

Classlessness as Doxa: Class Awareness, Crises, and the Icelandic Political Field

Abstract

Despite growing class inequality, scholars claim class awareness is waning due to the social changes of rapid globalization and late modernity. However, historical research is lacking in recent studies of class subjectivities. This article uses the economic boom and subsequent collapse of the Icelandic economy in 2008 to study how structural and cultural changes impact class discourse in the political field and how it relates to broader class awareness. The study is a historically contextualized ethnographic content analysis of Iceland's leading newspaper (N=500) and parliamentary debates (N=135) from 1986-2012. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, the study finds that the current economic crisis, and especially the crisis of prosperity foreshadowing it, undermined the unquestioned assumption (doxa) that Iceland is a relatively classless society. The analysis reveals discursive struggles between the dominant and dominated in the political field over the previously unquestioned classlessness as doxa, which, in turn, heightened class awareness. The findings contradict the argument that class awareness is declining across the board in "advanced" societies and suggest we must study class subjectivities in traditionally egalitarian and homogeneous societies.

Keywords: Classlessness; class awareness; crisis; political field; societal class ambivalence; Iceland.

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Crisis is a necessary condition for a questioning of doxa but is not in itself a sufficient condition for the production of a critical discourse...The dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of doxa and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of the doxa...or establish...orthodoxy (Bourdieu 1977: 169)

What does it mean to be an Icelander? What is the Icelandic national identity? It is being part of a small society where people share similar conditions and fates and we even talk of Icelandic society as a classless society. We cannot talk that way anymore (Parliamentary Records 2006)

Scholars argue that while class inequality has increased in recent decades, class awareness is limited, even declining (Savage 2000; Scott 2002; Bottero 2004; Crompton 2008; Archer and Orr 2011). Post-structural theorists claim this is due to cultural and structural changes wrought by globalization and late modernity, especially increasing individualization (Beck 2007; Giddens 2002). Some declare class dead: “society can no longer look in the mirror and see social classes. The mirror has been smashed and all we have left are the individualized fragments” (Beck and Willms 2004: 107). More specifically, the death-of-class thesis holds that structural changes are undermining class in “advanced” societies. The breakdown of class structures means “advanced” societies are becoming objectively classless and subjective awareness of class is vanishing in the process (Kingston 2000; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Critics claim, however, class awareness and identity have been re-constituted as individual and implicit, rather than collective and explicit. What remains, however, is limited class awareness, manifested in “dis-identifications” from class, and “defensive,” “hesitant,” “ambivalent,” or “ambiguous” attitudes to class labels. Nonetheless, many still recognize the salience of class inequality and willingly talk about class as a social and political issue (Devine 1992; Marshall et al. 1988; Reay 1998; Savage et al. 2001; Skeggs 1997).

Although class analysts argue social changes have transformed class awareness, historical research has been largely absent in recent empirical work on class subjectivities (Alexander 2010; but see Savage 2007; Woodin 2005). Consequently, few empirical works track the ebb and flow of class awareness in contemporary societies in relation to broader cultural and structural changes. Also, because the literature is so narrowly focused, we cannot determine whether claims of low, even declining, class awareness hold for “advanced” societies in general or just for Britain and the United States. It is, for example, possible that traditionally less diverse and more egalitarian societies have experienced different trajectories. Furthermore, we should not be asking why class awareness and class discourse are limited, but rather “why, and under what circumstances, hierarchically differentiated groups

adopt explicit class discourses, since this seems more unusual” (Bottero 2004: 997). This brings us to another neglected issue in recent scholarship: class struggle (Alexander 2010). This omission is critical because high-profile claims of classlessness, limited class awareness, and a lack of critical class discourse largely arise from class struggle and reflect the interests of the dominant classes (Bourdieu 1977, Skeggs 1997; Pascale 2008). This struggle is most evident in the all-important political field (Swartz 2013), surprisingly neglected in recent work in class analysis.

This article addresses aforementioned gaps in the literature by analyzing class discourse in the Icelandic political field and broader class awareness over an unsettled 26-year period (1986 to 2012), using parliamentary records and a national newspaper with — by international standards — unprecedented market share, readership, circulation, and public access. Iceland is the smallest and most ethnically and socially homogenous Nordic country and an egalitarian society where class divisions have not been considered particularly pronounced. However, Iceland’s post-industrial welfare society has changed drastically since the 1990s due to neoliberal globalization. Economic inequality greatly increased, class divisions intensified, and Iceland became more multicultural. My findings show that these changes undermine widespread notions of classlessness, which are integral to the Icelandic national identity and are defined in opposition to perceived “class societies.” This is evidenced by a significant increase in class discourse and critical reflection over previously unquestioned notions of classlessness, peaking following Iceland’s economic collapse in 2008. My findings suggest neoliberal globalization might heighten class awareness in traditionally homogeneous and egalitarian societies as they increasingly converge with more diverse and inegalitarian societies.

I begin with an overview of how Bourdieu’s field theory helps explain how crises carry the possibility of undermining taken for granted ideas about class and, in turn, can heighten class awareness. I then discuss ideas of classlessness in Iceland. After describing my data and methodology, I track the ebb and flow of class awareness and discourse over the study period. The last three sections focus on class discourse in the Icelandic political field during three time periods, demarcated by the onset of two crises.

Theory

This article draws on Bourdieu’s field theory to study the relationship between class discourse in the Icelandic political field and broader class awareness over “an adequate period of social change” (Thompson 1968: 11).

Bourdieu (1987) expects class awareness and class discourse to be lacking, particularly because culture mediates

the effects of structure on consciousness and dominant cultures mask the realities of class inequality. Social structures mold our habitus, i.e. “the system of durable, transposable dispositions that form the basis of perception and appreciation of one’s social experience” (Stuber 2011: 3). As a result, we tacitly take the established class stratification order for granted. However, unlike Durkheim (1933), Bourdieu does not argue for a one-to-one correspondence between signs, symbols and social reality. Instead, the cultural standards of any social order are arbitrary, and dominant cultures are constructions that differentiate, mask, and legitimate class stratification and its resulting class inequality. Taken for granted assumptions, therefore, constitute and normalize power relations. Dominant ideologies also have the capacity to disguise power in taken for granted forms. Symbolic power is thus “worldmaking power,” for its capacity to impose the “legitimate vision of the social world and of its divisions” (Bourdieu 1987: 13). Hence, what gets taken for granted about class is not class-neutral, but reflects the interests of the dominant (who want little or no talk of class). Hence our starting point is “class unconsciousness,” rather than Marxian class consciousness (Bourdieu 1985).

Discourse (or, rather, lack thereof) perpetuates the habitus by leading us to believe certain things are self-evident and need no discussion. Bourdieu (2005) calls this common sense knowledge of the habitus “doxa,” or the “tacit assumptions we accept as the natives of a certain society” (37). Doxa is contrasted with the field of opinion: orthodox and heterodox views. However, “[d]oxa is a particular point of view, the point of view of the dominant, which presents and imposes itself as a universal point of view” (Bourdieu 1998: 57). Dominant discourses legitimize the status quo by determining the parameters of acceptable discourse. By not talking about class, for example, the dominant normalize their privileged class status and class stratification in general as unremarkable (not worth mentioning).

Taken for granted ideas about class emerge out of struggle and the debate about class is integral to the class struggle. According to Bourdieu, society is made up of fields — the structured social settings in which a habitus operates. Fields are organized around struggles over capital. Positions in fields are based on types and amounts of capital and there is conflict between those who defend “orthodoxy” (the dominant) and advocates of “heterodoxy” (the dominated). Doxa is taken for granted by both dominant and dominated. The more stable a social formation, the more entrenched its doxa. However, dramatic structural change can create a disjuncture where the habitus cannot adapt to the field, which can expose the doxa. A crisis is therefore a necessary, but insufficient, condition for questioning doxa, because doxic assumptions are only made explicit through

competing discourses. “The dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of doxa and exposing the arbitrariness of the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of the doxa” (Bourdieu 1977: 169). The habitus is good at adapting and avoiding challenges calling the taken for granted into question. Nonetheless, the habitus always addresses present situations in the light of past experiences. Consequently, a habitus cultivated in a homogeneous and egalitarian society has to adapt when society becomes more differentiated. If change is too fast for habitus to adapt, a disjuncture results. Disjuncture carries the possibility for reflexivity, i.e. to call the taken for granted into question.

Bourdieu’s theoretical framework has been widely used to explain lack of class awareness (e.g. Pascale 2008; Reay 1998). However, a more important question is why and under what circumstances explicit class awareness and class discourse arise (Bottero 2004). This calls for a historical approach and an emphasis on a neglected aspect of Bourdieu’s work: change (Crossley 2003; Calhoun 2012). Furthermore, this requires us to study sites of direct and collective class struggle during times of crisis (Fantasia 1995). Iceland’s recent history offers such an opportunity, especially its most visible site of class struggle: the political field. Class awareness is closely linked to class discourse in the political arena (Cannadine 1999, 2000), yet recent research neglects this relationship.

Classless Iceland

Individuals are imprinted by the habitus of the groups they belong to, with each habitus bounded by a group’s homogeneity. However, the nation “usually has special prominence” (Elias 2001: 183). Furthermore, a habitus has broader reach and is more entrenched in relatively undifferentiated societies, where it works to reproduce the entire social culture (Calhoun 1993). Here, Elias’ (2001) concept “national habitus” is used for the set of dispositions Icelanders have in common, which condition a shared common sense (doxa).

A fundamental element of the Icelandic national habitus is the largely unquestioned assumption that Iceland is a relatively classless society, i.e. having little or no class division *to speak of* (Bjarnason 1974; Broddason and Webb 1975; Björnsson et al. 1977; Tomasson 1980; Oddsson 2012). This I term *classlessness as doxa* and define as *the taken for granted assumption that a society is relatively classless*. In Iceland, classlessness as doxa contrasts with the dominant, orthodox view that Iceland *is* a classless society, with *no* class division, and the dominated, heterodox view that Iceland *is not* classless and that class division *is a fixture* of society. However, despite their differences, dominant and dominated share the doxic assumption that Iceland is a *relatively* classless society and its class division is not particularly pronounced, especially compared to other societies.

Doxa is field-specific. However, when the same basic paradigm shapes all fields, then each is imprinted by the same doxa (Bourdieu 1999a). Classlessness as doxa has long established itself across Icelandic social space, making it integral to the national habitus (Tomasson 1980; Magnússon 2008). This “national doxa” (Karner 2005) is rooted in a culture of egalitarianism and individualism (Ólafsson 1999) and buttressed by a dominant ideology claiming there are no classes in Icelandic society:

Icelandic emphasis on the notion of the autonomous individual at the expense of conceptualization of the social is especially evident in denials of class as a social phenomenon... The denial of class is informed by an ideology of egalitarianism and homogeneity. If all are equal, there can be no classes, no social differences, hence no sphere of the social as distinct from the individual (Durrenberger 1996: 171).

Tomasson (1980) claims egalitarianism is Icelanders’ strongest cultural value. He argues class awareness is peripheral, the main foundation for this claim being that Icelanders make minimal status distinctions. Similarly, Ólafsson (1999) argues that while class division in Iceland is similar to neighboring countries, status distinctions are not pronounced. Bjarnason (1974) found that, despite being aware of unequal distribution of income, wealth, and other rewards, Icelanders believe there is no class division in Iceland. Broddason and Webb (1975) show these popular beliefs to be unfounded, but claim class awareness is weak. The respondents in Björnsson et al. (1977) argued Iceland is a classless society and did not see economic differences as indicative of class division. More recent studies found that more Icelanders see themselves as “middle class” or “classless” than in most other countries and notions of classlessness are widespread (Oddsson 2010, 2012).

What is taken for granted about class in a society reflects the state of its class struggle, where “the balance of power depends on the symbolic capital accumulated by those who aim at imposing the various visions in contention, and on the extent to which these visions are *grounded in reality*” (Bourdieu 1987: 16). In Iceland, the dominant uphold a vision of a classless society (Oddsson 2012). However, this vision is not groundless, as Iceland is one of the most ethnically and socially homogenous countries in the world and an egalitarian society where class divisions were until recently considered less pronounced than in most other “advanced” societies (Durrenberger 2001). This is important because Icelanders’ ideas of classlessness are profoundly relational, that is, products of comparison and contrast with other societies (Oddsson 2012). This is evident in Icelanders’ readiness to talk about class division in other societies, combined with reluctance, or refusal, to talk about class division in *present-day* Iceland. I term this *societal class ambivalence* and define it as *the willingness to talk about class in other societies, coupled with reluctance to discuss class division in one’s own present-day society*. Reluctance ranges from

qualified claims of class division (in regards to type and degree) to claims of absolute classlessness. Societal class ambivalence builds on Savage et al.'s (2001) concept of (individual) class ambivalence, describing people's readiness to talk about class "out there" (as a social or political issue), coupled with an unwillingness to discuss class "closer to home," i.e. to claim a class identity for themselves (see also Payne and Grew 2005). In contrast, societal class ambivalence refers strictly to the societal, not individual, level. It is also important to note that societal class ambivalence not only encompasses comparisons between two or more societies with distinct geographic boundaries, but can also refer to the "same" society at multiple points in time. For example, Icelanders are more willing to discuss class division in Iceland in the past or in a projected future, than they are to talk about present-day class division. Societal class ambivalence is fundamental for the maintenance of classlessness as doxa because it "protects" it from being exposed to critical reflection.

Obviously, one cannot separate Icelanders' notions of classlessness from their national identity, which competes with and masks the realities of class division (Bourdieu 1987). The circular premise is: "We, Icelanders, are classless because we are Icelanders." Correspondingly, claims to classlessness operate as a way of drawing symbolic boundaries by defining Iceland in opposition to other societies. These symbolic boundaries are strengthened by various social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002), many of which stem from Iceland's geographic and long-standing social isolation and low population (pop. 325.000). Icelanders have one of the most genetically homogenous populations in the world (Helgason et al. 2003) and maintained roughly the same ethnic profile for over a millennium. As late as 1996, immigrants comprise only 1.8% of the population (Statistics Iceland 2009). Furthermore, all Icelanders related at least seven generations back, which is important because kinship flattens hierarchy and masks class divisions (Bottero 2012). In addition, nearly all Icelanders speak the same language, and there are virtually no dialects. The Icelandic vocabulary also does not accurately describe a class-divided society because its word for class (*stétt*) is so ambiguous (Broddason and Webb 1975:57). Pálsson (1995) asserts that the Icelandic language helps uphold the myth of a classless society, as dominant ideas of classlessness have severed the language's ties with disadvantaged groups. Lastly, class is not institutionalized in Iceland. The Icelandic Census Bureau does not gather class-specific information. Neither political parties nor unions mobilize their constituents in the name of class and the legal system does not explicitly account for class. Lastly, Iceland is unique in Europe for never having had a *formal* aristocracy

(Hreinsson 2005). All of this contributes to Icelanders' sense of equality and homogeneity, which undergirds classlessness as doxa.

Methodology

This article uses ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1996) of class discourse in the national daily newspaper *Morgunblaðið* and parliamentary records from 1986 to 2012. Ethnographic content analysis is the reflexive analysis of documents (Plummer 1983). An ethnographic design generates descriptive categories and theoretical concepts (emergent themes). Then categories are coded systematically to analyze, validate and report results. The aim is to be systematic, but not rigid. While initial categories guide the study, other categories emerge during the analysis, facilitating constant discovery and comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Ethnographic content analysis collects quantitative and qualitative data, rather than forcing the latter into predefined categories.

This study uses a dataset of articles, news items and parliamentary records, obtained from the electronic archives of *Morgunblaðið* and the Icelandic parliament. Said sources were searched using all possible variations of the terms “class division,” “class divided,” “classlessness,” and “classless.” The full search returned 1,142 media accounts and 135 parliamentary transcripts containing at least one of these terms. Accounts referring to contemporary Iceland were marked for closer reading and analysis, resulting in a final dataset of 500 media accounts and 135 parliamentary records.

The dataset was analyzed using *Dedoose*, a mixed-methods data analysis software. Descriptors were assigned to each identified individual, i.e. date, source, field, position within field (dominant or dominated), gender, ethnicity, and residence. Relevant excerpts were identified and coded for type of discourse (orthodox, heterodox, doxic), trajectory (increasing or decreasing) and type of class division (economic, cultural, power, equality of opportunity), trajectory (increasing or decreasing), and type of classlessness, and corresponding issue.

I selected *Morgunblaðið* because it is traditionally the leading newspaper in Iceland. Secondly, it was the only newspaper published non-stop over the period in question. Thirdly, *Morgunblaðið* is an excellent mirror of public opinion due to its widespread readership, circulation and public access (Broddason 2005). For most of the study period, daily readership was around 60% and weekly readership close to 80% (Social Science Research Institute 1992–1998; Gallup 1999–2005). Since launching, *Morgunblaðið*'s website has been the most popular in Iceland, a nation where Internet connections per capita are extremely high (Internet World Stats 2011). Last, being conservative and right-of-center (Harðarson and Kristinsson 2006), *Morgunblaðið* is less likely to write explicitly

about class. However, its conservative stance makes it a critical case (Scott and Marshall, 2005), meaning: “If it is valid for this case, it is valid for all (or many) cases” (Flyveberg 2006:230).

The analysis focuses primarily on discursive struggles between the dominant and dominated in the Icelandic political field. Iceland has a multi-party parliamentary system, with four parties commanding center stage since the 1930s. Consistent with Bourdieu’s field theory (1977), members of the two right-of-center parties, the *Independence Party* (liberal-conservative) and the *Progressive Party* (liberal-agrarian), are defined as dominant. Said parties have historically dominated Icelandic politics; have the most accumulated capital (cultural, economic, social, symbolic), and represent the interests of the dominant classes. The other two major political parties are the left-of-center *Social Democratic Alliance* (social democrat) and the *Left-Green Movement* (socialist), both historically working-class parties. Members of these two parties, their forerunners, the *Social Democratic Party* and the *People’s Alliance* (socialist), and other less prominent political parties, are defined as dominated. Aside from 2009-2013, either the *Independence Party* or the *Progressive Party* led the government for the whole study period. More than half this time, the two dominant parties together formed a coalition government. Other times, either dominant party joined with a dominated party or two. Only from 2009 to 2013 did the government comprise two dominated parties, the *Social Democratic Alliance* and the *Left-Green Movement*.

Heightening Class Awareness

Before turning to the political field, the current section will use the numerical trend of articles and news items in *Morgunblaðið* to identify shifts and trends in overall class discourse and class awareness. From this information we can track the ebb and flow of class discourse and split the study period into relevant time periods.

Figure 1: Newspaper items mentioning, “class division,” “class divided,” “classless,” or “classlessness” by year.

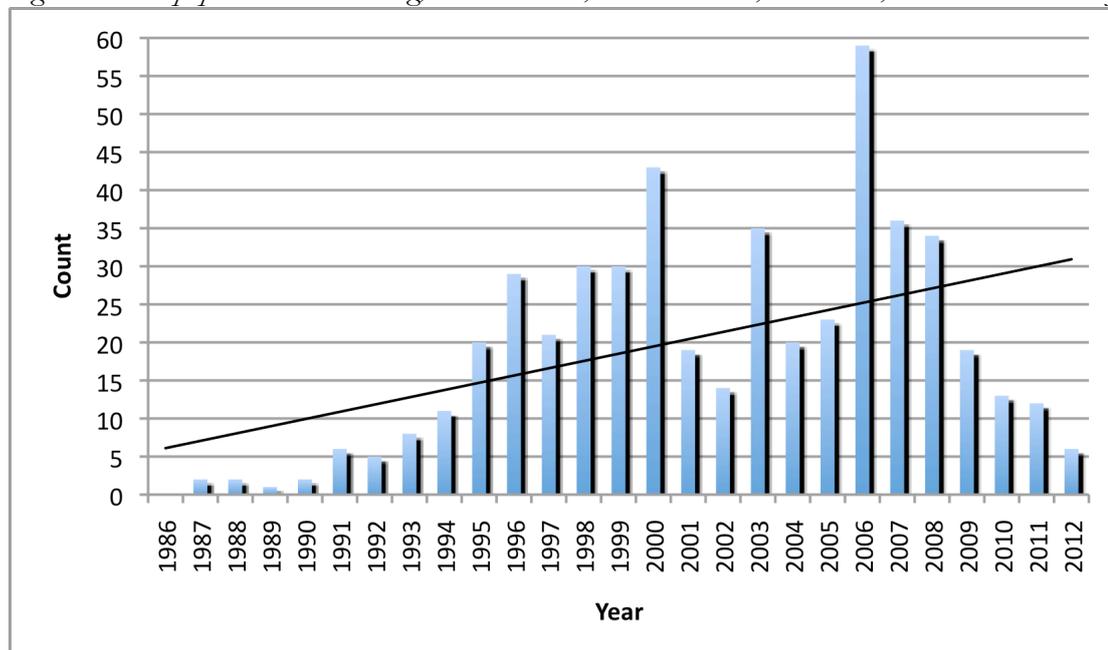
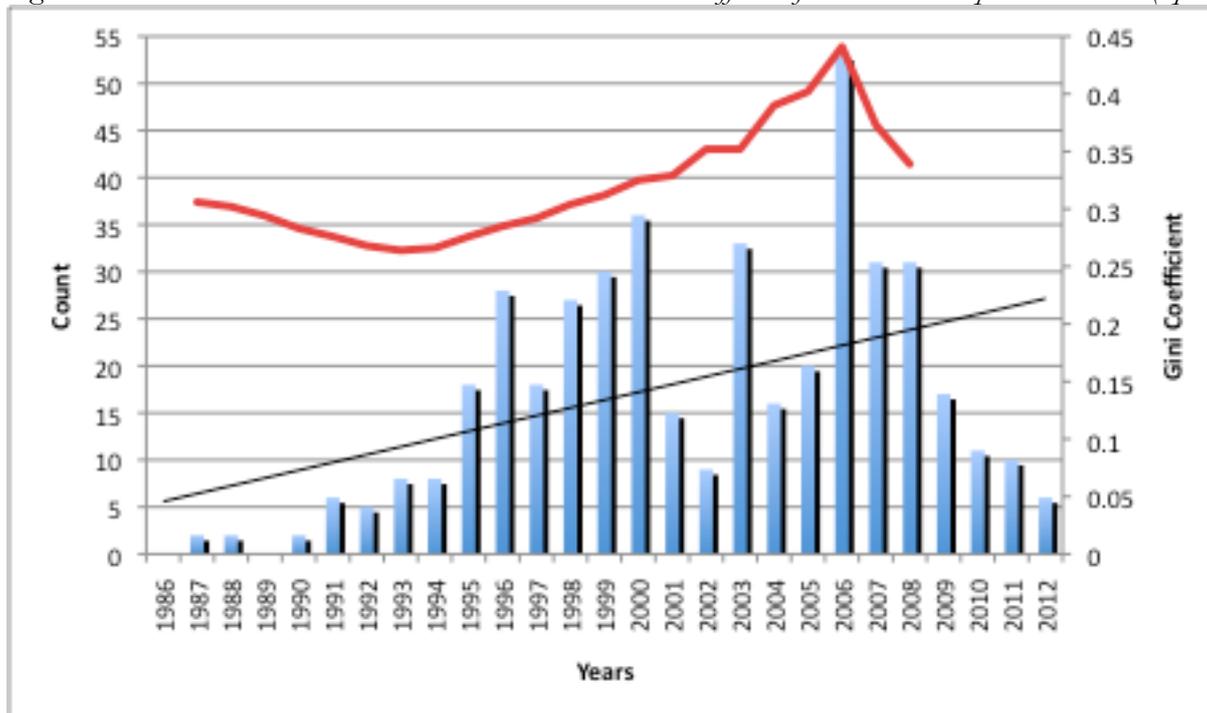


Figure 1 shows the number of articles and news items in *Morgunblaðið* mentioning “class division,” “class divided,” “classless,” or “classlessness” and referring to contemporary Iceland (N=500). The data clearly shows Icelanders becoming much more preoccupied with class after the mid-1990s, when neoliberal globalization and economic inequality escalated.

Figure 2 shows the number of newspaper accounts claiming there is class division in present-day Iceland (N=442) by year. This trend is used as an indicator of class awareness. Class awareness is defined here as *the tendency to see society divided into two or more social classes* (Rothman 2002). A clear distinction is made between “class awareness” and “class consciousness.” In the strictest sense it is only possible to talk of class consciousness when the structural position of a class generates a consciousness of common interests and leads to action through political representation. Class awareness is only the most emergent level of class consciousness (Giddens 1981). Class awareness is the cognitive aspect of class consciousness and its most fundamental level (Vanneman 1980). Nevertheless, being conscious of class is not the same as being class conscious.

The numerical trend of articles claiming class division in Iceland is juxtaposed with the Gini coefficient for individual disposable incomes (equivalized) (Jónsson et al. 2001; Ólafsson and Kristjánsson 2012). No Gini coefficient data is available for the first two years. The figure shows claims of class division increased significantly over the study period, with a slight decrease following the collapse. The increase paralleled a vast increase in economic inequality, greater than for any “advanced” country during the period and mainly characterized by income concentrating disproportionately towards the top (Ólafsson and Kristjánsson 2012). After peaking in 2007, economic inequality started decreasing and so did the number of newspaper accounts claiming class division. This not only suggests class awareness increased for most of the study period, but hardening economic inequality may have fueled it. The same goes for other auxiliaries of neoliberal globalization: foreign direct investment, immigration, number of tourists, and trips abroad. All increased drastically over the same period (Gunnlaugsson et al. 2010). Another indication of heightening class awareness is a recent study showing Icelanders to be much more class-aware in the wake of the collapse than earlier studies suggest (Oddsson 2010).

Figure 2: News items with claims to class division and the Gini-coefficient for individual disposable incomes (equivalized).



As figures 1 and 2 show there are two significant shifts in class discourse corresponding to major turning points in Icelandic society, the first in 1995 and the second in 2008. Both shifts mark the onset of a crisis, the former a crisis of prosperity and the latter an economic crisis. These crises, in turn, demarcate three distinct time periods to be studied in depth in the following sections. There we will see the shifts reflecting not only quantitative but also qualitative differences in class discourse. The first period (1986-1994) is characterized by an economic recession, historic class compromises that stabilized the economy and reduced inflation, low and declining economic inequality, and limited, largely uncritical class discourse (four newspaper items per year). The second period (1995-September 2008), brought a crisis of prosperity fuelled by neoliberal globalization, an unprecedented wave of immigration, the emergence of a super-rich class, rising conspicuous consumption, great increase in economic inequality, and a significant increase in (critical) class discourse (30 items per year). The last period (October 2008-2012) is marked by an economic collapse and crisis, widespread hardship, social unrest, the super-rich fall from grace, a return to more modest consumption standards, receding economic inequality, and a decline in overall class discourse (13 items per year).

Classlessness as doxa (1986-1994)

Classlessness as doxa has long been entrenched in the Icelandic national habitus. While the habitus is neither fixed nor permanent, it resists change and “tends to reproduce those actions, perceptions and attitudes consistent with the conditions under which it was produced” (Swartz 1997:103). The more stable the social formation, the more stable the habitus and greater the extent and the entrenchment of its doxa.

Although the 1986-1994 period in Iceland was one of recession, inflation, increasing unemployment, and labor unrest, it was primarily characterized by class compromises between labor and employers that brought economic stability and averted a full-blown crisis (Magnússon 2004). Also, despite a restructuring of class relations and aside from notable changes in the all-important fishing industry, there were no major social transformations. Most important, there were no major changes in the fairly homogenous class system and income and wealth remained relatively equally distributed. The Gini coefficient decreased from 0.31 in 1988 to 0.26 in 1994 and in 1993 the top 1% of families' share of the national income was a relatively modest 4% (Kristjánsson and Ólafsson 2009). Poverty rates remained low (Ólafsson 1999). All political parties at least paid lip service to the egalitarian ideal, e.g. by stressing equality in collective bargaining. Consistent with egalitarian cultural dispositions emphasizing modesty, consumption standards remained fairly inconspicuous, even among the upper classes (Jónsson 2009).

Consistent with claims that Icelanders lack class awareness, this period is characterized by an apparent lack of class discourse (see figure 1). Correspondingly, there was little talk of class in the political field, even by the traditional working-class parties. Classlessness as doxa remained in “the universe of the un-discussed.” This is critical because the symbolic class struggle is mainly fought by spokespersons in the political field (Bourdieu, 1987). From the few instances the topic of class was raised it is apparent that at this time the dominant and dominated largely shared the doxic assumption of relative classlessness. The lack of a critical class discourse naturalizes the national habitus and classlessness as doxa, which imposes itself on all fields, co-opting discourse and awareness of class.

A *Morgunblaðið* news report quoting Valgerður Sverrisdóttir, *Progressive Party*, illustrates the orthodox views of the dominant: “We argue Iceland is a classless country, which should mean everyone has the same opportunities to achieve established goals in life” (Parliamentary Records 1994b). The dominant, orthodox position reflects societal class ambivalence, where comparisons with “class-ridden” countries serve to highlight Iceland’s classlessness. This is exemplified by an excerpt from a bill put forth by members of the *Independence Party*: “Iceland is exceptional in many respects. Our society is more personal than in larger countries and class division is not in the nature of Icelanders, like it is in so many nations we know of, even among neighboring nations...” (Parliamentary Records 1994a). Most dominant claims center on cultural, rather than economic, classlessness. Here is an example from a speech given by Sigríður A. Þórðardóttir, *Independence Party*: “One of the strongest

characteristics we Icelanders have is the belief in the value of the individual. Equality is interwoven with the Icelandic national soul, as Icelandic society is one of the most egalitarian and classless of all Western countries” (Parliamentary Records 1991).

According to the heterodox views of the dominated, in contrast, class division is a fixture of Icelandic society. Nonetheless, the dominated rarely questioned classlessness as doxa during this period. Instead, they qualified their claims of class division so doxic beliefs of Iceland’s relative classlessness were not exposed to critical reflection. Societal class ambivalence is critical here and is evidenced by the qualified claims of the dominated that while there is class division in present-day Iceland, it has either not fully taken root, is less pronounced than it was in the past, or, especially, it is less acute than in other societies. The following excerpt is from a speech by Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, *Social Democratic Party*:

With these words I am not equating Icelandic and American society. But when comparing the growing income and wealth gap between the rich and poor in Icelandic society, the public rightly asks...Are we heading down the road of class division and growing income and wealth differences like the United States, which seem to be rotting from the inside?” (Parliamentary Records 1992).

In 1991, fishing quotas were made transferable, which effectively privatized Iceland’s main resource. Since then, fishing rights have greatly concentrated and discontent with the social ramifications, especially growing economic inequality, has increased (Skaptadóttir, 2000). Kristinn H. Gunnarsson, *People’s Alliance*, framed the issue in class terms, albeit without challenging classlessness as doxa:

“I am not sure all members of parliament will admit and dare to say to their voters they support this legislation that creates a special class in this country, to divide this society into classes. On one hand the haves and on the other the have-nots. To put in place a tenancy system as here described...Is that the society we want?” (Parliamentary Records 1993).

Gunnarsson’s words are characterized by societal class ambivalence, where Iceland’s feudal past is used to project a future where Icelandic society, currently classless, is divided by class. Societal class ambivalence is also evident in a joint op-ed written by representatives of left and right wing students at *Akureyri Junior College*, which reflects the shared doxic assumptions of dominant and dominated alike: “If a student is deterred from studying what he wants then all plans to increase freedom of choice have gone awry... [W]e live in a relatively classless society, but it seems to us a cornerstone of class division has been laid if this bill becomes law...” (“Open Letter to Ólafur G. Einarsson, Minister of Education” 1994).

Classlessness as doxa is a testament to the ideology of egalitarianism and homogeneity and the symbolic power of the dominant. Classlessness as doxa derives its power from the unquestioned belief that it presents

things as they are. Politicians cultivate it as self-evident truth and the public passively contributes to its entrenchment by accepting and repeating its propositions. However, doxic views are rarely undisputed. There are always heretics, especially among the dominated. This excerpt from a speech by Þórhildur Þorleifsdóttir, *Women's List*, is an example: “The myth of a classless society is maintained by averages. But the reality of each and everyone is no average and people falling below the average truly experience how great the class division and the income disparities are” (Parliamentary Records 1989). Challenges such as these would become much more common.

Pushing the limits (1995-September 2008)

Conditions for change are set up when a habitus meets structures very different from those under which it was formed. A crisis constitutes such a situation because it disrupts the immediate adjustment of habitus to field. Crisis calls for a different discourse and what has been unspoken is brought into discussion (Bourdieu 1977).

The 1995 through September 2008 period brought an unprecedented crisis of prosperity (Durkheim 1933) that seriously upset the Icelandic social order, not the least by blurring social boundaries. Rapid neoliberal globalization increased flow of capital, technologies, goods, and people across the national border, which challenged a clearly bounded Icelandic national identity and along with it, notions of classlessness. Traditionally, the Icelandic economy was been inward looking, heavily regulated, and centralized. In the early 1990s, a conservative-led government started an aggressive neoliberalization program (Wade 2009). Joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994 allowed Iceland access to Europe's single market and to enjoy its free movement of goods, persons, services, and capital. Excessive foreign credit helped Icelanders to diversify its economy from fishing and aluminum smelting, to financial services (Sigurjónsson 2010). EEA-membership allowed Icelanders to recruit foreign labor, which led to a great increase in immigration, peaking at 8.1 percent in 2008. Correspondingly, Iceland, previously relatively monocultural, became more multicultural (Statistics Iceland 2009). This led to great prosperity, with the Icelandic stock market growing nine-fold between 2001 and 2007. By 2007, the average income was close to \$70,000, almost 60% higher than in the United States. More importantly, aforementioned developments spurred the greatest increase in economic inequality of any advanced industrialized country at the time. Between 1993 and 2007, the top 1% of families' share of the national income grew from 4% to an astounding 20% and the Gini-coefficient increased from 0.26 in 1994 to 0.44 in 2007

(Kristjánsson and Ólafsson 2009). This reflected dramatic changes to the class structure, especially the emergence of a super-rich, transnational capitalist class (Sklair 2000):

The [Icelandic] class system has transformed over the last 15 years, from a relatively homogeneous class system into a polarized class system — in which the social cleavage between the transnational capitalist class and the traditional capitalist class is deepening alongside the increasing polarization between wage earners and the capitalist classes (Jónsson 2008: 143).

The super-rich and the merely rich indulged in unprecedented levels of conspicuous consumption (Veblen 2004) in their quest for distinction. This is important because “a class is defined as much by its *being-perceived* as by its *being*... [and while consumption] need not be conspicuous in order to be symbolic” (Bourdieu 1984:483, emphasis original), it increases its chances of being defined in class terms. The new conspicuous consumption ideal had profound effects as it trickled down, breaking long-held social codes of egalitarianism and moderation. As people tried to keep up with the Joneses, household debt reached 103% of GDP by 2007 (Wade 2009).

Paralleling aforementioned structural and cultural changes, there was a great increase in (critical) class discourse and class awareness (see figures 1 and 2). Classlessness as doxa became contested in the political field and was no longer confined to “the universe of the un-discussed.” Societal class ambivalence gave way to reflexivity as the dominated increasingly questioned classlessness as doxa. Margrét Frímannsdóttir, *People's Alliance*, criticized the government's neoliberal policies, saying: “... [the government had] in recent years worked in an organized manner to establish economic class division in Iceland... [This was] breaking down the Icelandic welfare system, increasing inequality, and undermining the solidarity that had prevailed until now” (“Resource Rent Ensures Just Distribution of Dividends” 1997). *Social Democrat*, Össur Skarphéðinsson, on the issue of ever increasing economic inequality, similarly argued: “To date, all political parties have agreed nothing should be done in Icelandic society to threaten [our] classlessness and equality. Davíð Oddsson and the Independence Party are breaking the social pact of a classless society” (2003). Guðjón Kristjánsson, *Liberal Party*, also criticized the government for its role in increasing economic inequality: “...we no longer live in a classless society. We hear about profits in the millions or billions for some while others barely have food on their plates. The gap between the rich and poor increases constantly... Many ordinary people have wages so low that they live hand-to-mouth” (“No Longer A Classless Society” 2005).

Challenges to classlessness as doxa by the dominated spurred discursive struggles with the dominant. This was especially evident in discussions relating to the extremes of the class structure: poverty and the extreme wages of the super-rich. The poverty discussion became particularly intense following the publication of *The*

Icelandic Way (Ólafsson 1999), which claimed there was more poverty and greater economic inequality in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries, and two Red Cross reports in 2000 arguing prosperity had bypassed low-income groups. Guðrún Ögmundsdóttir, *Social Democratic Party*, blamed the government for neglecting the poor: “Class division seems to be a fact...” She quoted a *Morgunblaðið* editorial: “Nowadays it is utterly impossible for an affluent nation like Iceland to accept such social conditions. It is in the interest of all, that conditions like this will be alleviated as soon as possible” (“A Dispute Over Whether Prosperity Has Reached Everyone” 2000). Davíð Oddsson, *Independence Party*, then Prime Minister, replied saying inequality and poverty are inevitable: “...one is hard-pressed to find a more classless society than Iceland” (“A Dispute Over Whether Prosperity Has Reached Everyone” 2000). Oddsson’s remarks define Iceland against the class-ridden “Other” and are consistent with Bourdieu in that it serves dominant interests to defend doxa.

A similar story unfolded in political debates over the extreme wages of the super-rich (rationalized as necessary because of global competition). Guðjón Kristjánsson, *Liberal Party*, analyzed the situation thus: “Our society is small and cohesive...everybody knows everyone and this is a bad development for us...Icelandic society has until recently had little class division” (“More of Extreme Wages to the State” 2006). This had changed, now Iceland had a super-rich class. Össur Skarphéðinsson, *Social Democratic Alliance*, offers a striking example of how societal class ambivalence had given into heightened reflexivity for the dominated: “Iceland is becoming the most class-divided country in Europe and income differences between those with the highest and lowest incomes have never been as great... [This is] ruining Icelandic classlessness” (“The Pension Funds Are Strong Weapons against Extreme Wage Policy” 2006). Addressing the same issue, Þorgerður Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, *Independence Party*, defended classlessness as doxa: “...Iceland is not and has not been class-divided...” (“More of Extreme Wages to the State” 2006). The dominant view is bound up with societal class ambivalence, highlighted by this quote from Elínbjörg Magnúsdóttir, *Independence Party*: “Icelanders pretend to know something about class division but that is bullshit. Britain, now that is another story” (“This is Just One’s Fate” 2006).

Although the dominant defended classlessness as doxa, they realized neoliberal globalization had changed Icelandic society and expressed concerns over what excessive economic differences might do to Iceland’s “cultural classlessness.” They did this, though, without using class terms, which is one way of protecting classlessness as doxa. Guðni Ágústsson, *Progressive Party*, for example, opined:

“I think [extreme wages are] a very unfortunate development for our small society... We are all descended from poor people. We are a small family and we want our children to walk together, be it the CEO or the worker and we have considered this one of the most important characteristics of our society” (“More of Extreme Wages to the State” 2006).

Similarly, Þorgerður Katrín, *Independence Party*, said of extreme wages: “The companies must realize they cannot go against the national soul and national consciousness, but it is hard to know where the gap lies” (“More of Extreme Wages to the State” 2006).

Lastly, high rates of immigration, another corollary of rapid globalization, aroused bi-partisan concerns that immigrants might come to form an underclass in Icelandic society. Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, *Social Democratic Alliance*, commented:

An essential element of the Nordic model is to reduce class division and to give people equal opportunities to full participation in society. It appears, however, that a new underclass is forming in the Nordic countries — a class of people of foreign origin who... have played a significant role in growing our economies... We have to prevent large groups from developing identities as powerless and peripheral to the community. That undermines the social structure and breeds feelings of inferiority, anger and conflict (2006).

Reflexivity in Recession (October 2008-2012)

“Everything suggests that an abrupt slump in objective to subjective aspirations is likely to produce a break in the tacit acceptance which the dominated classes [have participated in]” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:97).

Prolonged prosperity brought Iceland the highest standard of living in the world (UNPD 2007), excessive consumption patterns (Wade 2009) and a historic peak in public economic expectations (Capacent 2007). The crisis of prosperity escalated until the bubble burst when all three of Iceland’s major banks collapsed in late September 2008. This constituted the largest banking collapse in history relative to economic size and catapulted Iceland into “the greatest financial crisis ever” (Krugman 2010). The Icelandic króna fell more than 95 percent against the dollar and Iceland became the first developed country in 30 years to require assistance from the IMF. In January 2009, annual inflation reached 18.7 percent, the highest in Europe (Eurostat 2009). Household debt increased significantly, and even before the collapse it was higher than in any other European country or the USA (IMF 2009). Unemployment rose from 1.5 percent in September 2008 to its highest point of 9.1 percent in April 2009 (Directorate of Labor 2009). Early in this turmoil a protest movement emerged that helped bring down the government.

The economic crisis made Icelanders very critical of the social changes foreshadowing it. Resentment was mostly reserved for politicians and the super-rich, the most visible manifestations of “New Iceland” that had now collapsed under its own weight. Many questioned taken for granted ideas, including notions of relative

classlessness. Guðmundur Magnússon, historian and long-time *Independence Party* member, captured the feeling of a paradise lost in *New Iceland: The Art of Losing Oneself*, published shortly after the collapse:

In the last fifteen years or so, the global free market settled in Iceland with all its pros and cons. A new society has taken shape, partly through our own actions, partly due to globalization, and as a result of our EEA-membership (208)...[and when] this book comes out, we find ourselves in the midst of the turmoil and we do not know where it will take us. Many believe we are seeing the end of New Iceland...this society of affluence and plutocracy... Only time will tell whether that is correct” (7).

Focusing on the conspicuous and “foreign” lifestyles and growing influence of the super-rich, contrasted with the conditions of the poor, the book highlights how neoliberal globalization increased class division, which, in turn, eroded Icelanders’ egalitarianism. Similarly, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, *Social Democratic Alliance*, argued the super-rich “stopped adhering to Icelandic norms, took up the lifestyles of foreign billionaires and turned their nose up at the myth of the Icelandic classless society” (2009:).

Greater reflexivity was especially apparent among the dominated immediately following the collapse. Jón Baldvin Hannibalsson, former chairman of the *Social Democratic Party*, in a review of *New Iceland* observed:

The author [Magnússon] draws up an attractive image of yesteryear’s classless society...[and] contrasts it with the risk-junkies of yesterday’s casino. Doling out extreme wages, benefits, and bonuses. Everything justified with the theory of performance-based salaries to motivate... However, there is reason to question the image of classless Iceland of the past. Families of fishermen and workers...lived in run-down basements or shacks and their families barely had food on their plates when unemployment hit. The rich of the time paid little tax. There was a huge and obvious gap between the haves and have-nots (2008:).

Heightened reflexivity was most evident in a 2,300 page, nine-volume report of the *Althingi Special Investigation Commission* (2010) into the collapse of the banking system, written by some of Iceland’s most respected academics and called “the most important document in the history of Iceland” by one social commentator (Helgason 2010). The report documents:

how economic power concentrated in the hands of few so that around the turn of the millennium a new, privileged class lived in more luxury than ever before in this country...their life of luxury...characterizes the ethics of excess, showing-off, and smugness and runs counter to the values characterizing Icelandic society in the 20th century (“A More Ethical Approach is Imperative” 2010).

The report served as an important platform to understand what went wrong and what needed to be done in rebuilding Icelandic society. Lilja Rafney, *Left Green Party*, inspired by the report, commented:

“The prelude to the collapse was characterized by the moral bankruptcy of bank managers in taking extreme wages, stock options, and excessive bonuses... One of the things characterizing this time period was rapidly increasing wage disparity, class division, and inequality” (Parliamentary Records 2010).

On the whole, the dominant also accepted the report, albeit begrudgingly as their policies, actions, and inactions were widely blamed for the collapse. Sigurður Ingi Jóhannsson, *Progressive Party*, offered these reflections on the “greedization” of society in the years leading up to the collapse:

... what has been called one of the main strengths of our society became its primary weakness. The short lines of communication and lack of formality of the classless society proved to be an excellent playground for those who used the financial system as if they were playing Monopoly one evening and thought the next day they could start all over again without causing anybody harm. Unfortunately, said parties did not stick to such games (Parliamentary Records 2010).

Jóhannsson’s words reflect how the dominant largely saw “New Iceland” as an aberration and the collapse as inevitable given the worldwide “Great Recession” and having little to do with their actions. If anyone was to blame, however, it was the super-rich.

Reflexivity and class awareness peaked shortly after the collapse and then receded. This is evidenced by a significant decrease in class discourse following the collapse (figure 1) and the return of societal class ambivalence. In this period, societal class ambivalence appeared mainly in a willingness to talk about class division in pre-collapse “New Iceland,” combined with a reluctance to discuss class division in post-collapse Iceland. The dominant also continued defending classlessness as doxa by defining Icelandic society in opposition to “class societies.” Here, Tómas Ingi Olrich, *Independence Party*, argues against joining the EU because Iceland is fundamentally different from the rest of Europe.

...the EU also holds another common cultural heritage of Europe. The phenomenon in question is complicated. It is so complex there is no word for it in Icelandic. The word “hierarchica” means some sort of hierarchical system, where each individual is ranked. This hierarchical system was implemented as the basis of feudalism over the course of a few centuries and eventually reached the whole of Europe. There were, however, two exceptions: Switzerland and Iceland (“A Pan-European Cultural Heritage” 2011).

It seems counterintuitive that class awareness would decrease under conditions of such widespread economic hardship. However, we must take into consideration the nature of the crisis, which many saw as a break from a derailed “New Iceland” and a chance to rebuild “Old Iceland.” As a result, the economic collapse allowed Icelanders to draw a meaningful boundary to define themselves against: the increasingly class-divided pre-collapse Iceland. The crisis also facilitated a power shift in the political field, with Iceland’s first pure left-wing government (*Social Democratic Alliance* and *Left-Green Socialists*) taking over from the ousted conservative-led government. Members of the new left-wing government toned down their pre-collapse class rhetoric and opted for a more consensual approach. Also, not only did the super-rich (and the merely rich) lose their prestige and high status following the collapse, but also much of their wealth and incomes as the stock market was virtually

wiped out and many businesses went under. The media diligently covered their fall from grace, with many stories in a “Bad Apples” frame as opposed to the “Admiration” frame of years past (Kendall 2011). Since Icelanders’ class worldviews focus mainly upward, it is understandable that class became less salient once they witnessed the “downfall” of this new super-rich reference group. Relative deprivation is particularly significant in societies that emphasize egalitarianism, because egalitarian beliefs motivate upward social comparisons. The same goes for economic prosperity, upward social mobility and low class-based segregation (Runciman 1966) and the visibility of affluent people. All apply to Iceland’s prosperity period, which created conditions for “upward (unfavorable) social comparisons” (Bernburg et al. 2009). The economic collapse, however, seems to have ameliorated people’s relative deprivation, as supported by a study which found that Icelanders generally saw the class structure become “flatter” (more egalitarian) and their own class position improve even as the crisis deepened (Oddsson 2013). Also, only 18% of Icelanders thought the crisis more negatively affected them than other countrymen (Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2013). More importantly, after peaking in 2007, economic inequality decreased fast following the collapse, with the Gini-coefficient declining from 0.44 in 2009 to .. in 2012. This decrease in economic inequality was characterized by high-income individuals losing proportionately more following the collapse than low-income individuals and a more progressive tax code shifting tax the burden from middle- and low-income groups to high-income groups (Ólafsson and Kristjánsson 2012). As a result, relative poverty decreased (). The aftermath of the collapse was accompanied by overt denunciations of the hedonistic pre-collapse period, combined with a return to more egalitarian values, including more modest and less conspicuous consumption patterns. Lastly, another explanation class awareness and class discourse not increase in the years following the economic crisis is because although class inequality had increased sharply leading up to the collapse it had not become “crystallized” at that high level. More importantly, the super-rich had not become a culturally homogeneous upper class, which presumably would have drawn more class-based and “us versus them” rhetoric. This might also explain why political discourse became increasingly fragmented following the collapse (Weeden and Grusky 2012), evidenced by an all-time high of fifteen political parties running for office in the 2013 parliamentary elections.

Conclusions

Iceland’s economic crisis, and especially the crisis of prosperity foreshadowing it, undermined the previously unquestioned and now contested assumption that Iceland is a relatively classless society and heightened general

class awareness. Reflexivity over classlessness as doxa in the political field and overall class awareness increased markedly alongside increasing economic inequality as Iceland's crisis of prosperity escalated. This was manifested by societal class ambivalence giving way to more critical reflections over Iceland's relative classlessness, albeit primarily among the dominated in the political field. Challenges to classlessness as doxa by the dominated gave rise to discursive struggles with the dominant, with the latter attempting to defend classlessness as doxa.

Reflexivity and class awareness peaked immediately following the collapse and then receded. One explanation is that many saw the collapse as a break from the increasingly class-divided pre-collapse Iceland. The crisis also brought to power Iceland's first pure left-wing government, whose members toned down their pre-collapse class rhetoric. The super-rich also lost much of their prestige, status, income, and wealth following the collapse. The super-rich fall from grace made the group less prominent as a reference group, thereby lessening Icelanders' relative deprivation and making class less salient. In fact, a recent study shows that Icelanders saw the class structure "flatten" (become more egalitarian) following the collapse and their own class position improve. More importantly, economic inequality decreased rapidly after peaking in 2007, with high-income individuals losing more than low-income individuals following the collapse and with the tax code becoming more progressive. Relative poverty also decreased. This also could explain why class has become less significant, even during a time of widespread economic hardship. Another explanation for the economic crisis did not generating more class discourse is because although class inequality had increased sharply before the collapse it had not "crystallized," as noted earlier.

A striking feature of recent work in class analysis is that only specific kinds of empirical data are considered relevant (Crompton 2008). I call for a fuller engagement with available empirical data and attempt to show the utility of class analysis using media content. While some scholars examine media content to study other forms of stratification, especially gender and race, class is often overlooked in studies of this kind (Kendall 2011). The originality of this study lies partly in its use of a neglected data source for class analysis: newspapers. However, one limit of this study is that it relies on one newspaper. Nonetheless, *Morgunblaðið* is an excellent source of data for this kind of study. Furthermore, this is only the second study that uses ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1996) to study class discourse (Oddsson 2012). Also, while leading defenders of class see economic inequality as the bedrock of class analysis, economic inequality has increasingly been seen as a separate issue to

the study of class. Like Savage (2000), I argue that economic inequality should be reclaimed for class analysis and one of the more innovative contributions of this study is how it maps class discourse onto data on economic inequality (see also McCall 2013).

Consistent with Bourdieu, this study highlights how class is a profoundly relational process: people's ideas about the class structure of their own society are largely defined in relation to how they perceive the class structures of other societies. Yet, this cross-national context is all but overlooked in studies of class subjectivities, which predominantly emphasize individual class identities and all too often as unrelated to people's world-views (but see Lamont 1992). In Iceland, ideas of classlessness are defined in opposition to other societies: Icelandic society is "classless" relative to the "classness" of other societies. However, these are not free-floating ideas, evidenced by how cultural and structural changes paralleling rapid neoliberal globalization undermined classlessness as doxa and heightened class awareness. Correspondingly, Iceland's perceived "classlessness" decreased vis-à-vis the perceived "classness" of other societies. These findings suggest neoliberal globalization might be heightening class awareness in traditionally homogeneous and egalitarian societies as they increasingly converge with more diverse and inegalitarian societies.

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