

## II. ARGUING ECONOMICS: IN MEMORY OF LAURENCE MOSS

### **Alfred Marshall and the Concept of Class**

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this article is to analyze Alfred Marshall's concept of class. Marshall's concept of class is not well-studied. His idea of class is different from what Weber and Marx have proposed. In contrast to many other economists, he has a discussion of class that is developed. It is shown that Marshall sees classes as made up of people whose work offers similar chances of developing their higher faculties. An integrated idea is that different class positions are associated with different discount rates of future outcomes. Marshall's class theory combines physical and mental components.

#### I

#### **Introduction**

THIS TEXT on the British economist Alfred Marshall's (1842–1924) concept of class is written in the memory of Laurence Moss. I have

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mixed feeling about this text. To write it recalls memories because the text is published in a journal that I grew up with as an academic, but more so because it makes me think of Laurence, with whom I was in contact for more than 10 years. Frankly speaking, he was around during my international academic career. I have a vivid memory of my first personal meeting with Laurence, from when I attended my first international conference in Montreal (1998). I presented my paper on the sociology of Alfred Marshall in a huge lecture hall, where a man asked some very good and sharp questions. I was truly impressed by this man, who did not only ask very good questions but also stressed the importance of my topic. After the session he came to the podium and introduced himself as Laurence Moss. This was the first time I met him. What I strongly felt was immediate support, and a concern for me as a young scholar, and at the same time a serious interest in the subject matter. The talk was turned into a paper on Marshall, and it was my first international publication (Aspers 1999), which was to be followed by others in the *AJES* (Aspers 2001, 2007). But, as is true for many, the first publication often leaves a stronger imprint than those that follow.

Laurence was very important to me ever since this first publication. There was no doubt what I should write to honor Laurence; it had to be on Marshall. By choosing to write on Marshall, I also claim that this paper makes an academic contribution. I think this is the way Laurence would have preferred it, not the least as he had written on Marshall (Moss 1990, 1994). In this text, I will analyze Alfred Marshall's concept of class.

Class is often seen as sociological concept, so what can an economist have to say? We must remember that our contemporary ideas of sociology and economics were not those of Marshall nor any other of the social scientists who took part in the constitution of the different disciplines about 100 years ago. Anyone who has encountered classical social sciences, like Marshall, Weber, or Schumpeter—to take a few examples—realizes that a narrow categorization of their works as “sociology” or “economics” would be unbalanced or even unjust.

A reading of classical thinkers must first of all take the historicity of its own interpretation into account (Gadamer 1990). In practice, it means that we try to understand and make use of Alfred Marshall's

ideas in a process of interpretation. Unfortunately, class has played a limited role within economic sociology. Economic sociologists have mainly studied producer markets, whereas labor markets to a large extent has remained a field of its own, which has made only limited intellectual progress. It is, however, in relation to the latter field that class is positioned. Hopefully, this article can further the discussion of class within economic sociology, a discussion that could help to revitalize class also in sociology at large.

The paper proceeds as follows. It starts with an introduction to the field of class analysis in economics and sociology. Then the paper turns to Alfred Marshall, focusing on his idea of class. A brief introduction to Marshall is included, stress being laid on the philosophical and methodological aspects that underpin his writings. Then his theory of class is presented, which is followed by outlining some applications made by Marshall.

## II

### **Class in Economics and Sociology**

ACCORDING TO NEOCLASSICAL economic theory, only atomized actors who act independently of each other exist, and no single actor can affect the social outcome of their interaction. These actors are moreover assumed to be similar; in the cases when this is not so, they may be acting in different markets that are more or less independent of each other. Sociologists, on the contrary, often assume collective actors, groups, classes, and a stratified society, and the concept of class is a key concept in the sociological conceptual arsenal. Class is used as an explanatory concept to account for actors' structural positioning and their corresponding life chances. We find the sociological roots of class analysis in the writings of Marx.

Class does not really exist in today's mainstream economic theory, but this has not always been the case. One of the great founders of neoclassical economics, Alfred Marshall, used the concept frequently, and he has, in fact, presented what could be called a theory of class.<sup>1</sup> Though it should be emphasized that class is not a key concept in his theoretical edifice, it is a concept that is of importance for his more

applied analysis, and it also informs us about his view on ethics and social and economic development.

If class plays a limited role in economics, class has been, and still is, an important concept in sociology. There are many reasons for the persistent interest, in addition to its function of accounting for inequality. It has been valuable as a predictor in scientific studies, it is used in everyday language, and, in addition, there is an ideological component connected to it that has attracted some sociologists. However, class analysis may have seen its climax, not because of decreased structural inequality but because of the many other forms of structural inequality that have entered the scene, such as gender, global, and generation. The class concept, and the kinds of analysis connected to it, has been criticized from more than one direction.<sup>2</sup> The collapse of the communist states is important for its diminished ideological power, but there are also two kinds of methodological critique. The first is internal; that is to say, there is a discussion between class analysts that reveals serious problems with the concept and with class analysis at large. I personally see a mistake in reducing class to classification as a problem for theoretical development.<sup>3</sup> There is also an external critique, based on the lack of mechanisms provided by class analyses. Class analysis, it is argued, is occupied with relating “class” to other variables, such as health and voting, without providing any mechanisms that account for, or explain, the relations presented.<sup>4</sup> These two critiques overlap to some extent, but should be analytically separated.

I think that anyone who wants to make use of class must account for the formation of class as one kind of the general process of group formation (Bourdieu 1987). The most interesting revival of class analysis comes from Aage Sørensen. He has developed a Marxist-influenced concept of class and his idea is close to the original position held by Marx. Sørensen’s theory is from a structural position identical to Marx’s, with the exception that he abandons Marx’s theory of exploitation. The theory of exploitation has also been abandoned by leading Marxists, such as Roemer, Elster, and Wright; the main reason for this is that the labor theory of value, which is an assumption in the theory of exploitation in Marx’s writings, is considered to be false.<sup>5</sup> What Sørensen does is to replace the scientifically dead theory of value based on labor with a theory of rent (Sørensen 1996, 2000).

The theory of rent is traced by Sørensen, via the idea of rent seeking (Buchanan 1980), back to Marshall. By building the theory of exploitation on a firm base, Marx's theory can be saved, without any major alterations.

Sørensen's work, to my knowledge, is the only existing reasonable attempt to use a concept of class that is close to the ideas of Marx; that is to say, the structural inequalities in society produce classes. Sørensen's idea is that positions that generate rent are the condition for formation of classes. But this only happens if the positions generate rent for a longer period of time. Today's more and more capitalistic societies that are characterized by flux, he argues, destroy these positions rather quickly, making classes less likely to be formed.

### III

#### **Alfred Marshall: Some Central Ideas**

THIS SHORT PAPER contains no general introduction to Alfred Marshall and the relevance of his writings to sociology (Aspers 1999); only those aspects that are relevant for the understanding of his concept of class are discussed. But to understand Marshall's writing, we shall present the fundamental principles that underpin his entire scientific production.

Marshall's approach to economics is broader than most of his contemporaries, as manifested in his definitions of economics, or "social economics," which he sometimes used instead of the more frequently used term "political economy." In Marshall's view, political economy was too narrow (Marshall [1920] 1961: 43). The following definition reflects his broadness of scope:

Political Economy or Economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life; it examines that part of individual and social action which is most closely connected with the attainment and with the use of the material requisites of well-being. Thus it is on the one side a study of wealth; and on the other, and more important side, a part of the study of man. (Marshall [1920] 1961: 43; see also Marshall and Marshall [1879] 1994: 4–5)

The methodological individualist approach that he represents can be seen in his definition of economics (see above), and he refers to

the individual and the development of his faculties, and the character of the individual as the ultimate source of change and improvement in social life. But Marshall is not a narrow-minded methodological individualist, which should be remembered when discussing his class concept (Marshall [1873] 1925: 105). Marshall, in addition, says that man cannot be analyzed in isolation from the social setting of ordinary life, though the economist is primarily interested in man's undertakings in business life. This means that he disapproved of the usage of *Homo economicus*, and argued that Ricardo and others did not realize that "man himself is in great measure a creature of circumstances and changes with them" (Marshall 1885: 13). At a more fundamental level, Marshall is clear about what economic theory is about; he says that the "individual should not be regarded as 'an isolated atom'" and states that: "In all this [kinds of analyses] economists deal with man as he is: not with an abstract or 'economic' man; but a man of 'flesh and blood'" (Marshall 1896: 40).

Marshall, however, was well in line with the British empirical tradition, and he argued that there is no room in economics "for long trains of deductive reasoning" (Marshall [1920] 1961: 781). This critique is no surprise to those who know Marshall's writings. He argued for a scientific method that combines inductively generated laws with deductions. To Marshall, economics was a science of the practice of man, and this may inform us about his interest also in inequality and class.

An issue of debate between scientists interested in class, as well as scientists at large, concerns the issue of realism versus nominalism. Marshall is clearly a nominalist. The motto of *Principles*, *Natura non facit saltum* (nature makes no jumps) indicates this. His argument is that there is not a clear line of division in reality (Marshall [1920] 1961: xi). He is also aware of the problems caused by letting a concept affect the fundamental perspective in the analysis ([1920] 1961: 50; Marshall and Marshall 1879 [1994]: 3 n1).

The consequence of the philosophical position called nominalism regarding the issue of class is that there are no real boundaries between different classes.<sup>6</sup> This is a profound assumption in Marshall's writings. He nonetheless says: "[I]t is an universal rule of science that in seeking these fundamental laws, we should class together things that are similar in nature, and may be expected to obey similar laws"

(1897: 96).<sup>7</sup> This position, however, does not rule out an analysis based on class, because theories, or class concepts, are spread over a continuum in which nominalism and realism are the end poles.<sup>8</sup>

## IV

**Marshall in Relation to Sociology and Labor Movements**

NEEDLESS TO SAY, sociology at the time of Marshall was different from our time. Yet it may be of some importance to know how he viewed his contemporaries Comte, Spencer, and Marx. Marshall was influenced by Spencer (Groenewegen 1995: 167), critical to Comte and his ideas of a unified science, and clearly related his position to the works of Marx.

Marshall seems to have used Marx as a source of historical facts, and it has been argued that Marshall also adopted Marx's idea of the social organism and its mutually dependent parts (Groenowegen 1995: 580). Marshall was sympathetic to the general idea behind socialism, but he stated, after many years of thinking, that:

no socialistic scheme, yet advanced, seems to make adequate provision for the maintenance of high enterprise, and individual strength of character; nor to promise a sufficiently rapid increase in the business plant and other material implements of production, to enable the real incomes of the manual labour classes to continue to increase as fast as they have done in the recent past, even if the total income of the country be shared equally by all. (Marshall 1920: viii)<sup>9</sup>

He furthermore criticized Marx's idea of labor theory of value, and argued that Marx's argument was nothing but a definition ([1920] 1961: 587–588). There is, moreover, a similarity between Marx's idea of how consciousness is developed ([1845–1846] 1970: 47) and Marshall's idea of how man's character develops.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that Marshall was hostile to the endeavors of labor movements. He invited leaders of these movements, such as Thomas Burt, Ben Tilt, and Tom Mann, to spend weekends with him (Keynes [1933] 1951: 194). Keynes says the following about Marshall: "In truth, he sympathized with the Labour Movement and with Socialism (just as J. S. Mill had) in every way except intellectually" (Keynes [1933] 1951: 194). Marshall ([1889] 1925) saw cooperation as a possible way to

improve the situation for the working class, and he seems to have liked the idea that the improvement of man's character was of central importance to the movement.

## V

**The Concept of Class in Marshall**

THE POINT OF DEPARTURE for a discussion of Marshall's concept of class is a talk that he gave in 1873, "The Future of the Working Classes," at the age of 31. The talk was given at the Cambridge Reform Club, and Pigou writes in a footnote that "it bears marks of the over-sanguine temperament of youth" (1925: 101). However, Marshall himself seems not to have changed his ideas, since he did not change the paper later in his life. His definition of class is similarly constructed to his definition of economics; that is, there is no formal definition, but it is not difficult to grasp the main idea. The title of the talk at the Reform Club must be understood in relation to the underlying question addressed by Marshall: Will progress go so far as a situation in which "the official distinction between working man and gentleman has passed away"? ([1873] 1925: 102) Marshall argues that it will. Consequently, the definition of the working class, or working classes, is not the primary task, but a step in the direction to an answer to this question of social stratification.

The working class is not, Marshall says, comprised of all who work, simply because almost all men work. He says:

They [the working classes] are not all who live their life by selling the work of their hands, for our noblest sculptors do that. They are not all who for payment serve and obey, for officers in the army serve for payment, and most implicitly obey. They are not all who for payment perform disagreeable duties, for the surgeon is paid to perform duties most disagreeable. They are not even all those who work hard for low pay, for hard is the work and low is the pay of the highly cultured governess. Who then are they? ([1873] 1925: 103)

Marshall focuses on the effects on man produced by his work, rather than what he produces or what he owns, and he discusses this in terms of one of his more central concepts, character. The hypothesis is that man's work influences his character.<sup>11</sup>



The working class, as any other class, is composed of individuals who are affected by work in a similar fashion. Depending on how man can use his faculties at work, he is classified. Marshall says:

Man ought to work in order to live: his life, physical, moral, and mental, should be strengthened and made full by his work. But what if his inner life be almost crushed by his work? Is there not then suggested a terrible truth by the term working man, when applied to the unskilled labourer—a man whose occupation tends in a greater or less degree to make him live for little save for that work that is a burden to bear? ([1873] 1925: 108)

The incumbents of the working class are marked by having work that makes it impossible for them to develop their faculties.<sup>12</sup>

What does Marshall more specifically have to say about the activities that produce a strong character? An answer to this question points at the ideas of mobility that are part of Marshall's reasoning. He argues that education is the key to strengthening the faculties. This means that the child's home is of importance and, in particular, that the mother's role is crucial (Marshall [1920] 1961: 207, [1873] 1925).<sup>13</sup> Social interaction and anticipation of other people's feelings are two qualities that are connected to a strong character, and these, among others, Marshall argues, can best be developed if a child is brought up by a family living in a supportive society, which enables him to develop his faculties.

From a broader perspective, Marshall's theory of class, which as mentioned is grounded in the way work affects man, is a part of his more general idea of man's development as a result of his activities. The general theory is rather formal, but by presenting it in relation to the more specific theory of class, his ideas become more understandable. Thus, we can see that the consequences of man's action are far-reaching; not only man himself is affected, but his children as well.

## VI

### **Applications**

MARSHALL'S GENERAL IDEA of class cannot fully be grasped by the reader in light of what has been said so far. In order to understand Marshall's idea of class, one must study the way he applies class in various

studies. We saw above that Marshall stressed the effects of upbringing and work on man when identifying class position. This track will be followed next.

Although Marshall is clear about the negative consequences of work on man, this does not distract him from the more fundamental insight that work is key to human development (Marshall [1920] 1961: 563). We have already indicated how Marshall sees the important fact that humans can develop their faculties. Let us here concentrate on its downside. The toil of work, and especially manual and physical labor, combined with the nonmental working tasks, Marshall says, leads to two problems. The first is that man after a day of hard work is exhausted and therefore not able to read books, take part in social arrangements, and the like. This implies that there are few chances to develop his mental faculties. And if his mental capacities are not called forth at work, there are very few chances at all that he will develop his faculties and, hence, that his character will be strengthened.

What other consequences does the situation, which ultimately can be traced to the condition at work, produce? The most obvious is that many of these jobs pay poorly, and are very hard. In many families, both the woman and the man must work. The difficult condition of the working class, that its members are short of money, leads to cases in which children do not get enough food and must help to support the family at an age where they still should be in school. In sum, these conditions make it almost impossible to make use of all the potential faculties of the working class. One consequence in particular bothers the rather old-fashioned Marshall: the fact that the mother, who he believes to be of crucial importance for the development of the child, is forced to work ([1920] 1961: 560–564.)

A further consequence that is of more general and also contemporary interest is that the calculation of future benefits as consequences of various investments are often wrongly discounted by members of the working class. One example that Marshall often refers to is that education of a son is discounted at too high a rate by members of the lower classes. This rate increases with the “narrowness of their education and the pressure of immediate want” (Marshall and Marshall [1879] 1994: 112–113; see also Marshall [1920] 1961, vol II: 312). A consequence is that this narrowness is passed down from generation

to generation. To change the order of this process, Marshall advocates investments in education by the government ([1873] 1925: 113; cf. [1920] 1961: 562). Through this, people's efficiency will increase and, hence, production will increase.

Is this, the reader may ask, only a result of the economic conditions under which man lives? No, education is not only to be understood in the formal sense; education at the workplace also is considered by Marshall ([1920] 1961: 563). So in well-to-do families, the sons—Marshall rarely mentions the daughters—get the education necessary for entering new businesses, but this is not the case for the sons of the working classes.

Thus, by investments in education, national production can be increased. However, unless people from the working class are allowed to rise to higher positions in work life and in social life, not much progress will be made. One can without trouble go into a detailed discussion about Marshall's view of social distinctions in society, which becomes obvious to the reader via the vast number of references to motives indicating the willingness to display wealth to other persons, and thereby show one's social status. However, more interesting to us are processes that enable and hinder mobility.

As was said, education is one key for people who want to move upward in the social structure, but natural ability is another, or, more correctly, a complementary asset (Marshall [1873] 1925: 111.) However, the customs and habits existing in society may hinder mobility. In order to show this, Marshall contrasts the northern and southern parts of England, and says that there are more social distinctions, and here he uses the expression "spirit of caste," in the south. This leads to fewer chances for people from the working class to rise to higher posts and positions at large, which ultimately leads to less progress (Marshall [1920] 1961: 212–213). So, a dynamic economy cannot let social custom hinder individuals in moving upward.

The contrast between the United States and Europe regarding this is interesting to study. Marshall himself was struck by the mobility, both in terms of geography and social positions, that he found in America. Marshall, as we have seen, is discussing not only vertical but also horizontal mobility (Marshall [1920] 1961, vol. II: 312). This means that he does not explain the stability only by social structure but also in

terms of culture. He clearly identifies the structural conditions that separate those born from parents who are better off from those who are born in “the lower ranks of society” and who face great evil (Marshall [1920] 1961: 562). The difference is, of course, material, with more food, education, and so on for the upper classes and a lack of these in the working classes. Theoretically, this boils down, as said, to different ways of forecasting, or “discounting” the future. The upper classes simply have a longer perspective on their own lives and the lives of their children, which means they offer their children more chances to develop their faculties.

## VII

### Conclusion

WHAT HAS BEEN SHOWN in this paper about Marshall’s concept of class? Marshall developed a class theory that is structural, but it has a different structuration principle than Marxist and neo-Weberian theories, which stress ownership in the labor market. Marshall’s theory of class focuses on the effects on man because he is at work. Marshall classifies society, or more accurately its members, from a perspective that stresses the individual’s capacity to develop his mental and practical skills to cope with society, but also to move upward in the social structure. Marshall, consequently, does not reduce class, and the problem of mobility, to a matter of material resources. Although ownership most likely is a dimension that matters, it is not a cause itself, as it is in many class theories that lack an explanatory base.

Marshall furthermore deviates from mainstream economics by actually discussing class. His approach includes man’s mental and physical components. Marshall has no theory of exploitation, and in this light both similarities and dissimilarities to Marx’s concept of class were discussed.<sup>14</sup> Much more could be said on Marshall’s ideas on class. He talks about class consciousness and the need for workers to understand the value of industrial progress and cooperative production (Marshall 1920: 391–394). Internal labor markets and promotion within firms for manual labor is another theme (Marshall [1920] 1961: 309–310). His idea of class is part of his general theory of mobility, and more generally, on the wealth of nations.

## Notes

1. It is important to indicate the distinction between classes as mere economic strata and classes as interest groups composed of individuals that have a feeling of unity, which may cause them to act together. The first type was common among classical economists (Schumpeter [1954] 1981: 886); the latter type is basically Marx's version. It will be argued that Marshall's theory of class is more sociological than most of those presented by economists (for the example of Ricardo, see Schumpeter [1954] 1981: 553–554).

2. It is of course the case that there exist many different approaches using class, and it is perhaps wrong to lump them all together. However, the similarities are probably greater than the differences, and later in this paper some distinctions are made. For a discussion of the critique, see Grusky and Sørensen (1998).

3. Such schemes are only ways of describing current trends in society; and “explanation” is simply an existing correlation between a nominal category made by the researchers—sometimes in close correspondence with the bureaucracy of the state.

4. See the contributions in Hedström and Swedberg (1998) for examples.

5. One writer who has been influential in the Marxist paradigm is John Roemer. He has, over time, become more skeptical of the application of the Marxist theory of exploitation: “I came to believe that it [the theory of exploitation] is not itself a fundamental theory of (in)justice” (1996: 9). He says the following about the labor theory of value: “I think the labor theory of value is not a useful empirical theory. While the errors in the labor theory of value are Ptolomaic, the defects in the exploitation theory are Newtonian” (1994: 95). Thus, it is not possible to show, by using the theory of exploitation, that the employees unjustly are deprived of a part of the wage. This injustice, which Roemer thinks is real, must instead be proved with a “Rawls-Sen-Dworkin-Arneson-Cohen” type of ethical theory (1996: 9).

6. Class is of course a highly “objective” concept. This is because classification, for example, in biology means that the scientist puts different flowers under a common label. Generally, items are put together within a class.

7. By “laws,” Marshall is actually referring to tendencies, and not necessary relations.

8. Four different class concepts can be identified: a pure classification (nominalism), classes as lifestyles, theories of inequality that not are of a structural nature, and those that are (Sørensen 2000).

9. Socialism, as used by Marshall and his contemporaries, is not identical to the present meaning. The trend of his opinion toward socialism is directed to a more critical position. Mill, and especially his *Essays on Socialism*, influenced him as a young man, but the importance faded away.

10. This idea, however, is more likely to have been initiated by Marshall's reading of Aristotle. There is a strong resemblance to the way Aristotle speaks

about how man acquires virtues in *The Nicomachean Ethics* and Marshall's ideas about the development of character, and it is clear that Marshall, who refers to Aristotle several times, knew his works well. At the same time, he was not a servile admirer of ancient Greece—quite the contrary (1997: 126), and added to this are Christian ideas.

11. This led Marshall to criticize Taylorism, a principle of organization of work that makes it difficult for man to develop his faculties and character.

12. It is not obvious how to understand what he means by faculty; the concept is somewhat ambiguous. He moreover distinguishes between higher and lower faculties. Keynes's interpretation, which is supported by Chasse (1984), is, however, clear: "The solution to economic problems was for Marshall not an application of the hedonistic calculus, but a prior condition of the exercise of man's higher faculties, irrespective, almost, of what we mean by 'higher'" (Keynes [1933] 1951: 136).

13. One could easily move into a discussion of Marshall's argument for a redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor in order to increase the production of a society ([1920] 1961: 203; Marshall and Marshall 1879 [1994]: 9–12). The idea is that society must provide education for the geniuses born in the working classes, so that this potential can be fully utilized.

14. Marshall's more realistic and nonatomistic approach to social action is not shared by most contemporary economists. Marshall, I have claimed, proposes that we should take the man on the street as the starting point. This man is essentially social.

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