

Example #1 of a good paper from Sociology 621 (written by a non-native English speaker)

General comments:

You do a very good job in this paper in engaging some of the central issues and debates over the class character of the precariat. Aside from some grammatical problems here and there, the writing is clear and systematic, and you clearly demonstrate that you understand the core issues well. You also have some quite insightful things to say. So, a solid paper. The only important substantive issue concerns the question of whether the relations of production are actually the “same” for workers and the precariat. I explain in my marginal comments how one might argue that these are sufficiently different to constitute a class distinction.

While the paper is generally well written, I would still suggest that for your next paper you take it to the writing center before hand to go over with one of the tutors there for grammar. Grammatical problems make a paper a little harder to read, so it is worth having someone go over it carefully with you.

Is The Precariat A New Class?

In his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, Guy Standing introduces a group of people whom he believes possess distinctive characteristics arising in globalization era, and therefore should be categorized as a new separate class, which he calls the “precariat” – a term he creates by conjugating “precarious” and “proletariat,” on the ground that the precariousness present in this group is what distinguish it from the traditional proletariat working class.

This claim successfully captures some core issues unique to this unprecedented era of rapid globalization, which increasingly demands flexibility – the ability to change and adapt – at expense of stability. The “precariousness,” along with the various consequences it has on an individual’s life experience, that Standing uses to qualify the precariat to be a class is to a large degree a result of this demand. However, whether or not this precarious state is sufficient to declare the precariat a distinctive class remains a crucial question. Comparing to the manual workers, there is no decisive change in relation of production, nor is there fundamental conflict between the two groups’ interests. Moreover, it is evident that could be suggesting that what is happening is an adaptation by the old working class to the new era, rather than formation of a new class. This paper will argue mostly for how the precariat characterizes the working class in this new era of globalization and flexibility, but does not constitute a new class.

Standing attributes the emergence and suffering of the precariat to the neo-liberal promotion of flexible labor market. ~~Their~~ Neoliberal theory states European and American labor market is not flexible with all the securities for the working class keeping labor cost high, and this drives production and investment to developing countries where labor cost is low. The prognosis of their theory, Standing comments, has systematically resulted in already low-income workers being pushed into insecure forms of employment – short-term jobs with little space of wage increase or career development. Macro labor market flexibility for the nation equated to labor insecurity for individuals at the micro level. This group of people has emerged to a new class that “was no part of the ‘working class’ or the ‘proletariat’.”

Commented [EOW1]: Editorial comment: In the first paragraph you need to tell the reader what the central theme of your paper is and how it is going to be organized. Your title suggests this, of course, but still in the first paragraph you need to announce the objectives of the paper and its structure.

Commented [EOW2]: Good thesis statement.

Commented [EOW3]: In general when referring to a theory one would not say “their”, unless you have already discussed a specific group of people and you are commenting on their views. When referring to the internal logic of a theory, it is better to say “this theory” or to directly keep identifying it by its name “neoliberal theory” or “neoliberalism.”

Standing defines two characteristics as making the precariat a distinctive class from the others, especially the manual workers: a) the short-term nature of their job and the instability and insecurity that come with this nature and b) unique psychological state captured by the “4As.” He also listed other six groups as classes along with the precariat: above it the elite, the salariat, the proficians, the manual employees (which he equates with the old working class) and below it the unemployed and the detached. It is easy to see how the precariat share little to no similarity with the top three classes. The main concern is around its difference from the traditional working class. According to Standing, it can be found in both material and psychological conditions.

Commented [EOW4]: You probably should list these here.

First of all, while manual employees holds long-term contract relationships that provide them with labor ~~securities~~ security in exchange for subordination and loyalty, the precariat with only short-term contracts are not required ~~of to show~~ loyalty to the employer as long as the task is done properly. This fact deprives them of possibility to bargain ~~of~~ trust or security in exchange for subordination because subordination is required by the contract itself in exchange for payment. At the same time, this lack of labor security is only present in the group of the precariat but not in the working class, as members of the latter enjoy “industrial citizenship” from belonging to unions. That the primary requirement of the precariat is flexibility means they are constantly subject to changes of job content and location as and when the manager wishes, and exposed to the possibility of losing their job at any time. With neither opportunity to receive skill training provided by employers, nor collective bargaining power of a union of their own, the precariat is a class lower than that of manual workers.

Commented [EOW5]: There are quite a few grammatical mistakes in the writing, but I won't continue correcting them. It would be good to take your paper to the Writing Center before handing it in to be sure that these are corrected.

Standing goes further to say that the precariat has a distinctive pattern of income. He specifies six forms of income, collectively labeled “social income,” and demonstrates that the precariat could not fully acquire any of them because of the short-term-ness of their jobs. Money income and entrepreneurial, community and state benefits can all be similarly divided into a flexible part based on objective condition and a fixed part based on the individual's continuous contribution to the collective body. The precariat cannot enjoy the second part because, given the precariousness of their short-term, constantly changing jobs, they are not able to make continuous contribution to any one organization. Any income they receive is subjective to external uncontrollable factors.

With material conditions bad as such, the precariat has developed a unique state of mind, which Standing summarizes as “4As” – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. Their anger comes from blocked avenues of upward social mobility, the feeling of being trapped in the lowest part of the society. Anomie results from sustained defeat compounded with misunderstanding and condemnation from members of upper classes of the precariat being lazy and irresponsible, that they deserve unsatisfactory conditions. Anxiety comes from the constant need to change from job to job. Worries of whether or not it is possible to gain enough means of self-reproduction in the near future make the precariat very anxious, but are not of major concern for the manual employees. Finally, alienation is associated with the inability to identify with any group of people – lack of occupational identity because of changing job content, lack of communal identity because of changing location, to name a few. These 4As are not shared by the working class, who are characterized by long-term stability.

At the end of his argument, Standing acknowledges that right now the precariat has not become a “class-for-itself,” as the members are too heterogeneous and there has not been effective collective voice. But he emphasizes the importance of understanding this new class of precariat because they are potentially dangerous. Given their drastically instable and insecure life

conditions, they are too easy to be manipulated to the extreme and become a “political monster” posing threat to social stability.

While Standing’s theory provides valuable accounts of issues unique to the present world characterized by unprecedentedly high flexibility, the validity of its core claim – that the precariat is a distinctive class – ~~may remain in need~~ of further discussion. Up front, does their contracts’ being short-term distinguish them from the traditional workers who hold long-term contracts, when the nature of the relationship is still nothing new from contract and, more importantly, exploitative? Also, Standing depicts the two groups’ interests regarding social improvement as conflicting, but it seems to me most possible that with the precariat moving towards a “class-for-itself” as Standing suggests it should, they will find themselves siding with each other. Finally, if the ultimate goals are to provoke attention to the precariat, improve their living condition and prevent them from becoming a public enemy, achieving them does not require explicitly defining it as a class. I believe that the precariat should not be categorized as a distinctive class but should be recognized as the working class in this new era because:

- a) The precariat as Standing describes belongs in the working class because of the nature of their relation to production.
- b) The precariat and the workers share the same suffering, destination interest and collective identity.
- c) As globalization continues to escalate, eventually all workers will become precariat, out of self-choice or pushed by objective factors.

I will be explaining each of them in detail.

At current stage of its development, the precariat remains an ~~ascertained specific~~ part within the working class, at least from the Marxian conceptualization of class. Marxist theory defines class as a unique relation of production. In the past the theory has been consisting of two polarized classes of capitalists and workers – the former has ownership over means of production while the latter only has rights to use them to produce. With modern development of the theory to make it more suitable in explaining the present society in which the middle class constitutes ~~the biggest a significant~~ population, managers – those who has control but no ownership over means of production – gets introduced into the system. The trio of classes distinguished by ownership, control or usage of means of production as such contains almost all possibilities of an individual’s relation of production. The question to ask, then, is whether or not the precariat is an exception of this categorizing rule. Clearly it is not, since members of the precariat certainly do not own or control means of production in any sense, at the same time their have no more or less ability to use any means of production to perform labor activity, for the purpose of finishing a productive task given by the employer or manager than the workers do. That is to say, if given the same task to finish, manual employees, which Standing lists as the class one level above the precariat, does not enjoy any advantage over the precariat in terms of access of means of production and therefore are unlikely to produce better labor comparing to the precariat. Given this case, how can we treat these two groups as distinctive classes?

More importantly, both the working class and the precariat are the exploited groups in production relation. According to the Marxian theory of production, the capitalists exploit the workers and the workers are exploited by the capitalists. With the role of middle class gets introduced, we can say that the middle class is exploiting the workers while being exploited by

Commented [EOW6]: If it were really true that one group of workers has very long term and secure contracts and another group has very short term contracts, and further that these two categories are quite distinct (people do not move back and forth between them), then there could be grounds for saying that this begins to look like a class distinction. This would especially be the case if the long term contracts began to look like lifetime employment and the employer lacked the power to fire the workers except in very extreme situations. This becomes more like a distinct kind of production relation.

Commented [EOW7]: This is also a little ambiguous – it would depend on how secure the jobs of the core working class is and whether that security would be weakened by advances in the precariat’s position.

Commented [EOW8]: Standing denies this.

Commented [EOW9]: This is not quite the right way to put it: workers only have the right to sell their labor power. They have no right to use the means of production *unless they are hired by employers*.

Commented [EOW10]: You state the issues very nicely here. I think the thing to think about is that if there are workers who, once hired, have very strong jobs rights -- almost a property right in their jobs -- then this could be thought of as a distinct kind of relation. In effect, capitalism would consist of two distinct kinds of class relations depending on the extent to which one group of workers has near-ownership of their jobs. If an employer cannot fire a worker (except under extreme situations) than this is different from ordinary capitalism.

the capitalists, and this uniqueness in production relation qualifies to make them a separate class. This uniqueness is completely missing in the characteristics of the precariat. The precariat, exactly the same as manual employees, are the exploited in production process. They sign contracts, although in shorter-term than workers' contracts, that put them in subordination and domination of the capitalists and managers. The capitalist appropriate surplus value created in the precariat's labor activity to add to their profit, which qualifies this relationship as oppressive and exploitative, exactly like the relationship between the working class and the capitalist. At the same time, having a group of temporal workers with shorter-term contracts in the production process does not give the working class any more power. The manual employees cannot by any means exploit the precariat. Although it might be possible that the former can gain dominative power over the latter, if a manual worker is designated to supervise or lead a team of the precariat, there is almost certainly no possibility for manual workers to appropriate the surplus value produced by the precariat. From this point of view, we also conclude that the precariat should be a part of the working class.

Standing distinguishes one group from the other based off the time frame of their contract being long-term or short-term, arguing that the precariousness induced by short-term contract relationship blocks the precariat from access of stable incomes – all six kinds of social incomes – and a career path that can be planned. The fact that manual employees do enjoy access to these securities puts the precariat in a more disadvantaged status. I recognize this argument as [excellently](#) valid. It can even be argued that given the low possibility of receiving training, insufficient social welfare, little control of working hours and many deprivations alike, the relative cost for the precariat to reproduce is higher than that for the manual workers. But phenomena like these can only function to elevate the degree to which the precariat is being exploited. We may be able to define the precariat as probably the most exploited group within the working class, but it is not grounded if we separate them into a lower independent class. Since there is no direct exploitative relationship between the working class and the precariat, and that both groups are exploited by the classes above them, it would make much more sense to include the precariat in the working class.

The second major flaw of Standing's argument is that too many of the characteristics he uses to distinguish between the class of manual employees and the precariat cannot find very relevant supportive empirical cases. Actually, when thinking about some of them, it often appears that the reality suggests otherwise – that many of the advantages he claims the workers enjoy because of the long-term-ness of their contract have in fact extremely weak and fragile existence. For example, when stating that [compared](#) to manual workers, the precariat "is expected to do labour as and when required, in conditions largely not of its own choosing," Standing implies that workers have in some degree control over when to perform their labor activity, as well as under what kinds of conditions. This is hardly true to any modern occupation we can think of that can be grouped into working class. Taking common office clerks as an easy example, we clearly see working hours pre-specified in contracts restrict when they can do labor. As for working condition, it would be hard to imagine a situation in practical world where a clerk gets to choose where to be working at, or whom to be working with, as the employer – the exploiter – designate these conditions for the worker most of the times even prior to his or her arrival to the firm. The advantage of having long-term contract is not present here at all.

When introducing the concept of "denizenry," Standing himself is vague as to how many of the seven groups respond to denizen characteristics. Stating that a "growing number of

Commented [EOW11]: The counter argument would be that the two categories occupy different positions within the relations of *domination* even if they are both exploited by capitalists and workers do not exploit the precariat.

Commented [EOW12]: Good criticism.

people” around the world lack at least one of the listed citizen rights puts not only workers, but also proficians and perhaps even the lower bound of salariat in precarious status. An even more serious self-contradiction presents when Standing explains the exchange of job securities for employment security, describing that even some workers with envied secure long-term contract may have acquired it by sacrificing job activity and signing agreement to change location whenever the leaders require them to. The “4As” are not an exclusive psychological state of the precariat, either. The case of Japanese employees who form long-term parental-like relationship with their supervisors also experience anxiety of disappointing the “parent,” or losing the manager’s trust, and would feel strong alienation and even anomie if these two things do happen. Just thinking about what might be happening around us, we can easily realize during the recent financial crisis, most of the massive population being laid-off were in long-term contracts. Standing also lists the absence of occupational identity as a unique suffering of the precariat. However, he also states that there has been a decline in the strength of connection that workers have with the unions and their occupation. All these examples point to the increasing precariousness for long-term contract labors and evident for the fact that manual workers, just as the precariat, face insecurity and instability, simply because they both belong to the exploited class. Whether the contract works for 10 years or 10 months does not make as decisive a difference as that resulted from the very production relationship.

Having argued for the homogeneity of manual workers and the precariat in class terms, I would like to take a step back and try making sense of the emergence of the precariat not as a class, but as simply a group of people. There must be something unique-specific to this group that captures the special attention of renowned scholars like Standing, even promote their treating it as a separate class. The distinctive attractiveness, I believe, lies in the fact that it responds to the unique-development of our world toward one emphasizing on speed, flexibility, openness and things alike that are not so supportive of stability and security anymore, but rather has the tendency to equate these two to terms like boredom, conservativeness, lack of courage and inability to adapt. It is this change in values that is causing more and more manual workers to become the precariat. Most of them are pushed into the condition because their employers have experienced such change of value, or realized the need for the firm to such change in response to the society’s changing value. Others may have transited voluntarily from pursuing long-term contractual relationships that bound them to one occupation for the rest of their their entire life to chasing a sense of freshness and different experience as moving from job to job. Standing briefly mentions this tendency when stating some youths in the precariat take pride of their identity and are not willing to take on tenure jobs as they observed their parents’ generation be bounded in such occupations. It is also a fact that long-term contracts that secure means of reproduction for the workers at the same time secure exploitation of the workers for the capitalists, granting them the right to appropriate the surplus value workers produce in the very long time, often life-long, within the effective frame of the contract. Once realized this fact, given at the same time an increasing need from the global environment of flexibility, multitasking and expertizing on more than one field, it is rational to think most workers would voluntarily engage in more shorter-term jobs throughout their life, instead of pursuing towards an unchanging exploitative relationship.

A major barrier for this motive is the danger of failing to self-support. The ability of an individual to support himself as well as his family, to reproduce his own labor force, should acts as a deciding criterion for whether his lifestyle is flexible or precarious. It is the former that the precariat, or the working class in the new era, should actively seek to achieve. The universal

Commented [EOW13]: Or you might say as a segment of the working class, or perhaps *stratum* of the working class.

Commented [EOW14]: Is this really a question of *values* or of material conditions, technologies, competition, power, etc.?

basic income that was called for on Milan's May Day event could be an ideal way to ensure workers of the ability to reproduce and sustain. I believe after more in-depth discussion and evaluation, more methods alike should appear to satisfy this need. Once this goal is reached, there is great possibility that the precariat, along with the remaining manual employees, successfully transforms to the working class in the new era, with much more flexibility and adaptability to take on more forms of occupations as production needs, and at the same time enjoying the freshness each new occupation brings and the possibility of jumping out of jobs they do not enjoy as much. To put it using Standing's words, people would be working, not laboring. The "4As" would be much less a problem and the precariat would have put little threat to the society as well.

As the final conclusion, I might have been too optimistic in seeing it possible for the issue of precariousness to solve itself by turning into flexibility, and too naïve in counting on construction of social welfare such as the unconditional basic income to stimulate this overturn. But it is a grounded claim that treating the precariat as an explicit class independent from the working class is problematic and does not promote better solution for improving their living condition or for lowering the threat of their anger on social stability. Standing, while providing a powerful account on a serious social issue that might have gone overlooked, has been inconsistent in presenting his argument, contradicting himself at times and disconnected to both Marxian labor theory and the practical world in central matters. Given the same relation of production shared by manual workers and the precariat, and the ongoing transition from the former to the latter, it makes more sense to conduct analyses on them as two groups within the same working class and develop emancipatory social theories to improve living condition for both groups.

Example #2 of a good paper from Sociology 621

Fantastic paper: very interesting ideas, extremely well organized and transparent exposition, filled with insights and original formulations. The writing is excellent in all respect, but even more important, the good writing is in the service of serious and thoughtful ideas. I have quite a few comments on the margins, but they are nearly all in dialogue with your analysis rather than criticisms.

A Precarious Proposition?

Over the last few decades we have seen massive shifts in the global economy, altering what it means to labor. Guy Standing conceptualizes a new “global class” deriving from the changes in the structure of the globalized economy. Specifically, he claims there is a new “class-in-the-making” which he calls the precariat. I argue that Standing fails to provide a convincing account of the precariat and that no such class exists. I first give a brief overview of Standing’s concept, then critically engage the foundations of his argument. I argue Standing’s precariat lacks coherent definitional grounding, has no unique social class relations, and has no distinctive class interests.

Standing argues that the precariat is an emerging class defined by its relative low incomes, and its insecurity in relation to production, distribution, and the state. He conceptualizes three distinct types of precariat. The 1) “ativists” who feel out of the “old proletariat”; 2) “nostalgics” who are mainly migrants; and, 3) “progressives” who are young and well educated. Uniting the three groups is a precarious existence and a habituation of their precarious lives.

DEFINITIONAL GROUNDING

Standing limits the precariat to a group he sees useful for examining the potential for emancipatory transformation. Yet this group does not share unique characteristics and therefore does not plausible constitute a new class. Take the vast numbers of workers in the global south living precarious lives. Responding to Jan Breman’s critique regarding the overly inclusive nature of the precariat and the eurocentric analysis it depends on, Standing claims that the vast number of destitute workers living off of informal labor in India are not members of the precariat. Rather, the Indian precariat is in major cities, “where there is a growing number of young people with university education scrambling for careers” (2014b:4). Standing’s distinction is nonsensical. What criterion separate these groups? Standing briefly suggests that the precariat must be money wage laborers and, therefore, these vast populations are not included (2014b:2). I will discuss his argument about the relations of distribution in depth, but for the purposes of this point India has (and this is not a new phenomenon) vast swaths of rural and urban non-agricultural informal wage laborers (Breman 1996). More prominently, Standing attempts to narrow the precariat class based on relative education. This is an excellent example of Standing’s equivocation regarding the definition of the precariat. At times he suggests that the precariat are overeducated for the work they engage in (2014b:1), but it is clear this characteristic does not

Commented [EOW1]: Good first paragraph – nicely introducing your argument.

Commented [EOW2]: Another excellent bridging paragraph.

Commented [EOW3]: I share your disagreement with this view, but I think in an essay it is better not to dismiss an argument as nonsensical. A good strategy here would be to ask: what might be the grounds for making such a sharp distinction between the informal/marginal labor and the urban precariat? Is there a sense in which a precarious entry into the capitalist/corporate employment structure is quite different from the precarious existence in the rural, traditional, less capitalist countryside? What you might want to do is make sense of the intuition Standing has here and then show why his theoretical conclusions/conjecture from that intuition are inadequate.

universally apply to the precariat. Two of the three types of precariat (the “atavists” and “nostalgics”) are not likely to be highly educated, falling out of the old manufacturing proletariat and being displaced migrants, respectively.¹ Standing is unable to provide a cohesive (even if nonspecific) account of who is and is not part of the precariat.

Commented [EOW4]: The one thing that might unite these is that they are precariously connected to real capitalist employment relations – to jobs organized by capital.

Standing’s “class-in-the-making” fails to use a plausible temporal abstraction. For Standing, the interests of the precariat are defined not in relation to the broadly conceived economic structure, but rather to specific temporal characteristics of certain groups of workers. Standing notes that the precariat is not defined in a solely positive manner, but by examining what the precariat “is not” (2011a:40). Standing argues that the precariat is distinctly divorced from the proletariat, which he defines as “long-term, stable, fixed hour jobs” through which “labor securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty” (2011a:10; 2011a:14). This is a temporally truncated view of the proletariat. By suggesting that the proletariat is limited to the role they played in the welfare states of the global north post-WWII, Standing obscures that shifting nature of economic organization. Globalization has not solely removed workers from the “long-term, stable, fixed hour jobs” into the characteristic of the precariat, but has impacted these jobs themselves. That is to say, not only have some proletarian jobs disappeared due to the effects of the extreme fluidity of capital, but the jobs that remain have taken on a new function. Job protection for union workers is crumbling, collective bargaining rights are being challenged and in some cases revoked; the least precarious are living in a changing labor regime, no longer the post-WWII labor-capital settlement. Just as the labor regime shifted to create the post war ‘settlement,’ the economic arrangements are shifting again. In this way the precariat is simply the most extreme victims of the shift of power between the proletariat and the capitalists. Indeed, there are strong unifying foundations between Standing’s proletariat and precariat—exploitation by employers, domination in the workplace, and alienation from the fruits of one’s labor. Considering a broader temporal frame of the shifts in the relational position of individuals within the proletariat (to capital) is more meaningful than Standing’s desire to create a new class. One could imagine that if Standing were writing in the post-war era, as labor militancy was declining and the welfare state expanding, Standing’s analytical frame could justify a new class which sees itself as partnered with capital.

Commented [EOW5]: I’m not sure “function” is the best word to designate what you’re talking about here. What follows is more a description of structural properties of jobs and employment relations.

THE SOCIAL RELATIONS

Relations of Production

For Standing, the primary argument for a distinct, precariat relation of production is precarious incomes. The precarity or stability of incomes are positionally measured and a theoretical gradient can be constructed with the most precarious at one end and the most stable at the other. By depicting this group as binary, however, Standing obscures the centrality of precarity to all wage labor. Although certain members of the proletariat may not experience job changes on a regular basis, common to selling one’s labor is the potential for it not to be bought—the at-will exploitation relationship remains substantially similar for most wage workers. From this, we see that the interests of the precariat vis-a-vis labor stability are not in opposition to the interests of the rest of the proletariat. Protections from a precarious income (e.g., trade policies, universal basic income, just cause rights) benefit, or could benefit under certain conditions, all who sell labor. The precarious have a greater stake in the protections, but with the rise of neoliberalism

Commented [EOW6]: good. But there could still be an issue of some workers have de facto property rights in their jobs – the core workers in Japan, for example, or civil servants in many countries, or union-protected seniority rights in much of Europe. In all these cases there is something more like a binary relationship between jobs with enforceable claims to tenure and those without, even if among those without there is a smoother gradient of factual precarity.

Commented [EOW7]: This is really a U.S. characteristic. In much of Europe employment at-will is not the norm, even now.

¹ In lecture, Standing also specifically claims these two types of precariat have minimal education (Standing 2011b).

and the subsequent demise of long-held labor protections, it is clear that the “old proletariat” (as Standing denotes them) also gain from these measures.

Standing notes a second distinction. Although workers with a precarious income have always existed, the expectation of living a precarious life is a new process, deemed precariatization (2014b:1). This seems hardly plausible. Across the globe there are millions of workers who live, as their parents lived, by pursuing informal, constantly changing work. To suggest that these workers had the expectation of a stable income is incoherent.² It seems clear that Standing creates the boundaries of the precariat in order for his concept to be novel and instrumental in describing global political shifts in light of economic restructuring. But it is clear that there is nothing “new” about these characteristics. The workers of the precariat have existed under historical and geographically-specific arrangements of the economy (many workers during relative economic recession or significant restructuring in the global north—during industrialization, for instance—and many workers of the ~~the~~ global south during much of recent history). The notion that some workers who had stable incomes are becoming habituated to precarious incomes does not logically suggest they are a new class—they are still part of the class that is subjected to the relation of production that allows for precarity and (the internalized habituation to precarity) under specific economic conditions (wage laborers).

Commented [EOW8]: Again, like nonsensical, I would use a less loaded term here. You are really just saying that he is *incorrect* that there was in the past this general expectation of stability of incomes.

Commented [EOW9]: Nice formulation using the idea of habituation.

Standing’s third argument for distinctive relations to production is the ratio of “work-for-labour” to actual wage labor. He argues that the precariat are required to consistently complete various tasks in order to find work opportunities (e.g., retraining). This suffers from the same gradational problem of defining class based on income security. The neoliberal economy demands large swaths of the workforce be retrained, and requires more hours of non-wage work (e.g., non-professional child care) in order to supplant stagnant or decreasing wages. This has historically been true of the proletariat during economic turmoil, for marginalized workers, and for women.

Relations of Distribution

Standing makes two main claims regarding the precariat’s unique relations of distribution. These are 1) a reliance on predominantly money wages, and 2) a lack of community support in times of need. I have already noted the trouble Standing has when trying to define the precariat due to his geographic and temporal focus but because this is particularly problematic when it comes to the relations of distribution I will briefly revisit the issue. The relations of distribution of the precariat are not uncommon; many workers around the world rely mostly on money wages and have little ability to appeal to the wider community in times of need—this is especially true of the less capitalistically advanced countries of the global south where forms of enterprise benefits are less prevalent and concentrated poverty is relatively high. For Standing, this leaves two options (when operating within his conceptualization), either 1) the precariat is a very encompassing group particularly in the global south, or 2) these are cross-class characteristics of distribution. Although Standing estimates the precariat population to be quite significant, it seems he does not believe it to be encompassing of most of those who have the two aforementioned relations of distribution. For one, he specifically discounts the Indian informal

Commented [EOW10]: This is nice writing – informing the reader why you are backtracking a bit. You do a good job of signposting the elaboration of your arguments.

² It could be that something else distinguishes these people from the precariat. But, as I argued earlier, the only characteristics Standing offers are distributional (empirically not supported) and educational (internally inconsistent with his own delineation of the three types of precariat). See page 2.

sector, but additionally, he suggests that the largest precariat populations are likely in Japan and South Korea (2011a:35). Even if the precariat was mostly encompassing of those meeting the two criteria, it would not help Standing's argument that the precariat is becoming a new class. First, these characteristics (as discussed) are not new, and second, the precarity associated with these distributional characteristics do not delineate class interests (this is discussed in detail below). Taking Standing at his word, it seems a more plausible scenario is that the two distributional criteria are actually cross-class characteristics because a substantial portion of those with the characteristics are not included in his vision of the precariat. This breaks down his claim that the precariat has distinct relations of production and, importantly, demonstrates the commonality of those participating in wage labor. The mechanisms of production themselves (common to all wage workers) produce the possibility of a distributional domination in which workers are removed from the capitalist benefit structure altogether and are alienated from the community.³ Clearly, the concept of the precariat relies on a gradational conception of characteristics as class. I will challenge the utility of that view below but what is important here is that 1) the relations of distribution are not distinct and 2) the identified relationships of distribution are the outcome of wage work itself.

Commented [EOW11]: One might also raise the question of whether it is descriptively correct that *community* support has disappeared. The state may have withdrawn the safety-net, but the more networked based forms of community support could still be pretty important, especially when it is also interwoven with family and kin networks.

Relations to the State

Standing argues that the precariat are “denizens” because they have weaker civil, cultural, social, political, and economic rights and that the precariat is the “first mass class in history that has systematically been losing rights” (2014b:2). Standing uses the concept of rights in a peculiar and unuseful manner. The way Standing defines rights makes the concepts partially gradational and subsumes two ideas, 1) a relative lack of state resources and 2) access to legitimate legal status. The former is less of a support for the concept of the precariat as a class. Graduated state resources such as workfare are certainly less preferential for those working with relative job insecurity but the effects are not distinctive. The erosion of the welfare state, while disproportionately impacting those with precarious circumstances (regardless of whether these people are *precaritised*), it also impacts those performing more secure labor but have low incomes. The loss of welfare protections is never on the basis of work alone. For example PRWORA in the United States limits recipients to 60 months (or less in some states) of TANF regardless of work status. Access to legitimate legal status potentially is a bolder claim of delineation. The convicted and undocumented workers are two categories that definitely have less claims to important rights. But this is not a characteristic of the precariat, it is a characteristic of the convicted and undocumented. Indeed, the main “type” of precariat Standing focuses on (the “progressives”) are unlikely to be either convicted or undocumented. Lastly, it should be noted that Standing's claim regarding the precariat as “the first class that has been systematically losing rights” is blind to the greater unity of wage workers. The “old proletariat” has also been systematically losing rights in the globalised economy—the right to unionize and collectively bargain, have access to work-provided healthcare, and receive pensions have all come under attack. Does this mean that the proletariat is falling into the precariat? Certainly not. It means

Commented [EOW12]: The capacity to unionize has certainly declined. But in most places the legal right to unionize hasn't changed. Even in the US, except for state workers, the formal rights to unionize haven't changed much.

³The lack of community support is a tougher case. Standing is unclear on why and how community support is lost. One possible conceptualization is that the globalized economy demands mobility and the flow of workers breaks their links to the community. Although non wage laborers can certainly experience this newer necessitated mobility, being a wage worker has a distinct causal relationship on mobility; the wage workers rely of a labor market to buy their labor, no matter where that may be.

that the proletariat have a dynamic relationship with the state, that shifts as the political economy shifts, something that becomes clear when not limiting analysis to the post-WWII era in the global north.

THE INTERESTS OF THE PRECARIAT

Standing attempts to define the precariat as a “class-in-the-making” by arguing that they have distinct interests. He argues that “for the proletariat, the main objective was better, ‘decent’ labour, not escape from labor” (2014a:1). Standing wrote elsewhere that while, “the proletariat . . . aspired to stable full-time wage labour . . . the precariat aspires to achieve an enriching array of work activities in building occupational freedom . . . there is a difference” (2014b:6). Standing is vague about what “escaping” from labor would look like, but worse, he is silent on the question of why the proletariat would not also want to “escape” labor. Both groups are the victims of exploitation and domination in the workplace, as well as alienation from their own productivity. It seems likely that the economic structure in Standing’s “politics of paradise” would be a step forward for all wage workers. I now turn to specific examples.

Standing’s main suggestion is an institution of a basic income which, he argues, will decommodify the precariat, giving it a base capacity to bargain over conditions of employment (Standing 2012:605). This would provide the precariat with some of the leverage traditionally enjoyed by the organized proletariat. But a basic income would increase bargaining leverage for wage workers⁴ precisely due to their class relationship with the capitalists. Standing could argue that a basic income is of greater importance to the precariat, but such an argument would break down quickly. Although Standing’s murky definition of the precariat makes it difficult to know where individual workers are categorized, it seems that some of the less fortunate proletariat would benefit as much from a basic income as the precariat. As stated, Standing insists that most of the vast, destitute population of India that works informally is not part of the precariat because they do not experience “status frustration” based on education. But the interests of this group are certainly furthered by a basic income, if for no other reason than poverty alleviation. Interestingly, Standing would likely agree as he has worked on instituting such a model in Indian villages (Standing 2014b:4). But even if the precariat universally benefits more from a basic income, it is important to realize that the interests of the proletariat are not opposed to a basic income.

Another way Standing attempts to conceptualize the different interests of the precariat and proletariat is by arguing that the proletariat wants a return to the post-war welfare state which will do little to help the precariat. Standing notes that the precariat is alienated, or even “liberated” from the proletarian push for more jobs and a higher minimum wage (2011a:2; 2014a:5). While the “progressive” precariat may be adverse to returning to the “way it was before,” there is little evidence of a fundamental divide. Indeed, the labor movement is increasingly directly supportive of the examples Standing relies on of a ‘stirring’ precariat. This is becoming standard as unions stand in solidarity with immigrant rights movements and the increasing number of workers living precariously—examples are numerous and growing. In 2006, French unions went on strike in national solidarity with young people (importantly termed the *précarité*) protesting a proposed “fire-at-will” law that would have affected those under 26. The reverse is also true. Taking directly from Standing, the *euromayday* movement consistently

Commented [EOW13]: This is a very good point, but there may still be something into the vision of worklife held as the ideal in the conventionally understood “laborist” working class – a lifetime of stable employment within a capitalist enterprise backed by occupational identities versus a vision of work and income that involves no loyalty or identity to particular organizations or occupational roles.

⁴ This has been elaborated elsewhere. See Wright (2010:217-222).

demands a European minimum wage, an issue he deems worthy of the “old proletariat.” This is not to suggest that the two groups (if they can be granted reasonable delineation at all) have historically had or currently have equivalent demands and place equal priority on all issues. But to suggest that the two groups constitute separate classes, with clearly separated interests relies on either 1) empirically unsupported claims, or 2) a level of abstraction so low that the identified classes have little explanatory power for a general emancipatory push.

A strong case exists for analysing and defining classes outside of the demonstrated interests discussed above. Importantly the push by the Euromayday movement and others discussed by Standing only represent the “progressive” portion of the precariat, providing little explanatory power behind the class as a whole. The lived experiences of the workers in the theorized precariat and proletarians suggest a broadly cohesive path toward emancipatory goals. The mechanisms that form the relations to production which place and reinforce workers in their respective relation to capital are the same for the precariat as they are for the proletariat (assuming we ignore the definitional issue, cleanly placing workers in one or the other). Both groups are exploited for their labor by capitalists, dominated in the workplace, and alienated from their production. Broadly, an emancipatory vision which did away with the fundamental Marxist class division (between labor and capital) would emancipate the proletariat and the precariat. The specific economic structure would have to be more inclusive than some traditional visions of emancipation (with a way to produce what Standing calls “occupation citizenship”), but that applies not only to the precariat, but to the proletariat because the globalised economy has denatured traditional industries.

Standing’s major defense of his new class concept is theoretically grounded in explanatory utility. Standing argues that “compressing everybody into one gigantic ‘working class’ masks what is going on” (2014b:4). The question becomes “what type of differentiation makes analytical sense of studying what is happening” (2014b:4).

Are there characteristics of the precariat that makes distinguishing them as a class analytically useful? I have argued no. We have already seen that the conceptualization of precariat suffers from a severe lack of definitional grounding and the workers have broadly similar interests vis-a-vis the relations of production, relations of distribution, and relations to the state. Standing’s claim that the precariat is the formation of a new class fails to muster analytical consistency or explanatory use.

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Example #3 of a good paper from Sociology 621

General Comments

This is an excellent paper in every way: beautifully written, interesting and provocative ideas, insightful, intellectually engaging. I agree absolutely with you that any public policy that officially recognizes a deficit as something for which a category of people do not bear responsibility – which the philosophers then call “(bad) brute luck” – risks stigmatization, and of course the stigma itself becomes another form of disadvantage. This implies that there are serious difficulties of responding to these unjust inequalities. Your general recommendation that the best way of approaching this is to tackle the social structural sources of the disadvantage is absolutely right, and the more one can do that the better. But I am not sure that this will always be enough. Even in a fair labor market, some people’s earning capacity will be lower than others for reasons over which they have no control. The question then is whether there should be income distribution mechanisms that close this gap. It may be in practice in the US today this would be impossible, but of course doing anything serious about many of the structural issues is also impossible politically.

Anyway, this is a superb paper. It was a pleasure to read.

The Ethical Dilemma of Luck Egalitarianism

Behind the façade of meritocracy, the United States has a vested interest in maintaining and perpetuating social inequality to preserve the strength of capitalism. This notion is at the core of one of Erik Olin Wright’s arguments in *Real Utopias*, that capitalism is incompatible with liberal egalitarian principles of justice. Equal opportunity, he argues, must be achieved through the compensation of brute luck. While capitalism is indeed incompatible with equal opportunity, this method of achieving it is riddled with holes and moral dilemmas that make the method itself incompatible with utopian visions. Defining what constitutes ~~as~~ brute luck will likely be reflective of the current system of power, quantifying brute luck in order to compensate for it will create explicit social hierarchies, compensating at the individual level will absolve the larger social structure of their role in generating inequality, and highly charged social tensions will be generated between groups that are given different levels of compensation. In order to create liberal egalitarian alternatives to capitalism in hopes of realizing a utopian vision, it is imperative that these visions are developed meticulously in order to avoid creating more harm than good.

Background

Wright argues that one of the fatal flaws of capitalism is that it violates liberal egalitarian principals of justice by perpetuating unequal access to the means to live

a flourishing life and by preventing the realization of equal opportunity. Capitalism accomplishes this through various mechanisms, including inheritance laws that allow for extreme economic and social advantages to be transmitted through families and by displacing negative externalities, such as pollution, on to communities without consent. In order to realize the liberal egalitarian vision of social justice, it is necessary to eliminate specific types of institutionally perpetuated inequalities to strive towards a society of true equal opportunity.

In order to distinguish inequalities that are unjust from those that are not, liberal egalitarians invoke a dichotomy ~~is made~~ between “brute luck” and “option luck.” The latter is akin to a lottery, where individuals can freely choose to participate and are fully aware of the potential risks and rewards for their participation. An example of this would be investing in stock. People are fully aware that the stock market offers no guarantees for positive returns, so if ~~an individual~~ loses their fortune in the stock market it is entirely of their own choosing. Because participants are fully consenting, there is no need to compensate for option luck in order to achieve equal opportunity—if an individual is disadvantaged because of option luck, it is at no fault to the greater societal structure. On the other hand, instances of brute luck involve no consent or control by the individuals that it affects. Genetic traits, race, gender, disability, even some illnesses and accidents are just a few examples of what qualifies as brute luck. In order to achieve equal opportunity, it is argued that disadvantageous instances of brute luck must be fully compensated for and “once full compensation for brute luck has been made, then everyone effectively has the same opportunity, and all remaining inequalities are the result of choices for which a person has moral responsibility” (Wright, 52).

While compensating for brute luck in the name of equal opportunity may be an appealing concept to many in theory, the execution of such an endeavor, even in a world where financial resources were not a barrier, may result in ethical dilemmas, explicitly defined social hierarchies, and exacerbated social tensions. It is probable that the qualifiers for defining deficits in brute luck would reinforce current cultural ideals, the quantification of these deficits would likely (re)produce social hierarchies, and the execution of any potential strategies would risk reducing social inequality to the individual level, absolving social institutions, and would likely produce tension between those who are given compensation and those who are not.

The Problem of Organization

The task of defining a deficit in brute luck is a daunting one, as it carries with it an immense moral, ethical, and social weight. To define something as a “deficit” implies that any individual that has one is less than whole in the eyes of society, and that their natural way of being in the world is inferior to others. Based on the social and institutional context of the United States, anybody that is not identifiably a white, wealthy, educated, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender man would be suffering a deficit in brute luck, as each of these identities are ascribed more social, economic, and political power. There is a certain element of privilege that would likely accompany any individual who has the education, access, power, and time to be able to envision and realize these types of egalitarian social goals that may

Commented [EOW1]: It is probably worth noting explicitly that this distinction was created by philosophers who adopt what is generally called a liberal egalitarian concept of fairness and justice, one that revolves around equal opportunity but also wants to hold people responsible for outcomes that are under their control. My “equal access” principle is less concerned with these problems of individual responsibility.

Commented [EOW2]: Editorial note: If possible it is better to have a plural subject – individuals in this case – when you use “their.” It is interesting that in contemporary English the convention you adopted (“an individual loses their fortune...”) is becoming acceptable as a way of avoiding gendered pronouns, but I don’t think the language has fully adapted to this new use.

Commented [EOW3]: You make very compelling arguments here, but it is worth remembering the starting point of this language of option and brute luck, etc. The starting point is the claim that all inequalities in resources, welfare and flourishing of people are suspect. The initial problem is to distinguish between inequalities that are of moral concern and those that are not. The basic intuition is that an inequality that is entirely the result of something over which one has complete control is probably morally neutral, whereas one that occurs through reasons over which one has no control raises moral concern. In this context brute luck refers to positive as well as negative advantage – talents are the result of brute luck, and the higher income generated by talent (what can be called a talent-rent) can be taxed accordingly without imposing any unfairness on the talented. They don’t deserve their high income because talent itself is random. Anyway, once one acknowledges this contrast over outcomes over which one is responsible and not responsible (whether or not one uses the language of brute luck and deficits), then one faces the issue of “compensating” people for the latter by neutralizing the effects of brute luck one way or another.

Commented [EOW4]: Remember that the “compensation” need not take the form of cash transfers to constitute the “value” of the “deficit” in question; it can be spending the resources needed to eliminate the loss of capability that comes with the problem – curbs cuts and ramps; free prosthetic limbs; high intensity special needs classes to deal with learning issues, etc.

Commented [EOW5]: The argument, of course, is not that being black is a “deficit”, but that racism obstructs equal opportunity and that a counteracting mechanism – which may be costly in other respects – is their justified.

unintentionally shape the value given (or taken) from people of varying identities in the spirit of achieving equality. Therefore, it is a realistic possibility that an initiative implemented to achieve equal opportunity based in luck egalitarianism would inadvertently perpetuate the pre-existing social hierarchy by defining those in positions of lesser privilege as having an individual deficit of brute luck. From the connotation of defining identities as “deficits” to the level of privilege necessary to be involved in creating those definitions, it is probable that the very nature of defining lesser brute luck would carry with it the power to reinforce existing social hierarchies that are incompatible with the vision of egalitarian utopias.

After an agreement is made on what qualifies a deficit as being worthy of compensation, it then becomes important to establish the method of compensation. There are two likely strategies that this type of initiative would utilize—either resources would need to be allocated to change larger, pre-existing social structures or there would be a form of individual monetary compensation distributed in order to increase the standard of living for individuals with deficits in brute luck. A contemporary example of structural compensation is the American Disabilities Act, which led to increased accessibility for public transportation and the construction of curb ramps on sidewalks, along with countless other institutional improvements to limit discrimination. Individual compensation would most likely be modeled after insurance, and would not eliminate the existence of disadvantageous brute luck, but it would theoretically minimize its effects on their overall standard of living.

Each of these options present unique challenges. In the instance of using financial resources to change existing social structures, some deficits in brute luck are less obvious to resolve. Race is just one problematic example. Money is incapable of undoing centuries of racism that has been institutionally embedded within American society, although it may provide some benefits if directed towards educational initiatives or towards the elimination of stratification and funding inequality in the public school system. Approaching the compensation for brute luck from an individual perspective risks ignoring the larger social structures that create and perpetuate marginalized identities and also poses the challenge of quantifying these various deficits. Each of these options is imperfect, but based on the individualistic nature of the United States culture, it is likely that any initiative based on luck egalitarianism would probably be based more heavily on individual compensations.

If a definition for a deficit in brute luck were achieved, a standard measurement for the amount and type of compensation given for a particular deficit must be formulated. Therefore, the quantification of various instances of brute luck is necessary to achieve the liberal egalitarian vision of justice through this method. The moral and ethical weight of this task would be compounded with the problematic definition of a deficit itself—not only would identities need to be classified as deficits, but they would then need to be compared, ranked, and quantified in order to provide adequate compensation to ensure equal opportunity for success. For example, it would be necessary to establish the amount of disadvantage between Native American as opposed to Asian American, or between

Commented [EOW6]: You are raising an exceedingly important issue of how to avoid stigma when redressing unjust inequalities. This is at the core of at least some of the debates over affirmative action, for example, or even special needs teaching in elementary schools.

Often the brute luck compensation perspective is combined with the Amartya Sen & Martha Nussbaum analysis of *capabilities*. The deficit/disability problem then is defined with respect to deficits in capabilities, not socially-defined characteristics of person (like race or gender or sexual orientation).

Commented [EOW7]: But also housing revitalization, jobs programs that are self-consciously anti-racist, etc.

Commented [EOW8]: You may be write about this, but the central thrust of the luck-egalitarian view is to erase the deficit generated by bad rute luck rather than to provide a monetary equivalently to individuals.

individuals that are quadriplegic and those that have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, or between an individual that was struck by lightning and somebody that was a victim of a drunk driving accident. Making these distinctions and having them reified on an institutional level has the potential to (re)produce social hierarchies on an even more explicit level than currently exists.

The Problem of Implementation

One of the dangers of this approach of compensating for deficits in brute luck is that it risks reducing larger social issues to individual issues. Being a person of color is not innately a social limitation, it becomes a “deficit” only in the context of a society that privileges white skin through institutional processes such as redlining, funding public schools through property taxes, and mass incarceration for minor drug offenses. Being physically impaired only means being disabled in a society that privileges able-bodied individuals by having buildings that do not have ramps or elevators, by having most homes with doorways that are too narrow for wheelchairs to fit through, and by having seating in public spaces such as classrooms, movie theatres, or concert venues that is either nonexistent or segregated for individuals who use wheelchairs. These identities are socially constructed and reinforced as being disadvantageous in the repetition of every day life. Focusing on equal opportunity as something that is an individual issue, through compensating individuals for so-called deficits in brute luck, risks absolving the larger cultural and institutional structures from having generated and perpetuated these inequalities in the first place.

To further illustrate this danger in regards to disability, it is important to distinguish the difference between “impairment” and “disability”. To be impaired means that an individual has a physical, psychological, or physiological inability to perform a specific function. To be disabled means that an individual is restricted or deprived of the ability to participate equally in society due to social, institutional, and environmental barriers. In other words, disability is a social construction. For example, somebody who is deaf is hearing-impaired, but they may be disabled from being able to fully communicate with others because contemporary society doesn’t emphasize the use and knowledge of sign language. If everybody was able to use sign language, somebody who is deaf would still be unable to hear, but they would not be disabled from being able to fully communicate with others.

By treating perceived deficits in brute luck, like being hearing-impaired, as individual deficits, initiatives fail to address the concept of being disabled as a social construct. The intention of individual brute luck compensation in this example is to increase the general standard of living for somebody who is hearing-impaired or perhaps to provide some type of technology that may make it easier for them to communicate with individuals who are unfamiliar with sign language. While this may very well improve the standard of living for this particular individual, it fails to address the wider problems regarding the inaccessibility of contemporary social structures. It is the current societal structure that constructs disabilities, and the power to make the world more equally accessible lies in changing that structure, not in offering financial support to compensate for absent social support.

Commented [EOW9]: Excellent exploration of words and their implications. There was a time when the ordinary language expression was “A disabled person”. Now it is “a person with a disability”. The latter is obviously an improvement from the former because it doesn’t identify the whole person with the “disability.” Your suggestion that it would be better to say “a person with a function-specific impairment” might be another less stigmatizing discourse.

Just so you know, my mother, Beatrice A. Wright, was a pioneer in disability research and disability rights. Her book, *Physical Disability: a psycho-social approach* makes the kinds of arguments you are advancing here (although she does use the term disabilities, it is always in a function-specific way and always emphasizes the way the environment mitigates or intensifies any given issue).

Another potential danger is the generation of tensions within groups of various identities that are granted different levels of compensation. This issue can be illustrated through the contemporary equal opportunity initiative of Affirmative Action. While the goal of Affirmative Action is to create equal opportunities in higher education and employment for marginalized groups within the United States, a lack of widespread education regarding the policies, combined with a lack of acknowledgement of privilege in the wider national culture, has led to a host of social tensions. Rather than being viewed as a program that compensates for a highly stratified society, Affirmative Action is frequently viewed as granting unfair advantages to women, people who are differently-abled, and people of color. These widely held views on Affirmative Action are reflected in the countless lawsuits brought forward by distraught high school graduates that were rejected by their dream college and place the on blame Affirmative Action. Not only do these claims of the injustices of Affirmative Action overlook the historical and social reasons for its existence, but they also minimize the achievements of marginalized groups of people by assuming they are inferior and incapable of high levels of achievement without outside assistance. While these instances of disdain for programs like Affirmative Action by the general public are rooted in a lack of education and awareness of institutional inequality than in the program itself, it is still likely that other egalitarian initiatives that are based on similar forms of compensation would yield similar results, unless they are executed in a different way.

These tensions are present not only for structural equal opportunity programs, such as Affirmative Action, but they are also present in contemporary programs that offer individual compensation for those with lower income and resources. "Welfare" programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) are highly stigmatized in the United States. Poverty is viewed as an individual flaw rather than the result of *institutional inequality* due to the national cultural myth of meritocracy. As a result of this, federal funding for these social programs has plummeted simultaneously with the continual rise of poverty and economic inequality. Again, it is a lack of public awareness of privilege and the *institutionalized inequality* that pervades the social structure combined with a national culture that claims everybody has an equal chance to succeed that ensure that these social programs generate disdain. Until the culture of the United States evolves to include concepts of structural inequality and privilege, social programs that strive towards egalitarianism will continue to be heavily stigmatized.

Conclusion

The moral, ethical, and social risks of implementing a brute luck compensation program in the name of creating equal opportunity may very well make it incompatible with utopian visions. The potential to (re)produce social hierarchies and unequal power distribution, to reduce social structural issues to individual issues, and to create tensions between individuals that get different levels of compensation could mean that these programs may produce more harm than good. If a brute luck compensation model was implemented on a national level, a

Commented [EOW10]: Still, in spite of these negative second order effects of Affirmative Action, there may be no other equally effective policy in counteracting the unjust disadvantages for which they bear no responsibility that blacks and other groups face. The term "compensation" may be a bit misleading here; the real point is neutralizing an unjust deficit in opportunity.

high level of widespread education of the program would need to accompany it in order to minimize each of these unnecessary repercussions. Meticulous forethought and analysis for potential future social programs is imperative in order to envision and create society where utopian egalitarian visions are realized and equal opportunity can finally become a reality.

Work Cited

Wright, Erik Olin. *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London: Verso 2010. Pp. 52-54

Example #4 of a good paper from Sociology 621

General comments:

This is an excellent paper in every way – beautifully written, intellectually engaging, insightful. I enjoyed reading it and learned something from it. I think the one thing that could be added that would help a little is to have a more systematic exposition of the mechanisms involved in OSSI licensing. I didn't quite understand the rationale why, in order to *protect* the commons, users and savers of seeds would need to go through a lot of paperwork and get a license to use the seed. Ordinary patents don't always work this way: I can use a patented machine and give it to someone else without signing a license. I cannot make copies of the machine and sell them, but I can sell the machine. But, if the machine had some kind of open-source patent I could make a copy and give it away or use it myself. Why can the rules simply block privatization of the protected commons rather than also require licenses to use it? Anyway, clarifying this would help.

Envisioning a Real Utopia: Preserving Seed Sovereignty and Establishing a Protected Commons for Plant Genetic Resources in Latin America

I. Introduction

In the era of monopoly capitalism, the largest agribusiness corporations are working towards making an increasing amount-number of farmers dependent on off-farm inputs, including seeds. The importance of control over seeds and germplasm more generally cannot be overemphasized; whoever controls the seed exerts significant power over the whole agricultural production process. As the seed industry seeks to grow, the continued viability of local seed systems and the legality of various types of germplasm commons are facing a series of threats. Seed sovereignty – defined as people's right to save, replant, breed and share seeds; and their right to participate in decision-making processes regarding rules and laws that regulate germplasm access and use – is menaced (Kloppenburg 2013). These threats are not altogether new, but are qualitatively more dramatic than we have seen prior to the consolidation of transnational seed companies.

There are two fundamental processes that have led to the systematic erosion of seed sovereignty globally: one biological and the other socio-political (Kloppenburg 2004). With regards to biology, advances in genetics and plant breeding in the mid 20th century allowed for the development of the modern seed industry, which offers seed varieties that farmers can't easily save and replant the next season, and thus pushes them to buy seed every year. In socio-political terms, a series of legal changes have facilitated the patenting or otherwise "protecting" of germplasm via mechanisms such as Plant Breeders Rights. Together, these biological and political changes have set the stage for the possibility of commodifying and monopolizing seeds. Transgenic seeds neatly embody both of these processes. These trends are direct consequences

of the modernization of agriculture, which in turn is tightly linked to the growing penetration of capitalism into different aspects of agricultural production, with the ever-increasing commodification that that entails.

The seed enclosure has not gone unnoticed and has triggered various types of resistances throughout the world. Whereas seed sovereignty was once taken for granted, it has now acquired the aura of a real utopia that requires defense and protection. A relatively new type of resistance strategy that will be implemented soon has been evolving in the United States. Under the assumption that a ruptural transformation of North American capitalism is unlikely in the short term – which means that the agro-industrial model will continue to be the dominant paradigm – a group of breeders, academics, and sustainable agriculture advocates have decided that it is necessary to work towards seed sovereignty from within the system. Their resistance vehicle is called the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI). Inspired by the free/open source software model, OSSI is working on the design of licenses that (hopefully) will allow for the creation of a *protected commons* for plant genetic resources using the existing rules of contract law. OSSI members argue that we need a protected commons because the open access commons has not been effective for preserving seed sovereignty; in fact, it is precisely the unregulated nature of this type of commons what has permitted the privatization of a once freely accessible resource. What is needed then is a mechanism that enables the sharing of germplasm amongst those who are willing to share but excludes those who want to enclose it. The idea is to repurpose the tools of the master “in a way that the master did not intend and which actively subverts the master’s hegemony” (Kloppenburg 2013, p.18). As envisioned, germplasm protected by OSSI licenses will have only one restriction: it must be shared freely so that others can use it, save it, and breed with it.

Most OSSI supporters are not linked to a broader project of systemic transformation, but they care deeply about participating in a pragmatic response to what they consider to be an important social problem. OSSI is not trying to grapple with all of the obstacles for building a more socially and environmentally just agricultural system; rather, it is trying to implement one mechanisms that will take us in the right direction. In this way, OSSI’s work is reflective of the spirit of what Erik Olin Wright refers to as interstitial and symbiotic transformation strategies in *Envisioning Real Utopias*. Under this logic, “to invoke metamorphosis is not to abjure struggle, but to see the strategic goals and effects of struggle in a particular way: as the incremental modifications of the underlying structures of a social system and its mechanisms of social reproduction that cumulatively transform the system, rather than as a sharp discontinuity in the centers of power of the system as a whole” (Wright, p. 321). Whether OSSI contributes to such incremental changes remains to be seen.

Even though OSSI is currently constituted as a North American initiative, its ambition is to establish alliances in Europe and throughout the Global South (Kloppenburg 2013). OSSI as a strategy for change is the product of a particular historical context and of a particular analysis of what is possible in that context. Before promoting the tool in the Global South, it is important to do a serious diagnosis of each context in which it would be inserted and whether it would contribute positively to seed sovereignty in that setting. I am especially interested in assessing if there is room for an OSSI-like tool in the Latin American region or if other strategies are preferable at this point in time. The answer to this question will of course vary somewhat from country to country, but the structural position of farmers with respect to national and transnational agribusiness is quite similar throughout. Before addressing potential strategies for change in more detail, I will apply the framework used by Wright in *Envisioning Real Utopias* to think about the possibilities of achieving seed sovereignty in Latin America. “This framework is built around three tasks: diagnosis and critique; formulating alternatives; and elaborating

Commented [EOW1]: What would be an example of a plausible alternative strategy? It is hard to see what constitutes the strategic space here if the purpose is to counteract the intellectual property right regime of corporate seed producers.

strategies of transformation” (Wright, p. 8).

II. Diagnosis and Critique

Wright argues that the “starting point for building an emancipatory social science is identifying the ways in which existing social institutions and social structures systematically impose harms on people” (Wright, p. 11). In this spirit, I will begin by offering a diagnosis and critique of the harms of capitalism for farmers, with special emphasis on the implications of the commodification of the seed. There is, admittedly, an implicit theory of justice behind this exercise (Wright, p. 12). The underlying normative argument is that it is unjust that a few corporations control germplasm and exclude others from its free use. Stated in positive terms, it is an argument in favor of seed sovereignty as the desirable alternative.

The diagnosis of the present trends regarding the control of plant genetic resources by multinational corporations is, in summary, one of very rapid consolidation and growth. It is now estimated that “ten companies account for about two-thirds (65 percent) of the world’s proprietary seed – that is, branded varieties subject to intellectual property protections – for major crops” (Howard). To this day, however, the private sector hasn’t been able to make all growers systematically prefer and depend on “improved” seed varieties offered by both national and transnational agribusiness. In much of Latin America, for example, local seed systems encompassing the continued use of native and non-certified varieties, seed exchange networks, and widespread seed saving are still the preferred seed source for most farmers, especially smaller-scale growers and indigenous populations farming in extreme conditions. In fact, the FAO estimates that in Latin America around 75-80% of the seeds used are farmer-saved seeds or supplied by so-called “informal seed systems.” With such a large potential market to tap into, it is hardly surprising that seed companies are trying to expand their markets there.

In order to most profitably commercialize seeds, corporations need and want standardized Seed Laws and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) frameworks enforced by States that accept the possibility of legally privatizing life forms. Through international treaties such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), countries throughout the Global South are being pressured to strengthen their IPR regimes, including those regulating biotechnology and plants. In fact, members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) are required to grant some form of IPRs for plant material, be it patents, Plant Breeders Rights or what they refer to as an “effective *sui generis* system”. Agribusinesses and pharmaceuticals have been some of the strongest advocates of the importance of introducing such legislations. The pressures of the international political economic system have been undeniably effective, as practically all Latin American nations have passed some sort of Seed Law and IPR Law that addresses the regulation and control of plant genetic resources. Whether the content of these laws is successfully enforced or not is another story, but the willingness of the various governments to satisfy WTO expectations is generally there.

One of the most dramatic examples of the criminalization of seed saving in Latin America has occurred in Colombia. In 2010, a resolution was passed prohibiting the commercialization and sharing of all non-certified seeds. According to Resolution 970, non-certified seeds (including creole seeds) could only be saved and replanted by farmers managing less than five hectares, but not sold. When farmers that have grown, saved, exchanged, and sold rice seeds for years didn’t comply with this resolution, tons of uncertified rice seeds were literally destroyed, infuriating many. In 2013 a series of protests exploded in Colombia, and small-scale farmers were at the forefront of various demonstrations. Throughout the protests, farmers expressed concern about the implications of the recently signed free trade agreements

Commented [EOW2]: Strictly speaking, even if it were many corporations that did this it would be unjust. It might be worth thinking a little bit more about the underlying criterion for justice here. Isn't it simply the exclusion of anyone from the use of germplasm regardless of the mechanism of exclusion?

Commented [EOW3]: In terms of your previous discussion is this properly described as open-access commons rather than protected commons?

and about the aforementioned decree. In response to such massive mobilizations, Resolution 970 was modified so as to exclude native and creole seeds from the certification requirement. This small though important victory is representative of broader struggles over the control of germplasm around the world.

The Colombian example very clearly reveals the tensions and conflicts produced by the intent of capital to expand its reach in agriculture with the complicity of the State. In *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Wright lists eleven central criticisms of capitalism as an economic system. I want to highlight five of those points as they relate to agriculture in particular. These five points are not the only relevant ones, but they are especially noticeable in present-day seed politics. They are:

1. *“Capitalist commodification threatens important broadly held values”* (Wright, p. 37). Broadly held values of seed saving and seed exchange are increasingly threatened, criminalized and policed. Relative autonomy in food production, another fundamental value for small-scale farmers, is consequently being undermined.
2. *“Capitalism is environmentally destructive”* (Wright, p. 37). The vast majority of seeds produced by corporations are bred for large-scale industrial agriculture systems heavily dependent on external inputs, many of which are damaging for both the environment and human health. In addition, these systems have a series of negative ecological consequences, threatening biodiversity as well as *in situ* crop preservation and evolution.
3. *“Capitalism corrodes community”* (Wright, p. 37). By eroding seed sovereignty, community practices such as seed exchange, breeding, experimentation, and an overall spirit of collaboration are all threatened, and in the worst cases, criminalized. Instead of working together to develop cultivars and agricultural practices best adapted to a certain area, people are encouraged to spy on their neighbors so as to detect infringement of Seed Laws and IPR Laws. In place of an ethic of collaboration and sharing, we are witnessing the promotion of an ethic of individualism and policing.
4. *“Capitalism limits democracy”* (Wright, p. 37). Farmers and consumers have been completely excluded from a series of important decisions that directly affect their lives, including: the consolidation of the seed industry, the possibility of privatizing life forms via some form of IPR, the breeding of cultivars that require very specific inputs to grow successfully, and the criminalization of seed saving and exchange.
5. *“Capitalism is inefficient in certain crucial aspects”* (Wright, p. 37). Even if the agro-industrial model dependent on commodified seed is efficient from the point of view of profits and total goods produced, it is inefficient in at least three important ways. First, despite producing enough goods for everyone in the planet to eat, at least a billion people are chronically malnourished or hungry, while a large proportion of food systematically goes to waste. Second, IPRs as applied to germplasm tend to hamper innovation and creativity in plant breeding by reducing the amount of people that can do it and by concentrating mostly on crops that are likely to yield maximum profits. Lastly, the need to enforce Seed Laws and IPR laws means that resources have to be directed to that “nonproductive” endeavor.

Given this diagnosis and critique, it is clear that we need alternatives that question and undermine the logic that the sole determinant of agricultural models should be the maximization of profits, regardless of environmental or social implications.

III. Alternatives and Real Utopias

Commented [EOW4]: Again, just to be sure about the conceptual space here: is a law which explicitly excludes native and creole seeds from certification requirements the same as giving them protected commons status?

Following Wright's framework, "the second task of emancipatory social science is to develop a coherent, credible theory of the alternatives to existing institutions and social structures, that would eliminate, or at least significantly mitigate, the harms and injustices identified in the diagnosis and critique" (Wright, p. 20). The good thing about seed sovereignty as an alternative is that we know what it looks like and we know that it has worked in the past; in fact, in some places it still works. As defined earlier, seed sovereignty would guarantee at least five things: 1) the right to save seeds; 2) the right to replant seeds; 3) the right to breed new seeds and cultivars; 4) the right to share seeds; and 5) the right to participate in decision-making processes regarding rules and laws that regulate germplasm access and use.

Commented [EOWS]: Do you need to add to this: but not the ability/right to patent these new cultivars and seeds or in any other way exclude anyone from their use?

Wright argues that "social alternatives can be elaborated and evaluated in terms of three different criteria: *desirability*, *viability*, and *achieability*" (Wright, p. 20). The alternative can be deemed desirable if it is both socially and politically just, in the radical democratic egalitarian conception of justice (Wright, p. 12). I argue that seed sovereignty is, indeed, a desirable and necessary element of a socially just society insofar it allows people to have access to the germplasm needed for the production of agricultural goods. It is politically just insofar it gives people the opportunity to participate in the decision-making processes regarding germplasm control and regulation. Whether it continues to be viable in the places where it still exists and whether it can be rebuilt where it has been lost, will depend on the strategies used by those who believe in its importance.

OSSI licenses, if successful, could become a tool that contributes to seed sovereignty. In the process of drafting the licenses for the US context, OSSI participants have found that the development of robust and legally defensible licenses is, unfortunately, very cumbersome (Kloppenburger 2013, p. 21-22). Nonetheless, they still think that the strategy is worth trying because "open source offers at least the prospect of a shift from continuous defensive actions to the creation of a positive, relatively autonomous space in which capital might be effectively prohibited - by its own rules - from trespassing" (Kloppenburger 2013, p. 25). The idea is that if we manage to create and use a protected commons that helps institutionalize seed sovereignty we can contribute to the construction of one real utopia that may gradually alter the balance of power in favor of those who want a more just agricultural system, as part of a more just society.

Seed sovereignty by itself, of course, doesn't guarantee that farmers will live just and flourishing lives. Access to land, water, and other resources in the communities in which they live are also important issues to consider in any emancipatory project. An even more desirable real utopia that builds on mere seed sovereignty would be to guarantee a universal right to culturally appropriate food for everyone, everywhere. Control over germplasm, however, is a fundamental prerequisite for a more just agricultural sector. The seed, after all, does come first; without access to germplasm we have no agricultural system to speak of. Hence, it is reasonable to think about how to impede and revert the continued erosion of seed sovereignty as a first step.

IV. Transformation

In light of the above, the "third task of emancipatory social science is elaborating a theory of social transformation" (Wright, p. 26). For Wright, a theory of transformation should grapple with theories of: 1) social reproduction; 2) the gaps and contradictions within the process of reproduction; 3) the underlying dynamics and trajectory of unintended social change; and 4) of collective actors, strategies, and struggles (Wright, p. 26-28). For the scope of this paper, I will only address the fourth component in relation to the following question: What strategies of transformation are currently possible and preferable for the achievement of seed sovereignty in Latin America? As suggested earlier, the region is clearly not homogenous so strategies will vary

according to national contexts, but they are likely to have some common characteristics given that they are facing similar pressures.

Broadly speaking, there are at least five directions that struggles for seed sovereignty in Latin America could take, and in some cases, are already taking. They are:

1. A generalized defiance and disobedience of seed laws that attempt to dispossess farmers of their seeds, while simultaneously strengthening local and national seed systems.
2. The creation of an OSS-like tool to create a protected commons for germplasm of interest.
3. Opposition to laws that facilitate the privatization of life and the criminalization of seed saving, and the demand and implementation of laws that protect customary practices.
4. A more comprehensive struggle demanding a new agricultural paradigm, including agrarian reform, subsidies for smaller-scale and agroecological growers, and the institutionalization of the idea that guaranteed access to culturally appropriate and sustainably produced food should be a human right, and hence cannot be treated solely as a commodity.
5. A combination of any one of the above points.

The first three strategies are representative of what Wright calls interstitial and symbiotic logics of transformation. The fourth point has a more ruptural flavor. “Interstitial transformations seek to build new forms of social empowerment in the niches and margins of capitalist society, often where they do not seem to pose any immediate threat to dominant classes and elites” (Wright, p. 303). Symbiotic strategies involve engaging the State and using it to further emancipatory alternatives (Wright, p. 336). A ruptural transformation – a rapid and radical change in the economic system – is attractive from a theoretical point of view; but, in the world as it is, which strategies are most viable and achievable?

Let's consider the viability of the third and fourth points first. For the third strategy to be effective, there would need to be large and constant protests against such laws. The extent to which the material interests of farmers are affected by new laws will influence how politicized they get and how willing they are to mobilize against what they consider unjust. Until now, the introduction of Seed Laws, IPR Laws, and genetically modified crops has not gone completely unnoticed, but for the most part, they haven't triggered sustained and massive social mobilization capable of overturning them, with the exception of the Colombian decree mentioned above. Given the relative novelty of these laws, however, it is not inconceivable that the new “rules of the game” could still be challenged and perhaps reversed, as they are still weakly institutionalized and in many cases not effectively enforced. All nations do have legal sovereignty over the biological diversity within their territories according to the Convention on Biological Diversity, so with enough social pressure, they could theoretically decide to regulate it under a different logic. Still, it is important to recognize that the pressures of the WTO and the international political economic system more generally are very strong, and that it is not simple for States embedded in this system to ignore global expectations, especially if that could translate into economic retaliations and political isolation. Even countries with left-wing governments such as Venezuela and Bolivia are implementing laws that facilitate the increased commodification of the seed. Judging by the trends, the scenario isn't particularly hopeful, but it is certainly not hopeless yet.

The first and second strategies are more viable and arguably achievable in the short term. Fortunately, biology and cultural practices are on people's side when it comes down to

preserving existing seed systems. Seed saving and exchange is difficult to police, so we have good reason to believe that the enforcement of laws that criminalize them is likely to be imperfect to say the least. The most concrete and immediate way of resisting seed enclosures is to keep producing and exchanging seed. This, however, is not enough to prevent the continued growth of transnational agribusiness and its associated appropriation of germplasm. That is why we need a protected commons, say OSSI supporters.

Given the diversity of people engaged in agriculture in Latin America, there are likely to be different reactions regarding the desirability and viability of an OSSI-like tool. Those who think that working toward a ruptural transformation is currently possible would probably argue that OSSI is just a distraction and a Band-Aid that doesn't directly address a much deeper and difficult structural problem. Others may not be interested in it simply for logistical reasons; they'll argue that it couldn't possibly work. A third group, even while believing that profound structural changes are needed, is likely to support an OSSI-like logic because they think it is urgent and important to protect some germplasm from what seem to be ever-growing enclosures.

From the perspective of small-scale farmers that actively participate in "informal seed systems" and thus still enjoy some degree of seed sovereignty, the creation of a protected commons using contract law – as OSSI proposes – would probably be an unattractive route for several reasons. First, the nature of "informal" seed systems is such that germplasm is not thought of as having an individual owner who could register a cultivar and share it with a license attached to it. Second, some actors are ideologically against the idea of treating life as something humans own. Third, many farmers would probably not be interested in a form of seed sovereignty that requires dealing with convoluted paperwork. For illiterate farmers the nuisance of this process is obvious. For others, seed sovereignty is a practice, a culture, and a taken for granted part of life – not a legal contract requiring authorization from the State.

What actors, then, could be more receptive to the possibility of using OSSI-inspired licenses to help preserve some degree of seed sovereignty? Perhaps some public plant breeders and smaller seed companies that are seeing their work threatened by transnational companies would find it valuable. OSSI licenses could also become attractive for those negotiating germplasm transfers internationally, whether distributed via local and national seed banks, International Agriculture Research Centers or by people from a particular region or community. For example, a license could state that certain germplasm will be shared if and only if all users, including private companies, do not patent it or otherwise privatize it, and that it must make it freely available for others to use, save, and breed with. If OSSI is successfully implemented in the US, it is possible that some people in Latin America will at least consider its potential relevance in their countries.

As Wright reminds us, none of the possible "strategies is simple and unproblematic. All contain dilemmas, risks, and limits, and none of them guarantee success. In different times and places, one or another of these modes of transformation may be the most effective, but often all of them are relevant" (Wright, p. 307). OSSI licenses will probably not be the strongest resistance tool at this point in time in most of Latin America, but they could serve a positive purpose for some situations. Regardless of the strategies prioritized in different places, it is clear that something needs to be done in the face of the ever more consolidated transnational seed industry. What is at stake is who will have the power to control, use, profit from, distribute, and breed with the world's germplasm – a resource upon which all of humanity depends.

Commented [EOW6]: What, more precisely, is the argument that this is a distraction? Is there a real argument – as opposed to just statement – that OSSI makes other strategies more difficult?

Commented [EOW7]: Again: what is the argument here?

Commented [EOW8]: Does an OSSI system necessarily mean that farmers have to register what they are doing? Does it require a license or just prohibit a privatization of the commons?

Commented [EOW9]: The issues you raise here would be clearer if you had a more systematic statement about what OSSI is and why it imposes burdens on seed users rather than simply prevents corporations from appropriating the germplasm.

Example #5 of a good paper from Sociology 621

General comments

This is an excellent paper – beautifully written, systematic, interesting, intellectually engaging. You make good use of different perspectives on class to identify the specificity of the class location of teachers. I think your use of Goldthorpe’s contrast between the labor contract and the service contract and how teachers are a kind of mixed case was especially well formulated. I was a bit less convinced by the discussion of organizational assets – I didn’t really see what new insights this yielded, and some of the exposition around that specific issue was less clear. Still, this is a very solid first paper.

In February 2011, Wisconsin’s governor, Scott Walker, proposed and pushed forward a historic bill dramatically changing the organizational form and legal limits of public sector unions. The bill, first dubbed the ‘Budget Repair Bill’ and now known as WI Act 10, cut funding for public education and the state’s public health insurance program and curtailed bargaining rights for all public sector employees, except for police and firefighters (Wisconsin Act 10, 2011). Wisconsin’s public school teachers represent the largest sector of unionized public employees, and as such, the bill disproportionately impacted teachers. Days after the bill was proposed, local teachers’ unions called for a sick-out of its members, and by the end of the week workers from around the state poured in to the streets around Madison’s Capitol. Over the next three weeks, thousands of people from around the country camped in and around the Capitol, forming the state’s largest protests to date and earning the movement’s title: the Wisconsin Uprising (Yates, 2012; Nichols, 2011).

In addition to galvanizing a new era of social protests, the Wisconsin Uprising brought national attention to an underlying issue: the class location of public sector employees, especially teachers. In this paper, I intend to explore this issue, attempting to situate the class location of teachers, using the Wisconsin Uprising as an illustrative case of the complexity and vulnerability of their location. I will first diagnose the characteristics of the Wisconsin Uprising as a class struggle. I will then explore the popular strategy of teachers’ unions to represent members as professionals, and highlight the class dynamics this strategy may obfuscate fundamental class dynamics about teachers’ class location.

The specific class dimension of the Wisconsin Uprising itself can be understood by two important dynamics. The first is in regard to the direct offensive against labor. To the extent that class structure is determined by class struggle, as Gramsci suggests, and given the important role unions have played in the history of class struggle, Wisconsin’s legislative attacks on unions represents an **organizational rupture to the existing class structure.**

The second element of Wisconsin Uprising that gives it a particular class dimension deals with the peculiar class location of public sector employees, particularly public educators. Governor Walker’s bill earned popular support among conservatives who believed the state’s public sector teachers’ access to health care and benefits uniquely positioned them relative to

Commented [EOW1]: I would be more likely to call this a rupture in the structure of class *formations* than in the class structure as such. Unions are an organizational form of class formation – one of the critical ways that working class formations are constructed.

other workers in similar classes.¹ Conservatives interpreted teachers' union-bargained benefits and health insurance access as an elite status, which justified political animosity towards teachers. For these conservatives, the bill's reduction of union power represented a just act of organizational redistribution. This belief highlighted a crucial conflict about the public perception of teachers. It also identified contested particularities of teachers' class location, since teachers' benefits and health insurance were gained in exchange for lower wages.²

What's more, controversy over teachers' class position became evident in debates over their response to the bill. For teachers, responding to Wisconsin's legislative attacks on public workers and presented a complicated dilemma. The legislative attacks threatened their working conditions; choosing to abstain from action or analysis did little to protect their work. Yet engaging in job actions politicized teachers' work and destabilized their function and public image as workers and caretakers.³ This tension suggests a particular social and ideological position of teachers as both productive and reproductive workers. As productive employees, teachers are (at least partially) responsible for the intellectual development of their students. As reproductive workers, teachers are responsible for transmitting the prevailing ideologies and values of dominant structures (Wright, 1979). This tension highlights teachers' precarious and contradictory role: to produce necessary "goods" for the state and reproduce its ideological structure, while simultaneously being subject to its political and economic discipline.

The heart of this tension lies in teachers' contradictory class position. What are the employing relations of public teachers? Many teachers have high levels of training and pursue autonomous teaching conditions, are able to exercise a degree of ideological control of their work. Yet, during hard times, teachers are subject to layoffs, pay cuts, loss of benefits, and reduced authority over the classroom and curriculum. Particularly as schools are expected to serve as efficient producers of educational output, teachers are stripped of many opportunities to execute their own vision for their classroom, and are increasingly mandated to use scripted curriculum structured around preparing students for high-stakes standardized testing (Apple, 2000). These hard times, such as 2011 in Wisconsin, clarify teachers' class positions as

Commented [EOW2]: You might not want to say that educated labor is being produced "for" the state. They are being produced by state institutions, but the production of educated labor is for the economy and society more generally.

¹ Other defining class dimensions of the Wisconsin Uprising (which will not be examined in this paper) are the ideological and subjective domains of class-consciousness which became unusually visible during the Wisconsin Uprising. Class-conscious motifs streamed through popular vernacular, including controversies about who and what constituted workers, such as the above antagonism about teachers' class location. A study of the Uprising's protest art would provide excellent evidence for this analysis, wherein hundreds employees marched around the capital holding signs that read messages such as "This Self Employed Worker for Labor Rights."

² This is part of a larger issue in Wisconsin's funding of state education, starting in 1993 with Gov. Thompson's Qualified Economic Offer, which capped property tax levys, and thereby placing downward pressure on schools budgets. For more details, see Wisconsin Educational Association Council, "What is the QEO".

³ During the Uprising, many sympathetic physicians wrote "sick notes" to teachers who missed work for political purposes. In the weeks after the Uprising, the state board issued sanctions to many of these doctors for misusing their medical license. This action represents the state's coercive maneuvers to re-establish political dominance.

dominated workers, that is, workers with little control over their activities; the issue of domination in teachers' employment be taken up in more depth later in this paper.

The dominant strategy employed by teachers' unions to improve their class location has revolved around a strategy to recognize teachers as professionals (Labaree, 1992), or workers high amounts of technical knowledge and autonomy. For teachers, the fight for professionalization has centered on increasing requirements for education, credentials and licensing, in order to increase the technical knowledge that "professionals" in the field must possess. For example, the American Federation of Teachers, a national teachers' union calls itself "a union of professionals" and has called on its members to improve teacher quality and raise the prestige of occupation. This has primarily centered raising standards for professional education, instituting entry-level testing and peer certification, and establishing national organizations. In many instances during the Wisconsin Uprising, teachers and other public sector workers relied on their identity as professionals to defend against the legislative attacks. For example, many unions of professional workers printed "It's not about the money. It's about the rights" signs to re-establish their professional autonomy.

The mission to enhance the professional status of teachers represents opportunity hoarding, a mechanism of class structure which improves the class location of one group by enacting mechanisms to exclude others (Wright, 2009). Opportunity hoarding requires excluding some people from certain job categories and titles in order to give high pay and prestige those in that occupation. For teachers, educational requirements, credentialing and licensing serve as important mechanisms of opportunity hoarding. This formation of class gives some people access to resources precisely because others are excluded.

Teachers struggles to improve their class location through professionalization, using opportunity hoarding as a key mechanism, reflects a map of class structure dominated by two key axis: relations to technical skills and relations to authority (Goldthorpe, 2000; Wright, 1997). Teachers can improve their class location by moving further down the axis: by improving their relative access to technical skills, and/or by improving their relative position to authority. For Goldthorpe, these axes structure two essential employing relations: one based on a labor contract, and one based on a service relationship. Labor contracts represent working class conditions – workers are remunerated on a short-term basis for either their output (such as quantity of products produced) or their input (such as number of monitored hours logged). Contracted labor employment usually involves highly monitored work, with minimal skill expertise. A service relationship, however, is characterized by a long-term relationship between employer and employee, where the employee invests in the long-term organizational goals of the employer. This employing relationship characterizes many in the "professional" class, such as managers and supervisors, who adopt the employer's organizational goals as a way to improve their long-term employment prospects.

In many cases, the employing contracts are guided by employers' need for power and control over their workers. This is particularly apparent in labor contracts for productive workers – capitalists benefit from extracting the maximum value from their workers. In other cases, such as for public educators, employers are less concerned with maximizing the rate of profit, but rather efficiency to the benefit of all parties involved (Goldthorpe, 2000, p. 210). Pressures on public education to maximize efficiency has justified significant changes to teachers' employment relations, as evident by Wisconsin's 2011 supposed "Budget Repair Bill,"

Commented [EOW3]: You don't really need to go into this, but there is also a problem in defining the class location of teachers by virtue of being employed by the state rather than by private capitalists. Some theorists treat the state as a kind of collective capitalist, which eliminates the problem, but this doesn't seem right. The issue here is that although the labor market operates under capitalist principles, the employing organization is not directly subjected to the imperatives of capital accumulation as is the case of a private firm, and this means the social relations of production have a different character.

Commented [EOW4]: Nice synoptic statement of Goldthorpe's perspective.

Commented [EOW5]: The service contract condition is generally less about "efficiency" as such – the maximum outputs for given inputs – and more about the quality of outputs, which is much harder to monitor. This is one of the reasons for the long-term prospective contracts and security – to increase the loyalty of the employee to the institutions and to the objectives of the institution. This is part of the rationale for civil servants having strong forms of job security. The shift to efficiency considerations in neoliberalism is actually a rejection of the logic of the service contract in Goldthorpe's sense.

Using Goldthorpe's taxonomy of labor contracts and service relations, we can see how teachers occupy a mixed class position. Teachers' pay, job duties, and work hours are frequently contested and depend upon increasing levels of social monitoring; this characterizes their work as contracted labor. However, teachers' relative skill and ideological autonomy – as some labor unions would have it, their role as professionals – has granted them at least partial authority over their work conditions, and investment in the long-term organizational goals of schools. This characterizes some aspects of their employing relationship as a service relationship.

To summarize, Goldthorpe provides a useful analytical to describing teachers' class location in two ways. First, his axes of skill and authority and their corresponding class locations of labor contract and service relationship reveal the ambiguity of teachers' position. In particular, this analysis suggests the incomplete description of teachers as professionals: despite the dominant organized labor strategy to position teachers as professionals, many aspects of their job are better characterized as labor relations. Secondly, Goldthorpe's attention to the role of efficiency in determining employing relations, rather than exploitation to maximize profit, has high explanatory resonance for Wisconsin's teachers. Changes to teachers' work protections were explained in terms of public efficiency, not in terms of power and control to exploit workers for higher profit. The title of the bill as a "budget repair" measure to correct a fiscal deficit framed the changes to teachers' working conditions as a

However, Goldthorpe's analysis still leaves open significant questions about the nature of teacher's class position. Though explaining teachers employing relations in terms of maximizing efficiency rather than exploitation may resonate more with teachers, it does not necessarily follow that teachers' employing relations are *not* characterized by exploitation and dominance. A teacher may be considered to a part the service class, and invested in long-term organizational goals of the employer, and simultaneously dominated and exploited by efficiency logics (Wright, 1997, p. 19). What's more, this analysis of teachers' class location does not address the relational element of class location; that is, class locations reflect social relations, and therefore are defined by their position relative to other classes.

To discern how the social relation of teachers' class location, I turn my attention to an understanding of exploitation and domination. Domination is the ability to control the activities of others; exploitation refers to "the acquisition of economic benefits from the labor of those who are dominated" (Wright, 2009, p. 107). For teachers, domination might involve curricular mandates, changes to working conditions, or restriction of union rights, in the case of Wisconsin. Dominance characterizes a relationship descriptively; it does not imply a causal interest in actors to either exercise dominance or be dominated. To address a causal relationship between economic dominance, we must investigate the processes of exploitation.

As Wright (1977) explains exploitation refers to the causal relationship between differential assets of two actors. A relationship is exploitative if it meets three criteria: 1) the material well-being of one actor depends directly upon the material deprivation of another; 2) the material well-being of the advantaged actor depends upon excluding the disadvantaged actor from vital resources; and 3) the material well-being of the advantaged actor is earned by appropriating the fruits of another actor's labor, in addition to excluding them from vital resources. Forcing peasants off of common land and then re-hiring as a wage labor in order to support themselves and pay fees is an example of exploitation.

Commented [EOW6]: I think you are absolutely right about this mixed, contradictory character, but I would stress that this is a shift that comes with the transformation of the political economy of state activities towards much more capitalist-like practices -- again, part of neoliberalism.

But the issue of exploitation in a pure capitalist mode of production is more ambiguous for teachers, since their connection to production for the market is indirect. Teachers do not produce children, which administrators and superintendents – those who dominate teachers – then sell on the market for a profit. In other words, the productive value of public teachers on a capitalist market is hard to define. By training others (increasing the skills and therefore labor power), teachers play an indirect productive role in capital accumulation. For these reasons, teachers are often thought of playing a reproductive role – to promote and establish the state’s values and order. Because of the teachers’ role in reproducing capitalist culture and interests, teachers occupy an **ideological class location**, in addition to a material one. Teachers’ ideological class location reflects their organizational assets.

If we define exploitation only in terms of modes of productions, or assets for direct exchange on the market, it’s difficult to see how teachers’ employing relations are exploitative, rather than just dominated. However, if we expand our definition of exploitation to include organizational assets, as Wright encourages, teachers’ exploitation comes into sharper focus. As Wright notes, the technical division of labor is itself a source of production. Organizational assets refer to the control of labor – how it is used and in what forms. Labor can be controlled in three ways: simple control, technical control, and bureaucratic control (Apple, 1995, p. 208). Simple control is directly telling someone what to do. Technical controls are often physical controls embedded in the structure of employment, such as the number of photocopies a teacher can make a week. Bureaucratic controls are embodied in the social relations of a workplace, and enacted by organizational hierarchies. They are represented by workplace rewards and sanctions – how teachers get evaluated, promoted, reprimanded. These three types of control represent organizational assets that characterize the workplace of public teachers.

Exploiting these assets involves organizing a workplace in a way that takes away the autonomy of teachers to control their own labor. Rather, the workplace is organized in a way to facilitate the interests of dominant interests, to better position schools as facilitators of capital accumulation (Apple, 1995). Deskilling of teachers’ work represents one important example of the exploitation of an organizational asset. By separating manual labor from mental labor, planning from executing, deskilling teachers takes away teachers’ control from the structure of their work. It often involves breaking down complex tasks into small, incremental chunks in order to either be executed by less skilled (and therefore less costly) employees, or control the pace of delivery and output.

Though unions represent an important defense of teachers’ organizational assets, emphasizing teachers’ professionalization centers status assets, rather than organizational assets. This is because the strategy of positioning teachers as professionals is part of a larger trend in education which privileges technical knowledge and systems of scientific thinking, and increases technical divisions of labor for teachers. The move towards formal rationalization in education has a long and pocked history, and has been coupled with increased pressure for schools to operate as units of social efficiency (Labaree, 1992). In fact, many of the early reports (i.e. the Carnegie Report and the Holmes Report) that initially called for the need to professionalize teachers stress the link between effective instruction and schools’ social efficiency, reflecting the emphasis on “excellence” in education that fueled education reform efforts in the 1980s.

Yet, placing this premium on “excellence” in education may exacerbate social inequality by structuring a system around social hierarchies and guided by their *exploited organization assets* market forces, rather than social or pedagogical needs – misusing teachers’ organizational

Commented [EOW7]: This is an intriguing concept, but I am not 100% exactly what you mean here. Some theorists in the 1970s adopted a framework in which something like this was formulated – class locations were defined in part by the *functions* they filled for capitalism, and if they filled ideological functions this became part of their class determination. The best known person who argued this (in a totally confusing way) was G. Carchedi.

Commented [EOW8]: I am not sure that anything much is gained by shifting from domination to exploitation via organizational assets. It still isn’t clear the ways in which there is an appropriation by anyone of labor effort as such. I used the organizational asset argument to describe the way managers were able to appropriate part of the surplus, but this isn’t the way you are using it here. This part of your exposition isn’t so clear. In any case, I ultimately dropped the organizational assets formulation because I didn’t think it really helped deepen the understanding of mechanisms.

assets. Furthermore, it privileges “expert” forms of knowledge and gains legitimacy by emphasizing male-oriented work roles. As Labaree writes,

“From this alternative perspective, the teacher professionalization movement runs the risk of abandoning the distinctive and desirable characteristics of the female teacher (nurturing, emotionally supportive, person-centered, and context- focused) in order to take on the frequently undesirable characteristics of the dominant male professional (competitive, rationalistic, task-centered, and abstracted from context).” (Labaree, 1992, p.132)

From this point of view, teachers’ struggle to recognize their work as “professionals” may actually result in weakened work place conditions and autonomy. Furthermore, by identifying as professionals, teachers isolate themselves from other educational workers, such as paraprofessionals, librarians, and counselors. By defining themselves as professionals and therefore “above” other educational workers, teachers abandon possibilities for class solidarity. By joining forces with other educational workers and community members, teachers’ struggle for both improved working conditions and high quality education would be strengthened.

Finally, teachers’ identification as “professionals” may thwart the democratic structures and aims of public education; it may thwart the transformation of their organizational assets. By positioning teachers as the technical experts of education, it positions education as an apolitical product, rather than a serious of important political debate, and may weaken the larger struggle to strengthen schools as public goods and institutions. Efforts by students themselves, parents, and community members to participate in democratic deliberations around the form and content of public education may be seen as unacceptable interference, rather than an essential component to public education.

To summarize, teachers positioning as workers is occluded by a larger societal confusion about class, and what and who constitutes “workers.” Teachers’ labor struggles have primarily centered around positioning teachers as professionals. While this had certain positive effects – such as the struggle to valorize typically feminine “care” work that’s often excluded or from formal market and therefore rendered less valuable – it has also weakened opportunities for class solidarity across educational workers, and may threaten deep democratic structures that depend on community and student leadership and engagement.

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Commented [EOW9]: I think the central issue in professionalization is control over credentials, and thus is part of the skill/credential exploitation process. It doesn't have, I think, such a clear-cut connection to organizational assets.

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