

Labour, capital and the struggle over history: Reconstructing Marxist class theory from the standpoint of alienation

European Journal of Social Theory

2023, Vol. 26(3) 317–334

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DOI: 10.1177/13684310221129981

journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Emil Oversveen** *NTNU, Trondheim, Norway***Conor Andre Kelly***NTNU, Trondheim, Norway*

Abstract

During the last decade, class analysis has been re-invigorated as a response to increasing economic inequality, social fragmentation and political unrest. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the perspective that has traditionally been most associated with class analysis – Marxism – has largely been absent from these debates. This article reconstructs Marxist class analysis by considering the previously unexplored relationship between social class and alienation. Incorporating insights from alienation theory, we argue, allows for an expanded conception of class that avoids economism while also retaining the distinctness of Marxist theory as compared to other approaches. Our central argument is that Marxist class analysis cannot be reduced to an explanation of economic inequality but must instead be seen as a struggle over the conditions of social development. We conclude by demonstrating the theoretical, empirical and political implications of our analysis and by arguing for a shift in the politics of class from inequality to unfreedom.

Keywords

Alienation, economic inequality, history, Marx, Marxism, social class

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Alienation and social class: The road not taken

Alienation and social class are among the most influential terms within Marx's social theory, yet the relationship between them has rarely been examined in detail. On the one hand, alienation holds a controversial position within Marxist theory due to its reputation as an ideological, pre-scientific and even romantic concept (Althusser, 2005 [1965]; Mau, 2021; Øversveen, 2021). It is therefore hardly surprising that alienation theory is largely absent from sociological interpretations of Marxist class theory (see e.g. Atkinson, 2015; Clark & Lipset, 1991; Neilson, 2007; Savage, 2000; Wright, 2015). Conversely, those Marxist theories in which alienation has played a central role – most notably the Western Marxist tradition initiated by Lukács and the early theoreticians of the Frankfurt School – gradually abandoned class analysis in favour of philosophical and aesthetic concerns (Anderson, 1987; Benhabib, 1986). It is perhaps for this reason that recent contributions to alienation theory mention class only briefly (Choquet, 2021; Jaeggi, 2014; Sayers, 2011) or portray class and alienation as mutually opposing themes (Wendling, 2009, p. 50). The theoretical disconnect between alienation and class arguably reflects a schism within Marxism and critical theory more generally; between an economic and structuralist tradition centred on the determinative logic of class struggle and a culture-oriented tradition focused on the lived experience of capitalist everyday life (Benhabib, 1986; Boltanski & Chiaello, 2018 [1999]).

Today, however, a number of developments compel us to consider the relationship between alienation and social class. Economic inequality has grown to near-unprecedented levels, driven mainly by the concentration of wealth in society's upper strata (Piketty, 2020; Tyler, 2015). Meanwhile, Occupy Wall Street, the Gilet Jaunes, Black Lives Matter, right-wing populism and other movements have brought the discontent generated by social inequality back to the centre of the political agenda (Brown, 2019; Savage, 2021). A 2017 Global Risk Report published by the World Economic Forum (2017, p. 6) described economic inequality as 'the most important trend in determining global developments over the next 10 years', citing political discontent, environmental destruction and uncontrolled technological change as signs that 'the capitalist economic model may not be delivering for people' (World Economic Forum, 2017, p. 4). Economic inequality is particularly problematic due to its adverse effect on social cohesion and stability, which may be observed in rising rates of self-reported loneliness and declining faith in the institutions of liberal democracy (Brown, 2019; Hertz, 2020).

Ironically, the upsurge in economic inequality coincided historically with the retreat of class from the sociological agenda, as epitomized by Pakulski and Water's (1996) famous 'death of class' hypothesis from the late 1990s. Attempts have been made in recent years to revive and reconstruct the concept of class and its relevance for explaining our current predicament. Noteworthy developments in this regard include a shift in attention from poverty to economic elites, a turn towards cultural representation and identity, and a renewed focus on exploitation, class struggle and capital accumulation (Flemmen, 2013; Savage, 2021; Tyler, 2015). Most of these contributions have been written from a Bourdieusian perspective, meaning that the tradition most historically associated with class analysis – Marxism – has been notably absent. The centrality of

class has also been questioned within Marxism itself (Savage, 2000, p. 10). A particularly influential development within Marxist theory during recent decades has been the reinterpretation of Marx's critique of the value form, in which class often plays an ambiguous role (Mau, 2021). Among the most influential of these reinterpretations is that by Postone (2003, p. 159), who has argued that the 'structuring forms of capitalist society' have replaced class as the locus of social domination in capitalist societies. An important reference for Postone and other value critics is Marx's writings on alienation in the *Grundrisse*, again seemingly affirming the division between alienation and class in Marxist discourse.

This article seeks to bridge this theoretical impasse by offering a reconstruction of Marxist class theory centred on the alienation of labour. Based on a recent reinterpretation of the Marxist concept of alienation as a process in which the results of labour are appropriated and transformed into capital (Øversveen, 2021), we argue that conventional approaches to class – as represented by the class theory of Erik Olin Wright (2005, 2015) – have tended to privilege economic exploitation at the expense of considering how the results of labour are utilized as capital in order to facilitate the continued exploitation of labour. As a result, class has been reduced to a determinant of the distribution of material wealth, greatly limiting the explanatory scope of Marxist class analysis. Our central argument is that class – in addition to a relationship of economic exploitation – should also be conceived as a process of alienation in which the results of socialized labour are appropriated and used in ways that tend to reinforce the economic, material and emotional power of capital. Integrating insights from alienation theory thus helps avoid economic reductionism by centring issues of social power, technological development and affective states while also distinguishing Marxist class theory from other approaches. We conclude by discussing the theoretical, empirical and political implications of our analysis, arguing for a shift in the problematic of class from inequality to unfreedom.

This article is intended as a contribution to social theory and is, as such, written at a high level of abstraction. While examples will be used to develop and illustrate general theoretical points, providing detailed empirical analysis lies beyond the scope of this article. It should also be emphasized that this article is not intended as a piece of exegesis. We will be relatively unconcerned with answering the question of what Marx 'really' meant, an approach we view as justifiable given the well-known fact that Marx provided neither a consistent conceptualization of class nor of alienation in his later writings (Atkinson, 2015, p. 20; Sayers, 2011, p. 5). Our intention is rather to use Marx's texts as a theoretical resource for reconstructing a theory of alienation and class capable of contributing to Marxist theory while also speaking to some of the questions animating our present moment.

Conventional approaches and the problem of economism

Arguably, the central issue that any new formulation of Marxist class theory must confront is that of economism. The critique of Marxist economism is well-established within theoretical sociology and will, due to space limitations, not be reiterated in detail here (see instead Mau, 2021, p. 23). Suffice it to say that Marxist class theory is generally

accused of economism on two counts: In the ascription of class as the central site of struggle in capitalist societies, which has been criticized for side-lining other forms of struggle and domination; and in the reduction of social class to an exclusively economic issue divorced from power, culture and other issues (Atkinson, 2015; Clark & Lipset, 1991; Goldthorpe & Marshall, 1992; Savage, 2000).

This study addresses the Marxist understanding of class as a concept and makes no claim about the importance of class relative to other forms of social inequality. We will therefore restrict our discussion to the second form of economism. To investigate this issue, we will take as our example what is arguably the most influential interpretation of Marxist class theory within empirical stratification research, namely that developed by Erik Olin Wright. Wright's class scheme has been widely empirically applied and was also taken as representing the Marxist perspective in the sociological class debates of the 1980s and 1990s (Crompton, 2008; Neilson, 2007). It is important to note that our intention is not to evaluate or critique Wright's work as a whole but rather how his later and most influential works tend to equate class with economic exploitation. In these texts, Wright argues that the central distinguishing feature of Marxist class theory is the concept of exploitation, which he defines in terms of three criteria: An *inverse interdependent welfare principle* wherein the welfare of the exploiters depends on the deprivation of the exploited; an *exclusion principle* wherein the prior situation depends on the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources; and an *appropriation principle* wherein this exclusion permits exploiters to gain a material advantage by appropriating the results of the labour of the exploited (Wright, 2005, p. 23, 2015, p. 84). Wright (2005, p. 23) thus defines exploitation as 'the process through which the inequalities in incomes are generated by inequalities in rights and powers over productive resources', which can be measured by the difference between the total value of the commodities produced and the remuneration paid out to workers in wages.

The most important feature of this interpretation for our present purposes is the tacit reduction of class to a mechanism through which the dominant class secures their material welfare by extracting a surplus value generated by others, which marginalises the themes of class-based domination within the workplace and society as a whole (Neilson, 2007). Wright's interpretation of class-as-exploitation is by no means unique to him but is also advanced in Marxist and non-Marxist interpretations alike (e.g. Atkinson, 2015, pp. 21–22; Therborn, 2013, p. 57; Tilly, 1999, pp. 86–87). The exclusive focus on value extraction leads to an interpretation of class as primarily a determinant of economic inequality, understood narrowly in terms of disparities in income, wealth, property or other expressions of value. We may thus speak of two reductions that are indeed faithfully reflected in common critique of Marxist 'economism'. The first reduces class to a simple mechanism for generating economic inequality, while the second reduces economic inequality to the distribution of material wealth which is typically represented and measured by money. Bracketed is several of the key themes considered by Marx in his economic and historical works, notably the relationship between class and social formation, technological innovation, the organization of the labour process, the state, the relationship to nature and the development of human culture and subjectivity – in short, the production of history as such. Marxist class analysis is thus pivoted towards a Weberian research agenda in which class is primarily understood as an explanation of

social stratification. Hence Wright's (2005, p. 23) claim that there is no substantial difference between Marxist and Weberian approaches to class save the Marxist proposal that economic inequality should be explained by exploitation rather than by market exchange. Reducing class to stratification, we argue, not only leaves out those features that distinguish Marxist class from Weberian and Bourdieusian approaches, but also those issues most urgently needed in order to understand our present moment. Restoring these features may be accomplished by considering the relationship between class and alienation, a task to which we now turn.

Theoretical exposition

In this section, we demonstrate how conceiving class as a process of both exploitation and alienation allows us to go beyond economist interpretations to better understand the specific dynamics of capitalist class relations. We thereby extend a recent reinterpretation of the Marxist theory of alienation that differs from conventional accounts of alienation theory in numerous significant ways: (1) by focusing on Marx's later works instead of his early philosophical writings, (2) by conceiving alienation as an objective process rather than as a subjective state, and (3) by locating the source of alienation within the capitalist process of production (see also Øversveen, 2021). Our argument will for reasons of clarity and space limitations be restricted to the two main categories in Marx's class analysis, namely wage labour and capital,¹ and is developed in three main sections. We first offer a reconstruction of the relationship between capital and labour, demonstrating how the distinctions between *wealth* and *capital* and between *social position* and *class position* highlights how the explanatory aims of Marxist class analysis differs from other approaches. Next, we consider the relationship between social class and alienation, which we define as a process in which the results of production are first *appropriated* and then *transformed* into capital. The final section draws out the fuller implications of conceiving class in terms of alienation by considering Marx's concept of subsumption, which allows us to grasp how capitalist production tends towards reinforcing the economic, material and emotional power of capital over the proletariat.

The separation between labour and the conditions of production

Approaches to social class may be divided into two broad categories. *Empirical* approaches differentiate between social classes based on observed inequalities in income, wealth, education, political consciousness or other indicators, whereas *structural* accounts define classes in terms of the structure of society (Cohen, 2000 [1978], p. 73). The understanding of class which we seek to develop belongs to the latter category. As such, it does not attempt to describe any really existing stratification order in particular, but – in keeping with Marx's project – to uncover the general features held in common in all capitalist societies. Unlike conventional expositions of class theory, which typically begin with the distribution of property (e.g. Atkinson, 2015; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), we therefore take as our starting point the productive process considered in its most general form. According to Marx, two factors are necessary for all forms of production: *Labour power*, the 'mental and physic capabilities existing in the

physical form, the living personality, of a human being' (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 270), and the *means of production* used by humans in order to transform external reality. Humans also require *means of subsistence* to survive and reproduce their labour power. The means of production and the means of subsistence together constitute the *conditions of production*, in which 'production' refers to production both of use values, of society and of the individuals within it. Importantly, the conditions of production are themselves products of previous acts of labour. As Marx (1993 [1939], p. 706) puts it, they are 'products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature [...] they are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified'. Marx therefore refers to the products of previous labour as *objectified labour* in contrast to the *living labour* represented by the workers' activities (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 993). As objectified labour, the conditions of production are neither produced randomly nor according to some innate logic, but rather expresses the subjectivity of the humans which make them, the circumstances in which they find themselves, their relationships to others and to nature. Production is a process in which the living labour of the producing subject is united with the objectified labour of the past. Accordingly, production may be viewed as an interaction between the past and the present that provides an historical coherence to social development (Marx, 2012 [1847], p. 89). For Marx, the results of the process of production are therefore never restricted to the immediate products themselves, but also ultimately extend to the social order itself, both in terms of social relations and the material environment in which these relations are embedded.

Capitalism is founded on a structural separation between the immediate producers and the conditions of production. The vast majority of the population lack the means to produce – and therefore to survive – independently, compelling them to sell their labour to those who own and control the means of production. Capitalism thus separates life from the conditions of its existence, a separation which forms the basis of an economic power relation operating through the self-interests of the non-propertied rather than through direct coercion (Mau, 2021). This separation did not arise spontaneously, but – as Marx shows in his analysis of primitive accumulation – as the result of a process in which large segments of the population were violently dispossessed and expropriated from the land in which they lived and worked. Abstracting from these specific historical circumstances, Marx (1990 [1867], p. 874) describes the genesis of the capitalist class structure as follows:

The process [...] which creates the capital-relation can be nothing other than the process which divorces the worker from the ownership of the conditions of his own labour; it is a process which operates two transformations, whereby the social means of subsistence and production are turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers.

As a result of these two transformations, the bourgeoisie gains the effective right to initiate and control the productive process and legal ownership over whatever the workers produce. This brings us to an important, yet often unappreciated, facet of Marxist class analysis, namely the distinction between *wealth* and *capital*. As Marx (1978

[1849], p. 207, emphasis original) makes clear, wealth does not in itself constitute capital: ‘A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It becomes *capital* only in certain relations’. The same is also true for money, which ‘may only be *defined* as capital if it is employed, spent, with the aim of *increasing* it’ (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 976, emphasis original). Marx thus defines capital as *self-valorizing value*, that is, value that is used to create a surplus which can then be reinvested into production (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 977). Marx’s conception of capital differs sharply from that put forth by Bourdieu, who identifies economic capital with material wealth (Bourdieu, 1986; Desan, 2014). Moreover, Marx’s conception of capital should be distinguished from Piketty’s use of the term, which vacillates between a neoclassical conception of capital as wealth and a social conception of capital as a claim on future resources (Naidu, 2017). To summarize, capital in the Marxist sense is not a *resource*, but a *power* created by the use of material wealth – in the form of objectified labour – to create a surplus by exploiting the living labour provided by workers.

The distinction between wealth and capital has crucial implications for the understanding of class, as it logically leads to a rejection of the common understanding of ‘class’ as referring to the individual’s social position as these are determined by her or his economic circumstances. From a Marxist perspective, it is not sufficient for individuals merely to be wealthy in order to qualify as capitalists.² Rather, the wealthy only become capitalists when they use their property as capital, while the non-propertied conversely only workers through the act of being employed:

The capitalist, who exists only as a potential purchaser of labour, becomes a real capitalist only when the worker, who can be turned into a *wage-labourer* only through the sale of his capacity for labour, *really* does submit to the commands of capital. (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 989)

Capitalists and wage labourers thus only assume their class positions by confronting each other within the sphere of production, and even then only insofar as they fulfil the social roles designated by the structure of the capitalist economy. This point may be emphasized by introducing a distinction that Marx himself did not make, namely between *social position* and *class position*. Social position here refers to the individual’s position within a stratification order based on their access to one or more resources, whereas class position refers to a specific role within the process of production. While there certainly exists a relationship between the two, this relationship must be understood as one of probability rather than law – just as some people may operate as capitalists while being at the brink of personal bankruptcy, we can also conceive of a wealthy worker who chooses to sell her labour power despite having the opportunity of not doing so (see also Heinrich, 2012, p. 88). The distinction between social position and class position has important implications for how we think about one of the most criticized aspects of Marxist class theory, namely the ascription of interest to class positions (see Bourdieu, 1985 for an influential critique). While we can reasonably speak of objectively existing class interests – at least if we assume that people generally wish to avoid exploitation and to assert control over the labour processes in which they are involved – these class interests always co-exist with the broader scope of interests determined by the individual’s social position. It is also easy to imagine scenarios in which class and

social interests are mutually opposed, for example in the conflict between the oil capitalist *qua* oil capitalist's interest in increasing fossil fuel consumption, and the oil capitalist *qua* human being's interest in avoiding ecological disaster.

Going forward, we refer to as *proletarian* the social position of lacking access to the conditions of production and as *worker* the class position created by selling labour power to capital. *Bourgeoisie* and *capitalists* will serve as corresponding terms for respectively the social position entailed by the possession of large sums of value and the class position of those using this value as capital. Formulated in these terms, we may say that the social position of the proletariat compels them to sell their labour power, thus entering the class position of workers, whereas the material resources of the bourgeoisie enables them to function as capitalists. This formulation also reveals the asymmetrical relationship between the two classes: The working class is fundamentally *open*, in the sense that the bourgeoisie can always choose to sell their labour power, whereas the capitalist class position is *closed* in the sense that entering it requires access to resources that the proletariat by definition are excluded from. In addition to being important for analytic reasons, the distinction between social position and class position helps clarify the explanatory aims of Marxist class analysis as compared to other approaches. Weberian and Bourdieusian class theory generally treat social position and class position as synonymous, identifying classes on the basis of the clustered distribution of market-determined life chances or of 'capitals' defined as resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Weber, 1971 [1922]). Evaluating the importance of class from this perspective then becomes a matter of determining how relevant class is for determining individual properties (income, wealth, educational attainment, political views, cultural taste, etc.), leading to the conclusion that class ceases to matter – or even exist at all – if its predictive power falls below a certain threshold. In our view, the purpose of Marxist class theory is not primarily to predict individual-level variations but rather to account for how the conditions of social reproduction are shaped by the exploitation of labour and the social functions that must be fulfilled so that this process can take place. Understanding this issue requires us to consider the alienation of labour within the productive process.

The two moments of alienation

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1993 [1939], pp. 453–455) describes how workers under capitalism are alienated from the products of their labour in two ways: As *alien wealth* belonging to the capitalist and as an *alien power* that serves to reproduce and strengthen capitalism as a social system. Following Marx's formulation, we define alienation as a process in which the products of labour are *first appropriated as private property* and then *transformed into capital* (see Øversveen, 2021 for an extended justification). Alienation as we understand it therefore consists of two moments, which we respectively refer to as *appropriation* and *capitalization*.

The moment of appropriation entails the separation between workers and the direct results of their labour. Because the purchase of labour power gives the capitalist legal ownership over what the workers produce, the results of labour have 'ceased to belong to the worker even before he starts to work', instead appearing as '*alien labour* and hence a

value, *capital*, independent of his own labour power' (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 1016, emphasis original). In return for labour power, the workers receive wages, which they then use to purchase their means of subsistence as commodities on the market. These wages do not represent the full value created through the process of production. The surplus value is instead appropriated by the capitalist, thus creating the relationship of exploitation which Wright (2005) understands as the central fact of the capital relation. However, the appropriation of the products of labour also has the social effect of reinforcing the separation between the proletariat and the conditions of production, in the sense that these are created in the form of private property, which in turn reproduces and strengthens the proletariat's dependence on selling their labour power. Accordingly, 'the result of production and realization is, above all, the reproduction of and new production of the *relation of capital and labour itself, of capitalist and worker* [. . .] The capitalist produces labour as alien; labour produces the product as alien' (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 458, emphasis original). More than simply a matter of producing the material welfare of individual capitalists, therefore, the appropriation of the products of labour also has the more general function of reproducing the material basis of the capitalist class structure.

Some of the appropriated surplus value is spent by the capitalists for their own private consumption, for example, on luxury items. However, the most important portion of the surplus value from our perspective is that which undergoes the second moment of alienation by being reinvested as capital into productive process. Capitalists are compelled to reinvest portions of their surplus value by the pressures of competition, which forces them to continually innovate and expand in order to avoid being squeezed out of the market. This dynamic that provides capitalism with its extraordinary capacity for developing the productive forces, which it achieves mainly through technological development, the application of science to production and the development of more expansive and complex modes of cooperation (Marx, 1993 [1939], pp. 408–409). This capacity does not only distinguish capitalism from previous modes of production but also the capitalist class structure from other class structures. Unlike serfs obliged to produce directly for the feudal lord, the working class is not exploited for the direct material well-being of their employers but rather for the purpose of capital accumulation through continually expanded production. What distinguishes the capitalist class structure is therefore precisely that it is *not* simply a relationship of exploitation conceived in the narrow sense, but that exploitation is subjugated to the production of surplus value. Bourgeois society is furthermore not reproduced through the static maintenance of existing social forms but through constant productive – and therefore social – development. Concurrently, the bourgeoisie differs from previous ruling classes in that they do not derive their legitimation from tradition, order and stability but rather from an ideology of continual change and growth (Benhabib, 1985, p. 112). It is for these reasons that Marx describes capitalism as a revolutionary system that, due to its productive potential, promises to massively expand the power of the social collective. However, this promise tends to be subverted by the alienated nature of capitalist production, in which social power is created in an alienated form that strengthens the domination of capital over the working class.

Subsumption and the objectification of capital

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1993 [1939], p. 832) describes alienation as a process in which ‘the monstrous objective power which social labour itself erected [...] belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital’. This sentence neatly summarizes the theme we want to develop in this section, namely how the alienation of labour changes production into the domination of workers by capital. Going back to the concepts of *living* and *objectified* labour discussed previously, it is a general tendency of productive development to increase the importance of the latter relative to the former. This tendency may be easily illustrated by considering technological automation, foreshadowed by Marx (1993 [1939], p. 692) as a ‘moving power that moves itself’, which may reduce the need for living labour to a near-minimum. Productive development also diminishes the importance of individual workers relative to the power of *socialized labour*, that is, to the social collective (Marx, 1990 [1867], p. 1024). The growing importance of objectified and socialized labour relative to the living labour of individual workers is not in itself oppressive but is rather described a necessary condition for establishing a socialist society in which production can be rationally controlled and work can be motivated by desire rather than need. Under capitalism, however, the development of the productive forces tends to occur in a form that increases the social domination of capital over labour. The increasing importance of objectified and socialized labour in this context make it increasingly difficult to subsist outside the capital-relation, again reinforcing the proletariat’s dependence on the labour market.³

Labour’s dependence on capital is not only reinforced by the quantitative growth of objectified labour relative to living labour but also by qualitative changes in the objectified labour itself. A useful concept in this regard is *subsumption*. Originally a philosophical concept denoting the subjugation of a mass of particulars under a universal, Marx uses subsumption to refer to a process in which the development of the productive forces and the labour process are reorganized according to the social imperatives of capital (Endnotes Collective, 2010; Marx, 1990 [1867]). By selling their labour power, workers do not only lose control over the results of their labour but also the power to decide the ends of the productive process. Capitalist production is instead organized around the aim of facilitating and expanding the production of surplus value. Under capitalism, the development of the productive forces – technology, forms of cooperation, science, infrastructure and nature – are thus shaped by capitalist social relations that structure and constrain the possibilities of human agency in accordance with its own imperatives.⁴ Two examples of subsumption are the well-known strategy of planned obsolescence within consumer electronics and the development of productive forces that enable the supervision and disciplining of labour. Another example may be found in the field of agriculture. In 2013, the US Supreme Court ruled that not only soybeans grown from Monsanto’s patented herbicide-resistant Roundup Ready seeds are subject to royalties but also any yield grown by subsequent generations of seeds. The farmer, compelled to sow Roundup Ready seeds by the fact that over 90% of US soybean acreage is treated with Monsanto’s patented herbicide, is therefore placed into a situation of continued economic dependence that is reproduced and strengthened through her own labour. In this case, artificial selection – a practice that has been used in agricultural

production since prehistory – has been subsumed via enclosure by private actors, materializing the power of capital within the grains themselves.

Summarizing our exposition thus far, we have conceived alienation as composed of two moments: The appropriation of the products of labour as *alien property*, and the transformation of these products of labour into capital as an *alien power* utilized for the production of surplus value. Appropriation allows capitalists to extract the surplus value produced by workers in the form of private wealth, while also reproducing the basis of the capitalist class structure by enforcing the separation between labour and the conditions of production. What distinguishes capitalist class relations from other forms of class domination, however, is that the results of production are not primarily appropriated for the purpose of ensuring the material benefit of the exploiter. Instead, the products of labour are capitalized by being re-invested into the productive process, creating a process of subsumption in which the conditions of social development are increasingly re-shaped according to the requirements of capital accumulation. Subsumption objectifies the power of capital into material reality, converting the relationship between objectified and living labour into a social antagonism between capitalists and workers. Productive development, and thus ‘the progress of civilization [...] such as results from science, inventions, division and combination of labour, improved means of communication, creation of the world market, machinery etc. – enriches not the worker but rather *capital*; hence it only magnifies the power dominating over labour’ (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 308). As the precondition of subsumption, alienation – the process in which the results of production are appropriated and transformed into capital – appears as the crucial moment in which production is transformed into class-based domination. Contrary to Weberian and Bourdieusian approaches that take as their starting point the distribution of life chances and resources outside of the productive sphere, and to conventional interpretations of exploitation as a mechanism of unequal remuneration, the interpretation we have offered here allows us to view class-based power as created, maintained and contested within the productive process. Organizing domination through production has the added benefit of obscuring and naturalizing the sources of capitalist power, generating sentiments of powerlessness, estrangement and meaninglessness that effectively inhibits the potential of organized social resistance. Beyond a simple mechanism of economic inequality, therefore, the capitalist class structure tends to reproduce several distinct forms of class-based power: An economic power based on the separation of labour from the objective conditions of production; a material power created by the objectification of capital into external reality; and an emotional power created by the psycho-social consequences of alienated social development.

Bringing it all back home: Implications for Marxist class analysis

The main purpose of the above exposition has been to argue that class must be viewed as a process of both exploitation and alienation. Whereas exploitation concerns the extraction of value, reflecting the relationship between workers and their wages, alienation refers to the relationship between workers and what they produce. Our central argument is that conceiving class as exclusively a process of exploitation obscures the specific logic of capitalist class relations, which is that the results of labour do not only serve the

material interests of the exploiter directly, but that they are also re-invested as capital with the purpose of facilitating the continued production of surplus value through the exploitation of labour. Conceiving class as a process of both exploitation and alienation thus allows for viewing class as a struggle over history, in which class power does not merely operate through economic inequality but also and primarily through the (re)production of the conditions of social development.

In this section, we demonstrate the usefulness of this re-interpretation on three levels. *Theoretically*, we argue bringing in insights from alienation theory helps sharpen the distinction between Marxist and non-Marxist class theories while also avoiding the economism we have described previously. We will then demonstrate its capacity to illuminate a diverse set of *empirical* phenomena, and of providing an alternative explanation for the turn towards neoliberalism in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, we discuss the *practical implications* of conceiving class in terms of alienation for emancipatory politics, arguing for a shift in emphasis from distributive justice to freedom.

Marxist versus non-Marxist class analysis

Our exposition has followed the standard view that the fundamental difference between Marxist and non-Marxist class theories is that the former defines classes based on their position within the sphere of production whereas the latter do so based on the unequal distribution of resources in the market. A question which is often neglected, however, is why this distinction matters. Conventional accounts typically view all class theories as offering competing explanations of the same basic phenomenon, namely the distribution of resources (Atkinson, 2015; Adkins et al., 2020; Wright, 2005). The question then becomes whether it is reasonable to assume that class position in the Marxist sense is a more significant determinant of the distribution of resources than education, status, gender, 'race' or other factors, leaving Marxist theory vulnerable to the familiar criticism of ignoring non-class-based sources of inequality and oppression. Economistic conceptions of exploitation also seem to conflict with the empirical fact that post-WWII capitalist development in many countries coincided with significant improvements of the working classes standards of living, indicating that exploitation does not necessarily lead to economic immiseration. As long as class is primarily viewed as a determinant of social position, therefore, Marxist class theory may be easily dismissed as reductionist, outdated and empirically inaccurate.

While the alienation of labour presupposes and reproduces the economic inequalities highlighted in traditional class analysis, most importantly the separation between labour and the objective conditions of production, viewing class as a process of alienation makes it clear that class cannot be reduced to the distribution of material wealth typically highlighted in conventional accounts. Remembering the distinction between wealth and capital made earlier, we may say that exploitation concerns the distribution of economic wealth, whereas alienation concerns the power of capital over social development. The difference between the two may be illustrated by a simple thought experiment in which some particularly privileged workers are economically compensated for the full value of the commodities they produce, for example by some mechanism that reimbursed them of the monetary difference between their wages and the value of their products. Even in this

case workers would still be alienated in the sense of being stripped from effective control over the results of their labour, meaning that production would still reinforce capitalist domination. Consider also the example of a high-salaried IT worker seeking to create more democratic ways of digital communication, only to discover that her labour instead contributes to a surveillance industry in which people are monitored for the sake of profit. While this worker is obviously in a vastly different social position than the immiserated industrial workers described in the first volume of *Capital*, she still shares in common with them the state of being alienated in the sense that her labour contributes to her own oppression. These examples illustrate how alienation must be conceived as distinct from exploitation as a mechanism of class oppression, and the limitations of focusing exclusively on the latter. As we understand it, the purpose of Marxist class analysis is not primarily to investigate economic inequalities *within* a given economic system, but rather to critique that economic system as *a whole*. Understanding the full thrust of this critique requires broadening the view from value extraction to consider how the results of labour are appropriated and transformed into capital and to consider class as a process in which exploitation and alienation appear as mutually enabling moments.

Empirical implications

Up until now, our exposition has proceeded in an abstract and somewhat schematic manner, paying less attention to subjective experiences that alienation and class theory have traditionally been used to investigate. While providing a detailed empirical analysis of the relationship between class and alienation obviously lies outside the scope of this article, several potential avenues of investigation come to mind. Empirical research inspired by Marx's alienation theory has often studied alienation as a subjective experience within the workplace, pertaining for example to a lack of job autonomy, lack of workplace democracy and a lack of subjective identification with the process of labour (see e.g. Sawyer & Gampa, 2020; Soffia et al., 2021). While alienation in the sense we have defined it here is certainly relevant for explaining how people perceive their work, its implications extend far beyond the workplace. As we have demonstrated, conceiving alienation in terms of the appropriation of objectified labour and its transformation into capital allows us to study how the development of the productive forces – for example, technology, infrastructure, management techniques and science – are shaped by the dynamics of class, and how human agency is shaped and constrained by the objectification of these dynamics into material reality. It is important to emphasize, however, that the results of production are not limited to immediate outputs but also 'appear as the society itself, i.e. the human being itself in its social relations' (Marx, 1993 [1939], p. 712). More generally, then, alienation theory helps us understand how the increased dominance of capital over labour tends to generate a social order that appears as an alien, incomprehensible and uncontrollable force, generating subjective experiences of powerlessness and isolation that paradoxically increases as the cooperative power of the social collective is developed (Øversveen, 2021). The degree to which people experience subjective alienation is likely to be a function of their position within the class structure, a hypothesis that is supported by the empirical relationship between class and work–life alienation (see Sawyer & Gampa, 2020; Soffia et al., 2021) between class and mental

health (Yuill, 2005), ‘deaths of despair’ in the US working class (Case & Deaton, 2020) and the widespread loss of faith in political institutions among working class constituents observed in several developed capitalist nations (see Brown, 2019). On a more general level, considering the relationship between alienation and class may also make sense of how and why the dramatic spike in economic inequalities during the last decades – primarily driven by the accumulation of capital – coincided with the emergence of what sociologists often describe as a ‘liquid modernity’ characterized by social fragmentation, anomie and a breakdown in collective decision-making (Bauman, 2000). Rather than being viewed as disparate phenomena, our analysis indicates that these processes – the increase of economic inequalities, the loss of faith in political institutions and the destabilization of traditional social forms – might be viewed as expressions of the increased dominance of capital over social reproduction, of which the alienation of labour is the primary precondition.

Taking an expanded view of class may also help make sense of the turn towards neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this period, a wave of reforms of deregulation, union-busting, privatizing and welfare dismantling combined to produce what Brown (2019, p. 42) has described as an anti-democratic ‘attack of the social’, vastly unleashing the power of capital over society in general and the working class in particular. The political parties traditionally associated with the working class did not only fail to counter this neoliberal offensive, but to varying degrees enthusiastically embraced it, fostering widespread disillusionment with the political system (Wright, 2021, p. 139). Thus the social democratic order of the post-war era, in which relatively progressive taxation was the rule even in the United States, crumbled seemingly overnight (Piketty, 2020, p. 31). What can explain such a sudden and decisive triumph? Rather than interpreting the turn towards neoliberalism as simply a product of an ideological change (Brown, 2019) or as a concerted class project (Harvey, 2005), we might conjecture an explanation focused on subsumption and the alienation of labour. Throughout the post-war era, the forces of production were developed in ways that increased the social power of capital over labour, a process that could occur relatively undisturbed from social democratic policies targeting the distribution – rather than the production – of wealth. Thus the material and emotional domination of capital could increase even as wealth was (relatively speaking) equally distributed, stripping society of the power to resist and reverse neoliberal reforms. While this narrative is obviously highly speculative, it highlights the need to consider how class-based power is reproduced within the productive process in ways that profoundly conditions the potential of collective political agency, and the limitation of class-based politics which privileges economic redistribution over questions of social power.

Conclusion: From inequality to unfreedom

Mike Savage (2021, pp. 2–3) has recently argued that we are ‘witnessing the emergence of an inequality paradigm, which fundamentally unsettles long-term assumptions about the direction and nature of social change’, calling for a new approach to inequality capable of revealing the dynamics of capital accumulation as an historical force. This article has contributed to this project by offering a re-interpretation of class as a process

of the exploitation and alienation of labour. While conventional theories of class have focused on surplus value extraction, we have argued that class must also be understood as a process in which the social power created by labour is transformed into capital as an alien and antagonistic force. Remembering Thompson's (2013 [1963], p. 8) famous quip that class is not a thing but a *happening*, alienation can be conceived as the crucial moment in which capitalist class structure is maintained and expanded, transforming the process of production into a relation of domination. This allows us to view class as a site of struggle over the conditions of social development, that is, over history, expanding the issue of class far beyond the sociology of stratification it has often been confined to (Tyler, 2015).

Expanding the problematic of class has important implications for emancipatory politics. As noted by Blühdorn et al. (2022), emancipatory politics – focused on an agenda of equality, empowerment and democratization – have since the 1970s coincided with rising social inequalities, ecological destruction and new forms of marginalization. Despite the crisis-ridden nature of contemporary society capitalism still holds a powerful grip on public consciousness, in large part due to the difficulty of envisioning alternatives to our current system (Mau, 2021). One way of explaining this conundrum is by considering one of the central insights of early critical theory, namely that social crises since WWII have tended to assume an increasingly cultural and psychological, rather than economic, character (Benhabib, 1986, p. 250). While this development has spawned political movements that in many ways have replaced the militant labour movement as the main challenge to contemporary capitalism, cultural and psychological crisis also breed feelings of powerlessness, confusion and disillusion that erode the social basis of organized collective action. Resurrecting the politics of class in this moment requires re-connecting the two strands in Marxist and critical theory with which we began our article: The economic and objectivistic critique of class exploitation on the one hand, and the cultural critique of alienation on the other (Anderson, 1987; Benhabib, 1986; Boltanski & Chiarello, 2018 [1999]). While it is outside the scope of this article to provide detailed prescriptions for political practice, our analysis does indicate a potential basis of class-based solidarity overlooked by strictly economic accounts, namely the desire for a more meaningful, empowered and autonomous way of life than the alienated existence that increasingly seems to characterize contemporary capitalism. It seems useful to remember in this context that Marx's normative critique of capitalism, while certainly attuned to the suffering created by economic inequality, was not primarily written from the standpoint of redistributive justice. Marx's main critique of capitalism was rather its tendency to subjugate production – and therefore also individual and social development – to a reified economic sphere driven by the short-term imperatives of surplus value, and the resulting contradiction between the possibilities promised by the social power of labour and the actual alienation of this power by capital. As Marx (1993 [1939], p. 708) writes:

The more this contradiction develops, the more does it become evident that the growth of the forces of production can no longer be bound up with the appropriation of alien labour, but that the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour.

Connecting alienation and social class can from this perspective shift the focus of class politics from inequality to unfreedom, and from negating the economic injustices of capital to providing a positive vision of a non-alienated society.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Håkon Leiulforsrud, Sigrid Strømmen and the three anonymous referees from the *European Journal of Social Theory* for their valuable comments on a previous version of the article.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. We do not hereby intend to diminish the importance of other social classes in the reproduction of capital, such as state workers or non-waged labourers doing (often gendered) reproductive labour. Providing a detailed map of the class structure of any concrete society lies outside the scope of our article and must anyway be done through a combination of theoretical and empirical analysis. We therefore leave this issue to future inquiry.
2. Conceiving capital in this manner also helps clarifying the issue of whether workers in some countries are functionally capitalists due to the existence of pension funds in which their savings are invested on their behalf. Capitalists are not only distinguished by their asset ownership but by their ability to use these assets to gain control over the productive process. As citizens generally lack direct control over how their pensions are invested, the existence of such funds does not fundamentally alter their class position from a Marxist perspective.
3. The existence of ‘decommodifying’ policies in some welfare state nuances, but does not fundamentally challenge, this picture. Unemployment benefits, pensions and other welfare services all presuppose high levels of overall employment, meaning that the working class *as a class* is still dependent on selling their labour power.
4. While the productive forces are obviously not shaped by capitalist relations exclusively (the logic of gender comes to mind), the discussion will be restricted to class in keeping with the topic at hand.

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