

# CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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## PART 2 CLASS

### 2.1 Introduction

In this part of the book, seven critical research studies that address the nature and functioning of class are examined in detail. The focus is on the methodology employed in these critical studies that address class in one way or another as an oppressive system.

The first volume of *Capital* is explored below as an example of Marx's critical social research. Marx, of course, had a prodigious output over his lifetime. There is no attempt to assess his entire work here. The intention is to show how he developed a critical methodology. This involves drawing out his epistemological concerns as well as his dialectical methodology. Marx set himself an enormous task by focusing attention on the working of capitalism as a whole. Broadly, his approach was both structural and historical. He used a wide range of empirical material through which to deconstruct and reveal the workings of the late 19th century capitalist system.

In *The Power Elite*, C. Wright Mills (1956) analyses the power structure of mid-twentieth century America. He also adopts an historical and structural analysis and draws on a large array of empirical sources.<sup>1</sup> Mills work is an exemplar in a substantial tradition of American social criticism.

Goldthorpe and Lockwood in their study of *The Affluent Worker* (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1969) address the nature and role of the working class in advanced industrial society through an empirical critical case study of the embourgeoisement thesis. They adapt standard scheduled interviewing data collection techniques to the investigation of the relationship between working class affluence, industrial relations and working-class culture. Their negation of the embourgeoisement thesis has broader theoretical and praxiological implications.

Contemporary analyses that deal with problems of labour and of social order have made use of ethnographic techniques as a means of generating material. Paul Willis's (1977) study of the schooling of working class children and Roger Grimshaw and Tony Jefferson's (1987) equally painstaking examination of policing both make use of critical ethnographic techniques to engage the structural elements that underlie observed social phenomena. They do not adopt identical methods: Willis tends towards participant observation while Grimshaw & Jefferson prefer a non-participant theoretical case study. Both make use of in-depth interviews and group discussions and documentary analysis, to augment their observations. Both develop a fundamentally critical ethnographic research process. Willis' is an analysis guided by an overt concern with working-class culture. Race and gender are factors that are considered in relation to class culture. Grimshaw & Jefferson, while rejecting crude 'class functionalism', develop a structuralist-informed critical analysis that sees policing as an ongoing practice

determined by the interrelationship between the three structures of law, work and democracy. As such they provide a good counterpoint to the more overt class-cultural approach of Willis.

Media and cultural studies are other areas in which class-based critical social research approaches have been widely adopted. Many of these have been informed by structuralism and semiology as can be seen in Judith Williamson's (1978) study of advertising and Will Wright's (1977) analysis of Westerns as the contemporary American equivalent of the 'tribal' myth.

Each, in their own way, provides concrete examples of critical social research based on some notion of economic hierarchy. Class, in the sense of the position of social groups in relation to the process of production, is addressed directly by some of the studies, as in Marx's own analysis of capitalism and Williamson's critique of advertising. Other studies concentrate on power-based hierarchies, for example Mill's analysis of powerful élites in the United States. Nonetheless, the focus is on economic hierarchies of one sort or another, rather than on hierarchies informed by gender or ethnic differences. Subsequent parts of the book deal with these alternative structuring factors. All the studies reviewed in the book are thus approached as methodological examples.

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<sup>1</sup> Mills is criticised by some Marxists for replacing a class-based analysis of society by a sort of elite conspiracy theory (Swingewood, 1975).