A General Framework for the Analysis of Class Structure*

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The Point of Departure: Neo-Marxist Analyses of Class Structure

At the heart of the recent resurgence of Marxist theorizing on the problem of class has been what might be termed the "embarrassment" of the middle class. For all of their disagreements, all Marxists share a basic commitment to a polarized abstract concept of class relations. Yet, at least at first glance, the concrete class structures of contemporary advanced capitalist societies look anything but polarized. ¹ This empirical evidence of a large middle class has provided critics of Marxism with one of their principal arguments against Marxist class theory. In response, a variety of solutions to the problem of the middle class have been proposed in the recent Marxist debates.

Without going into any detail, it is possible to identify four broadly different strategies that Marxists have adopted to deal with the conceptual problem of nonpolarized class positions within a logic of polarized class relations.² First, the class structure of advanced capitalist societies really is polarized; the "middle class" is strictly an ideological illusion. This position deals with the problem of the middle class by

*This essay appeared in 1984, just before the publication of Classes. It represents a basic summary of the core arguments of the book, and does not reflect any of the new thinking on the problems of class which has been stimulated by the subsequent debate.

1. The scope of this paper will be restricted to the problem of class structure as such. This is not to suggest that class structure exhausts class analysis: the problems of class formation, class struggle, and class consciousness are also important and will be touched on briefly toward the end of the paper. My assumption is, however, that the decoding of the structural properties of class is a conceptual precondition for elaborating these other aspects of class theory. For a discussion of the interconnection among these aspects of class analysis, see E.O. Wright, Class, Crisis and the State (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 97-108.

2. For a more detailed review of these alternatives, see E.O. Wright, "Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure," Politics and Society, vol. 9, no. 3 (1980).
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denying the problem itself. Second, the middle class should be viewed as a segment of some other class, typically a “new petty bourgeoisie” or “new working class.” In this strategy the basic class map of capitalism remains intact, but significant internal differentiations within classes are added to the analysis. Third, the middle class is really a new class in its own right, completely distinct from either the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, or the petty bourgeoisie. Sometimes this class is given a specific name, such as the Professional Managerial Class, sometimes it is simply called “the New Class.” By adding entirely new classes to the class structure, this approach more radically alters the class map of capitalism than the class-segment strategy. Fourth, the positions aggregated under the popular rubric “middle class” are not really in a class at all. Rather they should be viewed as locations that are simultaneously in more than one class, positions that I have characterized as “contradictory locations within class relations.” Managers, for example, should be viewed as simultaneously in the working class (in so far as they are wage laborers dominated by capitalists) and in the capitalist class (in so far as they control the operation of production and the labor of workers). This strategy departs most from the traditional Marxist vision of class structure since the very meaning of a “location” is altered: there is no longer a one-to-one correspondence between structural locations filled by individuals and classes.

I no longer feel that this fourth solution is satisfactory. Specifically, it suffers from two important problems that it shares with most other neo-Marxist conceptualizations of class structure: it tends to shift the analysis of class relations from exploitation to domination; and it implicitly regards socialism—a society within which the working class is the “ruling class”—as the only possible alternative to capitalism.

Domination versus Exploitation

Throughout the development of the concept of contradictory class locations I have insisted that this was a reformulation of a distinctively

Marxist class concept. As part of the rhetoric of such an enterprise, I affirmed the relationship between class and exploitation. Nevertheless, in practice the concept of contradictory locations within class relations rested almost exclusively on relations of domination rather than exploitation. This difference in emphasis to exploitation functioned more as a background concept to the discussion of classes than as a constitutive element of the analysis of class structures. Managers, for example, were basically defined as a contradictory location because they were simultaneously dominators and dominated. Domination relations were also decisive in defining the class character of “semiautonomous employees”—locations that, I argued, were simultaneously petty bourgeois and proletarian by virtue of their self-direction within the labor process—since “autonomy” defines a condition with respect to domination. This same tendency of substituting domination for exploitation at the core of the concept of class is found in most other neo-Marxist conceptualizations of class structure.

For some people, of course, marginalizing the concept of exploitation is a virtue, not a sin. My own view, however, is that this is a serious weakness. The marginalization of exploitation both undermines claims that classes have “objective” interests and erodes the centrality Marxists have accorded class in social theory.

The concept of domination does not in and of itself imply any specific interest of actors. Parents dominate small children, but this does not imply that they have intrinsically opposed interests to their children. What would make those interests antagonistic is if the relation of parents to children were exploitative as well. Exploitation, unlike domination, intrinsically implies a set of opposing material interests. If we can find some way to retain some sense in which the interests of individuals as members of classes are not simply whatever interests those individuals subjectively hold, then the shift to a domination-centered concept renders this more difficult.

Domination-centered concepts of class also tend to slide into what can be termed “the multiple oppressions” approach to understanding

7. The concept of “objective interests” is, needless to say, highly contested, and even if we place exploitation at the center of our analysis of class it is still problematic to assert that classes so defined have unequivocal objective interests. The claim rests on the assumption that individuals have objective interests in their material conditions of existence regardless of what they think, but this claim is open to dispute. For useful discussions of the problem of objectivity of interests, see: R. Geuss, The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); W. Connolly, “On Interests in Politics,” Politics and Society, 2, no. 4 (1972), pp. 459-77; and I. Balbus, “The Concept of Interest in Pluralist and Marxist Analysis,” Politics and Society, February 1971.
society. Societies, in this view, are characterized by a plurality of oppressions each rooted in a different form of domination—sexual, racial, national, economic—none of which has any explanatory priority over any other. Class, then, becomes just one of many oppressions, with no particular centrality for social and historical analysis. How peculiar class is in a given society becomes an historically contingent question. Again, this displacement of class from the center stage may be viewed as an achievement rather than a problem. It may be that class should not occupy a privileged place in social theory. But if one believes, as Marxists traditionally have believed, that only by giving class this central place is it possible to develop a scientific theory of the trajectory of historical development, and in particular, a theory of the real historical alternatives to capitalism, then the domination-centered concept of class risks eroding the theoretical justification for Marxian class analysis itself.

**Classes in Postcapitalist Societies**

Classical Marxism was absolutely unequivocal about the historical prognosis for capitalism: socialism—and ultimately communism—was the future of capitalist societies. The bearer of that necessary future was the working class. The polarized class structure within capitalism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat thus paralleled the polarized historical alternatives between capitalism and socialism.

The actual historical experience of the twentieth century has called into question, although not unambiguously refuted, this historical vision. As I have argued elsewhere, it is necessary to at least entertain the possibility of postcapitalist class structures. The difficulty is that with few exceptions, the conceptual frameworks adopted by Marxists for analyzing capitalist class relations do not contain adequate criteria for understanding postcapitalist classes. In particular, all of the class categories in my analysis of contradictory locations within class relations were either situated firmly within capitalist relations (bourgeoisie, managers, workers) or in contradictory locations involving basically precapitalist relations (semiautonomous employees, the petty bourgeoisie, small employers). There were no elements within this analysis of class relations in capitalist society that could point the direction for the analysis of postcapitalist classes. The result is a tendency for discussions of postcapitalist class structures—the class structures of "actually existing socialism"—to have a very ad hoc character to them. These conceptual problems—the shift from exploitation to domination and the lack of a conceptual basis for analyzing postcapitalist classes—are there really two theoretical alternatives that could be pursued. One possibility is to celebrate the shift to a domination-centered concept and use this new class concept as the basis for analyzing both capitalist and postcapitalist society. This would lead class analysis firmly in the direction of Dahrendorf’s analysis of classes as positions within authority relations. A second alternative is to attempt to restore exploitation as the center of class analysis in such a way that it can both accommodate the empirical complexities of the middle class within capitalism and the historical reality of postcapitalist class structures. It is this second course of action that I will pursue in the rest of this paper.

The basis for this reconstruction of an exploitation-centered concept of class comes from the recent work of John Roemer. While Roemer himself has not been particularly concerned with problems of empirical investigation or the elaboration of concrete maps of class structures, the model for this reconstruction has been Roemer’s pioneering work on the concepts of exploitation and class and the class analysis of the Marxian critique of Marxism. Roemer is actively engaged in a circle of scholars who meet periodically to discuss problems of the conceptual foundations of Marxian theory that includes Jon Elster, G.A. Cohen, Adam Przeworski, Philippe Van Parijs, Robert Van der Veen, Robert Brenner, and myself.


9. One might also argue that the important Marxists accord class as not necessary for a theory of historical trajectories. Such a theory could perhaps be based on gender, the state, or other factors. Indeed, the legitimacy of a theory of historical trajectories can itself be rejected. Historical development could be viewed as a strictly contingent outcome of an array of autonomous causal processes rather than having any overall determination. These are serious objections and cannot be dismissed out of hand. For present purposes my claim is simply that if one does want to retain the traditional Marxist commitment to class analysis, then the shift to a domination-centered concept of class poses problems. For a preliminary discussion of some of these arguments, see E. O. Wright, “‘Giddens’s Critique of Marxism,’ *New Left Review*, no. 139 (1983); and idem, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), ch. 2.


nevertheless his work does provide a rich foundation for such endeavors. As I will attempt to show, with suitable modification and extension, his strategy of analysis can provide a rigorous basis for resolving the problems in the concept of contradictory class locations.

Roemer's Account of Class and Exploitation

The Concept of Exploitation

We observe inequalities in the distribution of incomes, the real consumption packages available to individuals, families, groups. The concept of exploitation is a particular way of analyzing such inequalities. To deny the growing inequality as reflecting exploitation is to make the claim that there exists a particular kind of causal relationship between the incomes of different actors. More concretely, we will say that the rich exploit the poor when two things can be established: that the welfare of the rich causally depends on the deprivations of the poor—the rich are rich because the poor are poor; and that the welfare of the rich depends upon the effort of the poor—the rich, through one mechanism or another, appropriate part of the fruits of labor of the poor. The first of these criteria by itself defines economic oppression, but not exploitation. Unemployed workers, in these terms, are economically oppressed but not exploited. Exploitation implies both economic oppression and appropriation of at least part of the social surplus by the oppressor. 14

The traditional Marxist concept of exploitation is clearly a special case of this general concept. In Marxist exploitation one class appropriates the surplus labor performed by another class through various mechanisms. The income of the exploiting class comes from the labor performed by the exploited class. There is thus a straightforward causal linkage between the poverty and effort of the exploited and the affluence of the exploiter. The latter benefits at the expense of the former.

Roemer has attempted to elaborate this view of exploitation using two strategies. The first of these involves studying through a series of formal mathematical models the flows of "surplus labor" from one category of actors to another in the course of various exchange relations; the

second involves adopting a kind of game-theory approach to specifying different forms of exploitation. Let us briefly examine each of these in turn.

The Labor-Transfer Approach

The analysis of labor transfers is an extension of the traditional Marxist view of exploitation, although Roemer self-consciously does not rely on the labor theory of value in order to explore such labor transfers. 16 The main target of his analysis is the view, commonly held by Marxists, that a necessary condition for the exploitation of labor in a market economy is the institution of wage labor. Roemer demonstrates two basic propositions. First, Roemer demonstrates that exploitation can occur in an environment in which all producers own their own means of production, in which there is no market in labor power and no credit market (that is, no borrowing). The only things that are traded are products. In such an economy if different producers own different amounts of productive assets such that different producers have to work different numbers of hours to produce the exchange-equivalent of their own subsistence, then free trade among these producers will lead to exploitation of the asset poor by the asset rich. What Roemer shows in this simple economy is not simply that some producers work less than others for the same subsistence, but that the workers who work less are able to do so because the less-endowed producers have to work more. The critical proof in this example is that if the asset-poor person simply stopped producing—died—and the asset-rich person took over the asset-poor's assets, then the asset-rich producer would have to work longer hours than before to maintain the same subsistence. 17 There is thus not merely an inequality among the producers in this economy, but exploitation as well.

14. For a fuller discussion of the distinction between economic oppression and exploitation, see Wright, Classes, ch. 3.

15. Roemer has demonstrated, convincingly I think, that there are particular circumstances in which Marxist exploitation does not correspond to this more general definition: there are cases where there are labor transfers from one actor to another that would be technically exploitative in the Marxist sense but that do not satisfy the above conditions. For the present purposes we need not engage these special cases.

16. While Roemer's work should not be viewed as an example of the "Steffan" critique of the labor theory of value, he shares with Steffan economists like I. Steedman, Marx after Steffan (London: Verso, 1977), the thesis that the labor theory of value should be discredited entirely. It is, in Roemer's view, simply wrong as the basis for any theoretical understanding of exchange and unnecessary for an understanding of capitalist exploitation.

17. The technical form of the argument involves constructing general equilibrium models based on relatively simple maximizing behaviors of the actors. As in all general equilibrium models, these models depend upon the specific assumptions adopted concerning preference structures and production functions. Recently, in an essay entitled, "Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?" Working Paper no. 221 (University of California, Davis, Department of Economics, 1983), Roemer has shown that it is possible to construct models in which the outcomes violate the logic of the concept of exploitation (for example, if the preference for leisure over labor declines as ownership of assets increases, then it can happen that labor transfers will flow from the rich to the poor under certain institutional arrangements). For the purposes of the present analysis, I will ignore these complications.
Second, Roemer demonstrates that there is complete symmetry in the structure of exploitation in a system in which capital hires wage laborers and in a system in which workers rent capital (that is, systems with credit and labor markets). For this analysis, he compares the class structures and patterns of exploitation on the two imaginary islands, "labor-market island" and "credit-market island." On both islands some people own no means of production and other people own varying amounts of the means of production. The distribution of these assets is identical on the two islands. And on both islands people have the same motivations: they all seek to minimize the amount of labor-time they must expend to achieve a common level of subsistence. The two islands differ in only one respect: on the labor-market island people are allowed to sell their labor power, whereas on the credit-market island people are prohibited from selling their labor power but are allowed to borrow at an interest rate, the means of production. Roemer shows that on each island there is a strict correspondence between class location (derived from ownership of differing amounts of means of production, including no means of production) and exploitation status (having one's surplus labor appropriated by someone else). This is what he terms the "Class-Exploitation Correspondence Principle." He also shows that the two class structures are completely isomorphic: every individual on one island would be in exactly the same exploitation status on the other island.

The upshot of these two propositions (and others that Roemer explores) is the claim that market-based exploitation is strictly a consequence of inequalities in the distribution of the means of production. However, while this may typically play itself out through a labor market, there is only one concrete institutional form for such exploitation: it is not the necessary condition for the exploitation to occur.

The Game-Theory Approach

While the labor-transfer analyses of exploitation were primarily designed to reveal the underlying logic of exploitation in market exchanges, the game-theory approach is used by Roemer to compare different systems of exploitation. The idea is to compare different systems of exploitation by treating the organization of production as a "game" and asking if a coalition of players would be better off if they withdrew from the game under certain specified procedures. Different types of exploitation are defined by the withdrawal rules that would make certain agents better off.

More formally, Roemer argues that a coalition of actors S can be said to be exploited, and another coalition S' (the complement of S) can be said to be exploiting, if "there is no alternative, which we may conceive of as hypothetically feasible, in which S would be better off than in its present situation, [and if] under this alternative, the complement to S . . . would be worse off than at present." The counterfactual in these two conditions is meant to convey the sense in which the welfare of S' is causally dependent upon the deprivation of S. Roemer uses this strategy to define three kinds of exploitation: feudal exploitation, capitalist exploitation, and what he refers to as socialist exploitation. Let's begin with capitalist exploitation. Workers own no physical assets; wages are allowed to become the means of production for wage labor. Are workers exploited under capitalism? The answer to this question, in the game theoretic formulation, requires positing an alternative game to the game of capitalism within which the two conditions specified above hold. What is the alternative? It is a game within which each worker receives his/her per capita share of society's total productive assets. What Roemer demonstrates is that if the coalition of all wage earners were to leave the game of capitalism with their per capita share of society's assets, then they would be better off by playing in capitalism, and capitalists would be worse off. The "withdrawal rule" in this case—leaving the game with per capita shares of physical assets—then becomes the formal "test" of whether or not a particular social system involves capitalist exploitation.

In contrast, the withdrawal rule to specify feudal exploitation is leaving the game with one's personal assets (rather than one's per capita share of total social assets). This is equivalent to the feudal sort being freed from all obligations based on personal bondage. Peasants would be better off under such circumstances; feudal lords would be worse off.

20. Strictly speaking, in terms of the general definition of exploitation presented at the outset of this discussion, these two criteria merely define economic oppression, not exploitation, since the results do not imply anything about the relationship between the effort of the exploited and the welfare of the exploiter. Roemer recognizes this difficulty and has added a number of additional criteria at various points in his analysis to eliminate certain problems (for example, the handicapped exploiting the well-bodied). Nevertheless, these two counterfactual criteria remain the core of Roemer's game theoretic analysis.

21. But note: workers in capitalism are not feudally exploited; they would be worse off, not better off, if they withdrew from the game of capitalism with only their personal assets. As Roemer argues, the claim by neoclassical theorists that wage earners in capitalism are not exploited is generally equivalent to the claim that they are not feudally exploited, that is, that they are not subjected to surplus extraction based on relations of personal bondage. See Roemer, A General Theory, p. 206.
The concept of the socialist exploitation is the least systematically worked out in Roemer's analysis. The withdrawal rule in this case is leaving the game with one's per capita share of inalienable assets (skills). A coalition will be said to be socialistically exploited if it would improve its payoffs by leaving with its own skills while its coalition partner would be worse off under such circumstances. This implies that people with high levels of skills in the game receive high income not simply because they have high skills, but because of the differentials in skill levels across actors. The highly skilled would become worse off if the unskilled obtained skills; they thus have an interest in maintaining skill differentials, and this is what underpins the claim that their income results from exploitation.22 If a skilled person's income reflected no more than the amount of time and resources it takes to obtain the skill, then there would be no skill-based exploitation. The higher incomes would simply be reimbursement for real costs incurred. The argument behind skill exploitation is that people with scarce skills receive incomes above the costs of producing those skills, a "rent" component to their income; it is this element that constitutes exploitation.23

Class and Exploitation

The central message of both Roemer's strategies for analyzing exploitation is that the material basis of exploitation is inequalities in distributions of productive assets, or what is usually referred to as property relations. On the one hand, inequalities of assets are sufficient to account for transfers of labor surplus; on the other hand, different forms of asset inequality specify different systems of exploitation. Classes are then defined as positions within the social relations of production derived from these relations of exploitation.24

These conclusions have led Roemer to challenge directly the tendency of Marxists (like myself) to define class relations primarily in terms of domination over the relations within production. Of course, exploiting classes dominate exploited classes in the sense of preventing the exploited classes from taking the exploiting class's productive assets. But domination within production, Roemer insists, is not a central part of defining class relations as such.25

In previous work I have criticized Roemer's position on this issue.26 I argued that class relations intrinsically involved domination at the point of production,27 which I identified as the "point of production" as such obtain the skill, then there would be no skill-based exploitation. The higher incomes would simply be reimbursement for real costs incurred. The argument behind skill exploitation is that people with scarce skills receive incomes above the costs of producing those skills, a "rent" component to their income; it is this element that constitutes exploitation.23

22. The asset-exploitation nexus thus depends upon the capacity of asset-holders to deprive others of that asset. The social basis of exploitation, understood in this way, is quite similar to Frank Parkin's characterization of Weber's concept of social closure as "the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles." F. Parkin, Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). While Parkin's central concern is with the kinds of attributes that serve as the basis for closure—race, religion, language—Roemer's is with the nature of the resources (productive assets) over which closure is organized.

23. Marx did not refer to the inequalities in income in a socialist society as the result of exploitation, and he did not refer to the relation between the skilled and unskilled as a class relation; nevertheless, Roemer's account corresponds well to Marx's analysis of inequality in socialism as laid out in his Critique of the Gotha Program. In that document Marx emphasized that skill-based inequalities would persist in socialism and that distribution would be on the basis of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his work." Only in communism would distribution be on the basis of need, which in effect implies that skill differentials would cease to be assets (income-generating wealth).

24. Roemer's conceptualization of the relationship between class and exploitation is similar in certain aspects to Alvin Gouldner's, although Roemer is unaware of Gouldner's work. Gouldner defines the "New Class" as a cultural bourgeoisie defined as a control over "cultural capital," where "capital" is defined as "any produced object used to make saleable utilities, thus providing its possessor with incomes, or claims to incomes defined as legitimate because of their imputed contribution to economic productivity." (Future of Intellectuals, p. 21). While Gouldner does not characterize this income allocation process in terms of exploitation, Roemer's exploitation concept would fit comfortably within Gouldner's general approach.

25. This is not to imply that domination in the labor process is institutionally unimportant, or indeed, that such domination does not in practice intensify capitalist exploitation and reinforce the capital-labor class relation. Roemer's point is simply that it is not the actual criterion for class relations; that criterion is strictly based on property relations as such.

26. Wright, "The Status of the Political."
definitions. Property-relations accounts of classes do not define classes by income shares, by the results of market transactions, but by the productive assets that classes control, which lead them to adopt certain strategies within exchange relations and which thereby determine the outcomes of those market transactions.

Toward a General Framework of Class Analysis

Extending Roemer’s Analysis

The heart of Roemer’s analysis is the linkage between the distribution of productive assets of various sorts and exploitation. Different mechanisms of exploitation are defined by different kinds of assets, and different class systems are defined by which of these assets is most important for shaping the patterns of exploitation in the society.

In Roemer’s own explicit formulation, only two kinds of assets are formally considered: physical assets (alienable assets in his terminology) and skill assets (inalienable assets). The distinction between exploitation in feudalism and exploitation in capitalism revolves around the nature of the withdrawal rules with respect to physical assets (withdrawing with one’s personal assets to define feudal exploitation versus withdrawing with one’s per capita share of assets to define capitalist exploitation). The feudal case, however, can be characterized in a somewhat different way. Labor power is a productive asset.27 In capitalist societies everyone owns one unit of this asset, namely themselves. In feudalism, on the other hand, ownership rights over labor power are unequally distributed: feudal lords have more than one unit, serfs have less than one unit. To be sure, it is not typical of feudalism for serfs to own no labor power—they are generally not slaves divested of all ownership rights in their own labor power—but they do not have complete effective control over their own persons as productive actors, and this is what it means to “own” one’s own labor power assets.28 The withdrawal rule that defines feudal exploitation can then be specified as leaving the feudal game with one’s per capita share of society’s assets in labor power, namely one unit. Feudal exploitation is thus exploitation (transfers of labor) that results from inequalities in the distribution of assets in labor power.29

Reformulating feudal exploitation in this manner makes the game-theory specification of different exploitations in Roemer’s analysis symmetrical: feudal exploitation is based on inequalities generated by ownership of labor-power assets; capitalist exploitation on inequalities generated by ownership of alienable assets; socialist exploitation on inequalities generated by ownership of inalienable assets. And corresponding to each of these exploitation-generating inequalities of assets, there is a specific class relation: lords and serfs in feudalism, bourgeoisie and proletariat in capitalism, experts and workers in socialism.

But how, it might be asked, should “actually existing socialist societies” be theorized within these categories? The anticapitalist revolution in Russia resulted in the virtual elimination of private property in the means of production: individuals cannot own means of production, they cannot inherit them or dispose of them on a market, and so on. And yet it seems unsatisfactory to characterize such societies simply in terms of skill-based exploitation. Experts do not appear to be the “ruling class” in those societies, and the dynamic of the societies does not seem to revolve around skill inequalities as such.

Roemer recognized this problem and introduced what he termed “status exploitation” to deal with it.30 The exploitation exercised by bureaucrats is the prototypical example. “If these positions,” Roemer writes, “required special skills, then one might be justified in calling the differential remuneration to these positions an aspect of socialist [skill-based] exploitation. . . . [However] there is some extra remuneration to holders of those positions which accrues solely by virtue of the position and not by virtue of the skill necessary to carry out the tasks associated with it. These special payments to positions give rise to status exploitation.”31

Roemer’s concept of status exploitation is unsatisfactory for two principal reasons. First, it is outside of the logic of the rest of his analysis of exploitation. In each of the other cases, exploitation is rooted in relations to the forces of production. Each of the other forms of exploitation is “materialist” not only because the concept is meant to explain

27. See G.A. Cohen, Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 40–41, for a discussion of why labor power should be considered part of the forces of production (that is, a productive asset).

28. In this formulation, slavery should be viewed as a limiting case of feudal exploitation, where the slave has no ownership rights at all in his/her own labor power, while the slave owner has complete ownership rights in slaves.

29. In this formulation it might be possible to regard various forms of discrimination—the use of descriptive criteria such as race, sex, nationality to bar people from certain occupations, for example—as a form of feudal exploitation. In effect there is not equal ownership of one’s own labor power if one lacks the capacity to use it as one pleases equally with other agents. This view of discrimination corresponds to the view that discrimination is antithetical to “bourgeois freedoms.”

30. Roemer is an economist, and the use of the word status was not meant to evoke the meanings generally attached to this word in sociology.

material distribution, but also because it is based on the relation to the material conditions of production. "Status" exploitation has no necessary relationship to production at all. Second, it is hard to rigorously distinguish status exploitation from feudal exploitation. The "lord" real wage is remuneration in a petty because of an incumbency in a position, not because of skills or ownership of capital. Yet, it hardly seems reasonable to consider the logic of exploitation and classification in the contemporary Soviet Union and in fourteenth-century feudal Europe as being essentially the same.

The problems with the concept of status exploitation can be solved by analyzing exploitation based on a fourth element in the inventory of productive assets, an asset that can be referred to as "organization." As both Adam Smith and Marx noted, the technical division of labor among producers is itself a source of productivity. The way the production process is organized is a productive resource independent of the expenditure of labor power, the use of means of production, or the skills of the producer. Of course there is an interrelationship between organization and these other assets, just as there is an interdependence between means of production and skills. But organization—the conditions of coordinated cooperation among producers in a complex division of labor—is a productive resource in its own right.

How is this asset distributed in different kinds of societies? In contemporary capitalism, organization assets are generally controlled by managers and capitalists: managers control the organization assets within specific firms under constraints imposed by the ownership of the capital assets by capitalists. Entrepreneurial capitalists directly control both kinds of assets (and probably skill assets as well), pure center capitalists ("coupon clippers") only own capital assets. Because of the anarchy of the capitalist market, no set of actors controls the technical division of labor across firms.

In state bureaucratic socialism, organization assets assume a much greater importance. Controlling the technical division of labor—the coordination of productive activities within and across labor processes—becomes a societal task organized at the center. The control over organization assets is no longer simply the task of firm-level managers but extends into the central organs of planning within the state. Exploitation in such societies is thus based on bureaucratic power: the control over organization assets defines the material basis for class relations and exploitation.

The control of organization assets bears a close relation to the problem of authority and hierarchy. The asset is organization. The activity of using that asset is coordinated decision making over a complex technical division of labor. When that asset is distributed unequally, some positions have effective control over much more of the asset than others, then the social relation with respect to that asset takes the form of hierarchical authority. Authority, however, is not the asset as such; organization is the asset and is controlled through a hierarchy of authority.

The claim that effective control over organization assets is a basis of exploitation is equivalent to saying that nonmanagers would be better off and managers/bureaucrats worse off if nonmanagers were to withdraw with their per capita share of organization assets (or equivalently, if organizational control were democratized); and that by virtue of effectively controlling organization assets managers/bureaucrats control part or all of the socially produced surplus.

A Typology of Class Structures, Assets, and Exploitation

If we add organization assets to the list in Roemer's analysis, we generate the more complex typology presented in Table 1. Let us briefly look at each row of this table and examine its logic. Feudalism is a class system based on unequal distribution of ownership rights in labor power. What "personal bondage" means is that feudal lords have partial effective economic control over vassals. The empirical manifestation of this unequal distribution of ownership rights over labor power in classical feudalism is the coercive extraction of labor dues from serfs. When corvée labor is commuted to rents in kind and eventually money rents, the feudal character of the exploitation relation is reflected in legal

32. Roemer acknowledges the similarity between feudal exploitation and status exploitation but treats this just as an interesting parallel rather than as a problem. Ibid., p. 243.

33. The term state bureaucratic socialism is somewhat awkward, but I do not know of a better expression. The term state socialism, although I have used it elsewhere in discussing such societies (E.O. Wright, "Capitalism's Futures," Socialism Review, no. 68 [1983]) has the disadvantage of identifying the class relations strictly with the state as such rather than with the material basis of exploitation in such societies (control over organization assets).

34. This "control of the surplus," it must be noted, is not the equivalent of the actual personal consumption income of managers and bureaucrats, any more than capitalist profits or feudal rents are the equivalent of the personally consumed income of capitalists and feudal lords. It is historically variable both within and between types of societies what fraction of the surplus effectively controlled by exploiting classes is used for personal consumption and what portion is used for other purposes (feudal military expenditures, capitalist accumulation, organization growth). The claim that managers/bureaucrats would be "worse off" under conditions of a redistribution of organization assets refers to the amount of income they effectively control, which is therefore potentially available for personal appropriation, not simply the amount they personally consume.
prohibitions on the movement of peasants off the land. The "flight" of a peasant to the city is, in effect, a form of theft: the peasant is stealing part of the labor power owned by the lord. 35 Feudal lords may also have more means of production than serfs, more organizational assets, and more productive skills (although this is unlikely), and thus they may be exploiters with respect to these assets as well. What defines the society as "feudal", however, is the primacy of the distinctively feudal mechanisms of exploitation. Accordingly, feudal class relations will be the primary structural basis of class struggle.

The bourgeois revolutions radically redistributed productive assets in people: everyone, at least in principle, owns one unit. This is what is meant by "bourgeois freedoms," and in this sense capitalism can be regarded as an historically progressive force. But capitalism raises the second type of exploitation, exploitation based on property relations in means of production, to an unprecedented level. 36

The typical institutional form of capitalist class relations is capitalists having full ownership rights in the means of production and workers none. Other possibilities, however, have existed historically. Cottage industries in early capitalism involved workers owning some of their means of production, but not having sufficient assets to actually produce commodities without the assistance of merchant capitalists. Such workers were still being capitalistically exploited even though there was no formal labor market with wages. In all capitalist exploitation, the mediating mechanism is market exchange. Unlike in feudalism, surplus is not directly appropriated from workers in the form of coerced labor. Rather, it is appropriated through market exchanges: workers are paid a wage that covers the costs of production of their labor power; capitalists receive an income from the sale of the commodities produced by workers. The difference in these quantities constitutes the exploitative surplus appropriated by capitalists. 37

35. In this logic, once peasants are free to move, free to leave the feudal contract, then feudal rents (and thus feudal exploitation) would be in the process of transformation into a form of capitalist exploitation. That transformation would be complete once land itself became "capital," that is, it could be freely bought and sold on a market.

36. It is because capitalism simultaneously largely eliminates one form of exploitation and accentuates another that it is difficult to say whether or not in the transition from feudalism to capitalism overall exploitation increased or decreased.

37. It should be noted that this claim is logically independent of the labor theory of value. There is no assumption that commodities exchange in proportions regulated by the amount of socially necessary labor embodied in them. What is claimed is that the income of capitalists constitutes the monetary value of the surplus produced by workers. That is sufficient for their income to be treated as exploitative. See G.A. Cohen, "The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation," Philosophy and Public Affairs, vol. 8 (1979), for a discussion of this treatment of capitalist exploitation and of its relation to the labor theory of value.
Anticapitalist revolutions attempt to eliminate the distinctively capital-
list form of exploitation, exploitation based on private ownership of
the means of production. The nationalization of the principal means of
production is, in effect, a radical equalization of ownership of capital:
everyone owns one citizen-share. Such revolutions, however, do not
eliminate, and indeed may considerably strengthen and deepen, inequa-
tilities of effective control over organization assets. Whereas in capitalism
the control over organization assets does not extend beyond the firm, in
state bureaucratic socialism the coordinated integration of the division
of labor extends to the whole society through institutions of central state
planning. The mechanism by which this generates exploitive transfers
of surplus involves the centrally planned bureaucratic appropriation and
distribution of the surplus along hierarchical principles. The correspon-
ding class relation is therefore between managers/bureaucrats—people
who control organization assets—and nonmanagers.

The historical task of revolutionary transformation of state bureau-
ocratic socialism revolves around the equalization of effective economic
test over organization assets, or, equivalently, the democratization of
bureaucratic apparatuses of production. This does not imply total
direct democracy, where all decisions of any consequence are directly
made in democratic assemblies. There will still inevitably be delegated
responsibilities, and there certainly can be representative forms of
democratic control. But it does mean that the basic parameters of plan-
nning and coordinating social production are made through democratic
mechanisms and that incumbency within delegated positions of respon-
sibility does not give incumebts any personal claims on the social
surplus. Such equalization, however, would not necessarily affect
exploitation based on skills/credentials. Such exploitation would
remain a central feature of socialism.

"Skill" in this context is not a trivial concept. The mere possession of
enhanced laboring capabilities acquired through training is not sufficient
to generate relations of exploitation, since the income of such trained
labor may simply reflect the costs of acquiring the training. In such cases
there is neither a transfer of surplus, nor would the untrained be better
off under the game-theory specification of exploitation. For a skill to be
the basis of exploitation, therefore, it has to be in some sense scarce rela-
tive to its demand, and there must be a mechanism through which indi-
vidual owners of scarce skills are able to translate that scarcity into
higher incomes.

There are basically three ways that skills can become scarce: first,
they may require special talents that are naturally scarce in a population;
second, access to the training needed to develop the skill may be
restricted through various mechanisms, creating an artificial scarcity of
transferable people; third, a certification system may be established
that prohibits uncertified people from being employed to use the skill even if
they have it. In all of these cases, the exploitation comes from the
skilled/certified individual receiving an income that is above the costs
of production of the skills by virtue of the scarcity of the availability of
the skill.

In this conceptualization of socialism, a socialist society is essentially
a kind of democratic technocracy. Experts control their own skills and
knowledge within production, and by virtue of such control are able to
appropriate some of the surplus out of production. However, because of
the democratization of organization assets, actual planning decisions will
not be made under the direct control of experts but will be made
through some kind of democratic procedure (this is in effect what demo-
cratization of organization assets means: equalizing control over the
planning and coordinating of social production). This means that the
actual class power of a socialist technocratic exploiting class will be
much weaker than the class power of exploiting classes in other class
systems. Their ownership rights extend to only a limited part of the
social surplus.

This much more limited basis of domination implied by skill-based
exploitation is consistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of Marx's
claim that socialism is the "lower stage" of "communism," since classes
are already in a partial state of dissolution in a society with only skill-
based exploitation. Communism itself, then, would be understood as a
society within which skill-based exploitation itself had "withered away,"
that is, in which ownership rights in skills had been equalized. This does
not mean, it must be stressed, that all individuals would actually possess
the same skills in communism, any more than eliminating property rights
in means of production implies that all individuals would actually use
the same amount of physical capital. What is equalized is effective control

38. This, it should be noted, is precisely what leftist critics within "actually existing
socialist societies" say is the core problem on the political agenda of radical change in these
countries.

39. Lenin's original vision of "Soviet" democracy, in which officials would be paid no
more than average workers and would be immediately revocable at any time and in which
the basic contours of social planning would be debated and decided through democratic
participation, embodied such principles of equalization of organization assets. Once in
power, as we know, the Bolsheviks were either unable or unwilling to seriously attempt the
elimination of organization exploitation. For a discussion of these issues in the context of
the Russian Revolution and other attempts at workers' democracy, see C. Siriani, Workers'
Control and Socialist Democracy (London: Verso, 1982).
over skills as a productive resource and claims to differential incomes resulting from differential use of skills.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{Some Unresolved Problems}

The general framework laid out in Table 1 offers an abstract conceptual basis for clarifying a variety of empirical and theoretical problems in neo-Marxist class theory while avoiding some of the limitations of earlier class-structure concepts. Nevertheless, there remain a number of unresolved problems and internal inconsistencies, some of which may ultimately prove "fatal" to this attempt at reconceptualization. Two of these are particularly glaring and deserve some comment: the ambiguous status of skills as the basis for a class relation, and the problematic character of organization as an asset.\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{Skills and Class}

While the ownership of skill assets, particularly when institutionalized in the form of credentials, may constitute a basis for exploitation, it is much less clear that it should be treated as the basis for a class relation (except insofar as skills or credentials might enable one to gain access to other kinds of assets). In each of the other types of assets—labor power, physical capital, organization—there is a clear correspondence between the distribution of the asset and a particular form of social relation—lord-serf relations, capitalist—employee relations, manager—worker relations. In the case of skill/credential assets there is no such correspondence: experts and nonexperts do not exist in the same kind of well-defined social relation as lords and serfs or capitalists and employees. Experts may thus have distinct interests from nonexperts, but they are not clearly constituted as a class in relation to nonexperts.

Ultimately, what this relative vagueness in the link between skill exploitation and class relations may imply is that the expert-versus-

\textsuperscript{40} It may be utopian to imagine a society without skill-based exploitation, or even a society without organization-asset exploitation, particularly if we reject the claim that a future society will ever exist in a state of absolute abundance. In the absence of absolute abundance, all societies will face dilemmas and trade-offs around the problem of distribution of consumption, and such dilemmas may pose intractable incentive problems in the absence of exploitation. For a careful exposition of the problem of utopian fantasies in Marxian theory, see A. Now, The Economics of Feasible Socialism (Hemel Hempstead: George Allen and Unwin, 1983).

\textsuperscript{41} For a much more extended discussion of these and other problems, see Wright, Classes, ch. 3.
to class formation; and the problem of class alliances. In each case my comments will be suggestive rather than exhaustive, indicating the basic lines of inquiry that can be followed from this starting point.

The Middle Classes and Contradictory Locations

The framework in Table 1 enables us to pose the problem of middle classes in a new way. Two different kinds of nonpolarized class locations can be defined in the logic of this framework:

1. There are class locations that are neither exploiters nor exploited, that is, people who have precisely the per capita level of the relevant asset. A petty bourgeois, self-employed producer with average capital stock, for example, would be neither exploiter nor exploited within capitalist relations. These kinds of positions are what can be called the “traditional” or “old” middle class of a particular kind of class system.

2. Since concrete societies are rarely, if ever, characterized by a single mode of production, the actual class structures of given societies will be characterized by complex patterns of intersecting exploitation relations. There will therefore tend to be some positions that are exploiting along one dimension of exploitation relations and are exploited along another. Highly skilled wage-earners (for example, professionals) in capitalism are a good example: they are capitalistically exploited because they lack assets in capital, and yet they are skill exploiters. Such positions are what are typically referred to as the “new middle class” of a given system.

Table 2 presents a schematic typology of such complex class locations for capitalism. The typology is divided into two segments: one for owners of the means of production and one for nonowners. Within the wage-earner section of the typology, locations are distinguished by the two subordinate relations of exploitation characteristic of capitalist society—organization assets and skill/credential assets. It is thus possible within this framework to distinguish a whole terrain of class locations in capitalist society that are distinct from the polarized classes of the capital.

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42. Note that some petty bourgeois, in this formulation, will actually be exploited by capital (though unequal exchange on the market) because they own such minimal means of production, and some will be capitalistic exploiters because they own a great deal of capital even though they may not hire any wage-earners. Exploitation status, therefore, cannot strictly be equated with self-employment or wage-earner status.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode of production</th>
<th>Basic classes</th>
<th>Principal contradictory location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feudalism</td>
<td>Lords and serfs, Bourgeoisie and proletariat</td>
<td>Bourgeoisie, Managers/bureaucrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism</td>
<td>Bourgeoisie and proletariat</td>
<td>Bourgeoisie, Managers/bureaucrats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State bureaucratic socialism</td>
<td>Bureaucrats and workers</td>
<td>Intelligentia/experts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43. The labor-force data in this table come from the comparative project on class structure and class consciousness, University of Wisconsin. Details of the coding of categories and the operationalization of variables can be found in Wright, Classes, appendix 2.

44. This is not to deny that many professionals and managers become significant owners of capital assets through savings out of high incomes. To the extent that this happens, however, their class location objectively begins to shift, and they move into an objectively bourgeois location. Here I am talking only about those professional and managerial positions that are not vehicles for entry into the bourgeoisie itself.

45. The old middle class in feudalism, however, is defined by the freed peasant (yeoman farmer), the peasant who, within a system of unequally distributed assets in labor power, owns his/her per capita share of that asset.

46. Theorists who have attempted to analyze the class structures of actually existing socialism in terms of a concept of a new class generally tend to amalgamate state bureaucrats and experts into a single dominant class location, rather than seeing them as essentially vying for class power. Some theorists, such as Konrad and Szelenyi and Gouldner, do recognize this division, although they do not theorize the problem in precisely the way posed here. See, for example, G. Konrad and I. Szelenyi, Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1979); Gouldner, The Future of Intellec- tuals.

47. Alvin Gouldner and others have argued that historically the beneficiaries of social revolutions have not been the oppressed classes of the prior mode of production, but “third classes.” Most notably, it was not the peasantry who became the ruling class with the demise of feudalism, but the bourgeoisie, a class that was located outside of the principal exploitation relation of feudalism. A similar argument could be extended to managers with respect to capitalism and experts with respect to state bureaucratic socialism: in each case these constitute potential rivals to the existing ruling class.

48. For an extended discussion of the thesis that capitalism has multiple possible futures, see Wright, “Capitalism’s Futures.”
class locations centered on the category "semiautonomous employees." Autonomy always seemed more of a characteristic of working conditions than a proper dimension of class relations as such, and as a result there was a fair amount of skepticism in my characterization of semiautonomous employees as constituting a distinctive kind of location within the class structure. In my empirical research on class structure, the semiautonomous category also proved particularly troublesome, generating a number of quite counterintuitive results. For example, janitors in schools who also perform a variety of "handi¬man" tasks ended up being more autonomous than airline pilots. These specific problems disappear in the reconceptualization proposed here.

Second, treating contradictory locations in terms of exploitation generalizes the concept across modes of production. The concept now has a specific theoretical status in all class systems and, indeed, has a much more focused historical thrust, as represented in Table 3.

Third, this way of conceptualizing "middle class" locations also makes the problem of their class interests much clearer than before. Their location within class relations is defined by the nature of their material optimizing strategies given the specific kinds of assets they own or control. Their specific class location helps to specify their interests both within the existing capitalist society and with respect to various kinds of alternative games (societies) to which they might want to withdraw. In the previous conceptualization it was problematic to specify precisely the material interests of certain contradictory locations. In particular, there was no consistent reason for treating the fundamental material interests of semiautonomous employees as necessarily distinct from those of workers, and certainly not as opposed to those of workers.

Finally, this exploitation-based strategy helps to clarify the problems of class alliances in a much more systematic way than the previous approach. In the case of contradictory locations it was always rather vague how the tendencies for contradictory locations to ally themselves with workers or nonworkers should be assessed. I made claims that such alliance tendencies were politically and ideologically determined, but I was not able to put much content to such notions. In contrast, as we shall see below, the exploitation-based concept of contradictory location helps to provide a much clearer material basis for the analyzing problem of alliances.

Class Structure and Class Formation

In classical Marxism, the relationship between class structure and class formation was generally treated as relatively unproblematic. In particular, in the analysis of the working class it was usually assumed that there was a one-to-one relationship between the proletariat defined structurally and the proletariat engaged as a collective actor in struggle. The transformation of the working class from a class-in-itself (a class determined structurally) into a class-for-itself (a class engaged in collective struggle) may not have been a smooth and untroubled process, but it was an inevitable one.

Most neo-Marxist class theorists have questioned this claim of a simple relationship between class structure and class formation. Generally it has been argued that there is much less determinacy between the two levels of class analysis. As Adam Przeworski has argued, class struggle is in the first instance a struggle over class before it is a struggle between classes.49 It is always problematic whether workers will be formed into a class or into some other sort of collectivity based on religion, ethnicity, region, language, nationality, trade. The class structure may define the terrain of material interests upon which attempts at class formation occur, but it does not uniquely determine the outcomes of those attempts.

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper highlights the relative indeterminacy of the class structure–class formation relationship. If the arguments of the paper are sound, then class structure should be viewed as a structure of social relations that generates a matrix of exploitation-based interests. But because many locations within the class structure have complex bundles of such exploitation interests, these interests should be viewed as constituting the material basis for a variety of potential class formations. The class structure itself does not generate a unique pattern of class formation; rather it determines the underlying probabilities of different kinds of class formations. Which among these alternatives actually occurs historically will depend on a range of factors that are structurally contingent to the class structure itself.

Class Alliances

Once class analysis moves away from the simple polarized view of the class structure, the problem of class alliances looms large in the analysis of class formations. Rarely, if ever, does organized class struggle take the form of a conflict between two homogeneously organized forces. The typical situation is one in which alliances are forged between classes, segments of classes, and above all, contradictory class locations.

Individuals in contradictory locations within class relations face three broad strategies in their relationship to class struggle: they can try to use their position as an exploiter to gain entry as individuals into the dominant exploiting class itself; they can attempt to forge an alliance with the dominant exploiting class; or they can form some kind of alliance with the principal exploited class.

In general, the immediate class aspiration of people in contradictory locations is to enter the dominant exploiting class by “cashing in” the fruits of their exploitation location into the dominant asset. Thus, in feudalism, the rising bourgeoisie frequently used part of the surplus accumulated through capitalistic exploitation to buy land and feudal titles, that is, to obtain “feudal assets.” Part of what a bourgeois revolution consists of, then, is preventing the feudalization of capitalist accumulation. Similarly, in capitalism, the exploitative transfers personally available to managers and professionals are often used to buy capital, property, stocks, and so on, in order to obtain the “unearned” income from capital ownership. Finally, in state bureaucratic socialism, experts try to use their control over knowledge as a vehicle for entering the bureaucratic apparatus and acquiring control over organization assets.

Dominating exploiting classes have generally pursued class alliances with contradictory locations, at least when they were financially capable of doing so. Such strategies attempt to neutralize the potential threat from contradictory locations by tying their interests directly to those of the dominant exploiting class. When these hegemonic strategies are effective, they help to create a stable basis for all exploiting classes to continue struggles by exploited classes. One strategy is to make it easy for people in contradictory locations to enter the dominant class; another is to reduce the exploitation of contradictory locations by the dominant exploiting class to the point that such positions involve “net” exploitation. The extremely high salaries paid to upper-level managers in large corporations almost certainly means that they are net exploiters. This can have the effect of minimizing any possible conflicts of interests between such positions and those of the dominant exploiting class itself.

Such hegemonic strategies, however, are expensive. They require allowing large segments of contradictory locations access to significant portions of the social surplus. It has been argued by some economists that this corporate hegemonic strategy may be one of the central causes for the general tendency toward stagnation in advanced capitalist econ-

50. See S. Bowles, D. Gordon, and T. Weiskopf, Beyond the Wasteland (New York: Anchor, 1984). The argument is that the growth of managerial costs associated with the growth of the megalorporation is one of the key factors undermining productivity growth in certain capitalist countries.

omies, and that this in turn may be undermining the viability of the strategies themselves. The erosion of the economic foundations of this alliance may generate more anticapitalist tendencies among experts and even among managers. Particularly in the state sector, where the careers of experts and bureaucrats are less directly tied to the welfare of corporate capital, it would be expected that more “statist” views of how the economy should be managed would gain credence.

The potential class alliances of contradictory locations are not simply with the bourgeois. There is, under certain historical situations, the potential for alliances with the “popular” exploited classes—classes that are not also exploiters (that is, they are not in contradictory locations within exploitation relations). Such classes, however, generally face a more difficult task in trying to forge an alliance with contradictory locations, since they generally lack the capacity to offer significant bribes to people in those positions. This does not mean, however, that class alliances between workers and some segments of contradictory locations are impossible. Particularly under conditions where contradictory locations are being subjected to a process of “degradation”—deskilling, proletarianization, routinization of authority—it may be quite possible for people in those contradictory locations that are clearly net exploited to see the balance of their interests being more in line with the working class.

Where class alliances between workers and various categories of managers and experts do occur, the critical political question becomes defining the political and ideological direction of the alliance. If the analysis presented in this paper is correct, these contradictory locations are the “bearers” of certain futures to capitalism, futures within which the working class would remain an exploited and dominated class. Should workers support such alliances? Is it in their interests to struggle for a society within which they remain exploited, albeit in noncapitalist ways? I do not think there are general, universal answers to these questions. There are certainly circumstances in which a revolutionary state bureaucratic socialism may be in the real interests of the working class, even though workers would remain exploited in such a society. This, in my view, is an important point to consider.

Empirical Implications

The concept of exploitation identifies situations in which there are intrinsically opposed material interests between actors. The character-
IZATION OF A CLASS STRUCTURE AS ROOTED IN A COMPLEX PATTERN OF EXPLOITATION RELATIONS, THEREFORE, IS MEANT TO PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO THE DISTRIBUTION OF FUNDAMENTAL MATERIAL INTERESTS ACROSS POSITIONS IN THAT STRUCTURE AND THE RESPECTIVE LINES OF CLEAVAGE IN CLASS CONFLICTS.

THE EMPIRICAL QUESTION THEN BECOMES HOW THIS COMPLEX TYPOLOGY OF CLASS LOCATIONS IS RELATED TO A VARIETY OF "DEPENDENT" VARIABLES. IN THE PRESENT ANALYSIS, I WILL FOCUS ON TWO OF THESE: INCOME AND CLASS ATTITUDES. I WILL BRIEFLY DISCUSS THE RATIONALES FOR ANALYZING EACH OF THESE VARIABLES, THE DATA SOURCES TO BE USED IN THE ANALYSIS, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE OPERATIONAL VARIABLES. ONCE THESE PRELIMINARIES ARE COMPLETED WE WILL TURN TO THE EMPIRICAL RESULTS THEMSELVES.

RATIONALES FOR VARIABLES


THE RATIONALE FOR EXAMINING CLASS ATTITUDES IS THAT SUCH ATTITUDES SHOULD AT LEAST TEND TO REFLECT THE REAL INTERESTS OF INCUMBENTS OF CLASS POSITIONS AND THUS WILL VARY SYSTEMATICALLY ACROSS THE CELLS OF THE CLASS TYPOLOGY. TWO OBJECTIONS CAN BE RAISED AGAINST STUDYING ATTITUDES. THE FIRST IS THAT CLASS STRUCTURE IS MEANT TO EXPLAIN CLASS STRUGGLE, PARTICULARLY THE ORGANIZED FORMS OF CLASS ACTIONS, NOT INTER-INDIVIDUAL VARIATIONS IN MENTAL STATES. THE SECOND IS THAT EVEN IF CLASS LOCATION SHAPES INDIVIDUAL MENTAL STATES, RESPONSES TO AN ATTITUDE SURVEY ARE AN INAPPROPRIATE WAY OF TAPPING THOSE CLASS-DETERMINED MENTAL STATES. MENTAL STATES ARE SUFFICIENTLY CONTEXT-DEPENDENT THAT THE RESPONSES TO THE ARTIFICIAL CONTEXT OF A SURVEY INTERVIEW CANNOT BE VIEWED AS INDICATORS OF MENTAL STATES IN THE REAL LIFE SITUATIONS OF CLASS RELATIONS.

BOTH OF THESE OBJECTIONS NEED TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. TO THE FIRST I WOULD SAY THAT EVEN IF THE ULTIMATE OBJECT OF EXPLANATION OF CLASS STRUCTURE IS COLLECTIVELY ORGANIZED CLASS STRUGGLES, IT IS INDIVIDUALS WHO PARTICIPATE IN THOSE STRUGGLES, WHO MAKE THE DECISIONS TO ACT IN PARTICULAR WAYS, AND THUS INDIVIDUAL MENTAL STATES HAVE TO BE IMPICATED IN THE PROCESS IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. TO THE SECOND OBJECTION, I WOULD ARGUE THAT TO THE EXTENT MENTAL STATES ARE CONTEXT-DEPENDENT, THEN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLASS LOCATION AND CLASS ATTITUDES AS MEASURED BY A SURVEY SHOULD BE ATTEMPTED, NOT STRENGTHENED. THE CONTEXT OF THE SURVEY INTERVIEW SHOULD TEND TO SCRAMBLE THE RESULTS, ADD NOISE TO THE REAL EFFECTS OF CLASS LOCATION. IF, THEREFORE, WE OBSERVE A SYSTEMATIC RELATIONSHIP IN SPITE OF THIS CONTEXT-DISTORTION, THIS SHOULD ADD CONFIDENCE IN THE MEANINGFULNESS OF THE RESULTS.

DATA

THE DATA WE WILL EXAMINE COMES FROM A LARGE, CROSS-NATIONAL PROJECT ON CLASS STRUCTURE AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS. IN THE PRESENT ANALYSIS WE WILL CONSIDER THE DATA FROM ONLY TWO COUNTRIES, THE UNITED STATES AND SWEDEN. WITHIN THE FAMILY OF ADVANCED CAPITALIST COUNTRIES WITH SIMILARLY SIMILAR LEVELS OF TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND AVERAGE STANDARDS OF LIVING, THESE TWO SOCIETIES REPRESENT ALMOST POLAR CASES: THE UNITED STATES HAS AMONG THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF REAL INCOME INEQUALITY (THAT IS, AFTER TAXES AND TRANSFERS) OF ANY DEVELOPED CAPITALIST SOCIETY, WHILE SWEDEN HAS THE LOWEST; SWEDEN HAS THE HIGHEST PROPORTION OF ITS CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE DIRECTLY EMPLOYED BY THE STATE (OVER 45 PERCENT), WHILE THE UNITED STATES HAS THE LOWEST (UNDER 20 PERCENT); SWEDEN HAS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF GOVERNANCE BY SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES OF ANY CAPITALIST COUNTRY, WHILE THE UNITED STATES HAS HAD THE LOWEST. BECAUSE OF THIS BASIC SIMILARITY IN THE LEVELS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMBINED WITH THESE SALIENT POLITICAL DIFFERENCES, THE COMPARISON BETWEEN SWEDEN AND THE UNITED STATES ON THE EFFECTS OF CLASS ON INCOME AND ATTITUDES SHOULD BE PARTICULARLY INTERESTING.

VARIABLES

THE INCOME VARIABLE IS TOTAL PERSONAL ANNUAL INCOME, BEFORE TAXES, FROM ALL SOURCES. IT THEREFORE COMBINES WAGE INCOME WITH VARIOUS SOURCES OF NONWAGE INCOME. THE CLASS-ATTITUDE VARIABLE IS A SCALE CONSTRUCTED BY COMBINING THE RESPONSES TO SIX ITEMS, EACH OF WHICH HAS A FAIRLY TRANSPARENT CLASS CONTENT. FOR EXAMPLE, RESPONDENTS WHO AGREED WITH THE

51. Details of the study can be found in E.O. Wright, C. Costello, D. Hachen, and J. Sprague, "The American Class Structure," American Sociological Review, December 1982; and Wright, Classes.
52. Complete details on the measures we will use can be found in Wright, Classes, appendix 2.
Table 4 Mean Annual Individual Incomes by Class Location in Sweden and the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owners</th>
<th>Nonowners (wage laborers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 Expert manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 Expert supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Expert nonmanager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bourgeoisie US:</td>
<td>$26,621</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW: $28,333</td>
<td>SW: $29,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small employer</td>
<td>$24,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW: $17,237</td>
<td>SW: $19,711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petty bourgeoisie</td>
<td>$14,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SW: $13,503</td>
<td>SW: $14,890</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

United States: N = 1282
Sweden: N = 1049

Note: Entries in cells are the means for gross annual individual income from all sources before taxes. The Swedish incomes were converted to dollars at the 1980 exchange rate.

Source: Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness.
exceptions are that categories 10 and 11 (uncredentialed managers and uncredentialed supervisors) are essentially identical, and categories 6 and 9 (credentialed and semicredentialed nonmanagerial employees) are essentially identical in both the United States and Sweden. Given the conceptual status of the "intermediate" categories of "uncredentialed supervisors" (category 11) and "semicredentialed workers" (category 9), these results are not inconsistent with the theoretical model.

What is particularly striking in the pattern in Table 4 is the interaction between the two dimensions of exploitation relations among wage-earners. The increase in average income is relatively modest as you move along either organization assets or credential assets taken separately (as you move along the bottom of the table and the right-hand column). Where the sharp increase in incomes occurs is when you combine these two exploitation mechanisms (moving along the top of the table and the left-hand column of among wage-earners). Hypothesis 2 is thus strongly supported.53

**Empirical Results: Attitudes**

Table 5 presents the mean values on the class-consciousness scale by class location in the United States and Sweden. Several generalizations can be drawn from these results.

**The Overall Pattern of Variations** In Table 5 the overall pattern of variations in means (not the actual value of the means, but the pattern- ing of the means) is quite similar in the United States and Sweden. In both countries the table is basically polarized between the manager and the working class (in neither table is there a significant difference between proletarians and semicredentialed workers).54 In both countries the values on the scale become decreasingly pro-working class and eventually procapitalist class as one moves from the proletarian corner of the table to the expert-manager corner of the table. As in the results for income, the means on the attitude scale change in a nearly monotonic manner along every dimension of the table. And in both countries, the means become increasingly procapitalist as you move from the petty bourgeoisie to the capitalist class proper among the self-employed.55

**The Degree of Polarization** While the patterning of differences in attitudes is similar in the two countries, the degree of polarization within that common pattern is dramatically different. In the United States the difference between the capitalist class and the working class is just over 2 points on the scale; in Sweden the difference is 4.6 points. (The difference between these differences is statistically significant at the .01 level.) The data indicate that there is basically an international consensus within the capitalist class on class-based attitudes, whereas no such consensus exists in the working class: Swedish and American workers differ on this scale by nearly as much as US workers and capitalists.

**Class Alliances** The pattern of class alliances—the ways in which the terrain of class structure becomes transformed into class formations—suggested by the patterns of consciousness in Table 5 varies considerably in the two countries. In Sweden the only wage-earner category with an emphatically procapitalist ideological position is expert managers; in the United States, procapitalist positions penetrate further into the wage-earner population. In the United States, only the three cells in the lower right-hand corner of the table can be considered part of a working-class coalition; in Sweden the coalition extends to all uncredentialed wage-earners and all nonmanagement wage-earners, and at least weakly includes semicredentialed managers and semicredentialed supervisors as well. Turning these results into proportions of the labor force in Table 2; in the United States approximately 30 percent of the labor force are in class categories within the bourgeois coalition whereas in Sweden the corresponding figure is only 10 percent. Correspondingly, in Sweden between 73 percent and 80 percent of the labor force (depending upon whether or not semicredentialed managers and supervisors are included in the coalition) are in classes within the working-class coalition, whereas in the United States only 58 percent of the labor force are in the

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53. In a separate analysis, not reported here, in which nonwage income was the dependent variable, the same monotonic pattern was observed, only with a considerably steeper differential between workers and expert managers. See ibid., ch. 6.

54. In the United States, expert managers are slightly more procapitalist than the bourgeoisie itself, but the difference is sufficiently small that they should be treated as essentially equally polarized with respect to the working class. It should be remembered in this context that most respondents in what I am calling the "bourgeoisie" are still fairly modest capitalists. Eighty-three percent of these capitalists employ less than fifty employees. Only 8 percent of expert managers, however, work for businesses with less than fifty employees. It would be expected that if we had data on a sample of large capitalists, the results would be somewhat different.

55. It might be objected that these results could be artifacts of other variables that are not included in the analysis. The sex composition of class categories, for example, could conceivably explain the observed patterns across the cells in the table. I have analyzed the results in Table 5 controlling for a range of possible confounding variables—age, sex, class origin, union membership, income—and while certain details are affected by these "controls," the basic patterns remain intact. For a discussion of this multivariate analysis, see Wright, Classes, ch. 7.
Table 5  Class Consciousness by Location in the Class Structure

I United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owners</th>
<th>Nonowners (wage laborers)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Bourgeoisie</td>
<td>4 Expert manager</td>
<td>7 Semicredential manager</td>
<td>10 Uncredential manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−1.31</td>
<td>−1.46</td>
<td>−0.34</td>
<td>−0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Small employer</td>
<td>5 Expert supervisor</td>
<td>8 Semicredential supervisor</td>
<td>11 Uncredential supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−0.87</td>
<td>−0.78</td>
<td>−0.24</td>
<td>+0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Petty bourgeoisie</td>
<td>6 Expert nonmanager</td>
<td>9 Semicredential worker</td>
<td>12 Proletarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>−0.09</td>
<td>+0.78</td>
<td>+0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

> 0 Organization assets

> 0 Skill assets

II Sweden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owners</th>
<th>Nonowners (wage laborers)</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Bourgeoisie</td>
<td>4 Expert manager</td>
<td>7 Semicredential manager</td>
<td>10 Uncredential manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−2.00</td>
<td>−0.70</td>
<td>+1.03</td>
<td>+1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Small employer</td>
<td>5 Expert supervisor</td>
<td>8 Semicredential supervisor</td>
<td>11 Uncredential supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>−0.98</td>
<td>+0.07</td>
<td>+0.74</td>
<td>+1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Petty bourgeoisie</td>
<td>6 Expert nonmanager</td>
<td>9 Semicredential worker</td>
<td>12 Proletarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+0.46</td>
<td>+1.29</td>
<td>+2.81</td>
<td>+2.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

> 0 Organization assets

> 0 Skill assets

Note: Entries in the table are means on the working-class consciousness scale. The values on the scale range from +6 (pro-working class on every item) to −6 (procapitalist class on every item).

Source: Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness.
working-class coalition. The working-class coalition in the United States is thus not only less ideologically polarized with the bourgeoisie than in Sweden, it is also much smaller.

Interpretations
Several general conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, the data are systematically consistent with the proposed reconceptualization of class in terms of relations of exploitation. In both the analysis of income and attitudes, the basically monotonic relationship between these variables and location along the exploitation dimensions of the class typology add credence to the concept.

Second, the data support the thesis that the underlying structure of class relations shapes the overall pattern of class consciousness. In spite of the dramatic political differences between Sweden and the United States the basic pattern linking class structure to class consciousness is very similar in the two countries: they are both polarized along the three dimensions of exploitation, and the values on the consciousness scale basically vary monotonically as one moves along these dimensions.

Finally, while the overall patterning of consciousness is structurally determined by class relations, the level of working-class consciousness in a given society and the nature of the class coalitions that are built upon those class relations are shaped by the organizational and political practices that characterize the history of class struggle. For all of their reformism and their efforts at building a stable class compromise in Swedish society, the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the associated Swedish labor movement have adopted strategies that reinforce certain aspects of working-class consciousness. Issues of power and property are frequently at the center of the political agenda, social democratic state policies tend to reinforce the material interests of capitalistically exploited wage-earners, and at least the radical wing of the labor movement and the Social Democratic Party keep alive the vision of alternatives to the existing structure of society.

In contrast to the Swedish case, political parties and unions in the United States have engaged in practices that, unwittingly or unwittingly, have undermined working-class consciousness. The Democratic Party has systematically displaced political discourse away from a language of class. While of course there are exceptions, the general tendency has been to organize social conflicts in nonclass ways and to emphasize the extremely limited range of alternatives for dealing with problems of power and property. State welfare policies have tended to heighten rather than reduce class-based divisions among wage-earners. The ineffectiveness of the labor movement to unionize even a majority of manual industrial workers, let alone white-collar employees, has meant that the divisions of exploitation-based interests among wage-earners have tended to be large relative to their common interests vis-à-vis capital. As a result, as the rhetoric of the 1984 presidential campaign reflected, the labor movement is regarded as a "special interest" group in the United States rather than as a representative of the general economic interests of wage-earners.

The net result of these differences in the political strategies and ideologies of parties and unions in the two countries is that class has considerably greater importance in Sweden than in the United States: class location and class experiences have a bigger impact on class consciousness; classes are more polarized ideologically; and the working-class coalition built upon that more polarized ideological terrain is itself much bigger.

Conclusion
The heart of the proposal advanced in this paper is that the concept of class should be systematically rooted in the problem of forms of exploitation. In my previous work, and in the work of many Marxist theorists, the concept of class had effectively shifted from an exploitation-centered concept to a domination-centered concept. Although exploitation remained part of the background context for the discussion of class, it did not systematically enter into the elaboration of actual class maps. That shift, I now believe, undermines the coherence of the concept of class and should be replaced by a rigorous exploitation-centered conceptualization.

If the arguments in this paper are persuasive, the specific exploitation-centered class concept that I have elaborated has several significant advantages over my own previous approach to class (and by extension, other existing class concepts). First, the exploitation-centered concept provides a much more coherent and compelling way of understanding the class location of the "middle class" than alternative concepts, both in capitalist societies and in various kinds of noncapitalist societies. The middle class ceases to be a residual category or a relatively ad hoc amendment to the class map of polarized classes. Rather, middle
classes are defined by the same relations that define the polarized classes themselves; the difference lies in the ways those relations are structurally combined in the concrete institutional forms of a given society.

Second, the exploitation-centered concept provides a much more coherent way of describing the qualitative differences among types of class structures than alternative concepts. The abstract criteria for assessing the class relations of a given society are consistent across qualitatively distinct societies and yet allow for the specificity of any given society's class structures to be investigated. The concept thus avoids the kind of ad hoc quality that plagues most other class concepts as they move across historically distinct types of societies.

Third, the exploitation-centered concept is more systematically materialist than domination concepts. Classes are derived from the patterns of effective ownership over aspects of the forces of production. The different kinds of exploitation that define different kinds of classes are all linked to the qualitative properties of these different aspects of forces of production.

Fourth, the exploitation-centered concept provides a more historical class concept than do domination-centered concepts. It is the forces of production that impart whatever discretionality exists to epochal social change. Since in the framework discussed in this paper, the class-exploitation nexus is defined with respect to specific forces of production, the development of those forces of production is what gives an historical trajectory to systems of class relations. The order to the forms of society presented in Tables 1 and 3, therefore, is not arbitrary but defines a developmental tendency in class structures.

Fifth, the concept of class elaborated in this paper has a particularly sustained critical character. The very definition of exploitation as developed by Roemer contains within itself the notion of alternative forms of society that are immanent within an existing social structure. And the historical character of the analysis of the possible social forms implies that this critical character of the class concept will not have a purely moral or utopian basis. Class, when defined in terms of qualitatively distinct asset-based forms of exploitation, provides a way of describing both the nature of class relations in a given society and the immanent possibilities for transformation posed by those relations.

Finally, the exploitation-centered concept provides a much clearer linkage to the problem of interests than domination-based concepts.

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57. See E. O. Wright, "Giddens's Critique of Marxism," *New Left Review*, no. 139 (1983), for a discussion of why the forces of production can plausibly be viewed as giving history a directional flow.