# *Class, Ethnicity, and Social Inequality*

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CHAPTER EIGHT

# *With or Without Class? The Problem of Pre-industrial Society*

The question of whether or not classes exist in pre-industrial society depends, naturally enough, on how one defines class. According to the Weberian definition, there are classes in such societies, given the existence of a market and different categories of people who have different capacities to command goods and services on the market according to their possession or lack of property, or their occupying some commercial or professional position. Without such market relationships there are no classes. Equally, according to Marx's definition, where there exists a category of persons who appropriate the surplus produced by others without themselves being producers, there exist two opposed classes. Or one could follow Dahrendorf and find classes wherever there exist imperatively co-ordinated associations, which could easily amount to all known and imaginable societies. It is clear, therefore, that any question we might ask concerning the existence or non-existence of class has to specify its terms carefully, since we are otherwise liable to be arguing in circles or at cross purposes. Nor should we lose sight of the interests that underlie the putting forward of one definition rather than another, and our opting for one of those definitions.

Against the background of these cautionary remarks I turn to the question of the existence of class in non-market-dominated societies. In this case the question is not entirely meaningless since it has been proposed (by Sahlins) that it is inappropriate to think in terms of class *on any definition* in relation to such societies.[1] Sahlins' study relates to a series of Polynesian island societies as they are held to have existed before European intrusion. The basic organizing principle in these societies is kinship. They are differentiated into those with a marked degree of stratification, with, for example, three distinct "status levels" (in Sahlins' term), and those where stratification is barely existent and yet not sufficiently absent for such societies to be termed wholly egalitarian.[2]

The more highly stratified of these island communities has a complex form of kinship organization that is described as a "ramage" system. This means that all individuals have their place on a vast genealogical tree. The tree consists of a central senior lineage that runs down through the line of eldest sons, and a number of branches (or ramages) that start with the younger sons at the point where the system is conceived to begin. This system is necessarily subject to change through the rising power of a junior lineage, but Sahlins holds that in such cases, while secular power goes into the hands of the rising lineage chief, the senior lineage retains its hold over the traditional aspects of chiefdom. In the less stratified islands kinship organization is much less complex and more localized, with only the immediate descent lines from, for example, a common grandfather being carefully remembered.

The reasons for these two distinct forms of kinship organization are related by Sahlins to questions of resource use and the possibilities and constraints operating at the level of the natural environment. In the more stratified ramage-type system, where the whole society is "placed" in terms of kinship, there is a tendency for scattered settlement and productive specialization, whether in fishing or the production of any one of a number of specific inland crops that might be favoured by a particular environment. The nature of the environment thus favours a particular kind of resource use, which itself leads to scattered specialization. This process, far from leading to a dismembered form of kinship organization, requires that the broadest possible links between groups be maintained, since producers, in order to obtain what they need, are obliged to maintain widespread exchange relationships.

Kinship connection in the form of the ramage system thus serves at one level as a framework in which exchange can take place. In the less stratified systems, by contrast, the constraints of the environment are such as to produce coastal village settlements with limited specialization, each family unit producing the bulk of its own needs. Contrary to what one might expect, this higher density of settlement is accompanied by a more limited kinship system, since there is no need to maintain exchange relationships with a number of specialist producers.

The pattern of kinship organization is thus directly related to the way in which production takes place. Alongside kinship, however, there is also the question of stratification, which both arises out of production and at the same time informs the process of production. The greater the surplus that can be produced beyond the needs of the individual producer, the greater the number of individual non-producers that can be supported, whether at the chiefly status level or in the form of craftsmen and other specialists. Those islands with the highest degree of stratification, therefore, are also those with the greatest productivity. However, these are not

market economies, so producers do not meet on the market to exchange their produce, with all the possible uses and abuses of market exchange that are central to both Marxian and Weberian notions of class. Instead the produce is circulated: in purely reciprocal exchange between direct producers and within the framework of their kinship connection, and in the appropriation by higher status levels of the surplus that is produced beyond the needs of the direct producers. That surplus is consumed by the individuals and their families at the higher status levels, and is distributed to the various craftsmen and specialists who are employed by those individuals. Anything that is left over is stored up for redistribution to the direct producers on festive occasions.

It is this last function of appropriation by the higher status levels, consisting of the chiefs and stewards, that is taken by Sahlins to characterize the role of those levels in society. It is not just a case of appropriation as such, but of redistribution. The chiefs store up produce for redistribution at times of need or festivity. This is their primary function and the rationale behind their being permitted to appropriate the surplus produced by those who are, according to the official ideology at least, their kinsmen. Towards the less stratified end of the spectrum of island societies such functions of redistribution and supervision, associated on occasion with arbitrary personal power, are much less pronounced. In the case of the Tikopia as studied by Firth, for example, they are almost vestigial, although the "chief" retains some authority as a production organizer and mediator.[3]

For Sahlins, therefore, these are not class but "kin" societies, and such stratification as exists is only within the all-encompassing framework of kinship. He is clear in his rejection of class: "In contrast to the social classes of market-dominated societies, status differences in kinship societies do not, as a rule, depend on differences in private wealth. Status inequalities in primitive societies are not accompanied by entrepreneurial enterprise and the complete separation of producers from the factors of production. Social relations of mastery and subordination are here not correlates of economic relations of owner and labourer. Modern sociological definitions of class which stress occupational standing, class antagonisms, differences of interest, and the like are not applicable to societies of the primitive order. To maintain a distinction, therefore, between what are really different phenomena, categories of rank in kin societies will be designated 'status levels' and the term 'social classes' will be reserved for the social strata of market-dominated societies."[4]

In suggesting that "class" should only be used of market-dominated societies, Sahlins is in effect espousing the Weberian definition of class and rejecting the Marxian, but he appears to reject the latter for reasons that have little to do with Marx's use of the term. The "complete separation of producers from the factors of production," for example, is not the *sine*

*qua non* of class relationships for Marx but only the process that accompanies and makes possible the development of capitalist relations of production and the coming into existence of the opposed classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat. And it is only in the context of those relations of production that the distinction between owners and labourers comes to be of full significance.

Classes for Marx exist wherever one identifiable category of persons in a society appropriates the surplus produced by another and uses that surplus to ensure its own subsistence without itself necessarily being involved in production.[5] However that relationship may be disguised, or however that surplus may be extracted, the basic relationship is one between two opposed classes with opposed interests. Set against such opposition is a form of primitive communism in which any surplus that is produced is communally appropriated. In certain kinds of lineage-based societies one can speak of the non-presence of class in Marxian terms inasmuch as no one category in that society appropriates surplus at the expense of another, leaving aside the universal element of communal appropriation for the support of the young, old, or incapable. In the societies described by Sahlins, however, this is not the case, since there is clearly appropriation of surplus by a chiefly class and by an intermediate class of stewards, however it may be dressed up in terms of kinship or justified in those of periodical redistribution. Such redistribution has its own logic in a society where wealth cannot be stored for long periods, and is a key element in the mystification of what are, in Marxian terms, relationships of class.

This discussion of Sahlins' work constitutes an illustration of the problems involved in the use of the concept of class in relation to pre-industrial societies. When Sahlins suggests that modern sociological definitions of class, including the Marxian definition, are inapplicable to non-market-dominated societies, he is really advancing a Weberian definition of class. And if one objects, one is likely to be doing so on the basis of a different definition. In other words, the argument has never really been joined since each side is arguing from different premises. The point is not whether there were or were not classes in Polynesian societies but rather that according to Marx there would have been (in some of them), and according to Weber there would not have been (in any of them), for the simple reason that class means something different in each case.

At issue is the adequacy of the correspondence between the way that a society is conceived to operate and the way it actually does. From a Marxian point of view, Sahlins' conceptualization is inadequate or incomplete in that it leaves out a major determining factor in social organization.[6] In accepting "native" explanations for the existence of status levels at their face value and in claiming that the kinship system constitutes the underlying logic of the system as a whole, Sahlins simply reproduces the

dominant ideology promulgated by the chiefly class. Yet he believes that to produce a conceptualized system in which classes play the principal role is equally to produce a system that does not correspond to the reality, the reality being marked rather by a form of vertical cohesion and functionality of the different levels according to the organizing principle of kinship and within the constraints laid down by the environment.

The question of adequacy is equally central to the different interpretations imposed on Fredrik Barth's Swat Pathan material by Barth himself and by Talal Asad.[7] Here a question that has been lurking in the background in the discussion of Sahlins' study comes into the open, that of the relative importance of, on the one hand, individual choice and action in the determination of social structure – at the heart of Weberian and subsequent structural functionalist approaches to society – and, on the other, the role of social structure itself, and particularly class structure, in determining such individual choices and actions. Sahlins' stratified lineage-based societies are essentially functionally organized collectivities composed of individual kinspeople, with such constraints as may exist operating primarily at the level of the environment and only secondarily at that of social structure. Other writers have adopted even more individualistic approaches to such societies, choosing to view them as characterized by a form of primitive capitalism in which society as a whole is composed of fledgling capitalists and their entourages, and in which everything is brought down to a calculating individualism.[8] Ultimately such individualistic approaches require one to view all forms of association in terms of personal ties and personal choices, a tendency that is well exemplified in Weber's explanation of the development of the patrimonial state and of feudalism.[9]

For Weber, the development of social structures in which authority is in the hands of an individual ruler arises from a form of localized patriarchalism. The origin of such systems – which might take the form of the patrimonial state, where everything depends on the ruler's whim, or of feudalism, where the rights of the king are to some extent limited by those of the various strata beneath him – lies in the dominant position of the senior kinsman in a more or less extended family unit. In so far as that unit expands, with junior kinsmen establishing themselves over a wider area but still under the authority of the senior kinsman in the senior lineage, the patriarchal form of authority comes to be (in Weber's terms) patrimonial, based neither on rules nor on personal charisma but on tradition. At the centre of this conception is the idea of the household producing and catering for its own needs, and including within itself the various special skills necessary for its subsistence. This is the archetypal "budgetary unit" for Weber, that is, an economically oriented association that produces for its own subsistence rather than for profit or trade.[10]

As this productive unit expands, it can come to be the basis for the development of the patrimonial state, with the various areas of state responsibility coming to be vested in the different specialists within the ruling household. But all attachments within such a state remain centred on the person of the ruler, whose authority is based on tradition.[11]

This notion of patrimonialism can serve as the vehicle for the conceptualization of social structure as consisting either of a series of parallel and competing vertically integrated patrimonial associations or of a unitary pyramid-type structure in which every member of society is to some extent under the authority and despotic control of the chief, as in Sahlins' highly stratified island societies. It fits particularly well with an individualistic view in which all individuals are considered to act on the basis of their own choices and enter into personal relationships with powerful patrimonial figures. Society comes to be seen as the vertically integrated unit of the household writ large.

Barth's approach to Swat Pathan society is an example of such a viewpoint. This society consists of a group of Pukhtun landowners who control the land by right of conquest, having taken over the region in question in the seventeenth century, and the non-Pukhtun majority who are subject to their domination. The Pukhtuns are divided into a majority of small landowners who work the land themselves and a minority of large landowners who do not. Each of the large landowners keeps a men's house, and those who choose to be part of an individual landowner's following demonstrate it by spending as much time as possible therein, most of the day and night if they do not work and all night if they do. The men's houses are constructed in easily defensible positions, and the social distance that separates the various groups that frequent them is carefully respected in sleeping and eating arrangements.

The key to the building up of a following is control over land, which is let out on a share-cropping basis to tenants. The landowner takes between three-quarters and four-fifths of the produce, which is used partly for his own subsistence and partly for redistribution in the form of hospitality in the men's house. The acceptance of this hospitality on the part of those who choose to belong to the men's house puts them under obligation to the landowner and constitutes the basis for their serving as a fighting unit under his control. No one is obliged to belong to a men's house, however, although anyone who does belong to one is obliged not to belong to any other. Being a tenant of a Pukhtun does not in itself involve a relationship of political allegiance, while being a house tenant does, with the heads of the locally dominant Pukhtun lineages controlling the various wards into which the villages are divided. However, the house tenant is still not obliged to belong to the men's house of the owner, and Barth gives the example of an individual working the land of one Pukhtun, living in a house belonging to another, and visiting the men's house of a third.

The large Pukhtun landowners are at the head of both productive units and the body of those who belong to their men's houses, and are bound to them by their redistribution of the surplus exacted from their tenants. The amassing and control of land is thus assured by one kind of vertically integrated Pukhtun-dominated association and the use of land in production by another, with in many cases the implements and seed used by the tenants being supplied by the landlord himself and the implements being maintained by craftsmen employed by the landlord and paid for from a share of the produce.

The operative units in society are thus Pukhtun-dominated, patrimonial-type associations, and the heads of the various men's houses compete with each other for followers and clients, the more so since the outcome of disputes tends to be decided by the numerical strength of the different power blocs. The leaders of the power blocs of declining importance are involved in a descending spiral of increasing redistribution to retain a hold on the diminishing membership of the men's house, a process that requires the selling-off of land and the further reduction of their resource base. The leaders of rising power blocs are caught in a different kind of spiral. In order to meet the increasing demands of their followers, they have to increase the amount of land under their control, which generally means encroaching on the land of their weaker patrilineal kinsmen. But the more such weaker lineage segments are dispossessed of their land and their leaders killed or forced into exile, the greater the number of individuals who are bound to seek vengeance on the person who is amassing the land. There is, therefore, an ever greater likelihood of that person's being killed and of the land that he controls being split up among the members of his lineage. Large concentrations of land are also under the constant threat of being broken up simply by the fission of unwieldy power blocs.

The political landscape in Swat – up until the fairly recent past and the development of a more centralized administration[12] – was thus composed of opposed power blocs dominated by Pukhtuns struggling to amass and control land. Each area included a number of such blocs, which maintained alliances with other blocs outside the area. Underlying this factionalism was a Pukhtun code of behaviour, which called for extravagant bravery and the immediate seeking of vengeance when circumstances required. Indeed, the ability of an individual to build up and maintain a following depended in large part on the extent to which his behaviour was held to be in conformity with the heroic code.

The key element for Barth in this continual ebbing and flowing in the power of individual Pukhtuns is that of choice.[13] Swat society is composed of a mass of calculating individuals who choose, according to their own best advantage, the tenancy agreement or the men's house that best suits their interests. The ebbing in the following of a given Pukhtun reflects the collective decision of his followers that better protection and greater profit

– in the form of access to redistributed produce – can be had elsewhere. Barth admits that given the shortage of land, the abundance of population, and the need for protection, the actual freedom of choice open to would-be tenants is limited; none the less, they choose, and it is through such choices that the central features of Swat social structure – production *units under* the control of the Pukhtun landlord, Pukhtun-dominated power blocs organized around the men's houses – come into existence. Social structures are thus explained on the basis of the rational calculation of the individuals of which they are composed.

Asad proposes a different way of viewing the society, based on the existence of class in its Marxian sense.[14] Rather than placing a construction on Swat society that splits it up into vertical units, he considers it preferable to look at the class positions of the various categories involved and the constraints that those positions put on them. In a Marxian class analysis the emphasis is not on the individual Pukhtun as the focal point of a Weberian patrimonial association – the leader and his followers – but rather on the individual Pukhtun as the member of a class of landlords who are both aware of themselves and organize themselves as a class in opposition to the non-Pukhtun majority. Ownership or control of land is restricted to Pukhtuns and to a lesser extent to a "caste" of "Saints" who acquire land from Pukhtuns as recompense for their peacemaking efforts and frequently to provide a buffer between the donor and his Pukhtun rivals. Judicial power and authority is also restricted to Pukhtuns, who alone are allowed to speak in the assemblies that are called together for the resolution of disputes. So the Pukhtuns, in spite of their rivalry and factionalism, constitute a dominant *class that* lives off the surplus produced by agricultural tenants and uses that surplus to maintain the followings that help to assure the maintenance of Pukhtun dominance.

The mass of tenants and labourers also constitute a class whose interests are opposed to those of the Pukhtun landlords. They are characterizable as a class in that they do not themselves control land. They are separated from the means of their own reproduction and only have access to those means on the terms that are laid down by the landlords, which include the giving up of four-fifths of what is produced to the landlords. Barth makes individual choice the operative principle on which social organization is based, but for Asad, the landless class has no real freedom of choice. It is obliged to enter into tenancy agreements in order to survive, and given the pressure of population, the individual has little choice which agreement and which landlord he will choose. So the contractual agreement between lord and tenant is both in appearance a free contract between individuals and yet one in which one party lays down the terms of the agreement and the other party has no option but to accept them. The nature of the choices that are open to the landless majority, therefore, are wholly

determined by their class position, and to present choice as the operative principle is to ignore the factors that determine those choices in the first place.

According to Asad it is only the conceptualization of Swat society on the lines of class that can expose the reality of that society.[15] He does not deny the existence of power blocs but sees them as being primarily of ideological significance, as a way of deflecting and inhibiting the development of class awareness among the landless by imposing vertically integrated structures of allegiance. They also create the very need that, for the purposes of the non-Pukhtuns, they are there to fulfil – the provision of security. The struggle between power blocs for the control of land threatens the security of the tenantry and obliges them to seek the protection, and support, of those very power blocs. The vertical organization of society into rival blocs and factions is thus a complex masking of the deeper and more threatening (for the Pukhtuns) horizontal division between classes. Barth presents us with the mask but not the underlying reality. Asad concludes his reconsideration of Barth's analysis by deploring the unwillingness of the students of other such societies, and notably anthropologists, to think in terms of class. Again, such disputes come down to the question of adequacy. For Asad, Barth's description of Swat society is inadequate as an account of the structural constraints that determine the kinds of choices that are made, which is not to deny that people choose. Barth, for his part, admits the existence of such constraints but considers them to be of secondary importance to the choices themselves and the patterns of allegiance that arise as a result of them.[16]

Whether or not there were classes in a given social formation depends on the definition of class that one chooses to adopt. But it is not just a question of how one characterizes a reality the essential features of which are not in dispute. Sahlins' choice of a Weberian rather than a Marxian definition of class means that Polynesian society is portrayed differently from what it otherwise might be. Stratification is seen as being in some way a rational adaptive response to the environment, and the role of the chiefly status level as being primarily redistributive. A Marxian approach suggests that there is a universal and inevitable tendency to class formation wherever productivity levels and social organization permit. Once such opposed classes come into existence, that opposition colours all other forms of opposition and organization. Inasmuch as classes are held to exist in Polynesian society – from a Marxian perspective – then that society is only understandable in the light of class opposition. The same is true of the Swat Pathans. Given the existence of the two opposed classes of Pukhtun landlords and landless non-Pukhtuns, any explanation that fails to take that opposition into account ignores the single most fundamental feature of Swat society. It is in this sense that a Marxian class perspective cannot

easily coexist with any other: it cannot recognize the validity of an approach to society that fails to take the reality of class struggle into account. The reason is clear in the case of Asad's criticism of Barth. From a Marxian point of view class is determinant of individual choices and actions.

This *sortie* into the field of understanding pre-industrial society with or without class serves to re-emphasize that Marx's approach to class is of a different order from those of Weber, Parsons, et al. The latters' definitions may or may not be useful ways of *describing* society, depending on what one wants to find out, or of *classifying* groups within society according to their economic or occupational situations, but for Marx class opposition underlies the structures and alignments we may see, and any attempt to understand those structures without taking it into consideration can only remain superficial.

Before looking more closely at the choice that we are obliged to make among these various definitions, I turn to certain questions raised by E.P. Thompson about what one really means by class in relation to pre-capitalist society. There is, first, Marx's classic distinction in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* concerning the French peasantry, who constitute a class by virtue of their finding themselves in common economic conditions and in conflict with other classes on the basis of those conditions, but who do not constitute a class in that they have no national political organization, no corporate unity or self-awareness beyond the purely local level.[17] This distinction is at the heart of the traditional Marxist approach to class and is also adopted by Dahrendorf, for example, where he speaks of "latent" and "manifest" class interest.[18] The idea is that in a limited sense a class can be said to exist without the members of that class themselves being aware of it, but it only comes to exist in the fullest sense of the word with the self-awareness of the class as a class. This is the approach adopted by E.P. Thompson, whose "making" of the English working class is the forging of its self-consciousness as a class in the early nineteenth century, leading to collective political action in its own class interests.[19] What existed before, therefore, was not "class" in the full sense but rather the potentiality for class.

There is a further problem according to Thompson, which is that the notion of class as a way of characterizing opposed categories within a society only came into its own with the Industrial Revolution and its progeny – the industrial bourgeoisie and proletariat. It was only at this stage in history that such opposed categories began to think of themselves as classes, and it is only at this stage that one can speak of class consciousness existing.[20] To speak of class or class-consciousness in relation to pre-capitalist or pre-industrial societies carries a different set of implications, since classes as such did not exist in those societies. What did exist were opposed interest groups that can be labelled classes on the basis of a definition of class that

derives from nineteenth-century experience. It is not merely a distinction between classes that exist without being aware of their classness and those that exist and have achieved that self-awareness, but rather one between class in the full sense of the word (existing as a class, aware of itself as a class, and organizing itself as a class) and a collectivity or interest group that we may or may not choose to describe as a class. In the first case, such classes can only be said to exist subsequent to the development of industrial capitalism; in the second, we are free to find classes in any society we choose, but they can only remain a construction that we place on that society.

This is essentially Thompson's point in relation to class.[21] From the Industrial Revolution onwards class is "present" in the evidence, in that groups organize themselves as classes as well as being the conceptual tool with which the historian attempts to understand society. Prior to that revolution groups organized and thought of themselves on other lines, and we have to be more careful in understanding those struggles as struggles between classes. At the same time the study of ancient and feudal societies has demonstrated that no other concept can adequately account for the reality of struggle within those societies.

Thompson is also opposed to the static theoretical formulations within Marxism in which any historical period is characterized by a dominant mode of production, itself reduceable to specific relations of production between definable classes. This makes a mockery of the complexity of different historical periods, in which there are no hard and fast lines of division; it also reduces the experience of class to something that necessarily accompanies and defines a given mode of production. The neatness and precision of theory fail to do justice to the complexity of class as it is lived, and rather reduce history to a set of empty definitions. Class is held to be something that exists automatically by virtue of the existence of a given mode of production, whereas for Thompson the existence of class in the full historical sense only arises as the consequence of class struggle, with class consciousness coming into being in the course of that struggle.[22]

For Thompson eighteenth-century English society is not automatically divisible into opposed classes in the way that certain schools of thought within Marxism might suggest. Instead there are the various interest groups and factions that make up the gentry on the one hand and the mass of the poor on the other, ever ready to object vociferously at the perceived erosion of what they took to be their traditional rights. Thompson sees society as having been a "field of force," with the gentry at one pole and the plebs at the other, and with intermediate categories aligning themselves with one pole or the other depending on their respective interests.[23] The relationship between gentry and plebs is one of reciprocity, in terms of which the poor are given leeway to riot, protest, burn, and huzzah in

defence of their interests at least until the 1790s. On the one hand there are the vertical relationships of patronage that link place-seekers and place-bestowers, and the broader cultural hegemony of a paternalistic gentry that was accepted by the poor, but only at a price, and on the other the traditional culture of the poor themselves, from which the working-class identity of the nineteenth century was to emerge. Eighteenth-century society cannot, therefore, be characterized simply in terms of vertical relationships nor of straightforward class opposition but only in terms of the combination of vertical and horizontal alignments that were to begin to crystallize in the 1790s along the lines of what would become nineteenth-century class divisions.

Thompson's approach introduces a set of nuances into our understanding of class. We need to avoid a form of mechanical class reductionism that reduces history to a sequence of simplified class oppositions. We need also to distinguish between class in the fullest sense of the word and class as a way of explaining underlying structural determination. Asad's analysis of Swat society would be an example of the latter, in that the objective relationship of different categories to the means of production (that is, land, seed, and implements) is considered to underlie and define whatever forms of association that emerge. By contrast, Hamza Alavi's study of a Punjabi village describes a society in which the vertical factionalism that was to be found in Swat Pathan society coexists to an increasing extent with explicit class consciousness and class organization among a dispossessed tenantry forced to work as wage-labourers on the consolidated estates.[24] In this latter context it is clear that class in the fullest Thompsonian sense of the word has come into existence – that is, what in Swat society is the latent potentiality for class has here led to the emergence of class. This, however, does not imply that class is not a reality underlying Swat social structure but simply shows up the different ways in which the concept of class (within a Marxian framework) can be applied to different kinds of society. We end up distinguishing between class as the underlying structural opposition between groups that informs and determines whatever associations and alignments may emerge at the surface of social structure, and class as the emergence of that underlying opposition into the light of day in the form of explicit political class organization.

In looking at the different kinds of theoretical construction that have been placed on class, or perhaps more accurately, in which the concept of class is used to characterize a particular aspect of the reality that the theory-constructor chooses to see, I have continually made a distinction between Marxist and non-Marxist approaches. The reason, as I have already suggested, is that according to the Marxian understanding of class, class struggle is the key to all social structures that are not characterizable as strictly egalitarian or primitively communist. In non-Marxist approaches

to class, class follows from some aspect of social organization, while in a Marxist approach social organization follows from class. We have the choice of using class as a key to understanding society or as a secondary form of classification, a way of arranging people in groups whose *raison d'être* is not so much class struggle as occupational and family status, market opportunities, or membership in a chess club. Which approach we choose necessarily depends on what we want to find out about society, what we want to do with that information once we have extracted it, and, ultimately, who we are in the first place.

But the choice can also be brought down to arguments that stand apart from our interests as such and relate rather to the level of explanation that different approaches can offer. It is in this sense that we can ask whether Sahlins' Weberian approach to class (or the lack of it) gives us a sufficient understanding of Polynesian society, that is, an understanding that adequately accounts for the evident inequalities in individual Polynesian societies. We can also ask how adequately Barth's analysis on the basis of individual freedom of choice explains the reality of Swat Pathan society. In both these cases the suspicion remains that an important level of explanation has been omitted, that of the determination of the actions and choices open to individuals according to the positions they occupy in relation to the means of subsistence (that is, free access to or separation from), and their rights or otherwise to dispose freely of the fruit of their own productive activity. It is not that such rights can exist apart from the political alignments of the broader society but rather that those alignments cannot be understood separately from the overall class relations of which they are a part.