes overall and, likewise, of class differentials in these outcomes. However, it is then secondary effects, operating through the decisions actually made by children, together perhaps with their parents, regarding particular educational options that will determine just how these potentialities are realised. With educational expansion and reform, the constraints on choice that primary effects impose will tend to weaken (and even if these effects do persist throughout educational careers) in that the degree of selectivity in successive transitions, in terms both of ability and resources, will be reduced. More children, in total, will stay on in education beyond the compulsory period, take more academic courses, enter higher education, and so on. And greater scope is thus created, at the

level of secondary effects, for less advantaged children to bring their take-up rates of relatively ambitious educational options closer to those of more advantaged children. In other words, educational opportunity is increased in the sense that the objective structure of opportunities is made generally more favourable. But, for present purposes, the crucial question is of course that of the particular pattern on which these enlarged opportunities are in fact exploited.

It may at this point be instructive to refer to the case of gender differentials in educational attainment. What has emerged from research in this area (see esp. Shavit and Blossfeld, eds., 1993) is that in the course of the decades of educational expansion these differentials have shown a marked decline across virtually all advanced societies. Former disparities in favour of males have been largely eliminated—and in some cases reversed—as, one might suggest, parents and their daughters have come to reach more positive cost-benefit evaluations of education for women in the light of changing gender relations and labour market conditions. Thus, the problem of class differentials is thrown into sharp relief: why is it that a comparably comprehensive and rapid process of equalisation, such as would be predicted by the liberal theory, has not in this case also been apparent?¹¹

From the theoretical position that I have taken, I would suggest an explanation that may be summed up in the following proposition. Class differentials in educational attainment have persisted because, even though with educational expansion and reform, the *general* balance of costs and benefits associated with more ambitious options has steadily changed so as to encourage their take-up, little concurrent change has occurred in the relativities between *class-specific* balances: that is, between such cost-benefit balances as they are on average assessed from the standpoints represented by different classes of origin. What needs then further to be shown, or at all events hypothesised, is why, in this latter respect, such stability should have prevailed.

THE RAT EXPLANATION DEVELOPED

In the liberal theory, one of the main bases of the expectation that class differentials in educational attainment will decline is the idea that costs will be a steadily waning influence on educational decision making by parents and children. The direct costs of education, in the form of fees, maintenance, and the purchase of books and equipment, will be much reduced through

growing public provision of free or subsidised education at all levels; and indirect costs, usually estimated in terms of earnings foregone by children who remain in education beyond the minimum school-leaving age, will tend to be discounted in a context of economic growth and generally rising family incomes. Thus, there will be rather few children, of whatever class background, who do not continue in education simply because of a lack of the necessary economic resources. Here, as indeed in other respects, the liberal argument undoubtedly has force, but at the same time several important considerations are neglected.

To begin with, the obvious point is that even if family income no longer represents a constraint *stricto sensu* on children's educational careers, it may well still affect the *probability* of their taking one rather than another of the various options facing them. And it has then further to be recognised that while generally rising affluence has indeed characterised modern societies, it is far less clear that there has been any major and continuing reduction in class differentials in family economic resources. Over recent decades class inequalities in the distribution of personal and household incomes have in fact widened significantly in many societies, and, perhaps still more relevantly, there is little evidence of any decline in the effects of class position on the security or stability of earnings or on the course that earnings typically follow in lifetime perspective (see further vol. I, ch. 5, and chs. 5 and 6, this volume).

On the one hand, manual wage workers remain far more likely than professional or managerial employees to experience job loss or recurrent or long-term unemployment. And, even when in employment, the fact that they are more often paid on a piece- or time-rate basis rather than receiving a fixed salary means that their earnings are far more subject to fluctuation. Thus, the consequences for family living standards of incurring a certain level of costs on children's education will be less easily calculable within the working class and, in turn, a greater degree of caution in this regard can be expected. On the other hand, differences persist, and may even have been accentuated, in the tendency for earnings in professional and managerial positions to show rising curves with age over a longer period than in the case of manual or routine nonmanual employment. It is in fact towards the end of the period of children's compulsory education, when crucial educational choices have to be made and when the question of opportunity costs first arises, that the earnings curves of parents in different classes are likely to be at their most divergent. In the course of their forties, the earnings curves of

parents within the salariat will still tend to be moving upwards, while those of parents in less advantaged class positions will already have flattened out (for British data, see Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006). Thus, for families in such differing class situations, absorbing the costs, direct and indirect, of children remaining in education is likely to have quite contrasting implications for the *trend* in their living standards (cf. Lane, 1972).¹²

It should in this connection be further noted that public subsidies for education are not always targeted on those families with the greatest need for them. To the extent that the principle of universal, compulsory, and free education applies, means testing is precluded and, further, those eligible for subsidised higher education can only be those who have opted for it—and, previously, for the school courses that lead to the requisite qualifications. Thus, insofar as state support for education does not succeed in reducing class differentials at early branching points in the system, it will thereafter tend to help families in more advantaged classes to maintain their higher take-up of what is in fact the most expensive kind of educational provision (cf. Goodin and Le Grand, 1987).

In sum, the declining influence of costs is surely part of the explanation of the growth in all modern societies in the total number of children remaining in education beyond the compulsory period. But it is not at all apparent—and the liberal theory throws no light on the matter—just what, so far as costs are concerned, might result in children of less advantaged class origins choosing to stay on in school and to pursue more extended educational careers *at a more rapidly increasing rate* than others. Rather, it may in this regard be suggested that the more or less unchanging class differentials in educational attainment that are observed do no more than reflect similarly unchanging relativities as between the costs of education and typical levels and dynamics of family income from class to class.

A further basis of liberal optimism regarding the reduction of class differentials is the assumption that, while the costs of education to the individual diminish, its perceived benefits will increase. As criteria of ascription give way to criteria of achievement in social selection, education becomes the key to economic success, and is generally recognised as such. Thus, the tendency will be for children of all class backgrounds alike to continue in education for as far as their abilities will take them. However, it is once more the case that although the liberal argument is relevant to explaining the general rise in educational levels, it underestimates the self-maintaining

character of class inequalities. It neglects the fact that educational decision making remains conditioned by the class situations in which it takes place, and that this is likely to lead to differing evaluations of benefits, as well as of costs, so that change is again inhibited in the ways in which, from class to class, primary effects are modified by secondary effects in producing the pattern of ultimate educational outcomes.

For example, one may suppose that, in viewing education as an investment good, the chief concern of families in more advantaged class positions is that their children should obtain qualifications sufficient to preserve an intergenerational stability of class position or, at very least, to guard against any decisive downward mobility. Thus, parents within the salariat will be more likely than others to encourage their children to go on from school into higher education of some kind. And, moreover, they may be expected to give such encouragement more frequently, and with an increasing commitment of resources, as a consequence of educational expansion itself. As Thurow has argued (1972), the development of a generally better educated population means that more advantaged families are under constant pressure to make greater investments in their children's education as a form of 'defensive expenditure': that is, as one necessary just to maintain their advantage. Considered as an investment good, education is, to an important degree, 'positional' (Hirsch, 1976): what counts, so far as returns in employment are concerned, is not the actual amount of education that individuals have but the amount relative to their competitors in the labour market. In the case of salariat families, it may then be expected that the importance that is attached to qualifications adequate to maintain class stability, together with parents' capacity to absorb the costs involved, will lead to children attempting to enter higher education even where their ability levels are such that, as regards the chances of a successful outcome, the investment is a rather high risk one.

Boudon (1974: 30) has suggested that this tendency is accentuated as a result of higher education becoming a social norm that children are induced to follow through family or peer-group pressures. But while this argument may hold good for certain status groups or milieux *within* more advantaged classes, it is not one that I would myself wish to invoke in the explanation of regularities as extensive, temporally and spatially, as those here in question. A more important consideration might be that, with rising living standards, more salariat families are able to regard higher education for their children

as, in the first instance, simply a desirable *consumption* good—although, of course, with resources still being available to create further opportunities, whether through additional education or otherwise, in the event either of failure or the qualifications initially achieved not appearing to offer sufficiently attractive labour market prospects.¹³

Turning now to families in less advantaged class positions, the theoretical expectation must be that they will view the possibility of higher education for their children in an altogether more guarded way. In their case, other, less ambitious, and less costly, educational options would be adequate to the goal of maintaining class stability, while also providing quite good chances of some eventual degree of upward movement. For working-class families, for example, the ‘best buys’ for their children, despite places in higher education becoming more widely available, could still appear to be vocational courses, linked perhaps to subsequent on-the-job training, which would reduce the chances of relegation into the ranks of the unskilled or unemployed (cf. Arum and Shavit, 1995; Müller and Shavit, 1998) while increasing those of relatively quick entry into skilled manual or technical or supervisory positions. It is, moreover, important to recognise that, in the case of working-class children, a failed attempt at obtaining higher-level academic qualifications is likely to be more serious in its consequences than for children from families enjoying superior resources. For as well as representing a loss in itself, it would also imply further opportunity costs if an alternative, say, vocational option were then to be taken up, and in some cases might actually preclude such an option or impose direct costs as a result of age limits on entry or on the provision of financial support.¹⁴ Thus, among children of less advantaged origins, a prevailing tendency just the opposite of that among the children of the salariat may be anticipated: that is, for academic courses of the kind leading to higher education to be turned down even by some of those with ability levels that would favour a successful outcome.¹⁵

Boudon would here too wish to bring social as well as purely economic considerations into the analysis. Working-class children, he suggests, may be reluctant to pursue academic routes that would imply their eventual mobility away from their communities, as well as their class, of origin (1974: 30). However, I would again not wish to follow him, if only because of scepticism about the social costs that mobility entails (cf. Goldthorpe, 1987: chs. 6 and 7); and his suggestion does, in any event, seem of doubtful relevance

to explaining the persistence of class differentials in educational attainment, since working-class communities of the solidaristic kind that are presupposed have in most modern societies been in steady decline.

What thus emerges from the foregoing are two, related, arguments that develop my initial explanatory proposition regarding the lack of convergence in class-specific evaluations in educational decision making:

1. class differentials in the take-up of more ambitious educational options have been maintained because so too have conditions in which the perceived costs and benefits of these options lead to children in less advantaged families requiring, on average, a greater assurance of success than their more advantaged counterparts before such options are pursued; and
2. the persistence of these differing propensities over time can be seen to have a basis in action of a rational kind once the implications of the resources, opportunities, and constraints that continue to typify differing class situations are taken into account.

The first of these arguments is one that, I believe, can now be left to empirical assessment. The main implication is that a particular pattern of association prevails between class origins, children’s demonstrated academic ability, and the kinds of educational decision that they make. A number of studies, from different periods and places, have in fact already revealed a pattern of just the kind in question: that is, they have shown that *even when demonstrated ability is held constant*, children are more likely to enter longer-term and more academic courses, the more advantaged the class origins from which they come (see, e.g., for Britain, Micklewright, 1989; Wadsworth, 1991; Jackson et al., 2005; for the United States, Sewell and Hauser, 1976; for France, Duru-Bellat and Mingat, 1989; Duru-Bellat, Jarousse, and Mingat, 1992; for Sweden, Erikson and Jonsson, 1993). Such findings have sometimes been taken to indicate that children of less advantaged backgrounds face discrimination in their academic careers in the form of an ‘ability handicap’ that is imposed, consciously or otherwise, by teachers or academic administrators. But an alternative, or at all events additional, interpretation is here proposed in terms of the higher level of ability that less advantaged children will need to show before they, and their parents, are likely to regard more ambitious educational options as, on balance, the best ones for them to follow. The question to be further investigated is then of course that of whether there is also evidence that within particular na-

tions this tendency has indeed remained, as would be hypothesised, rather little altered over time, and despite educational expansion and institutional reform. This is a matter to which I return in Chapter 4, this volume.

As regards the second argument, further clarification of just what is at issue empirically could still be thought desirable. An attempt to provide this may be made by further reference to the work of Gambetta (1987; cf. vol. I, ch. 6, p. 136). From his study of decision making by parents and children within the Italian educational system, one of the leading conclusions Gambetta reaches is that working-class families are indeed far more sensitive to the chances of success than are middle-class families. He contrasts the way in which the latter 'lightheartedly' expose their children to failure in high school and beyond with the 'extreme caution' of the former (1987: 171–72). But Gambetta then raises the question of how far these differing orientations can be regarded as rationally grounded. Although he is in general sympathetic to the RAT approach to explaining class differentials, as pioneered by Boudon, it is here that he sees a possible need to qualify it. His empirical results show that class still exerts an influence on educational choices even when family income and parental education are controlled: that is, middle-class families are still more ambitious and working-class families less ambitious, in the choices they make relative to their children's ability. This finding he then takes as an indication that parents and children do not simply respond to the limits and possibilities that are typical of their class situations in a conscious manner but, subintentionally, *overadapt*. They 'short-circuit' themselves by attempting, on the one hand, too much and, on the other hand, too little, as compared with what a rational appreciation of the probabilities of success and failure would suggest. In other words, parents and children are subject to the influence of 'behind-the-back' processes that, in their very nature, must lie beyond the scope of RAT (1987: 86–100, 180–86 esp.).

Now I do not believe that Gambetta's analysis in this regard is all that secure, and it certainly calls for confirmation. He is engaged in the dangerous practice of providing an *ex post* interpretation of a residual effect, which could well be no more than the result of misspecification in the model he applies. Furthermore, as he recognises (1987: 93–99), the question of how the 'inertial forces' to which he appeals might actually operate has to be left with no very plausible answer. Nonetheless, Gambetta's work does have the merit of bringing out the way in which, in relation to educational decision making, the boundaries of the explanatory potential of RAT are in principle

to be drawn and, in turn, the general form that would need to be taken by radically alternative accounts of how the differing propensities of more and less advantaged families are determined.

The key empirical issue that arises can be stated as follows. In accounting for persisting class differentials in educational attainment, do 'inertial forces' of some kind or other need to be invoked, implying the overadaptation of parents and children to the realities of their differing class situations, even if this would provide an essentially 'black-box' explanation? Or is it rather the case, as I have sought to argue, that persisting differentials are simply one expression of the way in which the unequal distributions of opportunities and constraints that characterise a class society contribute to their own perpetuation through the quite rational adaptive strategies that they induce on the part of those who must act under their influence? To produce evidence that would allow adjudication between these two possibilities will surely not be easy. It will mean entering into a closer examination of how educational decisions are actually made and in particular, I would believe, of what quantity and quality of *information* actors typically have available to them, or actively seek, and further of how they process this information (cf. Manski, 1993). The methodological resources of sociologists in this area are a good deal less developed than those that have enabled them to analyse the pattern of the eventual outcomes of educational decisions across populations and subpopulations and over time. But the challenges that arise must be accepted if empirical research is to go beyond its descriptive task of establishing the phenomena and become effectively allied with the development of theory that has real explanatory power.

EVIDENCE FROM A DEVIANT CASE

In the foregoing, the emphasis has been on the need to reorient class theory so that, instead of offering accounts of processes of class formation or class decomposition that have not in fact occurred, it addresses well-documented macrosocial regularities testifying to the resistance to change that prevailing class relations express. There is, however, no suggestion here that such regularities have the status of 'iron laws' that operate entirely without exception (or that must extend indefinitely into the future). Thus, in the case of educational attainment several instances can now be cited in which the effects of class have to some extent changed and indeed weakened. In conclusion

of this essay, it is therefore pertinent to ask how promising the theoretical approach that I have outlined would appear to be when it is a matter not of explaining the long-term persistence of class differentials in educational attainment but rather their diminution. The value in theory development of deviant case analysis, or of the exception that 'proves' (*sc.* tests) the rule, has long been recognised.

Where research findings have indicated declining class differentials in educational attainment in a particular national society, the trend shown up has usually been of a limited kind and sometimes, too, its reality has been open to question in the light of the results of other enquiries. However, there is at all events one case in which the evidence of a fairly general decline in differentials has been demonstrated and consistently confirmed on the basis of different data-sets, namely, that of Sweden (see, e.g., Jonsson, 1988, 1993, 2004; Jonsson and Mills, 1993; Erikson and Jonsson, 1993, eds., 1994). In Sweden in the period from the 1930s through to the 1990s, educational expansion has been accompanied by a narrowing in the probabilities of children of different class backgrounds staying on in school rather than leaving after the compulsory period and, likewise, in the probabilities of their taking up more advanced secondary courses and entering higher education. In particular, children of working-class and farm families have improved their levels of educational attainment as compared with those of children of the salariat.

If then, as I have argued, class differentials in general persist because little change occurs in the relativities of cost-benefit evaluations of educational options as these are—rationally—made in different class situations, what should also be found in the Swedish case is evidence of change, that is, of *convergence*, both in these relativities and in the social realities they reflect. In other words, evidence should exist of the features of employment relations that differentiate class positions being modified or their effects in some way offset.

In fact, quite extensive research findings are already available to show that over the period in question economic inequality in Sweden has for the most part been in decline. Personal incomes have become more equally distributed (Spänt 1979), and to a rather extreme degree as viewed in comparative perspective (Smeeding, O'Higgins, and Rainwater, 1990; Fritzell, 1993), while income differences between broad occupational groupings also fell, to the disadvantage especially of higher-level professional and managerial

employees (Åberg, Selén, and Tham, 1987). It would in addition seem likely that in Sweden highly developed social policies, 'active' labour market policies, and powerful trade unions have together reduced to a greater degree than in most other advanced societies the differences in economic security that exist as between wage workers and salaried staff (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1985, 1990; Vogel, 1987; Persson, ed., 1990; Hibbs, 1991).

Further, though, as well as such circumstantial evidence, results are available from a sophisticated time-series analysis undertaken by Erikson (1996), aimed at establishing more specific linkages between changing economic and social conditions in Sweden and the trend in educational differentials. Three points of main importance can be noted. First, there is little sign of economic growth, rising levels of consumption, or educational expansion per se having any connection with greater educational equality. Second, the trend in this direction is in certain respects associated with educational reform—notably, with the introduction of comprehensive schools that eliminated early branching points in the educational system. But, third, the trend is more generally and more strongly associated with what Erikson would interpret as increasing economic security, in particular for the working class, and as indexed primarily by declining rates of unemployment.¹⁶

It would surely be premature to claim that increased educational equality in Sweden has in fact come about in a way that confirms my account of why, in general, class differentials in education remain little altered: again, the need for further, more detailed, evidence is apparent. Nonetheless, what emerges from analyses of the Swedish experience is at all events consistent with this account, and, it may be added, by the same token must tell clearly against the contentions of the liberal theory. As Erikson (1996) concludes, not just the deviant character of the Swedish case but what is further known of its dynamics, points to the fact that increasing equality in educational attainment is by no means the more or less automatic outcome of inherent features of advancing industrialism. At very least, other conditions must be present, and the strong indication is that 'one of these is political action'. Indeed, it could be that the egalitarian tendencies apparent in Sweden in this, as in various other, respects will in the end have to be seen as being quite specific to, and thus limited by, the period of a distinctive political conjuncture—that of social democratic hegemony (cf. Castles, 1978; Esping-Andersen, 1985; Tilton, 1990)—and one that has, perhaps, by now reached its close.¹⁷

The general conclusion that I would draw is, then, that a duly reoriented

class theory should aim to break with the functionalist and teleological character of both its Marxist and liberal forerunners in two different ways. In present circumstances, its major task, I have argued, must be seen as that of accounting for the long-term stability of class relations and associated inequalities—for, in effect, their inherent self-maintaining properties. And here the prime need is for secure micro-foundations in the analysis of individual action and of its intended and unintended consequences, where individuals are seen as acting as members of classes in the sense of being subject to the differing levels and forms of opportunities and constraints that their particular class situations imply. However, insofar as such theory is also called on to explain processes of change, suggestive of a significant weakening—or, should the case arise, a strengthening—of the influence of class, it would seem likely that it will then have to turn to the analysis of action at a different level: that is, to the action of political elites, and of the organisations they command, insofar as this is specifically directed to modifying relations in labour markets and production units that constitute the matrix of class. Strangely, or perhaps not so strangely, this last point is one that many years ago I argued, together with David Lockwood, in a very different context—in fact, in the last chapter of the last volume of the *Affluent Worker* series (Goldthorpe et al., 1969)—but there, too, against the claims of Marxist or liberal immanentism and by way of asserting the importance of the ‘degrees of freedom’ that always remain to political creativity.

CHAPTER THREE

Explaining Educational Differentials Towards a Formal Rational Action Theory*

with Richard Breen

In the light of recent research in the sociology of education, which has involved extensive over-time and cross-national analyses (see esp. Shavit and Blossfeld, eds., 1993; Erikson and Jonsson, eds., 1996), it would seem that the following empirical generalisations can reliably be made and constitute *explananda* that pose an evident theoretical challenge.

1. Over the last half-century at least, all economically advanced societies have experienced a process of educational expansion. Increasing numbers of young people have stayed on in full-time education beyond the minimum school leaving age, have taken up more academic secondary courses, and have entered into some form of tertiary education.
2. Over this same period, class differentials in educational attainment, considered net of all effects of expansion per se, have tended to display a high degree of resistance to change: that is, while children of all class backgrounds have alike participated in the process of expansion, the association between class origins and the relative chances of children staying on in education, taking more academic courses or entering higher education has in most societies been reduced in only a rather modest and uncertain fashion, if at all. Children of less advantaged class origins have not brought their take-up rates of more ambitious educational options steadily and substantially closer to those of their more advantaged counterparts.
3. Some cross-national variation in this respect has, though, to be recognised. In one case at least, that of Sweden, there can be little doubt that class

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