

SOCIOLOGY 929
Reading Interrogations, session 3
September 19, 2006

Erik Olin Wright's reconstruction(s) of Marxist Class Analysis

1. Rudolfo Elbert

I think that there are many interesting issues raised by this week's bibliography that can guide a critical reading of Wright's work. Of these many issues, I would like to focus on the production vs. distribution discussion. One of the main stated purposes of Wright's class analysis is to gain a deeper complexity in the polarized class map of classic marxism, being the most important addition the class divisions among non-owners of the means of production (workers). Is this needed differentiation among workers based on the empirical finding that in fact managers, supervisors and skilled workers earn more money than non-skilled manual workers? If this is so, is the addition of the skill and domination dimensions a way of including the differentiated market capacities of workers? This question is related to a core issue in the production vs. distribution discussion: What is the conceptual role of the market in Wright's class analysis? And, what is the relevance of exchange relations in the definition of class boundaries? Is it that the only way of attaining this class complexity is by adding the *exchange* relations dimension to the *production* centred class analysis? If exchange relations are important, this means a conceptual shift from Marx to Weber in the explanation of class boundaries? An additional question that I would like to post: Wright gives a relevant place in his framework to the definition of property relations: Are these relations exclusively located in the market sphere, or they are also affected by the production sphere? **[The basic thrust of my proposal is not to substitute exchange relations for production relations in the understanding of class relations (and thus class "boundaries"), but to try to figure out how these should be combined. A given empirical category of people like "managers" can be defined both in terms of their location with the labor market and their location within the process of production itself: they were hired into a job because they had certain skills or credentials or connections, and then once hired they do certain things. So the problem is understanding how these two primary dimensions of a person's location in an economic system can be combined into something we call "class."]**

2. Adam Slez

I had a tough time thinking of a way to critically engage this week's reading; the logical soundness of Wright's theoretical argument leaves little in the way of immediate points of contention. By Wright's own admission, however, "[c]onceptual adjudication is a double process," in that it "compares rival concepts in terms of their respective consistency both with the abstract conceptual requirements of the general theory in which they figure and with the empirical observations generated using the theory" (Wright 1985:

23). Simply put, any given concept ought to hold up to both internal/theoretical and external/empirical checks on its validity. As noted above, it is exceptionally difficult to challenge Wright's class analytic framework on the basis of faults in its internal consistency. This leaves open the possibility of adjudication on empirical grounds. Or does it?

As Wright notes, the development of the concept of contradictory class locations has been spurred in part by a desire to "generate a substantial body of statistical data explicitly gathered within a Marxist framework" (Wright 1985: 48). To be certain, this is a laudable task. My impression, however, is that because the empirical demands of Wright's conceptual framework only seem to be met by the data he collected (Halaby and Weakliem 1993), there is a potential for his conceptual framework to become insulated, meaning that it is falsely validated solely because of the practical difficulties associated with subjecting it to an external check. **[EOW: My own data gathering – and that of the collaborators in the other dozen or so countries that have applied the data – was not organized in such a way that it had any built-in guarantees of validation. That is why there were so many puzzles generated by the data, rather than "confirmations" of prior theoretical arguments. The claim of self-validating data is a pretty strong claim, and certainly is not a logical corollary of generating data using a set of concepts.]** Interestingly, scholars (e.g., Halaby and Weakliem 1993) have used Wright's own data to challenge the efficacy of his conceptual model. While I certainly advocate challenges of this type, I also agree with Wright's (1993) reply that parsimony is not an inherently valid standard for empirical adjudication. Wright justifies his complex map of class locations on the grounds that "[t]he mechanisms through which each of these categories acquire their incomes are qualitatively different" (Wright 1993: 32).

On its face, I think that this claim is true—workers and capitalists earn their income in different ways. The problem lies in empirically verifying whether or not the dimensions of difference between classes (i.e., relation to means of production, relation to authority, relation to scarce skills) specified by Wright are causally meaningful. In other words, to what extent can we tell whether it is in fact differentiation along these dimensions which actually *causes* particular outcomes? There are at least two lines of thought with respect to the specification of causal mechanisms. On the one hand, it is argued that causal propositions cannot be validly specified on the basis of statistical models (Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998). On the other hand, it is contended that causal mechanisms cannot be validly specified through theoretical deduction (Somers 1998). Taken together, these propositions seem to suggest that causal mechanisms can only be validly specified via qualitative induction. Though I think it reasonable to question this claim, it is nonetheless worth considering whether the use of Wright's complex class typology can be justified on the grounds that it embodies distinct sets of causal mechanisms. **[It is of course a huge philosophical problem to define what one means by a "causal mechanism" let alone to specify how one empirically studies them. I take a rather open-ended ecumenical view of this. If you make a claim about certain kinds of mechanisms they should have specific empirical implications. If you then study the world and make observations which are consistent with those implications, then the credibility of the original claims are strengthened; if you get inconsistent observations, then you have puzzles to solve – to figure out what mechanisms are generating the inconsistencies; if you completely contrary observations, then your**

level of skepticism about the initial claims should increase. This is an endless iterative process where the pivot for pushing forward theoretical understandings of mechanisms is the discovery of puzzles generated by prior observations and then reconstructing the account of mechanisms in ways to crack the puzzles. The added complications in social science, of course, are (a) the world keeps changing, (b) the observations themselves are heavily shaped by observational mechanisms that are autonomous from the mechanisms generating the phenomena being studied, it is extremely difficult to sort out the interplay of these two types of mechanisms. This is a problem in all science (i.e. the mechanisms of optics in telescope lens interact with the mechanisms of the astronomical phenomena observed through the telescope), but it is especially tricky in social science for a host of familiar reasons.]

3. Ann Pikus

According to the Marxist approach to class analysis, class relations are defined by inequalities in peoples' rights and powers over resources deployed in production. [EOW: I would say this *slightly differently*: class relations are *determined by inequalities in rights and powers over resources*. The actual *relations* are not just about rights and powers over resources, but also about the activities of production itself. Unless you are packing that into the word "deployed" it makes it sound like the relations are simply defined by the control over resources brought to production, rather than what people actually do inside of production. Both are important.] Exploitation is purported to explain these inequalities. [EOW: exploitation is a result of these inequalities. In a special sense exploitation could, I suppose, be viewed as a cause of the inequalities, since exploitation reproduces inequalities. But it is a little misleading to say that exploitation explains the inequalities in rights and powers over resources deployed in production.] Exploitation requires (1) that the material welfare of one group depends on the material deprivation of another, (2) that the exploited be excluded from access to productive resources, and (3) that this exclusion results in differential welfare because the exploiters control the productive resources and can appropriate the fruits of the exploited group's labor.

People who own no means of production and are not in the paid labor force (and thus have no fruits ripe for appropriation) are neither exploiters nor exploited; consequently, they have no direct class location. However, Wright explains these people may fit into the class structure via mediated class locations. For example, family ties can link a child's material interests to the process of exploitation. Yet Wright concedes family ties are a poor basis for locating members of the "underclass" (i.e. non-exploited yet economically oppressed people typically without land or "productively saleable labor") within the class structure. Indeed, he seems to argue that since the people in the underclass cannot access the resources necessary to develop the skills that would make their labor saleable, they are effectively expendable (from the capitalist's perspective).

I am having a lot of difficulty with the Marxist approach to class analysis due to this seeming inability to locate the underclass in the class structure. Is there no potential for class consciousness, class formations, or class struggle for the underclass? What are the implications of the possibility that lack of productively saleable labor may not be the

root cause of the perpetuation of the underclass (i.e. racial discrimination and spatial mismatch of skills to jobs would seem to be other plausible explanations)? **[EOW: there are a number of distinct issues here: 1) the concept of exploitation and oppression do help us locate people in the “underclass” with respect to a class structure: being marginalized with respect to the dominant class relation is the specific quality of their location. Marginalization is a theoretical characterization of this position, and it is different from the suggestion contained in the expression “under” in underclass. 2) the problem of the mechanisms that reproduce the underclass – or any other feature of the class structure – is distinct from the criteria for defining the character of the location. Racial discrimination and spatial features are indeed good candidates for explaining the reproduction and deepening of the underclass precisely because they help explain marginalization.]**

4. Sarbani Chakraborty

In this interrogation I shall focus on the issue of the possible constitutiveness of non-class mechanisms in the analysis of class-structure.

Class structure as a qualitative demarcating line, “a central organizing principle of societies” and a “fundamental social determinant of limits of possibility of other aspects of social structure” (Wright, p. 32) brings to the fore the debate on the constitutiveness of “non-class mechanisms”. Terming race/ethnicity, gender or caste as non-class mechanisms seem to exclude them from being **integral parts of a constitutive analysis of class structures**. **[EOW: A lot hinges on precisely what you mean by “integral part” and “a constitutive analysis” of class structure. One interpretation of the idea might be that X is a “constitutive part” of Y, which implies that X is a dimension of Y, or a component of Y. If this is the case, then a full definition of Y includes X. But you don’t say in your statement that nonclass mechanisms are a constitutive *part* of class structure itself. Instead you say nonclass mechanisms are integral parts of a constitutive *analysis* of class structure. What exactly is a “constitutive analysis”?] They seem to be viewed either as “autonomous mechanisms” or in specific cases as mechanisms bringing about variations within “a given set of class limits” (p. 32). But theoretically non-class mechanisms may be understood as central mechanisms along with the class-structure. **[To say that nonclass mechanisms are central mechanisms along with class mechanisms is precisely what I am claiming when I say that nonclass mechanisms are autonomous mechanisms. To say this does not imply that they do not deeply interact with class mechanisms in generating effects on the lives of people – on their identities, their experiences, their possibilities. It is just saying that gender mechanisms are not simply a part of class mechanisms (and vice versa). This, it seems to me, is the same as saying that they operate “along with” class mechanisms. I am not sure what difference in views you are trying to explicate here.]****

A class-constrained view may create analytical problems when exploring class relations in societies where pre-capitalistic as well as forms of capitalistic relations of productions co-exist. Those pre-capitalistic societal structures may be intrinsically related to the

formation of class-structures. Here I stress on the aspect of capitalism because the phenomenon has engulfed almost every society today in some form or the other and with the advent of capitalism, class-locations have become or have potentially become more unstable. However, analysis of class-structures needs to take into an historical account the already existing economic and socio-political relations. For example, casteism as a form of pre-capitalistic system persists in many parts of India and has determined stable class locations through extraction of especially manual 'dirty' labour for generations. An individual's caste position even today most often automatically determines his/her class location. Casteism therefore seems to be a pre-class structural determinant. However, with the advent of capitalistic systems of production, even though the access to resources have ostensibly become more open, that access to resources does not equate to the distribution of capacities to act on them due to the caste positions. **[EOW: mostly what you have described here seems entirely consistent with my conceptual map – if I understand your point. When you say that caste “most often automatically determines his/her class location,” you imply that you can define the class location independently of caste and then use caste to explain why someone occupies a given class location. This implies autonomous mechanisms and their interaction. I would add here, of course, that some people in scheduled castes today are capitalists, even rich capitalists, even if this is rare; and some very high caste people are in dirty manual jobs. This merely reaffirms the autonomy of the mechanisms – one is not merely a reflection of the other, they exist “along side” each other and interact. Are you rejecting that formulation?]**

The **conflation** of caste-class locations raises the problem of access and the capacity of an individual to act, where access to resources and capacity to act need to be analyzed distinctly and not together. **[EOW: I am not sure that what you have described is a conflation of these two mechanism as opposed to their interaction or intersection. “Conflation means that the distinction disappears. Are you arguing that?]** While the class and caste position distribute access to resources, at times it is possible that the caste position and not the class, may have more determining power over the capacity to act for individuals on those resources. This seems to be in some contradiction to the chapter, “Biography of a concept...” Prof. Olin Wright observes, “The class structure [...] constitutes the basic mechanism for distributing access to resources in society, and thus distributing capacities to act (p. 28). **[EOW If you have “access” to a resource but you cannot use it – i.e. if it does not confer a capacity to do something – then I am not sure you really have access to it in the relevant sense.]** He again notes, “It is sufficient to argue that the class structure constitutes the central mechanism by which various sorts of resources are appropriated and distributed, therefore determining underlying capacities to act of various social actors” (emphasis mine, p.32-33). It could be argued that class structure may not be the central mechanism of appropriation and distribution because in some contexts, pre-capitalist or non-capitalist modes of production may still determine those aspects. **[But these can just be different kinds of class relations – precapitalist class relations of various sorts. If they are modes of production then why isn't this just a question of the complex mixing of different forms of class relations?]** Therefore, concepts, especially those of exploitation or exchangeability of labour seem to be more important than that of the centrality of the class-structure itself. **[EOW: You**

raise some fundamental issues here. Some of the problems may be terminological, but some may not. I generally regard nonclass mechanisms as entering the analysis of class primarily by determining how people are sorted into class structures and what sorts of class locations there are into which people can be sorted. In the US South, racial oppression made slavery possible, and race explained where in that structure people ended up. But I do not call the race relation itself a form of class relations: it may explain class relations and individual fates within that structure, but it is not in itself a “class” relation. I am not sure, but it seems that you may be arguing that race in this situation – or caste in the Indian context – is a form of class relations itself.

One other comment: you quote me correctly as stating that “class structure constitutes the central mechanism by which various sorts of resources are appropriated and distributed, therefore determining underlying capacities to act of various social actors”. I think you are right that the generic claim that class is “the” central mechanism through which resources are appropriated and distributed is too strong. There are contexts in which nonclass mechanisms could be more important in allocating resources. The issue, then, is whether there is a meaningful difference between describing such situation as one in which (for example) race is the primary mechanism for allocating resources vs race is the mechanism for allocating people to class positions?]

5. You-Geon Lee.

Class Relation between Irregular Workers and Regular Workers

Wright(1997;1985) tried to figure out middle class locations, adding the relation to authority and the relation to scarce skill on the Marx’s basic explanation which emphasized the ownership of, and exclusion from, the means of production. This seems to make sense in terms of its explanatory power. In addition, the concept of “contradictory class locations” within middle class leads me to another thought that focuses on a ‘quasi-contradictory class relation (?)’ within the working class. For example, in South Korea, the problem of irregular workers including temporary, contingent, or non-standard workers has been hotly debated in terms of their low wage, unstable employment, and relations to business owners and regular workers. My focus is on the relationship between irregular workers and regular workers. Definitely, irregular workers occupy a same class position with regular workers in that they don’t have the means of production and that they are exploited from the capitalist. However, they are quite different from regular workers in that they don’t have any **legal right of collective actions and bargaining**. **[EOW: this is undoubtedly an important distinction, but does it constitute a difference in their class position, or is this some other sort of cleavage? Does this render them a contradictory location within class relations, or is this a different kind of contradiction?]** In this context, some of irregular workers show their antagonism against regular workers (not against the capitalist). They argue that regular workers exploit them by using their political and organizational power - such as collective actions and bargaining, and the implementation of their authority from their

higher position than that of irregular workers - in a way that regular workers transfer their portion of work to irregular workers and that regular workers enjoy the increase of their wage which came from the decrease of irregular workers' wage. In this context, political powers and legal positions seem to give regular workers a kind of authority to control the labor power of irregular workers in the relation of production, and differentiate them from irregular workers in their class location (in this meaning, regular workers seem to occupy a kind of contradictory locations within class relations). Does it make sense to say that 'regular workers' and 'irregular workers' are in the exploitative relations? Do they really occupy different class locations or are they in different strata? Furthermore, is it possible to say that they are different classes? **[EOW: some of what you say here might imply that the distinction between regular and irregular workers is coming close to a class division constituting a special kind of contradictory location. If indeed regular workers exploit irregular workers, then this might be the case. But this may, of course, be an illusion: the regular workers may just have some special privileges relative to these other workers, and thus these would be strata – like big capitalists and small capitalists. Phillipe van Parijs has suggested that one kind of real class division among employees is between those who have effective “property rights” in their jobs. This is not just the right to collective bargaining, but actual rights to keep their jobs, making it very hard to be fired. This enables them to acquire a mor substantial *rent* from their employment, and perhaps this would justify calling them in a contradictory class location.]**

6. Charity Schmidt

I am confused by this statement presented in *Foundations of a Neo-Marxist Class Analysis* (p. 11) regarding variations in class relations: “There still can be *quantitative* variation of course [...] . But there is no theoretical space for *qualitative* variation in the nature of class relations.” Why is this so? Perhaps I am simply misunderstanding the statement, or I am trying to apply a macro-level concept to a micro-level analysis.

[The full statement from which the quoted passage comes reads:

“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.

This refers to various non-Marxist conceptualizations in which classes designate universal categories like “rich” and “poor”. I made this statement in order to bring into more relief the distinctiveness of the Marxist framework. You seem to be treating this statement as if I were endorsing this as a position within a broad Marxist approach.] Regardless of possible misunderstandings, here I go...

In the same piece, Wright describes the role of “social relations” and how such patterns of human interaction are determined by class location (p. 14). **[EOW: It is not quite right to say that social relations are “determined by class locations”. “Locations” exist only within relations: the concept of social relation is logically prior to the concept of locations. Consider the locations husband and wife. Does it make sense to**

say that these locations “determine” the relation “marriage” or that these are the locations within the social relation we call “marriage”?] While structured by class location, such interactions still command attention as potential qualitative variations within class relations. Unequal distribution of rights and powers over productive resources play a deterministic role in interactions and thus relations (p. 10), yet day to day choices and actions are also influenced by the subjective perceptions/conditions of individuals. This question of qualitative relevance becomes especially significant when analyzing the potential variance in interests and actions of the ‘middle class’. For a micro-level example, a university professor may qualify as a member of the middle class by virtue of her/his relationship to the means of production, yet they may make choices that appear to have no benefit for them within the structure of their class location (such as a project which serves the working class more than their own interests). We must assume then that some aspect of qualitative variation is, to some effect, determining such choices. [EOW: There are two sorts of ways that variation in concrete behaviors can be “explained” within class analysis: 1) one can try to specify more fine-grained variations in the class-character of the locations themselves – adding strata and “fractions” to class locations; talking about new forms of contradictory locations; adding a temporal dimension to class locations, etc.; 2) looking at the way various kinds of nonclass processes interact with class. In the case of professors siding with workers in class struggles, I think the latter is more promising. The issue here is not some special property of variation in the class character of their location, but rather of the specific effects of intensive intellectual work on values and ideologies.]

Perhaps my question could be construed as a Weberian critique of the Marxist concept of class by emphasizing the subjective conditions in the causal relevance of class. However, when we account for Marx’s concept of exploitation, the question still stands since “What exploitation adds to [class analysis] is a claim that conflicts of interest between classes are generated not simply by what people *have*, but also by what people *do* with what they have (*Class Counts*, p. 33).” Therefore, even in relation to Marx’s concept of exploitation, there is recognition of individual choice and thus the potential for qualitative variation and furthermore the potential for individuals to make choices/actions outside of their own class interests. To use more quotes from Wright to reinforce my proposition: “Micro-processes are mediated by macro-contexts” yes, but “macro-processes have micro-foundations (*Foundations*, p. 20).”

7. Hsing-Mei Pan

In the article, ‘The biography of a concept’, Erik establishes conceptual criteria by which complexities and contradictions of the social positions of wage earners are presented. According to his description, the motivation for making this kind of effort is to distinguish wage earners from the working class so that the working class can properly be specified. He attempts to do this by making a distinction between managers and workers in terms of domination and appropriation (p.51). On the other hand, in the article ‘A Neo-Marxist class analysis’, he mentions that a firm, a city, or a country can constitute an analysis unit and there is a class structure involved in it: the given material condition of

production. I find I still do not completely realize the property and the definition of the working class even though the contradictory locations of 'middle class' have been clearly expressed. For example, if my analysis unit is an entire society, how do I locate the social position of small farmers who own their own lands and means of production but do not hire anybody to work for them? Eventually, I find it is not easy to locate the social position of small farmers just in terms of social relations involved in this kind of material condition of production. On the other hand, if the concept of class is defined as a structure involved in a given material condition of production, does it mean we cannot simultaneously see workers in workshop and small farmers as the working class?

[EOW: The point about “units of analysis” was a way of clarifying what it means to talk about a *class structure*, not mainly a way of clarifying what we mean by a specific class *location*. That is, the expression “class structure” is always relative to some unit, some social space in which we want to describe this aspect of its structure. In this way you can talk about the class structure of the United States or the class structure of Wisconsin, or the class structure of General Motors. In all of these cases you would examine the character of the class relations within that unit and the distribution of class locations formed by those relations. This does not mean that the definition of a “worker” (i.e. a working class location within the class structure) would necessarily be different in our description of the class structure of Wisconsin or of the United States. So, to approach your question about the small farmer and a worker in a workshop: the former is not in the “working class” because the nature of their location within class relations is quite different from those of workers. They are in the “petty bourgeoisie” by virtue of owning means of production and not hiring others, not the working class. They may join with the working class in a collective class *formation* – a coalition of some sort – but that is a different matter.]

8. Michael Callaghan Pisapia

Wright argues that Marxist class analysis pays off because it helps to explain the dominating-resisting power relations between exploiters and exploited, and because it contains the rudiments of an endogenous theory of consent (Wright 2005: 29). Workers have power because of their “inherent capacity ... to resist their own exploitation” and exploiters, who above all are concerned with an optimal extraction of labor **power [this should be labor effort or just labor – labor power is the capacity to perform labor; capitalists are interested in extracting actual effort.]**, will likely try to develop ways to overcome that resistive power. The counter-power of exploiters against the resisting power of the exploited may be coercive, as it is under a system of slavery, or it may be more efficiently and optimally organized, as it is under capitalism, by creating working conditions that engender the cooperation of workers rather and diminishes their resistance. Capitalists seem to ‘know better’ than Masters how to efficiently extract labor power and to control or diffuse the inherent capacity of workers to resist: they “do things that elicit that active consent of the exploited” such as cultivating loyalty to firms and supporting ideological positions such as the moral responsibility to be a “good, hard worker”.

I do not understand the appearance in history of ‘doing things to elicit the active consent of the exploited.’ What explains this appearance? I suppose it is the profit motive; but how did profit-seekers under slavery, for example, fail to see that a strategy of eliciting consent would be better for their profit maximizing ends? Was it a lack of experience on their part? A lack of creativity? Or perhaps other ends motivated them more, such as a love of cruelly dominating others? What best explains changes in the strategies of exploiters? Is it the active resistance of the exploited that drives strategic considerations of the exploiters? Or are the exploiters preemptively clever? It seems like the exploiters do some learning. Is it off the mark to think of the development of economic history in terms of the learning process by which people positioned to exploit have learned more effective ways to extract the labor power of the exploited, or which amounts to the same thing, have learned to diminish levels of resistance. They have learned, for example that physical coercion is less efficient than an ideology of free labor in extracting labor power of naturally resisting laborers. Foucault also teaches us this: producing self-disciplined subjects is a more efficient way of controlling people than is disciplining them with external coercive instruments such as a whip. A worker who values “being a good worker” and who freely gives labor power is much more desirable than a resentful slave whose effort is forcibly extracted under a constant threat of violence. But how did the exploiting class “figure that out”? Does the answer lie with technological change and random discoveries about what most efficiently extracts labor power? How does technological change map onto, lie behind, or correlate with this ‘learning process’ (if it is appropriate to call it that)? Although Foucault might call the ‘ideology of being a good worker’ a technique of power, are such techniques a part of the Marxist theory of technological change?

[EOW: You raise some very interesting issues here. I have a couple of comments:

1) Even in slavery there was a problem of using purely despotic means to extract labor effort. Forms of slavery that were constant tyrannies often had more difficulty in the long run because the costs of supervision would become very high. So various forms of incentive were sometimes used. One of the pivotal issues here is how simple and observable is the labor process, how easy is it to actually monitor the performance of workers. Plantation work is relatively easy to monitor compared to more technologically complex forms of labor.

2) In capitalism there is wide variation in the extent to which employers rely on coercion and consent, close supervision or loyalty-incentives. Again, the nature of the labor process affects this. When you have technologies that require lots of skills and in which the degree of labor effort is not easily monitored, then other means of eliciting effort are needed besides surveillance and threats. Ideology can certainly matter. And so does the organized power of workers. When workers are collectively strong and constrain the despotic tendencies of capitalism, then capitalists are “forced to learn” how to elicit consent.

3) Your general point about learning is important. This is bound up with a range of perhaps contingent historical factors which make it easy or hard for employers to “learn”. The time horizons under which employers operate, for example, may make more cooperative forms of labor control difficult to institute. In the contemporary period employers sometimes resist instituting advanced forms for team work and cooperative shop floor participation because this can constrain certain kinds of

flexibility (hiring and firing at will) which given the short time horizons of investors puts lots of pressures on employers.]

9. Fabian T. Pfeffer

Taking advantage of the fact that a good portion of this week's readings deals with general issues of concepts of class, I would also like to raise points that apply to class analysis in general rather than Wright's specific class concept.

From *Foundations* (p.22) we learn that the core of a micro-analysis of class consists in the proposition that "what you *have* determines what you *get* [and] what you *have to do to get it*." My central concern is that class analysis would then also have to answer the question: "Where does what you have *come from*?" In my current understanding, the responses provided by Neo-Marxist class analysis (and other strands) are theoretically underdeveloped. On the macro-level, a Neo-Marxist explanation asserts that the "*class structure* constitutes the central mechanism by which various sorts of resources are appropriated and distributed" (*Classes*, 31-32). The question remains which micro-level mechanisms are at play here. In this regard, despite its "superficiality" (*Classes*, 25), status attainment research provides a better answer. **[EOW: Status attainment theory provides a fairly good answer to how people acquire variable forms of labor power assets – education, skills, etc. Status attainment theory has almost nothing to say about how people acquire capital. Marxism provides an historical explanation for initial accumulations of capital – the theory of "primitive accumulation" involving lots of force and fraud and extortion. From then on the basic argument is a combination of inheritance of wealth and the random process of winners and losers in competitive strategies. As for variations among nonwealth holders in acquiring the resources they get deployed in labor markets, well I think status attainment and Bourdieu are pretty good for that. This is not, however, in conflict with Marxism; it is a theory about a different problem and, I think, perfectly congruent with Marxism. But note one important flaw in those theories: status attainment theories of status acquisition always assume a fairly stable environment of positions for which people are acquiring human capital, or at most a process of change characterized by improving distributions of opportunities. They have no understanding of deskilling, of the strategies of capitalists to destroy skills, to make the training workers acquired useless so as to cheapen the supply of labor. The struggle over skills is not a part of their analysis.]**

To repeat: the question is how the access to rights and powers is regulated. One feasible field of investigation could be the political economy of inheritance, i.e. the analysis of intergenerational transfers of property rights within the family. My question is whether class analysis remains incomplete without such intergenerational component.

The idea that property rights can be transferred between generations brings me to my second (and related) point (also a follow-up to last week's question): say, I would want to embark on a larger project on the significance of wealth (private net worth) as an

individual asset. It is obvious that despite being an ‘economically relevant asset’, wealth does not fit into a Neo-Marxist class concept. First, because it does not fit the latter’s production-centered nature and second because it does not constitute a basis for exploitation (cf. *Class Counts*, 17: homeowners are not a class). If arguments can be made that the possession of significant individual wealth is not a marginal phenomenon in advanced capitalist economies, the question is to what degree it blurs or even jeopardizes analyses limited to relations in production. (Comment: The Weberian notion of “market capacity in exchange relations” seems somewhat more open to the inclusion of wealth; but is my feeling right that Soerenson’s rent-based class concept is what I should be looking into more closely for this specific problem?) **[EOW: You are right that within a Marxist framework the ownership of nonproductive wealth does not directly bear on class. Suppose a working class person has a rambrandt which has been in the family for 300 years and hangs on the wall. This does not make that worker a capitalist or middle class or anything. They are still a worker. BUT, the possession of this wealth (assuming, of course, they know that’s what it is) would still be relevant to their class position if one talked about what I call the shadow class of a person – the class that the could have if some condition in their life change or they choose a different strategy, since they would always have the option of selling the picture and having a large sum of liquid capital. Owning a house has some of this quality, depending upon the nature of the housing market: the accumulated equity is a potential that can be tapped, and this fact changes the strategy space for a worker and thus their interests. When a worker owns other houses and rents apartments to others (which sometimes happens if workers capitalize their home equity to invest in other property, for example), then they begin to have a different class position because their wealth is generating a flow of income. These are indeed “rents” and whether you regard this as a redistribution of exploited/extracted surplus or as a primary mechanism of extraction, it nevertheless means that the worker is acquiring income from capital. This can fit comfortably within a Marxist account. The sort of wealth that would not fit well is pure consumption-wealth that it not part of the strategic interests of the actor or a potential source of surplus-acquisition.]**

10. Elizabeth Wrigley-Field

I’ll focus my interrogation this week on two points:

1. Contradictory class locations. I like this theory and I think it is a particularly helpful way to think about managers. I also like the refinements that one can be in contradictory locations by having one’s income come in different ways (e.g. by working for wages in addition to being self-employed; or by earning one wage oneself and separately accessing money through household income gained through the appropriation of someone else’s work).

I wonder, though, about how much we want to build into the concept of “class location.” It seems to me that there are many features of how production is organized that

can become salient to explanations of collective action or lack thereof, class consciousness, etc. For example, whether/how much the distribution of jobs in a workplace (or, more broadly, in a whole economy) is segregated by race, gender, nationality, etc can certainly affect those things (I thought of this example because in the 1936 Flint sit-down strike the racial division of labor in the plant affected consciousness in ways that had to be overcome). But I don't think we'd want to call the level of segregation a feature of the class location of any particular employee in that workplace, even though it is a material fact about the way production is structured that can play some of the explanatory role we want class location to play.

It seems to me that the basis of what we want to include in class location should be the things that affect one's exploitation status (how much they're exploited, how much they exploit). I think this because it seems that exploitation can ground the categorization of people based on their objective interests and their objective ability to struggle effectively (through withholding of labor). Then we want to combine that understanding of class location with an understanding, particularly at lower levels of analysis, of ways that non-class location facts (including facts about production) influence class formation. Those non-class location facts might do this by influencing people's subjective sense of their interests, or by changing their ability to struggle not in terms of the effects of withholding their labor, but in terms of their ability to organize themselves (I'm thinking here of what seems like a plausible empirical argument that workplaces that engage in more collective production would become more easily organized than those in which people work more autonomously). **[EOW: This is a very nice statement of a really fundamental point in this conceptual terrain: how much explanatory work do we want the concept of class (and its associated concepts like class location) to do, and how should we demarcate the domains of class and nonclass mechanisms/processes. This is certainly part of what I have tried to do in the discussions of the problem of moving from higher to lower levels of abstraction in the specification of class locations. And your invocation of "exploitation" as the general criterion for specifying this criterion seems right within a Marxist framework. The problem, of course, is how to decide whether some particular element in a production process should be considered something which "affects one's exploitation status" or not. Consider supervision and authority: in a direct sense these are bound up with the domination aspect of the social relations of production. But domination is intimately linked to exploitation – the extraction of laboring effort in production. Or take skills: to the extent that these generate rents, they create special statuses with respect to the process of exploitation. But then why not consider gender as one of the "things that affect one's exploitation status" if women are paid less for the same work effort as men?]**

That brings me to:

2. How to conceive of exploitation. I disagree with Roemer's analysis because I think it is too permissive. For example, I think it yields the result that state taxation exploits capitalists, in the case that the taxes go to a purpose that does not benefit the capitalist to a greater extent than the amount of the taxes. (The capitalist has a "hypothetically feasible" alternative in which they're not taxed and would be better off, the state would be worse off without their taxes, the state prevents the capitalist from not

paying their taxes.) I think the problem with including something like this as exploitation is that it is too far removed from the explanatory roles exploitation is supposed to fill. **[EOW: I agree with you completely here. Roemer's withdrawal/counterfactual rules helped clarify a particular aspect of the exploitation problem and the way in which asset distribution and exploitation were linked. But it allows for exploitation to occur without expenditure of labor effort, which doesn't make sense within a relational view of class and exploitation.]**

I think exploitation needs a concept of appropriation of surplus to ground the idea that the exploiter depends on the labor done by the exploited (which, Wright notes in many places, is essential to explaining the *power* an exploited class has collectively by virtue of their exploitation). Wright's attempts to frame that idea without a concept of appropriation of surplus are unconvincing to me: he talks about the exploiter "being worse off if the exploited disappeared," but I think this, too, is too permissive. I disagree that capitalists would be better off (or equally well off) if the unemployed were to disappear: the existence of the unemployed helps to reduce wages and prevent collective organizing of the employed. **[I agree with you that to the extent the unemployed have the effect of lowering wages, then their presence contributes to the exploitation of workers even though they themselves are economically oppressed but not exploited. Capitalists benefit from their presence in that sense. My point in that discussion is not so different from what you are saying here, I think: I was linking exploitation to the production of a surplus (= all that the capitalist appropriates) via labor effort and wanted to make clear the distinction between nonexploited oppression and exploitation. Note, however, in your example, for the unemployed to have an effect on wages they have to be employable – thus they have to be in the floating segment of the unemployed, not the fully marginalized segment of the "surplus population" (which Marx sometimes called the "lumpenproletariat"). It is less clear that capitalists "need" that segment of the population, although perhaps one could add an ideological component about fear that would make them need them as well.]** We could try to restrict the concept to something like "being worse off if the group disappeared, because of its work" but this seems really ad-hoc to me unless the reason for it is that we are really restricting it to cases where there is appropriation of surplus.

I also find the argument against using appropriation of surplus, because of the difficulties of operationalizing this concept, unconvincing. I propose conceiving of the surplus as "that produced above and beyond what is needed to reproduce the worker *as a worker*" as opposed to as a human being (i.e., not bare subsistence). That means that facts related to subjective matters (how little people are willing to work for) would affect what is "subsistence" and what is "surplus." I don't see the problem with this, especially since you can also have counterfactual concepts of what people *would* be willing to work for in XYZ circumstances (though evaluating those empirically might be really tough).

11. Joe Ferrare

Two questions arose following the readings this week, both of which I believe to be fundamental to advancing the explanatory power of class. The first question relates to the *process* by which the neo-Marxist conception of class has been formulated: Is it appropriate to rely solely on a conception of class formulated a priori? The second question relates to the more *substantive* elements of the neo-Marxist conception of class: Would the explanatory power of class be increased if the conception were extended beyond the ownership and control of the means of production and the relations built around such ownership and control? I do not have a specific answer to either of these questions, but it is my hope that raising these issues will generate some discussion and lead to a greater understanding of the advantages and limitations of the neo-Marxist conception of class.

As I see it, there could be a few possible ways to formulate a conception of class. The first would be to develop the concept a priori. The limitation of this approach, it could be argued, is that such a conception makes an assumption that classes exist “out there” in a certain form and are demarcated from one another without any empirical basis. Such an assumption could run the risk of misleading empirical research in numerous ways. Wright seems to get around this somewhat by saying that his conception does not see classes as static “things” but rather locations within a set of relations, with the sum total of those relations comprising the class structure (Moreover, it could be argued that his theoretical conception of class was formulated, in part, by drawing upon previous empirical work.).

Another way of developing a concept of class would be a posteriori. In this approach one would use empirical data collected through a variety of means and look for patterns within those data. The central reason for this approach would be a claim that members of the same class should think and act in similar ways, and these patterns should reveal themselves in the data. However, there is a serious limitation in relying solely on this method, especially in class analysis. As much research has already shown, social actors who share an identical relationship to the ownership/control of production often contradict one another in their ideologies and behaviors. In many cases, relying solely on a posteriori approaches would put laborers and capitalists in the same class, since it is not uncommon for them to share strikingly similar behavioral and attitudinal characteristics.

For the reasons stated above, it seems to me that combining theoretical and empirical approaches to the formation of a conception of class would be most beneficial. In fact, I fail to see how either can take place without the other. But exactly what would such a process look like beyond my rhetorical musings above? **[EOW: It is a mistake, I think, to see the debates and elaborations of the concept of class of the 1970s and 1980s - -the debates in which I participated and through which things like the derivation of contradictory locations appeared – as illustrating an a priori approach to the concept of class. These debates occur in a context of a century or so discussions and research using Marxist class concepts, which generated mounds of data, historical accounts, descriptions of labor processes and struggles. The effort to step back from all of this historical and empirical work and then ask about the logic of the categories, how they fit together, what criteria are needed for them to make coherent sense, etc, is simply one “moment” in a longer iterative process. Now, this**

iterative process is quite different from the proposal to sift through data and see if “patterns” emerge, hoping that somehow classes will appear from the data. That is the sort of approach that Grusky defends which we will look at later in the semester. The dialogue between concepts and data which I propose is different: concepts are used in analysis, the analysis generates insights and anomalies, the concepts are reconstructed in light of those anomalies while still trying as much as possible to retain coherence with the broader theory of which they are part. This may come to a dead end and the whole structure come crashing down; or it may stimulate the repeated reconstruction and deepening of the theory.]

The more substantive question I would like to raise relates to the parameters by which class is defined. Would the explanatory power of class be increased if the conception were extended beyond the ownership and control of the means of production and the relations built around such ownership and control? An example may be helpful here. Consider the following set of workers who work at the same place and share an equivalent set of skills: a white male laborer, an African-American male laborer, a Latin-American male laborer, and an African-American female laborer. Now, each shares an identical location with respect to the ownership and control of the means of production. How, then, would we account for the fact that there is extensive variation in what each has to do to get what they want? Does this suggest a more expansive conception of class, one that goes beyond one’s relation to the ownership/control of the means of production and the relations built around such ownership and control? **[EOW: This raises the issue of whether it is better to enlarge the concept of class by adding dimensions to it, or to see the issue here as the specific ways in which class and nonclass processes interact. If male and female workers are really in different class locations because gender is a dimension of those relations, then (as I argue in a chapter we didn’t read) perhaps we should introduce a new concept – clender – to describe this new amalgam of class-and-gender. I think this ends up being more confusing than helpful, and I think that gender mechanisms have distinctive properties and should not be seen as just a variation on the general class logics of production.]**

12. Jorge Sola

I have two interrogations: the first one is related to a problem in the class structure map and second one concerns a normative issue.

1. Although I quite agree with Erik’s approach to class analysis and his strategy to deal the middle class’ problem, there is a variable which is not considered in the map of class locations: the kind of job (or labor contracts) that workers have within the same location. That is not a problem if within each locations all people have, more or less, the same kind of jobs, but it is a problem when this is not the case. I mean: when workers who are in the same location within class relations (*i.e.* they have the same skills and organizational assets), and even do the same task in the workplace, but they have different kind of jobs: ones a full-time, well-protected and well-paid job; another one is a part-time, casual and poorly paid job. I think this is a common situation in many European countries (despite the fact that there are a lot of differences among them): as a consequence of labor market

deregulation in a neoliberal direction the new generation of workers (and, what is important, not only non-skilled workers) have worse jobs and are less protected than their parents (of course, there is not a perfect relation between kinds of jobs and generations, but often the features of the job depend on the time one has entered to the labor market: before or after the reform process). The result of this deregulation process is a segmented labor market which divides workers who share the same class location into insiders or outsiders.

This problem is similar to the unemployment issue which is pointed out by Van Parijs. Nevertheless, what I would like to stress is not that there may be an exploiting relation depending on job assets, but that important consequences are brought about by this insiders/outside division for other topics in class analysis like class consciousness, class formation, and class struggle. The workers who have a temporary job find difficulties in developing a feeling of solidarity with their mates and in manifesting a worker's class consciousness, most of the time because they don't trust the unions and the unions don't protect them. Being unprotected, they are in a worse situation to organize themselves and protest against capitalists to improve the work conditions or the contractual features of employment. Finally, and concerning class struggles, there will be obstacles which won't allow the union to bridge the gap between insiders and outsiders, even although they work together and share the same *work* conditions: insiders can see outsiders as a threat to their safety, and the latter can see the former as privileged workers. I think this situation is quite prevalent at this time, at least in some countries and in some economic sectors.

Is this problem important enough to include in the class structure analysis? I think it is important to understand and explain the class formation and class struggle, but I'm not sure whether we can talk of an exploiting relation between workers who have a good job and workers who have a bad job (repeat: with the same skills and organizational assets). Do they have different interests or do they have the same ones but are actually victims of a false consciousness? In one way, a casual worker is potentially a well protected worker, and an unemployed worker has like a hidden class location, the job he would have if he entered the labor market. (At this point, likely, it would be necessary to differentiate between immediate and non-immediate interests. The immediate interest of this unemployed worker could be the government's reducing the minimum wage and removing some rights in order to let capitalists employ more workers, but his non-immediate interest could be in protecting the minimum wage and other rights although it makes finding a job more difficult for him, if it is the case that this unemployed person counts on getting a job soon or identifies himself with the political agenda of the working-class. But, how do we deal analytically with this question?) **[This is a very well articulated set of issues around the problem of irregular employment. When in a few weeks we discuss John Goldthorpe's approach to class we will see that the nature of the employment contract for him is a decisive issue. He distinguishes between what he calls the service relation and the ordinary employment contract, which is more like a spot-contract. These define a qualitatively different kind of relation between the employer and the employee, and because these are different relations the employees are in different class locations. In a sense it is like a situation**

in which a slave plantation in the US South had both slaves and hired hands, both doing manual labor (although undoubtedly somewhat different tasks), but under very different “employment” relations. In that case it is easy to say that the slave and the worker are in different class locations even if they are both exploited by the same person and even if they did the same kind of work. So the issue is whether the regular, stable, long term employment relation and these new, unstable, temporary, precarious relations constitute this kind of demarcation.]

2. I agree with the claim that class analysis involves normative questions. Nevertheless, I don't understand very well how we can link social research with normative discussions using the concepts of “exploitation” or “domination” (the latter in a narrow sense, like authority in production relations). It looks like the only way is a radical egalitarianism within the distributive justice dilemmas. What I would like to suggest is that we can choose another way to judge in a normative sense the class relations, a way based in the republican concepts of “domination” and “freedom”. (What I mean with “republicanism” is a political-philosophical tradition which, although it has been recovered in the last years by scholars like Skinner or Pettit, is much older and includes thinkers like Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau and Marx). Put simply, from a republican point of view, freedom is understood as non-domination (whereby liberals –like Berlin or Constant– understand freedom –what they call *negative* freedom– as “non interference”). But republicans understand domination in a broader sense: one is dominated by another one in social life when he depends on him and therefore cannot be autonomous to decide whatever he wishes. To be autonomous one must have the material or social resources to live without depending on anyone. Historically, most philosophers identified this requirement with land property: people who did not have land were neither free nor citizens. What happens with capitalism? Apparently people are free because all of them are owners of one particular form of property: their labor power. And, in principle, nobody forces workers to sell their labor power in the labor market. But, in a way, it can be considered a *fictio iuris*. I think Marx understands this, for instance, when he writes: “The man who possesses no other property than his labor power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labor. He can only work with their permission hence he lives only with their permission”. In republican terms: the workers are dominated (not directly but as a class, through the “invisible ties” of the labor market) by the capitalist, because the former depends on the latter to work and to live. If we accept this picture (and I know my short argument requires more reasons and details) we can take advantage of this point of view to judge the variations of capitalism, as well as to study social processes. The “domination” can vary in strength, depending most times on what the social bases are and on the capabilities of dominated people to refuse the domination. It is not the same worker who “possesses no other property than his labor power” that, moreover than his labor power, has a little part of land, or the pay-offs of welfare state, or the shmoo. From this point of view, to understand class structure it is very important direct attention towards the political struggles of capitalists to dispossess the working class in order to force them to enter into labor markets from a weaker position, as well as the opposite struggle of the latter to improve the social basis of their lives. (Of course, I'm talking of capitalist and workers to be clear, but the middle class' empirical problem also involves a

normative problem for which I don't have a solution). And, above of all, that would help us to say which alternative proposal (welfare state, basic income, market socialism, etc.) would make workers are more or less free (wherein workers would be more or less dominated by capitalist). **[EOW: Very thoughtful ideas here. A couple of comments: (1) I agree with you that domination (in the expansive societal sense) – and your elaboration of it in terms of classical republican ideals – provides one solid foundation for the normative critique of capitalism. I am not sure that it is quite enough; I think there are other bases for the normative critique of capitalism as well. (2) Exploitation by itself is clearly not a sufficient basis for a critique of capitalism either, since in any humane social world there would be lots of transfers of surplus from producers to nonproducers – think of children, the infirm, the elderly. Exploitation, I think, figures centrally in the explanatory program of Marxism and as a kind of bridge between the normative concerns and the explanatory concerns. (3). What I would add to the republican-autonomy nondomination theme is the idea of a radical egalitarian understanding of the conditions for universalized human flourishing. It takes a lot more than republican-autonomy for human beings to flourish and for all people to have equal access to the social and material conditions to live flourishing lives. Autonomy is one social conditions, but there are others, some of which in fact invoke solidarities and interdependency (but note: interdependency is in part mutual *dependency*, not mutual autonomy). The critique of capitalism is that it blocks the realization of these conditions. Lots to talk about here.]**

13. Adrienne Pagac

In the readings of this week, we encounter the myriad complications involved in conceptualizing a theory of class in the Marxist tradition that can address, both theoretically and empirically, the 'problem' of the middle class(es). Because advanced capitalist societies do not neatly fit into the bourgeois/proletarian dichotomy of class as previously proposed by Marxist theory, class as a concept has needed continuous revision, resulting in the inclusion or omission of categories as requirements of the definition, such as exploitation or conflict. My questions primarily involve the presentation/evaluation of exploitation in the readings.

In the exploration of exploitation (or domination), I understand that it is important for such a definition to include the extraction of surplus value/labor transfer. I am curious to know why the actual processes of extraction are not also mentioned? For example, to my understanding, the division of labor, at least in an industrial setting, implies an ab(use) of the producer/worker in that it manages the labor performed to yield a high return. Is this not essential to an understanding of exploitation? **[I think the issue of management, supervision, surveillance, etc. are discussed in various places – that is, the general problem of getting workers to expend effort, which is what it means to “appropriate the labor effort of workers” (or, as I sometimes put it, “the fruits of labor effort.” I don't generally use the term “surplus” to describe this appropriation, and perhaps I should. I backed off of that term for various reasons and did not thoroughly revisit that terminological/conceptual issue. But the content of the idea is**

still present: the extraction of labor effort from those who perform labor for capital.]

I feel as though this exploitative work environment could also apply to ‘middle class’ occupations, where one’s job is controlled/supervised continually (read: my understanding of particular management styles in Japan for example).

The concept of exploitation is examined also through its variances in the different modes of production. While I understand how exploitation operates within feudalism and capitalism, I am not sure I grasp how exploitation functions in socialism. Specifically, I do not understand how credentials ‘have the effect of restricting the supply of skills’. What is meant by ‘credentials’ here and how do they operate? Does this refer to the existence of guilds, unions, etc.? Why are other workers restricted from obtaining these skills (other than to keep wages for those workers ‘artificially’ high)? If there is no other reason, I do not understand why such inequalities of skills would be allowed to continue in socialism. Why wouldn’t/couldn’t those responsible for the production of goods (not the producers) train labor itself? **[EOW: the assumption in the Roemer analysis – which I was sharing – when I tabled skill exploitation as “socialist” is that in a socialist society the wages of skilled workers would be governed by supply and demand. Given the length of time it takes people to acquire very high levels of technical skills, and given – potentially – the limits on the underlying talent pool from which those skill formation processes are drawn, and given the premium that the most productive members of any skill-type are likely to command in the market (eg. basketball stars) then skill holding will be a basis for rent extraction in free labor markets. “Credentials” only socially sanctify this, and may augment it if the skill holders are in charge of the credentialing process. Now, this may do for a rough understanding of skill exploitation in general. It does not really correspond to the kinds of social practice we would expect in an egalitarian-democratic socialism and so probably should not be so closely identified as a socialist form of exploitation.]**

Stupid questions for the week: What does it mean to be able to *feudalize* a surplus? See Wright 82. Does it involve the practice of consuming the surplus rather than re-investing it to yield further profits? **[I would have to see the passage to know precisely what that means. I often talk about *capitalizing* surplus, as when higher earners buy stocks. I guess *feudalizing* surplus was the situation in early capitalism when successful capitalists would buy feudal titles and set themselves up as feudal lords.]** In the discussion of Roemer’s labor transfer approach, we learn that the asset-poor will be exploited by the asset-rich because “workers who work less are able to do so because the less-endowed producers have to work more.” See Wright 66. Why then would someone who is asset-rich, and subsequently inherits/obtains additional assets, have to work longer to obtain subsistence? I would think that having more assets would mean he/she would produce more. Therefore, I thought the asset-rich person would then be able to work even less than before the inheritance of further assets. Does inheritance of additional assets require a person work more to ensure the productivity of those assets? **[I don’t have the Roemer piece with me to remember precisely the point at which this observation comes. But in some of his island-set ups, everyone works their own means of production – there are no employees. The difference between rich and poor is the kind of assets they have: the rich have assets to produce commodity X (which requires less labor inputs and more capital inputs) the poor have assets to produce commodity Y (which is labor intensive). Everyone wants the same**

consumption bundle, so everyone has the same final standard of living. But the poor have to work longer hours to obtain this because they can only afford the labor intensive technology and in the market of exchange of commodity X for Y, the unequal exchange (due to differences in capital intensity) favor the capital intensive commodity. I guess in this situation, if you are rich and inherit more assets, since you don't hire anyone, you have to use it yourself, and if you already produce the amount of X to attain the amount of Y you want, then producing more X just means having a surplus of Y. Or something like that.]

14. Johannes Glaeser

“Skill rent” and “loyalty rent” managers and skilled workers can receive is a form of share of the surplus. This “middle class” controls knowledge and scarce labour power on the market or a strategic location within the organization of production. In these strategic positions they gain a specific kind of power in the labour market and in the labour process. Therefore they occupy positions which get valued on the market with higher wages than their own reproduction costs, mainly since they do not have to face the same competition than a unskilled worker. They are wage-earners with a lower degree of exploitation or even a share of the surplus. **[The loyalty rent component is not primarily because of insulation from competition. It is because of the ineffectiveness of monitoring responsible performance of managerial effort.]**

I think Marx did not emphasize such a middle class since he thought that competition between the workers would not allow such extra-wages, above the subsistence wage, in the long run. But managers and skilled labour have not only a better market position their relation to capital is characterized by a very high dependency. A manager can more easily restrain work and block production. It is not only more difficult to exchange a skilled worker, also loyalty and effort of a manager have to be bought.

It must be interesting to elaborate the mechanisms which block normal labourers to attain such positions, like limited access to education, secret knowledge of already employed managers about the company, and so on. **[This of course varies considerably historically and spatially. It is still the case in Japan that many lower and middle managers began as ordinary workers. And it is true in small firms today in the US in some sectors.]** If these mechanisms would dissolve, the existence of this middle class might be at risk, since these kinds of recourses and opportunities (skills) could get accessible to everybody. **[Not necessarily if (a) there is a talent component to the skills, and (b) if the loyalty rent remains important.]** As a result skilled workers would get proletarian, since competition would push the wage down again. It can be doubted that skills-differences will secure this class location in the long run not to fall down. And it is true that specific skills and knowledge never have a higher value forever. Therefore I understand that Marx did not believe that labour, regardless of skills, can be for a long time above the “natural price” or over its own costs. Such an unstable class location will hardly form a class (at least in capitalism). Every rent somebody receives, the right,

ownership and exclusiveness of that resource has to be secured to enable to base a class on it. In real socialism skill-labour/ beurocrats gained the power to build such a class.

15. Assaf Meshulam

Exploitation and Nonexploitative Economic Oppression

Exploitation has three criteria: (1) the inverse independent welfare principle (or antagonistic interdependence of material interests), (2) the exclusion principle (or the causal relation), and (3) the appropriation principle (or the causal mechanism which translates exclusion) (Wright, 2005:23 and Wright, 1999:10, respectively). All three of these criteria are necessary for exploitation to occur.

According to this schema, since the unemployed do not meet the third criterion, they are not exploited but, instead, “economically oppressed,” and hence, “the oppressor’s material interest would not be hurt if all of the oppressed simply disappeared or died” (Wright, 1985:75). In “Class Counts” a similar distinction is made: “In the case of nonexploitative oppression, the oppressors would be happy if the oppressed simply disappeared” (Wright, 1999:11). While such a subdivision into two modes of relationships—exploitation and nonexploitative economic oppression—might help to understand the potential for genocide, it is not an accurate depiction of the potentially exploited nature of the economically oppressed and how their existence contributes to the antagonistic interdependence of the material antagonism between the classes.

The unemployed do not constitute one cohesive group. They should in fact be divided into two or three sub-groups: those who do not want to work or do not want to work for others (sometimes labeled the chronically unemployed); those who are looking for a job and are, therefore, temporarily unemployed; and the unemployed in “welfare-state provisions of minimum of standards of living for the poor” (Wright, 1985:101 footnote 20). Each one of these sub-groups has different relations with the exploiters. The first group is, indeed, nonexploited and therefore dispensable. The second group, in contrast, is *potentially* exploited and is therefore not dispensable. Their existence makes the exploited, employed, replaceable; it affects the supply and demand of labor and their disappearance would adversely (from the perspective of the capitalist) affect the bargaining power of the exploited employed since the latter will now become irreplaceable. Thus the capitalist has no interest to remove this set of unemployed, breathing down the necks of the employed. There is in fact an inherent sub-antagonism between this subset of unemployed and the employed that is exploited by the capitalist. Unemployment (to some extent) is vital to the capitalist. Finally, the third group, to some extent exploit taxpaying workers and, perhaps even, capitalist taxpayers, since their taxes fund the third group’s welfare benefits. It is possible to say that they themselves partially meet the third condition, as they appropriate the fruits of the labor of the exploited *and* of those in control of the productive resources, or alternatively *through* those in control of the productive resources.

Thus the differences between the Native Americans and native South Africans can be explained as a belonging to two different groups: the nonexploited in the latter case and the potentially exploited in the former. The critical question here is what leads to these differences, which opens up other possible reasons for genocide.

[EOW: Excellent comments – I agree completely with you. This clearly reflects a less precise formulation than should have been given in the analysis I presented. I would add that once one includes the idea of temporal indeterminacy into the notion of a class location, your point is even further strengthened, for most of the unemployed are in fact episodically exploited – they move in and out of this category. My point, of course, was meant to apply to the marginalized surplus population that was not exploitable rather than simply temporarily not exploited, but you are correct to give more precision to this idea.]

16. Rahul Mahajan

Questions

Not all of my points lead directly to questions or topics for discussion. But some do:

1. (relating to points 1 and 2) Can we discuss the conflation of “material” with “economic” and the validity or invalidity of the “base-superstructure” paradigm. Cohen defends it, but we haven’t engaged with the question.
2. (relating to point 3) What are the analytical justifications for Wright’s slightly but not very far expanded notion of exploitation, on which he bases his class typology? In particular, if credentialist exploitation is considered, why not other kinds listed below?
3. (relating to point 6) Where does Marx’s “reserve army” fit into Wright’s analysis? They are not exploited but are needed by the capitalists.

Points

1. First, let me register a protest against the shoddy sleight-of-hand endemic in the Marxist literature whereby “material” is equated with “economic.” Of course, we want to look for material factors, of course we want a materialist theory. What’s the alternative? To invoke God or Hegel’s Spirit or Platonic Forms? Any social science framework with the most rudimentary grounding in science would have to be materialist. There is no *élan vital*, nor is there some equivalent that applies only to humans.

But economics is no more or less “material” than political or social processes and green rectangles of paper to which we ascribe certain mutually-agreed on values no more contain those values “materially” than, say, a different color of paper (voter registration card?) to which we ascribe certain other properties.

Chairs or iron bars or bolts of cloth have no more or less of a material substrate than an idea in a person’s mind. If I think of the notion of “freedom,” this corresponds to a definite arrangement of neurons in my brain, to certain electrochemical processes. Although the mapping between ideas and physical states of the brain is an area where still

not very much is known, we can and must assume this much at least simply because there is no alternative but God or *élan vital*, etc. Now, the idea of “freedom” in my mind and someone else’s won’t have the *same* exact kind of material substrate – to believe that would be idealism – but material they both are. **[You are absolutely right here.**

Materialism as a bit of rhetoric was sometimes directed against what was in effect spiritualism; and sometimes it was a loose way of talking about “determinism” vs voluntarism, although it pretty ill-defined in a lot of discussions (since there is somehow a belief that agent-centered explanations would not be “material”, but as you point they are). More generally in contemporary discussions I think materialism is a doctrine about the explanatory power of forces of production: it is a substantive claim, not a metatheoretical one.]

2. Related to this is the idea that economics is somehow analytically or otherwise prior to political and social processes. This is the essence of the base-superstructure distinction. In truth, even the valuation of money, let alone any more subtle and involved processes, is highly political at its core. Even the definition of what separates the economic from the non-economic realm is a highly politicized one. This is true in obvious ways – we legislate politically that human beings are not commodities (no slavery) and even that human organs are not. It’s also true in subtler ways – certain kinds of personal injury have been commodified legally mostly in the recent past (lawsuits, ...) and there are attempts to commodify certain property rights such that passing a law regulating pollution for example would constitute a “taking” and would require monetary compensation for affected property owners. In deeper ways still, I would argue that international currency exchange rates are much more politically than economically determined – this is, of course, arguable. In general, though, it means nothing even to talk about economics without a great many political specifications. The persistence of the base-superstructure formalism is something I really can’t understand. **[You are, I think, misconstruing the B/S contrast, which does not imply that economic structures are pre-political, that they existed “before” political structures, or anything like that. It is a functionalist explanatory claim, as Cohen rightly argues. Economic structures absolutely could not exist without political institutions. The state (or some functional equivalent) is a necessary condition for any extended market to function. The question, however, is whether the state takes the form it does precisely because it “fulfills” this function. If you can functionally explain the properties of the state by the reproductive and constitutive effects it has on the economy, then you have the kind of explanatory structure in the B/S model.]**

The above are remarks that I think apply broadly in the kind of Marxism we’ve been reading, rather than narrowly to Wright’s specific works.

3. Wright’s basic project deserves a lot of credit. It’s a carefully theorized attempt, with copious empirical data, to deal with reality’s well-known anti-Marxist bias.

The key insight is still the one he started with, that the mapping from individuals to class locations can map a person into more than one class location (mathematically, one would say that the mapping is not a function). This gains us a great deal of latitude in trying to

deal with actually existing individuals. It does complicate the attempt to find the connections between position in class structures and class consciousness and agency, but again one could well say that Reality had already performed that complication.

He then comes up with a workable typologization of classes that corresponds roughly to common-sense intuition and which is amenable to statistical analysis based on surveys. The criticism made by several that his typology is much like a mainstream sociology **occupational division** seems dead on, but is not necessarily a crippling objection. **[It is actually not all that close to most occupational typologies, since occupations can fall into several of my class locations. There is a loose overlap since the relation between occupation and class is not random, but I don't think it is right that my authority and property based categories a roughly occupations. The skill categories, of course, are an other matter.]**

But there seem to be fundamental analytical problems here. Wright departs from Roemer and Elster to hew to a formulation closer to that of classical Marxism, with some additions. Unfortunately, his formulation then seems to lose significant analytical rigor. The theoretical bases of Roemer and Elster's view of exploitation seem clear and coherent. You don't have to agree with their definitions, but they are consistent and plausible. Unfortunately, at least for Elster, the definition leads to a serious rift between concepts of exploitation and class (at least insofar as class can reasonably be connected to consciousness). Although a link between exploitation and class can be recovered in the average, exploitation involves mechanisms diffused throughout society whereas class involves interactions at the point of production.

Wright wants to maintain a more straightforward link between exploitation and class, so his theorization of the middle class forces him to broaden the concept of exploitation in a different way. In addition to exploitation through holding of capital, he wants to add exploitation through holding of organizational assets and of credential assets (although the last is problematic because extraction of surplus can't be looked at in terms of bilateral interactions). **[Of course – for the record – I have dropped that way of framing the issues, and no longer talk about skill and organization exploitation, but rather skill and organization generating a privileged location within exploitation relations – basically the loyalty rent and skill rents as generating *strata*. The authority/domination of management is still treated as a relational property of contradictory locations.]**

Once he goes that far beyond Marx, though, I cannot discern a coherent reason to stop at precisely this point. Especially with the notion of credentialist exploitation he is already in part abandoning what I think is a narrow and outmoded view that focuses on individual enterprises instead of taking into account how they're situated in the global economy. He is also, as I said, abandoning a narrow view of exploitation based on bilateral transfers.

Why not then at least be consistent? Why continue to focus solely on production? Why not include exploitation that occurs in market transfers? Why not take into account the power-based exploitative relations between corporations, not just between people,

especially those involving interaction of First and Third World corporations? If he did so, his concept of exploitation might regain the analytical coherence of Marx's, but with a much wider scope. As it is, it's a mishmash. **[If you think you can really demishmash these categories, go for it! I agree that I have sacrificed some analytical rigor – although my pulling back from *Classes in Class Counts* – restored some. But I am not clear that your proposal wouldn't just introduce different sorts of mishmash.]**

At one point, Wright refers to his basic orientation toward defining exploitation in terms of production and linking it straightforwardly to class as owing at least as much to his political commitments as to any analytical commitments. I think this is true, and that he should make those political commitments clearer since they seem to make the analysis treat things that should be seen very similarly (“exploitation” based on holding credentials and exploitation based on holding citizenship in a First World country or exploitation based on being a worker in highly-capitalized industry buying goods made by a worker in low-capitalized industry). In particular, I think this would apply to his rejection of ideas that he has characterized as “Third Worldist” (even though I think for example this view of exploitation follows clearly from Elster's definitions and indeed from a straightforward logical analysis and has nothing particularly politicized about it).

In a slightly different connection, it's worth noting Philippe van Parijs's objection that once you talk about credential-based exploitation you might as well add race, gender, and other kinds of status to the mix – especially when Wright's own research shows such sharp class differences related to race and gender.

4, A short observation: van Parijs's interesting and indicative extension of Roemer's counterfactual game method to the situation of the unemployed in a social-democratic welfare state like France suggests that those unemployed are “exploited” or deprived in greater degree by not having access to jobs than by not having access to capital (van Parijs has an argument about why it is legitimate to consider access to jobs as something very difficult to get, like access to capital). In terms of the basic general project of broadening the definition of exploitation as Roemer, Elster, and Wright are all doing in different ways, it makes sense to think of the unemployed as an exploited class. Unfortunately, as van Parijs points out, this formulation tells us little or nothing about the formation of class consciousness or collective action because of the unique difficulties the unemployed would have in class-formation.

To this, I would add the statement that in certain conditions of extreme racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination or exploitation, that barrier may be overcome. And thus, considering the unemployed “beurs” in France as a class might make sense, making use of these broadened notions.

5. Apologies in advance on this point. I'm verbally describing entries in a table.

In Chapter 5 of *Classes*, Wright makes an empirical adjudication between his and Poulantzas's notions of class (Poulantzas distinguishes between “productive” and “unproductive” workers, consigning the latter to the middle class). As I think Carchedi

observed, it is not surprising that when a theorist judges his own against other formulations his will do better. This is likely true even when the theorist, as in this case, has the best will and exerts himself fully to be fair. In the terms that Wright defines success, his theory does way better than Poulantzas's, and that is certainly an important fact. **[But in other empirical research I have done I have had to revise my own theoretical position in light of results. It is not the case that I go through lots of tests and then select the ones that work, and so I have been often surprised.]**

On the other hand, Poulantzas seems to have uncovered something very interesting that Wright does not, and which casts serious doubt on some of Wright's typologization (without then suggesting that Poulantzas's is better). In Table 5.7 on p. 165 of *Classes*, there is a table of class attitudes. In this table, Wright has categories of the working class and marginal working class (also the middle class); Poulantzas's categorization of working vs. middle class cross-cuts these, so that for example Wright's category of working class includes people Poulantzas would define as working class and those he would define as middle class.

Although in the aggregate, those Wright defines as working class or marginal working class have much more pro-worker attitudes (as measured by his questionnaire) than does the unambiguous middle class (where Wright and Poulantzas agree), and even though the same holds for people Wright classifies as working class but Poulantzas as middle class, and thus Wright's view seems vindicated over Poulantzas, there is a rather interesting fact.

In each of the two lower classes of Wright's typology, Poulantzas's middle class, even though it has significantly lower income than his corresponding working class members, has significantly less pro-worker attitudes. For Wright, on the other hand, the difference in attitudes between working class and marginal working class is slight, and the difference between each category restricted to those Poulantzas considers working class is almost nonexistent. To me, this calls into serious question the usefulness in terms of class consciousness of Wright's distinction between working class and marginal working class and suggests that Poulantzas, although he mischaracterized it, put his finger on something important about the relation between productive vs. unproductive labor and class consciousness.

On the other hand, all of these numbers are so contingent on the time the studies were done. I imagine that with a similar survey done in the US today, Poulantzas' middle class, heavily tilted toward government employees, would actually be more pro-worker than his working class (once one leaves out the "unambiguous middle class").

6. In the first chapter of *Classes*, Wright distinguishes between exploited people and nonexploited oppressed people. The capitalists, he says, have no interest in the existence of the latter people and indeed in some circumstances would be happy to see them disappear (think Native Americans). On page 29, he comes back to it:

Capitalism does not need the labor power of unemployed inner city youth. The material interests of the wealthy and privileged segments of American society would be better served if these people simply disappeared.

Although it is true that there are people whose labor power is not needed, it is not always the case that capitalists would be happy to see them gone. In extreme cases, often revolving around land grabs, of course genocide is a preferred solution. In the normal functioning of capitalism in a stable society, however, it's a very different story. Here Wright seems to have abandoned one of Marx's key insights, the role of the "reserve army" of the unemployed. People who aren't directly exploited by the capitalists often play a necessary role by bringing down labor costs merely by virtue of their presence. This role doesn't seem to fit in Wright's typology.