Forthcoming in Social Theory and Practice Vol. 47, No. 4 (October 2021): 603–626
DOI: 10.5840/soctheorpract2021916136

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Why Does Class Matter?

Abstract

This paper explores an under-examined theme, which is who or what is the working class and what is wrong with the situation that members of this class share. It argues that class divisions impose a unique harm for a diverse and interdependent group within capitalist societies both in spite and because of differences among group members. Class matters not just because it creates economic groups in which some are rich and others are poor, but because competition creates conditions that militate against solidarity, toward cleavage and conflict. Class is a constraint on collective self-determination and, therefore, a source of domination.

Keywords: structural injustice, labor, class, domination, solidarity, republicanism

Introduction

This paper explores an under-examined theme, which is who or what is the working class and what is wrong with the situation that members of this class share. In sum, I argue that class domination is a unique harm for a diverse and interdependent group within capitalist societies both in spite and because of differences among group members. My view differs from earlier accounts of class domination because I claim that internal divisiveness is constitutive of processes of class formation. I argue that social differences are salient for understanding who or

what the working class is and, thus, the character of the social solidarity that is required of the class to overcome its situation of domination. The problem, however, is that workers are subject to shared constraints and norms that inhibit such solidarity. Workers are collectively vulnerable to arbitrary power in a way that is not reducible to some other combination of variables like racism or sexism.

In my view, there is a deficit in contemporary philosophical thinking about class as compared to other groups. Perhaps this deficit is a hangover from the New Left when many radicals challenged the notion that class is a central analytical and political category. Much of the debate about class has since been superseded by debates about race and gender. But that was a long time ago. This paper leaves to the side familiar debates about whether one can develop a "total" theory of domination rooted in class theory to focus on the narrower problem of what, exactly, class illuminates about a broader field of domination that includes other paradigmatic instances of group domination. I do, however, make criticisms of theorists of multiple systems of domination to interrogate whether they have a conception of class domination that is adequate for answering my question.

Indeed, I begin by examining class conflict theory and the criticisms made of that theory by feminists and critical theorists of race. These critics point out that theories of class conflict are reductive if they cannot acknowledge the power of other kinds of domination that are not reducible to class differences. The latter is the problem of "class reductionism." Second, I show that critics of class reductionism often become reductive in a different way when they fail to solve the problem of class reductionism. It is no longer clear what normative issues are at stake in discussing social class, implicitly reverting to a normative framework in which the central

problem with class is inequality, not domination. A normative focus on inequality is as reductive for class as it is for other social groups.

Finally, I reconceptualize class by thinking of the economy as a normatively structured social practice. My view is practice-theoretical rather than structuralist, which is an historically influential Marxian approach to explaining class conflict. I go "inside" the economy to identify sources of domination based on the experience of capitalist competition instead of analyzing the economy as a structure from the "outside." Disabling the idea that there is an inside and an outside to the economy is an important step toward overcoming both kinds of reductionism that I identify above. Instead, I argue that the notion that there is an inside and an outside to such a socially and politically robust practice as class conflict is misleading and perhaps ideological. I then defend a pragmatic, class conflict approach to understanding the social harm of class that permits the view that internal division within the working class is constitutive of who or what the working class is. I focus on how the labor market creates shared vulnerability to arbitrary power for workers who are dependent on it and on one another.

(1) Class Theory and its Discontents

What makes class differences problematic under capitalism depends on the social theory that one uses to understand capitalism's class structure. Stratification theories, on the one hand, assume that class is a continuous variable. Stratification theories designate class locations based on distributive patterns that result from market exchange, although they vary as to which variables they consider important. Stratification theories see groups in terms of who has similar "life chances" on the market based on individual consumption habits, education level, lifestyle

preferences, cultural capital, and income (Davis and Moore 1945; Davis 1948; Otis and Duncan 1987). Theorists derive group-based affiliations from the relationship between individuals and certain resources that, in turn, depend on what group differences one wants to highlight or explain. For these theories, class could have an infinite number of gradational types and there may be no "capitalist class" or "working class" as such. Theorists explain what is wrong with class differences based on the notion of unfair advantage or disadvantage in having access to the combination of resources that they think provide the best life chances in a competitive market.

On the other hand, class conflict theories argue that class is a categorical variable and that there is something intrinsically problematic about class divisions. For class conflict theories, the problem is not relative advantage or disadvantage, but domination by a dominant class (capitalists) of other classes (most centrally workers). A classic starting point in class conflict theory is the *Communist Manifesto*, wherein Marx and Engels identify class conflict as a source of domination. Marx and Engels write that capitalism produces "a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labor increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce" (Tucker 1978: 479). Workers are dependent on access to a labor market because they do not own any means of production (i.e., land, tools, raw materials, facilities, and transport). Later, in *Capital,* Marx argues that capitalist agriculture displaces workers from property, which creates a compulsion to sell one's labor for access to means of subsistence (i.e., a wage). Marx argues that class societies exploit laboring classes by appropriating labor's surplus, as in the case of slaves or feudal serfs. Capitalist exploitation occurs when workers produce more than is needed to reproduce their own lives and capital appropriates the surplus to do with it what they will to maintain market shares. The imperative to maintain market shares

induces competition between capitalist firms to make profit, which incentivizes investing in labor-saving technology to increase labor productivity and decrease labor costs (Marx 1990). As labor productivity increases, capitalism creates a pool of unemployed or underemployed workers that act as perpetual competition with those more gainfully employed. Exploitation leads to domination because workers do not control the conditions of their labor and they are subject to interests that are antagonistic to their own.

The advantage of class conflict theory is that, by defining class categorically, it explains how domination aggregates to the level of a social group in a non-arbitrary way. Domination here is normatively stronger than anything the stratification theorists claim is harmful about relative advantage or disadvantage. The disadvantage is that positing a theory of social group domination places burdens on class conflict theory that need not worry stratification theories. For instance, Marxists claim that domination leads to struggle between classes over who controls work and the distribution of resources. By extension, they argue that workers can cohere as a collective political agent to challenge the basis of the domination they face. There is reciprocal, but asymmetric, dependency between capital and workers; workers may be dependent on the labor market, but they also have, potentially, a great deal of power because their employers depend on their labor and because the market organizes workers into workplaces where they can then organize themselves. Workers have, in some way, a unique emancipatory claim to self-determination based on the fact of domination, their strategic position, and its political potential. Stratification theorists need not worry about defending the idea that class conflict leads to emancipatory claims for self-determination since they do not define class categorically as group domination. They do not profess a need to overcome class divisions *tout court*.

Critics of class conflict theory have consistently challenged the latter, more ambitious and normatively laden point while acknowledging its advantages for understanding a paradigm case of social group domination. They deny that class illuminates a unique claim to self-determination for workers. In fact, feminists and critical race theorists argue the contrary, which is that class conflict theories are reductive. "Class reductionism" means failing to acknowledge the power of other kinds of domination that are not reducible to class differences or economic effects. Critics focus on the *intra-class conflict problem* within the working class to argue that class conflict theories are blind to domination outside of the exploitative relationship between capital and labor. Their blindness is a result of a normatively problematic and artificial ideal of unity within a dominated class, which obscures a broader field of domination.

The first problem is that class conflict theories posit a simplistic, dyadic theory of power between capital and labor. Heidi Hartmann writes that Marxists only "see women's oppression in our connection (or lack of it) to production. Defining women as part of the working class, these analyses consistently subsume women's relation to men under workers' relation to capital" (Sargent et al. 1981: 3). According to Hartmann, class is a "gender-blind" analytical concept that obscures the reality that men have an interest in subordinating women to serve their needs. Hartmann argues that it is often the case that efforts to promote the interests of working-class men will mean subordinating the interests of women and reinforcing their dependence on men. She cites the fight for a family wage for male workers during the Great Depression as one such example, which expelled women from the industrial labor force. Women do not simply fill functionary roles to maintain capitalist relations because capitalists are not their only oppressors. Hartmann's seminal essay inspired debate about whether capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy are each a system of domination. Some theorists rejected the notion of "systems"

altogether. Others diminished the role that class plays in reproducing social difference (Sargent et al. 1981; Hansen and Philipson et al, 1990; Walby 1990; Jónasdóttir 1994; Vogel 2013).

The important thing to take away from Hartmann's central objection is that some workers have an interest in dominating other workers or non-workers. Weberian sociologists take up the same issue and argue that exploitation is one way that a social group closes off resources to another, but there are also other ways. Max Weber argues that life outcomes are determined by social positions within the market, which motivates workers to secure wealth. Workers hoard opportunities to better their life chances within the market (Weber 2013: 926-8). Frank Parkin clarifies that not only are workers exploited (as in their surplus is appropriated by capital), workers also usurp (as in exclude others from) control over resources like credentialing and favorable employment contracts from other workers. Exploitation and usurpation are two parallel dynamics driving market outcomes; they are a process of dual closure by both appropriation and exclusion (Parkin 1983: 89-116). Charles Tilly similarly claims that the two central dynamics of the market are "opportunity hoarding" and exploitation (Tilly 1999). Thus, for a Weberian, there are practices of exclusion that influence the process of exploitation (Murphy 1985). Parkin's main example of how exclusion influences exploitation is that skilled white industrial workers in South Africa adopted exclusionary strategies toward unskilled blacks that were so beneficial that one should consider these workers a part of the ruling class, not the working class. Here the class map changes insofar one can define the social position of white South African workers by the nature of their closure strategy, not their place in the productive process.

The issue of closure is particularly salient when considering racism within the working class. Literature on race and class in whiteness studies provides abundant testimonial detail that racism and sexism prevent class unity and conceal exploitation (Allen 1975; Saxton 1990). One

thesis is that racism originates within the working class itself as "a way in which white workers responded to a fear of dependency on wage labor and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline" (Roediger 2000: 13). In the United States, industrial work discipline prompted white workers to construct an image of Blacks that embodied pre-industrial cultural traits that white people longed for and simultaneously distanced themselves from. Mills points out that white American workers have therefore historically identified themselves as white far more than they have identified themselves as workers, struggling against white capital but attempting to maintain their ontological standing as white workers (Mills 2000: 165-70). According to Mills, Marxists fail to see this dynamic because Marxism is implicitly committed to a social ontology in which what is *most* real about people is their labor. In other words, class is ontologically deep, and race is ontologically superficial or ideological. This ontology obscures race (or, gender) as a material reality that creates a qualitatively different set of social norms and experiences for people of color. Instead, Marxists see these social differences functionally, as a tool used to divide and conquer a working class that they assume is unified and homogenous (Mills 2000: 153-55).

Omi and Winant sum up a common thread of all the objections to class conflict theories by claiming that class-based approaches to understanding social difference are limited by economic determinism. Regarding race, they argue that class-thinking makes an important contribution to understanding race in particular insofar as it asks, "How do we create and sustain ourselves materially, practically?" However, placing class inequality at the center of analyses of race is limited by always having to look outside the economic sphere to find independent, causal variables that explain racial divisions. The economy is embedded in a society, so people bring values from outside the workplace into it (Omi and Winant 1986: 65-8; Cashmore and Jennings

et al. 2001: 277-85). Thus, there are race conflicts and discrimination "at the point of production" and conflicts in society that are not reducible to class conflicts. One could, I assume, say something similar about other social differences as well.

The presence of intra-class conflict casts doubt on the idea that workers can or ought to be a collective political agent, leading to the conclusion that class conflict theories are reductive. Consonantly, the working class has not played the political role that such theories hope. The working class has had a difficult time uniting itself and is more often fragmented and dispersed. Some even conclude that racism and sexism are *most* prevalent in the working class (Brittan and Maynard 1984). Contrary to Marxian expectations, the working class is not a social group in which "social agents, perfectly constituted around interests, wage a struggle defined by transparent parameters" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 104-5). The aggregate conclusion of these critiques is that the notion of a working class with generalizable interests or a normatively salient claim to self-determination as a collective is politically naïve.

(2) Two Types of Reductionism

I define reductionism in two ways. A theory is reductive in my sense (a) if it cannot acknowledge that domination is not reducible to class differences, or (b) if it cannot use a conception of class difference to shed light on normatively salient aspects of other kinds of domination. Critiques of class conflict theories insist that such theories are reductive in the first sense but are themselves reductive in the second sense. They omit an analysis of how class conflict reproduces social differences and what the class character of those differences are. Critics reproduce in theory an analytical distinction between the "inside" and an "outside" to the

economy that is a cornerstone of neoclassical economic theory. I argue that this distinction is misleading and perhaps ideological. As a result, alternatives to class conflict theories fail to explain why class is itself normatively problematic in relation to social differences that are not themselves reducible to class divisions. The unfortunate consequence is normative emphasis on inequality and its disproportionate effects, not on domination, as the harm perpetuated by class conflict, which is just as reductive for class as it is for race or gender.

First a word about neoclassical economic theory. Neoclassical economists assume that divisions within the market based on social group differences, like race or gender, are an aberration that result from the attitudes of imperfect individuals, not market competition itself. They make this assumption because they idealize capitalist competition with the notion of "perfect competition" to model market behavior. Perfect competition posits a large and homogenous market, that all consumers are expertly well-informed about commodities and their prices, that firms cannot influence prices, that labor is perfectly mobile, and that firms can enter or exit the market without cost. Under these conditions, economists hypothesize about the conditions for pareto optimal equilibrium, where the quantity supplied for every commodity, including labor, equals the quantity demanded. Thus, there are no involuntarily unemployed workers and every similarly skilled worker is paid the same wage. The model of perfect competition abstracts from the conditions of real competition in the world. If actual outcomes do not match the model's, neoclassicists posit that some variable that is external to the market must be adjusted to more accurately depict what is happening within it. For instance, if labor is not perfectly mobile due to restrictions on some group entering a labor market, then the reason for that restriction is the behavior of some group or institution that distorts the model by limiting labor's mobility (i.e., unions, xenophobia, sexism, racism).

The model of perfect competition is not only an abstraction, but an idealization of market competition. It makes some economic behaviors normatively salient, giving them a positive normative valence, then assumes that deviations from these value-laden behaviors are exogenous to the market as such. Within this framework, there is an analytical "inside" and "outside" to the norms that are germane to the market, and racism and sexism fall on the outside. My claim is that critics of class conflict theory basically retain this inside/outside distinction, which is reductive. As a result, alternative theories of how race and gender interact with capitalism's class structure fail to make salient normatively problematic issues regarding class. This claim might seem counterintuitive since the critics that I discuss also seem to accept some part of the Marxian story about exploitation and class conflict, so let me explain.

One can reproduce the same assumptions as neoclassicism from a different starting point. For neoclassicists, the market is basically indifferent to identity, so one must explain divergent labor market behavior through extra-economic prejudices, education levels, cultural influences, lazy dispositions, or the ignorance of the working class. For the critics that I discussed in the previous section, too, the fact that bringing workers together need not entail solidarity within the economy requires an extra-economic explanation. The subjective failures of workers are not the labor market's fault, but the fault of external processes that "shape" market competition. Racism and sexism shape the process of class conflict from the outside by preventing the requisite subjective affinities and political unity on the inside. Critics then conclude that capitalism may only bring white workers or male workers together in solidarity, so the effects are not what class conflict theories assume.

Consider multiple systems theories. Theorists of multiple systems (patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy) like Hartmann and Mills critique class conflict theory by identifying other

systems of social differentiation. Mills, for instance, explicitly retreats from the terrain of analyzing class and race together, toward analyzing white supremacy as its own system. Mills uses Roediger's cultural analysis of white working-class racism to support his view that whites have an "ontological stake" in white supremacy that shapes their interests. It is thus possible for white workers to forego their economic interests to maintain a privileged ontological position. Mills thinks that race shapes the contours of collective action and political solidarity because class brings workers together, but white supremacy divides them (Mills 2000: 164-9). Racism (extra-economic) shapes the class structure (economic). The inside/outside framing of the economy holds even if one admits that workers are exploited.

In my view, multiple-systems theory reifies the analytical distinction that originates with neoclassicism. Of course, the irony is that the view itself results from an attempt to conceptualize class in a less narrow, more relational way. But one need not vindicate earlier theories of class conflict to show that their critics do not resolve the problems that are germane to those theories. Indeed, the verb "to shape" invokes the image of someone making pottery with a wheel; hands running along the outside of a system in motion. Many words have been used to describe this basic image—intertwining, co-determining, interlocking. All retain the basic idea that the market is, in principle, indifferent to identity and then point to normative features that are ostensibly external to market principles explain why what happens on the inside is different than what one may expect based on abstract models. The outside "shapes" the inside of the market in a specific locale, which explains both market failures and failures of solidarity.

Weber, too, reproduces the neoclassical paradigm. Weber conceptualizes class as a uniquely economic group by distinguishing between status and class. Status groups differentiate based on non-economic qualities like honor, prestige, ethnicity, and race. Weber defines the

"economic" as the market, where workers are both exploited and vying to hoard resources. By his account slaves are an example of a status group, not a class, because they are not subject to market mechanisms. Weber argues that "status groups hinder the strict carrying out of the market principle" (Weber 2013: 930). I understand this statement to mean that status groups, not economic groups, motivate in-group closure and social differentiation, though Weber makes it unclear why some types of resource closure dictate others. Parkin, who is a prominent Weberian sociologist, concedes that workers try to usurp resources from one another within a framework determined by exclusive ownership of the means of production by capital (Parkin 1983: 93). In other words, capital-labor relations set the terms on which labor resists capital and intra-class cleavages transpire. So, what makes the capital-labor relation sufficiently distinct to shape how workers usurp resources? How does the former set the terms for the latter and what should one find problematic about that?[1] Like with multiple systems theories, thinking of class in a distinctively economic way, while also trying to explain social differences that are not reducible to class, fails to explain how status and class are related to one another.

For both multiple-systems theories and Weberian theories, reifying the neoclassical distinction between what is internal and external to the market is the result of continuing to idealize the non-discriminatory features of market competition. For neoclassicists, discrimination by employers is irrational unless something else interferes. For critical theorists of race and gender, market competition leads to solidarity among workers by homogenizing the labor force, unless something else interferes. As Iris Young and Cinzia Arruzza point out, the problem with adding on systems (or status) is that one fails to transform how one thinks about class and the economy in the first place (Arruzza 2016; Sargent et al. 1981: 43-69). One leaves the conceptual

[1] Thanks to Nantina Vgontzas for sharing this objection with me.

apparatus of the deficient theory of class intact and in doing so fails to challenge the core assumptions that make it deficient, which is that it is an "economic" theory and not a theory of "extra-economic" domination. A reductive concept of class conflict as an economic phenomenon continues to oblige theorists of race and gender to argue that whatever differentiates workers is somehow extra-economic.

The result is a tiresome chicken and egg dilemma regarding what causes what, which necessarily eclipses the problem of what one should find problematic about the role that class plays in reproducing social differences to begin with. In idealizing market competition, such theories transform class into a background *tableau* upon which other forms of domination do their work. This theoretical trend has had the pernicious effect of naturalizing the labor market and the scarcity that comes with it as a background condition for other kinds of domination. Thus, it obscures the class character of domination in capitalist societies writ large. In fact, the labor market can begin to look benign compared to other systems or status differences, as if it is mostly an opportunity for some people within the working class to take advantage of at the expense of others instead of the form of domination that creates the scarcity in which such advantage-taking can take place. When the labor market begins to look more like an opportunity for some workers and less like a fundamental constraint for the entire working class, it is a sign that one is no longer talking about domination but of inequality.

The problem with inequality discourse, which encompasses the stratification theories discussed in the first section, is that inequality is always a relation between two objects with respect to some good, so a critique of inequality depends on how one thinks about the condition of scarcity relative to its effects. I argue that the critics of class conflict theory fail to carry out such a critique, so now it is not clear why class is itself normatively problematic within a broader

field of domination. In other words, why does class matter? My view is that the normative conclusion for multiple systems and Weberian theories is ambiguous: Class is bad, but not that bad, since the labor market is not *in principle* racist, sexist, ableist, transphobic, and so on. Class inequality might affect certain groups disproportionately, but the disproportionate effects of inequality might really be the fault of workers for extra-economic reasons, not capitalism. In sum, these critics claim that class conflict theories are reductive, but they are reductive in another way. The reduction lies in failing to analyze class beyond inequality as a social and political dynamic, not just an economic one.

(3) For Structures, Against Structuralism

A theory is reductive in my sense if it cannot (a) acknowledge the power of kinds of domination that are not reducible to class divisions, or (b) use a conception of class conflict to shed light on other kinds of domination. Some theories have insisted on (a) and others have emphasized (b), but my view is that what is needed is a concept of class that enables (a) and (b). To develop such a concept, one must take stock of the limitations of influential structuralist theories of class. By "structuralist" I mean those who emphasize the idea of impersonal domination by abstract structures. In this story, Louis Althusser is the structuralist *par excellence*, based on the influence of his brand of structuralism on the critiques of class theory within the New Left, including those discussed in the previous section, and the assumptions that they make. In diagnosing structuralism's limitations, I argue that structuralism makes a "black box" out of class struggle, which motivates my turn to a practice-theoretic framework for

understanding class conflict and the class formations that emerge from it. Mine is a more pragmatic understanding of class structure.

My view is that Althusser's structuralism is deficient because it does little to explain the normative texture of class conflict. By "texture" I mean the salient features of the horizontal and vertical relationships in which workers forge bonds of solidarity, come to identify with one another, and thus engage in class conflict. Conversely, the normative texture includes the features of these relationships that prevent those bonds from forming, which is also a part of engaging in class conflict. In brief, the structuralist paradigm that results is vague about what motivates class struggle, which empties the notion of meaningful normative content. This empty way of conceptualizing class struggle is a result of a social theory that counterposes the economic structure with human agency. Call this the *upscaling human agency problem*, which conceptually reproduces the inside/outside dimension of the neoclassical frame by explaining class struggle, or lack thereof, by way of processes of ideological indoctrination within the working class.

In general, structuralists explain class conflict by describing the interaction between the "productive forces" and the "relations of production." The productive forces are the overall capacities that a society must utilize, which include raw materials, available technology, and labor-power. The relations of production are the sum of the economic, political, social, and ideological relationships in which people engage throughout society. Specifically, Althusser argues that the relations of production keep the capitalist organization of the forces of production in place (Althusser 2014: 22-7). Althusser distinguishes between the "mode of production" (the economic infrastructure or "base") and "social formation" (the sum of the relations of production) and argues that the former unifies the latter "in the last instance" (Anderson 1980:

54-7). Ideology enters Althusser's schema because he thinks that domination in the economic infrastructure cannot be kept intact without interpellation. "Interpellation" is the name Althusser gives for becoming a subject in an ideologically driven environment. Relations of production in the state, family, and other such structures interpolate subjects to maintain the structure of domination. Althusser defines class in terms of objective locations within production and ascribes corresponding roles to class actors, except, for Althusser, these roles are complicated by the fact that the subjectivity of class actors is interpolated by dominant ideologies. Althusser thinks that the economic infrastructure distributes agents across antagonistic social positions in which they must play characteristic roles, but subjects would not play their role if they were not interpolated in a particular way. Ideology is thus the glue that locks workers into domination within the economic base (Poulantzas 1973).

The curious thing about Althusser's structuralism is that he insists that class struggle is an historical inevitability. Yet, as Ellen Wood points out, he transfers agency upward and away from concrete practices of workers within the economic base and toward the realm of ideological contest to explain how and why class struggle does or does not transpire (Thompson 2008: 1-210; Wood 2016: 99-100). Althusser is mostly interested in why class struggle does not transpire and looks to ideological interpellation to make sense of why the motor of history so often falters. Put differently, the failure of workers to live up to what the theorist anticipates as their historic role in bringing about a revolution against capitalism prompts the theorist to look outside of the economy to explain their disappointment.

The turn toward ideology to explain the persistence of domination both reproduces the inside/outside paradigm for thinking about the economy and makes the economy into a black box. Thus, for Althusser, a rigid determinism continues to prevail in his representation of the

economic base. To his credit, Althusser seems to acknowledge that his notion of this infrastructure is rigid, technical, and thus economistic when he writes that his theory, "[D]oes not at all provide us with the key to what happens *in the base itself*; very precisely, to *what happens* in the base (in the unity of the forces of production/relations of production) that is capable of fostering and then unleashing the class struggle…" (Althusser 2014: 163, emphasis in original). Indeed, I think Althusser describes production itself as though it is a largely technical process, distinguishable from the agency involved in ideological struggle against the state, media, etc (see Wood 1989: 43-6). The question that remains is what motivates or does not motivate class conflict under adverse ideological conditions, which Althusser also admits in writing that "[W]e are far from having worked out a theory of this process" (Althusser 2014: 163). My view is that the upscaling human agency problem arises when one finds it unnecessary to explain processes of class formation, which refer to processes in which people collectively "organize social forces within class structures in pursuit of class interests" (Wright 1996: 379). This lacunae in the theory leads one to posit an awkward, abstract dichotomy between the economic structure and the human agency that reproduces it. In this case, it is not surprising that critics of structuralist Marxism also reproduce the internal/external framing of what counts as economic or extra-economic behavior and interests.

E.P. Thompson, author of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), famously makes a similar criticism of Althusser. As he notes, "The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making" (Thompson 2008: 9). Thompson argues that classes form "at the intersection of determination and self-activity" in a process of people experiencing concrete conditions and handling constraints in more or less conscious ways. Another way of putting this point is that people engage with the process of production and learn

to identify with one another based on its conditions, which are the conditions left to them by struggles that came before. They have ideas about these conditions, which they use to influence the productive process. I interpret Thompson as suggesting the intervention that I want to make here, which is that class struggle has a texture—it is a normatively structured practice, socially and politically robust, and if one conceptualizes this practice a bit more pragmatically then one will avoid thinking about class in a narrow, economistic (and therefore idealized) way to begin with.

My shift is toward a practice-theoretical view of class conflict and formation. I view the constraints of the capitalist labor market as basically an instance of problem-solving (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018: 148-52, 158-64). Problem-solving does not have a positive or negative valence in itself. Problems need not be bad, and solutions need not be good. They are the combined and uneven effects of people's responses to the objective constraints that they face. I take Thompson's lead in suggesting that the constraints that working people face, those that will make them a class, are problems. Of course, I will argue that these problems are bad, as are some of workers' solutions, but there might be other problems that are not bad or less significantly bad. I follow Rahel Jaeggi in arguing that a problem is objective and subjective, at once given and made from within social practices.

Like Jaeggi, I posit that a social practice is an informal, repeated, and rule-governed behavior that is the condition of possibility of certain institutions without being reducible to them (Jaeggi 2018: 56-8). Practices are normatively structured, habitual behaviors that with rules that are tacitly understood by those who participate. Such understanding that can make a practice successful as the type of practice that it is. That a practice is successful or not depends on how one evaluates the practice based on certain norms that are implicit, yet inherent to it. Norms

explicitly and implicitly prohibit certain things and permit other things by defining and establishing "the conceivable modes of behavior within a form of life by normatively structuring the space of possibilities of action itself" (Jaeggi 2018: 95). For instance, a retail salesperson who works commission at a luxury goods store and wants to sell something understands that they must reduce the feeling that their relationship with customers is instrumental. Many elite shoppers find instrumental relationships distasteful, so the personal connection with the sales employee makes the customer comfortable enough to buy products. The implicit norm of a successful interaction is that one ought to reduce a client's discomfort by elevating the personal, not instrumental dimension of the sale. The tacit awareness is that an instrumental relationship should not feel like an instrumental relationship.

Social practices produce problems along with normative resources for resolving problems. The normative structuring of a practice is what provides the resources for identifying that there is a problem that must be resolved and sets the terms for how one goes about resolving it. A case in point is that if the normative structure of a commercial transaction is instrumental, then one must develop mannerisms, affects, and verbal cues to make customers feel comfortable enough to buy commodities. However, the normative and cultural resources that one uses to resolve the problem of having to sell something might fail. Perhaps the customer is cynically aware that there exists an instrumental relationship and cannot be made to feel comfortable. In a practice-theoretical perspective, the norm that one must make customers feel comfortable is not contingently related to the act of selling something. The norm stands in necessary relation to the action by setting the terms of its success or failure in resolving the problem. In this sense, norms have a functional relationship to practices, which means that normative resources are not "outside" the problems to which they attend (Jaeggi 2018: 205).

I argue that what is needed, and what a practice-theoretical framework entails, is to enrich our understanding of the experience of what Marx would call the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx 1990: 899). That normative resources are not outside of the actions that portend to solve problems sheds a different light on the shared constraints of labor market dependency and competition among working people. As I will show, the social differences among workers that concern theorists of race and gender continue to emerge from previous attempts to resolve the problems incurred by this shared constraint. Thus, racism and sexism have a class character in capitalist societies regardless of whether capitalism is their original cause. They are a developmental pattern of capitalist class formation, or a part of how people learn to make sense of the inequality of and within the working class, the problem of market dependency, and the historically bounded constraints inherited from previous attempts to resolve that problem.

(4) Beyond Class Reductionism

A practice-theoretical perspective can grasp why the "working class" is dominated as a group under capitalism and why the reproduction of harmful social differences has a class character. In this section, I argue that class domination is a unique problem that is irreducible to any other form of domination like racism or sexism, and it partly explains their persistence under capitalism. To sum it up, class is a condition of collective vulnerability among individuals to both shared constraints and to one another. Specifically, workers are vulnerable to the arbitrary power of employers and they depend on one another to mediate that power. Yet both the objective constraints of the labor market and the functional norms of market competition inhibit workers' capacity for self-organization, which is what inhibits solidarity among workers *and*

makes the working class dominated as a class. Capitalism continuously undermines capacities that are necessary, if not sufficient, for collective self-determination.[2]

First, I define who is a worker. In my account, if one confronts dependency on the labor market as a problem and one depends on collective action to address it, then one is working class. I will explain further how this differs from managers and professionals below. This definition side-steps the issue of defining workers narrowly by occupation or type of work, and thus pigeon-holing who workers are. The upshot is being able to accommodate changes to the job profile and the demographics of the labor market, since it does not rely on one labor regime or manifestation of class consciousness within it to identify who is a worker (i.e., "white male industrial workers"). It also includes reproductive labor. Reproductive labor is labor that reproduces life in terms of housework, child-rearing, and emotional support. Someone must perform the labor that reproduces life outside of work, and families organize who does this labor by considering the relative market competitiveness of family members. It might make practical sense, for instance, for pregnant people to exit the labor market to have children and a more consistent laborer to stay in it to support a household. A single parent household will not have so many options or must rely on extended family to stay at work. My view is that the conditions of reproductive labor are congruent with the constraints that the labor market places on individuals, families, and households. My definition holds that the members of working-families are working class, whether they are themselves a part of the formal labor market or not.

Second, I posit that internal divisions within the working class are constitutive of class formation. Social differences emerge as a product of class formation, so they are part and parcel

[2] This section is indebted to the argument made in Claus Offe and Helmut Weisenthal, "The Two Logics of Collective Action: Theoretical Notes on Social Class and Organizational Form," *Political Power and Social Theory* 1(1)(1980): 67-115.

of who the working class is and how it got to be that way. Racism and sexism, the most prominent examples of such differences, are thus "ontologically thick" *vis à vis* class in the sense that they are bona fide constraints on class unity. Yet I find that it is a red herring to then argue on this basis that race and gender form different systems as others have done, or that the constraints such differences place on class unity are a sufficient reason to doubt that the working class has a claim to self-determination. On the contrary, I argue that the working class has a claim to self-determination because capitalism systematically undermines requisite capacities for exercising it. In brief, the original premises of the class reductionism debate were wrong, and I propose an alternative based not on an idealized model of market competition, but on a realistic one. This more realistic model provides greater insight into the problem-solving dynamics of the labor market.

The most important point of divergence between my account and earlier ones is that, contrary to neoclassical assumptions, I posit that workers *cannot be a homogenous group*. Howard Botwinick and Anwar Shaikh argue—persuasively, I think—that *real* capitalist competition does not lead to the labor market equilibrium that neoclassical economists expect. This point is significant because it creates a stark contrast between the social harmony that neoclassicists presume in the market at large. For a more radical audience, it dispels with the notion that capitalism brings workers together and automatically motivates at least some group of workers to be in solidarity with one another. To the contrary, if market competition is generally not perfect, then one can expect no less from labor market competition among workers. The notion of real competition is a step toward anti-essentialism, which would assume that there are automatic affinities among groups of workers based on some part of their identity. I claim that the labor market guarantees solidarity to no one.

The reason that workers cannot be a homogenous group is that real competition incentivizes technological innovation and investment in capital-intensive machinery by firms, in order to increase labor productivity. The point is to cut costs. Greater efficiency decreases the relative need for labor and pushes workers from capital-intensive to labor-intensive industries, where wages tend to be lower. Labor intensive industries and firms have less room to maneuver in cutting wage costs because their wage bill is a higher proportion of their total costs. Firms within the same industries also adopt technological innovations at different times depending on their fixed capital costs (i.e., capital that cannot be moved around easily, like production facilities and machinery). New firms might enter the market with state-of-the-art equipment, but existing capitals will gradually begin to replenish and expand their facilities with the latest techniques. Fixed capital takes a long time to depreciate, so there is little reason to assume that this process will result in equilibrium, just a continual re-differentiation in the conditions of production as lesser firms attempt to catch up with the conditions of "regulating" capitals that set the standards for an industry (Botwinick 1993: 146-7; Shaikh 2016: 259-326). The result is that, from the point of view of capital, there is constant pressure to make some sectors of the workforce redundant through technological innovation.

From the point of view of workers, unemployment, underemployment, or a diminished position within the labor market is a perpetual threat. This condition holds unless working-class organizations intervene to mediate this process—and they might not, or not do so sufficiently well. Hence, collectively, workers face a contradictory reality. They face a set of structural dynamics in which competition among capitals differentiates them by skill level, job classification, and level of productivity, but they must also rely on one another to shift the burden of labor market competition among themselves. Consider two-tiered wage systems, in which

employers classify workers into two or more groups: one that works part-time in a firm and another that works full-time. Normally, firms justify this pay scale by saying that they need to cut wages but want to protect the seniority and productivity of more experienced workers. Thus, employers say they will pay more for more experience and productivity but hire less experienced workers at lower wages to avoid increasing labor costs. In turn, there are two options for workers: They can allow their workplace to be fragmented into more or less privileged workers (full-time and part-time), or they can reject the tiering in defense of part-time workers. The former makes the full-time workers more vulnerable in the long run. Once they accept the logic of needing to cut wages, it will be more difficult to defend against similar moves by employers later. Full-time workers will then lack the collective power that they would have gained from being in solidarity with part-time workers. For instance, the United Auto Workers (UAW) were forced to accept tiering in their 2008 contract as a condition of the U.S. government bailout of the auto industry. The arrangement was supposed to be temporary to help employers through the financial crisis of that same year, but, once in place, tiering became harder to remove than expected. Ultimately, it drove a wedge between older and younger employees (Jacobs 2009). One could, perhaps, say something similar about tenure-track and adjunct faculty at universities today.

Compare the situation of workers confronting the imposition of a two-tiered wage system versus the situation of professionals or capital-managers. In the case of two-tiered wage systems, one can see that workers are collectively vulnerable as they are dependent on the same constraints. The severity of those constraints, in turn, depends in a significant way on how the group responds as a group: Do they show solidarity with part-time workers or not? By contrast, professionals and capital managers are examples of groups who do not experience collective

dependency. Individuals in these groups have lots of autonomy over their labor and can retain that autonomy by negotiating with their bosses as individuals, without worrying about depreciating working conditions as a result of failed collective action. They also have control over the labor of others who do depend on collective resistance. High level management is, of course, also often remunerated mostly by profits (such as stock portfolios) and thus does not depend on a wage. These are qualitatively different experiences of vulnerability than what workers face.

Labor market dependency creates historically unique obstacles for the collective action. The choice to be in solidarity might seem obvious, but it is not obvious when workers are not yet organized collectively, or their organization is not strong enough to give confidence to workers whose place in the labor market is under threat. Thus, it is more likely that the more employers fragment the pay scale, the more workers want to retain *their* job classification and their skill level. Workers tend to adopt a defensive posture toward retaining their advantages *vis-à-vis* one another rather than fighting it out with their boss. Hence, workers engage in practices of labor market closure along the lines of similar job classifications, skill, and seniority, as well as race, gender, or ethnicity in order to protect relative advantages. In a word, the labor market creates incentives among workers against collective action because it creates internal pressures toward group differentiation.

These practices of resistance to labor market dependency have an important normative structure. Real competition poses first-order problems that workers must resolve, and yet the norms that enable market competition to function "well" are the resources that workers have for resolving these problems. For instance, the most familiar functional norm of many capitalist societies is that hard work should earn social entitlements among parties who start off as

equals—status, respect, stability, social protection, even wealth. Unfortunately, the experience of real competition regularly contradicts the expectations that are implied by this norm, which are that hard workers will succeed in accruing certain entitlements and others will fail. It should not be a surprise that workers adapt these norms to justify strategies of closure.

Workers, like everyone else, often justify social differences based on their understanding of the entitlements that they think their hard work deserves and how others deviate from their understanding of the relationship between work and desert. It is, in fact, a problem-solving strategy that seems reasonable based on immediate circumstances. Thus, Black workers are lazy, Latin American workers are stealing jobs, women workers are unreliable (so motherhood is natural), Muslim workers are hostile to liberal norms, and so on. At this level of abstraction, I make no general claims about why it is some specific groups and not others who are subject to such essentialist ideas about their character. I think this question is largely an empirical one—for instance, a settler-colonial state with a slave population that reproduced demographically like the United States has a particular history of the integration of Black people into the labor market—so I make the make the more modest claim that the emergence of such ideas is a developmental pattern of market competition. Essentialist ideas, whether biological or cultural, naturalize social differences by resolving a social contradiction between the normative expectations of the market and its differentiating reality, which is why racism and sexism have a class character under capitalism. Conversely, essentialist ideas defend one's position in the market as deserved, indeed as natural.

The texture of class conflict makes it clear that the working class has never been a purely economic group. *Contra* Weberian and multiple systems theories, status-based norms are neither layered on top of inter-class divisions nor do they intervene in them from the outside to produce

intra-class divisions. Class is a racialized, gendered group because market competition is a process of social differentiation and the norms that are functional to it and adapted by its practitioners are constitutive of that process. Therefore, social differences among workers in general need not come from sources that are external to "the economy" and class conflict partly explains the specific forms they take. Put simply, class formation is complexly political, which, in my view, does not undermine the notion that the working class is dominated or that it has a claim to self-determination. To the contrary, my view is that this situation is one in which workers are subject to arbitrary power both because of and despite their differences. Workers need to associate collectively in order to exercise capacities for self-determination, but the normative and material conditions of their work systematically undermine their capacity to do so, thus making workers subject to the prerogative of employer incentives that have the effect of enforcing workers' dependency on the labor market (Gourevitch 2015; Cicerchia 2019).

If competition differentiates workers and has a normative structure that creates expectations of success and failure on the market, then it follows that for workers to organize themselves as a group, they require an alternative normative structure corresponding to practices of collective action. Historically, "solidarity" has been this alternative, so I focus on it here to illuminate why it is precisely its precarity and non-inevitability that makes the problem of class under capitalism one of domination. Many theorists have noted failures of worker solidarity as symptoms of privilege and stopped theorizing class domination there. By contrast, I argue that if one incorporates the systematic constraints that capitalism places on solidarity into the argument about why the working class is dominated, then one can interrogate the scarcity that creates relative privileges. Thus, against the grain, I argue that constraints on solidarity are a part of the class problem, not an external one.

I define solidarity as a practice of identifying someone else's different, but related interests as one's own, conversely, of identifying one's self-interest with a collective good (Leipold, Nabulsi, and White et al. 2020: 149-71).[3] Normatively speaking, it is the belief that one ought to fight on behalf of that someone else because one acknowledges and is invested in a collective political project. In a world devoid of solidarity, the normative resources that are imminent to solving the problem of market dependency obscure the interdependence and vulnerability that workers share. In such a world, workers tend to try to shift the burden of labor market competition but cannot eliminate it. Such attempts at burden-shifting are often too narrow and are thus self-defeating over time. What is obscured is that the labor market distributes the burden of competition across the class as a whole. By contrast, solidarity resolves the dilemma of labor market dependency by highlighting interdependence. An example is the old labor movement slogan of "an injury to one is an injury to all," which, seen from a practice-theoretical perspective, can be understood as the learned common sense of those who had witnessed the failures that came with assuming that their skill group, racial group, or seniority group will be the privileged ones to avoid the changes and pressures of the labor market. The notion of solidarity was not an abstract idea in that context, but a norm embedded in the collective practice of those who understood that attacks on those who are unlike them would likely become attacks on themselves. It was functional to understanding what made collective action successful.

The problem is that a counterculture in which solidarity is the prevailing norm is a precarious business under the best of circumstances. At their strongest points, workers establish their own institutions, like trade unions and political parties, which preserve the historical memory of shared vulnerability, as well as knowledge of how and why one engages in practices of

[3] See a related account where Alex Gourevitch argues that labor republicans thought of solidarity as a habit in Gourevitch 2015.

solidarity. However imperfectly, they mitigate the precarity involved in the self-organization of the class by teaching workers to see the contradictions of the market as a problem. Yet the organizational and normative vigilance required of workers to maintain such collective strength contrasts starkly with the relative ease with which employers organize to sabotage collective action through manipulation, intimidation, divide and conquer strategies like race baiting and red baiting, political engineering, and in some cases outright repression, to say nothing of their capacity to interfere in the conditions of work that makes workers vulnerable on the market in the first place. Most importantly, the changing conditions of production themselves are a persistent threat to preserving solidarity as a common sense among the vulnerable even where workers have been successful in the past.

I think recognition of the stakes of such vigilance, of collective success or failure, is why Black socialists in the U.S. have so often argued for the racial integration of the labor movement and depicted the issue of racism within it as a failure of the entire movement, not just for Black workers. Hubert Harrison was a leading Socialist Party member who called racism within trade unions "suicidal" in an essay called "The Negro and Socialism" published in the *New York Call* in 1911 (Heideman 2018: 107). C.L.R. James argued that the Black struggle in the United States is central to the development of the only kind of class struggle that can succeed in creating structural changes in how society is organized (McLemee and Paul Le Blanc 2018: 179-87). Early Black left feminists like Maude White and Claudia Jones persistently argued that the working-class movement ignored the problems of Black women at its own peril (McDuffie 2011: 51-2, 166-71). For these socialists, class interest and anti-racism went hand in hand in learning to exert durable forms of collective power over and against the precarious terrain of the market.

Consider an example of both learning to be in solidarity and the precarity of solidaristic practices. In the United States, the Congress of Industrial Unions (CIO) and its predecessor the American Federation of Labor (AFL) took different approaches to organizing Black workers that reflected changing conditions of production. The AFL organized itself on a craft basis, involving only skilled workers. These craft unions were often virulently racist and closed ranks to protect their access to skilled work. Before and after the Great Depression, American industry began employing hundreds of thousands of low-skilled workers. The craft model of unionism became increasingly unable to address the needs of auto, steel, rubber, and mining workers. The CIO, on the other hand, argued to "organize the unorganized" to meet these needs. Because these industries absorbed Black labor in greater numbers, the CIO argued to unionize workers across racial lines to disrupt the particularism of craft unionism. Thus, the labor movement learned through the failure of the AFL that it had to organize interracial unions. This learning process did not survive the red-baiting McCarthy era, which purged the labor left, particularly the Black left, from working class institutions for their communist sympathies (Marable 2007: 12-37). If one combines this repression with the onset of deindustrialization, then what emerges is a labor movement that was unable to transmit a learning process in which solidarity had emerged as a counterculture.

Constraints on solidarity are thus a part of what defines class domination because they reinforce dependency on the labor market and further subject workers to the arbitrary power of employers to act on their own prerogatives. Mitigating this dependency and attaining some modicum of self-determination is a burden that falls almost entirely upon workers under adverse conditions. What should inspire us is that workers continue to organize, to learn, and to resist. Although one would not glean it from much academic discourse about racism and whiteness,

they even learn to be anti-racist. Whatever its shortcomings, solidarity has been a practical principle of resistance for those claiming that they should determine the conditions of their actions and indeed, their very lives.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that class represents a unique harm done to a social group. Unlike multiple systems theories or structuralist theories, I adopted a practice-theoretical view of the economy. As a result, my account illuminates normatively problematic issues that these earlier theories could not make salient. Labor market competition, as any job seeker already knows, is a normatively structured practice. It stands to reason that those norms are constitutive of the struggles through which classes form and why they differentiate. My view is that capitalism's working class is large and diverse, yet interdependent and collectively vulnerable.

To reiterate, my goal has not been to arbitrate debates about the specific way that race or gender affect class formation. Class has been comparatively undertheorized, so I explained why previous theories of class have been insufficient. What I hope to have made possible is greater understanding of the role that class plays in reproducing various injustices during capitalist development. It should no longer be possible to observe absences of worker solidarity and to claim that class is not operative causally or normatively. Instead, my argument implies that class is always operative. One can now ask what constraints are stronger or weaker that make solidarity likely or unlikely in a historical conjuncture. Moreover, if class is always operative, and race and gender are heterogeneously distributed across the class structure, then one can

interrogate how the class politics of working-class members of these groups differ from, or conflict with, other strata.

To answer my original question, class matters not just because it creates economic groups in which some are rich and others are poor, but because competition creates conditions that militate against solidarity, toward cleavage and conflict. Class is, therefore, a constraint on collective self-determination. Conversely, it is a basis for a claim to self-determination by many if not most people in capitalist societies. Whether workers develop the requisite consciousness required to make this claim and negotiate their differences sufficiently to expand the scope of human freedom within or beyond capitalism is not a philosopher's prediction to make. I know that they have done it before, and that as a result of their struggle to lead lives free of domination, many of us today owe them ours.

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