

CHAPTER 1
FOUNDATIONS OF CLASS ANALYSIS
IN THE MARXIST TRADITION

Erik Olin Wright

The concept of class has greater explanatory ambitions within the Marxist tradition than in any other tradition of social theory and this, in turn, places greater burdens on its theoretical foundations. In its most ambitious form, Marxists have argued that class – or very closely linked concepts like “mode of production” or “the economic base” – was at the center of a general theory of history, usually referred to as “historical materialism”.¹ This theory attempted to explain within a unified framework a very wide range of social phenomena: the epochal trajectory of social change as well as social conflicts located in specific times and places, the macro-level institutional form of the state along with the micro-level subjective beliefs of individuals, large scale revolutions as well as sit-down strikes. Expressions like “class struggle is the motor of history” and “the executive of the modern state is but a committee of the bourgeoisie” captured this ambitious claim of explanatory centrality for the concept of class.

Most Marxist scholars today have pulled back from the grandiose explanatory claims of historical materialism (if not necessarily from all of its explanatory aspirations). Few today defend stark versions of “class primacy.” Nevertheless, it remains the case that class retains a distinctive centrality within the Marxist tradition and is called upon to do much more arduous explanatory work than in other theoretical traditions. Indeed, a good argument can be made that this, along with a specific orientation to radically egalitarian normative principles, is a large part of what defines the continuing distinctiveness and vitality of the Marxist tradition as a body of thought, particularly within sociology. It is for this reason that I have argued that “Marxism as class analysis” defines the

¹The most systematic and rigorous exposition of the central tenets of historical materials is Cohen (1978).

core agenda of Marxist sociology.²

The task of this chapter is to lay out the central analytical foundations of the concept of class in a way that is broadly consistent with the Marxist tradition. This is a tricky business, for among writers who identify with Marxism there is no consensus on any of the core concepts of class analysis. What defines the tradition is more a loose commitment to the importance of class analysis for understanding the conditions for challenging capitalist oppressions and the language within which debates are waged – what Alvin Gouldner aptly called a “speech community” – than a precise set of definitions and propositions. Any claims about the theoretical foundations of Marxist class analysis which I make, therefore, will reflect my specific stance within that tradition rather than an authoritative account of “Marxism” in general or of the work of Karl Marx in particular.

There will be two principle punchlines to the analysis: first, that the ingredient that most sharply distinguishes the Marxist conceptualization of class from other traditions is the concept of “exploitation”, and second, that an exploitation-centered concept of class provides theoretically powerful tools for studying a range of problems in contemporary society. The goal of this chapter is to make these claims both intelligible and – hopefully – credible. Part I lays out what is the fundamental point of class analysis within Marxism, what it tries to accomplish. This is above all a question of clarifying the normative agenda to which class analysis is linked. In Part II we will carefully go through a series of preliminary conceptual clarifications that are needed to frame the specific analysis of class and exploitation. Some people may find this section a little pedantic, a bit like reading a dictionary in places, but I feel that it is necessary in order for the reasoning on which these concepts are based to be transparent. Part III specifies the core *common* explanatory claims of class analysis in both the Marxist and Weberian traditions. This will be helpful in setting the stage for the discussion in Part IV of the distinctive hallmark of the Marxist concept that differentiates from its Weberian cousins and anchors the broader

² For a more extended discussion of Marxism as class analysis, see Wright, Levine and Sober (1993: chapter 8) and Burawoy and Wright (2001).

theoretical claims and agenda of Marxist class analysis. This will involve, above all, elaborating the concept of exploitation, one of the crucial causal mechanism through which Marxists claim that class relations generate social effects. Finally, in Part V I will briefly lay out what I see as the pay-offs of the Marxian-inspired form of class analysis.

I. The Big Picture: What the Marxist Concept of Class is all about

At its core, class analysis within the Marxist tradition is rooted in a set of normative commitments to a form of radical egalitarianism. Historically, Marxists have generally been reluctant to systematically argue for these moral commitments. Marx himself felt that talk about “justice” and “morality” was unnecessary and perhaps even pernicious, believing that ideas about morality really just reflected material conditions and interests of actors. Rather than defend socialism on grounds of social justice or other normative principles, Marx preferred to simply argue that socialism was in the interests of the working class. Nevertheless, Marx’s own writing is filled with moral judgement, moral outrage and moral vision. More significantly for present purposes, the Marxist tradition of class analysis gets much of its distinctive thrust from its link to a radical egalitarian normative agenda. In order to fully understand the theoretical foundations of the concept of class in the Marxist tradition it is necessary, if only briefly, to clarify this normative dimension.

The underlying radical egalitarianism within Marxist class analysis can be expressed in terms of three theses. I will state these in a stripped-down form, without elaborate qualifications and amendments, since our purpose here is to clarify the character of the agenda of Marxist class analysis rather than to provide a defense of the theory itself:

Radical Egalitarianism thesis: Human flourishing would be broadly enhanced by a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life. This thesis is captured by the classical distributional slogan advocated by Marx, “To each according to need, from each according to ability” and by the ideal of a “classless” society. This is the way material resources are distributed within egalitarian families: children with greater needs receive more resources, and everyone is expected to contribute as best they can to

the tasks needed by the family. This is also the way books are distributed in public libraries: you check out what you need, not what you can afford. The radical egalitarianism of the Marxist tradition affirms that human flourishing in general would be enhanced if these principles could be generalized to the society as a whole.³

Historical possibility thesis: Under conditions of a highly productive economy, it becomes materially possible to organize society in such a way that there is a sustainable radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life. Egalitarian normative principles within the Marxist tradition are thought not to simply reflect some kind of timeless human value, although they may be that as well, but are also meant to be embodied in a practical political project. Central to the Marxist theoretical project is thus the attempt to understand the conditions under which these moral ideals can feasibly be translated into social practice. Here the basic idea is that radical egalitarianism becomes increasingly feasible as a practical principle of social organization as the productive capacity of a society increases and absolute scarcity is reduced. In the strongest version of this thesis, the egalitarian ideals are strictly impossible to implement and sustain until material scarcity is largely overcome; in weaker versions all that is claimed is that high productivity makes a basic egalitarianism of material conditions of life more feasible.

Anti-capitalism thesis: Capitalism blocks the possibility of achieving a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life. One of the great achievements of capitalism is to develop human productive capacity to such an extent that it makes the radical egalitarianism needed for human flourishing materially feasible, yet

³ The question of precisely what is meant by “egalitarianism” and on what grounds this is a justified normative principle has been the subject of considerable debate, some of it informed by the Marxist tradition. For a general overview of the issues see Adam Swift, *Equality, Freedom and Community* (Polity Press, 2001). For a penetrating discussion of an egalitarian theory of justice infused with Marxist sensibilities, see G.A. Cohen, _____.

capitalism also creates institutions and power relations that block the actual achievement of egalitarianism. This sets the stage for the great drama and tragedy of capitalist development: it is a process which continually enhances the material conditions for an expanded scope of human flourishing while simultaneously blocking the creation of the social conditions for realizing this potential. The political punchline of classical Marxism is that these obstacles can only be overcome by destroying capitalism through a revolutionary rupture. More social democratic currents within the Marxist tradition accept the idea that capitalism is the enemy of equality, but reject the ruptural vision of change: capitalism can be transformed from within in ways which gradually move in the direction of a more profoundly egalitarian social order. The full realization of the radical egalitarian ideal may, of course, be a utopian fantasy. But even if “classlessness” is unachievable, “less classness” can be a central political objective, and this still requires challenging capitalism.

Each of these theses is controversial and in need of extended defense, but here I will treat them as assumptions which define the broadest context for thinking about the concept of class.⁴ Whatever else the concept of

⁴ The objections to these theses are fairly familiar. Against the *Radical Egalitarianism thesis* two sorts of arguments are frequently raised: First, even if it is true that equality promotes human flourishing, the redistribution of resources needed for material equality is unjust since it deprives some people of material advantages which they have rightfully acquired, and second, far from creating conditions for a flourishing of human potential, radical material equality would generate passivity, laziness and uniformity. Against the *historical possibility thesis*, many people argue that high levels of economic productivity can only be sustained when people have significant material incentives to invest, both in skills and capital. Any significant move towards radical material equality, therefore, would be unsustainable since it would lead to a decline in material abundance itself. Finally, against the *anti-capitalism thesis*, critics argue that while it may be true that capitalism blocks radical moves towards equality of material conditions of life, it does not block human flourishing; to the contrary, capitalism offers individuals the maximum opportunity to make of their lives what they wish.

class is meant to accomplish, within Marxist class analysis it is meant to facilitate understanding the conditions for the pursuit of this normative agenda. This means that the concept needs to be linked to a theory of capitalism, not just inequality, and it needs to be able to play a role in clarifying the dilemmas and possibilities of egalitarian alternatives to existing institutions.

Let us now turn to the elaboration of the conceptual components with which we can build a concept of class suitable for this agenda.

II. Conceptual components of class analysis

The word “class” is used both as a noun and as an adjective. As a noun, one might ask the question “What class do you think you are in?” and the answer might be “the working class”. As an adjective, the word class modifies a range of concepts: class relations, class structure, class locations, class formation, class interests, class conflict, class consciousness. In general, as will become clear from the analysis which follows, I think the term class is much more productively used as an adjective. Indeed, I think it is usually the case that when people use the term as a noun, they are speaking elliptically. An expression such as “the working class”, for example, is often just a short hand for a more cumbersome expression such as “working class locations within capitalist class relations”, or perhaps, “working class collective organizations within class conflicts”. In any case, I will generally use the term as an adjective and only use the generic term “class” when I am referring to the general conceptual field within which these more specific terms are located.

In order to lay the foundations of Marxist class analysis, therefore, we need to figure out exactly what we mean by this adjective. Here the pivotal concepts are class *relations* and class *structure*. Other terms in the conceptual menu of class analysis – class conflict, class interests, class formation, class consciousness – all derive their meanings from their link to class relations and class structure. This does not mean that for all problems in class analysis, the purely structural concepts of class are more central. It can certainly be the case, for example, that in trying to explain variations over time and place in state policies across capitalist societies, the variations in class formation and class struggle will turn out

to be more important than the variations in class structure as such. Still, at the conceptual foundation of class analysis is the problem of understanding class relations and class structure and thus it is on this issue that we will focus here.

In what follows we will examine seven clusters of conceptual issues: 1. the concept of social relations of production; 2. the idea of class relations as a specific form of such relations; 3. the nature of variations of class relations; 4. the problem of complexity in class relations; 5. the meaning of a “location” within class relations; 6. the distinction between micro- and macro-levels of class analysis. 7. Class “agency”

1. *Social relations of production*

Any system of production requires the deployment of a range of assets or resources or factors of production: tools, machines, land, raw materials, labor power, skills, information, and so forth. This deployment can be described in *technical* terms as a production function – so many inputs of different kinds are combined in a specific process to produce an output of a specific kind. This is the characteristic way that economists think of systems of production. The deployment can also be described in *social relational* terms: the people that participate in production have different kinds of rights and powers over the use of the inputs and over the results of their use.⁵ The actual ways in which inputs are combined and used in production depends as much on the way these rights and powers are

⁵ By “powers” over productive resources I mean *effective control over the use and disposition* of the resources in question. The term “rights” adds the additional idea that these powers are viewed as legitimate and enforced by the state. The expression “property rights” thus means “effective powers over the use of property enforced by the state”. In most contexts in a stable system of production relations there is a close connection between rights and powers, but it is possible that people have effective, durable control over resources without that control being recognized in formal legal terms as a property right. In any case, for most of the analysis proposed here it will not be necessary to emphasize the distinction between rights and powers and thus I will generally use the terms together as a couplet.

wielded as it does on the strictly technical features of a production function. The sum total of these rights and powers constitutes the “social relations of production”.

It is important to keep in mind that these rights and powers over resources are attributes of social relations, not descriptions of the relationship of people to things as such: to have rights and powers with respect to land, for example, defines one’s social relationship to other people with respect to the use of the land and the appropriation of the fruits of using the land productively. This means that the power relations involved in the social relations of production concern the ways in which the activities of people are regulated and controlled, not simply the distribution of a range of valuable things.

2. Class relations as a form of relations of production

When the rights and powers of people over productive resources are unequally distributed – when some people have greater rights/powers with respect to specific kinds of productive resources than do others – these relations can be described as class relations. The fundamental contrast in capitalist societies, for example, is between owners of means of production and owners of labor power, since “owning” is a description of rights and powers with respect to a resource deployed in production.

The rights and powers in question are not defined with respect to the ownership or control of things in general, but only of resources or assets *insofar as they are deployed in production*. A capitalist is not someone who simply owns machines, but someone who owns machines, deploys those machines in a production process, hires owners of labor power to use them, directs the process by which the machines are used to produce things and appropriates the profits from the use of those machines. A collector of machines is not, by virtue owning those machines, a capitalist. To count as a class relation it is therefore not sufficient that there be unequal rights and powers over the sheer possession of a resource. There must also be unequal rights and powers over the appropriation of the results of that use. In general this implies appropriating income generated by the deployment of the resource in question.

3. Variations in class relations

In some ways of using the term “class”, it makes little sense to talk about qualitatively different *kinds* of class relations. Classes are simply identified with some universal, generic categories like “the haves” and “the have nots”. There can still be *quantitative* variation of course – the gap between the rich and poor can vary as can the distribution of the population into these categories. But there is no theoretical space for *qualitative* variation in the nature of class relations.

One of the central ideas in the Marxist tradition is that there are many kinds of class relations, and pinpointing the basis of this variation is of central importance. The basic idea is that different kinds of class relations are defined by the kinds of rights and powers that are embodied in the relations of production. Consider, for example, three kinds of class relations that are often distinguished in the Marxist tradition: *slavery*, *feudalism*, and *capitalism*. In slave class relations, to say that a slave owner “owns” the slave is to specify a range of rights and powers that the slave owner has over one particular resource used in production – people. In the extreme case, the slave owner has virtually absolute property rights in the slave. In capitalism, in contrast, ownership of other people is prohibited. People are allowed to privately own land and capital, but they are prohibited from owning other people. This is one of the great accomplishments of capitalism: it has achieved a radically egalitarian distribution of this particular asset – everyone owns one unit of labor power, themselves.

In these terms, what is commonly called “feudalism” can be viewed as a society within which feudal lords and serfs have *joint* ownership rights in the labor of the serf. The conventional description of feudalism is a society within which the peasants (serfs) are forced to work part of each week on the land owned by the lord and are free to work the rest of the week on land to which they have some kind of customary title. This obligation to work part of the week on the lord’s land means, in effect, that the lord has property rights in the serf which take the form of the right to use the labor of the serf a certain proportion of the time. This ownership is less absolute than that of the slave owner – thus the expression “joint ownership” of the serf by the lord and serf. When a serf flees the land for the town attempting to escape these obligations, the

lord has the right to forcibly go after the serf and bring him or her back. In effect, by fleeing the land the serf has stolen something that belongs to the lord: the rights to part of the labor of the serf.⁶ Just as a factory owner in capitalism would have the right to have the police retrieve machines stolen from the factory by workers, the feudal lord has the right to use coercive powers to retrieve labor stolen from the manor by the serf.

4. *The problem of complexity in class relations*

Much of the rhetoric of class analysis, especially in the Marxist tradition, characterizes class relations in fairly stark, simplified, polarized terms. Class struggles are portrayed as battles between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, between lords and serfs, between slave masters and slaves. This simplified image does capture, at an abstract level, something fundamental about the nature of class relations: they do indeed, as we shall see, generate antagonisms of interests that underlie overt conflicts. But this polarized image is also misleading, for in concrete societies located in time and space class relations are never this simple. One of the tasks of class analysis is to give precision to complexity and explore its ramifications.

Two kinds of complexity are especially important. First, in most societies a variety of different kinds of class relations coexist and are linked together in various ways.⁷ In the American South before the Civil

⁶ The common expression for describing the right of lords to coercively bring peasants back to the land is that the peasant is “tied to the land” by feudal obligations. Since the pivot of this tying to the land is the rights the lord has in the labor of the peasant (or at least the fruits of labor when this takes the form of rents), the content of the class relation really centers on rights and powers over the ownership of labor power.

⁷ A technical term that is often used to describe a situation in which distinct forms of class relations coexist in different units of production is “articulation of modes of production”. Typically in such situations the articulation takes the form of exchange relations between the distinct forms of class relations. In the American South before the Civil War, slavery existed on plantations and capitalism in factories. The plantation provided cotton to factories, and the factories provided agricultural machinery to the plantation

War, for example, slave class relations and capitalist class relations coexisted. The specific dynamics and contradictions of that society came from the way these distinct principles of class relations were combined. Certain kinds of sharecropping in the United States in the early twentieth century contained striking elements of feudalism, again combined in complex ways with capitalist relations. If we are willing to describe state-bureaucratic ownership of the means production as constituting a distinctive kind of class relation, then many advanced capitalist societies today combine capitalism with such statist class relations. To fully understand the class relations of actual societies, then, requires identifying the ways in which different forms of class relations are combined.

Second, as we have already seen in our brief discussion of feudalism, the rights and powers people can have with respect to a given resource are actually complex bundles of rights and powers, rather than simple, one dimensional property rights. It is common when people think about variations in the rights and powers over various factors of production to treat these rights and powers as having a simple, binary structure: you either own something or you do not. In the ordinary everyday use of the term, “ownership” seems to have this absolute character: if I own a book I can do anything I want with it, including burning it, using it to prop open a door, giving it away, selling it, and so on. In fact, even ownership of ordinary things is generally much more complex than this. Some of the rights and powers are held by the “owner” and some are held by other people or collective agencies. Consider, for example, the machines in a capitalist factory. These are owned by the capitalists who own the business in the sense that they purchased them, can sell them, can use them to generate profits, and so on. But this does not mean that the capitalists have absolute, complete rights and powers over the use of those machines. They can only set them in motion, for example, if the machines satisfy certain safety and pollution regulations imposed by the state. If the factory exists in a highly unionized social setting, the capitalist may only be able to hire union members to use the machine. In effect, both state regulations of the machines and union restrictions in the labor market mean that some dimensions of the property rights in the machines have been transferred from the capitalist to a collective agency. This means that absolute capitalist property rights in the means of

production have been at least partially “socialized”.⁸

These kinds of complexity are pervasive in contemporary capitalism: government restrictions on workplace practices, union representation on boards of directors, co-determination schemes, employee stock-options, delegations of power to managerial hierarchies, etc. all constitute various ways in which the property rights and powers embodied in the idea of “owning the means of production” are decomposed and redistributed. Such redistribution of rights and powers constitutes a form of variation in class relations. Such systems of redistributed rights and powers move class relations considerably away from the simple, abstract form of perfectly polarized relations. This does not mean that the class relations cease to be *capitalist* – the basic power over the allocation of capital and command of profits remains, in spite of these modifications, under private control of capitalists – but it does mean that capitalist class structures can vary considerably depending on the particular ways these rights and powers are broken down, distributed and recombined.

One of the objectives of class analysis is to understand the consequences of these forms of variation of class relations. Such complexity, however, is still complexity in the form of class relations, not some other sort of social relation, since the social relations in question are still constituted by the unequal rights and powers of people over economically relevant assets.

5. *Class locations*

Since for many research problems sociologists want to treat class – along with such things as age, gender, race, religion, education, nationality, and so on – as an attribute of persons, sociological discussions of class often

⁸This can also be described as a situation in which capitalist class relations and socialist class relations *interpenetrate*. If *articulation* of different class relations refers to a situation in which distinct class relations exist in distinct units of production and then interact through external relations, *interpenetration* of different class relations is a situation in which within a single unit of production the distribution of rights and powers over assets combines aspects of two distinct types of class relations.

revolve more around the problem of class *locations* than the analysis of class *relations* as such. If sociologists want to predict voting behavior, for example, a standard kind of model is to look at all the attributes of persons which could be thought to influence voting preferences. Some of these might be stable, permanent attributes, such as sex or class *origin*; others might be relatively stable, but changeable, such as current class location; and others quite transient, such as current income.

There is nothing wrong in using the category class in research in this way. But, at least within the Marxist tradition, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that “class locations” designate the social positions occupied by individuals within a particular kind of social relation, class relations, not simply an attribute of the person. The premise behind the idea of social relations is that when people go about their lives in the world, when they make choices and act in various ways, their actions are systematically structured by their relations to other people who are also making choices and acting.⁹ “Social relation” is a way of talking about the inherently structured inter-active quality of human action. In the specific case of class relations, the claim is that the rights and powers people have over productive resources are important for the structured inter-active quality of human action. To talk about a “location” within a class relation, then, is to situate individuals within such structured patterns of interaction.

Since, as I have argued, the relations in “class relations” are multidimensional and complex, the locations within those relations must also be specified in a complex way. If class relations were themselves perfectly polarized – if there was an absolute disjuncture between the

⁹ To say that people make choices and act in structured relations with other choosing/acting individuals leaves open the best way to theorize choosing and acting. There is no implication, for example, that choices are made on the basis of some process of rational maximization, or even that all actions are consciously chosen. There is also no implication, as methodological individualists would like to argue, that the explanation of social processes can be reduced to the attributes of the individuals choosing and acting. The relations themselves can be explanatory. The concept of social relation being used here, therefore, does not imply rational choice theory or methodological individualism.

rights and powers of the different locations-within-relations – then it would be a fairly easy task to define the “class locations” occupied by individuals within those relations. In capitalism everyone would either be a worker or a capitalist. Actual class relations, as we have seen, are not generally so simple, and this poses a challenge for the specification of class locations. The trick, then, is to introduce complexity into the analysis of class locations in a systematic and rigorous manner rather than seeing complexity as haphazard and chaotic.¹⁰

One important aspect of the complexity of class locations is what I termed “contradictory locations within class relations”. Managers within corporations, for example, can be viewed as exercising some of the powers of capital – hiring and firing workers, making decisions about new technologies and changes in the labor process, etc. – and in this respect occupy the capitalist location within the class relations of capitalism. On the other hand, in general they cannot sell a factory and convert the value of its assets into personal consumption, and they can be fired from their jobs if the owners are unhappy. In these respects they occupy the working class location within class relations. The assumption behind this analytical strategy for understanding the class character of managers, then, is that the specific pattern of rights and powers over productive resources that are combined in a given location define a set of real and significant causal processes. Contradictory locations are like a chemical compound the properties of which can best be explained by uncovering the specific way in which different elements – different rights and powers with respect to the various assets used in production – are combined rather than treating such locations as unitary, one dimensional categories.

Besides contradictory locations within class relations there are a number of other forms of complexity in the ways people are located within class relations:

- Individuals can hold two jobs which are differently located within

¹⁰ For a general inventory of complexities in the specification of class locations, see Erik Olin Wright, *The Debate on Classes*, pp. -----, and *Class Counts*, pp.17-29.

social relations of production: a person can be a manager or a worker in a firm and self-employed in a second job. Such a person in effect is simultaneously in two class locations.

- Some people within working class locations within a capitalist firm may also own stocks (either in the firm in which they work or in other firms), and thus occupy, if only to a limited extent, a capitalist location as well.
- Some jobs are part of career trajectories – sequences of orderly job changes over time – in which there is a reasonable probability that the class character of these jobs will change over time. In some work organizations, for example, nonmanagerial employees have a realistic prospect of being promoted into management and even of moving up managerial hierarchies. Since a class “location” should be thought of as having a temporal dimension, this means that the location within class relations of people within such careers has what might be termed temporal complexity.
- To make matters even more complicated, in families in which more than one person occupies a paid job, the jobs of husbands and wives are frequently in different class locations. This too adds complexity to the problem of locating a person within a class structure, since such family ties link persons to the class locations of spouses.¹¹

These kinds of complexities in specifying class locations make certain common ways of talking about class problematic. People often ask the question “how many classes are there?” My own work on class structure, for example, has been described as offering a “12-class model”

¹¹Married couples in two earner families occupy what might be termed a direct class location (via their own jobs) and a mediated class location (via their spouse’s job). In a significant proportion of such households, these do not coincide. For a more detailed and sustained discussion of direct and mediated class locations see Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts*, chapter 10.

since in some of my research I have constructed a 12-category class variable in order to study such things as class consciousness or class mobility. Within the framework I am proposing here, this kind of question is, I think, misconstrued. A class “location” is not “a class”, it is a location-within-relations. The number of such locations within an analysis of class structure, then, depends upon how fine-grained an account is needed for the purposes at hand. For some research questions, a relatively fine-grained differentiation of locations within class relations is desirable, since the precise ways in which persons are connected to rights-and-powers-over-resources may be of explanatory importance. In my research on the relationship between class location and class consciousness, for example, I felt that a fairly refined set of categories would be relevant.¹² For other problems, a more coarse-grained description of locations-within-relations may provide more insight. In my work on the problem of class compromise I felt a much simpler two-location class model consisting only of workers and capitalists was appropriate.¹³

6. *Macro- and Micro-class analysis*

Class analysis is concerned with both macro- and micro-levels of analysis. The basic concept for macro-class analysis is *class structure*. The sum total of the class relations in a given unit of analysis can be called the “class structure” of that unit of analysis. One can thus speak of the class structure of a firm, of a city, of a country, perhaps of the world. Traditionally, the nation state has been the favored unit of analysis for the specification of class structure. This has been justified, in part, because of the importance of the state as the institution for enforcing the pivotal rights and powers over assets that constitute the stuff of class relations. Nevertheless, depending upon the problem under investigation,

¹²see *Class Counts*, chapter 14.

¹³Erik Olin Wright, “Working-Class Power, Capitalist-Class Interests and Class Compromise,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 105, Number 4 (January 2000): 957-1002

other units of analysis may be appropriate.

The macro-level of class analysis centers on the effects of class structures on the unit of analysis in which they are defined. The analysis of how the international mobility of capital constrains the policy options of states, for example, constitutes a macro-level investigation of the effects of a particular kind of class structure on states. The analysis of how the concentration or dispersion of ownership of capital in a particular sector affects the conditions for union organizing would be a macro-level investigation of class formation.

The micro-level of class analysis attempts to understand the ways in which class impacts on individuals. At its core is the analysis of the effects of class locations on various aspects of individual lives. Analyses of labor market strategies of unskilled workers, or the effects of technological change on class consciousness, or political contributions of corporate executives would be examples of micro-level class analysis.

Micro- and Macro-levels of class analysis are linked in complex ways. On the one hand, class structures are not disembodied wholes generating macro-level effects independently of the actions and choices of individuals: macro-processes have micro-foundations. On the other hand, the micro-processes through which a person's location in class relations shapes their opportunities, consciousness and actions occur in macro-contexts which deeply affect the ways in which these micro-processes operate: micro-processes are mediated by macro-contexts. Class analysis, like all sociological analysis, seeks to understand both the micro- and macro-levels and their interactions.

7. Class "agency"

The issues we have so far addressed have been almost entirely *structural* in character. That is, we have examined the nature of the social relations in which people live and act and how these can be understood in class terms, but we have not said much about action itself. Marxist class analysis is ultimately about the conditions and process of social change, and thus we need a set of categories in terms of which the actions of people that reproduce and transform these social relations can be understood. Five concepts are particularly relevant for this purpose: class interests, class consciousness, class practices, class formations and class

struggle.

- Class *interests*: These are the material interests of people derived from their location-within-class-relations. “Material interests” include a range of issues – standards of living, working conditions, level of toil, leisure, material security, and other things. To describe the interests people have with respect to these things as “class” interests is to say that the opportunities and trade-offs people face in pursuing these interests are structured by their class locations. An account of these interests provide the crucial theoretical bridge between the description of class relations and the actions of individuals within those relations.
- class *consciousness*: the subjective awareness people have of their class interests and the conditions for advancing them.
- class *practices*: The activities engaged in by individuals, both as separate persons and as members of collectivities, in pursuit of class interests.
- class *formations*: The collectivities people form in order to facilitate the pursuit of class interests. These range from highly self-conscious organizations for the advance of interests such as unions, political parties, and employers associations, to much looser forms of collectivity such as social networks and communities.
- class *struggle*: Conflicts between the practices of individuals and collectivities in pursuit of opposing class interests. These conflicts range from the strategies of individual workers within the labor process to reduce their level of toil, to conflicts between highly organized collectivities of workers and capitalists over the distribution of rights and powers within production.

III. The Explanatory Claims: *The fundamental metathesis of class analysis*

The fundamental metathesis of class analysis is that class (i.e. class relations, class locations, and class structure), understood in the above way, has systematic and significant consequences both for the lives of individuals and the dynamics of institutions. One might say “class counts” as a slogan. At the micro-level, whether or not one sells one’s labor power on a labor market, whether or not one has the power to tell other people what to do in the labor process, whether or not one owns large amounts of capital, whether or not one possesses a legally-certified valuable credential, etc. have real consequences in the lives of people. At the macro-level it is consequential for the functioning of a variety of institutions whether or not the rights over the allocation and use of means of production are highly concentrated in the hands of a few people, whether or not certain of these rights have been appropriated by public authority or remain privately controlled, whether or not there are significant barriers to the acquisition of different kinds of assets by people who lack them, and so on. To say that “class counts,” then, is to claim that the distribution of rights and powers over the basic productive resources of a society have significant, systematic consequences at both the micro- and macro-levels of social analysis.

At the core of these kinds of claims is a relatively simple pair of more specific propositions about the effects of class relations:

Proposition 1. What you *have* determines what you *get*.

Proposition 2. What you *have* determines what you *have to do to get what you get*.

The first of these concerns, above all, the distribution of *income*. The class analysis claim is, therefore, that the rights and powers people have over productive assets is a systematic and significant determinant of their standards of living: *what you have determines what you get*. The second of these causal processes concerns, above all, the distribution of economic *activities*. Again, the class analysis thesis is that the rights and powers over productive assets is a systematic and significant determinant

of the strategies and practices people engage in to acquire their income: whether they have to pound the pavement looking for a job; whether they make decisions about the allocation of investments around the world; whether they have to worry about making payments on bank loans to keep a farm afloat. *What you have determines what you have to do to get what you get.* Other kinds of consequences that are linked to class – voting patterns, attitudes, friendship formation, health, etc. – are second-order effects of these two primary processes. When class analysts argue, for example, that class locations help explain voting, this is usually because they believe that class locations shape the opportunities for standards of living of people and these opportunities affect political preferences, or because they believe class location affects the lived experience of people within work (i.e. the experiences generated by the activities of work) and these in turn affect preferences.

These are not trivial claims. It could be the case, for example, that the distribution of the rights and powers of individuals over productive resources has relatively little to do with their income or economic activities. Suppose that the welfare state provided a universal basic income to everyone sufficient to sustain a decent standard of living. In such a society what people get would be significantly, although not entirely, decoupled from what they own. Similarly, if the world became like a continual lottery in which there was virtually no stability either within or across generations to the distribution of assets, then even if it were still the case that relations to such assets *statically* mattered for income, it might make sense to say that class didn't matter very much. Or, suppose that the central determinant of what you have to do to get what you get was race or sex or religion and that ownership of economically-relevant assets was of marginal significance in explaining anyone's economic activities or conditions. Again, in such a society, class might not be very explanatory (unless, of course, the main way in which gender or race affect these outcomes was by allocating people to class positions on the basis of their race and gender). The sheer fact of inequalities of income or of domination and subordination within work is not proof that class counts; what has to be shown is that the rights and powers of people over productive assets has a systematic bearing on these phenomena.

IV. Marxist class analysis¹⁴

As formulated above, there is nothing uniquely Marxist about the explanatory claims of class analysis. “What people get” and “what people have to do to get what they get” sounds very much like “life chances.” Weberian class analysts would say very much the same thing. It is for this reason that there is a close affinity between Marxist and Weberian concepts of class (although less affinity in the broader theoretical frameworks within which these concepts figure or in the explanatory reach class is thought to have).

What makes class analysis distinctively Marxist is the account of specific mechanisms which are seen as generating these two kinds of consequences. Here the pivotal concept is *exploitation*. This is the conceptual element which anchors the Marxist concept of class in the distinctive Marxist agenda of class analysis.

Exploitation is a complex and challenging concept. It is meant to designate a particular form of interdependence of the material interests of people, namely a situation that satisfies three criteria:

- (1) *The inverse interdependent welfare principle*: the material welfare of exploiters causally depends upon the material deprivations of the exploited.
- (2) *The exclusion principle*: this inverse interdependence of the welfare of exploiters and exploited depends upon the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources.
- (3) *The appropriation principle*: Exclusion generates material advantage to exploiters because it enables them to appropriate the labor effort of the exploited.

Exploitation is thus a diagnosis of the process through which the inequalities in incomes are generated by inequalities in rights and powers over productive resources: the inequalities occur, in part at least, through

¹⁴ Parts of this section are drawn from Wright, *Class Counts*, chapter, pp. 9-19

the ways in which exploiters, by virtue of their exclusionary rights and powers over resources, are able to appropriate surplus generated by the effort of the exploited.

If the first two of these principles are present, but not the third, what might be termed nonexploitative economic oppression may exist, but not exploitation. In nonexploitative economic oppression, it is still true that the welfare of the advantaged group is at the expense of the disadvantaged, and this inverse relationship is itself based on the ownership and control over economic resources. But in nonexploitative oppression there is no appropriation of labor effort, no transfer of the fruits of labor from one group to another.

The crucial implication of this difference between these two types of inequality is that in nonexploitative economic oppression the privileged social category does not itself *need* the excluded category. While their welfare does depend upon the exclusion principle, there is no on-going interdependence of their activities. In the case of exploitation, the exploiters actively need the exploited: exploiters depend upon the effort of the exploited for their own welfare. Consider, for example, the contrast between the treatment of indigenous people by European settlers in North America and in Southern Africa. In both places the material welfare of the white settlers was secured through a process of exclusion of the indigenous people from access to the land. The welfare of the settlers was therefore causally linked to the deprivations of the indigenous people, and this causal link centered on control of resources. The two cases differ sharply, however, on the third criterion. In South Africa white settlers depended significantly on the labor effort of indigenous people, first as tenant farmers and farm laborers and later as mineworkers. In North America the European settlers did not rely on the labor of Native Americans. This meant that in North America when resistance by Native Americans to their dispossession from the land was encountered by white settlers, a strategy of genocide could be pursued. There is an abhorrent American folk expression, popular in the 19th century, which reflects this reality of the nonexploitative economic oppression of Native Americans: “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” It is no accident that there is no expression of the form “The only good worker is a dead worker”. One might say “the only good worker is an obedient worker or a conscientious worker,” but not “a dead worker.”

Exploitation, in a sense, imposes constraints on the exploiter, and this is captured in the contrast between North American A south Africa.

This deep interdependence makes exploitation a particularly explosive form of social relation for two reasons: First, exploitation constitutes a social relation which simultaneously pits the interests of one group against another and which requires their ongoing interactions; and second, it confers upon the disadvantaged group a real form of power with which to challenge the interests of exploiters. This is an important point. Exploitation depends upon the appropriation of labor effort. Because human beings are conscious agents, not robots, they always retain significant levels of real control over their expenditure of effort. The extraction of effort within exploitative relations is thus always to a greater or lesser extent problematic and precarious, requiring active institutional devices for its reproduction. Such devices can become quite costly to exploiters in the form of the costs supervision, surveillance, sanctions, etc. The ability to impose such costs constitutes a form of power among the exploited.

Exploitation, as defined here, is intimately linked to the problem of *domination*, that is, the social relations within which one person's activities are directed and controlled by another. Domination occurs, first, in the exclusion principle: "owning" a resource gives one power to prevent other people from using it. The power exercised by employers to hire and fire workers is the clearest example of this form of domination. But domination also occurs, in most instances, in conjunction with the appropriation principle, since the appropriation of the labor effort of the exploited usually requires direct forms of subordination, especially within the labor process, in the form of bossing, surveillance, threats, etc. Together exploitation coupled with domination define the central features of the structured interactions within class relations.

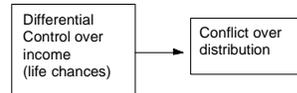
In Weberian class analysis, just as much as in Marxist class analysis, the rights and powers individuals have over productive assets defines the material basis of class relations. But for Weberian-inspired class analysis, these rights and powers are consequential primarily because of the ways they shape *life chances*, most notably life chances within market exchanges, rather than the ways they structure patterns of exploitation and domination. Control over resources affects bargaining

capacity within processes of exchange and this in turn affects the results of such exchanges, especially income. Exploitation and domination are not centerpieces of this argument.

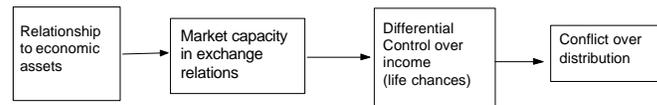
This suggests the contrast between Marxist and Weberian frameworks of class analysis illustrated in figure 1. Both Marxist and Weberian class analysis differ sharply from simple gradational accounts of class in which class is itself directly identified within inequalities in income, since both begin with the problem of the social relations that determine the access of people to economic resources. In a sense, therefore, Marxist and Weberian definitions of class relations in capitalist society share the same basic operational criteria. Where they differ is in the theoretical elaboration and specification of the implications of this common set of criteria: the Marxist model sees two causal paths being systematically generated by these relations – one operating through market exchanges and the other through the process of production itself – whereas the Weberian model traces only one causal path, and the Marxist model elaborates the mechanisms of these causal paths in terms of exploitation and domination as well as bargaining capacity within exchange whereas the Weberian model only deals with the bargaining within exchange. In a sense, then, the Weberian strategy of class analysis is contained within the Marxist model.

Of course, any Weberian can include an analysis of class-based domination and exploitation within any specific sociological inquiry. One of the charms of the Weberian analytical framework is that it is entirely permissive about the inclusion of additional causal processes. Such an inclusion, however, represents the importation of Marxist themes into the Weberian model; the model itself does not imply any particular importance to these issues. Frank Parkin once made a well known quip in a book about class theory that “Inside every neo-Marxist is a Weberian struggling to get out”. The argument presented here suggests a complementary proposition, that “Inside every leftist neo-Weberian is a Marxist struggling to stay hidden.”

I. Simple Gradational Class Analysis



II. Weberian Class Analysis



III. Marxist Class Analysis

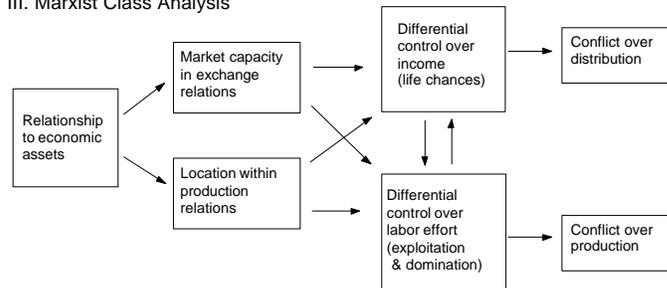


Figure 1
Three Models of Class Analysis

IV. The pay-off: what are the advantages of the Marxist strategy of class analysis?

Not everyone who is interested the study of class in capitalist society accepts the radical egalitarianism of the Marxist normative agenda. What if one believes that emancipatory transformations of capitalism, however morally attractive, are utopian fantasies? Or even more critically, what if one believes that capitalism isn't especially oppressive? If one rejects the relevance of the Marxist normative agenda, does this necessarily imply a complete rejection of the Marxist conceptualization of class as well? I think not. There are a number of reasons that elaborating the concept of class in terms of exploitation and domination has theoretical pay-offs beyond the specific normative agenda of Marxist class analysis itself:

1. *Linking exchange and production.* The Marxist logic of class analysis affirms the intimate link between the way in which social relations are organized within exchange and within production. This is a substantive, not definitional, point: the social relations which organize the rights and powers of individuals with respect to productive resources systematically shapes their location both within exchange relations and within the process of production itself. This does not mean, of course, that there is no independent variation of exchange and production, but it does imply that this variation is structured by class relations.

2. *Conflict.* One of the standard claims about Marxist class analysis that it foregrounds conflict within class relations. Indeed, a conventional way of describing Marxism in sociological textbooks is to see it as a variety of "conflict theory." This characterization, however, is not quite precise enough, for conflict is certainly a prominent feature of Weberian views of class as well. The distinctive feature of the Marxist account of class relations in these terms is not simply that it gives prominence to class conflict, but that it understands conflict as generated by *inherent properties of those relations* rather than simply contingent factors. Exploitation defines a structure of inter-dependent antagonistic interests in which advancing the interests of exploiters depends upon their capacity to impose harms on the exploited. This is a stronger antagonism

of interests than simple competition, and it underwrites a strong prediction within Marxist class analysis that class systems will be conflict ridden.

3. *Power.* At the very core of the Marxist construction of class analysis is not simply the claim that class relations generate deeply antagonistic interests, but that they also give people in subordinate class locations forms of power with which to struggle for their interests. As already noted, since exploitation rests on the extraction of labor effort, and since people always retain some measure of control over their own effort, they always confront their exploiters with capacities to resist exploitation.¹⁵ This is a crucial form of power reflected in the complex counter-strategies exploiting classes are forced to adopt through the elaboration of instruments of supervision, surveillance, monitoring, and sanctioning. It is only by virtue of this inherent capacity for resistance – a form of social power rooted in the interdependencies of exploitation – that exploiting capacities are forced to devote some of their resources to insure their ability to appropriate labor effort.

4. *Coercion and consent.* Marxist class analysis contains the rudiments of what might be termed an endogenous theory of the formation of consent. The argument is basically this: The extraction of labor effort in systems of exploitation is costly for exploiting classes because of the inherent capacity of people to resist their own exploitation. Purely coercively backed systems of exploitation will often tend to be suboptimal since under many conditions it is too easy for workers to withhold diligent performance of labor effort. Exploiting classes will therefore have a tendency to seek ways of reducing those costs. One of the ways of reducing the overhead costs of extracting labor effort is to do things

¹⁵It is important to note that one need not accept the normative implications of the concept of “exploitation” to recognize the problem of the “extraction of labor effort”. This is one of the central themes in discussions of principal/agent problems in transaction costs approaches to organization. For an discussion of class and exploitation specifically in terms of p/a issues, see Bowles and Gintis (1990).

which elicit the active consent of the exploited. These range from the development of internal labor markets which strengthen the identification and loyalty of workers to the firms in which they work to the support for ideological positions which proclaim the practical and moral desirability of capitalist institutions. Such consent-producing practices, however, also have costs attached to them, and thus systems of exploitation can be seen as always involving trade-offs between coercion and consent as mechanisms for extracting labor effort.

This argument points to a crucial difference between systems of nonexploitative oppression and exploitative class relations. In nonexploitative oppression, there is no dependency of the oppressing group on the extraction of labor effort of the oppressed and thus much less need to elicit their active consent. Purely repressive reactions to resistance – including genocidal repression – are therefore feasible. This is embodied in the abhorrent 19th century American folk expression “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”, an expression which reflects the fact that native Americans were generally not exploited, although they were certainly oppressed. The comparable, if less catchy, expression for workers would be “the only good worker is an obedient worker”; it would make no sense to say “the only good worker is a dead worker”. This contrast points to the ways in which an exploitation-centered class analysis suggests an endogenous understanding of the construction of consent.

5. Historical/comparative analysis. As originally conceived, Marxist class analysis was an integral part of a sweeping theory of the epochal structure and historical trajectory of social change. But even if one rejects historical materialism, the Marxist exploitation-centered strategy of class analysis still provides a rich menu of concepts for historical and comparative analysis. Different kinds of class relations are defined by the specific mechanisms through which exploitation is accomplished, and these differences in turn imply different problems faced by exploiting classes for the reproduction of their class advantage and different opportunities for exploited classes to resist. Variations in these mechanisms and in the specific ways in which they are combined in concrete societies provide an analytically powerful road map for comparative research.

These are all reasons why a concept of class rooted in the linkage between social relations of production on the one hand and exploitation and domination on the other should be of sociological interest. Still, the most fundamental pay-off of these conceptual foundations is that way it infuses class analysis with moral critique. The characterization of the mechanisms underlying class relations in terms of exploitation and domination focuses attention on the moral implications of class analysis. Exploitation and domination identify ways in which these relations are oppressive and create harms, not simply inequalities. Class analysis can thus function not simply as part of a scientific theory of interests and conflicts, but of an emancipatory theory of alternatives and social justice. Even if socialism is off of the historical agenda, the idea of countering the exploitative logic of capitalism is not.

References (incomplete)

Burawoy Michael and Erik Olin Wright. 2001. "Sociological Marxism", in *Handbook of Sociological Theory*, edited by Turner (Praeger Publishers)

Wright, Levine and Sober (1993: chapter 8)