

---

---

# A General Framework for the Analysis of Class Structure\*

*Erik Olin Wright*

---

---

## **The Point of Departure: Neo-Marxist Analyses of Class Structure**

At the heart of the recent resurgence of Marxist theorizing on the problem of class has been what might be termed the “embarrassment” of the middle class. For all of their disagreements, all Marxists share a basic commitment to a polarized abstract concept of class relations. Yet, at least at first glance, the concrete class structures of contemporary advanced capitalist societies look anything but polarized.<sup>1</sup> This empirical evidence of a large middle class has provided critics of Marxism with one of their principal arguments against Marxist class theory. In response, a variety of solutions to the problem of the middle class have been proposed in the recent Marxist debates.

Without going into any detail, it is possible to identify four broadly different strategies that Marxists have adopted to deal with the conceptual problem of nonpolarized class positions within a logic of polarized class relations.<sup>2</sup> First, the class structure of advanced capitalist societies really *is* polarized; the “middle class” is strictly an ideological illusion. This position deals with the problem of the middle class by

---

\*This essay appeared in 1984, just before the publication of *Classes*. It represents a basic summary of the core arguments of the book, and does not reflect any of the new thinking of the problems of class which has been stimulated by the subsequent debate.

1. The scope of this paper will be restricted to the problem of class *structure* as such. This is not to suggest that class structure exhausts class analysis: the problems of class formation, class struggle, and class consciousness are also important and will be touched on briefly toward the end of the paper. My assumption is, however, that the decoding of the structural properties of class is a conceptual precondition for elaborating these other aspects of class theory. For a discussion of the interconnection among these aspects of class analysis, see E.O. Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1978), pp. 97–108.

2. For a more detailed review of these alternatives, see E.O. Wright, “Varieties of Marxist Concepts of Class Structure,” *Politics and Society*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1980).

denying the problem itself. Second, the middle class should be viewed as a *segment* of some other class, typically a "new petty bourgeoisie" or "new working class."<sup>3</sup> In this strategy the basic class map of capitalism remains intact, but significant internal differentiations within classes are added to the analysis of class structure. Third, the middle class is really a new class in its own right, completely distinct from either the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, or the petty bourgeoisie. Sometimes this class is given a specific name, such as the Professional Managerial Class,<sup>4</sup> sometimes it is simply called "the New Class."<sup>5</sup> By adding entirely new classes to the class structure, this approach more radically alters the class map of capitalism than the class-segment strategy. Fourth, the positions aggregated under the popular rubric "middle class" are not really in a class at all. Rather they should be viewed as locations that are simultaneously in more than one class, positions that I have characterized as "contradictory locations within class relations."<sup>6</sup> Managers, for example, should be viewed as simultaneously in the working class (in so far as they are wage laborers dominated by capitalists) and in the capitalist class (in so far as they control the operation of production and the labor of workers). This strategy departs most from the traditional Marxist vision of class structure since the very meaning of a "location" is altered: there is no longer a one-to-one correspondence between structural locations filled by individuals and classes.

I no longer feel that this fourth solution is satisfactory. Specifically, it suffers from two important problems that it shares with most other neo-Marxist conceptualizations of class structure: it tends to shift the analysis of class relations from exploitation to domination; and it implicitly regards socialism—a society within which the working class is the "ruling class"—as the only possible alternative to capitalism.

### *Domination versus Exploitation*

Throughout the development of the concept of contradictory class locations I have insisted that this was a reformulation of a distinctively

3. The leading proponent of the concept of the "new petty bourgeoisie" is N. Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975). For the new-working-class concept, see S. Mallet, *La Nouvelle Classe Ouvrière* (Paris: Seuil, 1963).

4. B. Ehrenreich and J. Ehrenreich, "The Professional and Managerial Class," *Radical America*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1977).

5. A. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979); and G. Konrad and I. Szelenyi, *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1979).

6. E.O. Wright, "Class Boundaries in Advanced Capitalist Societies," *New Left Review*, no. 98 (1976); and *Class, Crisis and the State*. See also G. Carchedi, *The Economic Identification of Social Classes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

Marxist class concept. As part of the rhetoric of such an enterprise, I affirmed the relationship between class and exploitation. Nevertheless, in practice the concept of contradictory locations within class relations rested almost exclusively on relations of *domination* rather than exploitation. Reference to exploitation functioned more as a background concept to the discussion of classes than as a constitutive element of the analysis of class structures. Managers, for example, were basically defined as a contradictory location because they were simultaneously dominators and dominated. Domination relations were also decisive in defining the class character of "semiautonomous employees"—locations that, I argued, were simultaneously petty bourgeois and proletarian by virtue of their self-direction within the labor process—since "autonomy" defines a condition with respect to domination. This same tendency of substituting domination for exploitation at the core of the concept of class is found in most other neo-Marxist conceptualizations of class structure.

For some people, of course, marginalizing the concept of exploitation is a virtue, not a sin. My own view, however, is that this is a serious weakness. The marginalization of exploitation both undermines claims that classes have "objective" interests and erodes the centrality Marxists have accorded class in social theory.

The concept of domination does not in and of itself imply any specific interest of actors. Parents dominate small children, but this does not imply that they have intrinsically opposed interests to their children. What would make those interests antagonistic is if the relation of parents to children were exploitative as well. Exploitation, unlike domination, intrinsically implies a set of opposing material interests. If we wish to retain some sense in which the interests of individuals as members of classes are not simply whatever interests those individuals subjectively hold, then the shift to a domination-centered concept renders this more difficult.<sup>7</sup>

Domination-centered concepts of class also tend to slide into what can be termed "the multiple oppressions" approach to understanding

7. The concept of "objective interests" is, needless to say, highly contested, and even if we place exploitation at the center of our analysis of class it is still problematic to assert that classes so defined have unequivocal objective interests. The claim rests on the assumption that individuals have objective interests in their material conditions of existence regardless of what they think, but this claim is open to dispute. For useful discussions of the problem of objectivity of interests, see: R. Geuss, *The Idea of Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); W. Connolly, "On Interests in Politics," *Politics and Society* 2, no. 4 (1972), pp. 459–77; and I. Balbus, "The Concept of Interest in Pluralist and Marxist Analysis," *Politics and Society*, February 1971.

society. Societies, in this view, are characterized by a plurality of oppressions each rooted in a different form of domination—sexual, racial, national, economic—none of which has any explanatory priority over any other. Class, then, becomes just one of many oppressions, with no particular centrality for social and historical analysis. How important class is in a given society becomes an historically contingent question.<sup>8</sup>

Again, this displacement of class from the center stage may be viewed as an achievement rather than a problem. It may be that class should not occupy a privileged place in social theory. But if one believes, as Marxists traditionally have believed, that only by giving class this central place is it possible to develop a scientific theory of the trajectory of historical development, and in particular, a theory of the real historical alternatives to capitalism, then the domination-centered concept of class risks eroding the theoretical justification for Marxian class analysis itself.<sup>9</sup>

### *Classes in Postcapitalist Societies*

Classical Marxism was absolutely unequivocal about the historical prognosis for capitalism: socialism—and ultimately communism—was the future of capitalist societies. The bearer of that necessary future was the working class. The polarized class structure *within* capitalism between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat thus paralleled the polarized historical alternatives *between* capitalism and socialism.

The actual historical experience of the twentieth century has called into question, although not unambiguously refuted, this historical vision. As I have argued elsewhere, it is necessary to at least entertain the possibility of postcapitalist class structures.<sup>10</sup> The difficulty is that with

8. This view is characteristic of what is sometimes called “post-Marxist” radical theory. Some of the leading examples of this work include: M. Albert and R. Hahnel, *Marxism and Socialist Theory* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); J. Cohen, *Class and Civil Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982); and S. Aaronowitz, *The Crisis of Historical Materialism* (New York: Praeger, 1981).

9. One might also argue that the importance Marxists accord class is *not* necessary for a theory of historical trajectories. Such a theory could perhaps be based on gender, the state, or other factors. Indeed, the legitimacy of a theory of historical trajectories can itself be rejected. Historical development could be viewed as a strictly contingent outcome of an array of autonomous causal processes rather than having any overall determination. These are serious objections and cannot be dismissed out of hand. For present purposes my claim is simply that if one does want to retain the traditional Marxist commitment to class analysis, then the shift to a domination-centered concept of class poses problems. For a preliminary discussion of some of these arguments, see E.O. Wright, “Giddens’ Critique of Marxism,” *New Left Review*, no. 139 (1983); and *idem*, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), ch. 2.

10. E.O. Wright, “Capitalism’s Futures,” *Socialist Review*, no. 68 (1983).

very few exceptions, the conceptual frameworks adopted by Marxists for analyzing capitalist class relations do not contain adequate criteria for understanding postcapitalist classes.<sup>11</sup> In particular, all of the class categories in my analysis of contradictory locations within class relations were either situated firmly within capitalist relations (bourgeoisie, managers, workers) or in contradictory locations involving basically precapitalist relations (semiautonomous employees, the petty bourgeoisie, small employers). There were no elements within this analysis of class relations in capitalist society that could point the direction for the analysis of postcapitalist classes. The result is a tendency for discussions of postcapitalist class structures—the class structures of “actually existing socialism”—to have a very ad hoc character to them.

Given these conceptual problems—the shift from exploitation to domination and the lack of a conceptual basis for analyzing postcapitalist classes—there are really two theoretical alternatives that could be pursued. One possibility is to celebrate the shift to a domination-centered concept and use this new class concept as the basis for analyzing both capitalist and postcapitalist society. This would lead class analysis firmly in the direction of Dahrendorf’s analysis of classes as positions within authority relations.<sup>12</sup> A second alternative is to attempt to restore exploitation as the center of class analysis in such a way that it can both accommodate the empirical complexities of the middle class within capitalism and the historical reality of postcapitalist class structures. It is this second course of action that I will pursue in the rest of this paper.

The basis for this reconstruction of an exploitation-centered concept of class comes from the recent work of John Roemer.<sup>13</sup> While Roemer himself has not been particularly concerned with problems of empirical investigation or the elaboration of concrete maps of class structures,

11. A partial exception to this can be found in arguments for the existence of a “new class” of intellectuals and/or bureaucrats in capitalist and postcapitalist society. See: A. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*; and I. Szelenyi and W. Martin, *New Class Theory and Beyond* (unpublished book manuscript, Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, 1985).

12. R. Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1959).

13. Roemer is a Marxist economist engaged in a long-term project of elaborating what he calls the “microfoundations” of Marxist theory. His most important work is entitled *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). A debate over this work in which I participated appears in *Politics and Society*, vol. 11, no. 3: J. Roemer, “Recent Developments in the Marxist Theory of Exploitation and Class,” and E.O. Wright, “The Status of the Political in the Concept of Class Structure.” Roemer is actively engaged in a circle of scholars who meet periodically to discuss problems of the conceptual foundations of Marxist theory that includes Jon Elster, G.A. Cohen, Adam Przeworski, Philippe von Parijs, Robert Van der Veen, Robert Brenner, and myself.

nevertheless his work does provide a rich foundation for such endeavors. As I will attempt to show, with suitable modification and extension, his strategy of analysis can provide a rigorous basis for resolving the problems in the concept of contradictory class locations.

## Roemer's Account of Class and Exploitation

### *The Concept of Exploitation*

We observe inequalities in the distribution of incomes, the real consumption packages available to individuals, families, groups. The concept of exploitation is a particular way of analyzing such inequalities. To describe an inequality as reflecting exploitation is to make the claim that there exists a particular kind of causal relationship between the incomes of different actors. More concretely, we will say that the rich exploit the poor when two things can be established: that the welfare of the rich causally depends on the deprivations of the poor—the rich are rich *because* the poor are poor; and that the welfare of the rich depends upon the *effort* of the poor—the rich, through one mechanism or another, appropriate part of the fruits of labor of the poor. The first of these criteria by itself defines *economic oppression*, but not exploitation. Unemployed workers, in these terms, are economically oppressed but not exploited. Exploitation implies both economic oppression and appropriation of at least part of the social surplus by the oppressor.<sup>14</sup>

The traditional Marxist concept of exploitation is clearly a special case of this general concept.<sup>15</sup> In Marxian exploitation one class appropriates the surplus labor performed by another class through various mechanisms. The income of the exploiting class comes from the labor performed by the exploited class. There is thus a straightforward causal linkage between the poverty and effort of the exploited and the affluence of the exploiter. The latter benefits at the expense of the former.

Roemer has attempted to elaborate this view of exploitation using two strategies. The first of these involves studying through a series of formal mathematical models the flows of "surplus labor" from one category of actors to another in the course of various exchange relations; the

14. For a fuller discussion of the distinction between economic oppression and exploitation, see Wright, *Classes*, ch. 3.

15. Roemer has demonstrated, convincingly I think, that there are particular circumstances in which Marxian exploitation does not correspond to this more general definition: there are cases where there are labor transfers from one actor to another that would be technically exploitative in the Marxian sense but that do not satisfy the above conditions. For the present purposes we need not engage these special cases.

second involves adopting a kind of game-theory approach to specifying different forms of exploitation. Let us briefly examine each of these in turn.

### *The Labor-Transfer Approach*

The analysis of labor transfers is an extension of the traditional Marxist view of exploitation, although Roemer self-consciously does not rely on the labor theory of value in order to explore such labor transfers.<sup>16</sup> The main target of his analysis is the view, commonly held by Marxists, that a necessary condition for the exploitation of labor in a market economy is the institution of wage labor. Roemer demonstrates two basic propositions. First, Roemer demonstrates that exploitation can occur in an economy in which all producers own their own means of production and in which there is no market in labor power and no credit market (that is, no borrowing). The only things that are traded are products. In such an economy if different producers own different amounts of productive assets such that different producers have to work different numbers of hours to produce the exchange-equivalent of their own subsistence, then free trade among these producers will lead to exploitation of the asset poor by the asset rich. What Roemer shows in this simple economy is not simply that some producers work less than others for the same subsistence, but that the workers who work less are able to do so *because* the less-endowed producers have to work more. The critical proof in this example is that if the asset-poor person simply stopped producing—died—and the asset-rich person took over the asset-poor's assets, then the asset-rich producer would have to work longer hours than before to maintain the same subsistence.<sup>17</sup> There is thus not merely an inequality among the producers in this economy, but exploitation as well.

16. While Roemer's work should not be viewed as an example of the "Sraffian" critique of the labor theory of value, he shares with Sraffian economists like I. Steedman, *Marx after Sraffa* (London: Verso, 1977), the thesis that the labor theory of value should be dismissed entirely. It is, in Roemer's view, simply wrong as the basis for any theoretical understanding of exchange and unnecessary for an understanding of capitalist exploitation.

17. The technical form of the argument involves constructing general equilibrium models based on relatively simple maximizing behaviors of the actors. As in all general equilibrium models, these models depend upon the specific assumptions adopted concerning preference structures and production functions. Recently, in an essay entitled, "Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?" Working Paper no. 221 (University of California, Davis, Department of Economics, 1983), Roemer has shown that it is possible to construct models in which the outcomes violate the logic of the concept of exploitation (for example, if the preference for leisure over labor declines as ownership of assets increases, then it can happen that labor transfers will flow from the rich to the poor under certain institutional arrangements). For the purposes of the present analysis, I will ignore these complications.

Second, Roemer demonstrates 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 (that is, systems with credit and labor markets). For this analysis, he compares the class structures and patterns of exploitation on the two imaginary islands, "labor-market island" and "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 seek to minimize the amount of labor-time they must expend to achieve a common level of subsistence.<sup>18</sup> 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 prohibited from selling their labor power but are allowed to borrow, at some interest rate, the means of production. Roemer shows that on each island there is a strict correspondence between class location (derived from ownership of differing amounts of means of production, including no means of production) and exploitation status (having one's surplus labor appropriated by someone else). This is what he terms the "Class-Exploitation Correspondence Principle." He also shows that the two class structures are completely isomorphic: every individual on one island would be in exactly the same exploitation status on the other island.

The upshot of these two propositions (and others that Roemer explores) is the claim that market-based exploitation is strictly a consequence of inequalities in the distribution of the means of production. However, while this may typically play itself out through a labor market, this is only one concrete institutional form for such exploitation: it is not the necessary condition for the exploitation to occur.

### *The Game-Theory Approach*

While the labor-transfer analyses of exploitation were primarily designed to reveal the underlying logic of exploitation in market exchanges, the game-theory approach is used by Roemer to compare different systems of exploitation. The idea is to compare different systems of exploitation by treating the organization of production as a "game" and asking if a coalition of players would be better off if they withdrew from the game under certain specified procedures. Different

18. The results are robust over a range of motivational assumptions, but not over every possible preference structure.

types of exploitation are defined by the withdrawal rules that would make certain agents better off.

More formally, Roemer argues that a coalition of actors  $S$  can be said to be exploited, and another coalition  $S'$  (the complement of  $S$ ) can be said to be exploiting, if "there is no alternative, which we may conceive of as hypothetically feasible, in which  $S$  would be better off than in its present situation, [and if,] under this alternative, the complement to  $S$  . . . would be worse off than at present."<sup>19</sup> The counterfactual in these two conditions is meant to convey the sense in which the welfare of  $S'$  is causally dependent upon the deprivation of  $S$ .<sup>20</sup>

Roemer uses this strategy to define three kinds of exploitation: feudal exploitation, capitalist exploitation, and what he refers to as socialist exploitation. Let's begin with capitalist exploitation. Workers own no physical assets (means of production) and sell their labor power to capitalists for a wage. Are workers exploited under capitalism? The answer to this question, in the game theoretic formulation, requires posing an alternative game to the game of capitalism within which the two conditions specified above hold. What is the alternative? It is a game within which each worker receives his/her *per capita share of society's total productive assets*. What Roemer demonstrates is that if the coalition of all wage-earners were to leave the game of capitalism with their per capita share of society's assets, then they would be better off than staying in capitalism, and capitalists would be worse off. The "withdrawal rule" in this case—leaving the game with per capita shares of physical assets—then becomes the formal "test" of whether or not a particular social system involves capitalistic exploitation.

In contrast, the withdrawal rule to specify feudal exploitation is leaving the game with one's *personal assets* (rather than one's per capita share of total social assets). This is equivalent to the feudal serf being freed from all obligations based on personal bondage. Peasants would be better off under such circumstances; feudal lords would be worse off.<sup>21</sup>

19. Roemer, *A General Theory*, pp. 194–5.

20. Strictly speaking, in terms of the general definition of exploitation presented at the outset of this discussion, these two criteria merely define economic oppression, not exploitation, since the results do not imply anything about the relationship between the effort of the exploited and the welfare of the exploiter. Roemer recognizes this difficulty and has added a number of additional criteria at various points in his analysis to eliminate certain problems (for example, the handicapped exploiting the well-bodied). Nevertheless, these two counterfactual criteria remain the core of Roemer's game theoretic analysis.

21. But note: workers in capitalism are *not* feudally exploited; they would be worse off, not better off, if they withdrew from the game of capitalism with only their personal assets. As Roemer argues, the claim by neoclassical theorists that wage earners in capitalism are not exploited is generally equivalent to the claim that they are not feudally exploited, that is, that they are not subjected to surplus extraction based on relations of personal bondage. See Roemer, *A General Theory*, p. 206.

The concept of the socialist exploitation is the least systematically worked out in Roemer's analysis. The withdrawal rule in this case is leaving the game with one's *per capita share of inalienable assets* (skills). A coalition will be said to be socialistically exploited if it would improve its position by leaving with its per capita skills while its complement would be worse off under such circumstances. This implies that people with high levels of skills in the game receive high income not simply because they have high skills, but because of the differentials in skill levels across actors. The highly skilled would become worse off if the unskilled obtained skills; they thus have an interest in maintaining skill differentials, and this is what underpins the claim that their income reflects exploitation.<sup>22</sup> If a skilled person's income reflected no more than the amount of time and resources it takes to obtain the skill, then there would be no skill-based exploitation. The higher incomes would simply be reimbursement for real costs incurred. The argument behind skill exploitation is that people with scarce skills receive incomes above the costs of producing those skills, a "rent" component to their income; it is this element that constitutes exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

### Class and Exploitation

The central message of both of Roemer's strategies for analyzing exploitation is that the material basis of exploitation is inequalities in distributions of productive assets, or what is usually referred to as property relations. On the one hand, inequalities of assets are sufficient to account for transfers of labor surplus; on the other hand, different forms of asset inequality specify different systems of exploitation. Classes are

22. The asset-exploitation nexus thus depends upon the capacity of asset-holders to deprive others of that asset. The social basis of exploitation, understood in this way, is quite similar to Frank Parkin's characterization of Weber's concept of social closure as "the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles." F. Parkin, *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). While Parkin's central concern is with the kinds of attributes that serve as the basis for closure—race, religion, language—Roemer's is with the nature of the resources (productive assets) over which closure is organized.

23. Marx did not refer to the inequalities in income in a socialist society as the result of exploitation, and he did not refer to the relation between the skilled and unskilled as a *class* relation; nevertheless, Roemer's account corresponds well to Marx's analysis of inequality in socialism as laid out in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. In that document Marx emphasized that skill-based inequalities would persist in socialism and that distribution would be on the basis of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his work." Only in communism would distribution be on the basis of need, which in effect implies that skill differentials would cease to be assets (income-generating wealth).

then defined as positions within the social relations of production derived from these relations of exploitation.<sup>24</sup>

These conclusions have led Roemer to challenge directly the tendency of Marxists (like myself) to define class relations primarily in terms of domination relations within production. Of course, exploiting classes dominate exploited classes in the sense of preventing the exploited classes from taking the exploiting class's productive assets. But domination *within* production, Roemer insists, is not a central part of defining class relations as such.<sup>25</sup>

In previous work I have criticized Roemer's position on this issue.<sup>26</sup> I argued that class relations intrinsically involved domination *at the point of production*, not simply in the repressive protection of the property relations as such. I now think that Roemer is correct on this point. That capitalists boss workers around within production is unquestionably an important feature of most historic forms of capitalist production and may play an important role in explaining the forms of class organization and class conflict within production. However, the basis of the capital-labor relation should be identified with relations of effective control (that is, real economic ownership) over productive assets as such.

One of the reasons why I resisted Roemer's conceptualization of classes in terms of property relations is that it seemed to blur the difference between Marxist definitions of class and Weberian definitions. Weberian definitions, as I construed them, were "market based" definitions of class, whereas Marxist definitions were "production based." The reputed advantage of the latter was that production was more "fundamental" than exchange, and therefore production-based class concepts had more explanatory power than market-based concepts.

What now seems clear to me is that definitions of classes in terms of property relations should not be identified with strictly market-based

24. Roemer's conceptualization of the relationship between class and exploitation is similar in certain aspects to Alvin Gouldner's, although Roemer is unaware of Gouldner's work. Gouldner defines the "New Class" as a *cultural bourgeoisie* defined by its control over "cultural capital," where "capital" is defined as "any produced object used to make saleable utilities, thus providing its possessor with *incomes*, or claims to incomes defined as legitimate because of their imputed contribution to economic productivity." (*Future of Intellectuals*, p. 21). While Gouldner does not characterize this income allocation process in terms of exploitation, Roemer's exploitation concept would fit comfortably within Gouldner's general approach.

25. This is not to imply that domination in the labor process is *institutionally* unimportant, or indeed, that such domination does not in practice intensify capitalist exploitation and reinforce the capital-labor class relation. Roemer's point is simply that it is not the actual criterion for class relations; that criterion is strictly based on property relations as such.

26. Wright, "The Status of the Political."

definitions. Property-relations accounts of classes do not define classes by income shares, by the results of market transactions, but by the productive assets that classes control, which lead them to adopt certain strategies within exchange relations and which thereby determine the outcomes of those market transactions.

## Toward a General Framework of Class Analysis

### *Extending Roemer's Analysis*

The heart of Roemer's analysis is the linkage between the distribution of productive assets of various sorts and exploitation. Different mechanisms of exploitation are defined by different kinds of assets, and different class systems are defined by which of these assets is most important for shaping the patterns of exploitation in the society.

In Roemer's own explicit formulation, only two kinds of assets are formally considered: physical assets (alienable assets in his terminology) and skill assets (inalienable assets). The distinction between exploitation in feudalism and exploitation in capitalism revolves around the nature of the withdrawal rules with respect to physical assets (withdrawing with one's personal assets to define feudal exploitation versus withdrawing with one's per capita share of assets to define capitalist exploitation). The feudal case, however, can be characterized in a somewhat different way. Labor power is a productive asset.<sup>27</sup> In capitalist societies everyone owns one unit of this asset, namely themselves. In feudalism, on the other hand, ownership rights over labor power are unequally distributed: feudal lords have more than one unit, serfs have less than one unit. To be sure, it is not typical of feudalism for serfs to own no labor power—they are generally not slaves divested of all ownership rights in their own labor power—but they do not have complete effective control over their own persons as productive actors, and this is what it means to “own” one's own labor power assets.<sup>28</sup> The withdrawal rule that defines feudal exploitation can then be specified as leaving the feudal game with one's per capita share of society's assets in labor power, namely one unit. Feudal exploitation is thus exploitation (transfers of labor) that results

27. See G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 40–41, for a discussion of why labor power should be considered part of the forces of production (that is, a productive asset).

28. In this formulation, slavery should be viewed as a limiting case of feudal exploitation, where the slave has no ownership rights at all in his/her own labor power, while the slave owner has complete ownership rights in slaves.

from inequalities in the distribution of assets in labor power.<sup>29</sup>

Reformulating feudal exploitation in this manner makes the game-theory specification of different exploitations in Roemer's analysis symmetrical: feudal exploitation is based on inequalities generated by ownership of labor-power assets; capitalist exploitation on inequalities generated by ownership of alienable assets; socialist exploitation on inequalities generated by ownership of inalienable assets. And corresponding to each of these exploitation-generating inequalities of assets, there is a specific class relation: lords and serfs in feudalism, bourgeoisie and proletariat in capitalism, experts and workers in socialism.

But how, it might be asked, should “actually existing socialist societies” be theorized within these categories? The anticapitalist revolution in Russia resulted in the virtual elimination of private property in the means of production: individuals cannot own means of production, they cannot inherit them or dispose of them on a market, and so on. And yet it seems unsatisfactory to characterize such societies simply in terms of skill-based exploitation. Experts do not appear to be the “ruling class” in those societies, and the dynamic of the societies does not seem to revolve around skill inequalities as such.

Roemer recognized this problem and introduced what he termed “status exploitation” to deal with it.<sup>30</sup> The exploitation exercised by bureaucrats is the prototypical example. “If these positions,” Roemer writes, “required special skills, then one might be justified in calling the differential remuneration to these positions an aspect of socialist [skill-based] exploitation. . . . [However] there is some extra remuneration to holders of those positions which accrues solely by virtue of the position and not by virtue of the skill necessary to carry out the tasks associated with it. These special payments to positions give rise to *status exploitation*.”<sup>31</sup>

Roemer's concept of status exploitation is unsatisfactory for two principal reasons. First, it is outside of the logic of the rest of his analysis of exploitation. In each of the other cases, exploitation is rooted in relations to the forces of production. Each of the other forms of exploitation is “materialist” not only because the concept is meant to explain

29. In this formulation it might be possible to regard various forms of discrimination—the use of ascriptive criteria such as race, sex, nationality to bar people from certain occupations, for example—as a form of feudal exploitation. In effect there is not equal ownership of one's own labor power if one lacks the capacity to use it as one pleases equally with other agents. This view of discrimination corresponds to the view that discrimination is antithetical to “bourgeois freedoms.”

30. Roemer is an economist, and the use of the word *status* was not meant to evoke the meanings generally attached to this word in sociology.

31. Roemer, *A General Theory*, p. 243.

material distribution, but also because it is based on the relation to the material conditions of production. "Status" exploitation has no necessary relationship to production at all. Second, it is hard to rigorously distinguish status exploitation from feudal exploitation. The "lord" receives remuneration strictly because of an incumbency in a position, not because of skills or ownership of capital.<sup>32</sup> Yet, it hardly seems reasonable to consider the logic of exploitation and class in the contemporary Soviet Union and in fourteenth-century feudal Europe as being essentially the same.

The problems with the concept of status exploitation can be solved by analyzing exploitation based on a fourth element in the inventory of productive assets, an asset that can be referred to as "organization." As both Adam Smith and Marx noted, the technical division of labor among producers is itself a source of productivity. The way the production process is organized is a productive resource independent of the expenditure of labor power, the use of means of production, or the skills of the producer. Of course there is an interrelationship between organization and these other assets, just as there is an interdependence between means of production and skills. But organization—the conditions of coordinated cooperation among producers in a complex division of labor—is a productive resource in its own right.

How is this asset distributed in different kinds of societies? In contemporary capitalism, organization assets are generally controlled by managers and capitalists: managers control the organization assets within specific firms under constraints imposed by the ownership of the capital assets by capitalists. Entrepreneurial capitalists directly control both kinds of assets (and probably skill assets as well); pure rentier capitalists ("coupon clippers") only own capital assets. Because of the anarchy of the capitalist market, no set of actors controls the technical division of labor across firms.

In state bureaucratic socialism, organization assets assume a much greater importance.<sup>33</sup> Controlling the technical division of labor—the coordination of productive activities within and across labor processes—becomes a societal task organized at the center. The control over organization assets is no longer simply the task of firm-level managers but

32. Roemer acknowledges the similarity between feudal exploitation and status exploitation but treats this just as an interesting parallel rather than as a problem. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

33. The term *state bureaucratic socialism* is somewhat awkward, but I do not know of a better expression. The term *statism*, although I have used it elsewhere in discussing such societies (E.O. Wright, "Capitalism's Futures," *Socialist Review*, no. 68 [1983]) has the disadvantage of identifying the class relations strictly with the state as such rather than with the material basis of exploitation in such societies (control over organization assets).

extends into the central organs of planning within the state. Exploitation in such societies is thus based on bureaucratic power: the control over organization assets defines the material basis for class relations and exploitation.

This notion of organization assets bears a close relation to the problem of authority and hierarchy. The asset is organization. The activity of using that asset is coordinated decision making over a complex technical division of labor. When that asset is distributed unequally, so some positions have effective control over much more of the asset than others, then the social relation with respect to that asset takes the form of hierarchical authority. Authority, however, is not the asset as such; organization is the asset and is controlled through a hierarchy of authority.

The claim that effective control over organization assets is a basis of exploitation is equivalent to saying that nonmanagers would be better off and managers/bureaucrats worse off if nonmanagers were to withdraw with their per capita share of organization assets (or equivalently, if organizational control were democratized); and that by virtue of effectively controlling organization assets managers/bureaucrats control part or all of the socially produced surplus.<sup>34</sup>

### *A Typology of Class Structures, Assets, and Exploitation*

If we add organization assets to the list in Roemer's analysis, we generate the more complex typology presented in Table 1. Let us briefly look at each row of this table and examine its logic. Feudalism is a class system based on unequal distribution of ownership rights in labor power. What "personal bondage" means is that feudal lords have partial effective economic control over vassals. The empirical manifestation of this unequal distribution of ownership rights over labor power in classical feudalism is the coercive extraction of labor dues from serfs. When corvée labor is commuted to rents in kind and eventually money rents, the feudal character of the exploitation relation is reflected in legal

34. This "control of the surplus," it must be noted, is *not* the equivalent of the *actual* personal consumption income of managers and bureaucrats, any more than capitalist profits or feudal rents are the equivalent of the personally consumed income of capitalists and feudal lords. It is historically variable both within and between types of societies what fraction of the surplus effectively controlled by exploiting classes is used for personal consumption and what portion is used for other purposes (feudal military expenditures, capitalist accumulation, organization growth). The claim that managers-bureaucrats would be "worse off" under conditions of a redistribution of organization assets refers to the amount of income they effectively control, which is therefore potentially available for personal appropriation, not simply the amount they personally consume.

prohibitions on the movement of peasants off the land. The "flight" of a peasant to the city is, in effect, a form of theft: the peasant is stealing part of the labor power owned by the lord.<sup>35</sup> Feudal lords may also have more means of production than serfs, more organizational assets, and more productive skills (although this is unlikely), and thus they may be exploiters with respect to these assets as well. What defines the society as "feudal", however, is the primacy of the distinctively feudal mechanisms of exploitation. Accordingly, feudal class relations will be the primary structural basis of class struggle.

The bourgeois revolutions radically redistributed productive assets in people: everyone, at least in principle, owns one unit. This is what is meant by "bourgeois freedoms," and in this sense capitalism can be regarded as an historically progressive force. But capitalism raises the second type of exploitation, exploitation based on property relations in means of production, to an unprecedented level.<sup>36</sup>

The typical institutional form of capitalist class relations is capitalists having full ownership rights in the means of production and workers none. Other possibilities, however, have existed historically. Cottage industries in early capitalism involved workers owning some of their means of production, but not having sufficient assets to actually produce commodities without the assistance of merchant capitalists. Such workers were still being capitalistically exploited even though there was no formal labor market with wages. In all capitalist exploitation, the mediating mechanism is market exchanges. Unlike in feudalism, surplus is not directly appropriated from workers in the form of coerced labor. Rather, it is appropriated through market exchanges: workers are paid a wage that covers the costs of production of their labor power; capitalists receive an income from the sale of the commodities produced by workers. The difference in these quantities constitutes the exploitative surplus appropriated by capitalists.<sup>37</sup>

35. In this logic, once peasants are free to move, free to leave the feudal contract, then feudal rents (and thus feudal exploitation) would be in the process of transformation into a form of capitalist exploitation. That transformation would be complete once land itself became "capital," that is, it could be freely bought and sold on a market.

36. It is because capitalism simultaneously largely eliminates one form of exploitation and accentuates another that it is difficult to say whether or not in the transition from feudalism to capitalism overall exploitation increased or decreased.

37. It should be noted that this claim is logically independent of the labor theory of value. There is no assumption that commodities exchange in proportions regulated by the amount of socially necessary labor embodied in them. What is claimed is that the income of capitalists constitutes the monetary value of the surplus produced by workers. That is sufficient for their income to be treated as exploitative. See G.A. Cohen, "The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 8 (1979), for a discussion of this treatment of capitalist exploitation and of its relation to the labor theory of value.

Table 1 Assets, Exploitation and Classes

Type of class structure	Principal asset that is unequally distributed	Mechanism of exploitation	Classes	Central task of revolutionary transformation
Feudalism	Labor power	Coercive extraction of surplus labor	Lords and serfs	Individual liberty
Capitalism	Means of production	Market exchanges of labor power and commodities	Capitalists and workers	Socializing means of production
State bureaucratic socialism	Organization	Planned appropriation and distribution of surplus based on hierarchy	Managers/bureaucrats and nonmanagement	Democratization of organizational control
Socialism	Skills	Negotiated redistribution of surplus from workers to experts	Experts and workers	Substantive equality

Anticapitalist revolutions attempt to eliminate the distinctively capitalist form of exploitation, exploitation based on private ownership of the means of production. The nationalization of the principal means of production is, in effect, a radical equalization of ownership of capital: everyone owns one citizen-share. Such revolutions, however, do not eliminate, and indeed may considerably strengthen and deepen, inequalities of effective control over organization assets. Whereas in capitalism the control over organization assets does not extend beyond the firm, in state bureaucratic socialism the coordinated integration of the division of labor extends to the whole society through institutions of central state planning. The mechanism by which this generates exploitative transfers of surplus involves the centrally planned bureaucratic appropriation and distribution of the surplus along hierarchical principles. The corresponding class relation is therefore between managers/bureaucrats—people who control organization assets—and nonmanagers.

The historical task of revolutionary transformation of state bureaucratic socialism revolves around the equalization of effective economic control over organization assets, or, equivalently, the democratization of bureaucratic apparatuses of production.<sup>38</sup> This does not imply total direct democracy, where all decisions of any consequence are directly made in democratic assemblies. There will still inevitably be delegated responsibilities, and there certainly can be representative forms of democratic control. But it does mean that the basic parameters of planning and coordinating social production are made through democratic mechanisms and that incumbency within delegated positions of responsibility does not give incumbents any personal claims on the social surplus.<sup>39</sup> Such equalization, however, would not necessarily affect exploitation based on skills/credentials. Such exploitation would remain a central feature of socialism.

“Skill” in this context is not a trivial concept. The mere possession of enhanced laboring capabilities acquired through training is not sufficient

38. This, it should be noted, is precisely what leftist critics within “actually existing socialist societies” say is the core problem on the political agenda of radical change in these countries.

39. Lenin’s original vision of “Soviet” democracy, in which officials would be paid no more than average workers and would be immediately revocable at any time and in which the basic contours of social planning would be debated and decided through democratic participation, embodied such principles of equalization of organization assets. Once in power, as we know, the Bolsheviks were either unable or unwilling to seriously attempt the elimination of organization exploitation. For a discussion of these issues in the context of the Russian Revolution and other attempts at workers’ democracy, see C. Siriani, *Workers’ Control and Socialist Democracy* (London: Verso, 1982).

to generate relations of exploitation, since the income of such trained labor may simply reflect the costs of acquiring the training. In such cases there is neither a transfer of surplus, nor would the untrained be better off under the game-theory specification of exploitation. For a skill to be the basis of exploitation, therefore, it has to be in some sense scarce relative to its demand, and there must be a mechanism through which individual owners of scarce skills are able to translate that scarcity into higher incomes.

There are basically three ways that skills can become scarce: first, they may require special *talents* that are naturally scarce in a population; second, access to the training needed to develop the skill may be restricted through various mechanisms, creating an artificial scarcity of trained people; third, a certification system may be established that prohibits uncertified people from being employed to use the skill even if they have it. In all of these cases, the exploitation comes from the skilled/certified individual receiving an income that is above the costs of production of the skills by virtue of the scarcity of the availability of the skill.

In this conceptualization of socialism, a socialist society is essentially a kind of democratic technocracy. Experts control their own skills and knowledge within production, and by virtue of such control are able to appropriate some of the surplus out of production. However, because of the democratization of organization assets, actual planning decisions will not be made under the direct control of experts but will be made through some kind of democratic procedure (this is in effect what democratization of organization assets means: equalizing control over the planning and coordinating of social production). This means that the actual class power of a socialist technocratic exploiting class will be much weaker than the class power of exploiting classes in other class systems. Their ownership rights extend to only a limited part of the social surplus.

This much more limited basis of *domination* implied by skill-based exploitation is consistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of Marx’s claim that socialism is the “lower stage” of “communism,” since classes are already in a partial state of dissolution in a society with only skill-based exploitation. Communism itself, then, would be understood as a society within which skill-based exploitation itself had “withered away,” that is, in which ownership rights in skills had been equalized. This does not mean, it must be stressed, that all individuals would actually *possess* the same skills in communism, any more than eliminating property rights in means of production implies that all individuals would actively use the same amount of physical capital. What is equalized is effective control

over skills as a productive resource and claims to differential incomes resulting from differential use of skills.<sup>40</sup>

### Some Unresolved Problems

The general framework laid out in Table 1 offers an abstract conceptual basis for clarifying a variety of empirical and theoretical problems in neo-Marxist class theory while avoiding some of the limitations of earlier class-structure concepts. Nevertheless, there remain a number of unresolved problems and internal inconsistencies, some of which may ultimately prove "fatal" to this attempt at reconceptualization. Two of these are particularly glaring and deserve some comment: the ambiguous status of skills as the basis for a class relation, and the problematic character of organization as an asset.<sup>41</sup>

#### *Skills and Class*

While the ownership of skill assets, particularly when institutionalized in the form of credentials, may constitute a basis for exploitation, it is much less clear that it should be treated as the basis for a class relation (except insofar as skills or credentials might enable one to gain access to other kinds of assets). In each of the other types of assets—labor power, physical capital, organization—there is a clear correspondence between the distribution of the asset and a particular form of social relation—lord-serf relations, capitalist-employee relations, manager-worker relations. In the case of skill/credential assets there is no such correspondence: experts and nonexperts do not exist in the same kind of well-defined social relation as lords and serfs or capitalists and employees. Experts may thus have distinct interests from nonexperts, but they are not clearly constituted as a class in relation to nonexperts.

Ultimately, what this relative vagueness in the link between skill exploitation and class relations may imply is that the expert-versus-

40. It may be utopian to imagine a society without skill-based exploitation, or even a society without organization-asset exploitation, particularly if we reject the claim that a future society will ever exist in a state of absolute abundance. In the absence of absolute abundance, all societies will face dilemmas and trade-offs around the problem of distribution of consumption, and such dilemmas may pose intractable incentive problems in the absence of exploitation. For a careful exposition of the problem of utopian fantasies in Marxist theory, see A. Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* (Hemel Hempstead: George Allen and Unwin, 1983).

41. For a much more extended discussion of these and other problems, see Wright, *Classes*, ch. 3.

nonexpert distinction should perhaps be treated as a form of *stratification* within classes rather than a class relation itself. This could, for example, define a type of class *fraction* within particular classes.

In spite of these difficulties, throughout the rest of this paper I will treat skill/credential assets as the basis for a dimension of class relations. As we shall see, this will be particularly useful in rethinking the problem of middle classes. I will thus provisionally ignore the ambiguities in class analysis posed by the problem of skills.

#### *Organizational Assets*

There is a troubling asymmetry in the treatment of organization assets in the analysis of class and exploitation. In the case of each of the other assets it seems appropriate to say that the exploiting classes "own" the assets in question: feudal lords have ownership rights in their serfs; capitalists own the means of production; experts own their skills (or at least their credentials). But it does not seem appropriate to describe managers or bureaucrats as "owning" organizational assets. While it may still be the case that their effective control over these assets is a basis for exploitation, such control is quite different from the ownership relations of other assets and may call into question the argument that such control is the basis for a dimension of class relations.

As in the case of problem with skills, I will bracket this difficulty throughout the rest of this paper. The attempt to create a symmetrical concept of class across qualitatively distinct class systems may in the end be both unnecessary and unhelpful. Nevertheless, I will provisionally continue to treat organization assets and the corresponding forms of exploitation and class relations in a manner parallel to the treatment of labor power, capital, and skill assets.

Abstract discussions of concepts are continually plagued with loose ends, ambiguities, inconsistencies. At some point it is necessary to set aside these difficulties and explore the implications of the concepts under discussion for concrete empirical and theoretical problems. This will be the task of the rest of this paper. In the next section we will examine a range of theoretical implications of the framework elaborated in Table 1. This will be followed by a brief examination of some empirical research using the proposed concepts.

### Implications of the General Framework

In this section we will explore the implications of the framework in Table 1 for three problems in class analysis: the problem of understanding the class character of the "middle class"; the relation of class structure



**Table 3** Basic Classes and Contradictory Locations in Successive Modes of Production

<i>Mode of production</i>	<i>Basic classes</i>	<i>Principal contradictory location</i>
Feudalism	Lords and serfs	Bourgeoisie
Capitalism	Bourgeoisie and proletariat	Managers/bureaucrats
State bureaucratic socialism	Bureaucrats and workers	Intelligentsia/experts

talist *mode of production*: expert managers, nonmanagerial experts, nonexpert managers, and so on.<sup>43</sup>

What is the relationship between this heterogeneous exploitation definition of the middle class and my previous conceptualization of such positions as contradictory locations within class relations? There is still a sense in which such positions could be characterized as “contradictory locations,” for they will typically hold contradictory interests with respect to the primary forms of class struggle in capitalist society, the struggle between labor and capital. On the one hand, they are like workers, in being excluded from ownership of the means of production.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, they have interests opposed to workers because of their effective control of organization and skill assets. Within the struggles of capitalism, therefore, these new middle classes do constitute contradictory locations, or more precisely, contradictory locations within exploitation relations.

This conceptualization of the middle classes also suggests that historically the principal forms of contradictory locations will vary depending upon the particular combinations of exploitation relations in a given society. These principal contradictory locations are presented in Table 3. In feudalism, the critical contradictory location is constituted by the bourgeoisie, the rising class of the successor mode of production.<sup>45</sup>

43. The labor-force data in this table come from the comparative project on class structure and class consciousness, University of Wisconsin. Details of the coding of categories and the operationalization of variables can be found in Wright, *Classes*, appendix 2.

44. This is not to deny that many professionals and managers become significant owners of capital assets through savings out of high incomes. To the extent that this happens, however, their class location objectively begins to shift, and they move into an objectively bourgeois location. Here I am talking only about those professional and managerial positions that are not vehicles for entry into the bourgeoisie itself.

45. The old middle class in feudalism, however, is defined by the freed peasant (yeoman farmer), the peasant who, within a system of unequally distributed assets in labor power, owns his/her per capita share of that asset.

Within capitalism, the central contradictory location within exploitation relations is constituted by managers and state bureaucrats. They embody a principle of class organization that is quite distinct from capitalism and that potentially poses an alternative to capitalist relations. This is particularly true for state managers who, unlike corporate managers, are less likely to have their careers tightly integrated with the interests of the capitalist class. Finally, in state bureaucratic socialism, the “intelligentsia” broadly defined constitutes the pivotal contradictory location.<sup>46</sup>

One of the upshots of this reconceptualization of the middle class is that it is no longer axiomatic that the proletariat is the unique, or perhaps even the central, rival to the capitalist class for class power in capitalist society. That classical Marxist assumption depended upon the thesis that there were no other classes within capitalism that could be viewed as the “bearers” of an historical alternative to capitalism. Socialism (as the transition to communism) was the only possible future for capitalism. What Table 3 suggests is that there are other class forces within capitalism that potentially pose an alternative to capitalism.<sup>47</sup> This does not imply that there is any inevitability to the sequence feudalism–capitalism–state bureaucratic socialism–socialism–communism; state bureaucrats are not inevitably destined to be the future ruling class of present-day capitalisms. But it does suggest that the process of class formation and class struggle is considerably more complex and indeterminate than the traditional Marxist story has allowed.<sup>48</sup>

This way of understanding contradictory class locations has several advantages over my previous conceptualization. First, certain of the specific conceptual problems of the earlier analysis of contradictory locations within class relations disappear. In particular, one of the more serious problems with my previous conceptualization of contradictory

46. Theorists who have attempted to analyze the class structures of actually existing socialism in terms of a concept of a new class generally tend to amalgamate state bureaucrats and experts into a single dominant class location, rather than seeing them as essentially vying for class power. Some theorists, such as Konrad and Szelenyi and Gouldner, do recognize this division, although they do not theorize the problem in precisely the way posed here. See, for example, G. Konrad and I. Szelenyi, *Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1979); Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals*.

47. Alvin Gouldner and others have argued that historically the beneficiaries of social revolutions have not been the oppressed classes of the prior mode of production, but “third classes.” Most notably, it was not the peasantry who became the ruling class with the demise of feudalism, but the bourgeoisie, a class that was located outside of the principal exploitation relation of feudalism. A similar argument could be extended to manager-bureaucrats with respect to capitalism and experts with respect to state bureaucratic socialism: in each case these constitute potential rivals to the existing ruling class.

48. For an extended discussion of the thesis that capitalism has multiple possible futures, see Wright, “Capitalism’s Futures.”

class locations centered on the category "semiautonomous employees." Autonomy always seemed more of a characteristic of working conditions than a proper dimension of class relations as such, and as a result there was a fair amount of skepticism in my characterization of semiautonomous employees as constituting a distinctive kind of location within the class structure. In my empirical research on class structure, the semiautonomous category also proved particularly troublesome, generating a number of quite counterintuitive results. For example, janitors in schools who also perform a variety of "handyman" tasks ended up being more autonomous than airline pilots. These specific problems disappear in the reconceptualization proposed here.

Second, treating contradictory locations in terms of exploitation generalizes the concept across modes of production. The concept now has a specific theoretical status in all class systems and, indeed, has a much more focused historical thrust, as represented in Table 3.

Third, this way of conceptualizing "middle class" locations also makes the problem of their class interests much clearer than before. Their location within class relations is defined by the nature of their material optimizing strategies given the specific kinds of assets they own or control. Their specific class location helps to specify their interests both within the existing capitalist society and with respect to various kinds of alternative games (societies) to which they might want to withdraw. In the previous conceptualization it was problematic to specify precisely the material interests of certain contradictory locations. In particular, there was no consistent reason for treating the fundamental material interests of semiautonomous employees as necessarily distinct from those of workers, and certainly not as opposed to those of workers.

Finally, this exploitation-based strategy helps to clarify the problems of class alliances in a much more systematic way than the previous approach. In the case of contradictory locations it was always rather vague how the tendencies for contradictory locations to ally themselves with workers or nonworkers should be assessed. I made claims that such alliance tendencies were politically and ideologically determined, but I was not able to put much content to such notions. In contrast, as we shall see below, the exploitation-based concept of contradictory location helps to provide a much clearer material basis for the analyzing problem of alliances.

### *Class Structure and Class Formation*

In classical Marxism, the relationship between class structure and class formation was generally treated as relatively unproblematic. In particular, in the analysis of the working class it was usually assumed that there

was a one-to-one relationship between the proletariat defined structurally and the proletariat engaged as a collective actor in struggle. The transformation of the working class from a class-in-itself (a class determined structurally) into a class-for-itself (a class engaged in collective struggle) may not have been a smooth and untroubled process, but it was an inevitable one.

Most neo-Marxist class theorists have questioned this claim of a simple relationship between class structure and class formation. Generally it has been argued that there is much less determinacy between the two levels of class analysis. As Adam Przeworski has argued, class struggle is in the first instance a struggle *over* class before it is a struggle *between* classes.<sup>49</sup> It is always problematic whether workers will be formed into a class or into some other sort of collectivity based on religion, ethnicity, region, language, nationality, trade. The class structure may define the terrain of material interests upon which attempts at class formation occur, but it does not uniquely determine the outcomes of those attempts.

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper highlights the relative indeterminacy of the class structure–class formation relationship. If the arguments of the paper are sound, then class structure should be viewed as a structure of social relations that generates a matrix of exploitation-based interests. But because many locations within the class structure have complex bundles of such exploitation interests, these interests should be viewed as constituting the material basis for a variety of *potential* class formations. The class structure itself does not generate a unique pattern of class formation; rather it determines the underlying probabilities of different kinds of class formations. Which among these alternatives actually occurs historically will depend on a range of factors that are structurally contingent to the class structure itself.

### *Class Alliances*

Once class analysis moves away from the simple polarized view of the class structure, the problem of class alliances looms large in the analysis of class formations. Rarely, if ever, does organized class struggle take the form of a conflict between two homogeneously organized forces. The typical situation is one in which alliances are forged between classes, segments of classes, and above all, contradictory class locations.

49. A. Przeworski, "From Proletariat into Class: The Process of Class Struggle from Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to Recent Debates," *Politics and Society*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1977).

Individuals in contradictory locations within class relations face three broad strategies in their relationship to class struggle: they can try to use their position as an exploiter to gain entry as individuals into the dominant exploiting class itself; they can attempt to forge an alliance with the dominant exploiting class; or they can form some kind of alliance with the principal exploited class.

In general, the immediate class aspiration of people in contradictory locations is to enter the dominant exploiting class by "cashing in" the fruits of their exploitation location into the dominant asset. Thus, in feudalism, the rising bourgeoisie frequently used part of the surplus acquired through capitalist exploitation to buy land and feudal titles, that is, to obtain "feudal assets." Part of what a bourgeois revolution consists of, then, is preventing the feudalization of capitalist accumulation. Similarly, in capitalism, the exploitative transfers personally available to managers and professionals are often used to buy capital, property, stocks, and so on, in order to obtain the "unearned" income from capital ownership. Finally, in state bureaucratic socialism, experts try to use their control over knowledge as a vehicle for entering the bureaucratic apparatus and acquiring control over organization assets.

Dominating exploiting classes have generally pursued class alliances with contradictory locations, at least when they were financially capable of doing so. Such strategies attempt to neutralize the potential threat from contradictory locations by tying their interests directly to those of the dominant exploiting class. When these hegemonic strategies are effective, they help to create a stable basis for all exploiting classes to contain struggles by exploited classes. One strategy is to make it easy for people in contradictory locations to enter the dominant class; another is to reduce the exploitation of contradictory locations by the dominant exploiting class to the point that such positions involve "net" exploitation. The extremely high salaries paid to upper-level managers in large corporations almost certainly means that they are net exploiters. This can have the effect of minimizing any possible conflicts of interests between such positions and those of the dominant exploiting class itself.

Such hegemonic strategies, however, are expensive. They require allowing large segments of contradictory locations access to significant portions of the social surplus. It has been argued by some economists that this corporate hegemonic strategy may be one of the central causes for the general tendency toward stagnation in advanced capitalist econ-

50. See S. Bowles, D. Gordon, and T. Weiskopf, *Beyond the Wasteland* (New York: Anchor, 1984). The argument is that the growth of managerial costs associated with the growth of the megacorporation is one of the key factors undermining productivity growth in certain capitalist countries.

omies, and that this in turn may be undermining the viability of the strategies themselves.<sup>50</sup> The erosion of the economic foundations of this alliance may generate more anticapitalist tendencies among experts and even among managers. Particularly in the state sector, where the careers of experts and bureaucrats are less directly tied to the welfare of corporate capital, it would be expected that more "statist" views of how the economy should be managed would gain credence.

The potential class alliances of contradictory locations are not simply with the bourgeois. There is, under certain historical situations, the potential for alliances with the "popular" exploited classes—classes that are not also exploiters (that is, they are not in contradictory locations within exploitation relations). Such classes, however, generally face a more difficult task in trying to forge an alliance with contradictory locations, since they generally lack the capacity to offer significant bribes to people in those positions. This does not mean, however, that class alliances between workers and some segments of contradictory locations are impossible. Particularly under conditions where contradictory locations are being subjected to a process of "degradation"—deskilling, proletarianization, routinization of authority—it may be quite possible for people in those contradictory locations that are clearly net exploited to see the balance of their interests being more in line with the working class.

Where class alliances between workers and various categories of managers and experts do occur, the critical political question becomes defining the political and ideological direction of the alliance. If the analysis presented in this paper is correct, these contradictory locations are the "bearers" of certain futures to capitalism, futures within which the working class would remain an exploited and dominated class. Should workers support such alliances? Is it in their interests to struggle for a society within which they remain exploited, albeit in noncapitalist ways? I do not think there are general, universal answers to these questions. There are certainly circumstances in which a revolutionary state bureaucratic socialism may be in the real interests of the working class, even though workers would remain exploited in such a society. This is the case, I believe, in many Third World countries today. In the advanced capitalist countries, however, radical democratic socialism, involving the simultaneous socialization of capital and democratization of organization assets, is a viable, if very long-term, possibility.

### Empirical Implications

The concept of exploitation identifies situations in which there are intrinsically opposed material interests between actors. The character-

ization of a class structure as rooted in a complex pattern of exploitation relations, therefore, is meant to provide insight into the distribution of fundamental material interests across positions in that structure and the corresponding lines of cleavage in class conflicts.

The empirical question then becomes how this complex typology of class locations is related to a variety of "dependent" variables. In the present analysis, I will focus on two of these: income and class attitudes. I will briefly discuss the rationales for analyzing each of these variables, the data sources to be used in the analysis, and the construction of the operational variables. Once these preliminaries are completed we will turn to the empirical results themselves.

### *Rationales for Variables*

While the relationship between the theoretical concept of exploitation and empirical data on personal income is not a simple one, the two should nevertheless be closely related. If, therefore, ownership or control of productive assets is in fact the basis for exploitation, then incomes should vary systematically across the cells of the class typology in Table 2. More specifically, we can make two basic hypotheses: (1) mean incomes should be polarized in the class structure between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; and (2) mean incomes should increase monotonically in every direction from the proletariat corner of the table to the expert-manager corner, and from the petty bourgeoisie to the bourgeoisie. Examining the relationship between class structure and income, therefore, is a way of adding credibility to the theoretical claims underlying the class typology.

The rationale for examining class attitudes is that such attitudes should at least tend to reflect the real interests of incumbents of class positions and thus will vary systematically across the cells of the class typology. Two objections can be raised against studying attitudes. The first is that class structure is meant to explain class struggle, particularly the organized forms of class actions, not inter-individual variations in mental states. The second is that even if class location shapes individual mental states, responses to an attitude survey are an inappropriate way of tapping those class-determined mental states. Mental states are sufficiently context-dependent that the responses to the artificial context of a survey interview cannot be viewed as indicators of mental states in the real life situations of class relations.

Both of these objections need to be taken seriously. To the first I would say that even if the ultimate object of explanation of class structure is collectively organized class struggles, it is individuals who participate in those struggles, who make the decisions to act in particular ways,

and thus individual mental states have to be implicated in the process in one way or another. To the second objection, I would argue that to the extent mental states are context-dependent, then the relationship between class location and class attitudes as measured by a survey should be attenuated, not strengthened. The context of the survey interview should tend to scramble the results, add noise to the real effects of class location. If, therefore, we observe a systematic relationship in spite of this context-distortion, this should add confidence in the meaningfulness of the results.

### *Data*

The data we will examine comes from a large, cross-national project on class structure and class consciousness.<sup>51</sup> In the present analysis we will consider the data from only two countries, the United States and Sweden. Within the family of advanced capitalist countries with roughly similar levels of technological development and average standards of living, these two societies represent almost polar cases: the United States has among the highest levels of real income inequality (that is, after taxes and transfers) of any developed capitalist society, while Sweden has the lowest; Sweden has the highest proportion of its civilian labor force directly employed by the state (over 45 percent), while the United States has the lowest (under 20 percent); Sweden has the highest level of governance by social democratic parties of any capitalist country, while the United States has had the lowest. Because of this basic similarity in the levels of economic development combined with these salient political differences, the comparison between Sweden and the United States on the effects of class on income and attitudes should be particularly interesting.

### *Variables*

The income variable is total personal annual income, before taxes, from all sources. It therefore combines wage income with various sources of nonwage income. The class-attitude variable is a scale constructed by combining the responses to six items, each of which has a fairly transparent class content.<sup>52</sup> For example, respondents who agreed with the

51. Details of the study can be found in E.O. Wright, C. Costello, D. Hachen, and J. Sprague, "The American Class Structure," *American Sociological Review*, December 1982; and Wright, *Classes*.

52. Complete details on the measures we will use can be found in Wright, *Classes*, appendix 2.

statement "Employers should be prohibited by law from hiring strike-breakers during a strike" were classified as having taken the pro-working-class position, those who disagreed with this statement were classified as having taken the procapitalist position. The scale goes from -6 (the respondent takes the procapitalist position on all six items) to +6 (the respondent takes the proworker position on all items).

The ownership of productive assets that underlies the class structure typology is operationalized through the use of a wide range of questions on decision making, authority, property ownership, occupational skills, and educational credentials. There are, needless to say, a host of methodological problems with these measures, particularly the measures of skill/credential assets. For this reason I have trichotomized each of the assets. The two poles of each dimension constitute positions with unambiguous relations to the asset in question. The "intermediate" position is a combination of cases with marginal assets and cases for which the measures are ambiguous.

### *Empirical Results: Income*

Table 4 presents the data for mean personal income by class for the United States and Sweden. In general, the data in this table are strongly consistent with the theoretical rationale for the exploitation-based conceptualization of class structure.

In the United States, income is strongly polarized between the proletarian cell in the typology and the bourgeoisie: the former earn, on average, just over \$11,000/year, the latter over \$52,000. In Sweden, the results are not as clear: the bourgeoisie in the sample has essentially identical income to expert managers. However, there are only eight respondents in the bourgeoisie category in the Swedish sample, and they are certainly relatively small capitalists. Also, because of the very heavy taxation on personal income in Sweden, capitalists take a substantial part of their income in kind rather than in cash. It is impossible to measure such nonmonetary elements in personal income with the data we have available, thus the figure in Table 4 is certainly an underestimate. Hypothesis 1, that mean incomes should be polarized between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, is thus strongly supported in the United States and is at least provisionally supported in Sweden.

The results for hypothesis 2, that mean incomes should increase monotonically from proletarian to expert manager and from petty bourgeoisie to bourgeoisie, are less equivocal. In both the United States and Sweden incomes increase in a largely monotonic manner in every dimension of the table as you move from the proletarian corner in the class-structure matrix to the expert-manager corner. The only

**Table 4** Mean Annual Individual Incomes by Class Location in Sweden and the United States

Owners		Assets in the means of production						Organization assets	
		Nonowners (wage laborers)							
1 Bourgeoisie	US: \$52,621 SW: \$28,333	4 Expert manager	US: \$28,665 SW: \$29,952	7 Semicredentialed manager	US: \$20,701 SW: \$20,820	10 Uncredentialed manager	US: \$12,276 SW: \$15,475	+	
2 Small employer	US: \$24,828 SW: \$17,237	5 Expert supervisor	US: \$23,057 SW: 18,859	8 Semicredentialed supervisor	US: \$18,023 SW: \$19,711	11 Uncredentialed supervisor	US: \$13,045 SW: \$15,411	> 0	
3 Petty bourgeoisie	US: \$14,496 SW: \$13,503	6 Expert nonmanager	US: \$15,251 SW: \$14,890	9 Semicredentialed worker	US: \$16,034 SW: \$14,879	12 Proletarian	US: 11,161 SW: \$11,876	-	
									Skill assets
									> 0

United States: N = 1282  
Sweden: N = 1049

Note: Entries in cells are the means for gross annual individual income from all sources before taxes. The Swedish incomes were converted to dollars at the 1980 exchange rate.

Source: Comparative Project on Class Structure and Class Consciousness.

exceptions are that categories 10 and 11 (uncredentialed managers and uncredentialed supervisors) are essentially identical, and categories 6 and 9 (credentialed and semicredentialed nonmanagerial employees) are essentially identical in both the United States and Sweden. Given the conceptual status of the "intermediate" categories of "uncredentialed supervisors" (category 11) and "semicredentialed workers" (category 9), these results are not inconsistent with the theoretical model.

What is particularly striking in the pattern in Table 4 is the interaction between the two dimensions of exploitation relations among wage-earners. The increase in average income is relatively modest as you move along either organization assets or credential assets taken separately (as you move along the bottom of the table and the right-hand column). Where the sharp increase in incomes occurs is when you combine these two exploitation mechanisms (moving along the top of the table and the left-hand column of among wage-earners). Hypothesis 2 is thus strongly supported.<sup>53</sup>

#### *Empirical Results: Attitudes*

Table 5 presents the mean values on the class-consciousness scale by class location in the United States and Sweden. Several generalizations can be drawn from these results.

**The Overall Pattern of Variations** In Table 5 the overall *pattern* of variations in means (not the actual value of the means, but the patterning of the means) is quite similar in the United States and Sweden. In both countries the table is basically polarized between the capitalist class and the working class (in neither table is there a significant difference between proletarians and semicredentialed workers).<sup>54</sup> In both countries the values on the scale become decreasingly pro-working class and eventually procapitalist class as one moves from the proletarian corner of the table to the expert-manager corner of the table. As in the results

53. In a separate analysis, not reported here, in which nonwage income was the dependent variable, the same monotonic pattern was observed, only with a considerably steeper differential between workers and expert managers. See *ibid.*, ch. 6.

54. In the United States, expert managers are slightly more procapitalist than the bourgeoisie itself, but the difference is sufficiently small that they should be treated as essentially equally polarized with respect to the working class. It should be remembered in this context that most respondents in what I am calling the "bourgeoisie" are still fairly modest capitalists. Eighty-three percent of these capitalists employ less than fifty employees. Only 8 percent of expert managers, however, work for businesses with less than fifty employees. It would be expected that if we had data on a sample of large capitalists, the results would be somewhat different.

for income, the means on the attitude scale change in a nearly monotonic manner along every dimension of the table. And in both countries, the means become increasingly procapitalist as you move from the petty bourgeoisie to the capitalist class proper among the self-employed.<sup>55</sup>

**The Degree of Polarization** While the patterning of differences in attitudes is similar in the two countries, the degree of polarization within that common pattern is dramatically different. In the United States the difference between the capitalist class and the working class is just over 2 points on the scale; in Sweden the difference is 4.6 points. (The difference between these differences is statistically significant at the .01 level.) The data indicate that there is basically an international consensus within the capitalist class on class-based attitudes, whereas no such consensus exists in the working class: Swedish and American workers differ on this scale by nearly as much as US workers and capitalists.

**Class Alliances** The pattern of class alliances—the ways in which the terrain of class structure becomes transformed into class formations—suggested by the patterns of consciousness in Table 5 varies considerably in the two countries. In Sweden the only wage-earner category with an emphatically procapitalist ideological position is expert managers; in the United States, procapitalist positions penetrate further into the wage-earner population. In the United States, only the three cells in the lower right-hand corner of the table can be considered part of a working-class coalition; in Sweden the coalition extends to all uncredentialed wage-earners and all nonmanagement wage-earners, and at least weakly includes semicredentialed managers and semicredentialed supervisors as well. Turning these results into proportions of the labor force in Table 2, in the United States approximately 30 percent of the labor force are in class categories within the bourgeois coalition whereas in Sweden the corresponding figure is only 10 percent. Correspondingly, in Sweden between 73 percent and 80 percent of the labor force (depending upon whether or not semicredentialed managers and supervisors are included in the coalition) are in classes within the working-class coalition, whereas in the United States only 58 percent of the labor force are in the

55. It might be objected that these results could be artifacts of other variables that are not included in the analysis. The sex composition of class categories, for example, could conceivably explain the observed patterns across the cells in the table. I have analyzed the results in Table 5 controlling for a range of possible confounding variables—age, sex, class origin, union membership, income—and while certain details are affected by these "controls," the basic patterns remain intact. For a discussion of this multivariate analysis, see Wright, *Classes*, ch. 7.



working-class coalition.<sup>56</sup> The working-class coalition in the United States is thus not only less ideologically polarized with the bourgeoisie than in Sweden, it is also much smaller.

### *Interpretations*

Several general conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, the data are systematically consistent with the proposed reconceptualization of class in terms of relations of exploitation. In both the analysis of income and attitudes, the basically monotonic relationship between these variables and location along the exploitation dimensions of the class typology add credibility to the concept.

Second, the data support the thesis that the underlying structure of class relations shapes the overall pattern of class consciousness. In spite of the dramatic political differences between Sweden and the United States the basic pattern linking class structure to class consciousness is very similar in the two countries: they are both polarized along the three dimensions of exploitation, and the values on the consciousness scale basically vary monotonically as one moves along these dimensions.

Finally, while the overall patterning of consciousness is structurally determined by class relations, the level of working-class consciousness in a given society and the nature of the class coalitions that are built upon those class relations are shaped by the organizational and political practices that characterize the history of class struggle. For all of their reformism and their efforts at building a stable class compromise in Swedish society, the Swedish Social Democratic Party and the associated Swedish labor movement have adopted strategies that reinforce certain aspects of working-class consciousness. Issues of power and property are frequently at the center of the political agenda, social democratic state policies tend to reinforce the material interests of capitalistically exploited wage-earners, and at least the radical wing of the labor movement and the Social Democratic Party keep alive the vision of alternatives to the existing structure of society.

In contrast to the Swedish case, political parties and unions in the United States have engaged in practices that, wittingly or unwittingly, have undermined working-class consciousness. The Democratic Party has systematically displaced political discourse away from a language of

56. These estimates are based on the following aggregations from Table 5: Swedish bourgeois coalition = cells 1, 2, 4; US bourgeois coalition = cells 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10; Swedish working-class coalition = cells 6, 9, 10, 11, 12 (low estimate) and also 7, 8 (high estimate); US working-class coalition = cells 9, 11, 12. Note that in neither country is the petty bourgeoisie—category 3—part of either coalition.

class. While of course there are exceptions, the general tendency has been to organize social conflicts in nonclass ways and to emphasize the extremely limited range of alternatives for dealing with problems of power and property. State welfare policies have tended to heighten rather than reduce class-based divisions among wage-earners. And the ineffectiveness of the labor movement to unionize even a majority of manual industrial workers, let alone white-collar employees, has meant that the divisions of exploitation-based interests among wage-earners have tended to be large relative to their common interests *vis-à-vis* capital. As a result, as the rhetoric of the 1984 presidential campaign reflected, the labor movement is regarded as a “special interest” group in the United States rather than as a representative of the general economic interests of wage-earners.

The net result of these differences in the political strategies and ideologies of parties and unions in the two countries is that class has considerably greater importance in Sweden than in the United States: class location and class experiences have a bigger impact on class consciousness; classes are more polarized ideologically; and the working-class coalition built upon that more polarized ideological terrain is itself much bigger.

### **Conclusion**

The heart of the proposal advanced in this paper is that the concept of class should be systematically rooted in the problem of forms of exploitation. In my previous work, and in the work of many Marxists, the concept of class had effectively shifted from an exploitation-centered concept to a domination-centered concept. Although exploitation remained part of the background context for the discussion of class, it did not systematically enter into the elaboration of actual class maps. That shift, I now believe, undermines the coherence of the concept of class and should be replaced by a rigorous exploitation-centered conceptualization.

If the arguments in this paper are persuasive, the specific exploitation-centered class concept that I have elaborated has several significant advantages over my own previous approach to class (and by extension, other existing class concepts). First, the exploitation-centered concept provides a much more coherent and compelling way of understanding the class location of the “middle class” than alternative concepts, both in capitalist societies and in various kinds of noncapitalist societies. The middle class ceases to be a residual category or a relatively ad hoc amendment to the class map of polarized classes. Rather, middle

classes are defined by the same relations that define the polarized classes themselves; the difference lies in the ways those relations are structurally combined in the concrete institutional forms of a given society.

Second, the exploitation-centered concept provides a much more coherent way of describing the qualitative differences among types of class structures than alternative concepts. The abstract criteria for assessing the class relations of a given society are consistent across qualitatively distinct societies and yet allow for the specificity of any given society's class structures to be investigated. The concept thus avoids the kind of ad hoc quality that plagues most other class concepts as they move across historically distinct types of societies.

Third, the exploitation-centered concept is more systematically *materialist* than domination concepts. Classes are derived from the patterns of effective ownership over aspects of the forces of production. The different kinds of exploitation that define different kinds of classes are all linked to the qualitative properties of these different aspects of forces of production.

Fourth, the exploitation-centered concept provides a more *historical* class concept than do domination-centered concepts. It is the forces of production that impart whatever discretionality exists to epochal social change.<sup>57</sup> Since in the framework discussed in this paper, the class-exploitation nexus is defined with respect to specific forces of production, the development of those forces of production is what gives an historical trajectory to systems of class relations. The order to the forms of society presented in Tables 1 and 3, therefore, is not arbitrary but defines a developmental tendency in class structures.

Fifth, the concept of class elaborated in this paper has a particularly sustained *critical* character. The very definition of exploitation as developed by Roemer contains within itself the notion of alternative forms of society that are immanent within an existing social structure. And the historical character of the analysis of the possible social forms implies that this critical character of the class concept will not have a purely moral or utopian basis. Class, when defined in terms of qualitatively distinct asset-based forms of exploitation, provides a way of describing both the nature of class relations in a given society and the immanent possibilities for transformation posed by those relations.

Finally, the exploitation-centered concept provides a much clearer linkage to the problem of interests than domination-based concepts.

And this, in turn, provides the basis for a more systematic empirical analysis of the relationship between the objective properties of class structures and the problems of class formation, class alliances, and class struggle.

---

57. See E. O. Wright, "Giddens's Critique of Marxism," *New Left Review*, no. 139 (1983), for a discussion of why the forces of production can plausibly be viewed as giving history a directionality.