The doctrine of ‘class’ in social theory, empirical sociology, methodology, etc. has always been fundamental in understanding complex societies – valuable thoughts concerning class had been bequeathed to us by the ancient sages of India and China. Nevertheless, the importance of class in modernity was assured by the birth of a world movement whose aim was and perhaps still is the creation of a classless society. This movement – the socialist one – was the main antagonist of modern capitalism or bourgeois society, therefore the problem of class is a matter of political contention and also a matter of theoretical debate with extremely high stakes.

The problem itself is the following:

Is the position one has in the process of material self-reproduction of society capable of defining one’s membership in major social groups and thus in social hierarchy?

Or:
Is it true that some performing wage labour and producing commodities are per se opposed to those who are not, especially those who are expropriating the plus-value created by wage labour?

Or:
Do differences of income, status and prestige – i.e., inequalities – define social classes, quite independent of the ownership of the means of production?

Or:
Do cultural self-perceptions count when determining whether certain people do or do not belong to a certain social class? (in other words, the problem of class consciousness)

Or:
Are or are not power relations defining people’s class position? (in other words, the problem of elites)

Or:
Is the relevance of class dependent on the hypothesis of exploitation? (in other words, is Marxism correct?)
Or:

Is division into classes and the existence of the state a perennial feature of all complex societies?

Or:

Is inequality and class conflict the same thing, or is it the one the cause of the other or vice versa?

These partly overlapping questions are still fundamental for any self-respecting social science, although this statement is by no means uncontroversial. The reason for this is the post-1968 ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences. The ‘cultural turn’ is twofold:

1. the growth of interest in people’s self-interpretation and self-perception as opposed to their collective social actions; and
2. the growth of interest in ethnicity and religiosity – a common characteristic of all conservative epochs – seen in terms of tradition and habitus, collective behaviour rather than collective action, description of ‘opinion’ rather than analysis of structure.

This shift is well demonstrated by the success and dominance of the anthropological point of view in the social sciences – and the retreat and relative ‘untrendiness’ of sociology and, more seriously, the absence of a critical political economy and of a political philosophy critical of capitalism which used to be the background to sociology not only in the case of Karl Marx, but also in the case of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

For example, the proletariat – a highly theoretical concept in Marxism, the content of which is inferred from a structural analysis of bourgeois economy, especially, from the central Marxian concept of value – has been reinterpreted as a cluster of behavioural patterns among blue-collar denizens of the rust belt transformed – hey presto! – into an obsolete minority group.

The political direction of such a transformation is all too obvious. But is this transformation an advance in understanding? Does it have a greater explanatory force than earlier theories? It depends on what do you consider to be the explanandum.

The sheer existence of classes is not straightforwardly denied today, it is rather ignored – except maybe in England where it possesses a parochial cultural significance.

Goals of the course:

The main goal of the course is to offer a grounding in one kind of social theory by addressing a classical problem in sociology, and to develop understanding of such issues and methodological ability to handle it through concrete – inter alia, historical – assimilation of knowledge, as ‘class’ is both a tool familiar from political history since the
XVIIth century and, at the same time, a problem through which the difference between empirical givens (inequality, stratification) and theoretical illumination (class as consequence of the capital relation) can be presented.

**Learning outcomes:**
The students should be able to theorise – at least - the deep contrast between commodity-market societies and subsistence-martial societies as regards social differentiation on several levels: (a) biopolitical: the role of race in caste societies and in 'modern' class societies, (b) 'economic': at the level of production and of distribution, (c) socio-cultural: status, deference, manners, social group subcultures.

**Week by week breakdown:**

**Week 1-2**
Introduction; the problem. Outlines of the Marxian social doctrine. Capitalism: a society of conflicts, antagonism, contradiction. Is a common good possible? Is class conflict conducive to relativism in social sciences?

**Week 3-4**
Class: structure and formation. The problem of class consciousness. Bourgeois and proletarian: ideal types or empirical realities?

**Week 5-6**
Class and inequality of wealth, power, status, prestige. Are divisions within these determining factors in class formations.

**Week 7-8**
The class struggle: the concept, the history, the politics. Trade unions, worker’s councils, parties.

**Week 9-10**
The political side of class consciousness. Communism vs. egalitarianism. Egalitarianism vs. elitism.

**Week 11-12**
Non-bourgeois and non-proletarian classes: middle class, managers, petty bourgeois, peasants. Is there really a central class antagonism?

Each class consists of a lecture and a subsequent seminar/dialogue. The lecture can be interrupted at all times with clarifying questions or observations.

**Assessment:**
Students' work will be assessed in traditional ways: activity in class will mean 20%, seminar papers 30%, end paper 40%, discussion of paper 10%. Ideally, each student
ought to be asked to deliver one seminar paper. Students auditing the class are expected to be active in discussions in class. Suggestions from students are welcome and will be taken into account.

Contact please at gmtamas@yahoo.com.

The bibliography and the contents of the 'reader' are available and useful to all, but some texts will be specially assigned to those who write brief seminar papers to be discussed in class.

G.M. Tamás, Telling the Truth about Class (Socialist Register, 2004)
Patrick Joyce, ed., Class, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995
Karl Marx, Grundrisse, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993, pp 239-450 (‘the chapter on Capital’)
Nicos Poulantzas, Political Power and Social Classes, London: Verso, 1982
Pierre Clastres, Society Against the State, New York: Zone, 1998, pp 7-76