Contradictions in the Class Sytem

A Comparative Analysis of Interpretations of Social Class in Austria and the UK

While social class has been marginalized as an explanatory variable throughout the1990s and early 2000s, it has become popular again in the recent years. Nevertheless, there is little consensus on what social class actually is, which seriously hinders the debate of its importance in today's societies. Today's most prominent social classification schemes are either based on theoretical deliberations or quantitative studies. To generate a broader and deeper understanding of social class and its effects within societies, qualitative research is desperately needed.

The aim of my research was to fill up a bit of this gap, to inform research on social class and aid in policy generation to tackle social inequality. To do so, I conducted a qualitative research project that is based on focus groups with additional individual interviews. In these focus groups, the participants discussed what social class means to them and how it influences one's life. Two focus groups were conducted in Austria, both with university students and service workers as well as one focus group with university students in the UK and two individual interviews with service workers.

University students were mainly chosen because of their accessibility by the researcher and the fact that in both countries university students over-proportionally come from higher strata of society. The second group investigated are service workers. A prerequisite for the service workers was that they are under the age of 35 and do not hold a university degree or an equivalent degree. The reason here for was the aim to recruit participants that are from a different socio-economic background but nevertheless were socialised during a similar time frame as the university students. Furthermore, service workers were chosen due to there low organisation rate in comparison to industrial workers, which was seen as a proxy for class consciousness. In addition, in both countries, service worker are now by far the biggest employment category.

The focus group discussions were transcribed and then analysed, both individually and in comparison to each other. This analysis was conducted with a social constructivist approach. The interpretation of social class is viewed as being a contested content within the 'social stock of knowledge' and through their interaction, the participants negotiate the meaning of social class. Additionally, the moderator and even the observer are part of this negotiation of meaning. The interpretations of social class are therefore not 'discovered' in the focus group, but rather 'created'. Charmaz (2014) created a research concept that takes up these considerations by combines the Grounded Theory programme with a social constructivist approach which is embraced in this research. The analysis was supported by atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software.
The final step was to compare the 'patterns of interpretation' of social class with popular academic definitions of class.

The main results are the following:

Class awareness: All participants, even those who denied today's existence or importance of social class, had a rather pronounced understanding of class differences and where able to name several ways in which these class difference are enforced on an everyday level.

Class guilt: Especially members of privileged groups felt discomfort when being confronted with the idea of a class system and chose a variety of strategies to veil their privileged position within the class system, namely blaming, distancing and rejecting. Blaming is here understood as members of a privileged class who are confronted with their privileged class position not engaging with it but pointing to other people and groups and describing them either as more privileged or focusing on

the moral wrongness of other's privilege. Distancing happens when a member of a privileged class uses a certain class symbols of a different class to hide their class position. The last of the strategies is a rejection of the relevance of class today. This can either be done on the basis of empirical or moral reasons.

Covert class action vs. overt class action: Based on the empirical material, a system of covert class action was identified. In comparison to overt class action (e.g. industrial actions, joining labour organisation etc.), covert class action uses a variety of class symbols, ranging from socio-dialects to leisure actives, to evaluate the class position of a certain individuals and to then ascribe a certain value to the individual.

Contradiction of class differences: Class differences might be less visible as in the past but this is not due to a dissolving of class differences but the due to three main factors: appropriation of working class culture, the proletarianisation of white-collar professions and the deterioration of middle-class profession. Appropriation of working class culture means that certain elements of this specific class culture are taken up by members of other class. Examples here for are especially clothing, music and socio-dialect. The proletarianisation of white-collar professions is the process of individuals from a working class background moving into typical middle class jobs but maintain at least a certain part of their working class culture. The deterioration of middle-class profession captures the development of typical middle class jobs, such as teacher or architect, ceasing to provide the economic means to sustain a middle class life.

Contradictions between empire and theory: The research was shown that especially prominent class concept of Savage (2013) but also concepts from other important academics in class theory and the study of inequality are in stark contradiction to the understanding of class encountered in my research and that of other researchers. A new way to think about class differences is necessary.

Rediscovering social class in polity making: An improved understanding of how class differences are manifested in today's societies is necessary for progressive and emancipatory policy making.

Key literature

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Savage, M., Devine, F., Cunningham, N., Taylor, M., Li, Y., Hjellbrekke, J., Le Roux, B., Friedman, S., Miles, A., 2013. A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment. Sociology 47: London, 219–250.