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# Class Theory: Still the Axis of Critical Social Scientific Analysis?

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By now, some notion of class is common to most schools of social science. But only in Marxist social and political theory are the concepts of class and class struggle traditional analytical cornerstones. In Marxist analyses, history is the “history of class struggle”; economic class positions—under capitalism notably those of capital and labor—are the most important bases of collective action; class interests govern politics and ideology; as a political doctrine devoted to the working class. Marxism is founded on class theory. Engels wrote the classical formulation of this theory. In his view, Marx had

discovered the great law of motion . . . according to which all struggles in history, whether they happen on a political, religious, philosophical, or any other ideological terrain, are indeed the more or less clear expression of struggles between social classes. The existence and therefore the collisions between these classes are conditioned by the development of their economic situation—by their mode of production.<sup>1</sup>

Although the various Marxisms have always differed considerably, for a long time fundamental criticisms of the centrality assigned to class and class struggle were stigmatized as “revisionist.” For nearly a century, some version of the traditional view as expressed by Engels was canonical in mainstream Marxist theories. And the—at least implicit—

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1. F. Engels, Foreword to the 3rd ed. (1885) of K. Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, in *Marx-Engels-Werke* (hereafter *MEW*) vol. 8, (East Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1956–), p. 562.

assumption of an objectively socialist working class was a common feature of these theories.

Only recently, in the course of the so-called crisis of Marxism, has this heritage been questioned rigorously and on a large scale within Marxism itself. The past decade witnessed, as it were, the erosion of class theory and of other fundamentals of traditional Marxism. Class reductionism, economism, essentialism, and even obscurantism are now identified as serious defects in Marxist theory. As a result, Marxism in the mid-1980s has lost many of its traditional contours, and its central concern has shifted from the question of capitalist reproduction to themes like the periodization of capitalist modes of accumulation and comparative public policy research. However, the erosion of traditional Marxism was not always based on rational argument. To some extent this process is simply an uncritical intellectual adaptation to a changing socio-political context.

Erik Olin Wright's plea for the restitution of the "explanatory priority" of the concept of class based on an exploitation-centered approach and his insistence on objective class interests as the foundation for social-scientific critiques are thus a remarkable contrast. Wright's position provides the occasion to reflect systematically on the relevance of the concept of class in social and political theory. In the following, I outline recent theoretical developments regarding the explanatory status of the concept of class, consider Wright's theses, and then return to Marx to pose the question of the original basis for arguing the centrality of class. Finally, I discuss the question of objective interests and the relevance of investigations into class structure.

The main thesis of this article is that there is indeed a certain specificity of class, a specificity overlooked by both the adherents and the critics of the centrality of class. It stems from the structural dynamics of the relationship between capital and labor. Capital is compelled to accumulate, and labor is pressed to resist what I call the "logic of capital." The structurally dynamic character of the conflict between labor and capital renders the presence of this conflict in the history of capitalism plausible, and it defines a special quality of the respective class locations as bases for politico-ideological articulation and action. No *a priori* explanatory primacy, however, can be deduced from this specificity. Therefore, Wright's view has to be rejected. Furthermore, I argue that the notion of objective interests of the working class in socialism is not tenable. More generally, I reject Wright's assumption that the analysis of class structure provides the base for a critical social science.

Throughout this article, I try to argue along the lines of an empiricist, "naive" falsificationism. This means, in short, that I accept abstract

propositions as generally valid only if they can be made plausible by corresponding descriptive propositions and by deductions on this lower level of abstraction. This method is empiricist because it assigns priority to the lower levels of abstraction, and it is naive because the supposed criterion of falsification is not an objective one. But the epistemological naivety is justified because in daily life we are condemned to assume that "true" knowledge corresponds to reality and that human beings are not only capable of producing this knowledge, but actually do so.

## The Challenge to Tradition

### *Althusserian Rhetoric*

The renaissance of the intellectual left in the late 1960s was characterized by a critical stance toward Marxist orthodoxy. Although representatives of the older independent Marxism—for example, E.P. Thompson in Britain, J.-P. Sartre in France, and adherents of the Frankfurt School in Germany and the United States—had a great impact on this revival, probably the most prominent exponents of the academic Marxism that dominated the following years were Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas.

In the tradition of Gramsci, one of the central objectives of their work was to attack economism and class reductionism, which they denounced as "deviation," "revision," and "bourgeois interpretation."<sup>2</sup> The central methodological points of departure for Althusserian Marxism were the postulates of "economic determination in the last instance" and of the "relative autonomy" of the superstructural "levels" of politics and ideology. To underline this approach, Althusser coined the concept of the class struggle as the "motor" of history. The development of productive forces is not the motor of history; rather the class struggle is, with its irreducible politico-ideological dimension, as Poulantzas pointed out in his 1968 work *Political Power and Social Classes*. For him, there are no inherent class interests in the economic structure and nothing like a "class in itself."<sup>3</sup> However, Althusser and Poulantzas never examined the fallacies of economism and class reductionism in detail.

2. See A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, eds. Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 163ff; L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Verso, 1971), pp. 7, 19, 45; and Nicos Poulantzas, "The Problem of the Capitalist State," *New Left Review*, no. 58 (1969) p. 68.

3. N. Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), pp. 110–17.

The anti-economism of Althusserian Marxism marked a rupture in the history of Marxist thought. For the first time the explanatory status of the economy and of economic class positions was questioned, not just by isolated theorists, but by a whole generation of Western Marxists. Claims, however, are one thing; their realization is quite another. And, in fact, a closer look at Althusser's and Poulantzas's claims reveal them to be sheer rhetoric, or—to use Alvin Gouldner's phrase—"programmatically theatrical."<sup>4</sup>

Some examples may illustrate the aptness of this characterization. Without a class reductionist ascription of political objectives to economic class positions, it is impossible to say, as Althusser did, that Marxism-Leninism "represents the proletarian class struggle in theory" and that it "brings the social classes face to face with their truth."<sup>5</sup> Relatively autonomous processes of class formation or, more specifically, of the formation of political forces in such a conception can only be "deviations." The theses of "economic determination in the last instance" and of "relative autonomy," then, refer to real history but not to true history, which is the point of reference of the first.

The same can be said of Poulantzas. Starting from the proposed relative autonomy of politics and ideology and from the distinction between "class determination" on the structural level and "class position" in the politico-ideological conjuncture, he claims to evade an economist definition of class: "A social class is defined . . . by its place in the social division of labour as a whole. This includes political and ideological relations." But this is followed by: "A social class . . . may take up a class position that does not correspond to its interests, which are defined by the class determination."<sup>6</sup>

This construction is typical. Presenting structural class determination as the standard of true or objective class interests conflicts with the proclaimed relative autonomy of politics and ideology at this level. In order to function as a standard, they must be derived from economic positions. As a result, politics and ideology are only relatively autonomous in the conjunctural class positions, but here it is just this autonomy that makes conjunctural class interests deviate from true class interests. If class interests are true and thus correspond to class determination, conjuncture in such a case would be nothing more than a reflection of

4. A.W. Gouldner, "Stalinism? A Study of Internal Colonialism," in *Political Power and Social Theory*, vol. 1, ed. M. Zeitlin (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1980), p. 244 n. 2.

5. Althusser, *Lenin*, pp. 19, 8, see also p. 100.

6. N. Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1975), pp. 14, 15.

structure. Structure refers to true history; conjuncture—where the autonomy of politics and ideology is effective—to a deviation from true history. Intentionally or unintentionally, Poulantzas presents a Hegelian argument; he "is not denying economism, but merely complicating it."<sup>7</sup>

Ever present in Althusserian Marxism are the assumptions of a "properly" revolutionary socialist proletariat, determined by its economic class location, and of a "normal" course of history that would lead to the abolition of capitalism. In this essentialist construction, the continued existence of capitalism proved that the capitalists dominated the working class. Political power and ideological hegemony were the necessary conditions for the survival of capitalism. Its survival showed that these conditions existed; the state therefore could only be a capitalist class state, and the dominant ideologies could only be capitalist class ideologies. Everything was determined by class, and class was determined by economic location. But the (majority of the) actual working class in any given conjuncture deviates from this picture. A working class determined by its class location would have destroyed capitalism! Since, however, politics and ideology have the "function" of bringing about the "cohesion" of capitalism, conjunctural politics and the ideology of the working class necessarily have to deviate from proletarian "class determination" in the logic of Althusserian Marxism.

### *Radical Criticisms*

Despite all critical pretensions, the dominant Marxist social theory of the 1970s remained economist and class reductionist. Economist because political and ideological content was *a priori* ascribed to economic relations; class reductionist because social and political events were *a priori* reduced to class struggle. The late 1970s, then, witnessed a radicalization of the theoretical claims placed on the agenda by Althusser and Poulantzas. This development was represented by Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, Ernesto Laclau, and Adam Przeworski.

Apart from E.P. Thompson, Hindess and Hirst were perhaps the sharpest critics of the "isms" of Althusserian Marxism. In their view, classes have to be distinguished radically from political forces:

The problem . . . is that when we turn to confront the dominant political issues and struggles of the day, "classes", categories of economic agents, are

7. P. Hirst, "Economic Classes and Politics," in *Class & Class Structure*, ed. A. Hunt (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977), p. 138; for a detailed presentation and critique of Poulantzas's theory, see B. Jessop, *Nicos Poulantzas: Marxist Theory and Political Strategy* (London: Macmillan, 1985).

not directly present in them. We encounter state apparatuses, parties . . . trade union and employers' organisations, bodies of armed men, demonstrations, riotous mobs, etc., but never classes. . . . So much for the forces acting in the political [domain], what about the issues at stake? Just as classes are not political organisations, so political struggles do not occur in the form of direct contests between classes for political hegemony, contests in which the issue is the nature of the social relations of production: capitalism versus socialism.<sup>8</sup>

The central thesis of Hindess's and Hirst's criticism is that there is no necessary correspondence between classes and politics. Classes are simply categories of economic agents. They "do not have given 'interests', apparent independently of definite parties, ideologies, etc., and against which these parties, ideologies, etc., can be measured." Consequently, politics and ideology have their "conditions of existence," which are manifold, but they do not "represent" classes in any direct form. The assumption of "some essential arena of class struggle beyond politics," therefore, has to be rejected.<sup>9</sup>

The decisive difference between traditional Marxism, in its classic version as well as in its Althusserian revision, and critics like Hindess and Hirst seems clear. Where the former hold essentialist assumptions, the latter reject them because they cannot see an empirical basis for these assumptions. The critics' own approach is to present an elementary description of a more complex social and political reality and to assume the irreducibility of this complexity. This mode of argument holds true for Hindess and Hirst—though they explicitly reject any empiricist epistemology<sup>10</sup>—as well as for Laclau and Przeworski.

In contrast, Przeworski's theory leaves room for politico-ideological "class formation" and for classes as political subjects. This difference, however, is partly a question of the definition of class. Yet Przeworski's emphasis on the irreducibility of social complexity is identical:

The organization of class as historical subjects . . . is not determined by the places occupied by individuals within the realm of property relations. There is no relation to be deduced here. The history of capitalism need not be a history of class struggle . . . although it may happen to be that if workers and capi-

8. Hirst, "Economic classes," pp. 125–6.

9. Ibid., p. 131. See also B. Hindess, "Classes and Politics in Marxist Theory," *Power and the State*, ed. G. Littlejohn et al. (London: Croom Helm, 1978), pp. 72–97; and A. Cutler et al., *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977–8).

10. B. Hindess and P. Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social Formation* (London: Macmillan, 1977), esp. pp. 7, 20–21.

talists organize as such and if everyone struggles only in their capacity of workers or capitalists.<sup>11</sup>

And further:

The people who perpetuate their existence by selling their capacity to work for a wage are also men or women, Catholics or Protestants, Northerners or Southerners. They are also consumers, tax-payers, parents, and city dwellers. They may become mobilized into politics as workers, but they may also become mobilized as Catholic workers, Catholics or Bavarian Catholics.<sup>12</sup>

Przeworski never took part in the discourse of Althusserian Marxism. Laclau, by contrast, did, and his first attempts to criticize class reductionism still show the marks of the Althusserian approach. In his 1977 critique of Poulantzas's theory of fascism, he asserts that

every contradiction is overdetermined by class struggle. According to basic Marxist theory, the level of production relations always maintains the role of determination in the last instance in any social formation. This in itself establishes the priority of the class struggle.<sup>13</sup>

By the beginning of the 1980s and with direct reference to the "crisis of Marxism," however, Laclau (mostly in cooperation with Chantal Mouffe) began to develop a theory of political articulation in which the traditional "isms" of Marxism were banned. In 1985 this preliminary work culminated in the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.<sup>14</sup>

The central element of the "post-Marxist" theory of Laclau and Mouffe is the concept of discourse. They conceive political subjectivity as resulting from discursive articulation; that is, from processes of the "production of meaning." Articulation is a "discursive practice which does not have a plane of constitution prior to, or outside, the dispersion

11. A. Przeworski, "The Ethical Materialism of John Roemer," *Politics and Society* vol. 11, no. 3 (1982), pp. 293–4. Przeworski's initial contribution to the subject of class was his "Proletariat into a Class: The Process of Class Formation from Karl Kautsky's 'The Class Struggle' to Recent Controversies," *Politics and Society* vol. 7, no. 4 (1977): 343–401.

12. A. Przeworski and J. Sprague, "Party Strategy, Class Ideology, and Individual Voting: A Theory of Electoral Socialism" (Paper prepared for the Colloquium on Class Formation, Paris: Sept. 1982).

13. E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory: Capitalism–Fascism–Populism* (London: Verso, 1977), p. 108.

14. E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 4: "we are now situated in a post-Marxist terrain."

of the articulated elements." Consequently, there does not "exist a constitution principle for social agents which can be fixed in an ultimate class core." According to Laclau and Mouffe, traditional Marxist concepts like objective interests lack "any theoretical base whatsoever," and the search for the "true" working class is a "false problem."<sup>15</sup> Meaning, political subjectivity, and collective action cannot be read off from structural positions; processes of discourse circumscribe an irreducible level of social constitution, and this is exactly what characterizes the "openness" of the social. Class locations are not even privileged bases for articulation. Race, sex, nationality, or anything else can have the same or greater importance in this respect. The base of articulation has to be found in the "plurality of diverse and frequently contradictory positions."<sup>16</sup> Class is just one of them, and nothing can be predicted about its relevance.

One could say that Hindess's and Hirst's criticisms lack a sustained constructive component; that Przeworski's concept of class is inconsistent; and that Laclau and Mouffe can be faulted for the confusion they create in defining the concepts of articulation and discourse,<sup>17</sup> as well as for the absence of empirical transparency in these concepts. Furthermore, all of these authors tend to exchange one extreme (economism and essentialism) for another (relativism and subjectivism). The lapse into subjectivism seems particularly apparent in the texts of Laclau and Mouffe, who reject the distinction between discursive and non-discursive aspects of social reality,<sup>18</sup> and thus tend to reduce this reality to processes of the constitution of meaning, which are based on meaning. In such a conception, any given structural context of action (and of discourse), whether constituted by discursive practice or not, is irrelevant.<sup>19</sup>

But however justified these criticisms may be, these authors reject the centrality that Marxism traditionally assigned to class.<sup>20</sup> Their writings pose the question of how class and class struggle ever came to be seen as

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–5, 109.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 84; for the "openness of the social," see p. 113.

17. At one point (*Hegemony*, p. 96), they define a discursive structure as "an articulatory practice"; elsewhere (p. 105) they call discourse the "structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice." Perhaps a structure can be a practice, but it makes no sense to say, as their definitions imply, that a structured totality resulting from a discursive structure is called discourse!

18. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

19. For a similar criticism, see B. Jessop, *The Capitalist State* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982), pp. 199–200.

20. More recently, the publications of, e.g., Isaac Balbus, Jon Elster, Anthony Giddens, Claus Offe, Frank Parkin, and Theda Skocpol point in the same direction.

relevant. Is it not evident that the concept of class lacks any special explanatory status?

## Looking for Arguments for the Centrality of Class

### *Wright's Defense*

In his 1985 publication *Classes*, Erik Olin Wright answered no to this question. *Classes* is above all devoted to problems of class structure. Although Wright certainly does not try to rehabilitate economism and class reductionism, he insists that Marxism must adhere to the centrality of class. According to him, this centrality has been undermined "by the shift to a domination-centered concept of class." This concept tends

to slide into the "multiple oppressions" approach to understanding society. Societies, in this view, are characterized by a plurality of oppressions, each of which is rooted in a different form of domination—sexual, racial, national, economic, etc.—none having any explanatory priority over any other. Class, then, becomes just one of many oppressions, with no particular centrality to social and historical analysis.

To retain this centrality, Wright argues, Marxism has to opt for an exploitation-centered concept of class.<sup>21</sup>

The question, however, is whether the concept of class deserves centrality. Centrality, understood in a nonreductionist way, would mean, as Wright indicates, the explanatory priority of class. For him, therefore, the class structures should

not only . . . be viewed as setting the basic limits of possibility on class formation, class consciousness and class struggle, but they also constitute the most fundamental social determinant of limits of possibility for other aspects of social structure. Class structures constitute the central organizing principles of societies in the sense of shaping the range of possible variations of the state, ethnic relations, gender relations, etc.

And, he adds:

the claim is that class structures constitute the lines of demarcation in trajectories of social change . . . the thesis that class struggle is the "motor" of

21. E.O. Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 57. See also chapter 1 above, p. 8.

history, then, means that it is the conflict between actors defined by their location within class structures which explains the qualitative transformations that demarcate epochal trajectories of social change.<sup>22</sup>

Wright has to demonstrate that class structure is the most important determinant of human identity and that class struggle explains the basic features of society and history. And since it is impossible to demonstrate this in an all-embracing empirical way, Wright would make his claim plausible only if he could refer to some societal mechanism or to some fundamental social fact that generates the centrality of class and if he could illustrate such configuration by significant examples. Does he provide arguments of this kind?

To maintain the primacy of class, he says: "It is sufficient to argue that the class structure constitutes the central mechanism by which various sorts of resources are appropriated and distributed, therefore determining the underlying capacities to act of various social actors. Class structures are the central determinant of social power." Because class structure "distributes the basic access to the resources which determine human capacities to act," Wright argues, it establishes the "limits" within which "non-class mechanisms operate."<sup>23</sup> Is this a basic social fact, and is it really sufficient?

Marxism has always stressed the material dimension of social life and considered it fundamental because access to material resources determines the existential conditions of life, the standard of living, and hence, to a large extent, access to other resources like education, culture, information, and politics. This stress is certainly justified, and by themselves material factors explain many aspects of social differentiation. It is also true that class structure is the most global matrix for the distribution of material resources. The concrete distribution of these resources, however, reflects the various individual economic positions and circumstances of a population, which cannot adequately be described in class terms. Moreover—and Wright seems to endorse this view—the distribution of resources between the sexes, among nations and even regions, or among ethnic groups is not (primarily) a matter of class. Every

22. *Classes*, pp. 31, 32–3.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 312–2, 29. In an earlier publication ("Giddens's Critique of Marxism," *New Left Review* no. 138 [1983]), Wright mentions two further reasons for the primacy of class: (1) that it has "the greatest *existential* impact on human subjectivity" (p. 23); and (2) that "class relations have an internal logic of development" that is "articulated to the development of the forces of production" (p. 24). In my view, the first reason (which he himself critically undermines in that article) seems to be an aspect of his thesis that class structure limits the possible range of variation of other social dimensions. This could not be the case if class structure did not have a decisive impact on human subjectivity. The idea of the "internal logic" of class structure has entirely disappeared in *Classes*.

member of one of these categories may also be a member of one class and involved in particular class structures, but his or her *specific* capacity to act is determined by a complex configuration of *specific* relations.

But even if we accept the view that class structure is the central determinant of access to resources, a question remains: Does this fact "limit" the possible variations of non-class relations more than these relations limit the possible variation of class structure? Wright does not refer to any compelling mechanism that would substantiate his claim. As an illustration of his thesis, he mentions only male domination, whose persistence, he admits, cannot be explained by class structure. The historical possibility of the "elimination of institutionalized forms of male domination," however, must still be explained by the "transformations of class relations—the development of advanced forms of capitalist production accompanied by emerging elements of state production."<sup>24</sup> Here Wright obviously conflates class structure and the economy, and this again is not convincing.

The concept of the capitalist economy is much more comprehensive than the concept of capitalist class structure. The largely autonomous dynamics of capitalist development—which are irrelevant to Wright's argument—indeed cause change on other social terrains. These dynamics, which resulted in more change in the past two hundred years than anything in the preceding millennia, are determined not by the presence of private property in the means of production and the existence of wage labor, but by the combination of these production relations with production for largely anonymous, unregulated markets under a system of competition among capitalist enterprises. Historically, it was the unleashing of the market that brought about the "great transformation" toward a society that is condemned to change and develop by its elementary economic structure.<sup>25</sup> Apart from specific circumstances determining the rise and fall of national economies, long waves, and the business cycle, the structural dynamics of capitalism cause more or less continuous change in at least three dimensions: technology and productive knowledge; commodities and the material way of life; and social structure. The "transformation of class relations" is only one aspect of this dynamic.

Thus, as Wright recognizes, when in the past two decades, traditional

24. *Classes*, p. 59 n. 17.

25. See Karl Polanyi's famous *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), especially Part 2. One might object that capitalist markets are by no means unregulated. Indeed, there are thousands of regulations and restrictions. But none of these regimentations is comparable to the strict limitations of the precapitalist private markets in, for example, medieval Europe or China.

patriarchal relations have been questioned, this is because of new technico-economic demands, the proliferation of higher education, growing professionalism, and increasing socio-geographic mobility, as well as mass consumption and modern mass communication. In this erosion of traditional bonds, the changing class structure (the expansion of the middle classes) was but one link in a causal chain and not even a central one at that. Indeed, the historically unique dynamics of capitalism open up various possibilities of social change. Because of capitalism's power to penetrate, it can justifiably be seen as the central motor of social development in the modern world. Structure always limits as well as enables action, and capitalism tends to limit the range of possible social variation by generating functional requirements. But this argument does not resemble Wright's arguments for the "primacy of class."

Finally, Wright's universal thesis of the centrality of class struggle, especially with regard to periods of epochal change, seems to me very weak. If one defines epochal change as fundamental change in class structure, the choice of possible actors struggling for change is already restricted by definition. Many questions, however, remain. Are there always definite periods of epochal change? What if fundamental change occurs gradually, without any central and conscious struggle over class structure? Actually, both feudalism and capitalism rose gradually; we can identify the decisive steps only in retrospect. The bourgeois revolutions turned out to be a sort of class struggle, but not, however, a struggle between the relational classes of feudalism, the feudal lords and the peasantry. Moreover, these revolutions were first and foremost political revolutions. By contrast, the Russian revolution of 1917–19 changed the class structure, and the given class structure limited its possible range. But the latter is trivial and does not substantiate the centrality of class struggle. Were the opposing forces class forces, or popular versus ruling forces? Was the revolution initiated by class relations? And was the even more fundamental Stalinist revolution of 1928–30 determined by class structure and class struggle? Were the factions of the party classes; were the peasants who were stigmatized as "kulaks" a class? Or, as a final example, German fascism did not seriously affect class structure, but it did change social reality dramatically. The struggle of class-based forces was, no doubt, of great relevance in this process. But if the concept of class provides the central explanation, why did fascism rise only in Germany and—in a less dramatic form—in Italy?

In conclusion, Wright does not provide sustained arguments for his claim. So, more than ever, one has to ask why Marxism traditionally accorded centrality to the concept of class. What were the original arguments?

### *Marx's Materialist Account*

Why did Marx assume that social relations, social action, and social change must be explained by the struggle of economically defined classes? His so-called political writings describe socio-political processes of his time, but contain no foundation for his claim concerning the universal explanatory status of class. Nor does his political economy provide this foundation; it is restricted to capitalism. The only thing one could expect from Marx, then, is a theory of the centrality of class within capitalism. And indeed, such a theory can be derived from his political economy.

Even with regard to capitalism, however, this theory refers only to a very limited field. Its central thesis holds that capitalist development will *in the long run* demote social positions other than class to historical irrelevance. In the long run people are *forced* to "make history" on the basis of their economic class location only. And it is the working class that is forced to destroy capitalism and to bring about socialism. That capitalism must necessarily give birth to socialism is an element of Marx's metaphysical teleology of history. But Marx's claim that the working class necessarily has to destroy capitalism is debatable. His arguments originate in his materialism, in which material force is the most important concept.<sup>26</sup>

In essence, Marx's theory of capitalism contains a two-class model. He defines classes as relational categories shaped by the relations between producers and the means of production.<sup>27</sup> In capitalism the "subjective" and "objective" factors of production are "divorced" and represented by wage labor and capital. For Marx the landowners—also mentioned as a separate class—and the small bourgeoisie are declining entities, and the new middle classes are not a serious theme. He deals only sporadically with the differentiation of wage-earners into industrial and "commercial," skilled and unskilled, and supervisory and executing workers.<sup>28</sup> This differentiation, as well as the distinction between productive and nonproductive wage laborers,<sup>29</sup> will have no impact on capitalist development. In the long run, uniformity will triumph.<sup>30</sup> The relevant classes, therefore, are the capitalists and the unified working

26. The following account draws heavily on U. Becker, *Kapitalistische Dynamik und politisches Kräftepiel: Zur Kritik des klassentheoretischen Ansatzes* (Frankfurt a/Main: Campus Verlag, 1986), pp. 15–45, 90–94.

27. K. Marx, *Das Kapital II* (MEW 24), p. 42.

28. See, e.g., *Das Kapital I* (MEW 23), pp. 351, 443, 697; *Das Kapital III* (MEW 25), pp. 311–12, 402; and *Theorien über den Mehrwert I* (MEW 26.1), p. 145.

29. *Theorien I*, pp. 145, 171; and *Theorien II* (MEW 26.2), p. 576.

30. *Kapital I*, p. 442; *Kapital III*, pp. 311–12, 402–3, 508.

class. Marx's definition of the working class is ambiguous: one could identify it with only the industrial working class, but if we follow the dominant logic of Marx's political economy, his working class has to be identified with more or less all wage-earners.

In Marx's theory, the "law of motion" of the capitalist mode of production will ultimately force the working class to destroy capitalism, and it is this principle that gives centrality to class struggle. Because of the strain of competition, capital has to maximize profit to develop productive forces, to create new products, and to enlarge the surplus value by lowering (relatively or even absolutely) the costs of the labor force, thereby increasing the rate of exploitation. All this determines the unique dynamics of capitalism, but it also threatens the material existence of wage-earners. People work for use values, but the logic of the capitalist orientation toward profit undermines this objective. Progress in production threatens job security, and reduced labor costs can imply lower wages, more working hours, a higher intensity of production, and diminished security on the shopfloor. Hence the relation between labor and capital is a structural opposition (in Marx's dialectical terminology, a "contradictory" relation) and therefore one of potentially permanent conflict.

Marx does not consider exploitation defined as a certain quantitative relationship as the source of class antagonism under capitalism. In his view, this antagonism originates in the overall *dynamics* of capitalist accumulation, in which the dynamics of exploitation are a central element. What is important for the current argument is that in his political economy Marx postulates a dramatic deterioration in living conditions for the working class in the course of capitalist accumulation. The development of productivity and, in conjunction, the swelling of the industrial "reserve army" and the increasing rate of exploitation will inevitably lead to the impoverishment of (large homogenized parts of) the working class. This is "the general law of capitalist accumulation,"<sup>31</sup> which in the long run will bring about a situation of generalized existential misery in which it will be irrelevant whether the wage-earners are of one nationality or another, men or women, Catholic or Protestant, young or old, villagers or city dwellers. The only base of political action that counts will be the wage-earners' class location: because of their class location they will be forced to overthrow capitalism.

Whether Marx argued for the absolute impoverishment of the working class is subject to academic dispute. Throughout his work he made contradictory remarks about the development of the material conditions

31. *Kapital I*, ch. 23, esp. p. 675.

of life of the working class. However, in central parts of his work, whenever he deals with epochal change, Marx does hypothesize the absolute impoverishment of the working class: see, for example the *Communist Manifesto*, *Labor and Capital*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and especially "Address on the Anniversary of *The People's Paper*," "Inaugural Address to the IAA," and the final chapters of *Capital* Volume I. But, more important, Marx's emphasis on material necessities and historical laws would have no coherent base without a theory of the increasing misery of the working class. This theory is the only, though very limited, foundation for the extraordinary significance that Marx and traditional Marxists assign to class location and the class struggle.

### Capitalist Dynamics and the Pressure to Class-Based Struggle

It is no secret that the crucial aspects of Marx's theory of the historical tendencies of capitalist accumulation are not tenable. His basic mistake was to raise certain abstract possibilities of development to the status of *the* tendencies of history, of long-term laws proceeding with "iron necessity."<sup>32</sup> Thereby he abstracts "from processes that affect predictions," and these abstractions "are bad abstractions."<sup>33</sup> Thus, in analyzing the process of capitalist accumulation, he treated the change in the composition of capital in favor of fixed capital—that is, the substitution of machinery for human power—as the determinant of the course of this process.<sup>34</sup> And on the basis of his investigation of this "factor," Marx arrived at the absolute impoverishment of wage-earners. The creation of new products—which in the labor market can compensate for increases in productivity—and, most important, the organization and struggle of the wage-earners to improve their material situation *within* capitalism, got no attention from Marx. It is precisely these factors, however, that are responsible for the fact that the working class is *not* forced to destroy capitalism. Hence, there is no economic development to diagnose here that in the long run consigns sexual, racial, national, religious, or sociogeographic positions to historical irrelevance.

Moreover, Marx's thesis of the increasing homogeneity of the working class has not proved to be true. On the contrary, capitalist development involves, as an inherent tendency—as a condition of the

32. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

33. Przeworski, "Ethical Materialism," p. 299.

34. See *Kapital I*, p. 640.

technological and organizational division of labor—a growing differentiation of wage labor. The process of capitalist accumulation is twofold: the tendency toward the polarization of labor and capital is opposed by a tendency toward the individualization and fragmentation of wage-earners. The existence of the so-called new middle classes is the most tangible result of this development. The individualization and fragmentation of wage labor makes it evident that the concrete relation between labor and capital is not simply a relation between the working class and the capitalist class. Individual and collective economic locations do not necessarily coincide.

Hence, critics like Hirst, Laclau, and Przeworski are right in contesting the centrality that traditional Marxism accorded to class. However, they tend to overlook the specificity which class location actually has as a base for social articulation and political action. *The true kernel of Marx's theory remains his stress on the structurally dynamic character of capitalism.* The dynamics of capitalism make some sense of the theorem of base and superstructure, because in capitalist society and only in capitalist society no other part of the social whole has overall effects comparable to those of the economy. This dynamic, which is absent in feudalism or other precapitalist modes of production (and which has nothing to do with Althusser's "last instance"), is the locomotive of the development of capitalist society. By continually reshaping class structure, human needs, and the material space of society, the economy initiates change and adjustments in politics, ideology, and culture much more than the latter influence the economy. In this sense, the capitalist economy is the "base" for historical development. The notion of "superstructure," however, is questionable, because no economic mechanism strictly determines politics, ideology, and culture.

A second kernel of truth in Marx's theory is his emphasis on the *structural* character of the antagonism between labor and capital or, more generally, between the human orientation toward use values and capital's orientation toward profit. In fact, the logic of capital, the structurally imposed pressure to maximize profits and to lower costs, threatens the existence of the wage-earners and *structurally* pressures them to struggle against this logic. The everyday struggle over wages and working conditions is an obvious expression of this pressure. In contrast to nineteenth-century capitalism, the current struggle between labor and capital in the North and West is not normally about existential subsistence. But without labor's resistance to the logic of profit maximization, there would not even be a relative guarantee of work, of wage levels, of hours of labor, and of decent conditions on the shop-floor. Life would be a very uncertain affair, and labor would be a plaything of capital. Whereas people can manage the poverty resulting from

exploitation, they cannot manage the complete uncertainty of life expectations that the pure logic of capital would create.

It is the structural pressure on wage-earners to fight the logic of capital—and the impetus to struggle for more, which is fostered by capitalist expansion and by its continual reshaping of the consumers' needs—that explains why the conflict between labor and capital in capitalist society is *universal* and *nearly permanent*. No other front of conflict has such a comparably broad and indeed fundamental, existential basis as that between the orientation toward use values and the orientation toward profit—of which the struggle between labor and capital is the central and primary form. No other front of conflict has a comparable historical record. The structural pressure to conflict involved in the relational capitalist class locations is their distinguishing feature. This does not prove the overall explanatory "centrality" of class, but it certainly does substantiate a characteristic of the relational class locations as bases for articulation and political action. The structural pressure to conflict establishes the peculiarity of the struggle between labor and capital.

This structural antagonism between labor and capital is a concrete reality. But it is an abstraction because its manifestation in struggle depends on many factors. First, the capitalist class locations overlap the hierarchical division of labor, which differentiates and fragments the wage-earners.<sup>35</sup> This makes the capitalist class structure more complex, and it implies that not all individual wage-earners are threatened by the logic of capital in the same way and to the same extent. The result is that the antagonism between labor and capital usually does not lead to a struggle between two class collectivities. Further, it cannot be deduced from the structural antagonism between labor and capital how the struggle between these two poles will be settled. Hindess and Hirst are right here: the struggle between labor and capital is a struggle between political forces. These forces are based not only on the relational class locations but also on individual economic locations, on ideological traditions like the distinction between the prestige of manual and mental labor, on age, on sex, and on other positions. All these factors are effective in their own right. Finally, political articulation—resulting from the processes of socialization, manipulation, and learning from experience—is an irreducible level of social reality.

To conclude, the confrontation between labor and capital is distinguished by its structural dynamics, but this does not justify the general

35. Capital is also differentiated, but that is of lesser exemplary relevance in the present discussion.

claim that class locations have a particular explanatory force. Class struggle is not the motor of the history of capitalist society. If there is any such motor, and only in the sense of the central initiator of societal change, it is the dynamics of the capitalist economy, of which the structural antagonism between labor and capital is only one aspect. Capital is compelled to accumulate, and labor is pressed to fight the logic of capital accumulation. Because of its elementary existential dimension, therefore, the conflict between capital and labor is a universal and nearly permanent feature of capitalist society. Theorists like Hindess and Hirst and Laclau and Mouffe tend to overlook this specificity. The capital-labor conflict, to be sure, has a central place in capitalist history. Evidently, the history of the distribution of profits and wages or the development of important parts of welfare legislation are rooted in the power relations between the two poles of the capitalist antagonism. But in the explanation of the various histories within capitalist society, such as the rise of fascism or the "cultural revolution" of the 1960s, the antagonism between labor and capital has no *a priori* centrality.<sup>36</sup>

It follows that the concept of class struggle is useful only in the sense of a struggle between class-based (political) forces initiated by problems originating in the dynamics of class relations. The concept of class formation should be considered in the same way. Class formation—in its emphatic sense as the politico-ideological formation of an economic class as a class—refers only to a theoretical possibility. What really exists is the formation of class-based forces such as social-democratic or Catholic unions. The concept of class consciousness is problematic. Does it refer to any given awareness members of a class have of class structure and the interests that articulate within this structure? The point of reference in this case would not be class but the individual. Or does the concept of class consciousness refer to the extent that members of a class express the objective interests that can be derived analytically from their class locations? Such an interpretation is acceptable only if the concept of objective class interests is viable.

### Class Structure, Objective Interests, and Critical Social Science

In traditional Marxism the concept of class does not have "explanatory

36. This does not mean that the capital-labor conflict explains the commonalities among capitalist nations. To a certain extent this may be the case. But for the rest, these commonalities originate largely in common traditions (Christianity, for example) and in the tautological fact that all the capitalist nations are capitalist.

priority" only. Marxism has always claimed to be a critical science or, in Engels's words, the theory of "scientific socialism." In this context the concepts of class, particularly of objective class interests, and of class structure as the basis for these interests are of central importance. Marx's goal in his political economy was to offer the "theoretical foundation" of communism<sup>37</sup> through an analysis of the process of capitalist accumulation, which would necessarily both define antagonistic objective interests and lead to the realization of the objective interest of the working class in socialism/communism. In this teleological theory, *critique* was a synonym for the analysis of the direction of capitalist development. Whatever values might have guided Marx's investigation, in his own judgment, his theory was only an "organ" of real history.<sup>38</sup>

With the shift of the overall problematic of Marxism from social change to social reproduction, the relevance of the notion of objective interests changed. It came to serve as a criterion for the determination of "deviant" class consciousness and as a justification of the socialist/communist party's claim to be a scientifically led "avant-garde" of the working class. And in "actually existing socialism," the objective interests of the working class for the party and the related state apparatus even serve to justify repressive measures against the working class and the whole population. This evolution of the idea of objective interests should, at the very least, be reason enough for a careful use of this concept, which intrinsically tends to distinguish between those who claim to have objective knowledge and those who do not know their own "true" interests.

There has been limited discussion in Marxism of the validity of the concept of objective class interests. As long as economism, class reductionism, and a teleological view of history were dominant, the validity of the notion of the objective interests of the working class in socialism was largely—especially in the tradition of Georg Lukács's theory of "objective class consciousness"—taken for granted.<sup>39</sup> In Althusserianism, the concept of objective interests was absent because it was considered a feature of "historicism" and subjectivism, but the Althusserian critique remained ambiguous. In the course of the recent crisis of Marxism, however, the concept of objective interests more or less withered away as an aspect of the "bad isms" of traditional Marxism. In criticizing Wright, Laclau and Mouffe say simply that this

37. See his letter to Lassalle of February 6, 1849 (*MEW* 39, p. 618).

38. See *Elend der Philosophie* (*MEW* 4, p. 143).

39. See Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Berlin: Malik-Verlag, 1923), pp. 57–93.

concept “lacks any theoretical basis whatsoever” and that it “becomes meaningless” if one abandons the “privileging [of] certain subject positions.”<sup>40</sup> To these authors, a systematic elaboration of their criticism does not seem necessary. The question is whether Wright, with his new, exploitation-centered approach, does provide tenable arguments for the restitution of the concept of objective class interests, and particularly for his claim that the working class has an objective interest in socialism.

### *A Short Outline of Wright's Approach*

Wright's points of departure are neither teleological nor Leninist. But he is one of the few Western Marxists who explicitly pay attention to the concept of objective interests. His basic assumption is that people “have an ‘objective interest’ in increasing their capacity to act.” And “insofar as the actual capacity that individuals have to make choices and act upon them—their real freedom—is shaped systematically by their position within the class structure, they have objective class interests based on this real interest in freedom.”<sup>41</sup> The analysis of class structure, therefore, is of crucial importance, for it has to locate the structural bases of these objective class interests.

In Wright's view, the suitable criteria for determining class structure are the relations of exploitation. In contrast to domination, he asserts, “exploitation intrinsically implies a set of opposing material interests.”<sup>42</sup> Following the theory of John Roemer, he conceives exploitation as denoting a causal relationship between the wealth of one person, group, or class and the poverty of another person, group, or class. The cause of exploitation is seen in the unequal distribution of productive assets, of which the main examples are private ownership of the means of production, control over organizations, and possession of skills. Exploitation through property assets—the classical item of Marxism—refers only to a special case in Roemer's and Wright's general concept of exploitation, and defines—with regard to capitalism—the classes of labor and capital. Organizational assets (prototypically belonging to managers and supervisors) and skill assets (prototypically belonging to experts) define the location of the new middle classes. These locations, however, are “contradictory locations,” because the wage-earners involved are capitalistically exploited on the one hand but are skill or organizational

40. Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony*, pp. 83–4.

41. Wright, *Classes*, pp. 28, 249.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 56–7.

exploiters on the other hand.<sup>43</sup> The true working class, then, consists of those wage-earners who are exploited both by capital and by the new middle classes. Wright calls them “uncredentialed non-managerial employees.”<sup>44</sup>

In Roemer's view, however, exploitation is not just a causal relationship between wealth and poverty. He has a second criterion: A coalition  $S$ , in a large society  $N$ , is exploited if and only if:

- (1) There is an alternative, which we may conceive of as hypothetically feasible, in which  $S$  would be better off than in its present situation.
- (2) Under this alternative the complement to  $S$ , the coalition  $N-S=S'$ , would be worse off than at present.<sup>45</sup>

Wright bases his theory of objective class interests on this construction. Since the capitalists would be worse off and thus have a diminished capacity to act by the elimination of private property, they have an objective interest in the reproduction of capitalist relations. The working class, by contrast, would be better off in a society in which “each worker receives his or her per capita share of society's total productive assets.”<sup>46</sup> This class, therefore, has an objective interest in changing society in this direction. It also has an objective interest in the abolition of skill and organizational differentials. The opponents of the working class in this respect are the new middle classes, who have an objective interest in maintaining these differentials. On the other hand—and this characterizes their contradictory location—they share the workers' interest in the elimination of private ownership of the means of production.<sup>47</sup>

In sum, capitalists have an objective interest in capitalism; the new middle classes seem to have an objective interest in a mode of production resembling “actually existing socialism,” which Wright calls “statism”;<sup>48</sup> and the working class has an objective interest in what Marxism traditionally describes as full communism, that is, a society characterized by “radical democratic control over the physical and

43. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 182. For present purposes, it is sufficient to distinguish between capitalists, the middle class, and the working class. It should be mentioned, however, that Wright in his detailed investigation develops a map of seven or even twelve classes. The seven classes are employers, petty bourgeois, managers, supervisors, non-managerial experts, skilled workers, and workers.

45. J.E. Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 194.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

47. For this argument, see *ibid.*, pp. 68–70, 285.

48. Wright does not say this explicitly, but it can be deduced from his argument.

organizational resources used in production."<sup>49</sup> And according to Roemer and Wright, it is the prospect of hypothetically feasible alternative modes of production in which the exploited would be better off that makes the labor transfers from labor to capital and from the working class to the new middle classes exploitative, for "it only makes sense to talk about exploitation if the exploited would be better off in the absence of exploitation."<sup>50</sup> And precisely because the exploitation-centered approach "contains within itself the notion of alternative forms of society," the concept of class based on the theory of exploitation "has a particularly sustained critical character."<sup>51</sup>

### *Hypothetically Feasible Alternatives as the Basis of Critical Science?*

Before trying to answer this question, I will briefly comment on certain features of Wright's (and Roemer's) theory of exploitation that are not directly related to the problems in the critical science Wright intends to develop.

First, Roemer's and Wright's concept of exploitation is a purely quantitative one that refers to the unequal distribution of income by labor transfers. According to this theory, capitalist exploitation is nothing more than a special case of the general concept. This, however, is questionable; capitalist exploitation is much more than the enrichment of one class through the labor of another class. And the picture of the struggle between labor and capital drawn by Roemer as a "class struggle between poor workers and rich capitalists" seems unrealistic—even as a model.<sup>52</sup> Aiming at analytic relevance should at least imply that models pretend to say something about reality. And this is possible only when the models are not fictitious but consciously idealized constructions of reality.

Capitalist exploitation is the private appropriation of the socially produced surplus in which use is determined by production for profit. It intrinsically involves a dynamic relationship between the exploiters and the exploited. Roemer and Wright disregard this specificity and offer a theory in which capitalist, skill, and organizational exploitation are equally relevant to the concept of class structure. With this concept of

49. *Classes*, p. 287.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

51. Chapter 1 above, p. 42.

52. J.E. Roemer, "New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Exploitation and Class," *Politics and Society* vol. 11, no. 3 (1982), p. 275.

exploitation, one can strive for the abolition of capitalist income exploitation even within the context of capitalism. The logic of capital would not necessarily be touched in a democratized capitalism without capitalists.

Wright's arguments for skill exploitation are also not convincing. His thesis is that "people with scarce skills receive incomes above the costs of producing those skills."<sup>53</sup> Are these costs a compelling criterion? Is not productivity that is intensified by qualification a more appropriate criterion for the valuation of someone's work and income? In any case, this question seems to be much more complex than Wright suggests, as is the connection between exploitation and class structure. There are many forms and degrees of exploitation, of enrichment by the labor of others. And we would have multifarious classes if all exploitative relations constituted class relations. But which exploitative relations constitute class relations and which do not? Wright does not provide any clearcut criterion here.

Further, I doubt that a domination-centered approach "weakens the link between the analysis of class locations and the analysis of objective interests." The human capacity to act is restricted as much by domination as by exploitation. If the concept of objective interests is viable, the oppressed have an objective interest in changing their situation. Wright seems unaware of the arbitrariness of any theory of class structure. The differentiation of wage labor does not involve any objective classificatory criterion. And where society does not provide such a criterion by itself, we have to make a substantiated choice. But this choice is always governed by our analytical objectives.

I question, finally, the idea that exploitation can be determined as exploitation only in the light of a "hypothetically feasible" alternative. If there is no such alternative, Roemer and Wright argue, exploitation has to be considered necessary. I think that this is wrong because the social conditions that possibly make exploitation necessary for the moment are never fixed once and for all. And since all social arrangements are in principle changeable, *each definition of social reality potentially contains a hypothetically feasible alternative*. Thus, hypothetical feasibility is not a specific classification criterion at all. Moreover, people first define their social situation and value it as worth maintaining or changing. Only after this—however preliminary—judgment do they think about the actual, not the hypothetical, feasibility of change.

But, and this is the central question of this section, does the criterion

53. *Classes*, p. 70.

of hypothetically feasible alternatives justify the thesis that the exploitation-centered approach "contains within itself the notion of alternative forms of society" and that it, therefore, "has a particularly sustained critical character"? Is it possible that an imaginary criterion, "a construction of thought experiment,"<sup>54</sup> provides the basis for a critical social science? How? Would it not be necessary that the alternative be truly feasible? Roemer and Wright do not answer these questions. Roemer concedes that the abolition of capitalism "will alter institutions and incentives in such a way as to make the exploited agents worse off instead of better off,"<sup>55</sup> whereas Wright's argument is not consistent. On the one hand he adheres to the concept of (only) *hypothetically* feasible alternatives, and on the other hand he characterizes the "possibilities for transformation" of capitalism as "immanent" possibilities of the "given society."<sup>56</sup>

In any case, the meaning of socialism or communism that is central in this respect remains unclear. What is needed is an elaboration of the *concrete* possibilities and difficulties of the transformation toward a democratically organized society in which exploitation would be eliminated or at least radically reduced and in which other capitalist excesses like waste and environmental damage would disappear. How to avoid an all-embracing bureaucratization, how to combine democracy and efficiency, and how to combine the market with planning—these are some of the questions that have to be discussed in the light of the experiences of actually existing socialism. Only such a discussion, which would extend far beyond a discussion of the problem of incentives,<sup>57</sup> could sustain the particularly critical character of Marxism.

### *Objective Class Interests: A Viable Concept?*

Is it possible to infer objective interests from class structure? What makes interests objective? Without going into an epistemological discussion about the notion of objectivity, there are two principal possibilities: objective interests could be defined (1) as interests that are objectively *imposed* on someone, as in the case in Marx's original theory; or (2) as the objective purposive rationality that can be deduced from someone's situation. The latter is Wright's version of objective interests. "If workers had a scientific understanding of the contradictions

54. Cf. A. Carling, "Rational Choice Marxism," *New Left Review* no. 160 (1986), p. 50.

55. Roemer, *General Theory of Exploitation*, p. 241.

56. Chapter 1 above, p. 42.

57. Wright, *Classes*, pp. 120–21.

of capitalism" he once wrote, "they would in fact engage in struggles for socialism."<sup>58</sup> The rationalistic construction of objective interests is bound to some fundamental premiss. The objectivity of objective interests understood as objective rationality, then, depends on: (1) the validity of the premiss; (2) whether the premiss is without rivals; and (3) the possibility of realizing the deduced rational interests.

Wright's premiss is that people have an objective interest in increasing their capacity to act. I do not know whether this is an interest at all. But I will accept Wright's assumption as a premiss of critical social science because there is some indication that the interest to increase the capacity to act is an inherent aspect of the motives of human action. One can, however, construct other, and what is more important, conflicting premisses; for example, the tendency of people to reduce or at least to minimize risk. This interest seems to me as fundamental as the interest in increasing the capacity to act. And since the attempt *to increase* the capacity to act carries with it the risk that one may become worse off, it no longer makes sense to infer objective interests from this premiss. The very notion of "increase" becomes relative and conditional. Interests, or to be more exact, "instrumental interests,"<sup>59</sup> lose their logical contours in the context of complex configurations of premisses. Their determination, then—supposing it is rational—becomes *a practical problem in which people have to weigh several factors*.

This problem is much more difficult when we realize that people are not only workers, skill exploiters, or capitalists, but also individual assembly-line workers, electricians, supervisors, teachers, technical experts, or managers. Wright restricts his concept of contradictory objective interests to the middle class, that is, to those wage-earners occupying a contradictory class location. But why not extend this concept to all wage-earners, except perhaps the top managers? If increasing the capacity to act is the premiss or the fundamental interest and if rationality is the criterion for defining objective instrumental interests, why then should we deny the assembly-line worker an objective interest in becoming a supervisor or technical expert? Thus, he or she also has contradictory interests. And these interests may become even more contradictory when gender and age as well as specific

58. E.O. Wright, *Class, Crisis, and the State* (London: Verso, 1978), p. 89.

59. Although interests are always bound to preceding premisses, it is perhaps useful to distinguish between intrinsic or fundamental interests, which can be considered premisses of human action, and instrumental interests. Wright made this distinction in his paper "Agency and Class Interests," which was presented to the Colloquium on Class Formation in Paris, September 1982. The interest in increasing the capacity to act, then, is a fundamental interest; the workers' interest in socialism an instrumental interest.

personal conditions are taken into consideration. Does it make sense to stress the objectivity of all rational interests that can be deduced from someone's social and economic locations, when these interests are contradictory? And, moreover, does it make sense to talk about the *objective* interest of the working class in socialism, when the chances and possibilities for realizing people's fundamental interests are tenuous in socialism? It may be possible to construct an objective interest in a better world or even in paradise. The concretization of these abstract interests, however, is a matter of historical subjectivity and struggle.

Against this background socialists and critical social scientists are not justified in speaking of an objective interest of the working class in socialism. And if there is no objective interest in socialism, the concept of class consciousness loses its *raison d'être*. The only thing critical social science can do is to offer an interest in socialism as a *possible rationality worthy of discussion*. The feasibility of an efficient, nonbureaucratic, and nonrepressive socialism, in which the people's capacity to act would increase, however, would have to be shown. And in this respect Wright and most Marxists have nothing to tell us.

### Conclusion

The relevance of class structure is more limited than Wright assumes. Class structure is certainly an important, and moreover, as in the case of labor and capital, a specific base of political articulation. Knowledge of it should be part of the basic knowledge of social science. The starting point of the analysis of the class structure of capitalist society should be the overlap of economic polarization and fragmentation. The inevitable subdivision of the overly abstract class of wage-earners into working class(es) and middle class(es) is determined not just by objective criteria like income. The lines of class demarcation are also always determined by the purpose of the analysis, and therefore they are to a certain extent arbitrary.

The analysis of class structure can be used neither for the determination of "take-off areas" of teleological historical processes nor for the determination of objective rational interests, and it is not *the* basis of critical social science. Our society is, among other attributes, a capitalist, industrial, patriarchal, racist, and bureaucratic society, and it is organized in nation-states. To all these dimensions of reality correspond different social-scientific points of departure. Capitalism refers to the most basic dimension of our society, and the dynamics of capitalism initiate its historically unique development. But this does not devalue the other dimensions of reality as autonomous points of departure. Critical

social science does not have a "natural" addressee. This, in conjunction with the failure of all attempts to provide an objective or emphatically "scientific" base for the critique of society, necessitates a more modest assessment of critical social science.<sup>60</sup>

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60. After spending more than a decade on the development of an objective, normative criterion of social critique, even Jürgen Habermas adjusted his theory in his monumental *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt a/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981). One can only try to make norms "plausible," he writes (vol. 1, p. 199). See pp. 132-33, 417.