
The Status of the Political in the Concept of Class Structure

In rethinking the basic categories within Marxist theory over the past twenty years, Marxists have devoted considerable attention to the concept of class. They have both reconceptualized the place of "class" in the overall Marxist theory of society and social change and transformed the concept itself.¹

Many of the attempts at reconceptualizing have revolved around the relationship between the political and the economic in class relations. Traditionally, Marxists have regarded class structure as an economic category. Whether defined by property relations or by production relations, class structure was understood in strictly economic terms. Capitalists appropriated surplus-value because of their location within economic relations; workers produced surplus-value because they did not own their own means of production and had to sell their labor-power to capitalists. In this notion of a "class-in-itself," politics entered the analysis explicitly in only two ways: first, the state was seen as essential for reproducing this structure of economic class relations and for setting its legal presuppositions (guaranteeing contracts, enforcing property rights, and so forth); and second, politics was seen as central to how classes became organized in the class struggle. Indeed, the transition from a "class-in-itself" to a "class-for-itself" was traditionally viewed as a movement from the purely economic existence of classes to their political existence.

More recent Marxist analyses have stressed the importance of political relations in the very definition of class relations. Not only does the state establish the legal preconditions of property relations, but in a deep

1. For an overview of alternative perspectives on class within current Marxist debates, see Erik Olin Wright, "Varieties of Marxist Conceptions of Class Structure," *Politics & Society*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1981.

sense those relations themselves have a political dimension. Different theorists express that dimension in different ways – as power relations, relations of domination and subordination, relations of control – but in all cases they assert a notion of class relations that necessarily embodies a political aspect. Even at the most abstract level, they have argued, a purely economic understanding of class relations is unsatisfactory.

John Roemer challenges this recent trend in class analysis in his article, “New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Class and Exploitation.”² His central argument is that, at the most abstract level, classes can be defined strictly in terms of ownership relations. Political factors enter into the story only at “lower” levels of abstraction, particularly in the institutional conditions necessary for maintaining the basic property relations. In this chapter I will critically examine Roemer’s arguments in support of this thesis. I will argue that while, as Roemer argues, *exploitation* can be defined in purely economic terms, *class* cannot. Class is an intrinsically political concept and for it to serve its explanatory purposes it must have its political dimensions systematically represented within the concept itself. Before making these arguments, however, I will briefly situate the theoretical object of this discussion – class structure – within a broader context of class analysis and discuss what is meant by “political practices” and “political relations.”

Class Structure as an Element in Class Analysis

It is useful in discussing the concept of class to distinguish three separate elements in a class analysis: *class structure*, *class formation*, and *class struggle*. While each of these presupposes the other two and can be defined only in terms of its connection with the other elements, it is nevertheless important to make the distinctions. Class struggle refers to the practices of individuals and collectivities in pursuit of class interests; class formation designates the social relations within each class that

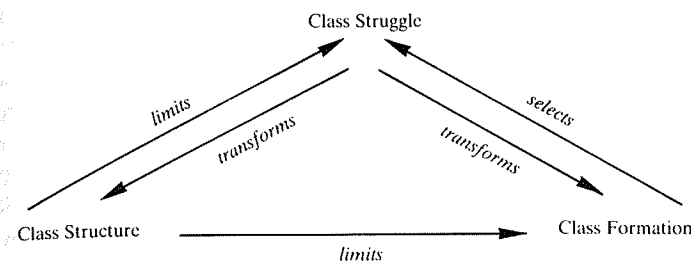


Figure 3.1 Interconnections among Core Elements of Class Analysis

determine its capacity to pursue its interests; and class structure is the social relations between classes that determine or shape basic interests over which classes-in-formation struggle. These three elements, then, are related as illustrated in Figure 3.1.³ The underlying structure of class relations limits the possible forms of collective class organization and the possible forms of class struggle. Within these limits class struggle transforms both class structure and class formation. These transformations imply that the limits on class struggle (and on class formation) are not permanently fixed but change in response to the struggles themselves. It is in this sense that the model can be seen as “dialectical”: struggles transform the conditions of their own determination.

This model is, of course, purely formal in character. There is no specific content given to any of the terms and no concrete propositions about the nature of the limits and transformations involved. The model provides a framework to specify a theory of class, but does not itself constitute such a theory.

One of the critical steps in developing a theory is to elaborate the logic of each of the elements in the model. In this chapter I will focus on the concept *class structure*, particularly on the role of political relations. I will not, except in passing, discuss the role of the political in class formation and class struggle. This is not to suggest that explicating the concept of class structure is somehow the key to the entire analysis, but simply that it is a necessary starting point.

2. John Roemer, “New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Exploitation and Class,” *Politics & Society*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1982, pp. 253–87. This chapter will not address Roemer’s innovative strategy for defining exploitation using game-theory models, nor his development and defense of the Class-Exploitation Correspondence Principle. I consider both of these to be extremely important contributions to the Marxist theory of exploitation and class. My critique is limited to the way Roemer deals with politics in his analysis. His claims about domination could be modified without any fundamental change in his general argument.

3. This model is, of course, a radically incomplete picture. The state, ideology, nonclass relations and interests, and many other factors have been left out. It is not meant to show how all the aspects of class are determined but simply to explain the interrelationships among them. For a discussion of the precise meaning of “limits,” “selection,” and “transformation” in this diagram and for further elaboration on what constitutes class, see Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, London 1978.

The Concept of the "Political"

In order to define the political, it is first necessary to define social practice. Following Althusser, "practice" can be defined as human activity that transforms some raw material, using specific means of production, into some product.⁴ Practices are thus human activities viewed in terms of their transformative effects in the world. Different practices are distinguished by the nature of the transformation (the nature of the raw material, of the means of production, of the transformative activity, and of the product). Economic practices can thus be defined as those activities that produce and transform *use-values*; political practices can be defined as those activities that produce and transform *social relations*; and ideological practices can be defined as those activities that produce and transform the *subjective experience* of those relations. Concrete, observed activities of people typically involve each of these types of practice. When workers work on an assembly line, they simultaneously transform nature into useful products (an economic practice) and produce and reproduce a particular structure of social relations (a political practice) and particular forms of subjectivity (an ideological practice).

These distinctions among practices correspond to distinctions among social relations. Thus, economic relations can be defined as social relations that shape or limit the activities of transforming nature; political relations can be defined as those social relations that shape or limit the activities of transforming social relations; and ideological relations can be defined as those social relations that shape or limit the activities of transforming subjectivity. Again, any concrete social relation may involve all three types. Using the example of the factory, we might say that the technical division of labor is primarily an economic relation in that it systematically shapes the activities that transform nature; the authority structure is primarily a political relation in that it systematically limits the capacities of workers to transform the relations within which they work; and the job structure (seniority, competition in internal labor markets) is primarily an ideological relation in that it systematically shapes the subjectivity of workers on the job.⁵

When we speak of "political practices" or "political relations," the terms should be understood as a shorthand for practices or social

4. See Louis Althusser, "On the Materialist Dialectic," in Althusser, *For Marx*, New York 1970, pp. 166 ff.

5. It would be incorrect, however, to say that such labels exhaust the character of actual social relations within the factory. The technical division of labor also influences capacities to transform social relations; authority relations also shape subjectivity; and so on.

relations within which the political aspect is the most important. This may be quite difficult to determine empirically in specific cases, as in the debate over whether educational institutions should be viewed as primarily ideological (producing forms of subjectivity) or primarily economic (producing skilled labor-power). We must nonetheless acknowledge this complexity of practices and relations and set the agenda for investigating the relationships among the various types.

The focus here is on the political dimension of class structure (the structure of class relations). As already stated, a political relation is a relation (or that aspect of a relation) that shapes the practices of transforming social relations. In these terms, the relations of domination and subordination are quintessentially political. To say that A dominates B is to say that A not only tells B what to do or in other ways directs B's activities, but also that A has the capacity to constrain B's attempts at transforming the relationship between A and B. To be a subordinate is not simply to be in a position in which one is given orders, but to be unable to transform the relationship of command-obedience. This is what distinguishes following instructions or suggestions in a reciprocal relationship and following orders in a hierarchical relation. They may be behaviorally equivalent in a given instance, but they are structurally quite distinct.

The question at hand, then, is whether this particular political aspect of social relations – domination and subordination – is essential in defining class relations. I will show in the next section that as John Roemer argues, such relations of domination are not necessary for a definition of exploitation, but that they are necessary for a definition of class relations.

Roemer's Treatment of Domination in the Concepts of Class and Exploitation

In his discussions of class and exploitation, Roemer adopts two rather different stances toward domination. In the first part of his analysis he argues that both class and exploitation can be specified strictly in terms of the distribution of property rights, without any reference to domination relations. At the end of the paper, when he introduces a game-theory analysis of exploitation, he argues that there is an implied relation of domination in the concept of exploitation and thus in class as well. What I will argue is that each of Roemer's formulations is half right: class does require domination relations; exploitation does not.

Let us first examine the strategy Roemer employs to investigate exploitation and class as direct consequences of the distribution of

property rights. His strategy is to examine several different economies that differ only in the kinds of markets that are allowed in them and in the character of the distribution of productive assets. In the course of these investigations he proves two propositions, both of which may at first glance seem quite surprising. First, he shows that exploitation can occur in situations in which all producers own their own means of production, and thus there is no domination whatsoever within the actual process of production; and, second, he shows that there is complete symmetry in the structure of exploitation in a system in which capital hires wage laborers and in a system in which workers rent capital. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Roemer demonstrates that exploitation can exist in an economy in which every producer owns his or her own means of production and in which there is consequently no market in either labor-power or means of production; the only things that are traded are final products of various sorts, *but* different producers own different amounts of productive assets. The result is that some producers have to work more hours than other producers to produce the exchange-equivalent of their own subsistence. What Roemer shows in this simple economy is that the result of trade among producers is not only that some producers work less than others for the same subsistence, but that the producers who work less are able to do so *because* the less-endowed producers have to work more. That is, an actual transfer of labor occurs from the asset-poor to the asset-rich. (The critical proof is that if the asset-poor person simply stopped producing – died – the asset-rich producer would be worse off than before and have to work longer hours.) Since in this economy the exploiter clearly does not in any way directly dominate the exploited – they both own their own means of production and use them as they please – this example shows that exploitation does not presuppose immediate domination relations. Of course, a repressive apparatus may be needed to guarantee the property rights themselves – to protect the asset-rich from theft of assets by the asset-poor – but no domination directly between the rich and poor is implied.

The second analysis is more complex. It compares the class structures on what Roemer calls a “labor market island” and a “credit market island.” On both islands some people own no means of production, and other people own varying amounts of the means of production. The distribution of these assets is identical on the two islands. And on both islands people have the same motivations: they all are labor-time minimizers for a common level of subsistence. The two islands differ in only one respect: on the labor-market island, people are allowed to sell their labor-power, whereas on the credit-market island, people are not allowed to sell labor-power but are allowed to borrow, at some interest

rate, the means of production. Roemer then demonstrates two things. First, that on each island there is a strict correspondence between class location (ownership of differing amounts of the means of production, including no means of production) and exploitation status (having one’s surplus labor appropriated by someone else). This is his important “Class-Exploitation Correspondence Principle.” Second, he demonstrates that the two class structures are completely isomorphic: every individual on one island would be in exactly the same class on the other island.

It is because of this strict functional equivalence of the labor-market island and the credit-market island that Roemer concludes that domination plays no essential role in the most abstract definition of classes. Roemer writes:

Exploitation can be mediated entirely through the exchange of produced commodities and classes can exist with respect to a credit market instead of a labor market – at least at this level of abstraction. In this analysis, coercion is still necessary to produce Marxian exploitation and class. However, it suffices for the coercion to be at the point of maintaining property relations and not at the point of extracting surplus labor directly from the worker. . . . These results thus force some re-evaluation of the classical belief that the labor process is at the center of the Marxian analysis of exploitation and class. . . . I have demonstrated that the entire constellation of Marxian “welfare” concepts can be generated with no institution for the exchange of labor. Furthermore, this has been done at the level of abstraction at which Marxian value theory is customarily performed.⁶

Political relations are important for institutionally reproducing class and exploitation, but they are not essential in the very definitions of these concepts.

This is not, however, the only assessment of domination made in Roemer’s analysis. Toward the end of the paper, when a game-theory approach is introduced, domination re-enters the analysis as a central feature. The idea is to compare the different systems of exploitation by treating the production system as a kind of game and asking if a coalition of players would be better off if they withdrew from the game under certain specified procedures. Different types of exploitation are defined by the withdrawal rules that would make certain kinds of agents better off. “Feudal exploitation” is defined as the situation in which agents would be better off if they withdrew from the game with only their

6. Roemer, “New Directions,” p. 266.

personal assets (that is, if they were freed from relations of personal bondage). Capitalist exploitation is defined as the situation in which agents would be better off if they left the game with their per capita share of total social assets (not just personal assets).

Roemer's game is a clever and insightful device, but it immediately runs into problems without additional specifications. For example, under the rules laid out so far, the handicapped could be said to exploit the nonhandicapped feudally, since the nonhandicapped would be better off if they withdrew with their personal assets from the game in which the handicapped are aided. Even more damaging, perhaps, if two islands, one rich and one poor, are arbitrarily grouped together even though they have no relations with each other, the poor island would be considered "exploited" capitalistically by the richer one (that is, it would be better off if it withdrew from the game with its per capita share of the combined assets of the two islands).

It is to avoid these and related problems that Roemer added a number of further specifications of the game-theory approach in footnote 15 to the paper. There he states:

a coalition S is said to be exploited at an allocation if two conditions hold: (1) that S does better than at the current allocation by taking its payoff as specified by the characteristic function of the game; and (2) that the complement of S (called S') does worse than at the current allocation by taking its payoff. . . . One way to pre-empt the invalid example might be to require a third condition for exploitation, namely, (3) that S' be in a relation of dominance to S . Since dominance is undefined and is as elusive a concept as exploitation, the addition of (3) is ad hoc . . . and reduces the sharpness of the game-theoretic characterization.⁷

This final criterion, Roemer's reluctance to include it notwithstanding, implies that a relationship of domination in some sense or other is required for the definition of exploitation and class. The handicapped do not dominate the nonhandicapped – indeed, if anything, the relations of domination are in the opposite direction – and thus even if they receive benefits from the assets of the nonhandicapped, they cannot be considered exploiters. Similarly, the poor island is not exploited by the rich one, since even though it would benefit from getting its per capita share

7. Ibid., p. 277.

of the two islands' combined assets, there is no social relationship between the people of the two islands.⁸

Why is it that, in the discussion of the game-theory strategy of analyzing class and exploitation, Roemer was compelled to introduce relations of domination into the basic definition of class, whereas in his earlier discussion he was not? It is because, I think, the initial discussion was confined to the problem of exploitation and class within commodity-producing economic systems, whereas the game-theory discussion was designed to explicate the problem across more fundamentally different economic systems, including non-commodity-producing economies. Since feudalism, for example, revolves around relations of bondage and since this is at the heart of the definition of feudal class relations, it is impossible to generate a purely economic definition of feudal classes. So-called extra-economic coercion must be considered part of the definition of class relations in feudalism, not simply an institutional boundary-setting political process. Within commodity-producing societies, however, it appears that political relations are separated from economic relations, and it becomes possible to talk about classes and property rights as if they did not imply domination.

This view of the relationship between class exploitation in commodity-producing systems is, I believe, incorrect. Let us return to Roemer's discussion of simple commodity production and the two market "islands." In each of these analyses Roemer convincingly shows that exploitation can be specified strictly in terms of property rights and their distributions. Domination enters the story of *exploitation* only externally, in the enforcement of property rights themselves.

But what about class relations? Here we notice that there is a critical difference between the analysis of simple commodity production and the two islands. In the simple commodity-producing case there are, in Roemer's view, no classes properly speaking, since all actors have the same relationship to the means of production, whereas in the two islands we do have classes: a class of owners and a class of non-owners. But why

8. I would want to add a fourth criterion to Roemer's three: the two groups not only must exist in a relationship of domination and subordination, but this relationship must in some sense causally explain the inequalities between the two groups. Prison guards, for example, dominate prisoners, and the prisoners would be better off materially (and in other respects) if they withdrew from the prison with their per capita share of the combined assets of guards and prisoners (or indeed with just their personal assets), but they are not necessarily exploited by the guards, since the income of the guards is not gained by virtue of their domination of prisoners (that is, they do not appropriate any surplus labor from prisoners). Roemer's second criterion – that S' be worse off – touches on this issue, but it is possible for S' to be worse off even if its position in the initial game did not explain the initial inequalities. (The situation in the prison example would be quite different, of course, if the guards obtained services from prisoners. Then part of the inequality between guards and prisoners would be causally explained by a relationship of domination and subordination.)

does owning matter to such an extent as to warrant the designation "class"? In the simple commodity-producing society depicted by Roemer there are people who may live a life of relative leisure because of the heavy toil of others. With relatively little modification of the conditions of his story we could also have people with very different levels of final consumption – rich and poor standards of living (rather than just high and low levels of toil). Why is not the distinction "rich" and "poor" itself a *class* distinction?

The reason is that the rich do not dominate the poor in the simple commodity-producing society. No social relationship binds them directly to each other in a relation of domination and subordination. In both the credit-market island and the labor-market island, however, the owners and non-owners are directly bound together in relations of domination and subordination. There is thus a crucial difference between having few assets, but still enough to produce one's own means of subsistence, and having no assets, and thus having to either sell one's labor-power or rent the assets of others. Rich asset-owners do not directly tell the poor asset-owners what to do – they do not directly dominate them. However, a new kind of social relation is generated between the asset-owner and the non-owner: owners do dominate non-owners.

This implies that the *property rights* have a different social content in the two cases. In the simple commodity-producing economy, property rights only specify a set of effective powers over *things* – productive assets. While of course such effective powers imply that one has the right to exclude other people from using those assets (or to prevent them from taking them), the right itself implies no ongoing relationship in which effective powers over people are exercised. In the credit-market and labor-market economies, property rights imply a set of effective powers over both things and people. The owner of assets not only has the right to use those assets but the right to control in specific ways the behavior of people who have no assets but who desire to gain access to assets. The labor contract and the credit contract both imply a relation of domination – an agreement on the part of those without assets to follow certain orders from those with assets.

Because property rights in the labor-market and credit-market islands entail such relations of domination and subordination, the exploitation relations in this case constitute a class relation and not simply a basis of inequality.⁹ Exploitation without domination, or domination without

9. G. A. Cohen makes a similar point in his discussion of classes and subordination. He argues that the distribution of ownership rights specifies class relations only when combined with relations of subordination and domination. See G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, Princeton, N.J. 1979, pp. 69–70.

exploitation, do not constitute class relations. Domination by itself, such as that of prison guards over prisoners, may be a form of oppression, but not class oppression. Similarly, exploitation without domination is not a form of class relations. Children certainly appropriate the surplus labor of their parents, but do not (at least in the normal sense of the term) dominate them and thus cannot be considered a "ruling class" within a family.¹⁰

Roemer is thus correct when he asserts that analyzing the labor process is not essential to specify the minimum conditions for capitalist exploitation. But he is wrong when he asserts that the labor process is also not essential for an abstract understanding of class relations in capitalism. At a very minimum, the capitalist labor process must be understood as a structure of relations within which capitalists have the capacity to dominate workers. For ownership to be the basis of a class relation, ownership rights must imply domination over the activity of workers. And this is indeed what the analyses of the labor process are concerned with: the forms of domination that govern laboring activity within production.¹¹

Implications for Class Analysis

The argument that the political is intrinsic to the concept of class at even the highest level of abstraction has a number of important implications

10. But note: where fathers both exploit and dominate their children, as is true in some societies, then the father-child relation could be considered a form of class relation.

11. As we will see in the next chapter, it can be argued that domination also enters the analysis of capitalist class relations because workers will generally prefer to labor at a lower intensity than desired by capitalists. Domination is thus needed in order to get workers to actually perform labor once they are hired, or in traditional Marxist terms, to transform labor-power into labor. Roemer, in a personal communication, has objected to this argument for the importance of domination on the grounds that the reduction of work effort by workers is parallel to the problem of capitalists "cheating" each other. Thus, just as Marx bracketed the problem of cheating in contracts among capitalists in his abstract analysis of capitalism, Roemer argues we should bracket the problem of "cheating" in the contracts between workers and capitalists, even though the problem of such cheating may be massively important in understanding the concrete institutions of hierarchy within production. Roemer's argument here hinges on the view that the labor effort problem is strictly analogous conceptually to capitalists cheating each other in exchange relations. There is, however, a fundamental difference in the two cases. Inter-capitalist exchanges are symmetrical, and thus cheating is equally likely to occur on both sides. Both parties to the exchange therefore have identical basic interests with respect to the problem of cheating. The capital-labor exchange is radically asymmetrical, and the problem of effectively extracting labor effort from workers is an inherent part of the relation created by the exchange. The actors have intrinsically different interests with respect to this issue. As a result domination is not a contingent property of the capital-labor relation that only enters at a lower level of abstraction; it is an essential aspect of the relation itself.

for class analysis. I will discuss several of these: implications for the labor theory of value; implications for the defense of the Marxist concept of class against its various bourgeois rivals; implications for the more concrete elaboration of the concept of class in capitalist societies; implications for the problem of classes in socialism; and implications for the general Marxist analysis of modes of production.

The labor theory of value

Roemer argues that the justification for choosing labor-power as the numeraire commodity for defining value and exploitation is that it is uniformly distributed throughout the population. This property is essential for a "proper" theory of exploitation, that is, a theory that classifies the poor as exploited and the rich as exploiters. Only labor-power, Roemer argues, has this property since "no produced commodity is uniformly distributed, since proletarians are dispossessed of all productive assets."¹² Furthermore, the purpose of the theory is to explain class struggle between capitalists and workers, and the use of labor-power does indeed generate a theory of exploitation that corresponds to the polarization between capitalists and workers.

Once we add domination relations directly into our idea of class, a different kind of argument can be built for the use of labor-power as the numeraire commodity or, equivalently, for the use of labor time as the metric for exploitation. Labor time, as opposed to any other metric for the surplus product, is simultaneously a measure of appropriation relations and domination relations. It is a measure of how much product is appropriated and how much human time is dominated through that appropriation. As appropriators, exploiting classes appropriate surplus *products* in one way or another, and if the appropriation relation was sufficient to define class relations, any basic good could provide a satisfactory metric for the quantitative aspect of class relations. But, as I have argued, the concept of class is intrinsically a political concept as well. The ideal metric of exploitation, therefore, should capture both aspects of class relations. Labor time does do this, for it identifies how much laboring activity is appropriated by virtue of domination in production.¹³

To justify the choice of labor time as the metric of exploitation we

12. Roemer, "New Directions," p. 274.

13. Labor time is, of course, only a *quantitative* measure of domination relations, not qualitative. Labor time by itself does not provide an adequate way of analyzing domination, but it is the one metric of value that expresses both the magnitude of the product and the magnitude of domination.

must argue that domination relations are as central to class relations as are appropriation relations. While I have shown that domination relations are implied in Roemer's analysis even though he relegates them to secondary importance, I have not yet provided a general argument in support of their importance in a class analysis. To do so, I will turn to a comparison of Marxist and non-Marxist concepts of class.

Marxist versus non-Marxist concepts of class

Non-Marxist concepts of class typically take one of two forms: either they are structured around categories of distribution without reference to domination, or they are structured around categories of domination without reference to distribution. In the first of these tendencies, class is defined either directly in terms of distributional outcomes (incomes) or in terms of the proximate determinants of those outcomes (occupation or "market capacity" – the Weberian approach). In either case, relations of domination are either absent from or incidental to the discussion. The second tendency, most explicitly found in the work of Ralph Dahrendorf, defines classes solely in terms of power, or authority relations. There are "command classes" and "obey classes" in every institutional sphere of the society, with no special status being given to economic institutions.

The Marxist account of class subsumes both of these images of class relations through the concept of exploitation. Class relations are the unity of appropriation relations (the Marxist way of theorizing categories of distribution) and domination. The justification for this view of class relations rests on two arguments. First, within production relations, domination without appropriation and appropriation without domination are unreproducible structures of social relations.¹⁴ Second, the coincidence of domination and appropriation within production relations provides the basis for understanding collective actors in the epochal processes of social conflict and social change.¹⁵ The first of these can be

14. This does not mean that in every social position, domination and appropriation perfectly coincide but that a complete non-correspondence cannot be stable. It is entirely possible in capitalist production for certain positions – middle and lower management for example – to be in a domination relation to workers without being in an appropriation relation. This kind of noncoincidence is the heart of the idea of "contradictory locations within class relations," a concept developed to decode the class logic of "middle strata." See Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, chapter 2. What I am excluding as a possible structure of production relations is one in which power is completely divorced from appropriation.

15. "Epochal social change" refers to fundamental, qualitative transformations of a society's social structure. In the Marxist tradition this revolves around a transformation from one mode of production to another.

termed the "conditions of existence" argument, the second, the "historical materialism" argument. Let us briefly examine each in turn.

The first thesis states that within the social relations of production any time the relations of domination and appropriation cease to correspond with each other the situation would be highly unstable and tend toward a restoration of correspondence. Imagine, for example, that as the result of a series of labor reforms, workers organized in militant trade unions won the capacity to collectively organize the process of work, including the capacity to allocate labor and the means of production to different purposes, but that the rights to the products produced with these means of production, and thus the appropriation of the surplus product, remained in private hands. Capitalists could not tell workers what to do or fire them, but because they owned the means of production and appropriated the surplus product they could effectively veto any investment decision made by workers (for example, they could decide to consume their surplus rather than let it be used productively). This would be a situation in which appropriation brought with it no immediate power of domination, and domination was unaccompanied by appropriation. In such a situation it seems likely that either workers would attempt to extend their powers to include actual appropriation *or* that the appropriators' capacity to block investments would become a new means of domination, thus undermining or limiting the apparent domination of production by workers.

A radical non-correspondence between appropriation and domination within the relations of production cannot endure for long periods of time. There are two basic reasons for this. First, the appropriation of surplus products requires power. Direct producers usually do not like to toil for the benefit of exploiting classes, and unless there are coercive mechanisms at the disposal of the exploiting class to force them to do so, the level of exploitation is likely to decline. Second, unless relations of domination enable people in positions of domination to command resources, that domination quickly reaches severe limits. In the end, it is the capacity to command the use of the social surplus that provides the material basis for effective domination within the relations of production.

A concept of class that unites the relations of domination and appropriation, therefore, is structured around the necessary conditions of existence of both domination and appropriation. But Marxist theoretical claims go beyond this kind of functional or reproductive argument. Historical materialism, in its various incarnations, is an attempt to understand the conditions and dynamics of epochal social change and social conflict, not simply the conditions for the reproduction of stable structures of social relations. To define class as the unity of domination

and appropriation is meant also to provide a way of understanding these problems.

A defense of historical materialism (or more accurately, of a modified version of historical materialism) lies outside the scope of this chapter, but I will offer a few comments on the suitability of the concept of class being discussed here for the theoretical ambitions of historical materialism.¹⁶ The heart of social change necessarily revolves around the transformations of the social use and allocation of productive time and resources. This has two important implications for the present discussion. First, since class struggles are structured by the social relations within which laboring time and resources are allocated and used, such struggles are always implicated in epochal social change (although this does not imply that all such change is reducible to class struggles; other kinds of conflict, involving other sorts of actors and determinations, may also be of great importance in specific historical circumstances).

Second, any social movement, whatever its social base and whatever its logic of development, that pursues projects of fundamental social change ultimately faces the problems of reorganizing how time and resources are controlled. If the system of class relations is left intact, then there are clear limits to the range of possible social changes. If those limits are to be surpassed, then the social movement must be a movement for the transformation of class relations. Ethnic, religious, nationalist, and other non-class movements are thus forced to engage in class-like struggles, struggles that systematically transform basic class relations.

To summarize: non-Marxist accounts of class stress either distribution (appropriation) or domination, but not the unity of these two within a concept of class exploitation. The Marxist attempt to combine these two elements within a single concept produces a much more powerful theoretical tool, both in terms of analyzing the conditions of the existence of classes (the relational requirements of their reproduction) and in terms of analyzing the conditions for epochal social transformation. For both of these purposes it is essential in analyzing class structures that classes be understood as having a political dimension even at the highest level of abstraction.

Implications for the concrete investigation of class structures

Abstract concepts are to be evaluated not only for their logical presuppositions and coherence, but for their usefulness in more concrete

16. For my views on classical historical materialism and its weaknesses, see Andrew Levine and Erik Olin Wright, "Rationality and Class Struggle," *New Left Review*, no. 123, 1980.

investigations. One of the advantages of a concept of class that is defined explicitly in terms of the unity of exploitation and domination relations is that it provides a strategy for examining capitalist class relations at more concrete levels.

For example, such a concept provides a way of understanding the class character of managerial positions within capitalist production. Managers can generally be understood as locations within the social relations of production that (1) dominate the working class, (2) are dominated by the bourgeoisie, and (3) are exploited by capital, but (4) are exploited to a lesser extent than are workers. Whereas the capitalist class and the working class are perfectly polarized on both the domination and exploitation dimensions, managers occupy what I have termed elsewhere a "contradictory location within class relations."¹⁷ They are simultaneously in the capitalist class and in the working class, occupying class locations that have some of the relational characteristics of each class. If capitalist class relations are defined exclusively in terms of exploitation relations, then most managers would fall into the working class. The specification of class in terms of both exploitation and domination thus provides a strategy for more concrete analyses of class.

The analysis of socialist exploitation and class

One of the most promising lines of investigation opened up in Roemer's work is the strategy for analyzing exploitation in socialist societies. Roemer suggests that socialist exploitation should be understood in terms of inequalities generated by the distribution of "inalienable assets," that is, skills. The exploiters in socialism are those who possess skills; the exploited are the unskilled. Given Roemer's formal criteria for exploitation, this would be a reasonable way of characterizing the distributional outcomes of skill inequalities in socialist societies.

The question, however, is whether or not this kind of exploitation can be considered a class relationship. If, in addition to benefiting from an exploitive redistribution, the skilled also dominated the unskilled, then this relationship would constitute a class relation. However, unlike the possession of alienable assets, the sheer possession of skills does not

17. See Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State*, chapter 2. In subsequent work, especially in *Classes*, I criticized this particular strategy for understanding the class location of managers. Instead of seeing managers as a special position defined by domination and appropriation, I argued that managers should be seen as exploiting workers through a distinctive mechanism based in their control of organizational resources. More recently, in "Rethinking, Once Again, the Concept of Class Structure" (chapter 8 in *The Debate on Classes*), I have criticized this second formulation and proposed a conception closer to the one discussed here. For a brief discussion of these issues see pp. 250-51 below.

logically entail domination of the skilled over the unskilled. Thus, it is possible to imagine a situation in which the skilled still received an exploitive redistribution of income, even though production was controlled by democratic bodies of workers that decide on production priorities and procedures and that give orders to both skilled and unskilled workers. This would be the case, for example, if the only way of inducing people to acquire skills is through heavy incentives that effectively redistribute income from the unskilled to the skilled. This does not imply, however, that within the actual organization of ongoing production it was the skilled workers who dominated the unskilled workers. In such a situation, the skilled could reasonably be regarded as a privileged stratum of workers, but not as a different class.

The two kinds of "socialist" societies we have described are likely to have very different forms of social conflict, even though they may share a similar pattern of distribution. If the skilled actually dominated the unskilled as well as exploited them, social conflicts would be likely to crystallize between the unskilled and skilled. If the skilled received exploitive redistributive benefits, but did not dominate the unskilled, conflicts would be less likely to take on a class-like character. Conflicts might develop over the motivational underpinnings of the incentive structures, but they would not necessarily develop between the skilled and unskilled. If, however, we fail to distinguish these two situations by failing to incorporate the notion of domination into the specification of class relations, then in both cases skilled and unskilled would have to be regarded as antagonistic classes.¹⁸

Modes of production

I argued earlier that to include the political in the structural definition of class would facilitate a class analysis of the social conflicts implicated in

18. The conditions under which socialist "exploitation" becomes crystallized as a new form of class structure bears directly on what Roemer terms "status exploitation." Although not analyzed extensively in his "New Directions," Roemer's status exploitation refers to situations in which a person receives exploitive net redistributions not by virtue of ownership of private property or skills, but by virtue of incumbency in some office, typically of a bureaucratic character. I would argue that when socialist exploitation as defined by Roemer becomes a form of class relations, that is, when it coincides with relations of domination, it will also tend to generate what Roemer calls status exploitation, but which might more appropriately be called "bureaucratic exploitation." While according to traditional Marxism, socialism is not a new mode of production but rather a transition from a class society (capitalism) to a classless one (communism), the concept of bureaucratic or status exploitation suggests the existence of a form of postcapitalist class relations, a new mode of production altogether. For a further elaboration of these issues, see chapter 6 below.

epochal social change. In this final section I will examine how this definition of classes affects the theoretical specification of the "epochs" themselves, that is, of "modes of production."

In distinguishing capitalism and feudalism as modes of production, Marxists have usually stressed that feudal exploitation required "extra-economic" coercion whereas capitalist exploitation was purely "economic." This formulation was typically accompanied by the claim that in feudalism politics and economics (or the state and production) were institutionally fused in the social organization of the feudal manor, whereas in capitalism the political and the economic are institutionally separated.

The argument of this chapter challenges this traditional view of the modes of production. Classes in both capitalism and feudalism imply domination, and not simply system-preserving coercion, but domination directly within the social organization of production itself. The issue is where the coercion is located, how it is organized, and how it is articulated to other aspects of the system of production (technical, ideological, and so forth). Instead of seeing the contrast between capitalism and feudalism as economic exploitation versus extra-economic coercion, the contrast should be formulated as follows: class exploitation based on non-coercion outside the labor process and on coercion inside the labor process versus class exploitation based on coercion outside the labor process and on self-determination inside. The issue, then, is how the political dimension of the production relations is linked to the economic dimension of those same relations.¹⁹

This way of understanding production suggests a simple typology of modes of production, as shown in Table 3.1.²⁰ I will briefly discuss three implications of this typology for class analysis: the problem of class formation, the analysis of politics in general, and the transition between

19. Ellen Meiksins Wood, in an important article, "The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 127, May-June 1981, pp. 66-95, makes a similar argument. She characterizes capitalism as a social system in which politics are made private (that is, removed from the "public sphere") through the organization of "politics of production" within the private factory. In feudalism, the political dimension of production coincided with the political dimension of the state - both were united in the feudal lord, and thus the politics of production had a "public" character. In capitalism, it is not that the political and the economic are institutionally separated, but that the political dimensions of production are institutionally separated from the state. For related arguments on politics of production, see Michael Burawoy, "The Politics of Production and the Production of Politics," *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 1, ed. Maurice Zeitlin, Greenwich, Conn. 1979.

20. This typology is only a first approximation. To deal effectively with such modes of production as the "Asiatic mode of production" or (if it is a legitimate concept) the "state bureaucratic mode of production," various distinctions within the category "coercion outside of the labor process" would have to be made. I will not explore these issues here.

Table 3.1 Typology of Modes of Production

<i>Mode of Production</i>	<i>Political Dimension Outside the Labor Process</i>	<i>Political Dimension Inside the Labor Process</i>
Slavery	Domination	Domination
Feudalism	Domination	Self-determination
Capitalism	Self-determination	Domination
Communism	Self-determination	Self-determination

modes of production, particularly from capitalism to socialism and communism.

Class formation

Traditionally, Marxists have understood the process of class formation as a transition from a "class-in-itself," which was seen as an economic category, to a "class-for-itself," which was seen as a political category. The analysis presented here suggests that classes can never be seen as purely economic categories, even at their most disorganized and atomized. They are always political. This suggests that instead of seeing class formation as a one-dimensional process of political formation, we should develop a typology of class formations. Classes can be formed around the political dimensions of production relations, around the political dimensions of the state, or around both. Without attempting to defend the argument, I suggest the simple typology of working-class formations shown in Table 3.2.

Politics

Politics cannot be analyzed simply as state-centered political processes and practices, that is, as politics oriented toward and structured by the state apparatuses. Instead, political analysis should focus on the articulation of what Michael Burawoy has called "global politics" and "production politics" - politics organized around the state and politics organized within the process of production.²¹ Burawoy, for example, analyzes the relationship between these two sites of politics in the transition from the colonial to the independent state in Zambia, paying particular attention to the politics of production in the mining sector.²² The mode of

21. See especially Michael Burawoy, "Terrains of Contest," *Socialist Review*, no. 58, 1981.

22. See Michael Burawoy, "The Hidden Abode of Underdevelopment," *Politics & Society*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1982.

Table 3.2 The Political Dimension of Class Formation

<i>Political Formation of Working Class</i>	<i>Formation Centered on Production Politics</i>	<i>Formation Centered on State Politics</i>
Syndicalist	Yes	No
Reformist		
social democratic	No	Yes
Revolutionary	Yes	Yes

production in mining, Burawoy argues, can best be characterized as a "colonial mode of production," a variant of capitalism that depended upon coercive forms of labor control and on certain forms of extra-economic coercion outside of the labor process. The whole social organization of the mines was built around this particular form of production during the colonial period. Burawoy then observes what happens when there is a drastic change in the form of the state and an accompanying change in the character of global politics, while the structure of the production system in the mines remains relatively unchanged. This meant in Zambia that global politics and production politics no longer corresponded with but instead contradicted each other.

Transitions between modes of production

The classic Leninist position on the transition between capitalism and socialism was that the proletariat had to *smash* the capitalist state apparatus and construct a new kind of state – a proletarian form of the state – that would enable the working class to be stabilized as a ruling class. Expropriating the means of production from the capitalist class plus restructuring the state were sufficient to consolidate socialism and accordingly to ensure the transition to communism. As became clear in Lenin's praise of Taylorism (scientific management), one-man management, and so on, no fundamental restructuring of production politics was deemed necessary.

The argument of this chapter suggests that the transition from capitalism to socialism requires a change in production politics as well as in global politics. If workers are dominated within production relations, it is hard to see how they could become a dominant class in any meaningful sense of the word, even if private ownership of the means of production were abolished. Under such conditions a new class system is likely to emerge in which public appropriation of the surplus product would combine with new forms of domination over direct producers. It is only

when the political dimension of production relations and thus of class relations is recognized that such a new class system can be adequately theorized. If forms of appropriation of surplus labor are the only criterion for class, and if modes of production are understood in purely economic terms, then the public appropriation of the surplus product becomes *ipso facto* socialist production.

John Roemer's work is one of the few genuinely novel contributions to the Marxist theory of exploitation and class to be produced in recent years. It opens up possibilities not only for deepening our understanding of exploitation within a Marxist perspective but for critically assessing the competing claims made by the different theoretical traditions. His analysis is less satisfactory when he extends his idea of exploitation to the problem of class. The value of the Marxist concept of class lies in the way it links together economic and political relations within a single category. Classes are not determined solely by relations of exploitation or by relations of domination, but by the two together. If domination is ignored or made marginal, as it is in some of Roemer's analysis, the concept of class loses much of its power in explaining social conflict and historical transformation.