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ScienceDirect
Research in Social Stratification and Mobility 28 (2010) 199–213
Research in Social Stratification and Mobility
http://elsevier.com/locate/rssm

Why does class matter? Policy attitudes, mechanisms, and the case of the Nordic countries

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Received 1 June 2008; received in revised form 16 November 2009; accepted 12 January 2010

Abstract

In most democracies, classes tend to vary with respect to an array of attitudes and behaviours, and differences are large within a number of European polities. What mechanisms lie behind these differences? Do they relate primarily to individuals' material interests, as assumed by traditional class theories, or instead, to socialization and self-selection factors? This paper seeks to extend theory and research through an analysis of mechanisms behind class differences in policy attitudes. Our focus is on the Nordic countries, where class differences are extensive and well-documented in past scholarship. We take advantage of high-quality European Social Survey data for Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Analyzing three policy arenas and the 9-category European Socio-economic Classification scheme (ESeC), we find evidence that class-related factors help to explain cleavages in attitudes. Comparisons with the more detailed, 103-category International Standard Classification of Occupation scheme (ISCO) suggest that these factors explain less "micro-class" occupational variation. Results shed new light on mechanisms behind class differences, and the empirical foundations of established class theories. These and other implications are discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords: Class cleavage; Mechanism; Policy attitudes; Nordic countries

1. Introduction

The concept of social class is central to the fields of stratification research and political sociology, and perhaps increasingly as well to much of contemporary sociology as a whole. Indeed, in contrast to sweeping claims advanced during the 1990s regarding the displacement of class by identity politics and other postmodernization processes (Clark & Lipset, 1991; Inglehart, 1990; Kingston, 2000; Pakulski & Waters, 1996), the past 15 years of scholarly work has provided accumulating evidence for class-based influence. A common description used to summarize empirical findings is that class is of "continuing relevance" (Evans, 2000; Wright, 1996; see also Lareau & Conley, 2008). This description is in keeping with findings from studies of social mobility (Beller & Hout, 2006; Breen & Jonsson, 2005; DiPrete, 2002), policy attitudes and political behaviour (Elff, 2007; Evans, 1999; Svallfors, 2006), and income and health inequalities (Fischer et al., 1996; Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005; Wright, 1994).

By the same token, however, cross-national scholarship shows that class differences vary, often considerably, across countries. Put another way, class relations tend to exert a significant influence over out-

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0276-5624/$ – see front matter
doi:10.1016/j.rssm.2010.01.003

comes, but that influence also depends on the outcome in question and the country context under consideration (e.g., Hout & DiPrete, 2006; Kumlin & Svallfors, 2007; van der Waal, Achterberg, & Houtman, 2007). This understanding coincides with an ongoing maturation and sophistication in empirical research on class analysis. Evidence of cross-national variation has, for instance, been incorporated to address new questions about the specific, national-level processes that mediate the influence of class (e.g., Breen & Jonsson, 2007; DiPrete, 2005; Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007).

Amidst the current renaissance in scholarship on social class are a pair of questions that we believe may be beneficial for scholars to begin to more fully address. The first relates to mechanisms underlying observed patterns of association between class and outcomes. Is it indeed class-related mechanisms relating to material interests and perceptions of risk that contribute to differences in attitudes, behaviour, and other outcomes of interest? This is the assumption of virtually all established theorizing on class relations. Unequally distributed assets and life chances, alongside individuals' calculations and attitudes toward welfare and economic risk, underlie the influence of class. But to this point in its development, comparative class analysis has yet to address this question empirically, with only a handful of important exceptions (for example Evans, 1993; Manza & Brooks, 1999; Weakliem & Heath, 1994), and these have focused exclusively on Britain and the United States.

Questions about mechanisms pose, we believe, important challenges for the field. If class-based differences are often substantial and persistent, it matters subsequently if they are indeed a product of the factors presumed by conventional class theory. Alternatively, if class-based patterns of influence are difficult to explain or instead keyed by selection scenarios, a good deal of existing class analysis will require reconsideration.

A second challenge to the field that we consider concerns the appropriate level of aggregation for class analysis. The class scheme developed by Erikson and Goldthorpe (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2000) has evolved into an international standard for the field with the development of the European Socio-economic Classification, or ESeC typology (www.iser.essex.ac.uk/esec/). This scheme distinguishes between a small number of classes based on characteristics of the employment relations of occupations (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 2000). The ESeC scheme has been shown to have criterion validity (Evans, 1992; Evans & Mills, 2000), with evidence for significant patterns of association with a host of important outcomes.

Several of the assumptions behind the ESeC schema have recently been challenged in an innovative and systematic fashion by Grusky and colleagues (Grusky & Galescu, 2005; Grusky & Sørensen, 1998; Grusky & Weeden, 2001; Weeden & Grusky, 2005). They argue that aggregation of occupations in the ESeC scheme and conventional class analysis masks underlying (and perhaps larger) class differences. Analysts should ratchet down class analysis to the *occupational* level to unearth real social groupings and processes of closure and selection that constitute the stratification order. According to this argument, occupations are not proxies for more fundamental class attributes; they are "micro-classes" in their own right. If this line of argument is on-target, analysis of (micro-class) occupational groupings should thus unveil greater group differences and enhance explanations in comparison to established class schema.

Using these considerations as our point of departure, we seek to begin addressing questions about mechanisms that underlie the frequent, if nationally variable, influence of social class. First, we offer tests of hypotheses regarding whether it is such class-related factors as income and economic risk perceptions that explain class differences in outcomes (rather than alternative factors such as demographic composition or the values-based selection of individuals into occupations). We contrast results using the conventional ESeC class typology versus a much finer-grained occupational scheme. In doing so, we hope to offer results that may help advance scholarly understanding of the foundations of conventional class analysis, as well as the emerging challenge offered by micro-class analysts.

1.1. A focus on the Nordic countries

Our focus in this study is on the four major Nordic countries and the class cleavage in policy attitudes. While the breadth of the questions at hand imposes some limits on the scope of our investigation, the Nordic countries represent particularly informative contexts in which to consider explanatory questions about micro-foundations. First, the class cleavage in policy attitudes and political behaviour has been central to class-analytic scholarship (for example, Esping-Andersen, 1985; Korpi, 1978, 1983; Kumlin & Svallfors, 2007; Svallfors, 2006), lending subsequent results theoretical relevance. Further, as instances of comparative scholarship's "social democratic" ideal-type, the Nordic countries are viewed by most scholars as having historically prominent and well-established class cleavages (e.g., Esping-Andersen, 1990; Huber & Stephens, 2001; Korpi, 1983), ones that have consequential linkages to both historical