

# The Aggressive Class Theory

(A Social Psychological Perspective On Aggressive-Submissive Class Relations)

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## Abstract

This article takes a new social psychological perspective on an old issue of social classes and argues that there is an aggressive-submissive relationship between them. Accordingly, a new class, the aggressive class, is proposed. The aggressive class theory helps to explain how the system works, sustains itself and makes it unlikely for a change. I propose that aggressiveness is typically necessary and often sufficient for success in capitalism. Aggressiveness is typically overlooked or mislabeled on purpose. Submissiveness, on the other hand, is widely promoted.

KEYWORDS: MARX, CAPITALISM, CLASS, INEQUALITY, AGGRESSIVENESS, DOMINANCE, ALTRUISM, HUMANISM, GREED, MONEY, MORALITY, LABOR

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“Society is divided between the rich and the poor, [...] some people subjugate and exploit other people.” Fidel Castro on discovering Marxism 2009

There are two major classes: the rich and the poor,<sup>1</sup> and there is an aggressive-submissive relationship between them. Economists claim that free market capitalism is a fair and moral system that frees people and rewards their hard work (Smith 1776, Glaeser 2011). The opposite is true, the foundation of the system is the aggressive-submissive relationship that is unfair, immoral, and enslaves people.

An aggressive person is likely to be a part of the dominating class, which will set the rules: “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” (Marx and Engels [1845] 1965) A submissive person is bound to work hard and remain submissive. The submissive class by working hard, works against its own interest—the more a person works, the more value is extracted from her, and the bigger the wealth chasm between the submissive and the aggressive.

Three wealthiest persons in the US own more than the poorer half of the country ([inequality.org](#)), and at least about two thirds of the country supports the system (Pew 2019). This is a paradox. A theory is needed to explain how this aggressive-submissive relationship works and sustains itself. I offer a new social psychological perspective on social classes.

I propose that behavior, aggressiveness, is key for wealth and dominance, and hence, aggressiveness largely defines the successful and dominant class. Likewise, submissiveness is largely responsible for failure to gain wealth and dominance. Submissiveness also enables dominance, and dominance forces submissiveness. It is a relationship with both sides necessary.

Capitalism must force submissiveness—someone needs to work to create the value, so that cap-

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<sup>1</sup>Covid-19 pandemic has confirmed this basic typology: capitalists and their acolytes and mercenaries and some other high earners, not working or working from their mansions or second homes in scenic environments v everyone else toiling to produce value.

italists can extract surplus (Marx [1867] 2010, Harvey 2014)—submissiveness leads to failure in capitalism (lack of accumulation and domination). Both aggressiveness and submissiveness are overlooked and instead pleasant and welcoming labels such as “leadership” and “hard work” are used.

## The Aggressive Class Theory

In general, aggression is done in order to succeed, achieve some goal, typically dominance of some sort. In capitalism, the goal is capital accumulation. Aggressiveness is defined here as “forceful, assertive, and monopolizing pursuit of one’s aims and interests without provocation and deference to others.”<sup>2</sup> The essence of aggressiveness as defined here is not putting in a high level of effort or being agentic and energetic in pursuit of a goal, but rather subjugating, taking advantage of, and abusing others. Hence, the aggressive type has the “ability to navigate the system.” The aggressive type has an ability to navigate emotions and interpersonal relations, and broadly understood institutions, being “street smart” and having knowledge of how “system works.” For instance, economists, lawyers, and politicians tend to have the ability to navigate the system.<sup>3</sup>

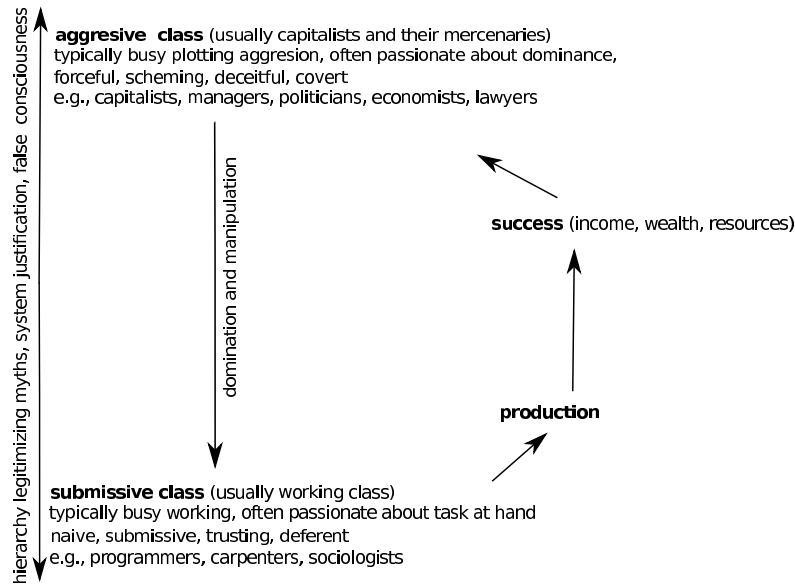
A related term to “aggressive” is “dominant,” which overlaps with “aggressive” as defined here in terms of the following: freedom from subjugation, having impact on others, maintaining reputation

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<sup>2</sup>Aggressiveness is instrumental (proactive, offensive, “cold-blooded”, etc), as opposed to reactive (defensive, “hot-blooded,” etc). It is deliberately enacted in order to achieve a goal and typically motivated by greed. It is unprovoked and long-term. It is structural, institutionalized, systemic, and systematic. Synonyms: mercenary, confrontational, combative, pushy. Antonyms: respectfulness submissiveness, and notably altruism and its synonyms: compassion, kindness, goodwill, and decency. Note that this definition differs from psychological textbook definition (e.g., Anderson and Bushman 2002, Stangor 2014) that requires there to be an intent to cause harm by perpetrator, and motivation to avoid harm by the target. Here, the intent of perpetrator is trying to dominate and accumulate material resources—harm is typically not a direct goal. Strikingly, targets are usually not only unaware of being targets, but they often believe they are fortunate to be submissive to the aggressor. For instance, being ignored by a capitalist and left unemployed is worse than being taken advantage of.

<sup>3</sup>The aggressive type may be greedy. Greed is important to channel aggressiveness properly in capitalism. Narcissism and Machiavellianism may help as well. Machiavellianism is pursuit of self interest but appearing merciful, faithful, humane, frank, and religious (Hawley 2006). All three members of so called “Dark Triad,” narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism correlate negatively with agreeableness (Paulhus and Williams 2002). Lack of agreeableness can be considered a correlate of aggressiveness—aggressive types tend not to be agreeable.

and prestige, ability to access valued resources, influence others, affect social outcomes, ability to act without deference to others (Burgoon et al. 1998, Pratto et al. 2011). Dominant types are: forceful, monopolizing, assertive, competitive, stubborn, bossy. And they are not: deferential, cooperative, conflict avoiding, submissive, humble, obedient, easily led, docile, and accommodating.



**Figure 1:** The aggressive-submissive system.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the aggressive class theory and explains how the aggressive-submissive system works and sustains itself. Much of figure 1 is inspired by Marx ([1867] 2010).

The key relationship shown in the middle with the arrow from aggressive class to submissive class is that of domination and manipulation. Capitalists own means of production, and hence, they own workers, the “wage slaves” (Marx [1867] 2010).<sup>4</sup> This key domination and manipulation enables the relationship shown with arrows on the right. Workers must produce in order to make wages. Capitalists extract the value added. The submissive class produces value which is the basis of income, wealth, and resources, which in turn define success in capitalism and are extracted by the aggressive class.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>See also Goldman et al. (2003), Stefan (2010). Wage slaves are “hired slaves instead of block slaves. You have to dread the idea of being unemployed and of being compelled to support your masters” (p. 283 Goldman et al. 2003).

<sup>5</sup>Figure 1 depicts simplified general patterns; there are, of course, much more complex relationships and exceptions:

Aggressive class at the top dominates and manipulates submissive class at the bottom by aggression. The aggression is a subjugating message but covered up as equality, mobility, and freedom, and goes something like this: We are all in this together, one big middle class, all working hard, our motives are benign to improve lives for everyone, rising tide raises all boats, etc.<sup>6</sup> Capitalists and other leaders actually do you a favor by organizing this amazing opportunity, just work hard you will make it to the top. And people believe it, especially in the US Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011). One of the exceptionalisms of the US is very low class consciousness (Lipset 1997, Lipset and Marks 2000). Americans are unconscious about capitalistic and working classes, and they are unconscious about aggressive-submissive relationship between them.

The aggression is often premeditated and covert as discussed later. This is the key feature—it must not be manifested openly, otherwise aggressive class is at risk of reactive counter-aggression. Aggressive class uses submissive class to produce, and aggressive class enjoys fruits of labor and benefits of domination.

The aggressive-submissive system is maintained through system justification (Jost and Banaji 1994, Jost et al. 2004) and hierarchy legitimizing myths (Pratto et al. 1994, 2006) (inequality is due to differences in hard work, perseverance, education, talent, etc); and false or lack of class consciousness (Marx [1867] 2010, Marx and Engels [1848] 2012) (everyone is free and has equal opportunity and almost everyone is in broad middle class and everyone can advance), and few other factors specific to the US (Lipset 1997, Lipset and Marks 2000). Right wing authoritarianism may help sustain the facade, too (Altemeyer 1998)

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some success goes to submissive class; some production is done by aggressive class; some economists are submissive and some sociologists are aggressive, etc. Inclusion of academic disciplines as examples seems justified: most economists and lawyers work to support the aggressive class interests, while most sociologists work against it. Importantly, over the long run, plenty of success may diminish aggressiveness (due to satiation), and lack of success may increase aggression (due to relative deprivation and frustration).

<sup>6</sup>The tide has risen, but only a minuscule fraction of boats went up. For decades Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and productivity have been increasing, but median income has stayed flat, only top incomes went up—income mobility is a myth (Corak 2013, 2011, 2004).

In too many cases aggressiveness defines success. It is hard to find a truly warm friendly non-aggressive person who is successful at the same time. Aggressive types are successful in terms of income, wealth, and resources, but they do not produce much, rather they are able to dominate and manipulate more submissive types to produce and generate wealth, and then extract it as shown in figure 1.

In a capitalistic society, hard work (among workers, not capitalists) is a form of submissiveness: one is generating value through work, and this value is then being extracted by a capitalist—the foundational principle of capitalism is accumulation through dispossession (Harvey 2014), or in my terminology, it is a dominant-submissive relationship between classes.

Often workers work really hard to the point of mental and physical health damage, not to mention damage to family and social relations. There is evidence that capitalism causes people to work more. Often it is repeated that advancing capitalism brought prosperity and less work, but such comparisons are made against early industrialization when work hours were long—it is forgotten that people actually worked less before industrialization than they do now (Schor 2008). People tend to overearn, that is, they work to earn more than they need (Hsee et al. 2013). Overearning is another term for mindless accumulation. Overwork has negative health consequences (Artazcoz et al. 2012). Many jobs are meaningless—the modern equivalent of assembly line job are administrative “pushing paper” jobs (Economist 2013).

Perhaps, aggressiveness has caused capitalism—as in many animals, there is much aggressiveness in humans, and hence creating capitalism can be in some ways “natural.”<sup>7</sup> Regardless, the point is that capitalism causes people to be more aggressive, that is, people would not be that way if not

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<sup>7</sup>Greed is good in many ways as reviewed by Seuntjens et al. (2015): Greed has many positive economic consequences: greed and self-interest are principal motivators for a flourishing economy: greed motivates the creation of new products and the development of new industries. Some greed may be inherent to human nature—all humans are greedy to some extent. Greed may be an evolutionary adaptation promoting self-preservation. Those who are more predisposed to gain and hoard as much resources as possible may have an evolutionary advantage.

capitalism (Fromm 1964, [1941] 1994, 1992). Perhaps, if capitalism did not develop, people would be more like Rousseau's "noble savage." Capitalism is all about competition—aggressiveness is the key for success in competition. Even if you happened not to be aggressive, it makes sense to become aggressive to have a better chance to win. While some aggressiveness is natural or adaptive for humans (Little et al. 2013), more than hundred-fold inequalities in income, wealth, and command of resources are not natural. Neither is vicious capitalistic competitiveness natural to our species. Hunter gatherers were quite egalitarian and cooperative (Argyle 1994, Bowles and Gintis 2011, Fromm 1992). They were almost like Rousseau's "noble savages," although inter-group conflict and violence were common (Little et al. 2013).

Of course, if too many people try to live off capital, not work, the capitalistic engine sputters—bubbles are created and crises arise (e.g., Harvey 2014). Yet, even if one knows that that crisis is near, even if one causes the coming crisis, one needs to do what one has to do—take advantage of the system and make as much money as possible or other more aggressive types will: "As long as the music is playing, you've got to get up and dance" remarked CEO of Citigroup regarding Citi taking advantage of people (Dealbook 2007).

It could be counterargued that being aggressive is a good strategy in any system, not just capitalism. Arguably, to some degree, but it is especially good strategy in capitalism. Again, capitalism is built on competition, and aggressiveness is critical in competition. Extreme inequality is an integral part of capitalism and when rewards and punishments are greater, aggression intensifies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

Aggressiveness is necessary to survive if one is not gifted with other ingredients for success—aggressiveness can compensate for lack elsewhere. And there are positive feedback loops. Arguably, aggression breeds aggression. If most people are aggressive, then it is more difficult not to be so. Successful aggressiveness leads to dominance and inequality, which in turn leads to more aggressive-

ness. The more inequality, the taller are the social ladders and the more power at the top. Power corrupts (Fiske 2010, Frank 2012) and more instrumental aggressiveness is likely to occur. More inequality also means more relative deprivation among those at the bottom, and hence more reactive aggressiveness is likely. In such society aggressiveness makes more sense, even violence does. Indeed, inequality has been linked to crime (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, Argyle 1994). Dominance and inequality are foundational in capitalism, despite that economists argue to the contrary (Galbraith and Crook 1958). According to (Harvey (2014, p. 171)):

The inequality derives from the simple fact that capital is socially and historically constructed as a class in dominance over labor [...] Workers must be dispossessed of ownership and control over their own means of production if they are to be forced into wage labor in order to live.

People tend to believe that status=competence, i.e. world is just and meritocratic (Benabou and Tirole 2006). Yet, causality rather goes in the opposite direction: high status causes high perceived competence (Fiske 2010). Even clothing or accent signaling high status causes high perceived competence (Argyle 1994). Many people at the top of the hierarchy, notably capitalists, are often neither able nor hard working and often just aggressive. Yet, they enjoy higher quality of life and many other benefits (Pratto et al. 2011, Fiske 2010). Notably, they are healthier and live longer (Marmot 2005).

How exactly aggressive types influence submissive types? There are at least several channels: (a) coercion, (b) reward, (c) legitimacy, (d) expertise, (e) information, (f) referent (i.e. affiliation). There is coercion and reward: carrot is wealth and stick is poverty (Galbraith and Crook 1958). There is legitimacy myth: the most able and hard working are those with power (Parker 2012). Typically workers have more expertise and technical knowledge than capitalists. Capitalists and



their mercenaries, on the other hand, are well informed, organized, affiliated, and they know how the system works.

Capitalism is a system where the winners are the ones who are best able to take advantage of others. It is a class struggle between capitalists and their mercenaries on one side, and workers on the other side. Both classes should be aggressive—it is a struggle, conflict, or warfare after all. Yet, one reason why workers fail is because they are not aggressive enough—that is why they are workers in the first place. Capitalists and their mercenaries are clearly more aggressive or perhaps aggressive in some “better” way—they are able to take advantage of others and get away with it. Others yet need to become more aggressive so that they are not taken advantage of.

Note, that no amount of hard work is going to help. If anything, it will actually make things worse, because it would allow capitalists to extract even more surplus and widen the gap. This is what happened over past few decades: working hours increased, productivity increased, and upper class income increased, but median wage stayed flat (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011, Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mazelis 2016).

Aggressive class can be defined not only by act (how aggressive you are), but also by outcome (whether your aggressiveness/taking advantage of others worked, whether you are at the top of the hierarchy, whether you are rich). In other words, aggressiveness can be understood as willingness to overcome others, but also as ability and outcome. By that approach, simply, aggressive class is upper income class; percentwise you could say 1 percent v 99 percent, and astonishing reality is that in western democracy where everyone is supposed to be equally important, the 99 percent of population is losing, and almost nobody is doing anything serious about it. Caveat, of course, is that in many cases people became rich mostly due to some other ingredient for success, and sometimes perhaps without much aggressiveness at all. Yet, most people need substantial aggressiveness to be successful, and many became successful mostly due to aggressiveness.

Capitalism appears like a democracy—a quite bad system with many problems, but nobody has a better idea than this. Very few (some obscure academics and activists) question the very need for capitalism. People disagree about details—taxation, transfers, etc—but the very notion of replacing capitalism with something else seems unthinkable.

As of now, at least in the US, and arguably in most other highly unequal countries, the majority is clearly taken advantage of by the minority, and people seem to think that nothing can be done beyond cosmetic social transfer adjustment. At the same time, the rule in democracy is not by few oligarchs, but by majority, and clearly something can be done if masses become conscious.

Capitalism is supposed to make people free (Hayek 2014). We are not free. Everyone except capitalists is a commodity on labor market, just like any other commodity trying to sell herself for some price (i.e. wage) (Esping-Andersen 1990, Scruggs and Allan 2006), and some succeed (notably capitalist’s mercenaries), but many fail (unemployed, underemployed, below living wage). And again, success or failure is largely due to aggressiveness, not due to hard work or ability only.

Many manage to remain in middle class, but they toil long hours, remain under high pressure, and do not enjoy their lives (Fischer et al. 1996, Coote 2010, Schor 2008, Cha 2013). Middle class is not free, only capitalists are. Non-capitalists could be free to some degree in theory—as predicted long time ago by Keynes ([1930] 1963): In 21st century we have enough money now for everyone to enjoy her life. But the money is owned by few who buy majority’s labor.

It could be counterargued that capitalist faces (perhaps fiercer than ever) competition from other capitalists and he needs to sell on market, too. But as long as his portfolio is diversified, he does not risk much. Increasing share of capitalists are rentier capitalists as opposed to industrial capitalists (Harvey 2014), and their business has very low risk, virtually zero if properly diversified. Fundamentally, any risk for any capitalist is of his own choosing, he could just keep his millions in a bank or in government bonds and live from interest.

The most striking is that many poor in the US still support such system. Majority is oppressed by minority, be it 95 v 5, or 99 v 1 percent and those being taken advantage of are actually often indifferent or even happy about it. For instance, I have met a taxi driver who vehemently opposes “Obamacare” (Affordable Care Act), yet cannot afford health insurance. Even many poor do not want to change the system—almost nobody revolts against capitalism; people only want some cosmetic changes within capitalism.

One important fascist-like feature of capitalism is crowd control (Kunstler 2012), and this is also a key feature of aggressive-submissive relationship—we are controlled and manipulated by aggressive class. Capitalism has a unique ability to make people who are taken advantage of to support those who take advantage of them. Alas, the aggressive and submissive classes are born and maintained.

Brutal competition makes you more aggressive and competitive against weaker ones and submissive to those above you, i.e., capitalists. You cannot become a capitalist right away—you need capital, and hence you are forced to work hard for a capitalist to save and accumulate capital and hope to become a capitalist one day, and if you are aggressive enough, you may be able to gradually take advantage of people and extract value added from their labor. More realistically, however, you will simply work hard for a capitalist for the rest of your life and regret it Ware (2012). It has to happen this way—if you do not have capital—you have to embrace the system—otherwise you won’t survive. If you have the capital, why would you act against the system? You may be leftist, humanistic, and Marxist in your youth, but at some point you are forced to turn pro-capitalistic. If you don’t, you will become homeless, poor, or at best an academic or an artist, but almost certainly you will not be successful (wealthy), and hence your opinion will not matter much. Those who embrace capitalism, are likely to succeed, and hence their opinion matters and it perpetuates status quo. “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx 1845). Such design ensures capitalism survival, and it works very well indeed.

Not only rationality, but also ideology perpetuates capitalism. Economics is to be blamed—it claimed that laissez faire neoliberal free market capitalism is fairest for everyone—and masses believed in this. Ironically, masses supporting capitalism are irrational and acting against their own interest—but they do so following classical economic theory preaching that everyone is rational and self-interested. We know that people are not very rational and they often act against their own interest (Akerlof and Shiller 2010, Ariely 2009, Shiller 2015). Aggressive class is more rational and self-interested than others.

As discussed above, non-capitalists are not free in capitalism, they are commodities in the market and they work too much and worry too much to enjoy life (Okulicz-Kozaryn et al. 2014). Ironically again, we have capitalism in the first place in order to be free—we justify the very existence of capitalism with freedom (Hayek 2014, Friedman 2009, Glaeser 2011). Free market provides incentives to embrace capitalism and submit oneself to a capitalist, and economics provides “science” to justify such as system. There is also a biological or specifically hormonal mechanism supporting status quo or preventing submissive class from overthrowing the aggressive class (Wood and Eagly 2012).

Among animals, aggression is mostly directed towards those next in rank. Humans are not exception. Most aggressiveness is from top to bottom: capitalists→their mercenaries→workers. This is instrumental aggression (proactive, offensive, controlled, “cold-blooded,” etc). Such aggressiveness is portrayed as fair and desirable using terms like “leadership.” There is some reactive aggressiveness (defensive, “hot-blooded,” etc) from bottom to top in riots, strikes, protests, etc, and such aggressiveness is frowned upon. Bottom-up aggressiveness rarely aims to challenge capitalism in general; its aims are modest, for instance, raising wages.

Many aggressive types do not own much capital, neither they work for wages,<sup>8</sup> hence, they

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<sup>8</sup>Again, working class is understood here as comprising of people working for wages, paid for doing something else than extracting value added.

neither belong to capitalist nor working class. They are either self employed or they live off taking advantage of others (like capitalists and their mercenaries) but they do not own capital and simply consume their earnings like workers. They do not work directly for capitalists as mercenaries, but they are typically supportive of and submissive to capitalists. If they are self employed, their aggressiveness is directed towards their clients, business partners, and competition. Some of the middle class can be classified here: freelancers, entrepreneurs, owners of very small businesses. An old term “petty bourgeoisie” can be used to classify these people. For discussion of petty bourgeoisie in contemporary times see Steinmetz and Wright (1989). Aggressiveness-submissiveness relationship for each class, capitalists, workers, and petty bourgeoisie is summarized in table 1. Table provides a simplified typology, for instance, some workers are aggressive and they may become capitalists one day; and some capitalists may be submissive (say they inherited wealth) and they may fall to working class. Likewise, there is much diversity within and overlap across classes, and there are other similar typologies—for discussion see Argyle (1994), Wright and Perrone (1977).

**Table 1:** Aggressiveness among contemporary Marxists classes as defined by Wright and Perrone (1977), who made a good case for adding managers (or mercenaries as labeled here) as a class.

class	aggressiveness-submissiveness
capitalists	aggressive towards everyone, including other capitalists and submissive to none
mercenaries (leaders/managers)	submissive to capitalists (and higher-level managers) and aggressive towards workers (and lower level managers)
petty bourgeoisie	submissive to capitalists; aggressive towards workers (if any)
workers	submissive to everyone

## Conclusion And Discussion

### What can be done? Policymaking?

“The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality” Dante (Apocryphal)

Aside from speculation about the long run, there is an easy fix in the short run. We should simply tax aggressiveness. It is a vice after all, and we tax other vices—smoking, drinking, etc. Before we can measure aggressiveness reliably and inexpensively for everyone, we can simply tax capitalists and their mercenaries, that is, the rich. This is quite imprecise and crude, to be sure, but it is easy, does not cost anything (everyone already files a tax return), and most importantly, there are other good reasons to tax the rich more. As argued here, vast majority of successful people (notably capitalists and their mercenaries) do not deserve to be successful—some or even all of their success is not due to hard work, but due to aggressiveness. Other random factors (beyond one’s control) such as luck and talents play a role, too. For elaboration see Frank (2012, 2016).

As a first step in the right direction, I would follow Piketty’s idea to tax incomes of rich people at 80% (Piketty 2014, Piketty and Saez 2003, Piketty 1995, Piketty and Saez 2006, Diamond and Saez 2011, Piketty et al. 2011).

## Conclusion And Discussion

“Nice guys finish last.” Leo Durocher (cited in Judge et al. 2012)

Everyday we are experiencing a tyranny by aggressive class—they take advantage of us to achieve their goals, they extract value added from our work, they are remunerated for their dominance, and

we continue to be submissive to receive a share of their wealth produced by us.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalism is not sufficiently understood as being tyrannical.<sup>10</sup> It is not exactly tyranny of a police state, tyranny as conquest, or the tyranny of dictatorship or oligarchy. And yet all these tyrannical elements are present. A major mission of the police is to protect “law and order,” which boils down to protecting status quo, which is aggressive-submissive as elaborated here. Police is protecting interests of capitalists more specifically, for instance, in terms of the private property: vast majority of the property is owned by capitalists, e.g., 3 wealthiest persons in the US own more than the poorer half of the country ([inequality.org](http://inequality.org)). There was tyranny as conquest, e.g., British East India Company, and still is, for instance, the US invasion of Iraq was arguably in large part due to oil—the US did not intervene in other major human rights and humanitarian crises (Power 2013). And clearly, capitalism is the tyranny of dictatorship or oligarchy: wealthiest persons in the US are clearly in many respects like traditional oligarchs of the past wielding an awesome power and influence (Mayer 2017).

The very psychological structure of the system, the aggressive-submissive hierarchy perpetuates capitalistic system. The most successful and powerful ones are likely to be aggressive, as argued here, this is one of the reasons why they are successful in the first place. And the unsuccessful ones are

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<sup>9</sup>There is also a book making a similar parallel “The invisible handcuffs of capitalism: How market tyranny stifles the economy by stunting workers” (Perelman 2011). Interestingly, Pope Francis calls capitalism a tyranny in an official Vatican document (underlined by author): “Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape. Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a “disposable” culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised—they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”. [...] While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation. Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control. A new tyranny is thus born, invisible and often virtual, which unilaterally and relentlessly imposes its own laws and rules.” [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)

<sup>10</sup>Marx’s Capital is fundamentally a critique of the economic concepts that make social relations in a free-market economy seem natural and inevitable, in the same way that concepts like the great chain of being and the divine right of kings once made the social relations of feudalism seem natural and inevitable (Menand 2020). In his 1845 “The German Ideology,” Marx wrote, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.”

not aggressive enough, again, this is one of the reasons why they are unsuccessful. Aggressiveness is required to change the system, but those who are aggressive have no interest in changing the system, but on the contrary, they have interest in increasing exploitation and inequality. This untamed greed, however, is leading to unmasking of the aggressive-submissive relationship. The aggressive class is, to paraphrase Marx ([1848] 2012), its own grave-digger.

On the other hand, there appears to be an equilibrium—aggressive class is only abusing and exploiting others as much as possible, but not more. It fears retaliation. Hence, many developments happened against aggressive class interests, for instance, New Deal, Great Society, and more recently, Walmart and McDonald’s raising wages. These developments might have prevented social unrest that could have endangered aggressive class existence.

The goal of this paper is to define aggressive class, show aggressiveness being key ingredient for success in capitalism, and hence, argue for action to break the link between aggressiveness and success. An obvious solution (that will also solve many other problems) is to replace capitalism with something else, say socialism and humanism (Maslow 2013, Harvey 2014), but further development of this line of thought is beyond the scope of this paper, and a more modest and narrow conclusion is offered instead.

We should stop overemphasizing hard work as key ingredient for success. At best, it is inaccurate. At worst, it is simply taking advantage of people, akin to slavery,<sup>11</sup> making them work hard and then reaping the benefits of their work. Notably, academics and governments should stop overemphasizing hard work, because it is our job to protect the people—they pay us for that in taxes. Rules of the game are not clear, and worse, what is promoted (submissive hard work) is opposite to what leads to

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<sup>11</sup>Nietzsche put it this way “Whoever does not have two-thirds of his day for himself, is a slave, whatever he may be: a statesman, a businessman, an official, or a scholar.” And there is a concept of wage slavery; Marx himself makes a distinction between wage-labor and slave-labor ([1867] 2010). See also Goldman et al. (2003), Stefan (2010). Wage slaves are “hired slaves instead of block slaves. You have to dread the idea of being unemployed and of being compelled to support your masters” (p. 283 Goldman et al. 2003).



success: aggressive and covert taking advantage of others without doing much work. Aggressiveness is built into capitalism—capitalism is built on a premise of ruthless competition, and aggressiveness is a key skill when it comes to ruthless competition.

The thesis of this paper is that aggressiveness is key for success in capitalism but the opposite is perpetuated that submissiveness is necessary for success. Not only aggressiveness is key for success in capitalism but also that capitalism fosters aggressiveness—I do not intend to develop this line of thought further here—it was already developed by Erich Fromm (1964, [1941] 1994, 1992)—for a brief overview see Swanson (1975).

The fundamental problem with aggressive class is that it is remunerated for aggressiveness and not for hard work or ability or other virtue. Remuneration (money or exchange value) should reflect labor, or perhaps some other virtue such as ability or creativity, but not a vice, aggressiveness.

Given great injustice in the aggressive-submissive relationship, it is important to note the powerful forces working to support the status quo. First, there is lack of class consciousness or false consciousness (Marx and Engels [1848] 2012, Marx [1867] 2010) preventing the submissive class from realizing that they are being taken advantage of. Most people in the US believe that they belong to the middle class and they strongly believe that their hard work will result in success (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011), and hence, even if actually poor and disadvantaged, they think that they will make it one day. Paradoxically, it is often the most disadvantaged ones that justify the system most (Jost and Banaji 1994, Jost et al. 2004).

World is dangerous for aggressive class (Perry et al. 2013), but also aggressive class is dangerous for the world. It is likely that if they lead, there will be racism, sexism, and other prejudice, possibly unemployment, and even war and famine (Altemeyer 2003, 2004). Not only society, but also nature is likely to be more exploited in unsustainable way if aggressive types lead (Milfont et al. 2013, Klein 2014). Fundamentally, capitalists (the aggressive class) cause resource depletion, pollution,

and climate change (Harvey 2014, Klein 2014).

Importantly, note that this monograph refrains from moral judgments.<sup>12</sup> Aggressive class is simply only condemned on the grounds that there are double-standards, deceit, hypocrisy, or simply logical inconsistency between what is done and what is said. The advertised logic of capitalism is that talents and hard work results in success. But aggressive class is largely remunerated neither for work, nor for talents, while the popular wisdom is the opposite: success in capitalism is a result of hard work and talents.

Another logical inconsistency is that the working class acts against its own interest by being submissive. First step is to gain class consciousness, and second step is to take action. Some of that is already happening. While capitalism is still most popular, socialism is slightly gaining popularity in general population and significantly among groups: socialism is more popular than capitalism among 18-29 age group and Democrats.<sup>13</sup> There are also movements, notably Bernie Sanders and Protest Wall street.

Paradoxically, morality is used to cover-up aggressiveness—most successful types appear moral, but act aggressively, and propagate and instill moral behavior in others so that others are more easily taken advantage of. Another paradox is economists' use of freedom to justify capitalism: economists claim that people are free in aggressive-submissive relationship.

In general, our civilization is moving from more aggressive to less aggressive over time as we continue development. Yet note that the more development, the less aggression, but also less freedom and more inhibition (Freud et al. 1930). We are less free today to express our (natural) aggressiveness. While arguably aggressiveness was important for survival in our evolutionary history and is now important for economic success, one also needed cooperation—we were quite coopera-

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<sup>12</sup>Some may consider terms such as “greed, selfish, narcissistic” to be moral condemnations, but I use them in descriptive or positive as opposed to moralistic or normative sense. Even when I say that aggressiveness is a vice, I simply make a descriptive classification based on quoted lists of vices developed by others.

<sup>13</sup><https://news.gallup.com/poll/240725/democrats-positive-socialism-capitalism.aspx>

tive and egalitarian through our evolutionary history as hunters-gatherers(Bowles and Gintis 2011, Maryanski and Turner 1992).

But the point is that in our evolutionary past clearly more aggressiveness was needed than today, hence, given fast (in evolutionary time) recent progress of our civilization, it is safe to assume that some of our aggressiveness is non-adaptive. In other animals some aggressiveness is non-adaptive as well. For instance, some spiders kill but do not consume prey or even kill potential mates and fail to mate (Sih et al. 2004). Deers developed antlers for fight, but some have developed antlers so large that they get stuck in trees and whole species survival is endangered Frank (2012).

It would be a mistake to say that free market capitalism or aggressiveness is in some way inherently most natural to humans. It is natural for humans to fight and compete but also to cooperate, and if anything to cooperate more than fight (Bowles and Gintis 2011).

But fundamentally, the aggressive-submissive relationship described here, the laissez faire free market capitalism that has dominated the world is an artificial mechanism. It has not existed throughout our evolutionary history for tens of thousands of years, and only appeared about two hundred years ago. The aggressive-submissive relationship is simply designed and regulated by policy, as is inequality for instance as pointed out by (Fischer et al. 1996). Surely capitalism exploits natural human tendency to compete, but so does communism exploits natural human tendency to cooperate, Nazism exploits natural human tendency to overcome others, and so on. If they did not exploit some tendency they would not develop. A Marxist perspective on aggression can be found in Reed (1970).

Aggressiveness and capitalism in many ways contradict broadly understood human progress and development. To use Harvey's (2014) terminology, this is yet another contradiction of capitalism. Perhaps, aggressiveness and capitalism get us closer to our animistic nature and instincts, but they get us farther away from human development as defined by Maslow or Fromm (Maslow 2013, Fromm

1992, 1964, [1941] 1994). In other words, while aggressiveness is socially competent and successful (Little et al. 2013), as argued here, it is not socially desirable. Because it is not socially desirable, it has been commonly argued that aggression is maladaptive and must be avoided.

We frown upon most forms of aggressiveness in general, and only allow it in some regulated form usually as a sport or some other form of entertainment. Notably physical aggressiveness on the streets is forbidden, but it is allowed as a sport, say boxing. Same with aggressive car driving: car racing on public streets is forbidden, but we allow it as a sport.

Yet, we still maintain that socioeconomic aggressiveness by capitalists and their mercenaries is somehow beneficial for everyone and everywhere. Arguably, one reason we still believe it is because human brain is hardwired to accept authority (Milgram and Van den Haag 1978). Another explanation for persistence and support by victims of aggressive-submissive relationship is perhaps victim-perpetrator attachment or so called “Stockholm Syndrome,” where victims support perpetrators (Van der Kolk and McFarlane 2012, Graham et al. 1988, Van der Kolk 1989). Just like physical violence and car racing, socio-economic aggression should be left for games. Monopoly board game is one already existing example.

Life would be better without aggressive class. Imagine a world when everyone or vast majority is aggressive—very little resources would be available because most energy would be devoted to plotting, scheming, and attempting to overcome others.<sup>14</sup> It would be also a very brutal and barbarian world. A world without aggressive class, on the other hand, would be full of resources, because energy would be focused on production and enjoyment, not aggression. It would be also a welcoming and friendly world, where people can retain benefits of their work as opposed to being them taken away by aggressive class. It would be free-play spontaneous world envisioned by the

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<sup>14</sup>These are of course hypothetical examples meant for illustrative purpose. And there would be little resources if everyone or vast majority of people were in aggressive class. So far capitalism has actually produced great deal of resources (albeit highly unequally owned), but only a small fraction of the society was an aggressive class, and as argued here, the resources were mostly produced by non-aggressive class.

Frankfurt school (Marcuse 2015, 2013, Fromm 1992, 2012, 1964, 1962, 1944, [1941] 1994).

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## Supplementary Online Material (SOM)

### Ingredients for Individual Success (Micro Or Person Level)

”Success is the result of perfection, hard work, learning from failure, loyalty, and persistence.” Colin Powell

Hard work is most commonly advertised as necessary and sufficient for success, and this myth successfully functions in popular culture in the US (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2011).

However, as this paper argues, in capitalism, aggressiveness is key for success. Others have argued other ingredients as enumerated in table 2,<sup>15</sup> but aggressiveness has been largely overlooked—or rather omitted and mischaracterized on purpose. At the same time, we seem to more readily acknowledge that aggressiveness is important for success among other animals. Argyle (1994), for instance, lists following predictors of dominance among animals: age, sex, size, rank of mother, intelligence, and aggressiveness.

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<sup>15</sup>The list is rather exhaustive than mutually exclusive. There is an overlap and circularity to some degree, for instance, both genes and environment define talents. Ingredients’ importance depends on environment and historical time, and they lead to different specific types of success. These factors lead to success, because they are appreciated due to particular aspects of the environment. That is, if the feature wasn’t interpreted by others as a mark of success, or if the society did not have a pathway by which those features translated into success, the factor would not matter. Michelangelo, for example, might be revered now as an original, creative, and skillful artist. During his day, however, he was regarded as a craftman, a decorator, not an artist—he never had superior position, made much money, or achieved success. Success, however, is defined broadly here (see section ??).

**Table 2:** Ingredients for success.

iq (intelligence quotient)/talent/intelligence (Herrnstein and Murray [1994] 2010)
eq (emotional intelligence quotient)/emotions/social skills or “ability to navigate the system” (Goleman 2006)
communication skills (Grant 2013, Trump and Schwartz 2009)
environment/ecology (notably country, neighborhood, and family) (Fischer et al. 1996)
hierarchy/elites (Mills 1999)
education (Becker 2009)
creativity (Florida 2008)
intuition, gut feeling, or leap of faith (Dane and Pratt 2007, Bezos 2010, Jobs 2005, Walker 2014)
passion/flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, Vallerand et al. 2007)
luck/risk (including genes) (Frank 2012, 2016)
hard work (Andrews 2005, Duckworth 2013)

Over the course of our civilization development, we are trying to or in most cases actually increasing the success ingredients listed in table 2, including hard work (Schor 2008). We are decreasing, on the other hand, aggressiveness (Freud et al. 1930). Indeed, decreasing aggressiveness is one of the hallmarks of human progress, what makes us different and better than animals. Luck and hard work are peculiar, too. Luck is purely beyond our control and typically underestimated, and hard work is purely within our control and typically overestimated—the myth is that if you work hard and keep on trying you will finally succeed.

All above ingredients for success matter, and lack of any single one can jeopardize benefits of all others, or plenty of any single one can compensate for all others. In short, all ingredients from table 2 are often necessary, and sometimes few or even one is sufficient for success. I will not try to argue, as many others did, that my key ingredient, aggressiveness, is more important than others. I simply want to make a case that it has been overlooked, misused, and that there are some far reaching consequences.

In its crudest, yet popular and populist form, all success depends on hard work in capitalism.



More enlightened observers would add other ingredients as enumerated above, but most people emphasize individual agency in determining one’s own success. Few, such as Fischer et al. (1996), Mills (1999), and Frank (2012) deviate from such view and claim that success is largely determined by outside forces.

Ingredients for success could be classified as positive or negative, virtues or vices. All success ingredients from table 2 would be mostly positive, but aggressiveness has been mostly classified a vice.<sup>16</sup> We want more talent/intelligence, education, creativity, and communication skills. We want better emotions, and environment/ecology (notably neighborhood and family). But we do not want more aggressiveness, nor “better” aggressiveness—this is true for human society as a whole. Persons, groups, and notably countries, unfortunately, typically benefit from being aggressive, at least in the short run. In other words, aggressiveness is “smart for one, but dumb for all.” Our civilization has realized that aggressiveness is harmful, and hence, it has been discouraged (Freud et al. 1930), especially violent physical aggressiveness is commonly penalized. Aggressiveness is discouraged and penalized among children and adolescents (Little et al. 2013) and among adults (e.g., Dahling et al. 2014). People rarely get advice to be aggressive violently, rather they are sometimes advised to be aggressive in a “smart” way: they are told to be a leader, to compete viciously, etc. But by far the most popular advice for success is to work hard, or to get education (i.e. work hard at school). One needs to make an effort, create value. How convenient for a capitalist.

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<sup>16</sup>See SOM (Supplementary Online Material) section “Aggressiveness Is A Vice”