

1 Foundations of a neo-Marxist class analysis

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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 core agenda of Marxist sociology.²

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

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

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.³

There will be two principal 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 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 it from its Weberian cousins and anchors the broader theoretical claims and agenda of Marxist class analysis. This will involve, above all, elaborating the concept of exploitation, one of the crucial causal mechanisms 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.

³ There is a very large literature both of exegesis of Marx’s own work on class and on varieties of class analysis within the broadly construed Marxist tradition. For an exegesis of Marx’s treatment of class, see Cotreel (1984, Ch. 2). For a general review of alternative Marxist approaches, see Wright (1980b). For examples of Marxist class analyses that differ substantially from the approach outlined in this chapter, see Poulantzas (1975); Carchedi (1977); Resnick and Wolff (1987).

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 and that it was, in any case, the historical destiny of capitalism. Nevertheless, Marx’s own writing is filled with moral judgment, 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.⁴ 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.⁵

⁴ The radical egalitarianism thesis as stated here is not, in and of itself, a thesis about justice. The claim is that human beings will generally flourish better under such egalitarian conditions than under conditions of inequality and hierarchy, but it does not stipulate that it is a requirement of justice that such flourishing be promoted. I believe that this is a question of social justice, but that belief is not necessary in the present context.

⁵ 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

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 simply to 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 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 conclusion 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 that define the broadest context

informed by the Marxist tradition. For a general overview of the issues see Swift (2001). For a penetrating discussion of an egalitarian theory of justice infused with Marxist sensibilities, see Cohen (1995).

for thinking about the concept of class.⁶ Whatever else the concept of 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.

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 that 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 shorthand 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

⁶ 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.

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 eight 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 meaning of “variations” of class relations; 4. the problem of complexity in class relations; 5. the meaning of a “location” within class relations; 6. complexity in specifying class locations; 7. the distinction between micro- and macro-levels of class analysis; 8. class “agency.” While, taken as a whole, these conceptual problems are particularly relevant to elaborating the concept of class within the Marxist tradition, many of them will be relevant to other agendas of class analysis as well.

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.⁷ The actual ways in which inputs are combined and used

⁷ By “powers” over productive resources I mean effective control over the use and disposition of the resources in question. The term “rights” provides 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.

in production depends as much on the way these rights and powers are 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.

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 of 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 the use of that resource. In general this implies appropriating income generated by the deployment of the resource in question.

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.⁸ 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.

⁸ 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.

The problem of complexity in concrete 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.⁹ In the American South before the Civil 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 of 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

⁹ 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.

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. In conventional language, 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.”¹⁰

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,

¹⁰ This 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.

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.

Class locations

Much of the sociological debate about class becomes in practice a debate about the optimal inventory of class locations – or some equivalent expression like “class categories” – rather than *class relations* as such. To a significant extent, this is because much empirical research, particularly quantitative research, revolves around data that are tagged onto individuals and it thus becomes important to be able to locate the individual within the social structure. In the case of class analysis, this implies assigning them a location within class relations. As a practical matter, any such exercise requires that one decide which criteria are going to be deployed to differentiate among class locations and “how many” class categories are to be generated using those criteria.

There is nothing wrong in using the concept of 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 atomized 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.¹¹ “Social relation” is a way of talking about the inherently structured interactive 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 interactive quality of human action. To talk about a “location” within a class relation, then, is to situate individuals within such structured patterns of interaction.

¹¹ 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 reductionist versions of methodological individualism.

Complexity in class locations

At first glance it might seem that the problem of specifying class locations is pretty straightforward. First you define the concept of class relations and then you derive the inventory of class locations from these relations. In capitalism the central class relation is the capital/labor relation and this determines two class locations, capitalists and workers.

As in our discussion of the problem of complexity in class relations themselves, for some problems it might be sufficient to distinguish only two class locations in capitalist societies. But for many of the questions one might want to ask for which the problem of class locations figures in the answer, such a single, binary model of class locations seems woefully inadequate. If we want to understand the formation of people's subjective experience within work, or the dilemmas faced by union organizers on the shop floor, or the tendencies for people to form different kinds of coalitions within political conflicts, or the prospects for living a comfortable material existence, then knowing that they are a capitalist or a worker within a polarized model of class relations is unlikely to tell us everything we want to know.

Given this explanatory inadequacy of the two-location model, we face two basic kinds of choices. One option is to retain the simple two-location model (often called the "two-class model"), and then add additional complexities to the analysis that are not treated as complexities in class locations as such. Thus, for example, to understand the formation of the subjective experience of people within work we can introduce a set of concrete variations in working conditions – degrees of autonomy, closeness of supervision, levels of responsibility, cognitive complexity of tasks, physical demands of work, promotion prospects, and so on – which are relevant to understanding work experience. These would then be treated as sources of variation in experience among people occupying working-class locations within class relations, where working-class locations are defined in the simple binary terms of the two-location model. Alternatively, we can note that some of these variations in "working conditions" are actually variations in the concrete ways in which people are located within class relations. The degree of authority an employee has over other employees, for example, can be viewed as reflecting a specific form of distribution of the rights and powers over the process of production.

In my work in class analysis I have opted for the second of these strategies, trying to incorporate a considerable amount of complexity directly into the account of class locations. I do this (hopefully) not in the stubborn belief that we want to engineer our class concepts in such a way that class locations as such explain as much as possible, but because I believe

that many of these complexities are in fact complexities in the concrete ways in which rights and powers over economic resources and activities are distributed across locations within relations.

The trick is to introduce complexity into the analysis of class locations in a systematic and rigorous manner rather than seeing complexity as haphazard and chaotic. This means trying to figure out the principles through which complexity is generated and then specifying the implications of these principles for the problem of locating people within class relations. Five sources of such complexity seem especially important for class analysis:

1. Complexity of locations derived from complexity *within* the relations themselves: unbundling the rights and powers of class relations
2. Complexity in the allocation of individual persons to locations: occupying multiple class locations at the same time
3. Complexity in the temporal aspects of locations: careers vs slots
4. Strata within relations
5. Families and class relations

Unbundling of rights and powers. If the rights and powers associated with class relations are really complex bundles of decomposable rights and powers, then they can potentially be partially unbundled and reorganized in complex ways. This can generate class locations which I have referred to as “contradictory locations within class relations.”¹² 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 defines a set of real and significant causal processes.

Another candidate for a kind of “contradictory class location” is rooted in the ways in which certain kinds of skills and credentials confer upon their holders effective rights and powers over many aspects of their work.¹³ This is particularly true for employed professionals whose control over

¹² For a discussion of the development of this concept, see Wright (1985, Ch. 2) and Wright *et al.* (1989, Ch. 1).

¹³ Control over the conditions of employment constitutes a redistribution of the rights and powers of capital-labor relations insofar as employers no longer have the capacity to

their conditions of work constitutes a distinct form of employment relation with their employers, but aspects of these empowered employment relations also characterize many highly skilled nonprofessional jobs.¹⁴



Allocating people to class locations. Individuals can hold two jobs which are differently located within 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. A factory worker who moonlights as a self-employed carpenter is located within class relations in a more complex way than one who does not. Furthermore, 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. Workers in a firm with a real Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) do not thereby cease to be “in” working-class locations within the class relations of capitalism, but they are no longer *merely* in those locations: they are simultaneously in two class locations.

Temporality of locations. 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, most managers begin work in nonmanagerial positions with the full expectation of moving into management after a kind of shop-floor apprenticeship and subsequently of moving up managerial hierarchies. Even though they may for a time be working alongside ordinary workers, their “jobs” are, from the start, connected to managerial careers. Why should this matter for understanding the class character of such jobs? It matters because both the interests and experiences of people in such jobs are significantly affected by the likely future tied to their job. This means that the location within class relations of people within such careers has what might be termed temporal complexity. Furthermore, since the future is always somewhat uncertain, the temporal dimension of class locations also means that a person’s location

effectively direct the laboring activity of such employees and are forced to offer them fairly secure long-term contracts with what John Goldthorpe has called “prospective rewards.” In the extreme case, as Philippe Van Parijs has argued in Wright *et al.* (1989, Ch. 6), this comes close to giving employees something like property rights in their jobs. John Goldthorpe describes this kind of employment relation as a *service* relation to distinguish it from the ordinary wage labor relation characteristic of people in working-class locations.

¹⁴ I have formulated the quality of the contradictory class location of these kinds of positions in different ways at different times. In my early work (Wright 1978) I called them “semi-autonomous employees,” emphasizing the control over the conditions of work. In later writing (Wright 1985, 1997) I referred to them as “experts,” emphasizing their control over knowledge and credentials and the way in which this affected their relationship to the problem of exploitation.

within class relations can have a certain degree of temporal indeterminacy or uncertainty.

Strata and class locations. If class locations are defined by the rights and powers people have with respect to productive resources and economic activities, then another source of complexity within class locations centers on the amount of resources and scope of activities subjected to these rights and powers. There are capitalists who own and control vast quantities of capital employing thousands of workers all over the world, and capitalists who employ a small number of people in a single location. Both are “capitalists” in relational terms, but vary tremendously in the amount of power that they wield. Among people in working-class locations, workers vary in their skills and in their associated “market capacity,” their ability to command wages in the labor market. If their skills are sufficiently scarce, they may even be able to command a significant “rent” component within their wages. Both skilled and unskilled workers occupy working-class locations insofar as they do not own or control means of production and must sell their labor power in order to obtain their livelihood, but they vary the amount of one specific resource, skill. These kinds of quantitative variations among people who occupy a similar relational location can be referred to as strata within class locations.

Families and class locations. People are linked to class relations not simply through their own direct involvement in the control and use of productive resources, but through various other kinds of social relations, especially those of family and kinship. The reason we care about a person’s class “location” is because we believe that through a variety of mechanisms their experiences, interests, and choices will be shaped by how their lives intersect class relations. If you are married to a capitalist, regardless of what you yourself do, your interests and choices will be partially conditioned by this fact. And this fact is a fact about your “location.” This particular dimension of the problem of class locations can be called “mediated locations within class relations.”¹⁵ Mediated locations are especially important for understanding the class locations of children, of retired people, of housewives, and of people in two-earner households. Mediated locations add particularly interesting complexities to class analysis in cases in which a person’s direct class location – the way in which they are inserted into class relations through their own jobs – and their mediated class locations are different. This is the case, for example, of a female typist in an office married to a corporate manager. As the proportion of married women in paid employment and the length of time they spend in the labor force increases, the existence of such “cross-class

¹⁵ See Wright (1997, Ch. 10).

households,” as they are sometimes called, becomes a more salient form of complexity in class locations.¹⁶

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 “twelve-class model” since in some of my research I have constructed a twelve-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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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.

¹⁶ In the 1980s, roughly a third of dual-earner families in the United States would be classified as cross-class households, which meant around 12 percent of the adult population lived in such households. See Wright (1997, pp. 226–7).

¹⁷ My views on the problem of the “number” of class locations are very similar to those of Erickson and Goldthorpe, who write that “the only sensible answer [to the question ‘How many classes are there?’] is, we would believe, ‘as many as it proves empirically useful to distinguish for the analytical purposes at hand.’” Erickson and Goldthorpe (1993, p. 46).

¹⁸ See Wright (1997, Ch. 14).

¹⁹ See Wright (2000, pp. 957–1002).

Nevertheless, depending upon the problem under investigation, 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.

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 provides 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.

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 for 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 at the micro-level of individual lives:

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 are 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 are 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 affected 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.

Marxist class analysis²⁰

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" sound 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 that are seen as generating these two kinds of consequences. Here the pivotal concept is *exploitation*. This is the conceptual element that 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. This means that the interests of actors within such relations are not merely different, they are antagonistic: the realization of the interests of exploiters imposes harms on 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 the

²⁰ Parts of this section are drawn from Wright (1997, pp. 9–19).

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 ongoing 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 nineteenth 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 the fate of indigenous people in North America and Southern Africa.²¹

²¹ One of the pivotal differences between the conception of exploitation offered here and that in Aage Sørensen’s strategy of class analysis (Chapter 5 in this volume) centers on the

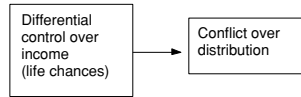
This deep interdependence makes exploitation a particularly exploitive form of social relation for two reasons: First, exploitation constitutes a social relation which simultaneously pits the interests of one group against another and which requires their ongoing interactions; and second, it confers 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 of 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 defines the central features of the structured interactions within class relations.

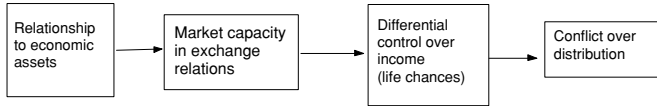
In Weberian class analysis, just as much as in Marxist class analysis, the rights and powers individuals have over productive assets define the material basis of class relations. But for Weberian-inspired class analysis, these rights and powers are consequential primarily because of the ways they shape *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

distinction between nonexploitative oppression and exploitative oppression. Sørensen rejects this distinction arguing with respect to my analysis of European settlers in North America that "the European settlers clearly created antagonistic interests that brought about conflict, so it is not clear what is added by the requirement of transfer of the fruits of labor." The appropriation principle would not matter if all we are concerned with is the sheer presence or absence of "antagonistic interests," for in both exploitative and nonexploitative oppression there is surely deep antagonism. But the dynamic of antagonism is quite different in the two contexts: *exploiters depend upon and need the exploited* in a way that is not true for nonexploitative oppressors. Sørensen's treatment of exploitation does not distinguish between a situation in which an exclusion from access to resources simply imposes a harm on the excluded and a situation in which the welfare of the advantaged category also depends upon ongoing interactions with the excluded.

I. Simple Gradational Class Analysis



II. Weberian Class Analysis



III. Marxist Class Analysis

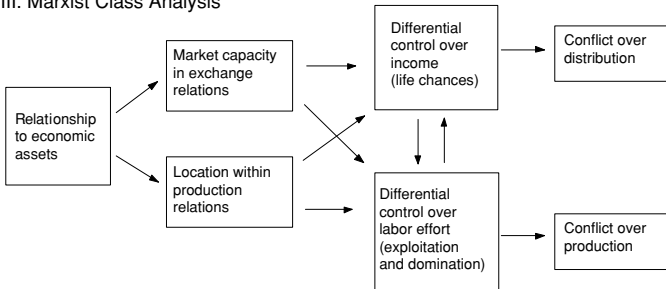



Figure 1.1 Three models of class analysis

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 1.1. 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 path; 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 nested within the Marxist model.



This nesting of the Weberian concept of class within the Marxist means that for certain kinds of questions there will be little practical difference between Marxist and Weberian analyses. This is especially the case for micro-questions about the impact of class on the lives of individuals. Thus, for example, if one wants to explain how class location affects standards of living of people, there is no particular reason for the concept of class location used in the analysis to differ within a Marxist or a Weberian approach. Both treat the social relationship to income-generating assets, especially capital and skills, as central to the definition of class locations.²²

Of course, any Weberian can include an analysis of class-based domination and exploitation within any specific sociological inquiry. One of the attractions 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.”

²² Of course, the operational criteria adopted may differ between any two scholars faced with the inevitable difficulties of making pragmatic choices. For example, in both John Goldthorpe’s approach to class analysis and my own, large capitalists, corporate executives, and “high-grade” professionals occupy distinct kinds of locations within class relations because they differ in the kinds of resources they control and the nature of the employment relations in which they are located. But we differ in our operational choices about how to treat these categories in our empirical work: whereas I keep these three categories separate as distinct kinds of class locations, Goldthorpe merges them into a more heterogeneous class I for largely pragmatic reasons. This is not fundamentally because my work is rooted in the Marxist tradition and his has a closer link to the Weberian tradition, since both traditions regard professors and capitalists as occupying different class locations. It is because of a pragmatic judgment about where it is important to maintain close operational congruence with abstract categories and where it is not. For the questions Goldthorpe wishes to address he feels that since there are so few proper capitalists in his samples anyway, nothing much is lost by merging them with professionals into a single class category.

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

Exploitation and domination are both normatively loaded terms. To describe class relations this way is to affirm the egalitarian critique of those relations. For someone committed to the radical egalitarian vision of the Marxist tradition, this is an attraction, but of course not everyone who is interested in 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 shape 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.²³ This is a crucial form of power. It is 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 inter-dependencies of exploitation – that exploiting classes 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 that 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 implies a specific prediction about the kinds of ideologies that are likely to emerge under conditions of exploitative class relations and conditions of nonexploitative oppression. 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

²³ It 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 a discussion of class and exploitation specifically in terms of p/a issues, see Bowles and Gintis (1990).

elicit their active consent. Purely repressive reactions to resistance – including in some historical situations genocidal repression – are therefore feasible. The central ideological problem in such a situation is likely to be the moral qualms within the oppressive group, and thus ideologies are likely to develop to justify this repression *to the oppressors*, but not to the oppressed. The slogan “the only good Indian is a dead Indian” was meant for the ears of white settlers, not Native Americans. Within exploitative class relations, on the other hand, since the cooperation of the exploited is needed, ideologies are more likely to attend to the problem of creating consent, and this puts pressure on ideologies to incorporate in one way or another the interests of the exploited group.

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 as well. Even if socialism is off the historical agenda, the idea of countering the exploitative logic of capitalism is not.