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THE DEATH OF CLASS?

Abstract

This paper is a critical analysis of the ‘death of class’ thesis advanced by Jan Pakulski and others. The thesis is found to be flawed on theoretical and substantive grounds.

Key words: transformation of class structure, the ‘death of class’, the new forms of inequality

INTRODUCTION

Whilst the idea that social class is an outdated or dead concept is not a particularly new one, still the last twenty or so years have seen the emergence of a number of influential sociological theories declaring its irrelevance. These include, for example, some aspects of globalisation theory, or perhaps most famously post-modern perspectives, such as one represented by Pakulski and Waters [1996], or the notion of individualisation, which is commanding attention in textbooks and amongst general social theorists. It is argued that the need to reformulate the concept of class is rooted in recent global changes in the way in which society is stratified. The new forms of inequality have created the need to look for alternative and competing concepts to that of class.

PAKULSKI & WATERS’ ARGUMENTS

Jan Pakulski is perhaps the most vocal critic of the notion of class and made his name with his declaration that class is dead. According to Pakulski and Waters, the end of social classes in today’s post-modern societies results from the changes

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that have occurred in the last decades in Europe: the withdrawal of Marxism, the dissolution of communist regimes, and the fact that class ideology no longer affects Western Europe. The most developed countries have ceased to be class societies, particularly after the second half of the 20th century, although class maintain sits strength in the less developed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In particular, the authors indicate that modern Western societies are characterised by “a wide redistribution of property; the proliferation of indirect and small ownership; the credentialisation of skills and the professionalization of occupations; the multiple segmentation and globalisation of markets; and an increasing role for consumption as a status and lifestyle generator” [Pakulski, Walters 1996: 4]. As a result, they argue “that classes are dissolving and that the most advanced societies are no longer class societies” [Pakulski, Walters 1996: 4]. Well, given Pakulski and Walters’s remarkable self-confidence, the reader may be forgiven for being taken by surprise by our contention that this whole reasoning is based on more than a single misunderstanding.

Firstly, a number of their arguments refer to ideology, or at best social consciousness, rather than social reality itself. Thus, whether what they call “the withdrawal of Marxism” has actually taken place or not, this fact *per se* has nothing to do with the significance (or lack thereof) of class. It appears that the announcement of the ‘death of class’ probably has something to do with the collapse of the so-called “real” or “actually existing” socialism. This fact in and of itself is unquestionable, but this does not refer to its alleged association with the decline of Marxism. Whilst it is true that Marxism, or more accurately Marxism-Leninism, constituted an official ideology in the Soviet-bloc countries of Eastern and Central Europe, it is equally clear that the ruling elites only paid lip service to it, the more so and to a larger extent when we speak of the post-Stalinist rather than the Stalinist era. In point of fact, even during Stalinism what was put into political and economic practice was not Marx’s historical materialism, but rather an extremely distorted version of it. There is an unbridgeable gap between Marx’s humanistic vision and Stalin’s genocidal practices. But again, even if one takes for granted (contrary to the facts) that the policies in the countries concerned were driven by Marxist assumptions, this neither confirms nor undermines the validity of class. Social classes are real social collectivities existing in the empirical social world, not ideological constructs. As forms of thought, both theory and ideology may only reflect the class relations that exist independently of collective or individual awareness. As far as ideology goes, by the way, it should be noted that the authors themselves fall victim to it, which is shown, *inter alia*, in their adoption of the label “communism” for the countries of the

former Soviet bloc. In what sense they were communist, we are not told. Theirs is purportedly a scholarly investigation, and in such a case one is not supposed to mirror common or folk wisdom. It is true that political propaganda and the media in the West often used and even continue to use that misleading label, but this does not justify a scholar's unreflective (sorry to say) following in the footsteps of such-by definition-unscientific thinking. In as much as the distinction between communism and socialism refers not to any moral evaluation of the respective systems, nor to their respective political regimes, but to the type of economic property relations governing society, it may be suspected that this theoretical gap in Pakulski and Walter's thinking will have some impact on their treatment of class as well. And surely it does.

Pakulski [2011] states that: "While class groupings and actors are seldom found, social groupings formed on the matrix of communal and authority relations are quite common. So are the cases of collective action by status-type groupings (eg. nations, ethnic groups), <imperatively coordinated associations> (Dahrendorf's term) and elites. As contemporary elite theorists point out, the most momentous developments of the last century – the collapse of European communism and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union have been engineered and crafted by the top leadership groups, with remarkably little mass, let alone class, participation" [Pakulski 2011: 182].

This, again, is messy and ill-informed. Firstly, if we are to take his earlier declarations regarding the importance of stratification seriously, does this mean that nations and ethnic groups are to be regarded as strata? And what then is the relation to stratification of Dahrendorf's "imperatively coordinated associations"? Pakulski, as his surname suggests, should be more familiar with the events in Central and Eastern Europe than he actually appears to be. His view with respect to the drivers of those events echoes the widespread but naive conspiracy theories, whose only bridge with science is the word "theory". Quite contrary to Pakulski's assertion, the masses – and classes in particular – played a decisive role in toppling the former regime. The roots of the exposed ignorance, though, most likely lie deeper, in theoretical weaknesses. Pakulski believes that "The post-Stalinist decades in Soviet-type societies resulted in a formation of social ranks (Scott calls them <blocs>), that is well-articulated strata formed on the matrix of authority relations. The top partocratic strata, sometimes ironically labelled "red aristocracies", and the politically circumscribed *nomenklatur as* are good examples of social command strata" [Pakulski 2011: 198–199].

This implies that even if the class structure existed in these types of societies, it was unimportant as compared to a command-based stratification. This con-

ception is closely related to his lack of identification of class struggles as a key factor in the fall of “real socialism”. Meanwhile, the so-called *nomenklatura* was, on the one hand, a grouping of several social classes and estates, and on the other constituted a class in its own right. That class was based on the common ownership of labour power manifested in the so-called “job carousel”, i.e. each member of the nomenclature had a secure job, which one month might be that of a high official in the central committee of the party, and the next month that of a president of a cooperative association or an editor-in-chief of a nationwide journal. However, they were also unified by their shared, privileged relation to the means of production. And it is for that reason that the nomenclatura was called not the “red aristocracy”, but the “red bourgeoisie”. And it was that class that constituted, notably in Poland but also elsewhere, the target of the class struggle of the working, or, more broadly, employee class¹.

The aforementioned authors argue that a wide redistribution of property and the proliferation of indirect and small ownership is somehow linked to the fall of class. Their redistribution thesis is interesting given that at the same time they announce the decline, or at least the essential weakening, of the welfare state. A weak state capable of carrying out such a wide redistribution is *contradictio in terminis*.

Another contradiction which exists is centred around the claim and the social realities of wide – and indeed ever-widening – inequalities. But again, even granted for the sake of argument that the authors’ claim is true, it remains their own private mystery how that redistribution is to translate into the end of class divisions. They surely do not go so far as to declare the full levelling or averaging out of all citizens’ wealth and income. To make the matter even more difficult for them, even such a situation of complete *uravnilovka* (*evening out*) would not necessarily wipe out all class divisions, as those, in contradistinction to strata, are not based on wealth or income alone. Pakulski and Walters state that their notion of class draws on Marx and Weber, i.e. on property and market relations. How one is to reconcile this claim with their interpretation of indirect and small ownership? There is no way. Indirect ownership may mean different things. Firstly, it can refer to the proliferation of ownership mediated by money, which is true of e. g. corporate securities, which constitute ownership claims to some portion of corporate capital. But a more common usage, and one adopted by Pakulski and Walters, refers to more intermediate forms of economic property such as mutual and other investment funds, or pension funds. The increased role

¹ More in [Tittenbrun 1996].

of various kinds of financial institutions in today's stock markets is undisputable. But what is singularly missing in Pakulski and Walters' book is an analytical interpretation in terms of socio-economic theory of ownership. I have attempted such an analysis in several publications. This research was based on the distinction between ownership of capital and savings, or (in the case of employee pension funds) labour power. Another case considered was concerned with philanthropic foundations. It would have seemed that the assets of these institutions constituted, almost by definition, some form of non-private property. Upon closer inspection, however, matters turned out to be not that simple. It is, rather, a matter of mixed property, with different foundations displaying both private and common property characteristics in various proportions. Just like in the case of pension funds, the privileged beneficiaries of foundation capital are their managers. Of course, from the legal standpoint they have no title to the assets of those financial institutions that they manage. A socio-economic analysis, however, discloses their true socio-economic position as – in many instances – the majority beneficiaries, and thereby the economic owners of pension funds, mutual funds and the like. Slogans about “democratic capitalism” are little more than hot air; stock ownership is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the wealthy bourgeoisie.

A recent study by the Russell Sage Foundation suggests that these patterns of inequality, which have been developing over the last several decades, have become more pronounced in the post-Recession period. In 2013 the wealth of those at the 90th and 95th percentiles was actually higher than ten years ago. Everyone else's is lower. And indeed wealth is no less concentrated than income. Even prior to the latest financial turmoil, total household wealth was distributed nearly evenly into three groups: the wealthiest 1%, the next 9%, and the remaining 90% [Kenickell 2006]. At the bottom of the wealth distribution ranking, nearly 17% of Americans in 2004 had zero or negative net worth [Wolff 2007]. Individuals in this wealth-devoid group who owned assets were thus encumbered by debt [Kenickell 2006]. Furthermore, current household income and total household net worth share a low correlation [Lerman&Mikesell 1988], suggesting that income inequality can only partially explain wealth inequality [Wolff 2001]. In 2007 the richest 1% of the American population owned 34.6% of the country's total wealth, and the next 19% owned 50.5%. Thus, the wealthiest 20% of Americans owned 85% of the country's wealth, and the remaining 80% of the population owned 15% of the country's wealth. Financial inequality (“Financial wealth” is defined by economists as “total net worth minus the value of one's home”, including investments and other liquid assets) was even greater than the inequality in total wealth, with the top 1% of the population owning 42.7% of ‘financial wealth’,

the next 19% of Americans owning 50.3%, and the bottom 80% owning 7%! [Jacobs 2011]. However, after the Great Recession that started in 2007, which should be rather dubbed a depression, the share of total wealth owned by the top 1% of the population grew from 34.6% to 37.1%, and that owned by the top 20% of Americans grew from 85% to 87.7%. And it should be mentioned that these are the official figures, far from accurate. As reported in the Daily Mail Reporter, “the top 1 percent of U.S. earners were previously estimated to control 30 percent of the country’s wealth, but it seems that number could be closer to 37 percent. A new working paper from European Central Bank senior economist Philip Vermeulen claims 30 percent is a lowball estimate of the net worth of the nation’s elite because wealthier households are less likely to respond to surveys about their assets than lower-income families. Vermeulen’s research may also suggest that the wealth controlled by the richest 5 percent in America, which was always thought to be a huge 60 percent, may also be more. The men and women on the Forbes’ billionaires list have an aggregate wealth of \$6.7 trillion”. [Daily Mail Reporter 2014]. More specifically, the ultra-rich, i.e. people with net worth of more than \$100 million, owned 11% of total wealth in 2012. Perhaps no other group better personifies the woes of American capitalism than the Walton family, which has more wealth than the bottom 40% of America. In other words, that kind of ratio means that “10 people have as much as 100 million people combined” [McKenzie 2014].

This does not mean that other echelons of the big bourgeoisie could be regarded, even in a relative sense, as disadvantaged. Those who could be regarded as only ‘really rich’ have done pretty well too. Those worth between \$20 million and \$100 million have seen their wealth share nearly double, while the ‘merely rich’ – those with wealth between \$4 million and \$20 million – saw only a slight uptick. The other 99% of households saw a relative decline in wealth.

It is worth noting a regularity pointed out by Branco Milanovic, a visiting professor at the City University of New York and an expert on income inequality: “The higher you are in the income distribution, the greater the gains” At the same time “people who are poorer haven’t really benefited from the expansion”. The reasons behind this wealth explosion cannot be reduced to tax advantages alone, though it is true that the wealthy enjoy low tax rates. But blaming the current wealth concentration on tax cuts for the rich would be far too simple, as evidenced by the fact that the trend worldwide has been similar, and is expected to accelerate in the years to come.

Indeed, according to the Boston Consulting Group, the ultra-rich around the world are expected to see their wealth grow by over 9% a year between

2012 and 2017. There are over three thousand \$100 million-plus households in the United States alone. Meanwhile, households worth less than \$100,000 are expected to see their net worth grow just 3.7% a year.

Among the reasons why the rich are getting richer faster than everyone else, the following factors are usually mentioned: according to one view, today's entrepreneurs tend to be quickly vaulted into the ultra-rich category (think of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg). Another position holds that the already well-off have access to better financial products. A somewhat related theory is that the wealthy are better able to take advantage of technology and globalization: As companies and markets become bigger, those at the top are given bigger rewards. In fact, all these factors have a common origin in the "Matthew effect", which in colloquial terms couches what constitutes the core of ownership.

However Robert Frank, a Cornell University economist and author of a book under the trendy title of "The Winner-Take-All Society" presents a view whose relevance is more limited. He says: "Talent is hard to find, production workers are not" This has a very specific application inasmuch as real talent is really rare—the very concept can refer to a soprano, but very seldom to a manager, and of course², you don't need to have any talent at all to be a member of the arch-rich Walton family. There is more to be said for the view of French economist Thomas Piketty, who in his "Capital in the 21st Century" argues that inequality has always been extreme. In his opinion, the relative drop in inequality witnessed during the middle of last century was an anomaly, caused at that time not so much by the middle class becoming new affluent winners, but rather by the rich turning into relative losers as a consequence of two world wars and the Great Depression. In any case, according to what Piketty recently told CNN "we're going back to the kind of concentration of wealth we had in the 19th century" [Hargreaves 2014].

As to the second circumstance invoked by Pakulski and Walters in the context under consideration, i.e. the growth of small property, it is hard to understand why this should conflict with or naysay class analysis. On the contrary, if we wish to determine the socio-economic position of owners of those small businesses in precise terms, we cannot but utilise class categories. Some of them would be classified, in terms of socio-economic structuralism as the authors theoretical position is termed, as the autocephalous class (the petty bourgeoisie), while those employing alien labour power would in all likelihood be classed as small capitalists. On the other hand, from an empirical standpoint small business

² Similarly, to this author's knowledge, Oliver Stone has no plans to direct any "Natural born Bankers".

start-up shave declined as a portion of all business grow thin the U.S., from 50% in the early 1980s to 35% in 2010, while their share of employment dropped down from 20% to 12%. Indeed, a 2014 Brookings report revealed that small business “dynamism”, measured by the growth of new firms compared with the closing of older ones, has declined significantly over the past decade, with more firms closing than starting for the first time in a quarter century. Indeed, this has been – alongside with the staggering economic polarisation – one reason for the currency of a thesis that on the surface may fit the framework under consideration, i.e. the one that proclaims “the death of the middle class” However, it is being used to draw conclusions that are nothing but the dismissal of class analysis: “the middle class – especially the blue-collar middle class – is also starting to look like a fluke, an interlude between Gilded Ages³ that more closely reflects the way most societies structure themselves economically. For the majority of human history – and in the majority of countries today – there have been only two classes (...) It’s an order in which the many toil for subsistence wages to provide luxuries for the few. Twentieth century America temporarily escaped this stratification, but now, as statistics on economic inequality demonstrate, we’re slipping back in that direction” [Good 2013]. Of course, these are not the only objections concerning the work under consideration. Research suggests that “the experience of individuals in terms of economic security, stability and prospects will typically differ with the class positions that they hold. At least with some of the more marked contrasts that in this way arise, individuals in different class positions could in fact be seen as living in quite different economic worlds, not just as regards their levels of material welfare but, further, as regards the whole range of economic life-chances – of risks and opportunities – that they face.

From a methodological standpoint, the findings “(...) throw further doubt on claims of the decline or death of class in modern – or, supposedly, <post-modern> – societies such as that of contemporary Britain. What is rather indicated is the general persistence, and in some respects even the heightening, of inequalities that can be shown to derive directly from the incumbency of different class positions: that is, not from the attributes of individuals per se but from their location within the social relations of labour markets and productions units that form the class structure” [Goldthorpe, McKnight 2004]. In the words

³ Another author takes a similar view, but extends the concept into yet another employee class, which only underlines the distinction between class and stratification: “When folks say, “the middle class is going extinct” what does that actually mean? (...) Americans in the aggregate really prospered economically when large amounts of people were making living wages and there was both a “blue collar” and a “white collar” middle class” [Chin 2014].

of Goldthorpe and Marshall, “what is revealed is a remarkable persistence of class-linked inequalities and class-differentiated patterns of social action, even within periods of rapid change at the level of economic structure, social institutions, and political conjunctures” [Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992: 393]. In this view, effects of class on values are stable, both across time and across countries. “Social classes, apart from being tools for analysing and theorising, were glorified as individual and collective identities, while they also expressed social inequality and power structures. Power relations and inequality themselves don’t die in the contemporary megalopolis of neo-liberalism and of the ‘Asian Tigers’, nor have they disappeared from people’s daily experiences, sense and language” [Yannitsiotis 1999].

INDIVIDUALISATION

The aforementioned ‘need’ for an alternative, non-class treatment of social differentiation is connected to a definitive view of the relationship between the individual and his or her society, and borrows a lot from the theory of so-called *individualisation* as an allegedly key trait of modern, or post-modern if you will, societies. To convince oneself about the relevance of the trait, let us examine in some detail the said theoretical perspective according to which “the rise in individualization is regarded as having made social class obsolete in social explanation” [Ribbens McCarthy, Edwards and Gillies 2003: 132]. In this critique we are by no means alone. Cromton, for instance, notes that “the assertion that ‘class’ is no longer useful for the analysis of ‘late modern’ societies has been made so often as to be almost banal. One frequent argument is that in ‘reflexive modern’ societies, the individual has become the author of his or her own biography” [e.g. Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002]. That is, rather than simply being able to ‘follow the rules’ as laid down by the established collectivities of class, status, and gender, the individual is now ‘forced to choose’. Beck [Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 202] states that: “individualisation is a concept which describes a structural, sociological transformation of social institutions and the relationship of the individual to society, freeing people from historically inscribed roles. Individualisation liberates people from traditional roles and constraints, and individuals are removed from status-based classes. Social classes have been detraditionalised”. Lowell puts the central thrust of the concept under consideration this way: “Some of the theorists of modern individualization have drawn from the resources offered by postmodernism, although not necessarily from the poststructuralist ‘linguistic turn’, and in doing so, have been willing to give

culture and consumption a central position in the analytical frame. They detach socio-economic class from particular cultural formations, and culture, increasingly mediated by consumption, is held to be more formative of the social identities and allegiances of individuals than social class". Ulrich Beck has gone so far as to speak not only of a "capitalism without class", but of "class", alongside "family", "neighbourhood" and other furniture of classical sociology, as "zombie categories"[Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 2002: 203] – "the living dead of sociological discourse drained of their earlier vitality in the processes of identity-formation and purposive social action in modern society" [2004].

However, upon closer scrutiny, there are knotty theoretical and empirical problems with that account. Beck argues that there is a "growing pressure towards reflexive lifestyles and individualized biographies", with "meaning and identity" being "discovered individually". There is thus no longer a "collective identity of class", as individualization theorists show there to be a "divergence" between subjective features ("consciousness, lifestyle, leisure interests, political attitudes") and objective features ("income, hierarchical position") or, in other words, an "uncoupling of class culture from class position" As Beck puts it elsewhere: "the old idea that, by knowing that someone was a Siemens apprentice, you also knew the things he said, the way he dressed and enjoyed himself, and what he read and how he voted" has become deeply "questionable" with individualisation [Beck and Beck-Gersheim 2002: XXIV]. The end result, he claims in his response, is that we now have 'capitalism without classes', or 'more precisely', "without classes for themselves".

There are, however, some pretty blatant weaknesses in his argument. First of all, there is a huge contradiction in claiming that individualisation is not "falsified" by looking at attitudes and behaviours, but that it is manifest, in the case of class, in reflexive lifestyles and an uncoupling of leisure interests, attitudes, consciousness and so on from objective positions. On the one hand, we are told that the "empirical proof" of individualisation does not reside in the "contingency of attitudes and modes of behaviour", while on the other, that the way to prove individualisation is occurring in the realm of classes is through the observation of reflexive, individualised lifestyle pursuits and interests. Or again, we are confidently informed that individualisation results in an uncoupling of lifestyles and attitudes from class positions, but that, in reality, individualisation may only "possibly" or "then again perhaps not" result in changes in attitudes and likes because how individuals deal with individualisation (as the changes in rights and laws) is an "open question", that is, attitudes, behaviours and reactions are "contingent". Is all this not a question of wanting to have one's cake and eat it

too? Beck's get-out clause on attitudes and behaviour – that how individuals deal with individualisation is an open question (the “crux of contingency”) – is hardly satisfactory, not only because simply stating the existence of contingency without any elaboration or proof is not good enough, but also because it raises a fundamental question which has long been unanswered in his theory: what exactly is his abstract conception of the relationship between the macro, objective elements of the social cosmos (social structures) and micro or subjective elements (attitudes, behaviours, perceptions)? Beck lacks any coherent position on this. If he had one, he would not be able to hide from the empirical falsification behind the claim that actions and attitudes are simply “contingent” – unless he holds to a pure voluntarism – because a rigorously worked out theoretical understanding of the principle of action linking structure and behaviour (such as rationality or ingrained dispositions] would grant an understanding of who reacts how and why, that could even, it might be conjectured, disclose a differentiation according to class.

Another problematic issue besetting Beck's reassertion of individualisation is that throughout this account there lurks a crude and unelaborated definition of what classes were before being individualized out of existence, hinged on such casually-used quasi-Marxist terms such as “collective class identity”, “class cultures” and “classes for themselves”, together with vague claims that “features, functions and activities were ‘previously assigned’ to classes, all of which presuppose the importance of solidarity and collectivism for the very existence of classes” [Atkinson 2007b]. Whilst his critique is essentially sound, Atkinson's familiarity with class theory leaves something to be desired. If one distinguishes “class for itself” from “class in itself”, then clearly this implies that class exists in both those modes. Therefore, to pin Marxist class theory on this point to the theories of Weber and Bourdieu is baseless. Interestingly enough, Atkinson later indirectly acknowledges this point: whether such collectivism ever really existed to the extent he makes out is a contentious point [Marshall et al. 1988; Savage 2000], but it is certainly the case that it is not in any way necessary to the conceptualization and study of class. In a new twist, however, it is also interesting that in some of the language in Beck's response there is an extra ambiguity: whilst class-based cultures and attitudes and ‘classes for themselves’ may have disappeared or been uncoupled from objective class positions, the insinuation is that the objective positions, classes “in themselves” and class conflicts still exist, just in an individualised form, i.e. lived and fought without reference to a collectivity.

But it could then be argued that if it is, as seems the case, these objective positions and conflicts which form the systemic contradictions for which individuals

must find biographical solutions – or, in the vocabulary of Janine Broadie (which he approvingly quotes), the structural inequalities which the state frames in terms of individual choices and personal solutions – then does individualisation not boil down to the much less threatening but still interesting argument that whilst the state casts social issues and problems in terms of individual choices and responsibilities, with the consequence that individuals may also perceive themselves in these terms, the structural base underlying life chances and, via a theory of action, shaping life choices (i.e. the class structure) remains in a way consistent with Goldthorpe, Bourdieu and other class analysts? If so, Beck would need to take heed of his own line of reasoning and realize that class is not simply synonymous with collectivism and solidarity, and stop pronouncing it irrelevant on this account. Indeed, the result is actually not too far from the ‘bridge’ between individualisation and class theory forwarded by Nollmann and Strasser.

But is this conclusion not thoroughly undermined by the two arguments that Beck claims discredit the empirical evidence of class theory and give support to individualisation? Given that they are both, again, premised on crude portrayals of class analysis and thus flawed, the answer has to be no. Starting first of all with the ‘elevator effect’ – denoting the fact that some people from working-class backgrounds managed to gain access to higher education in the 1960s and 1970s and have subsequently ‘passed on’ their advantages to their offspring – I am not fully sure why exactly this is considered problematic for class analysis, other than the curious assertion on the ‘equation of class culture with class position’, because it concerns the transmission of socially-acrued advantages and resources. Is Beck suggesting that class crumbles when there is some upwards mobility? This argument is as logically unsound as it is empirically unproven. In fact, if anything the expansion of higher education and the continued “widening participation” scheme in the UK, whilst still only recruiting a minority of poorer youth (whatever measure of class one wants to use), have provided fertile areas for investigating the persistent and pernicious operations of class – for example, in differentiating the types of courses studied (abstract or prestigious disciplines versus the infamous “Mickey Mouse” degrees), the type of institution attended (Oxbridge, red-bricks, post-1992 institutions, etc.), the propensity and ability to gain good grades (in the Bourdieusianscheme at least) and, through these, the relative value of the educational credential gained in the local, national (dare I say) and indeed global labour market. Whether the parent passing on the accrued advantage is a first-generation graduate is neither here nor there except perhaps, in a detailed qualitative investigation, in studying the effects of their trajectory on their attitudes, expectations and transmission of resources.

Secondly, while Beck makes the true enough point that those occupying “working class” positions are not, given immigration, an ethnically homogeneous group with a shared (white) culture, he is mistaken in thinking that this means class is irrelevant. He argues that “the constancy of social classes unreflectedly assumes the constancy of the national membership of the members of these classes. Here too it is the case that class culture and class position are being uncoupled; the multi-ethnic, multi-national working class is no longer a working class” But this argument is based on the incorrect assumptions (linked to his construction of classes noted above) that for classes to exist they must be ethnically homogeneous and that class analysis assumes them to be so. No class analyst would argue such a thing: all that is needed to prove the continued relevance of class is evidence that objective class positions still impact in some way on life chances or life choices, even if entwined with the particular effects of ethnicity [Atkinson 2007b].

Regarding the latter concept, Pakulski and Walters claim that the theory of class ignores other important dimensions of social differentiation such as age, sex, race or ethnicity. We cannot be held responsible for each and every class theory ever formulated, but as far as our own approach is concerned, this charge is untrue. Our theory of ownership of labour power (which is of course a key building block of class position) explicitly takes all those factors into account in the form of, *inter alia*, age, sex or race discrimination, positive discrimination, such as affirmative action, included. The above-mentioned characteristics are simply part and parcel of a cluster of ascribed labour power traits.

Besides, when it comes to the comparative efficacy of the factors concerned, a comprehensive investigation of a variety of attitudes across a spectrum of European countries showed that “the differentiation due to class and education is generally larger than the differentiation due to generation and sex” [Kalmijn and Kraaykamp 2007]. And as to the alleged primacy of ethnicity over class, a well-researched study shows that “class origins and educational qualifications can largely account for the overall disadvantages suffered by Irish men who have migrated to Britain. They also account for about half of the overall Caribbean and Pakistani disadvantage although still leaving substantial disadvantage unaccounted for. (...) In particular, contrary to theoretical expectations, advantaged class origins bring the members of ethnic minorities much the same occupational benefits as they bring whites” [Heath, McMahon 2000].

By the same token, it is arguable that another foundation of the death of class thesis has been seriously undermined. To be sure, Pakulski and Walters make their case for the death of class, in the sense that it is no longer applicable to contemporary society by citing some other evidence as well. For example,

in their opinion evidence suggests a dissolving connection between ‘class’ and voting behaviour: i.e. , the British ‘working class’ is less likely to vote for the British Labour Party than it once was, with similar results for other industrial countries. Bauman’s “Memories of Class” [1982] and Gorz’s “Farewell to the Working Class” [1982] are examples of ‘evidence-free’ dismissals of class politics, with greater or lesser remorse at its demise. Franklin’s “The Decline of Class Voting in Britain” [1985a] and Huckfeldt and Kohfeldt’s “Race and the Decline of Class in American Politics” [1989] provide somewhat more empirical evidence for their claims. Kitschelt’s analysis of “The Transformation of European Social Democracy” [1994] is explicit in its treatment of post-class party strategies. Eder’s “The New Politics of Class” [1993] is a good example of an exercise in redefinition with no empirical basis, while in their portentous “The Death of Class” Pakulski and Waters [1996] fare little better [on this point, see Marshall 1997: 16–18]. Numerous studies have shown that the working class is more supportive of left-wing parties than the middle class, although this pattern of ‘class voting’ has diminished over time [De Graaf, Nieuwbeerta, and Heath 1995; Manza, Hout, and Brooks 1995]. Related to this is the finding that the working class is more egalitarian in its attitudes toward economic issues than the middle class [Van de Werfhorst and De Graaf 2004; Wright 1985]. In an article analyzing trends over time in the relationship between social class and political preferences in EU countries between 1976 and 2003, a “prevailing stability over time of the association between class position and political preferences” was found [Barone et al. 2006].

Concerning the above-mentioned claim, Harvey pointedly notes that “this evidence would also be consistent with a lessening of the (working-) class nature of the Labour Party, as well as with the reduced significance of class. “Pakulski and Waters do not mention, let alone explore, this alternative explanation. It is relevant that an investigation into the impact of social class and local context on individual vote in Britain from 1964 to 1997 found no evidence for a process of individualisation of the voter. The findings suggest that the effects of both individual and contextual social class on voting have remained fairly stable over time. Moreover, although the researchers found “an increase in the impact of campaign spending over time, this increase was similar among all social classes. Were the individualization thesis to hold, changes would have been most notable among the working class” [Anderson et al. 2005]. The most comprehensive longitudinal examination to date of the effect of contextual social class on voting is Andersen and Heath’s [2002] study of the relationship between constituency social class composition and voting in Britain from 1964 to 1997. They found that the social

class composition of constituencies was important to individual voting patterns in every election since 1964, i.e. the more middle class the constituency, the greater the probability that individuals voted for the Conservative Party and the lesser the probability that they voted for the Labour Party. Andersen and Heath also show that the contextual class effect is consensual for all classes, but strongest for the working class. This finding is consistent with the idea that working class people have less diverse social contacts. Finally, they also found that the impact of constituency social class on individual voting has not declined over time. On the basis of her ethnographic study, Kindall [2006] questions the view of the Death-of-class advocates that the United States is moving toward a classless society, or that class is no longer a useful concept in the social sciences, arguing “that class is not only a highly salient factor in stratification and inequality but it also is a compelling force in the lives of elites as they seek to enforce their privileged positions – at least at the local and regional levels – across generations. Her ethnographic study documents how privileged women contribute to the maintenance and social reproduction of the upper class through boundary maintenance practices involving residential selection, children’s peer groups and schools, elite by-invitation-only social and volunteer organizations, and rites of passage such as the debutante presentation – all of which serve in the macro-level process of class-based legitimization and the perpetuation of an opportunity structure that benefits the privileged at the expense of non-elites. Some other evidence of the social efficacy of class may be found in [Tittenbrun 2011a; 2011b].

BAUMAN ON CLASS

Zygmunt Bauman, like many other ex-Marxists, rejects class analysis as a research tool. However, it is easily seen that his Marxist chickens [in the form of an allegiance to an over-simplified two-class model] come home to roost, which produces rather peculiar results when combined with his new interest in stratification. Whether conceived in terms of the freedom to consume and experiment with one’s identity versus exclusion as ‘flawed consumers’ and bearers of unshakeable, stigmatising identities [Bauman 1998a, 2004a: 38], or in terms of freedom to move around the globe at will (“tourists”) versus either those who have to move because of the inhospitality of the world (“vagabonds”) or those who cannot move for lack of resources [Bauman 1998b], or simply in terms of the polarisation of wealth, income and life chances [Bauman 2001: 115], there are, in Bauman’s vision of society, always winners and losers [Atkinson 2010]. Thus, Bauman’s view of the composition of the new stratification order of liquid

modernity that supposedly serves as a replacement for classes suffers from the drawbacks of both a Marxist-Stalinist approach and a stratification one. For one thing, Bauman's conceptualisation of society in terms of a polarised dichotomy between the winners and losers, the seduced and repressed, the tourists and vagabonds [see e.g. Bauman 1987: chaps 10 and 11; 1998b: chap 4; Gane 2004: 23ff] provokes an obvious question "who exactly constitutes the minority and who the majority in the polarisation?" [Atkinson 2010]. It turns out that Bauman appears undecided in this regard; his answers to that question vary considerably depending what work or even page in that work is taken into consideration. In some places, for instance, the "losers"—the "new poor", "flawed consumers" or "underclass"—are seen very much as the minority [Bauman 1998a], counterposed to John Kenneth Galbraith's ever freer 'contented majority' of consumers [Bauman and Tester, 2001: 154]. Elsewhere, however, the dividing line of the polarisation is suddenly said to have "moved up the hierarchy" in liquid modernity, with the elite of extraterritorial global actors at one end and, at the other, the "great majority" for whom "effective therapy" (apparently higher education) against the afflictions of liquid modernity has been lifted "beyond reach" [Bauman 2004b: 14; cf. Gane 2004: 23ff; Atkinson 2010].

On the other hand, it takes a little effort to find places in Bauman's writings where a dichotomous vision of societal stratification is replaced by a tripartite vision. Thus, Bauman describes the "privileged" elite, i.e. those who are "free to pick and choose their identities and travel at will as being at the top, the immobile and stigmatised at the bottom, and most of us struggling to balance freedom and security in the middle". Bauman's inconsistency is, given the well-known flaws of stratification theories, hardly surprising. Perhaps an exclusive value added which Bauman contributes in this area stems from his post-modernist perspective with its emphasis on [treated in this case too] "fluidity". Fluidity as an ontological category is one thing, but fluidity as an epistemological notion leading to an ever-shifting frame of reference is quite another.

Finally, the above-mentioned 'chickens' attract, and rightly so, criticism to the effect "that Bauman's tendency to draw a single dividing line between winners and losers in liquid modernity is incredibly simplistic and detached from the intricacies of daily life, bunching together in each camp a myriad of heterogeneous actors and failing to recognise any internal modes of division and differentiation [cf. Savage et al. 2005: 205]" [Atkinson 2010]. What may seem more odd is that Bauman appears to be keen on eating his cake and having it too. That is to say, on the one hand he declares class theory to be useless but on the other he is careful enough not to throw the baby out with the bathwater when he interprets

his bipolar model in Marxist terms, defining “the global elite/localised masses division of today as an outgrowth of the capital-labour relations” [eg Bauman 2001: 25; Gane 2004: 26; cf. Bauman 1987: chap 11], and even, in some places, still refers to the elite as (extraterritorial) capital.

But an undifferentiated binary division loses its justification when the Marxist categories are jettisoned. After all, there is no necessary nexus between Bauman’s winners and losers like there is between Marx’s bourgeoisie and proletariat, no relation of exploiter and exploited, no sense that each group depends on the other for its existence yet stands utterly opposed to it on the plane of interests, to the extent that the ensuing struggle between the two will inevitably result in the dramatic conclusion of history’s dialectic – especially in those instances where the winners are supposed to be the consuming majority rather than the elite minority. Having said that, even Marx was faithful to the complexities of the social world in a way that Bauman clearly is not [Atkinson 2010].

CONCLUSIONS

It is appropriate to end this essay with the discussion of Bauman, as his case is highly symbolic: Setting out to “kill class”, he ends up being haunted by social class alive and kicking. And such is also the upshot of the preceding analyses. All the arguments for the irrelevance of class that have been considered do not withstand theoretical and/or empirical scrutiny. In a word, once more the burial of class has proved to be premature, to say the least.

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CZY ŚMIERĆ KLAS?

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera krytyczną analizę tezy o „śmierci klas”, sformułowanej przez Jana Pakulskiego i innych badaczy struktury klasowej, która okazała się błędna, zarówno na gruncie teoretycznym, jak i na poziomie faktów.

Słowa kluczowe: transformacja struktury klasowej, „śmierć klasy”, nowe formy nierówności.