# Interrogating Inequality

Essays on Class Analysis, Socialism and Marxism

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# 11

# Marxism After Communism

In both the popular press and the scholarly media the collapse of regimes ruled by communist parties is often equated with the collapse of Marxism as a social theory. However, while there is unquestionably an historical linkage between Marxism and capital-C Communism, they are not interchangeable. Marxism is a tradition of social theory, albeit a social theory that has been deeply embedded in efforts to change the world. What is more, it is a tradition of social theory within which it is possible to do social science – that is, identify real causal mechanisms and understand their consequences. Capital-C Communism, on the other hand, is a particular form of social organization, characterized by the eradication or marginalization of private ownership of productive resources and high levels of centralization of political and economic power under the control of relatively authoritarian political apparatuses, the party, and the state. Such parties and states used Marxism as a legitimating ideology, but neither the collapse of those regimes, nor their failure to live up to the normative ideals of Marxism are, in and of themselves, proofs of the bankruptcy of Marxism as a tradition of social scientific practice.[1]

Indeed, there is a great irony in the claim that the demise of communist regimes based on command economies implies the demise of Marxism. The core ideas of classical Marxism as developed in the late nineteenth century would lead one to predict that attempts at revolutionary ruptures with capitalism in backward, non-industrialized countries would ultimately fail to accomplish their positive objectives. Orthodox historical materialism insisted that socialism only becomes possible when capitalism has exhausted its capacity for development of the forces of production – when it is a fetter on the future development of society's productive capacity.[2] All Marxists, including Lenin, believed this prior to the Russian Revolution. The anomaly from the point of view of classical Marxism, therefore, is not that the state bureaucratic command economies have failed and are in a process of transition to capitalism, but that they survived for as long as they did. This reflects a basic silence in classical Marxism: it contains no theory of the temporal scale of its predictions. But the important point in the immediate context is that the collapse of communist states is not a refutation of Marxism; it is at most a refutation of Leninist voluntarism, of the belief that by revolutionary will and organizational commitment it is possible to build socialism on inadequate material foundations.

Yet, even though strictly speaking the collapse of communist regimes does not imply a refutation of Marxism as a social theory, nevertheless the events of the late 1980s have helped to accelerate a growing sense of self-doubt and confusion on the part of many radical intellectuals about the viability and future utility of Marxism. I continue to believe that Marxism remains a vital tradition within which to produce emancipatory social science, but I also feel that in order for Marxism to continue to play this role it must be reconstructed in various ways. In the rest of this chapter I want to sketch briefly the basic contours of this reconstruction, focusing especially on the problem of class analysis.

## Three Nodes of Marxism

Before discussing the project of reconstruction itself, it is first necessary to map out the central contours of what it is that is being reconstructed – that is, what is "Marxism"? The answer to this question, of course, can become an exercise in stupid doctrinal scholasticism: what is a *true* Marxist as opposed to a phoney Marxist. The Marxist tradition is littered with the debris of battles over this kind of question. My intention here is not to define a set of beliefs which one must hold in order to be properly counted as a "Marxist," but rather to map out the basic coordinates of the Marxist tradition as a way of giving focus to the task of reconstruction.

1. It has been argued, especially by political conservatives, that there is an inherent connection between the nature of Marxism as a social theory and the pathologies of state bureaucratic socialism. Marxism produces the Gulag. The social effects of a complex body of ideas like "Marxism," however, can never simply be derived from the logic of the theory *per se*, but are always highly contingent on the social constraints and dilemmas in which actors accepting the theory find themselves. Just as Christianity as a religious tradition played an important role in such varied social practices as the Spanish Inquisition and the American civil rights movement, so Marxism as a social theory will have different consequences for social practice depending upon the social forces and context in which it is embedded.

2. For the clearest and most systematic elaboration of this classical claim, see G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a defense*, Princeton, New Jersey 1978.

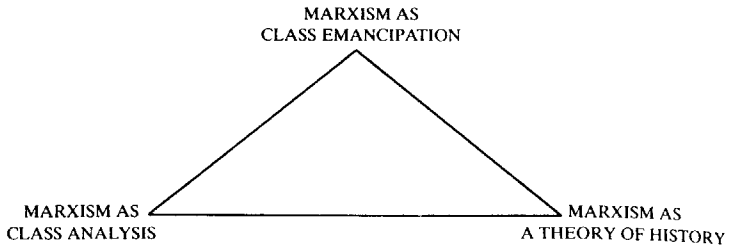


*Figure 11.1* The Three Nodes of Marxism

To do this I think it is useful to see the Marxist tradition as being built around three conceptual nodes.[3] These I will call Marxism as *class analysis*,[4] Marxism as a *theory of historical trajectory*, and Marxism as an *emancipatory normative theory*. These three nodes are illustrated in Figure 11.1. Let me briefly define each of these and their interconnections, and then indicate what I see to be the central tasks of reconstruction within them.

The contrast between Marxism as class analysis and Marxism as a

3. There are other ways of defining the contours of the Marxist tradition. From different sides of the methodological fence Alvin Gouldner in *The Two Marxisms*, New York 1979 and Louis Althusser in *For Marx*, London 1977, for example, see the central line of demarcation within the Marxist tradition lying between deterministic-scientific Marxism and voluntarist-humanist Marxism. Others have distinguished between "vulgar Marxism" and non-reductionist Marxism. In contrast to schemas which analyze the Marxist tradition in terms of epistemological and methodological commitments, the proposal that the Marxist tradition should be mapped in terms of these three nodes emphasizes the substantive preoccupation of different styles of Marxism. For a more elaborate discussion of these nodes of Marxist theory, see Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober, *Reconstructing Marxism*, London 1992, chapter 8. It should be noted that in that earlier treatment the "theory of historical trajectory" node was referred to as "Marxism as scientific socialism."

4. Robert Brenner has argued (personal communication) that "class analysis" is too narrow a characterization of the "explanatory node" of Marxism. In particular, class analysis does not adequately encompass the problem of *alienation*. While alienation generated inside the capitalist labor process might be subsumed under class analysis, alienation rooted in markets and competition (also theorized under the rubric "commodity fetishism") cannot. Such alienation would exist even if we had a market economy consisting entirely of worker-owned and run cooperatives. In Brenner's view, market-generated alienation is as powerful an explanatory principle within Marxism as class-generated exploitation. He thus proposes substituting the concept of "social property relations" for "class analysis" as the encompassing term to capture the core explanatory logic of Marxism. Class analysis would then be one among several aspects of the analysis of social property relations. In my usage of the terms here, the analysis of market competition within capitalism is treated as one dimension of class analysis, namely the analysis of the forms of competitive interaction among agents *within* specific classes – labor markets for the working class and commodity markets for the capitalist class.



theory of history can be clarified by the use of an analogy from medicine. Consider the following two disciplines: endocrinology and oncology. Endocrinology is what might be called an "independent variable discipline." If you are an endocrinologist you are allowed to study a vast array of problems – sexuality, personality, growth, disease processes, etc. – so long as you explore the relationship between the endocrine system and those explananda. Endocrinology is disciplined in its explanatory variables – the hormone system – but promiscuous in its dependent variables. Furthermore, in endocrinology it is not an embarrassment to discover that for some problems under investigation hormones turn out not to be very important. It is an advance in our knowledge of endocrinology to know what hormones do not explain, as well as to know what they do. Oncology, in contrast, is a dependent variable discipline. As an oncologist you can study any conceivable cause of cancer – toxins, genetics, viruses, even psychological states. Oncology is disciplined in its dependent variable but promiscuous in its independent variables. And, in oncology, it is not an embarrassment to discover that certain potential causes of cancer turn out to be not very important.

In these terms, Marxism as class analysis is like endocrinology – it is independent variable Marxism – and Marxism as a theory of history is like oncology – dependent variable Marxism. As class analysts Marxists can study virtually anything. You can do a class analysis of religion, war, poverty, taste, crime. As in endocrinology, it should not be an embarrassment to discover that class is not very important for certain problems – this, too, is an advance in our knowledge about class. For example, in a recent study on the relationship between class and the sexual division of labor in the home in the United States and Sweden, in spite of valiant efforts on my part to show that class was important, I concluded that the class composition of the household had very little to do with the distribution of housework between husbands and wives in either country. Yuppie husbands and working-class husbands did equally little work. The resulting paper, "The Noneffects of Class on the Gender Division of Labor in the Home," is, I hope, a contribution to class analysis by virtue of helping to clarify the limits of the explanatory reach of class.[5]

The distinctive dependent variable of Marxism is history or, perhaps somewhat more precisely, *historical trajectory*. In its most ambitious form this is the overall epochal trajectory of human history from the prehistory of human civilization, through the present and into the future. In its more modest form, it is the trajectory of capitalist development, from its origins within precapitalist feudal societies through its dynamic

5. *Gender and Society*, June 1992.

development and towards its eventual demise. In both cases Marxism attempts to theorize the inherent tendencies of historical change to follow a particular trajectory with a specific kind of directionality.[6]

Marxism as an emancipatory normative theory is the third, and in some ways the least elaborated, node of the Marxist tradition. Indeed, there have been Marxists – including Marx himself in places – who have denied the relevance of moral theory altogether. Nevertheless, the emancipatory dimension of Marxism is important and helps to frame much of what makes Marxist class analysis and Marxist theories of history distinctive. The heart of the emancipatory theory of Marxism is the idea that the full realization of human freedom, potential, and dignity can only be achieved under conditions of "classlessness" – the vision of a radically egalitarian society in terms of power and material welfare within which exploitation has been eliminated, distribution is based on the principle "to each according to need, from each according to ability," and the control over society's basic productive resources is vested in the community rather than in private ownership.

There are many different ways in which this egalitarian emancipatory ideal has been elaborated. Sometimes the stress is on the communitarian aspects of the ideal, sometimes on the issue of self-actualization and individual freedom, sometimes on the issue of material egalitarianism and the end of exploitation. In the strongest versions of the Marxist emancipatory vision, classlessness is treated as the necessary and sufficient condition for the realization of emancipatory goals. Most contemporary Marxists would take a more modest position, seeing classlessness as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition, thus opening the door for an autonomous role for gender and other non-class issues in a project of human emancipation. In any case, what makes these normative issues distinctively Marxist is the commitment to classlessness as the necessary condition for the realization of these values.

Working-class politics – the collective organization of social forces in pursuit of working-class interests – has traditionally constituted the unifying link among the three nodes of Marxism. The emancipatory

6. In these terms, Marxism is much more ambitious than Darwinian evolutionary biology in its attempts to explain historical change. Darwin never attempted to treat the trajectory of biological history as having any directional tendency of development. Its trajectory is the result of the contingent connection between accidental environmental factors and universal laws of adaptation. Classical Marxism, in contrast, argues that human history in general – or at least the history of capitalism in particular – has a relatively determinate trajectory. In this sense, the Marxist theory of history more resembles the theory of the development of a single organism from conception to birth through maturation than it resembles the theory of evolution. For a systematic comparison of the Marxist theory of historical materialism and the Darwinian theory of biological evolution, see Wright, Levine, and Sober, chapter 3.



normative theory defines the ultimate values of radical working-class politics; the theory of history generates its broad, long-term objectives; and class analysis provides the basis for its strategies. If the point is actively to change the world, not merely to interpret it, then Marxism is above all about using *class analysis* to understand the political processes for the realization of *historically* possible *emancipatory* goals.

## The Interconnections among the Three Nodes of Marxism

The interconnections among these nodes are an essential part of what makes Marxism a distinctive intellectual enterprise.[7] Consider class analysis. What is most distinctively "Marxist" about Marxist class analysis? It is not the view that capitalists and workers exist in a class relation based on ownership of the means of production and sale of labor power. Nor is it the claim that this relation generates material inequalities and conflicts. This much one finds in Weber's class analysis. The crucial property of Marxist class analysis which differentiates it from Weberian analysis is its linkage to the normative problem of class emancipation and a theory of historical trajectory. The emancipatory normative theory is directly implicated in one of the core concepts of Marxist class analysis: exploitation. "Exploitation" is simultaneously an explanatory concept and a morally charged term. As an explanatory concept, exploitation is meant to identify one of the central mechanisms through which class structure explains class conflict. Class relations are thought to explain conflict in part because classes do not simply have *different* material interests which are contingently conflictual; their material interests are *intrinsically antagonistic* by virtue of being based on exploitation. Identifying such class relations as exploitative also implies a moral judgment about the inequalities generated within those relations. Exploitation does not simply define a "transfer of labor" from one social group to another, but a transfer that is deemed unjust or illegitimate. The emancipatory ideal of radical egalitarianism – ending class exploitation – is thus implicated in the very conceptualization of class itself.

7. Not all Marxists would accept this characterization of the "terrain of Marxism." Some Marxists, especially those who work in the more Hegelian tradition of theorizing, would object to the language of "mechanisms," "independent variables," and "dependent variables." Instead, Marxism's core concepts are seen as rooted in a notion of totality which cannot be meaningfully decomposed into "causes" and "effect." Still, even in Hegelian Marxism, class analysis figures prominently in the conceptualization of the totality, and the central point of theorizing the totality is to understand the "unfolding of history" towards the emancipation of the proletariat. Hegelian Marxism can therefore be seen as engaging these three nodes albeit with a very different philosophical stance towards the problem of theoretical construction than the one I am using here.

One could, of course, construct a form of class analysis in which the concept of classlessness was simply a normative ideal of radical egalitarianism without any belief in the possibility of achieving this normative ideal. This would give the class analysis a moral edge, but there would be no implication that this alternative to capitalism was actively posed by capitalism itself. This is where the link between class analysis and the theory of historical trajectory comes in. The theory of history attempts to show that there are inherent tendencies inside capitalism which pose socialism as an alternative. There are various forms of such claims, from highly deterministic ones (capitalism necessarily destroys itself through its own contradictions and is inevitably superseded by socialism) to much softer versions, in which the development of capitalism simply poses the possibility of socialism, perhaps making that possibility more and more viable, but not more and more of a necessity. In any case, this link between class analysis, class emancipation, and historical trajectory is crucial for the distinctive, critical force of Marxism: class analysis is not just a moral condemnation of capitalism rooted in its link to an emancipatory ideal; it is also an empirical critique of capitalism rooted in its account of the historical generation of real alternatives.

In classical Marxism, these three theoretical nodes mutually reinforced each other in an extremely tight manner. Marxism as class emancipation identified the disease in the existing world. Marxism as class analysis provided the diagnosis of its causes. Marxism as the theory of historical trajectory identified cure. Without class analysis and the theory of history, the emancipatory critique of capitalism would simply be a moral condemnation – what Marx derisively called "utopian socialism" – while without the emancipatory objective, class analysis would simply be an academic speciality. The three nodes constituted a unitary theory in which class analysis provided the necessary and sufficient explanatory principles for the theory of historical trajectory towards an emancipatory future. The enormous appeal of Marxism came in part from the unity of these three elements, for together they provided a seemingly firm basis for the conviction that eliminating the miseries and oppression of the existing world was not simply a utopian fantasy, but a practical political project.

In recent years, along with a considerable deepening of our understanding of each of these nodes taken separately, there has been a gradual erosion of their unity and integration. Today, relatively few Marxists still believe that class analysis alone provides a sufficient set of causes for understanding the historical trajectory of capitalism, and even fewer feel that this historical trajectory is such that the likelihood of socialism has an inherent tendency to increase with capitalist development. From a comprehensive and relatively self-contained paradigm of



social science which aspired to explain all social phenomena relevant to emancipatory social change. Marxism is moving towards a more loosely coupled conceptual framework that provides an account of a range of specific causal mechanisms that help explain those phenomena.

This decline in the integration of its theoretical components has contributed to the sense of intellectual crisis in the Marxist tradition. The loosening of its theoretical structure, however, need not signal the impending demise of Marxism; on the contrary, the less rigid framework may open up new avenues of theoretical development within each of the nodes of the Marxist tradition. Such a reconstruction is especially important given the intellectual climate created by the collapse of the command economies ruled by communist parties.

## The Challenge to Marxism Posed by the Collapse of Communism

Even though a good case can be made that the collapse of the command economies is consistent with the predictions of classical Marxism, these great historical transformations nevertheless pose a challenge for all three nodes of Marxism. The Marxist emancipatory ideal, the theory of history, and Marxist class analysis all depend in one way or another on the plausibility of socialism as an alternative to capitalism. If the collapse of these regimes undermines the theoretical arguments about the feasibility of transcending private property and capitalist class relations, then these elements of Marxism are seriously threatened. While the demise of the command economies does not prove that there are no viable emancipatory alternatives to capitalism, it does potentially call such claims into question, depending upon one's diagnosis of exactly why the command economies reached such a crisis and impasse.

Neo-Marxists had been very critical of the Soviet Union long before the present attempt to construct capitalism. The guts of the standard neo-Marxist critique revolved around the problem of democracy: in the absence of meaningful democracy, socialist economic institutions could not be constructed and sustained. Many neo-Marxists thus felt that a profound democratization of social and political institutions would be able to lend viability to the socialist project, at least under conditions of highly developed forces of production. Rather than seeing the core problem of command economies as the absence of private ownership of capital, we argued that it lay in the absence of workers' democracy.

Hardly anyone in Russia and Eastern Europe seems to believe this. What is more, many radical intellectuals in the West who share the egalitarian values traditionally associated with Marxism are also today skeptical about the viability of democratic socialism, let alone commun-

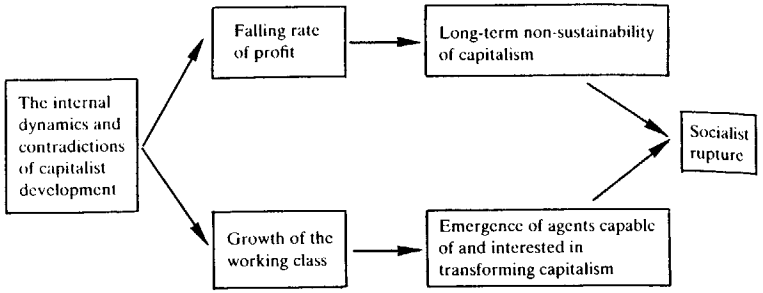


*Figure 11.2* Traditional Marxist Argument for Socialism

ism.[8] Even if one believes that the empirical evidence remains highly ambiguous on these matters, it is difficult nevertheless to sustain the concepts of socialism and communism with the certainty that once characterized Marxism. Without such concepts, however, the whole enterprise of Marxist class analysis falters.

As explained in the last chapter, classical Marxism had a brilliant solution to the problem of establishing the credibility of socialism as a form of social production: it turned the problem upside down and tried to prove the long-term *non*viability of capitalism. The story is quite familiar, as illustrated in Figure 11.2. It is based on two causal chains, both rooted in the internal dynamics of capitalist development. One causal chain leads from the contradictions of capitalist development through the falling rate of profit to the fettering of the forces of production within capitalism and thus the long-term non-sustainability of capitalism; the other causal chain leads through the growth of the working class to the increasing capacity of agents capable of transforming capitalism. The coincidence of these two causal chains makes a rupture in capitalism desirable and possible.

If this story were correct, then it would perhaps be less essential to have a positive theory of socialism as an alternative to capitalism. If capitalism is non-reproducible in the long run and if agents exist (workers) who have a clear interest in democratic control over social production and a capacity to seize power, then perhaps the problem of demonstrating the viability of socialism can be bracketed. Unfortunately, both of the causal chains in this argument no longer seem secure, even to many theorists still working within the Marxist tradition. The

8. The issue here is not socialism as an immediately achievable political project, but its viability as a successful, sustainable alternative to developed capitalism under any plausible historical conditions.



thesis of the long-term non-reproducibility of capitalism – the inherent, endogenous tendency towards deepening, and eventually catastrophic, crises rooted in the falling rate of profit – is certainly problematic, as is the claim that capitalism produces a sufficiently homogeneous class of proletarians to constitute its gravediggers.

In this context, then, the failure of the command economies and the tentative embrace of capitalism by many people in those societies is troubling to democratic socialists. While these societies were not socialist in the sense of society's productive resources being democratically controlled by workers, they had suppressed capitalist property, and their failure is thus consistent with the claim that private ownership of capital is essential for incentives and efficiency in developed economies.

The future of Marxism thus faces two significant challenges: first, there is the theoretical challenge posed by developments within radical social theory, including the Marxist tradition itself, which have led to a rejection of totalizing versions of Marxism, and second, there is the political challenge posed by the dramatic historical developments of recent years which call into question the feasibility of a critical theory normatively anchored in socialism. Some people might think that these challenges will ultimately lead towards a dissolution of Marxism as a coherent intellectual tradition. There are certainly voices in the post-Marxist, post-modernist camp who reject all explanatory ambitions for class analysis as epistemologically illegitimate and believe that efforts of reconstructing Marxism are last-gasp efforts by recalcitrants unwilling to face the facts. Such counsels of despair should, I believe, be resisted. While there may be no going back to the confident assurances of Marxism as a comprehensive paradigm of everything, it is also the case that any serious attempt to understand the causes of oppressions in order to enhance the political projects aimed at their elimination must include as part of its core agenda the analysis of class. And for this, a reconstruction of Marxism is essential.

In what follows I will briefly discuss ways of recasting the tasks of each of the nodes of the Marxist tradition, and then turn to a more sustained discussion of certain problems in class analysis.

## Reconstructing the Nodes of Marxism

### Marxism as the theory of historical trajectory

The central *function* of the theory of historical trajectory within Marxism is to provide a grounding for the claim that socialism – and ultimately communism – are not simply moral ideals, but empirically viable alterna-

tives to capitalism. Historical trajectory was taken as an explanandum not primarily for its own sake as an object of intellectual curiosity, but because it provided the foundation for scientific socialism.

The question, then, is whether this function can be satisfied without embracing the problems of trying to construct such an ambitious theory of history. Two departures from the traditional model are particularly promising.[9] First, the explanandum can be shifted from historical *trajectory* to historical *possibility*. Instead of trying to explain the overall trajectory of human history, or even the trajectory of capitalism, as a more or less determinate sequence of stages, it may be more useful to focus on the ways in which alternative futures are opened up or closed off by particular historical conditions. A theory of historical possibility might develop into a stronger theory of historical trajectories, but it does not presume that sequences follow a single trajectory as opposed to a variety of possible trajectories.

Second, instead of understanding historical variation in terms of discrete, qualitatively discontinuous modes of production as in classical Marxism, historical variation can be analyzed in terms of more complex patterns of decomposition and recombination of elements of modes of production.

Consider capitalism and socialism. Capitalism is a society within which capitalists own the means of production and workers own their labor power; socialism is a society within which workers collectively own the means of production while still individually owning their labor-power. In traditional Marxist conceptions of modes of production you have either one or the other, except perhaps in periods of unstable transition. (Of course, in a socialist society one might still have vestiges of some capitalist enterprises and in a capitalist society there can be some state enterprises and even worker-owned enterprises, but any given unit of production would be capitalist or socialist.)

An alternative conceptualization sees the category of "ownership" as consisting of a complex set of rights and powers, and entertains the possibility that these rights and powers can be broken apart, that they need not form a unitary gestalt. Within a given system of production, certain rights can be socialized while others remain private. Individual firms can therefore have a mixed ownership character. Even in American capitalism, the heartland of relatively pure capitalism, certain aspects of private property rights are partially socialized through such things as health and safety regulations and environmental protection. Such a situation, as suggested in chapter 6, might be termed an "interpenetration" of modes of production. Rather than seeing the historical trajectory of capitalism primarily in terms of the ruptural division of capitalism versus socialism, this way of thinking about economic structure opens up the possibility for a much wider set of variations among capitalisms and socialisms in which different patterns of interpenetration become the salient problem for analysis. In analyzing the historical development of capitalist societies, then, the issue becomes one of trying to theorize the development of different trajectories (in the plural) of such interpenetrations of modes of production.

9. For an extended discussion of these and other modifications of classical historical materialism, see Wright, Levine, and Sober, chapter 5.



### Marxism as a theory of class emancipation

The shift in the account of historical variation from a sequence of discrete modes of production to patterns of interpenetration of modes of production suggests a parallel shift in the normative theory of class emancipation. Instead of seeing "classlessness" as the practical normative principle motivating Marxist theory, this principle might better be thought of as "less classness." This implies a shift from an idealized end state to a variable process. Capitalisms vary in the degree of exploitation and inequality that characterizes their class structures and in the extent to which socialist elements have interpenetrated the system of production. Private ownership of capital can be more or less constrained through democratic empowerment of workers, and through socialized control over various dimensions of property rights. Classlessness still remains as a utopian vision, but the operative norm that provides the basis for the empirical critique of existing institutions is the reduction in classness.

A focus on less classness also opens the door for a much broader variety of theoretical models of practical emancipatory objectives. Let me give two recent examples. As discussed in chapter 7, one proposal for the reform of the welfare state in advanced capitalism is to replace most income-support programs with an unconditional "basic income grant" (or BIG).[10] The idea is quite simple: every citizen is given a subsistence grant of basic income sufficient to have a "historically and morally" decent standard of living, unconditional on the performance of any contribution to the society. The grant of basic income is like the grant of basic education and basic health: a simple right of citizenship. Such a grant effectively breaks the linkage between separation from the means

10. A particularly lively discussion of basic income was launched by the publication of an essay by Robert Van der Veen and Philippe Van Parijs, "A Capitalist Road to Communism," *Theory and Society*, no. 15, 1986, pp. 635–55. For a provocative collection of essays evaluating the normative and practical issues involved in basic income, see Philippe Van Parijs (ed.), *Arguing for Basic Income: ethical foundations for a radical reform*, London 1992.

of production and separation from the means of subsistence which is the hallmark of proletarianization in capitalism. Marxists, following Marx, have always assumed that it was inherent in capitalism that, by virtue of the separation from ownership of the means of production, workers would also be separated from the means of subsistence and would thus be forced to work for a living. This is what it means to call workers "proletarians." What the BIG proposal hopes to accomplish is a significant erosion of the coercive character of capitalism by making work much more voluntary, and thus at least partially deproletarianizing the working class. There are, of course, many possible objections, both ethical and practical, to BIG. The point here is that this kind of proposal is opened up within a reconstructed theory of class emancipation once the normative core is understood in terms of less classness, rather than exclusively in terms of classlessness.

A second illustration of the new kinds of models of emancipatory objectives is represented in John Roemer's controversial work on the problem of public ownership and the meaning of "socialism."[11] Roemer argues that it is inconceivable that any technologically advanced society can function with the minimum necessary efficiency without a substantial role for markets in both consumption goods and capital. He therefore believes that the idea of a centrally planned socialism is no longer viable. But how can you have real markets, especially in capital, without having private ownership? How can the idea of "market socialism" be made coherent? His proposal is basically quite simple. Very briefly, it amounts to creating two kinds of money in a society – money for the purchase of consumption goods and money for the purchase of ownership rights in firms (stock-money). Stock-money is initially distributed equally to all adults and a mechanism exists for the individuals in each new cohort of adults to receive their per capita share of stock-money. The two kinds of money are non-convertible; you cannot cash in your wealth in commodity money for stock-money. This prevents people who have a high income from their jobs becoming wealthy owners. You are allowed to buy and sell stocks with your stock-money, and thus there is a stock market. Firms obtain new capital through loans from banks, which are publicly owned.

There are various other details and refinements of this idea, but basically it amounts to creating a mechanism in which it becomes impossible for people to become wealthy owners of the means of production. Ownership is "socialized" in the sense that every person has

11. See John Roemer, "Can there be Socialism after Communism?" *Politics and Society*, no. 20, 1992, pp. 261–76 and *A Future for Socialism*, Cambridge, Mass. 1992.



close to the per capita share of ownership of means of production and credit institutions are democratically controlled. In other respects, markets function with only the usual kinds of regulations one finds in capitalist economies.

Is this socialism? Does it further the emancipatory goals that socialists have traditionally supported? These are important and controversial questions. But again, as in the case of BIG, models of this sort enter the purview of a normative theory of class emancipation once the preoccupation shifts to less classness.

### Marxism as class analysis

To understand the tasks facing a reconstructed class analysis it is useful to distinguish between two understandings of what class analysis can realistically hope to achieve. Consider the problem of explaining various aspects of gender oppression – let's say the unequal division of labor in the home. One view is that Marxists should aspire to a general class *theory* of gender and thus of gender inequalities. To return to the analogy between Marxism and medicine, this would be equivalent to proposing an endocrinological theory of cancer in which hormones would be viewed as the most fundamental determinant of cancer. Similarly, a class theory of gender oppression implies that class is in some sense understood as the most fundamental or important cause of gender oppression. This need not imply that all aspects of gender oppression are explainable by class; rather it suggests that at an appropriate level of abstraction, class explains the most important properties of gender oppression.

An alternative view is that Marxists should engage in the class *analysis* of gender oppression without prejudging ahead of time whether or not a full-fledged class theory of gender is achievable. A class analysis implies examining the causal connections between class and gender and their mutual impacts on various explananda, such as gender ideologies, women's poverty, or sexual violence. This implies a provisional recognition that gender processes are rooted in autonomous causal mechanisms irreducible to class, and that the task of class analysis is to deepen our understanding of their interactions in explaining specific social phenomena. Now, it may happen that out of the discoveries of the class analysis of gender oppression, it may eventually be possible to construct a class theory of such oppression. While such an eventuality seems unlikely given our present knowledge of these processes, it is not logically precluded.

Reconstructing class analysis, therefore, involves a shift from an a priori belief in the primacy of class in social explanations to a more open stance toward exploring the causal importance of class. It might appear

that this way of treating class analysis relegates class to the status of simply one factor among many. Does this not lead to a kind of causal pluralism characteristic of some currents in "post-modernist" social theory, in which everything causes everything and nothing is accorded special explanatory importance?[12] Such a conclusion might be warranted if we had recently arrived from outer space and never studied anything about human social life. The fact is, however, that we know a great deal about social life, both from casual observation and from systematic research, and one of the things we know is that class is massively important for understanding many social phenomena. Class is a powerful causal factor because of the way in which class determines access to material resources and thus affects the use of one's time, the resources available to pursue one's interests, and the character of one's life experience within work and consumption. Class thus pervasively shapes both material interests and capacities for action. This is to suggest not that class is universally the most important determinant of everything social, but that it is presumptively important for a very wide range of phenomena. More specifically, class is likely to be especially important in explaining the possibilities for and obstacles to human emancipation, since on virtually any construal of the problem, emancipation requires fundamental reorganizations of the use of society's material resources, surplus, and time. Such projects, therefore, inevitably involve in a central way class politics – political struggles over property relations and control of the social surplus. The central task of class analysis, then, is to give greater precision to the causal structure of class phenomena and the relationship between class and other social phenomena relevant to the normative goals of Marxism.

## Elements of a Reconstructed Class Analysis

My work on reconstructing class analysis has revolved around a relatively simple model of the interconnections among the core concepts of class analysis: class structure, class formation, and class struggle. This model is illustrated in Figure 11.3. The basic idea of this model, as explained in chapter 3, is that class structures impose *limits* upon, but do not uniquely determine, both class formations (i.e. the collective organization of class forces) and class struggles; class formations *select* class struggles within

12. Or, in some versions of post-modernist social theory, nothing explains anything and everything is simply a matter of perspective.



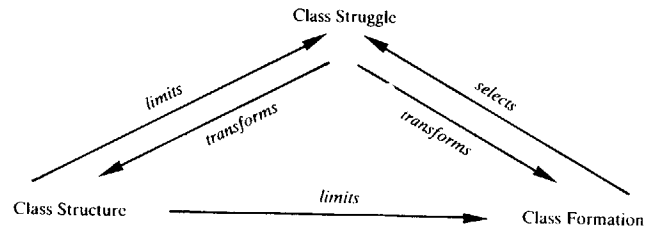


*Figure 11.3* Model of Class Structure, Class Formation and Class Struggle

the limits imposed by class structures; class struggles in turn have *transformative* impacts on both class structures and class formations.[13] This is not a purely structural model, for the conscious practices of actors – class struggles – transform the social structures which limit those practices. But it is also not an agent-centered model, for those struggles are seen as systematically constrained by the structures within which people live and act. Structures limit practices, but within those limits practices transform structures.

This model defines, at best, an agenda of problems to be solved. Content needs to be put into each of the terms and mechanisms need to be elaborated for each of the connections specified in the model. My own work on these issues has been preoccupied primarily with one element of the model: class structure. I have argued that in order to have a solid foundation for understanding the relationship between class structure and class formation, and of both of these to class struggles, we first need a coherent concept of class structure. Traditional Marxist concepts of class structure suffered, I have argued, from two major problems. First, they were too *abstract* for many empirical problems. The conventional Marxist concept of class structure posits polarized, antagonistic classes defined within pure modes of production – slaves and slavemasters, lords and serfs, capitalists and workers. But for many concrete empirical problems, many locations in the class structure, especially those loosely called the "middle class," do not seem to fit such a polarized view of classes. Second, traditional Marxist concepts of class structure tended to be too macro. They described the overall structures of societies, but did not adequately map onto the lives of individuals. My objective, then, was to

13. The model in Figure 11.3 can be considered the core macro-model of class analysis. There is a parallel micro-model which links class *locations* to class *consciousness* and class *practices* of individuals.

produce a Marxist concept of class structure which would link concrete and micro-levels of analysis to the more abstract macro-concepts.

I will illustrate this problem of concept formation through two specific conceptual issues: the problem of the *middle class* and the problem of *class alliances*.[14]

## The middle class

The "middle class" poses an immediate problem for Marxist class analysis: if the abstract concept of class structure is built around polarized classes, what does it mean to be in the "middle?" In the 1970s, when I began to work on this problem, there was, in my judgment, no satisfactory answer to this question. I proposed a new concept as a way of dealing with these kinds of locations: *contradictory locations within class relations*. The basic logic was quite simple. Previous attempts at solving the problem of the middle class all worked on the assumption that a given micro-*location* within the class structure (a location filled by an individual) had to be in one and only one class. Thus the middle class was treated as part of the working class (a new working class), part of the petty bourgeoisie (a new petty bourgeoisie), or as an entirely new class in its own right (a professional-managerial class). I argued that there was no need to make this assumption. Why not entertain the possibility that some class locations – jobs actually performed by individuals – were simultaneously located in more than one class? Managers, for example, could be viewed as simultaneously capitalists and workers – capitalists in so far as they dominated the labor of workers, workers in so far as they did not own the means of production and sold their labor-power to capitalists.

The idea of contradictory locations seemed to provide a more coherent solution to the problem of the middle class, a solution that was consistent with both the abstract polarized class concept and the concrete complexities of real class structures. Nevertheless, there were a number of significant conceptual problems with this approach.[15] This led me in the mid 1980s to propose a second solution to the problem of the middle class. This solution revolved around the concept of "exploitation."

14. In the original version of this chapter published in the *New Left Review*, a third problem was discussed, the problem of the so-called "underclass." Since the discussion of the underclass appears in the final section of chapter 2 above, it has been deleted here.

15. These problems are discussed at length in Erik Olin Wright, *Classes*, London 1985, chapter 2. The most salient of them is that the concept of domination replaced exploitation as the core criterion for class locations within the concept of "contradictory locations."



Exploitation can be loosely defined as a process by which one group is able to appropriate part of the social surplus produced by another group. Any society, I argued, is characterized by a variety of mechanisms of exploitation. Capitalist societies do not simply have distinctively capitalist forms of exploitation based on unequal ownership of means of production. They also contain what I called, based on the work of John Roemer, "skill exploitation" and "organization exploitation."[16] In skill exploitation, owners of scarce skills are able to extract a rent component in their wages. This is basically a component of the wage above and beyond the costs of producing and reproducing the skills themselves.[17] It thus embodies part of the social surplus. In organization exploitation, managers are able to appropriate part of the surplus through the power which they command inside the bureaucratic structures of capitalist production. Using this notion of differentiated mechanisms of exploitation, the "middle class" could be defined as those locations in the class structure which were exploited on one mechanism of exploitation but were exploiters on another. Professional and technical employees, for example, can be seen as capitalistically exploited but skill exploiters. They thus constitute "contradictory locations within exploitation relations."

Both of these proposals break with the idea that individual class locations must have a homogeneous class character, and in this way they introduce greater concrete complexity than earlier concepts of "class location." In other respects, however, both of these proposals still adopt a quite restricted view of what it means to occupy a class "location." In particular, they both define locations statically and restrict the concept of class locations to jobs. A fully elaborated micro-concept of how individual lives are tied to class structure needs to break with these restrictions by developing the idea of *mediated* class locations and *temporal* class locations.[18]

16. See John Roemer, *A General Theory of Class and Exploitation*, Cambridge, Mass. 1982.

17. The concept of "surplus" is not easy to define rigorously. The conventional idea in the Marxist tradition is that the total social product can be divided into two parts. One part – the necessary product – is the part needed to cover all of the costs of production, including the costs of producing workers (or, as Marxists have traditionally called it, the "value of labor-power"). The surplus, then, is the difference between the total product and the necessary product. The difficulty with this definition comes in when we try to define precisely the "costs of producing labor-power." If such costs are equated with the empirical wages of employees, then, by definition, no employee can be an exploiter. If, however, wages are seen as potentially containing "rents" derived from various kinds of barriers to entry in labor markets, then wages can contain pieces of surplus.

18. For a more extensive discussion on the concepts of mediated and temporal class locations, see my essay "Rethinking, Once Again, the Concept of Class Structure," chapter 8 in Erik Olin Wright et al., *The Debate on Classes*, London 1989.

The concept of mediated class locations recognizes that people are linked to the class structure through social relations other than their immediate "jobs." People live in families, and via their social relations to spouses, parents and other family members, they may be linked to different class interests and capacities. This problem is particularly salient in households within which both husbands and wives are in the labor force but may occupy different job-classes. A schoolteacher married to a business executive has a different "mediated" class location than a schoolteacher married to a factory worker. For certain categories of people – full-time housewives and children, for example – mediated class locations may be the decisive way in which their lives are linked to class. For others, mediated class locations may be less salient. In any case, the patterning of mediated class locations is potentially an important way in which class structures vary.

Temporal class locations refer to the fact that many jobs are embedded in career trajectories which in various ways involve changes in class character. Many managers, for example, begin as non-managerial employees, but the fact that they are on a managerial career track changes the class interests tied to their statically defined location. Moreover, many middle-class employees have a sufficiently high rent component in their wage (i.e. earnings above what is needed to reproduce their labor-power) that they can turn a significant amount of savings into capital through various kinds of investments. Such a capitalization of employment rents is itself a special kind of temporal dimension to class locations, for it enables highly paid middle-class employees over time to tie their class interests directly to the bourgeoisie. This does not mean that they become capitalists, but rather that their class location assumes an increasingly capitalist character over time.

All of these complexities are attempts at defining systematically the linkages between individual lives and the class structure in ways that enrich the general mode of determination in Figure 11.3. In that model, class structures are seen as imposing limits on the process of class formation. There are two basic mechanisms through which this limitation occurs: first, class structures shape the material interests of individuals and thus make it more or less difficult to organize certain arrays of class locations into collective organizations; and second, class structures shape the access to material resources and thus affect the kinds of resources that can be deployed by collective organizations within class struggles. Both of the proposed concepts of the middle class, as well as the concepts of mediated class locations and temporal class locations, attempt to provide a more fine-grained map of the nature of the material interests and resources available to individuals by virtue of their linkage to the class structure and thereby facilitate the analysis of the process of class formation.



**Class alliances and multiclass movements**

One of the main objectives in elaborating these refinements in the concept of class structure is to facilitate the analysis of class formations and class politics. One crucial dimension of class formation is the problem of class alliances. Class alliances are situations in which people from different class locations come together to engage in collective action against a common class enemy by reaching, in one way or another, some kind of compromise on the differences in their class interests. A class alliance is thus to be contrasted with what can be termed a "multiclass movement" in which the actors agree to ignore class differences in order to form a solidaristic movement for some political objective. National liberation movements, for example, frequently place class differences among their supporters on a back burner in the name of "national unity." No real attempt is made to forge a class compromise between bourgeois, middle-class, working-class, and peasant participants in the struggle. They are united in their opposition to a colonial power, but their unity is not grounded in any significant attempts at reconciling their conflicting class interests.

This contrast between multiclass movements and class alliances is, of course, somewhat stylized. Many situations involve variable mixes between these two ideal types. Nevertheless, the analytical distinction is important both politically and theoretically. In many situations, multiclass movements are easier to form than class alliances, but equally, they frequently founder by virtue of the unresolved class tensions within them. Class alliances, on the other hand, may be harder to forge, but once forged may be more durable since conflicts of interest have been compromised rather than ignored.

The various complexities in the analysis of class structure we have been discussing can help to illuminate specific problems in the formation of class alliances. Consider the problem of alliances involving the middle class with either the capitalist class or the working class. People in the middle class and the working class are both exploited by capitalists; they are both employees dependent upon the labor market for their livelihoods. They thus share some common class interests vis-à-vis capital which constitutes a basis for a class alliance. On the other hand, as skill and organization exploiters, middle-class employees earn salaries that contain a component of surplus which they are interested in protecting. Particularly when this component is large, people in the middle class have the capacity to capitalize their surplus and thus link their class interests directly to those of capitalists. These conflicting forces mean that within class struggles the middle class will be pulled between class formations involving alliances with workers or with capitalists. There are

historical moments when the middle class seems to ally strongly with the bourgeoisie, as in Chile in the overthrow of the Allende regime, and other circumstances in which segments of the middle class forge fairly durable alliances with workers, as in Sweden in the period of the heyday of Social Democratic Party rule. An important task of class analysis is to sort out the conditions under which one or the other of these patterns of alliance occurs.

The underclass, as discussed in chapter 2, poses quite different problems for the analysis of class alliances. It might seem natural that the underclass and the working class would tend to form class alliances, but there are many obstacles to this occurring. In their efforts to protect the jobs of workers and increase their wages, the labor movement often creates barriers within labor markets which act to the disadvantage of people in the underclass. In many historical cases, the underclass has been a source of scab labor in strikes and in other ways it has been manipulated by capitalists against workers. Thus, while both workers and the underclass share an interest in the state providing job training, regulating capital, and increasing employment opportunities, in many contexts they see each other on opposing sides. Again, one of the tasks of class analysis is to understand the conditions which make solidaristic movements combining the working class and the underclass feasible.

The last twenty-five years have witnessed an extraordinary development of theory and research within the Marxist tradition. Our understanding of a host of Marxist problems – including such things as the labor theory of value, the theory of history, the dynamics of capitalist development, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the contradictions of the capitalist state, the mechanisms of consent formation within production, and the problem of the middle class in capitalist societies – has been fundamentally transformed. These are solid achievements.

It is ironic, then, that in the context of such advances Marxism should be pronounced dead as an intellectual force in the world. Mark Twain once remarked, on reading his own obituary in the newspaper, that "the reports of my death are highly exaggerated." What look like the death throes of Marxism to hostile critics may be simply growing pains as Marxism matures as a social scientific theory of class and its effects. One thing, however, is certain: class politics will continue to be a central dimension of social struggles, since the forms of ownership and control of society's productive resources have such a pervasive impact on so many social issues. And, if class politics is a central dimension of social struggle, then class analysis will have an important role to play in



developing adequate theoretical tools for radicals. What remains to be seen, however, is the extent to which such class analysis will be embedded in a broader theoretical configuration that contains the normative commitments of class emancipation and the explanatory aspirations of a theory of historical possibilities.