

were in the working class insofar as they had to sell their labor power in order to obtain their livelihood; they were in the capitalist class insofar as they dominated workers within production. And since the class interests of workers and capitalists were inherently antagonistic, a dual class location that combined these two classes was dubbed a "contradictory location within class relations."⁴⁷

How can it be that a concrete location in a class structure can be simultaneously in two classes? Within a relational concept of class, class locations are positions-within-relations. In order for it to make sense to see a "location" as simultaneously in two (or more) "classes", therefore, it must be the case that class relations themselves are multidimensional or multifaceted.

In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to clarify briefly what I mean by the term "social relation." What is related within a social relation is not, strictly speaking, either a set of "positions" or a set of actual people as such, but rather a set of *practices*: social relations link practices to each other. The capital-labor relation defines a systematic relation between the practices of capitalists and workers within that relation. Conceptually, we cannot even define the practices of capitalists without reference to their connection to the practices of workers: capitalists *employ* workers who *sell* their labor power to capitalists. The verbs "employ" and "sell" designate relational practices in that they imply interacting practices of distinct agents. While for simplicity it is often useful to refer to social relations as binding together the people within the relation, this should be understood as a somewhat elliptical way of talking about the interactions among their practices.

To talk about the multidimensionality of a relation, therefore, is equivalent to talking about the multidimensionality of the practices structured within that relation. What we call the "capital-labor relation" should thus be viewed as a package of relational practices. In these terms, then, managers would occupy the bourgeois location within one aspect or dimension of these relational practices and the proletarian location within another.

That was the basic intuition underlying the conceptual strategy of contradictory locations. I elaborated this intuition in a variety of somewhat different ways.⁴⁸ These differences are not particularly important in the present context. The common thread was the view that the

47. At roughly the same time as I was elaborating the concept of contradictory class locations, G. Carchedi was working on essentially the same underlying insight in his functional definition of the new middle class as being constituted by the simultaneous presence of the "functions" of capital and of labor. See Carchedi, *The Economic Identification of Social Classes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

48. For a specific review of the development of the concept, see ch. 2 of *Classes*.

concept of "class relation" had two primary dimensions: property or ownership relations and possession or control relations. The former was linked to the concept of exploitation; the latter to the concept of domination. Managers occupied a capitalist location within control relations (that is, they dominated workers), but a working-class location within ownership relations (that is, they sold their labor power to capitalists).

This framework emerged as a specific solution to the problem of managers in the class structure. It was subsequently modified to try to accommodate the problem of professionals, experts, and credentialed specialists and technicians of various sorts. How should these kinds of jobs be located within a class structure? Unlike managers, they did not directly control workers, and thus could not easily be placed in the capitalist location on the domination dimension of class relations. By the logic of the concept of contradictory locations they thus did not seem to be simultaneously in the capitalist class and the working class. And yet, at least at an intuitive level, it did not seem appropriate to consider such jobs as simply an integral part of the working class.

The solution I came up with was to consider these class locations as simultaneously working class and *petty bourgeoisie*. This means that, rather than being a contradictory location *within* a given "mode" of production (that is, within capitalist relations of production), they were a contradictory location that combined elements from two distinct kinds of production relations: capitalist relations and what is sometimes called petty commodity production relations. That is, expert/professional employees were petty bourgeois in so far as they had direct control over their *own* labor process (self-direction or autonomy within work), but were proletarian in so far as they had to sell their labor power to an employer in order to work. For want of a better expression, I called such positions "semiautonomous employees."

Finally, to complete the picture, small employers were characterized as a contradictory location that combined petty bourgeois and capitalist relations. Like the petty bourgeoisie they were direct producers working alongside their employees, but like capitalists they were exploiters of workers.

This first strategy of building a class structural concept capable of systematically handling the "middle class" has a number of attractive features. First, it is a strongly relational concept. The definitions of different class locations—both fundamental classes and contradictory locations—are all specified in relational terms. This is especially clear in the case of managers. But even for semiautonomous employees, the attempt was made to define the distinct social relations of petty commodity production and then incorporate this into the definition of their class location.

Secondly, while the concept of contradictory location was built around the interest-logic of class relations, it also suggested a particular set of experience-generating mechanisms linked to class. Domination and autonomy are aspects of work settings that are closely tied to daily experiences within production. The concept of contradictory locations thus managed to capture at a lower level of class structure analysis at least the thin notion of lived experience embodied in the more abstract concept. If we want the concept of class to provide a basis for linking material interests and lived experiences, then this particular strategy of analysis provides at least some foundations for this endeavor.

Finally, the idea of contradictory locations introduced into class analysis a desirable kind of explanatory indeterminacy. One of the purposes of trying to develop a more refined class structural concept was to facilitate analyses of the relationship between class structure and class formation, in which class formations were not seen as simply derivative of class structures. What was needed, then, was a class structural concept which systematically allowed for other causal factors to play a role in the translation of class structures into class formations. The concept of contradictory locations helps to open up this theoretical space. Since many locations in the class structure have dual (and even contradictory) class logics, this implies that their translation into class formations will be contingent upon social processes which mobilize action around one or another of these poles. This gives a theoretically specific, rather than just an ad hoc, role for political and ideological determinants of class formation.

Nevertheless, in spite of these strengths, the concept of contradictory locations quickly ran into difficulties. I will briefly mention only three of these here:

1. *Domination and exploitation* While in the rhetoric of the concept of contradictory locations, exploitation is treated as the basic interest-generating mechanism within class structures, nevertheless it does not actually enter into the specification of the class map in a very systematic manner. In practice the central novel categories of the analysis—managers and semiautonomous employees as contradictory locations within class relations—are both defined exclusively in terms of *domination* relations, not exploitation as such. This is not to deny that domination relations are an essential aspect of class structures in the Marxist tradition. But the analysis of domination should be systematically linked to exploitation, whereas in the development of the concept of contradictory class locations domination had effectively displaced exploitation.

2. *The state* The concept did not offer a satisfactory way of dealing with the problem of the state in the analysis of capitalist class structures. This had two practical implications. First, the criteria used to define managers and semiautonomous employees within the capital-labor relation were simply applied to state employment with no modification or justification. Given that classes are supposed to be defined within distinctive types of social relations of production, it was at best a weakness of the framework that state employment was simply amalgamated to capitalist relations. Second, the lack of systematic elaboration of the problem of classes within the state also meant that the framework was unable to define the specificity of classes in post-capitalist, “state socialist” societies. Given that the concept of contradictory locations was meant to provide a general strategy for studying class structures in different kinds of societies, some way of dealing with the problem of class in such societies was needed.

3. *Operationalizations* At a practical level, it was exceptionally difficult to operationalize for empirical research one of the contradictory locations that figured in the general conceptual framework: the category “semiautonomous employees”. Autonomy within the labor process proved to be an extremely elusive concept; all attempts at operationalizing it had a suspiciously gradational (rather than relational) quality to them, and none of these attempts seemed reliable. Of course, operational difficulties need not invalidate an abstract concept, but they do tend to generate skepticism about the adequacy of the conceptualizations. At a minimum they undermine the usefulness of the conceptualization for the concrete investigation of class structure which was, after all, one of the central reasons for developing the new concepts in the first place.

3.2 *The Second Solution: Multiple Exploitations*

Given these conceptual problems, and a deepening sense that I could not effectively pursue my empirical research without resolving them, I attempted in various ways to elaborate an alternative general strategy. The steps in this initial rethinking the concept of class structure have been discussed thoroughly elsewhere, so I will not go into the details here.⁴⁹

The basic idea of the new solution has been discussed a variety of times earlier in this book: different “modes of production” are based on

49. See *Classes*, ch. 3.

distinctive mechanisms of exploitation which can be differentiated on the basis of the kind of productive asset the unequal ownership (or control) of which enables the exploiting class to appropriate part of the socially produced surplus. Building on the work of Roemer, I distinguished four types of assets, the unequal ownership or control of which constituted the basis of distinct forms of exploitation: labor power assets (feudal exploitation), capital assets (capitalist exploitation), organization assets (statist exploitation), and skill or credential assets (socialist exploitation).⁵⁰ While pure modes of production can be identified with single forms of exploitation, actual societies always consist of different forms of combination of the different mechanisms of exploitation. This opens up the possibility that certain locations in the class structure are simultaneously exploited through one mechanism of exploitation but exploiters through another mechanism. Such positions, I argued, constitute the "middle class" of a given society. In capitalism the key instances of such locations are managers (who are capitalistically exploited but organization exploiters) and experts (who are capitalistically exploited but skill/credential exploiters).⁵¹

At the time I formalized this second strategy for solving the puzzle of the middle class, I felt that it had a number of theoretical advantages over the earlier concept of contradictory locations within class relations.

First, unlike in the earlier concept, exploitation-based interests occupy center stage. Claims about different mechanisms of exploitation are systematically deployed to define locations within a class structural matrix. While it was still the case that I never attempted to directly operationalize exploitation as such—the class map is built around relations to exploitation-generating *assets* rather than exploitation *per se*—nevertheless, exploitation was the organizing principle for the overall class structural analysis.

Second, the new formulation has a much stronger connection to the general Marxist theory of history, historical materialism, than did the earlier framework. The structural typology on which the class structure map was based had a clear standing within a general theory of the historical trajectory of social forms. The "sequence" feudalism–capitalism–statism–socialism could be characterized as a *logical* sequence of successive eliminations (or at least marginalization) of

50. For specific definitions of each of these forms of exploitation, see this volume, pp. 14–22.

51. Note that in the new framework, managers are not simultaneously in the bourgeois class and the working class, as in the original conceptual solution; rather, they are simultaneously in an organization-asset exploiting class and in the working class. They are not part of the bourgeoisie at all.

specific forms of exploitation.⁵² This conceptual typology also gave the problem of the middle class a distinctive historical cast: the middle class of a society dominated by one mode of production was the principal contender for being the dominant class in the subsequent mode of production. The emergent bourgeoisie was the pivotal middle class of feudalism and the managerial-bureaucratic "class" is the central middle class of capitalism.

Third, it seemed that this new formulation also coped with the problem of the state more effectively than the original contradictory locations approach. At least it became possible to identify a specific form of exploitation (organization exploitation) and associated class relations with what is sometimes called a "statist mode of production."

Fourth, I initially thought that the shift from a domination-centered to an exploitation-centered concept of class structure avoided the messy operational problems that had been generated by the concept of "semi-autonomy." Rather than trying to situate professionals and experts in the class structure via the slippery concept of their self-direction within work, they were now situated with respect to their capacity to appropriate the surplus due to their monopoly of certain skills, particularly when this monopoly was legally certified through credentials.

Finally, as a kind of fringe benefit from this reconceptualization, the new class concept provided a particularly nuanced empirical map for studying the relationship between class structure and class formation. In the case of capitalist society, by introducing three distinct dimensions of the class structure—dimensions based on capital assets, organization assets and skill assets—the picture of class structure can become quite differentiated. The proliferation of concrete structural "locations" within this map allows for a much more subtle empirical investigation of the ways in which people within these locations become collectively organized into class formations.⁵³

These seemed like substantial theoretical gains, and thus, while I recognized from the start that there were problems with the new

52. This is a logical sequence rather than an historical one, since there is no presupposition that actual societies must pass through these forms in a rigid, linear fashion. "Stages" can be skipped, and, perhaps, the actual order could be altered. If, for example, capitalism is restored in certain state socialist societies, one might interpret this as a reversal of two elements of the logical sequence.

53. Once it is no longer assumed that there is a one-to-one relationship between class structure and class formation—that is, that class structures impose limits on class formations but do not determine unique outcomes—then there is a considerable empirical pay-off for having a highly disaggregated picture of the class structure itself, since this allows for a more fine-grained description of the different ways in which these differentiated structural positions are actually formed into collectively organized coalitions.

concept, I enthusiastically reoriented my empirical work around it.⁵⁴ It now seems to me that these problems are more significant than I originally realized. In particular, I would stress the following issues, some of which have been brought up in certain of the essays in this book:

1. *Skill exploitation* As I already indicated in my discussion of skill exploitation in Chapter 5 of this volume, there is a basic conceptual problem in treating surplus appropriation rooted in the ownership of skills or credentials as "exploitation" which does not exist for capitalist or feudal exploitation. An employee in a capitalist firm who has a high level of scarce skills (that is, skills which are scarce relative to their demand on the market), whether or not that scarcity is institutionalized through credentials, performs labor, and thus contributes to the social surplus.⁵⁵ When such an employee appropriates part of the social surplus through wages that are above the costs of reproducing labor power, the most natural way of describing the outcome is that this person has been able to appropriate part of the surplus which he or she produced. That is, instead of saying that this employee is an exploiter of unskilled labor power as is posited in the skill-exploitation concept, it would make more sense to say that they are simply *less* exploited by capitalists.

Of course, it could happen that certain credential holders are able to appropriate so much surplus that they become, in fact, net exploiters: they could retain all of the surplus which they produce and appropriate surplus from others. The problem is that since this appropriation remains entirely contingent upon the actual performance of labor by the credential holder, there is no simple way of distinguishing those credential holders who are real exploiters from those who are simply "privileged" by virtue of being less exploited than other employees.

This problem with skill exploitation is not simply the result of the fact that the "level" of skills varies more or less continuously (although this gradational quality to the distribution of the asset in question certainly adds to the problem). Imagine a world in which capital assets were normally distributed, with many employees owning nontrivial amounts of capital. While this would certainly affect the overall shape of the class

54. In *Classes* I wrote a section called "Once again, Unresolved Problems" in an effort to try to clarify the problematic aspects of the multiple-exploitations approach. At the time I treated these problems as unfinished tasks.

55. I am ignoring the problem of "unproductive" labor within the framework of the labor theory of value in this discussion, because it is not relevant to the analytical points being made. Even if one accepts the labor theory of value and the accompanying concept of unproductive labor, the issues raised here would still apply for credentialed *productive* labor.

structure, it would not pose the conceptual difficulties of skill assets since the income derived from the sheer ownership of capital inherently constitutes an exploitative transfer, that is, it involves the appropriation of surplus produced by others.⁵⁶ In this imaginary world, since many capital owners also perform labor and therefore contribute to the surplus as well, it may be difficult in some cases to ascertain whether or not a given capital owner is a *net* exploiter. It could happen, for example, that in some situations an owner of capital produces more surplus as a laborer than she or he appropriates as a capitalist. Nevertheless, even in such unusual and ambiguous situations, the capitalist in question is still unambiguously a *capitalist* exploiter by virtue of the transfers linked to capital ownership. It would therefore make sense to describe such a person as a capitalist exploiter by virtue of owning capital, and capitalistically exploited by virtue of selling labor power. In contrast, in the case of skill exploitation, one cannot distinguish the mechanism through which the individual appropriates their own surplus and the surplus of others.

Another way of stating this problem with skill exploitation is that the idea of credential or skill-based classes is less relational than the idea of capital-based classes. Knowing that a person owns capital intrinsically sets that person into a social relation with workers. That is, their practices as an owner of capital are inherently linked relationally to the practices of workers. This is true whether the capitalist in question is an actual employer (in which case the social relation in question is a quite direct linkage between employer and worker) or merely a rentier coupon-clipper owning stocks (in which case the relation between capitalist and worker is mediated through a series of other relations).

In the case of skill owners, there is not necessarily an inherent social relation that binds them to the unskilled in the required way. The possession of a skill or credential may help to constitute a distinctive kind of social relation with employers, reflected in the description that skill holders are "less exploited" than the unskilled, but this does not necessarily imply a social relation built around antagonistic material interests with the unskilled themselves. Such antagonisms *may* exist, of

56. This is not a completely watertight specification of exploitation, since it is possible to define certain specific conditions in which the appropriation of surplus via the ownership of capital might not be properly considered exploitation. Thus, for example, if workers' pensions are invested in shares in corporations, and if workers actually had ownership rights to those shares once they retired—suppose they could sell them and keep the "capital gains"—one might want to treat the flow of income to the workers derived from such ownership as a recuperation of past exploitation rather than exploitation in its own right. For present purposes, however, I do not think that such complications need to be introduced.

course, but they are not inherent in the relations that define owners of skills/credentials as such. Thus, credentials are a relatively ambiguous basis for defining a *class* relation, at least if we want the concept of class to be built around relations of exploitation.

2. *Capitalist managers and statism* One of the implications of the multiple exploitations view of the middle class which has aroused the most skepticism concerns the alleged interests of managers within capitalism. If it is correct to claim that managers are simultaneously exploited by capitalists and yet organizational exploiters, then it follows that in principle they should have an objective material interest in the elimination of capitalist exploitation and the creation of a society within which organizational exploitation was the primary basis of class relations.⁵⁷ That is, it was claimed that there was an objective basis for managers to be anticapitalist and prostatist. What is more, this objective interest in statism should increase as one moves up managerial hierarchies, as the control over organizational assets becomes greater.

This characterization of managers flies in the face of most historical evidence. Undaunted, I argued that the obvious support of capitalism by managers in general, and by top managers and executives in particular, reflected the strength of capitalist "hegemony." Hegemony, in these terms is a situation in which one class is able to materially link the interests of other classes to its own. Above all, a hegemonic class attempts to tie the interests of potential rival classes to its interests as a way of neutralizing their latent opposition. In the case of managers this is accomplished through the organization of managerial careers and the

57. In a personal communication, Philippe Van Parijs points out that even if managers were properly described as organization exploiters, it does not necessarily follow that they should empirically be anticapitalist. He writes: "Roemer's exploitation criterion explicitly abstracts from the incentive effects of various types of production relations. Managers as a class may be capitalistically exploited (because of a below-average capital endowment) and yet lose out if capital assets were equally distributed if it turned out that the system would perform less efficiently (even after the transition period). The most powerful explanation of the managers' antisocialist alliance with capitalists, however, is probably that even if the total surplus were not to drop as a result of introducing [socialism], and even if, as a class, managers would (or might) then have a stronger hold on that surplus, there is a greater (or even greater) uncertainty as to whether, as individuals, their lot will be improved, because the demise of the people who granted them their organizational assets is likely to jeopardize their possession of these assets, and hence their sharing in whatever benefits the managerial class may gain from the change." While I think Van Parijs's comments are well taken, nevertheless since one of the main reasons for producing concrete class structure concepts was to facilitate the analysis of class formation, the staunchness of the opposition of managers, especially high-level corporate managers, to either statist or socialist organizations of production, does undermine the credibility of conceptualizing them as organizational-asset exploiters.

ability of managers to buy their way into the bourgeoisie (through investments, stock ownership, etc.). Such strategies, however, do not obliterate the latent conflicts of interest, but merely contain them within narrow limits. Under conditions of sustained capitalist crisis in which the material basis for this hegemonic integration of management declined, I argued, an anticapitalist statist politics of management could become an historical possibility.

This kind of argument sounds very much like special pleading. While it is not unthinkable that historical circumstances could arise in which managers in general would adopt a statist critique of capitalism, this possibility seems like a weak basis for understanding the essential class character of managers in capitalism itself.

In these terms, the original intuitions of the concept of contradictory class locations seem much sounder. In that framework it was quite natural that managers should have strong tendencies towards a pro-capitalist ideological orientation, and that these tendencies should increase as one moved toward the top of managerial hierarchies. Managers were theorized as simultaneously in the capitalist class and the working class, the balance between these two poles shifting towards the former as one moved up the hierarchy. Within this conceptual field, top managers and executives, therefore, would be expected to be resolutely procapitalist because they are fundamentally part of the bourgeoisie with only minor contradictory elements in their class location.

3. *Organizational assets and the state* One of the appeals of the multiple exploitation approach was that it provided a more satisfactory way of incorporating state employment within a class structural analysis. In a "state mode of production," the state was seen as the site of the concentrated control over organization assets. The material basis of exploitation in a statist society, therefore, was conceived as the monopoly over organizational assets by the state bureaucratic class.

Whatever one thinks about this as a characterization of class and exploitation in state socialist societies, it does not in the end solve the problems of the analysis of state employment within capitalism generated by the concept of contradictory locations. As mentioned above, the original concept of contradictory locations essentially fused class locations in the state and private sectors. Above all, it treated "domination" (or authority) as a determinant of class location irrespective of the institutional site of that domination. The concept of organizational asset exploitation is guilty of precisely the same problem. In the map of class locations in capitalism, no account whatsoever is made of the institutional site of the organizational assets controlled by managers. Manager/bureaucrats in the state and in capitalist corporations are

treated as situated in identical ways within the class structure because they bear a similar relation to their class-defining asset, organizational resources.

4. *Operationalizations* One of the reasons for shifting away from the concept of contradictory locations was the enduring problems of operationalizing the concept of "semi-autonomy." In the end, however, this problem has simply been displaced on to the categories of skills and credentials, which are, if anything, more difficult to operationalize in a consistent and theoretically meaningful way. There are two basic problems. First, as is often noted, it is very difficult to elaborate unambiguous criteria for the "level" of skill associated with different jobs. Should this be measured by the training time necessary to competently perform the job? By the cognitive complexity of the job? By the level of formal credentials required for the job?

Second, even if we solve the first problem, this would merely give us criteria for differentiating labor power in terms of the amount of skill embodied in it; it would not help us in specifying the actual productive *asset* capable of generating exploitation. Skills become the basis for exploitation only when they are monopolized sufficiently to allow the skill owner to appropriate surplus. (And even then, as pointed out above, much skill-based surplus appropriation should not be regarded as exploitation.) Without clear criteria for distinguishing the relevant levels of skill assets, it is quite ambiguous how these levels could be translated into class categories. Skill levels vary in a more or less continuous manner, and thus in the absence of a social relation linked to these assets, this introduces an inherent arbitrariness in using skill assets as such as a basis of defining class "locations."

It might seem that this operational problem in the use of skills as a basis of a dimension of the class structure would be reduced, or even eliminated, if we restrict the concept of skill assets to formally *credentialed* assets. Credentials certainly are more dichotomous than skills and they have more the character of a property right. And credentials also have a clear relational quality to them, since the institutions of credentialing have the effect of systematically excluding people from certain labor markets. Credentials thus do constitute the basis of a relation between the credentialed and uncredentialed.

Nevertheless, there are two serious problems with the use of credentials as the operational criterion for skill-based class relations. First, there are so many different kinds of credentials, and credentialing systems vary so significantly across countries, that the problem of arbitrariness in operationalization is not really solved by replacing skills with credentials. At the operational level, there is no clear criterion available

to distinguish credentials that are constitutive of a class division from those which are not. Second, even if we could consistently compare credentials across labor markets and across countries, the basic problem of distinguishing the appropriation of one's own surplus from exploitation would remain. Credentials thus may be a useful way of defining certain kinds of labor market *privileges* (the privilege of being less exploited), but they do not solve the operational problems with skill exploitation in general.

Taken individually, responses to each of these problems are possible. Taken together, they seriously challenge the conceptual coherence of the proposal to analyze the class structure of capitalist societies as a multi-dimensional matrix rooted in capitalist, organizational, and skill exploitation.

4 The Weberian Temptation

Given these difficulties with the concepts of class structure built around contradictory class locations and around multiple exploitations, there are several broad choices about how to proceed. First, we could retain the abstract, simple polarized concept of class structure but abandon the project of trying to develop a repertoire of more concrete, micro-level Marxist class concepts derived from it. We could decide, for example, that the Marxist concept of class structure is analytically powerful for understanding the overall macro-dynamics of capitalist societies in general, but that we cannot systematically derive from this abstract concept a concrete concept of class structure capable of explaining variations in such things as state policies or individual consciousness.⁵⁸ Abandoning the goal of producing a micro-level, concrete concept of class structure, then, would open the door to a more eclectic choice of concepts for such micro-level problems. One could, for example, adopt

58. This position would be close to that argued for in Uwe Becker's essay in this book (see Chapter 4 in this volume). He argues that "the structural antagonism between labor and capital" is perhaps the most systematic and universal source of cleavage and struggle in capitalist societies, and thus clearly deserves to be given explanatory *importance* (although not, in his judgment, *primacy*) in the analysis of the universal dynamics of capitalism. But he rejects the claim that class *locations* have any particular explanatory force, or that variations in capitalist class structures have necessarily any particular theoretical importance in explaining variations in the histories of capitalist societies (as opposed to the universal, abstract dynamic tendencies of capitalism in general). This is equivalent to arguing for the importance of the abstract concept of class structure while rejecting the usefulness of corresponding concrete, micro-level class structure concepts.

Weberian class concepts for the analysis of variations in individual consciousness while retaining the abstract, polarized Marxist concept for understanding the structural dynamics of capitalism.

This response to the dilemmas of producing a satisfactory concrete, micro concept of class structure, might, in the end, be the best one can do; but it threatens to undermine the overall explanatory aspirations of Marxist theory. Even though I am critical of the attempt by methodological individualists to reduce all macro phenomena to micro explanations, nevertheless it seems to me that the explanatory force of the abstract, macro-level Marxist concept of class would be greatly compromised if it was unconnected to corresponding micro-level concepts, concepts that are closely tied to the lives and conditions of individuals. And it also seems to me that the explanatory potential of Marxist theory is undermined if its core concepts, in particular class, are only useful for understanding the long-term, epochal dynamics of social change, but not the variations across capitalist societies. If Marxist class analysis is to be theoretically powerful and politically useful, then it seems necessary to continue the attempt at forging concepts at the concrete, micro-level of analysis that are consistent with the more abstract concepts.

A second possible response to the conceptual problems we have been discussing is to retain both the abstract class structure concept and the concrete derivations from that concept, and decide simply to live with a certain level of conceptual incoherence. After all, all conceptual frameworks (in sociology at least) if pressed too hard reveal inconsistencies and weaknesses, and Marxist theories of class are no exception. If one wants to do empirical work on class, then at some point one has to suspend the preoccupation with the reconstruction of foundational concepts and get on with the business of studying the world, and this generally requires a tolerance for a certain degree of conceptual ambiguity and inconsistency. This does not mean abandoning altogether the project of eliminating such inconsistencies; one can still try to forge new conceptual solutions, either by way of a synthesis of previous ideas or through the introduction of new conceptual elements. But it does mean adopting a certain pragmatic attitude toward research and not waiting until all conceptual problems are resolved. This is essentially the response I have adopted to these enduring conceptual problems in my empirical projects.

There is, however, a third possible response. One can decide that these conceptual issues have been so persistent and apparently intractable that they probably reflect deeper problems in the larger theoretical framework of which they are a part. Rather than continue struggling with the problem of constructing an adequate Marxist concept of the

middle class in capitalist societies, therefore, these problems might call into question the general Marxist theory of class itself. Before turning to a discussion of a range of new amendments to my previous conceptualizations in section 5, therefore, it is worth considering this more drastic remedy to the problems we have encountered, namely abandoning Marxist class analysis altogether.

Many of the conceptual difficulties bound up with the problem of the middle class within a Marxist framework appear to vanish within the Weberian tradition of class analysis. While of course there are still plenty of problems of operationalization within Weberian class structure analysis—the concepts of “market situation” and “work situation” which are used by Weberians such as John Goldthorpe both pose significant problems of operationalization and measurement—nevertheless, the category “middle class” does not pose the same kind of conceptual difficulties for Weberians that it does for Marxists.⁵⁹

Why is this so? Weberians have an easier time than Marxists in forming a concept of the middle class because in the Weberian tradition the concept of class structure is relieved of three theoretical burdens which must be contended with in one way or another within a Marxist framework:

1. *Class, mode of production, and the theory of history* For Weberians, the concept of class structure does not have to be linked to an abstract concept of “mode of production.” Classes within the Weberian tradition are viewed as categories of stratification specific to market societies, and thus there is no need to develop a general schema of class analysis that applies across different kinds of economic systems. And further, as a corollary of this, the concept does not have to figure in any general theory of history for Weberians as it generally does for Marxists. Even when, as often occurs today, Marxists reject the general Marxist theory of history—historical materialism—they nevertheless generally remain committed to a class-based *structural typology* of historical variations. Thus, even without the strong claims of historical materialism, the Marxist concept of class is under the theoretical constraint functioning within a typology of historical forms of variation

59. John Goldthorpe, in *Social Mobility in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, pp. 39–42), for example, makes the following distinctions in developing his class structure concept: “high grade” versus “low grade” professionals; “higher-grade technicians” versus “lower-grade technicians”; managers in large versus small establishments; nonroutine versus routine nonmanual employees in administration and commerce. In each case there are difficult problems in defining nonarbitrary criteria for operationalizing these distinctions. Nevertheless, the conceptual status of these distinctions poses no difficulties within the overall class structure concept.

of class structures. The absence of this constraint for Weberians means that the specific problem of conceptualizing classes in capitalist society does not have to meet any criteria of coherence with the analysis of class structures of precapitalist or postcapitalist societies.

2. *Exploitation and antagonistic classes* While the Weberian concept of class is relational (it is grounded in the problem of economic exchange relations), it is not based on an abstract model of polarized relations. In principle, then, Weberians can admit an indefinite number of additional classes besides workers and capitalists without having to postulate any underlying conflicts of material interest. All that is necessary is that a given class be characterized by a distinctive work situation and market situation, or, more broadly, by distinctive economically conditioned "life-changes" (to use a favorite Weberian expression). Marxists, on the other hand, have to produce concepts of specific class locations that are congruent with the underlying antagonistic logic of class relations based in exploitation. This does not mean that every distinction among class locations in a concrete, micro-level concept has to itself be polarized to some other distinction; but it has to somehow be systematically embedded in an analysis of such polarized, exploitative class relations.

3. *Ambitiousness of the theoretical ordering of concepts* The Weberian concept of class, at least as it has been elaborated by contemporary neo-Weberians, does not attempt to specify and defend a systematic hierarchy of conceptual elements. There is no attempt, for example, to articulate a conceptual ordering of the problems of material interests, lived experiences, and capacities for collective action in the specification of class structures. This means that Weberians can deploy a variety of different kinds of criteria for defining aspects of class structures in a rather ad hoc manner without embarrassment. Weberians typically argue that class positions are defined by common work situations and market situations, but there is no attempt to construct a logical decomposition of these two concepts or to order them in a systematic way. Weberians are nearly always silent, for example, on the question of whether two jobs which share a common market situation but different work situations constitute divisions *within* a single class or *distinct* classes. The lower level of aspiration of conceptual and theoretical integration within the Weberian tradition compared to the Marxist tradition, therefore, facilitates taking a rather pragmatic, empirical attitude towards the introduction of specific distinctions in a class structure analysis without worrying too much about the implications for a larger theoretical structure.⁶⁰

The absence of these three theoretical constraints makes it much easier to locate categories like professionals, technical employees, and managers in the class structure. It is sufficient, for example, to demonstrate that the marketable skills of these categories gives them distinctive economic advantages in the labor market. No conceptual difficulty is posed by the fact that ownership of skill assets does not correspond to any distinctive polarized social relation between skill owners and non-owners. All that is necessary is that skills (or, in principle, any other attribute) constitutes the basis for distinctively enhanced economic opportunities within exchange relations.

In a similar fashion, Goldthorpe argues that certain properties of work situations are the basis for the class structural differentiation of what he terms the "service class" from the working class.⁶¹ He argues that such characteristics as exercising managerial authority or having a great deal of discretion, autonomy, and responsibility on the job means that the employer-employee relation must involve high levels of *trust*. This trust element, in turn, means that instead of a simple employment contract, the employment relation is constructed as a "service relation," the critical element of which is the centrality of *prospective rewards* rather than simply current remuneration. Primarily because these elements of the work situation systematically enhance economic opportunities (in the form of stable careers), they constitute the basis of a distinctive class, the "service class."⁶²

60. Val Burrell, in a personal communication, suggests that the relatively low level of aspiration for theoretical integration of the distinct elements of class theory in the Weberian tradition is due to certain general properties of Weberian theory: "(1) as a theory of social action, the Weberian theory is absolved of having to specify structural forms of causation; (2) because Weberian theory is unabashedly *multicausal* and rejects the primacy of class relations, it is not forced to pack so much into its concept of class; (3) because Weberian theory focuses on *exchange* relations, it deals with phenomena that are closer to the empirical level of lived relations as compared with the production relations that Marxists must reconstruct theoretically." For a further discussion of these themes, see Val Burrell, "The Neo-Marxist Synthesis of Marx and Weber on Class," in *The Marx-Weber Debate*, edited by Norbert Wiley (London: Sage Publications, 1987), pp. 67-90.

61. Goldthorpe, "On the Service Class", *op. cit.* pp. 167-70.

62. There are places where Goldthorpe seems to suggest that it is the possession of power and responsibility as such, rather than the way in which such power-holding constitutes the basis for a distinct kind of employment relation, that provides the rationale for treating the service class as a distinct class (for example, Goldthorpe, *Social Mobility in Modern Britain*, pp. 39-40), but generally he seems to stress the ways in which work situations generate distinctive kinds of market situations (see especially "On the Service Class", pp. 170-71). Other writers (for instance, Lockwood, *The Blackcoated Worker*; Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*) using a similar set of concepts suggest in various places that the workplace *experiences* of actors under these different work situations also differ systematically and constitute part of the justification for treating these differences in work situations as the basis for class structural differences.

The service class, defined in this way, is constituted around a distinctive kind of employment relation with superordinate employers (capitalists, corporate boards, the state). Within this definition, there is nothing inherently antagonistic about this relation, and certainly there is no implied *inherent* antagonism between the service class and non-service class employees.⁶³ Of course, conflicts, perhaps even explosive conflicts, may empirically occur among these classes, but the concept of class itself is based simply on a notion of distinctive *differences* in material interests and conditions among classes, not inherent cleavages.

Given the fact that the middle class is so much easier to contend with in a Weberian framework, the question clearly arises: Why not simply jump ship and adopt the Weberian approach? Frank Parkin, for one, has argued that an impulse in this direction is implicit in the efforts of neo-Marxists to grapple seriously with problems of class analysis:

The fact that these normally alien concepts of authority relations, life-chances, and market rewards have now been comfortably absorbed by contemporary Marxist theory is a handsome, if unacknowledged, tribute to the virtues of bourgeois sociology. Inside every neo-Marxist there seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out.⁶⁴

Once you adopt a fairly differentiated Marxist class concept of the sort I have advocated, then in practice there is not actually all that much difference in the nature of the empirical class structure "variables" that are generated in neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian frameworks: after all, both acknowledge in one way or another that differences in property, skills/credentials/autonomy and authority are bases for differentiating locations in the class structure. If you compare Goldthorpe's seven-category class structure schema (or the more elaborate eleven-category schema that contains a range of subclass divisions) with my analysis of class structure in terms of multiple-exploitation mechanisms, for example, you will find that in practical empirical terms the contrast is not great.⁶⁵ Therefore, given that there is not all that much empirical difference between many neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian class maps, and given that the conceptual problems are greater within Marxist

63. Indeed, there is no inherent social relation of any sort between the service class as a general category and nonservice class employees. Sometimes there exists an authority relation linking these two, but not invariably. The relationship between the service class and the working class is basically understood via the distinctive differences in their respective relations to their employers rather than a relation which directly binds them to each other.

64. Frank Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 25.

theory, why not, then, just opt for the Weberian approach?

If the *only* reasons for adopting a Marxist approach to the concept of class structure was the practical usefulness of the categories derived from the conceptual framework for micro-level empirical analyses of class, then there would be little reason to choose it over a range of neo-Weberian alternatives. The reason for adopting a Marxist strategy, then, has to rest on a commitment to the theoretical constraints that Marxist theory imposes on class analysis. More specifically, unless one sees the value of embedding the concept of class structure in an abstract model of modes of production in which classes are fundamentally polarized around processes of exploitation, then there would be no reason to accept the difficulties this abstract framework generates for the concrete analysis of classes.

My personal commitment to these constraints is grounded in three broad considerations: one political or normative, one theoretical and one methodological.

First, *politically*, the Marxist tradition broadly understood continues to provide, in my judgment, the most comprehensive and compelling theoretical framework within which to understand the possibilities for and obstacles to emancipatory social change. While a range of rival frameworks for radical social theory have emerged in recent years, none of these has yet achieved the level of analytical power for understanding

65. For an extended discussion of the differences between these two schemas, see Gordon Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose, and Carolyn Vogler, *Classes in Modern Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1988). One comment on this book is in order. It was written by members of the British research group in the Comparative Project of Class Structure and Class Consciousness. The heart of the book is an attempt at empirically comparing various properties of my class concepts and that of Goldthorpe. While there is a great deal that is of interest in this book, it suffers from a relative inattention to the difference between problems in the *operational choices* made by different theorists, and disagreements in the conceptual categories themselves. Thus, for example, they criticize my conceptual map of classes on the grounds that I have allocated certain people—such as a skilled machinist with a subordinate apprentice—into "managerial" class locations who should be properly classified as workers (as they are in Goldthorpe's framework). This may be a valid criticism, but it is simply a criticism of an operational criterion adopted in my research, not of the conceptual issues differentiating the two approaches. In terms of managerial authority, Goldthorpe and I share virtually the same conceptual criterion: in both cases the issue is real (not merely nominal) participation in the making of significant organizational policy decisions (the exercise of authority in Goldthorpe's case; the control over organization assets in my case). In my empirical work, because of my specific analytical objectives, I was particularly concerned with avoiding incorrectly describing a manager as a worker, and thus I deliberately adopted a "generous" set of operational criteria for defining managerial locations. This may have been a bad operational decision, but it does not reflect conceptual differences between my approach and Goldthorpe's. If one wants to compare two conceptual frameworks empirically, it is essential that the comparison rigorously distinguish such operational problems from the conceptual problems at issue.

large-scale processes of social change as that offered by the Marxist tradition.⁶⁶

Second, *theoretically*, if one wants the concept of class structure simultaneously to figure centrally in analyses of both epochal social change and systematically structured social conflict within given types of society, then something very much like these conceptual constraints is necessary. To borrow a metaphor from rational choice theory, the ambition of Marxist theory is to link systematically an account of conflict within a given type of game to an account of the fundamental shifts from one kind of game to another. If class structure is to figure in such a theory, then it will need to be subjected to the kinds of conceptual constraints indicated above.

Finally, *methodologically*, I believe it is generally better to try to develop and reconstruct specific concepts within a clearly specified set of constraints than to do so in the absence of rigorously elaborated constraints. The Weberian tradition is generally characterized by quite ad hoc and diffuse conceptual specifications. While these may be grounded in certain abstract understandings of human action, they are not systematically derived from a general theory of society and its development. The choice between Marxist and Weberian concepts of class, therefore, is not strictly speaking a choice between concepts with equal theoretical standing. As Charles Camic has noted, the choice between Marxist and Weberian approaches is not really between two theories of society, but between a theory and nontheory.⁶⁷

The implication of this methodological point about the status of class concepts within the Marxist and Weberian traditions is that the choice between these concepts cannot be reduced to a simple choice between their "explanatory power" in any given empirical setting. As a general metatheoretical proposition one would expect that in any given particular empirical context, it is easier to construct empirical categories that are highly correlated with what one is trying to explain when the

66. To avoid misunderstanding, two points of clarification are needed to this statement. First, the claim is about the Marxist *tradition*, defined in an ecumenical fashion, not about any particular theoretical position within that tradition. Second, the claim is not that this tradition provides the most fruitful framework for analyzing every question of relevance to radical projects of social change, but simply that it provides the best overall framework for the general problem of understanding the obstacles to and opportunities for emancipatory transformation. Thus, for example, the Marxist tradition probably does not—and perhaps can not—provide adequate tools for understanding many of the important issues bound up with gender oppression. As a result, for the study of gender some kind of linkage between Marxism and feminism is essential. Nevertheless, in my judgment Marxism remains the most comprehensive and productive general framework for developing macrostructural theory of large-scale emancipatory possibilities.

67. Personal communication.

theoretical constraints on such constructions are relatively weak than when they are strong. This is precisely what gives "empiricism" as a strategy of concept formation such appeal: the researcher is relatively free to modify definitions and to juggle concepts (the categories of observation and analysis) in response to the specific exigencies of any given empirical analysis without worrying about violating any theoretical constraints on concepts. In these terms, the Weberian tradition of class analysis is relatively more "empiricist" than the Marxist tradition.⁶⁸ The problem, of course, is that at the end of the day it may be much less clear what one has really *learned* cumulatively from such empiricist exercises beyond the predictions and observations of the specific analysis, since the categories deployed are not orchestrated within an elaborated, more abstract framework. If we want to gain knowledge not simply *about* a particular empirical problem, but *from* that problem, it is crucial that the concepts used in the analysis be as integrated into a general conceptual framework as possible.

These comments should not be interpreted as a devious way of getting a Marxist approach to class analysis "off the hook" of having to demonstrate its empirical power. If indeed it is the case that Weberian categories are consistently better predictors of micro-level empirical phenomena—for example, individual class consciousness, or variations in individual economic welfare, or propensities to participate in specific patterns of class formation—then this would be a challenge for a Marxist approach.⁶⁹ It would then be incumbent upon a defender of class analysis within a Marxist framework to try to explain these Weberian-generated results within the theoretical constraints of Marxism. One

68. I am treating empiricism in this context as a variable tendency: different analyses can be more or less empiricist—that is, operating under more or less strictly imposed theoretical constraints. The opposite pole of empiricism is thus theoreticism. I should also note that my comments here do not constitute a generalized critique of empiricism: there are contexts in which relatively empiricist analyses may be productive. In general in the practice of research I think it is desirable to cycle back and forth between relatively empiricist and relatively theoreticist modes of analysis.

69. I do *not* think that the case for the empirical superiority of Weberian categories for micro-level analysis has been proven. For reasons cited in footnote 62 above, in the one case where there has been a sustained, systematic empirical comparison of my own class structure concepts with that of a prominent neo-Weberian, John Goldthorpe, there are sufficient methodological problems in the empirical strategy that it is hard to draw any definitive conclusions. In any case, even in that comparison, the differences in the two approaches were not very striking empirically. Other less extensive cases of empirical comparisons between neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian class concepts have also not found dramatic differences in the brute "explanatory power." See, for example, W. Johnston and M. Ornstein, "Social Class and Political Ideology in Canada," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 22, (no. 3), pp. 369–95; David Livingstone, "What Class? What Consciousness?" (unpublished manuscript, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1989).

hypothetical possibility, for example, might be something like the following:

Let us introduce a distinction between the process of class formation under conditions of stable social reproduction in democratic capitalism and under conditions of systemic capitalist crisis. Under the first of these conditions, categories of economic actors become collectively organized on the basis of divisions of *immediate* material interests—divisions defined entirely within the “rules of the game” of capitalism; under the second set of conditions, social categories have a much higher probability of becoming organized around “fundamental interests,” interests defined in terms of what game is to be played. Now, the kinds of distinctions in market situations embodied in Weberian class concepts do define divisions within immediate interests among sellers of labor power. Under conditions of stable reproduction, then, these are likely to become more salient as bases of social differentiation and collective organization. In short: Weberian class categories will have greater micro-level explanatory power under conditions of stable reproduction than under conditions of generalized economic crisis.

Other theoretical strategies for incorporating Weberian empirical results within a Marxist theoretical framework could also be entertained: these empirical findings could, perhaps, be treated as generated by the particular institutional organization of bargaining arrangements (as in the literature on corporatism), or as effects of the particular strategies of political parties (as in Przeworski’s analyses of social democracy). In each of these possible lines of theoretical argument, the empirical observations generated within Weberian class analysis would be taken seriously rather than simply dismissed out of hand. The task of Marxist class analysis, then, would be to explain the “conditions of possibility” of the Weberian patterns.

A critique of empiricism is thus not equivalent to a critique of empirical research or of empirically grounded knowledge. The point is simply that the task of adjudicating between alternative general approaches to class analysis—alternative “paradigms,” as they are sometimes called—is an arduous one, and cannot be reduced to the simple task of testing predictive power in a concrete empirical setting.

Weberian solutions, therefore, do represent a way of avoiding the conceptual knots generated by trying to conceptualize the middle classes within the Marxist tradition. But these solutions are purchased at the price of lowering the ambitiousness of one’s theoretical aspirations and abandoning the attempt at consistency with the conceptual framework—Marxism broadly conceived—that remains the most coherent general approach to radical, emancipatory social theory. Sticking with that framework, however, creates headaches; since the conceptual knots won’t disappear and cannot be indefinitely avoided by evasion, new

efforts at untying them must be attempted. In what follows I will present some of the elements which may facilitate such an attempt.

5 New Complexities

Recall the basic task at hand: to produce a more differentiated repertoire of Marxist class structure concepts capable of being used effectively at concrete, micro levels of analysis. In this enterprise, the problem of the middle class has loomed large, both because of the conceptual difficulties it poses for attempts at rendering more concrete the abstract, mode of production concept of class and because of its salience in the micro-level processes that affect class formation.

Each of my previous strategies of constructing a comprehensive concept of class structure was built around a specific analytical principle: the notion that a given location in a class structure could be simultaneously in two or more classes (strategy 1) and the notion that a given location could be situated with respect to more than one mechanism of exploitation (strategy 2). In each case I tried to build a differentiated map of the class structure on the basis of a single principle. I cannot at this point offer a third general strategy of this sort which will dissolve the anomalies and difficulties of the previous two. Indeed, it is not obvious that the proper way to proceed is to search for a new, unitary principle for solving the puzzle of the middle class(es).

The structural problem of the middle class, however, is not the only important issue involved in elaborating a concrete, micro-level concept of class structure. In this section I want to explore a number of new complexities that bear not only on the problem of understanding the middle class, but on the problem linking class structures to individual lives in general. In section 6, then, we will return to the problem of the middle class and see how these new complexities may help to clarify its class character.

In the past, all of my work on class structure has treated class structures as sets of relationally defined “locations” filled by individuals, in which a location was basically equivalent to a “job.” The class structure was thus essentially a relational map of the job structure. The underlying premiss of the analysis, as discussed in section 2 above, was that the nature of the material interests of *individuals* could be derived from an account of the social relations of production in which their *jobs* were embedded. The kind of complexity I introduced in order to generate a more differentiated map of class structures, therefore, was entirely preoccupied with the complexities of the relations in which jobs were embedded.