CHAPTER ONE

The Moral Economy of Class

This is a book about classes. Its main focus is not on how different classes live but on how classes differ in how they look at society. What are their opinions on distribution and justice? What do they think about work and the family, about the market and politics, about rights and morality? Do class patternings differ between countries, and, if so, why? Do the patternings in class opinion change over time, and, if they do, what is the reason for this change? Why are there class differences in opinions in the first place?

The book is based on the notion that there is a "moral economy" in society, in which the mutual rights and obligations of the governing and the governed are collected and condensed (Svallfors 1996b). The term "moral economy" was coined by the English historian E. P. Thompson in an analysis of the recurrent bread riots of 18th-century England (Thompson 1971). Thompson found that it was seldom the starvation and the fury that were responsible for them. Instead, it was an idea that the governing powers had broken the unspoken contract, the idea of the rights to which all citizens were entitled, that was firmly rooted in society.

The term "moral economy" has been rediscovered in political sociological theory recently (Svallfors 1996b: 17–20; Mau 2003: Chap. 3). In different contexts, researchers have considered it useful for complementing a pure self-interest perspective on preferences and attitudes. These authors argue that people's notions of social institutions are guided by normative ideas of reciprocity, obligation, and responsibility, which cannot be reduced to a mere question of who is the winner or loser in different processes of distribution. In forging this moral economy, the role of public policies and political institutions is paramount, in that they "influence the ways individuals understand

their rights and responsibilities as members of a political community" (Mettler and Soss 2004: 61). The moral economy of present-day societies may therefore, to a large extent, be seen as resulting from normative feedback effects of public policies and formal institutions. A normative feedback mechanism is present where public policies and institutions provide citizens with a sense of not only what their material interests are but the desirable state of affairs.

In other words, one could say that the welfare capitalist countries of today are profoundly influenced by a modern form of moral economy, centering on notions of the justice and legitimacy of social structures. The moral economy is stratified insofar as its contents may vary between society's different groups and strata. For the purposes of this book, we could talk about a "moral economy of class," in which the focus is directed on ideas held by different classes on the reasonableness and fairness of a certain distribution of resources or the ways certain societal institutions operate.

To many, talking about class in the 21st century could seem a little outdated. Didn't classes belong to the old industrial society? What can class analysis add to our understanding of a society where increasingly fewer people actually manufacture things? Is it not more interesting to study people's lifestyles, sexualities, or capricious cyber-selves? Isn't all this talk about classes quite simply hopelessly passé?

We will be returning to these questions in the concluding chapter. Meanwhile, however, it should be remembered that much of the talk about the dissolution of class on close examination seems to be just this: empty talk, more often than not rooted in a desire to conjure up a picture of a society free from fundamental conflict. The conclusion that class has played out its role would therefore seem a little hasty and based more on hopes and fears than on any systematic research. If what people did to earn a living was no longer important for shaping their lives or the way they look at the world, it would represent a radical societal transformation; any claim that such a change is actually taking place would seem, however, grossly exaggerated.

Complaints about exaggerated ideas of society's radically new disposition do not of course carry any implication that the class society should necessarily be static, that its structure and effect on other social phenomena should remain constant or similar over time. On the contrary, it is important to understand how dynamic the class situation is, both on an individual level (with people crossing class barriers during their working lives and often attaining class positions different from those of their parents) and on a so-

cial level (where entire industries and professions die out to be replaced by others). However, in the midst of all this dynamism, the relative pros and cons of particular classes tend to be reproduced, as do the attitudes, values, and opinions to which they give rise.

Nor does identifying class as one of the keys to understanding society mean that one believes that classes and their representatives are the driving forces of history, that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1967: 79). The class analysis presented here is based on different, more modest, assumptions. In a nutshell, my claim is that people's position in the social distribution of labor, or more specifically the employment relations that their jobs entail, has an immense impact on other aspects of their lives. This is why classes and their political expression are an important feature of the processes of change in modern society. However, this is not to claim that the conflicts between the categories discernible in this respect, or between the political representatives who become their self-appointed spokespersons, are the driving forces of history.

There are several reasons why it now seems urgent to study the relationship between class and social attitudes. One is that for the past few decades we have been witnessing a paradoxical coexistence of *recommodification* and *dearticulation* in the class arena. In this context, the term "recommodification" denotes processes that, each in their own way, make the population more dependent on the market for its welfare (Breen 1997). This differs of course from country to country and region to region, but a few key aspects of this trend can be summarized in point form nonetheless:

- a stronger dominance of global capital and financial markets at the expense of national regulation and legislation
- more precarious employment relationships, owing both to increased unemployment and to more irregular and temporary forms of employment
- retrenchment of welfare state programs, making them less effective in countering market inequalities
- strengthened links between positions in the labor market and other resources, such as social insurance coverage and benefits, housing standards, and access to social services
- a decline of institutions for collective wage bargaining
- greater income inequality
- stronger roles for "internal markets" (e.g., "buy-sell systems" and the decentralization of budget responsibility) and "outsourcing" in the private and public sectors

These are tendencies that to a greater or lesser extent can be found effectively throughout the Western world. Nonetheless, national variations have been considerable and the Western political economies have shown almost no signs of convergence on institutional organization and distributive results over the past few decades (Kitschelt 1999; Scharpf and Schmidt 2000; Pierson 2001). This is attributable to the way developments toward "more market" have been most manifest in the countries that originally had the strongest market liberal orientation, such as the United States and Britain. In other countries, including Germany, the changes have been much less marked.

Just what the consequences of this recommodification will have for class is a matter of dispute. As will be seen in Chapter 2, some commentators argue that it will lead to a state of "individualized inequality," whereby inequality is made more pronounced yet less conformant to class or other such boundaries. Others argue that these developments will lead to a reinforcement of class differences.

A parallel, and in some sense paradoxical, development to recommodification processes is the contemporaneous dearticulation of the class content in political discourse. The decline of classic social democracy, as witnessed in its gradual dissolution into the social liberalism of "the third way" and "*Die neue mitte*" in the major western European social democratic parties, makes the class articulation from the left less evident than before. The marginalization of the trade unions in public discourse and policy, compounded in many places by their weakening membership and coverage, also contributes to the dearticulation of class in politics. In addition, the collapse of the neoliberal project in the United Kingdom, and the subsequent reorientation of parties of the right elsewhere, has deprived us of any real class articulation from the political right as well.

It should be emphasized that, as in the case of recommodification, the dearticulation of class is a highly uneven development among the Western countries. Some countries, such as the United States and Canada, never had a strong social democratic party or trade union movement to begin with. In other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, the labor parties were originally the ones to espouse most clearly various neoliberal policies. In Europe, the extent to which the class content of politics is dearticulated varies enormously but is apparently a common trend nonetheless.

The dearticulation of class can be partially understood as a gradual ideological adaptation to the difficulties of pursuing redistributive policies.

Many of the instruments that have been used to pursue such policies, such as extensive taxes, social insurance and welfare services, or collective wage negotiations, have become less feasible. This is put down to factors of both an international (e.g., greater capital mobility) and national (e.g., the opposition of employers and groups with strong market positions to redistribution or demographic changes that frustrate the financing of welfare policies) nature.

These problems of actually pursuing policies with a clear class content have led to a gradual dissolution of class articulation also in public rhetoric and discourse. Political actors on the left may see little point in articulating a class content that they do not believe can be realized in practical policies; hence the adaptation to the demands of the global economy clearly visible in the various "third-way" policies espoused by European social democracy over the past few decades. Meanwhile, political actors on the right, together with the mainstream private media, have little interest in articulating their own policy when the dominant trend anyway seems to be toward a gradual kowtowing to the dictates of the market.

One of the principal questions this book poses is what the combined effect of recommodification and dearticulation will be on attitude patterns. One possibility is that the relationship between class and attitude will gradually strengthen. If this happens, it would suggest that the microsociological experiences that people have are more important than the different mediated representations with which they are fed. Another possibility is that the relationship between class and attitude weakens. This would suggest either that the microsociological experiences will no longer follow class boundaries so closely or that a political discourse in which class is bereft of meaning makes the experiences increasingly difficult to interpret as class-based. A third possibility is that certain types of attitudes, such as those that concern specific attitudes to different social issues, will be more clearly structured on class lines, while other attitudes, such as social identity or political sympathies, will become less class determined.

Another important reason for focusing on class and its impact on attitudes and values at this point in time is that working life and social structures have undergone considerable changes over the past decades. New forms of organization and leadership at work, new demarcation lines in society (e.g., between immigrants and nationals or between different family types and life-cycle phases), and new modes of political articulation and mobilization are some of the factors that come into play here. A perhaps

especially pertinent development is the increased female labor market participation and correlated changes in gender patterns in the family and household. These factors are of such a kind that in certain respects they cut straight across the established class boundaries and can be expected to introduce greater variation within the classes. If the classes tend to become increasingly internally heterogeneous, we could also expect the class structuring of attitudes to be all the more diffuse.

The questions are, in a way that public debaters and commentators do not always realize, deeply empirical and cannot be settled on a conceptual level or with reference to casual observations of social debate and cultural life. They can be properly examined only through systematic, comparative, extensive research of the kind that this book tries to emulate.

This book draws on two interconnected but still largely separate bodies of research. One is the comparative study of social attitudes and values, where several large-scale comparative datasets now exist, allowing comparisons across space and over time (for some recent discussions, see Kuechler 1987, 1998; Svallfors 1996a; Jowell 1998). The other is class analysis, where several decades of concerted research from various theoretical perspectives has resulted in an immense literature on the associations between class and various social conditions and processes, such as social mobility, educational attainment, living conditions, voting, etc. (for some important recent examples, see Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992a; Marshall et al. 1997; Evans 1999).

The wealth of data and the already considerable amount of research regarding comparative social attitudes is still growing rapidly. The latest bibliography of research that uses data from the *International Study Programme* contains almost 2,000 items (Smith 2005). The dearth of data that still characterized this research area at the end of the 1980s is now a deluge. Although this is in itself evidence of the dynamism and sharp growth of the research environments, it has yet to be paralleled by a similar increase in qualified analyses and interpretations. As Jowell lamented, “Analysts of cross-national data frequently abandon offering explanations and interpretations in favour of league tables of distributions showing merely ‘gee whiz’ national differences” (Jowell 1998: 168).

While class analysis is generally far better equipped with theories and explications, there are problems even here. As pointed out by Breen and

Rottman (1995), class analysis has succeeded in demonstrating the persistent association between class and a range of social outcomes; yet it has been far less successful in explaining exactly *why* such associations occur. Explaining what Breen and Rottman call "class conscious outcomes," of which social attitudes are considered a central example, appears to these authors to pose a particularly formidable challenge to future class analysis, "one of linking a *material* basis (differential rewards) to differential forms of consciousness" (Breen and Rottman 1995: 466).

Despite some promising attempts (e.g., Evans 1993a), it is clear that little progress has been made in explaining just why social attitudes are linked to class. One of the aims of this book is to contribute to such an enterprise, with a particular focus on class patternings in Sweden. One possibly obvious purpose is, however, to show *what needs to be explained*, i.e., how class differences in attitude within and between countries manifest themselves in different attitude domains.

As will be made clear in the next chapter, there is every reason to adopt a strategy of national comparison in order to analyze class differences in attitudes. There are naturally many ways of doing this, but the approach I have decided to take is to strategically choose a select cluster of countries instead of as large a group as possible. This is in order to be able to include a wealth of information about the countries' institutional structures and the contexts within which people form their attitudes, which is often essential to giving meaningful interpretations of differences and similarities in attitudes (Jowell 1998).

Class differences in attitudes are compared in four Western countries: Britain, Germany,[1] Sweden, and the United States. As will be seen in the empirical chapters, these countries represent the span of institutional and political-economic configuration that exists in the West. The United States but also to an increasing extent Britain are examples of liberal regimes in which the processes of distribution are heavily dominated by different kinds of markets. Sweden and Germany, on the other hand, are examples of market economies in which politics and institutions are based on, and apply, relatively radical modifications of market distributions. These intercountry institutional and political discrepancies will be examined in more detail in each empirical chapter. The reason for choosing these four countries is that they represent the variation we find within the advanced capitalist countries while being fundamentally similar enough not to preclude meaningful

comparisons. An even more pragmatic reason for this selection is that the comparative attitude data available is comprehensive and of acceptable quality.

In the next chapter we will be discussing how class is defined in this book. What is it that distinguishes the groups we call "classes" from other categorizations? The attitude dimensions on which the empirical analysis focuses will also be defined, and there will be a discussion on the conceivable mechanisms that link class and attitudes. I will also present my methodological strategy and give a brief sketch of the data upon which the analyses are based (a more thorough account is provided in Appendix A).

Chapters 3 through 7 contain comparative analyses. The first four of these chapters deal, in order, with class differences in attitude regarding work and production, market and distribution, state and redistribution, and family and reproduction. Chapter 7 contains an analysis of "class and conformism," highlighting attitudes on morality and justice. Throughout, all five chapters compare attitudes found in Britain, Germany, Sweden, and the United States.

Chapter 8 tests some of the questions and areas of special inquiry that characterize contemporary class analysis on Swedish data. Here we use a more refined breakdown of class than applied in the preceding chapters to see if any interesting variations can be found in attitudes *within* the class categories used in the comparison of the countries. We also examine whether it is the class position of the individual or the household that is the most appropriate categorization factor and whether any specific attitudes can be discerned in marginalized groups on the labor and consumer markets.

The closing chapter ties up the themes and arguments of the preceding chapters in a discussion of class and social attitudes in a comparative perspective. Are some countries and some social attitudes more class structured than others? What possible explanations are there for the differences and similarities we find? Is class declining in importance, or are class differences becoming more sharply defined? Or do they remain as strong as before but in different manifestations? In brief, what is the present nature of the moral economy of class and in what direction is it heading?