Beyond Structural Marxist Debate over the Class “Boundary Problem”:
Bringing Agency into Class Analysis*

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Twentieth-century Marxist scholars advanced highly sophisticated theories of class structure and debated class boundaries. The dispute centered on the class location of burgeoning white-collar workers and their relationship with other classes—the so-called boundary problem. Membership heterogeneity and ideological variance among white-collar workers rendered the polemic over the boundary problem intricate, but their numerical increase and political significance made the debate important and controversial. This paper contends that the deterministic and reductionist bias of structural Marxist analysis of the boundary problem is liable to infer that class structure leads to class struggle and class consciousness because it views class as a structural derivative. Conceiving of class as being historically formed and collectively constructed instead, I suggest bringing agency into class analysis by incorporating social movement theories and blending synchronic and diachronic approaches. This type of analysis can be used to elaborate the detailed processes of class consciousness construction and class struggle mobilization—class formation—which predates class structuration.

Keywords: boundary problem, white-collar workers, class structure, class formation, class consciousness, class struggle, social movements

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of class boundaries in a contemporary capitalist society has been a significant issue among social scientists. Class has been regarded not only as an important index for designating changes in social structure, but also as a theoretical criterion by which major collective behaviors are analyzed. Especially for Marxists, class analysis had political as well as sociological meanings: class analysis does not simply mean drawing a line between classes and allocating social agents according to each category. Class analysis implies a “universal” role of the working class in transforming society, and the identification of class boundaries serves as the starting point of political strategies for this change (Burris 1987).

Marx himself uses the term “class” in two different senses: class as an economically defined social entity, and class as an organized sociopolitical force. He never thoroughly defines class structure or elaborates on class analysis in detail. His theory is incomplete and sometimes even contradictory.1 He views class as a social category primarily defined by the social relations of production. The proletariat is a “universal class” that suffers from a severe contradiction inherent in capitalism, and is therefore the only agent to abolish its structure and effect a transition toward socialism. Based on this general theme, Marxists sought to establish demarcation lines between the proletariat and other classes and tried to identify the character and the social role of the proletariat in capitalism.

The emergence and maturation of “organized” capitalism in the West during the late nineteenth century had fundamental economic effects. Monopoly capital became concentrated in industrial production sites and approached economies of scale, while government interference in the economy and other non-political realms produced a class-based welfare state and growing service and public sectors (Lash and Urry 1987). New technical divisions of labor and the detachment of owners from daily factory operations created intricate new managerial hierarchies. White-collar workers assumed owners’ former administration and oversight function, and capitalists created new management techniques to supervise them (Edwards 1979). Although white-collar workers shared sociopolitical power, they became increasingly differentiated into managerial, administrative, professional, technical, clerical, and sales subgroups. Concurrently, blue-collar workers’ social significance declined with their reduced labor force presence. The middle class was seen as a potential ally of the working class whose revolutionary zeal had gradually declined (Crozier 1965). Despite being a relatively minor and overly heterogeneous segment of society, white-collar labor has proven pivotal in effecting social change at critical junctures throughout history. However, white-collar workers and the

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1 On the ambiguous use of the term “class” in Marx, see Ollman (1968). Draper (1977: 17) even laments, “It all offers a splendid opportunity for pointless quotation mongering through which a new ‘theory of class’ can be discovered in Marx every week.”
middle class have also been politically ambiguous and erratic, constantly switching between conservative and progressive agendas. There has been much scholarly debate over white-collar workers’ inconsistent class location and political preferences. Sudden and rapid growth in white-collar ranks led to a class position debate that Abercrombie and Urry (1983: 1) identify as “one of the most intractable issues in contemporary sociology.”

The core theme of this paper is to critically appraise structural Marxists’ class theories. The emphasis is on the question: How successfully do class boundaries advocated by different scholars ensure the internal homogeneity of class agents and support their formation of a collective identity and their mobilization of collective action? Because class is not a mere categorical unit but a social agent that shares common identities in collective behaviors, the “boundary problem” of class analysis must be logically valid to explain the relationship between class structure, class formation, and class struggle. In this respect, Marxist class analyses were theoretically flawed because class consciousness and contention were deemed to be mere derivatives of class structure, which stemmed from Marxists’ undue prioritizing of structure over agency and identity. As an alternative to this logical shortcoming, I suggest using social movement theories in class analysis in order to examine the process of identity formation and mobilization by collective agents.

POLARIZATION OF CLASS STRUCTURE

The simplest analyses of class structure consider capitalist society to be divided into two hostile classes: a small number of the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat composed of most of the rest of the population. This division used to be accepted by “traditional” or “orthodox” Marxists (e.g., Becker 1974a, 1974b; Callinicos and Harman 1987; Cohen 1978; Cottrell 1984; Freedman 1975; Gorz 1967; Hunt 1970, 1977a, 1977b; Loren 1977). Their premise is that class implies antagonistic relations between two incompatible social groups: one exploits and the other is exploited. The peculiar character of capitalist society is the separation of the ownership of the means of production from the hands of workers so that they are compelled to sell their labor power for wages to capitalists. These “property relations” form the core concept of class analyses, and class boundaries are prescribed by the “form and manner in which surplus value is created and extracted” (Hunt 1977a: 219). Based on the ownership/non-ownership division, most wage laborers are (and have been increasingly) included in the category of the working class.2

According to this perspective, large numbers of white-collar workers (scientific workers,

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2 According to Loren (1977: 32), approximately 90 percent of the U.S. population are considered working class, and 2 percent bourgeoisie.
supervisory staff, executives, technicians, and administrative workers) constitute “strata” within the broad working-class category. They become members of the working class as “collective workers” through the “socialization of production.” These groups are composed of a wide range of occupational and social categories without meaningful homogeneity and do not have any objective unity of interests; however, through the process of “proletarianization,” their income levels and the nature of work become increasingly like those of industrial manual laborers (Hunt 1970: 170). Therefore, the separation between the traditional working class and the newly emerging middle strata is subjective and artificial.

This simple polarization approach reduces the social relations of production to a one-dimensional relationship of economic ownership — with the working class as wage laborers (Wright 1980: 339). However, under “monopoly capitalism,” the social relations of production generate complex, coordinated production processes and create fragmented work situations. Due to the gradual separation between legal “economic ownership” and “possession,” increasing numbers of white-collar workers participate in the labor process as collective workers fulfilling the duties of management and control, and simultaneously of the production of surplus value on behalf of capitalists. In this scenario, the role of the large number of social workers and professionals is more political and ideological than economic. Therefore, the separation of economic ownership from wage laborers is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to define the working class.

Likewise, the relations between class boundaries and political strategies cannot be explained in a deterministic manner. The simple “reductionism” or “determinism” of this approach — the unspecified link between class structure, class struggle, and political strategy — leads to identifying class structure as the direct cause of class politics and political strategy. Class struggle is thus the mere effect of the structural basis of economic relations. In reality, class struggle is something engaged in by collectivities of individuals embedded within the hierarchy of civil society, but whether or not these people struggle primarily against capital cannot be determined by their property relations alone (Clegg et al. 1986).

The problem of relations between class structure and class struggle has been a major theoretical issue in Marxism in general, and in Marxist class analysis in particular. The distinction between “class-in-itself” and “class-for-itself,” which Marx introduced in The Poverty of Philosophy (1847), is considered the theoretical link between class as structural

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3 Monopoly (or “organized”) capitalism is distinguished from the previous stage of capitalism by the concentration and centralization of capital and is characterized by technological development and corresponding changes in labor process control—scientific management. The production of surplus value is based not primarily on the expansion of working days but on increasing productivity due to the introduction of scientific machinery. “Real subsumption” of labor, contrary to “formal subsumption,” is completed at this stage (details below).

4 This refers to the “real economic control of the means of production, i.e. the power to assign the means of production to given uses and so to dispose of the products obtained” (Poulantzas 1975: 18).

5 Economic possession is defined as “the capacity to put the means of production into operation” (Poulantzas 1975: 19).
formation and class as historical agency. Class-in-itself is the category defined at the level of the social relations of production — objective and economic. Class-for-itself is characterized by organization and consciousness of solidarity — subjective, political, and ideological. According to Marx, class locations structured by economic relations are filled by social agents without their will, and they are supposed to have “class interests” in accordance with their places. Class agents are then transformed into political forces when they are organized, represented, and expressed. The transformation from the former to the latter is explained as either “deterministic” or “voluntaristic” (Przeworski 1977: 348-49).

In the deterministic version, objective relations are transformed into subjective relations. Since objective relations define interests and politics is a struggle about the realization of interests, it becomes a matter of deduction that objective locations are reflected in interests and political actions. In the voluntaristic view, objective conditions do not lead spontaneously to the organization of political classes. Classes are formed politically only as a result of an organized intervention by an external agent, namely, the Communist Party — the Leninist revision.

The orthodox Marxists’ analysis of class structure is primarily centered on the problem of class-in-itself. The definition of class is made only by reference to relations of production, without taking into account ideology, politics, or culture. Class can exist as class-in-itself purely on an economic basis and transform itself into class-for-itself according to material conditions without any mediation (Cohen 1978: 73-74). This position is too dogmatic to explain complex capitalist class structures, and too deterministic in that it ignores any particular role of human agency. Class is treated as the only categorical entity with an objective position with respect to the economic relations of production.

THE WHITE-COLLAR WORKER AS A NEW AGENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE

While traditional Marxist theorists of class polarization view wage laborers as an undivided working class and industrial workers as hegemons in revolutionary socialist movements, other theorists pay attention to the role of white-collar workers. Mallet (1975) focuses on technological development and its effects on the production process, which establishes new contradictory relations in class structure; and Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979a, 1979b) underscore the new functional roles of upper-level white-collar workers — as managers and professionals — in the broad context of social relations. Influenced by French radical industrial sociology and the New Left in the United States, they share a belief that monopoly capitalism enters a new phase of relations of contradiction. Accordingly, new class structures and class conflicts are created.
The New Working Class
Mallet divides contemporary Western societies into two major classes: the capitalist class and the “new working class.” He emphasizes the development of technology and its effects on changing class structure. The increasing numbers of white-collar workers are considered the new working class, defined as “the workers employed in automated industries” and primarily composed of “technicians, research workers, qualified workers of automated concerns, etc.” (Mallet 1975: 27, 66). He regards all salaried workers within the collective labor force as the new working class, excluding only managerial functionaries.

According to Mallet, automation, which is a particular characteristic of monopoly capitalism, changes not only the organization of work and the relations between labor and capital but also the role of the working class, its demands, and the character of class politics. Automation destroys the fragmentation of work and recreates the synthetic vision of a complex task at the level of a production team, or even a whole work force (Mallet 1975: 67). As the production unit becomes smaller, human contacts become more frequent and less anonymous. In these circumstances, the interests of the modern working class are revised to secure technical development, a substantial reduction in working hours, job reevaluation, mobility, and most important, “self-management” (Mallet 1975: 30).

The automation period simultaneously leads to the emergence of new agencies of social change and new political strategies among labor movements. Mallet suggests that the new locations for class conflict within capitalist production create a true collective worker, one whose function transcends the traditional manual/non-manual division and blurs the productive/non-productive labor distinction. The new working class plays the hegemonic role of social transformation. Mallet denies that the aim of traditional working-class politics is to seize state power at any cost through mass revolutionary insurrection, first because the transformation of economic, social, and political structure cannot be obtained by destroying or seriously weakening the existing means of production — “the machine is too valuable to smash” — and, second because the achievement of political power is not immediately accompanied by the transformation of social hierarchy (Mallet 1975: 28). As an alternative, there exists the objective possibility to develop a generalized self-management of production and the economy. The “company-level trade unionism” that characterizes the new working-class movement leads to demands for control over company management, both the technical aspects of production (machinery and work organization) and the economic aspects (investment and market orientation) (Mallet 1975: 68-69).

Mallet’s analysis contains several problems. First, his overall theorization might be criticized as “technicism.” He begins by analyzing the effects of technological development on changing class structure and its subsequent political implications for working-class movements, without considering its link to social relations. This approach disregards the extent
to which productive techniques are conditioned by inherent patterns of conflict, relations of authority, and economic organization. Technologies are by nature a material expression and a crystallization of social and political forces. Technology cannot be treated as an autonomous, independent force; nor can it be fetishized as an extra-social, quasi-natural evolutionary force (Burris 1980:20). Mallet’s recognition of the dominance of technology over social relations stems from his acceptance of the neutrality of technology. He does not view technological development as having social meaning. The importance of technology is how it has developed and been used in the labor process (cf. Braverman 1974; Marglin 1974; Stone 1974).

Mallet’s misconception of the effects of automation in the social relations of production leads to his simplified conclusion about the character of the new working class: Technicians and engineers are incorporated into the production process as collective workers. However, the changing character of the capitalist relations of production transforms how collective workers participate in the production process. Technical workers differ from industrial manual workers in terms of (1) technical workers’ partial role of control over the production process, (2) their mental labor, (3) their indirect contribution to productivity, and (4) their working autonomy (Smith 1987: 67). As Oppenheimer (1985) and Poulantzas (1975: 243) correctly point out, Mallet fails to count a dual process: qualification and disqualification of labor under monopoly capitalism, particularly of professionals. This process does not guarantee the class unity of the new working class as collective workers. The fragmentation of occupations within the new working class such that some are in the process of becoming proletarianized while others are moving upward is a serious obstacle to considering them as a unity (Oppenheimer 1985). It is also hard to assume that all new working-class members are in antagonistic relations with capitalists.

According to Mallet, under an automation process, the increasing interdependence between production and management conflicts with the continuing private ownership of capital and the organization of managerial power. He argues that this conflict can be solved through the modification of economic organization by the new working class. Mallet’s assertion of a new hegemonic role for the new working class, and of its reformist strategy, derives from the historical background of the labor movement of Western countries in the 1960s, especially from the May Movement in France. The most active participants then were professionals, students, and lower-level supervisory staff. They raised radical issues such as changing the bureaucratic structure of industry and “self-management” by productive workers in the decision-making process. As Mann (1973) suggests, however, the militancy of the new working class owed more to the specific rigidity of the French managerial structure than to the general characteristics of their productive status.

The demands of working-class movements are not limited only to the rationalization of the management process and the abolition of hierarchies. Working-class movements have also taken the form of both economic and political class struggles. The implementation of alternate
forms of production is only possible as part of a broader political and ideological struggle within civil society and the state. This involves changing the political and social relations within the state. State power that is exercised through institutional interventions in industrial relations and organizational reforms has a decisive role in the outcome of class struggle (Clegg et al. 1986).

The Professional-Managerial Class
Like Mallet, Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich explore the expanding class of white-collar workers and their functional roles in society. They put forward the theory of the “professional-managerial class” (PMC), which they define as “salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and class relations” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979a: 12). This includes both (1) those who carry out this reproductive function in their roles as agents of social control, or as producers and as propagators of ideology (teachers, social workers, psychologists, entertainers, advertising copy writers, and others), and (2) those who do so through their performance of the administrative and technical roles that perpetuate the capitalist relations of production (such as mid-level administrators, managers, engineers, and other technical workers).

Despite the wide range of occupations included in the category of the PMC and the unclear boundaries separating it from the capitalist class above and the working class below, Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich maintain that the PMC constitutes a single, coherent class in itself. According to them (1979a: 11), classes are defined by two general characteristics: (1) “a common relation of the economic foundations of society — the means of production and the socially organized patterns of distribution and consumption” and (2) a “coherent social and cultural existence,” including shared lifestyle, educational background, kinship networks, consumption pattern, work habits, and beliefs.6

Historically, Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979a) argue, the PMC emerged with the rise of monopoly capitalism. The formation of the PMC in the United States depended on the coexistence of two conditions that were not met until the early twentieth century: (1) the expansion of social surplus to the point that it could sustain a new unproductive class, and (2) the development of class struggle to the extent that a class specializing in the reproduction of capitalist class relations became a necessity to the bourgeoisie. The role of the emerging PMC was to mediate the class conflict of capitalist society and to create a rational, reproducible social order.

Forged from the heat of class struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie,

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6 Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979a: 13-14, 22) estimated that in the United States, the PMC comprised 20-25 percent of the population, the working class 65-70 percent, the old middle class 8-10 percent, and the ruling class 1-2 percent.
Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich suggest, the PMC is enmeshed in a complex web of partly complementary and partly antagonistic class relations. As agents of bourgeois cultural and technological hegemony, the PMC exists “only by virtue of the expropriation of skills and culture once indigenous to the working class” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979a: 17). It therefore has objectively antagonistic relations with the working class. However, as salaried employees, members of the PMC share with other workers a common antagonism toward the bourgeoisie, whom they view as limiting their professional autonomy and as an obstacle to their vision of technocratic society. The PMC is therefore a reservoir of anti-capitalist sentiment, albeit of an elitist and reformist variety.

What is most appealing in Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich’s analysis is their attempt to combine historical, economic, and cultural factors to account for the contradictions of middle-class life and politics. This multidimensional aspect of their analysis is its great strength but is also the source of several problems. First, there is a problem of class unity among the PMC. The social functions, control, and authority of the PMC are too diverse to consider it a unified single class, ranging from top managers and high-level state bureaucrats to low-level semi-autonomous supervisors and clerical workers. In Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich’s argument, the reproduction of social structure is bound up with the notion of control, where this means the preservation of capitalist class hegemony; the establishment and extension of managerial prerogatives to determine the social organization and the material means of production; and the detailed managerial supervision of the actual production process. However, bureaucrats in the state sector and managers and technicians in the industrial sector operate in different circumstances. The former do not control or regulate the labor process as the latter do. Bureaucrats’ power comes from the domination and manipulation of state services. Their role is mainly political and ideological. Also, whereas technicians and engineers employed by corporations sell their labor power and technical knowledge as a commodity for capital, state bureaucrats are salaried civil servants whose labor power is not exchanged in the marketplace (Cohen and Howard 1979).

Thus the interests of bureaucrats, engineers, and technicians are far from homogeneous. While interests in occupational autonomy and the rationalization of social activities according to expert knowledge can be assigned increasingly to technocrats, it cannot be ascribed to non-expert bureaucratic managers in either the state or the industrial sector. The relative autonomy of bureaucratic managers is wholly dependent on the institutional role from which they derive their power and privilege. Hence, while one group is concerned with the rationalization of bureaucratic hierarchy, the other group is in a position to sustain bureaucratization — even though they both retain the common social role of reproducing capitalist class relations.

A second criticism concerns the antagonistic relations between the PMC and the capitalists. These antagonistic relations, which are taken by Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich as important evidence that the PMC should be considered a single class, are less than convincing (Clegg et
al. 1986). As technological and organizational control is extended to the upper strata of bureaucratic hierarchies, those who operate in those areas are subject to more control over their professional work by a smaller number of external agents. They are largely dependent and reliant upon capitalist institutions and thus are unlikely to have a sufficient basis for conflict with the capitalist class.

Finally, we should focus on Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich’s theoretical criterion for deciding that certain social groups constitute a class. They seem to suggest that the PMC is a class because its members share economic functions and a cultural existence, and therefore have antagonistic relations with other classes. This is a descriptive definition of a social class. To be considered a social class it is at least necessary to have distinct class interests and political representation (Aronowitz 1979: 217). This does not mean that a class cannot be identified without existing political organizations; instead, a class should have a material basis that enables it to constitute political forms to represent its interests. Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich provide little evidence to indicate that the PMC concerns itself with political power, or that it seeks ideological representation in the social and political order. Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich argue that a form of technocratic consciousness is the main thrust of ideological development. However, the PMC seems much less concerned with antagonistic relations to any major section of the capitalist class than with an ideological justification for the limited discretionary function that its members are accorded (Clegg et al. 1986).

STRUCTURAL DETERMINATION OF CLASS STRUCTURE

Heavily influenced by an Althusserian approach, Poulantzas, Wright, and Carchedi adopt a “structural causality” of class structure, which accounts for the importance of political and ideological circumstances. Althusserian Marxism addresses three different degrees of abstraction: a mode of production, social formation, and historical conjuncture. All three theorists’ class analyses are conducted at the level of social class formation.

The New Petty Bourgeoisie

Poulantzas’s theory of social class begins with his formulation of “structural determination.” He avoids providing a voluntaristic and historicist account of class struggle (to be detailed in the next section). For Poulantzas, the form of class struggle is determined by the totality of economic, ideological, and political relations that characterize a particular historical situation, but only up to the limits of the possible effects of class struggles on these relations.

The important concept in Poulantzas’s theory is “class position.” It is sharply distinct from structurally determined “class places” and “class practices.” Class position refers to “the orientations of classes in the concrete class struggle of a particular social formation in a
particular conjuncture, or historical moment” (Skotnes 1979: 36). Class position is manifested in alliances between classes and in classes openly confronting other classes. Therefore, structurally determined class places and class positions do not necessarily correspond: classes can take up the positions of other classes (e.g., labor aristocracy), yet the structural determination of that class does not thereby change.

Poulantzas argues that there are three main social classes in advanced capitalist societies: the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, and the petty bourgeoisie (“old” and “new”). The primary economic criterion is a distinction between “productive” and “unproductive” labor. Poulantzas decisively rejects wage labor as an appropriate criterion for defining the working class (Poulantzas 1975: 20). He defines productive labor in a restrictive manner as labor that produces surplus value in a material form (Poulantzas 1975: 216). According to this definition, unproductive wage earners must be excluded from the proletariat because they are outside the basic capitalist relations of exploitation (Poulantzas 1975: 212).

A political criterion distinguishes a “non-supervisory” from a “supervisory” position. Within the process of material production, Poulantzas says that supervisory labor is productive because it contributes to coordinating and integrating the production process and helps to “collectivize” the labor process. Within the social division of labor, supervisory activity represents the political domination of capital over the working class (Poulantzas 1975: 227-28). Because the supervisors’ principal function is to extract surplus value from workers, supervisors must be excluded from the working class. Supervisors are also excluded from the bourgeoisie, for although they dominate the working class politically, they are simultaneously subjugated by capitalists.

An ideological criterion is the distinction between “manual” and “mental” labor. This distinction excludes the working class from the “secret knowledge” of the production process, and this exclusion is necessary for the reproduction of capitalist social relations (Poulantzas 1975: 238). Even low-level clerks, secretaries, and civil servants share the ideological position of mental labor and thus belong to the new petty bourgeoisie. In short, the working class, according to Poulantzas’s criteria, is composed of productive, non-supervisory, and manual laborers.

Another peculiar classification led by Poulantzas is his inclusion of the old and new petty bourgeoisie in one class. While the former includes self-employed, small-scale owners, the latter consists of white-collar employees, technicians, supervisors, civil servants, and so forth. These two utterly different sectors constitute a single unit, he claims, “because social classes are only determined in the class struggle, and because these groupings are precisely both polarized in relationship to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat” (Poulantzas 1975: 294). This polarization has the consequence of forging a rough ideological affinity between the old and new petty bourgeoisie (Poulantzas 1975: 287). Common petty bourgeois ideologies include reformism, individualism, and power fetishism (Poulantzas 1975: 291-92).
Unlike his analysis of the proletariat and the new petty bourgeoisie, which includes political and ideological aspects, in discussing the bourgeoisie Poulantzas concentrates exclusively on economic levels: “economic ownership” and “possession.” These two dimensions of the social relations of production are particularly important in analyzing the class location of managers. In developed monopoly corporations, where heterogeneous production units are often united under one owner, managers possess the means of production without having direct economic ownership. Poulantzas, however, insists that this dislocation does not mean that possession has become separated from the place of capital. Capital retains a unitary structural position within class relations even if the functions of capital have become differentiated. Therefore, “In all cases, the managers are an integral section of the bourgeois class” (Poulantzas 1975: 181).

The most controversial aspect of Poulantzas’s analysis is his narrow definition of productive labor as producing surplus value in a material form (Cottrell 1984; Giddens 1981; Hunt 1977b; Skotnes 1979; Wright 1976). For Marx, the productive labor that produces surplus value is embodied in “use value,” regardless of the material content of the product. The distinction rests on the social relations within which labor is carried out, not on its particular material attributes. The purpose of this division in Marx’s conceptual definition is to provide tools with which to analyze a central contradiction of the capitalist development process. Productive and unproductive labor conceptualizes the allocation of surplus value and labor power between the sector that produces more capital (and thus accumulates capital) and the sector that drains capital away from accumulation but that is necessary for the reproduction of social formation (Skotnes 1979). Given the integrated processes of production, most labor in capitalist society has both productive and unproductive aspects. The productive/unproductive labor distinction should be thought of, therefore, as reflecting two “dimensions” of labor activity rather than two “types” of wage earners (Wright 1976: 16).

For any particular distinction to be identified as a class criterion, it must meet certain theoretical standards. A class boundary sets the limits and directions within which concrete operations and activities occur. Since it is through the execution of a class practice that a social agent becomes a member of a particular class, the agent must have a distinct experience. Productive labor does not meet this condition. Because both productive and unproductive workers are exploited by the capitalist class in the form of surplus value or surplus labor time, it is difficult to posit that productive workers have experiences different from those of unproductive workers (Skotnes 1979).

A more unusual point in Poulantzas’s theory is his unit of class analysis. Wright (1980) criticizes Poulantzas’s categorization of the working class in the United States as constituting less than 20 percent of the economically active population. With respect to this question, Poulantzas supplies an absurd answer. Classes in contemporary capitalism do not refer to each particular social formation, he argues, but the imperialist context must be considered. Thus, the question of the numerical size of the working class, especially when we speak of imperialist
countries, must be thought of according to imperialist boundaries, not national ones (Poulantzas 1977: 119). According to his argument, the unit of class analysis in imperialist countries is bigger than the realm of a single society. On the unit of class analysis in dependent societies, however, Poulantzas remains silent.

Poulantzas’s claim that the old and the petty bourgeoisie can be treated as belonging to a single class is also unconvincing. As he admits, these two sectors reside in different economic situations; the former is declining, self-employed in simple commodity production, whereas the latter is expanding, consisting mostly of white-collar salaried workers under the direct domination of the capitalist class. Despite these differences, Poulantzas claims they constitute a single class because of their ideological affinities. In this respect, ideology is given more weight in identifying the single petty bourgeoisie. This obviously contradicts his own argument that “the economic place of the social agents has a ‘principal’ role in determining social classes,” though it is not sufficient for the structural determination of social classes (Poulantzas 1973: 27). In addition, ideological differences are still as great as commonalities between the two sectors (Wright 1976: 24).

**Contradictory Class Locations and Exploitations**

Wright (1976) advances the theory of “objectively contradictory locations within class relations.” In Wright’s model, which distinguishes between ownership and possession, class relations in capitalist societies are structured by three central social relations of production: (1) control over the physical means of production, (2) control over labor power, and (3) control over investments and resource allocation. The combinations of these three processes of class relations constitute the two unambiguous locations: the bourgeoisie, with full control over the entire apparatus of production, over the authority structure as a whole, and over the overall investment process; and the proletariat, which is excluded from all of these. The petty bourgeoisie, on the other hand, constitute an unambiguous location within simple commodity production. They have economic ownership and control over the physical means of production but control no labor power (Wright 1976: 30-31).

All of the remaining positions that do not perfectly match the three dimensions of class relations are classified by Wright as “contradictory class locations,” i.e., as social positions that are not firmly rooted in any single class but occupy objectively ambiguous locations between classes. Wright (1976: 27) identifies three groups of contradictory locations. (1) “Managers and supervisors” between the working class and the capitalist class are excluded from control over investments and resource allocation, while they exercise a degree of control over the physical means of production and over the labor of others. (2) “Semi-autonomous employees” between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie are excluded from both control over investment capital and control over the labor of others but retain a degree of control over their immediate physical means of production in the labor process. (3) “Small employers” between the petty
bourgeoisie and the capitalist class employ and control a minimal amount of labor power, but not enough to accumulate large masses of capital.

Wright recognizes that political and ideological criteria must be brought into the analysis of class boundaries. While maintaining the primacy of economic relations, he indicates that the more contradictory a position is within the social relations of production, the more political and ideological relations can influence its objective position within class relations (Wright 1976: 39-40). Thus, the mental/manual division may well reinforce the structural separation of, for example, technicians from the proletariat, while strong trade unionism may contribute to blurring the line that separates skilled craftsmen from the proletariat. In this way, political and ideological class struggles become determinants of the objective class positions of contradictory locations at the economic level.

In his book *Classes* (1985), Wright subsequently modified his position and argues that class must be conceptualized exclusively as a relationship of “exploitation.” He regards “effective control over resources as the material basis for class relations” (Wright 1985: 106). Exploitation — the transfer of labor from one class or individual to another — is considered essentially a product of the unequal distribution of property rights in the means of production: “The material basis of exploitation lies in the distribution of productive assets, usually referred to as property relations” (Wright 1985: 71-72).7

For Wright, the dominant form of exploitation in capitalist society is based on “private ownership” of the material means of production, but there are also subsidiary forms of exploitation that derive from the unequal distribution of other productive assets. He identifies four kinds of productive assets: “labor power,” “means of production,” “organization assets,” and “skills.” The last two deserve particular consideration. “Skill-asset exploitation” is based on the restriction in supply of specialized knowledge — the transfer of information into credentials. “Organization-asset exploitation” relies on the access to organization — that is, “the conditions of coordinated cooperation among producers in a complex division of labor” (Wright 1985: 79). Within this framework, salaried intermediaries are distinguished from the working class by their ownership of one or the other (or both) of these subsidiary assets and thus occupy contradictory class locations. Such differentials in skill and organization assets, Wright argues, enable them to exploit the labor of other workers as they are exploited by capitalists.

On the boundaries of the working class stand two contradictory class locations. The first is “salaried managers,” which Wright now distinguishes by their ownership of organization

7 This new conception of exploitation by Wright derives from Roemer’s (1986) theory. Roemer seeks to detach Marx’s concept of exploitation from the labor theory of value. He claims that exploitation can arise purely on the basis of market exchanges, without the exploiters exerting any control over direct producers. Roemer proceeds to construct a more general theory of exploitation than Marx, which makes the ownership of various kinds of productive assets the basis of exploitation. He thus suggests that there is such a thing as “socialist exploitation,” which arises from the ownership of “skill assets” and which exists as long as the more-skilled receive greater rewards than the less-skilled.
assets. The second is various “non-supervisory intermediaries” (mainly salaried professionals and technicians), who are distinguished by their ownership of skill assets. Under capitalism, Wright suggests, organization assets have priority over skill assets, so the interests of managers are defined mainly by their organization assets, and skill assets are crucial chiefly for non-managers.

Most criticisms concerning Wright’s new theory center on his definition of “exploitation.” Though Wright asserts that the Marxist perspective on class is relational, is based on social organization and economic relations, and is related to the social relations of production, his new formulation is gradational; i.e., it is oriented to the technical organization of economic relations and characterized by the social relations of exchange, which he criticized earlier as Weberian social stratification theory. He gives exchange, rather than production, a central place in his theory of exploitation: “In all capitalist exploitation the mediating mechanism is market exchanges. . . [The] surplus is appropriated through market exchange” (Wright 1985: 106). Wright’s concept of exploitation is thus a purely quantitative one that refers to the unequal distribution of income by labor transfers (Becker 1989). Consequently, the mode of class structure emerging from Wright’s new “class map” fits exactly the fragmentary picture of an infinite subdivision of classes that Marx criticized as flowing from a theory of class based on the market. Introducing skill and organization assets, non-owners of the means of production (wage laborers) are divided into nine categories, which are assumed to have distinct class interests from each other (Wright 1985: 88). Yet these are not classes, but “locations” as defined by structuralists.

All of these fragmentary class structures originate from Wright’s intention to dissect the cooperative and integrated character of the social relations of production. This approach falls into the “taxonomic fallacy.” First, Wright reduces ownership to a matter of possession. For Wright (1985: 28), class structure “constitutes the basic mechanism for distributing access to resources in society,” including access to the means of production. In this theory, the ownership of the means of production is not what characterizes production relations. Instead, the focus is who has access and who is denied access to resources: the means of production, skills, and organization assets (Carchedi 1987: 126-27).

Wright also makes arbitrary distinctions between economic ownership and organization assets and between labor power and skill assets. To have effective economic control of the organization of capital means having “real” economic ownership of the means of production (Carchedi 1987: 200). The separation between the ownership of capital assets and the ownership of organization assets is meaningful only insofar as economic ownership is restricted to “legal” ownership, which Wright does not intend to suggest. This distinction implicitly suggests an invalid antagonistic relation between capitalists and managers.

Likewise, skilled credentials are inseparable from labor power. Skills can only be embodied in labor power. Moreover, the owners of credentials do not exploit the non-owners; on the
contrary, they simply receive higher wages than others due to the higher value of their labor power — higher productivity that is intensified by qualification through credentials. Wright designates certain assets as important largely because they have “income consequences” (Meiksins 1986: 110). From Wright’s point of view, the highly paid sections of the working class would be viewed as exploiters of those who earn less.

According to Wright (1985: 89), the working class is now no longer viewed as the only agent of change: “other class forces . . . have the potential to pose an alternative to capitalism.” Wright asserts that managers have an interest in establishing state ownership, which is supposedly closer to socialism than to private capitalism. The ideological and political affinities of managers with the capitalist class and their performance of capitalist functions are not seen as evidence of their inherent interest in capitalism. Yet the creation of hierarchically organized production processes, and the detailed division of labor from which managers and bureaucrats derive their privileges and benefits, are very much part of the development of large-scale, organized capitalism. It is hard to imagine that within the organization of a production process in which both capitalists’ and managers’ interests reside, there are any fundamental, mutually conflictive disagreements between them on transforming capitalism into another social system (Meiksins 1986).

**Economic Identification of the New Middle Class**

Carchedi, like Wright, states that there are contradictory class locations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which he terms “the new middle class.” From the beginning he restricts his analysis to the economic identification of class locations and pays attention to the functions performed in the production process. Carchedi bases his theory of the economic identification of social classes on the Marxist theory of value. The production of surplus value requires certain functions that the socialization of capital and labor in monopoly capitalism makes “global,” not individual, in form.

Carchedi defines class locations in terms of three types of social relations. First is “ownership relations”: owners versus non-owners of the means of production. Carchedi (1975b: 362-63) refers here to real economic ownership, which he defines as “the power to dispose of the means of production and labor power,” while possession is defined as “the ability to set in motion and to govern the means of production.” Possession, Carchedi insists, contrary to Wright, is a characteristic of the working class, not of the capitalist class, since it is the workers who concretely “set in motion” the means of production.

Second is “expropriation relations”: expropriation versus non-expropriation of surplus labor. Unlike Poulantzas, Carchedi does not differentiate between productive and unproductive labor. He does, however, specify the use of two terms: when unpaid labor is expropriated in the form of surplus value, it is “exploited,” whereas when it is expropriated directly as labor, it is called “economic oppression.”
Third is “functional relations”: the “global function of capital” versus the “function of the collective worker.” This social relation is key to the analysis of Carchedi’s formulation. Of particular importance is the social content (as opposed to the technical content) of functions within the production process. In the phase of monopoly capitalism, Carchedi (1977: 68) defines the function of the collective worker as being “to take part in the complex, scientifically organized labor process (i.e., in the production of use values, either material or not) as a part of the collective labor, as agents through which capital in the productive sphere produces and appropriates directly surplus value or through which capital in the unproductive sphere participates in the sharing of surplus value produced in the productive sphere of the economy.” The global function of capital is defined as “the control and surveillance of the labor process” — a function that is essential to the expropriation of surplus labor and that Carchedi (1975a: 29) distinguishes from the technically necessary work of “coordination” and “unity” of the production process (which is part of the function of the collective worker).

Carchedi views these three aspects as bound together in a relation in which the ownership element dominates the expropriation and functional elements. In an ideal type, there is a correspondence between ownership, expropriation, and functional relations. This correspondence determines the two basic classes of the capitalist mode of production: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. However, in particular historical situations, a degree of non-correspondence has developed between ownership and functional elements.

In the course of capitalist development, the function of the individual capitalist (“control” and “surveillance” of the labor process) has been taken over by a differentiated managerial apparatus (the “global capitalist”), while the function of the individual worker (the production of use value) has been broken down and reorganized into a complex division of labor (the “collective worker”). This creates the possibility of a non-correspondence between ownership and functional relations in the form of agents who, while not owning the means of production, nevertheless perform the global function of capital, or perform in a varying balance both the global function of capital and the function of the collective worker. These contradictory positions — essentially salaried managers and supervisors — are classified by Carchedi as belonging to the “new middle class.” The top layers of this new middle class are heavily oriented toward the global function of capital; the bottom layers are oriented toward the function of the collective worker.

Carchedi employs this schema to analyze the processes of proletarianization that involve two separate dimensions of the new middle class. In the first instance, the devaluation of labor power involved in the function of the collective worker proceeds via changes in the technical division of labor. The second dimension encompasses the function of the collective worker that capital can appropriate in producing surplus value. There is pressure, therefore, for capital to decrease the area of human activity devoted to the global function of capital and to increase that dedicated to the function of the collective worker. Thus, the devaluation of the labor power
of the new middle class occurs when the time required for control and surveillance diminishes. This devaluation of new middle-class labor power, coupled with the elimination of the performance of the global function of capital, defines for Carchedi (1975b: 376) the concept of proletarianization.

A first problem is that Carchedi’s conception of the global function of capital is too narrow and economistic. Noticeably absent from the conception of class relations are any forms of capitalist domination that go beyond direct control and surveillance of the labor process. There are other forms of domination (e.g., those described by Poulantzas as the monopolization of strategic knowledge of the production process) that are also integral to the expropriation of surplus labor and should therefore be included in the global function of capital.

This narrow definition of the global function of capital produces some contradictory results. In Carchedi’s analysis many foremen on an assembly line would primarily perform the function of capital. While some foremen are involved in coordinating production, in many situations their central responsibility is surveillance and control. Many middle- and upper-managers, however, spend virtually no time at all in control and surveillance activities. Instead, their preoccupation is with long-run planning of production, market evaluations, and general decision-making about production processes. In effect, therefore, in terms of Carchedi’s functional element at least, foremen could well be much closer to the capitalist class than top managers, while some top managers perform more like workers (Wright 1980: 362).

Also, it is highly problematic to separate the “function of labor” from the “function of capital,” with the latter conceived as external to the actual production process and concerned purely with the exploitation of labor. In relation to the earlier stage of manufacturing in a narrow sense (corresponding to Marx’s concept of the “formal subsumption of labor”), it may make sense to talk of a distinct “function of capital,” since at that stage the actual production process still had its traditional form and the intervention of the capitalist was largely restricted to enforcing discipline on the workforce. Yet, in the latter form of production — the “real subsumption of labor” — the external relation between exploitation and production is abolished. In a sense, the whole production process becomes a “function of capital,” since it is the capitalist enterprises that organize the collective laborer and carry out the application of new technologies (Cottrell 1984).

REDUCTIONISM AND DETERMINISM IN STRUCTURAL MARXIST CLASS ANALYSIS

Poulantzas, Wright, and Carchedi all advance complex and elaborated theories of social class, yet there remains a logical incoherence on one fundamental question: on class as a historical

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8 It is the stage at which the capitalist form of property is imposed on a pre-existing artisanal labor process.

9 At this stage the production process is fundamentally altered through the use of machinery, the application of science to production, and the increased scale of industry.
agent and political movements prior to categorical places in the social relations of production. All three of these Marxists stress the importance of class struggle as a main force in transforming society. But they are less successful in explaining the link between class structure and class movements. This problem has long been an implicit difficulty for Marxist analysis and used to be answered, as mentioned earlier, in either an economic or a voluntaristic way: as class-in-itself or class-for-itself.

Poulantzas on Class Formation
Poulantzas rejects the class-in-itself/class-for-itself division as historicist and economist. For Poulantzas, construing classes in terms of a process of class formation is historicist, empiricist, subjectivist, and ultimately idealist. He (1975: 16) argues that “structural class determination involves economic, political, and ideological class struggle, and these struggles are all expressed in class positions in the conjuncture.” Structural determination cannot be reduced to class position, nor to the effects of concrete class practice and class struggle. Class determination creates class “experience” or “class instinct,” which imposes in the long run the limits of “class interests” on the class positions of the working class. This is why the working class is “the only class that is revolutionary to the end” (Poulantzas 1975: 204).

Poulantzas concedes that there are interdependent relations between class determination and class position, between class instinct and class consciousness. These relations must be persuasively illustrated in order for his primary assertion that classes exist only in relation to class struggle to have real meaning. How and under what circumstances does structurally determined class place affect class struggle to negate fixed class structure, and under what conditions does class position generate real class interests that overcome its structural restrictions? When does class attain “real” class interests that correspond to class “instinct” that is imposed by the totalizing effects of structural determination? With respect to these fundamental questions Poulantzas takes a “formalistic” perspective (Carter 1985; Connell 1979; Hirst 1977; Johnson 1977; Lockwood 1988; Mackenzie 1982). Jessop (1985: 185) is keen on these difficulties and properly points out that “without referring to specific forms and apparatuses, any discussion of class relations or class practices in particular conjunctures would be underdetermined and gestural.”

Poulantzas’s analysis fails to solve the problem of “reductionism,” because his own view of the multi-factor constitution of production relations as “class powers” does not address what specific conditions are required for the autonomous operation of the ideological and political relations. As a result, these relations operate as a totalizing essence in which the constitution of class powers at the level of production relations is then expressed in all systems of domination and subordination — the logical conclusion being that wherever relationships of domination and subordination exist in society, they must express those class powers that are created through a process of reproduction-in-general (Johnson 1977). In this context, Hindess (1979)
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criticizes Poulantzas’s analysis as “essentialism.” By essentialism, Hindess means a mode of analysis in which social phenomena are analyzed not so much in terms of their specific conditions of existence and their consequences for other social relations and practices, but as the more or less adequate expression of their essence.

Wright on Class Formation

Not confined to static criteria on class boundaries, Wright suggests a more elaborated view of class analysis. He distinguishes “class structure” from “class formation.” The former refers to the structure of social relations between individuals that determines their class interests, whereas the latter refers to the formation of organized collectivities based on the interests shaped by class structure (Wright 1985: 8-9). If class structure is defined by social relations “between” classes, class formation is defined by social relations “within” classes: social relations that forge collectivities engaged in struggle.

On this basis he proceeds to define the relationship between class structure, class formation, class struggle, and class consciousness. Wright calls this “the model of determination,” and it has three dimensions: “limitation,” in which one element imposes limits of possible variation on another; “selection,” in which one element imposes narrower limits of variation on another element within a range of already established broader limits; and “transformation,” in which social actors (individuals and organizations of various sorts) transform a given element within the constraints of limitations and selections (Wright 1985: 29-30).

However, the logical links between four important factors — social relations of production, class locations, class interests, and class struggle — are not clearly established in Wright’s analysis. Wright conceptualizes the relation between structure and consciousness in a deterministic way and insists that these two factors are linked without any mediation by political parties, trade unions, social movements, and so on. Yet he does not relate his classificatory schema to the historical process of the development of capitalist society (Mackenzie 1982: 74).

Wright analysis omits any discussion of dynamic change in capitalist society. This problem comes from his mechanical and static approach. The three “interrelated structural changes” are mentioned in a largely descriptive manner. In acknowledging the gradual decline of the petty bourgeoisie and the progressive increase of white-collar occupations with major ideological and political characters as contradictory class locations, Wright’s scheme of class structures in advanced capitalist societies often seems fragmentary and is characterized as representing “middle-class” societies.

Carchedi on Class Formation

One of the fundamental methodological problems in Carchedi’s theory is the separation of the “economic identification” of social classes from class struggle. His approach is “objectivist.”
Carchedi seems to assume that classes can be formed economically before they have ideological or political associations, and that those relations should be analyzed later (Giddens 1981: 303). This is a deterministic view in which classes exist first and only later enter into class struggle. Carchedi’s levels of abstraction ultimately invoke an economic “essentialism,” involving the progressive addition of super-structural variables that merely reflect the original abstract divisions (Johnson 1977: 198).

Such “structural formalism,” as Johnson (1977) argues, raises the problems of determination (reductionism) and autonomy (free-floating conjuncture) insofar as it ignores the task of specifying the relationships of the economic, political, and ideological conditions within specific capitalist processes in actual institutions and organizations. In other words, class powers cannot be determined from class structure; instead, class powers have specific economic, political, and ideological conditions that arise within particular capitalist processes and institutional contexts.

Generally speaking, formalist and structuralist understandings of class identification reviewed so far assume that class is defined by a conglomeration of specific occupations, wherein class agents unconsciously learn class characteristics through occupational structures (Crompton 1998). While a number of scholars have elaborated on theories related to class structure, comparatively less scrutiny has been directed towards class agents. Scholars have largely ignored the ability of collective agents to mold self-identity and to form the processes of class consciousness (Bourdieu 1984). Within this theoretical vacancy, I propose an alternative explanatory framework for analyzing class formation and class structure.

**CLASS AS SOCIOHISTORICALLY FORMED AND RELATIONAL**

As E. P. Thompson (1963) suggests, social class is a sociohistorical construct influenced by both non-economic and economic relations and by struggle with other classes. Class is a process and social force that is constantly being altered (Therborn 1983). The process by which collective actors become class members is historically contingent rather than universal; and it is multi-causal, not unidirectional. Despite the undeniable importance of economic relations, class formation, especially that of the middle class, clearly entails other social conditions as well. During the proletarianization of the early twentieth century, the middle class emerged as white-collar workers lost socioeconomic privileges, but the outcomes were far from uniform in different countries, particularly in terms of the relationship of the middle class with the working class (Suh 2002).

Class formation is by its nature relational and social — not merely descriptive. In other words, “class is a name of a relation,” and can only be defined in terms of its relationship to other classes (Przeworski 1977: 388). Class formation begins as a struggle about class and
eventually becomes a struggle between classes. Collective agents become class conscious as “collectivities-in-struggle” through discourse and exchange with other established classes. This concept applies especially well to the middle class, which historically was able to form only after its emergence from and interaction with the capitalist and working classes. Class and class consciousness emerge when collective agents observe and emulate individuals articulating common interests in terms of class, and ossify when these agents collectively self-identify in ways that contrast with others’ identities. It is when this distinct collective identity — both claimed and ascribed — assumes class characteristics that it can lead to the formation of an independent class.

Class formation is a product of interclass struggle in which important actors organize and mobilize others as class members. A class identity is defined in terms of the group’s common interests, which can be distinct from or even in opposition to the interests of other actors or groups. Interclass struggle is molded and shaped by the economic, political, and ideological conditions in which it arises. Social relations are objective within the process of class formation only insofar as they are conducive to shaping interclass struggle. Put simply, social relations are “structures of choice” (Przeworski 1977: 377) and not, as structural Marxists argue, “structures of determinacy.” The objective conditions of interclass struggle are important to analyze because they define and determine the struggle’s realms of possibility. These objective conditions alone, however, are not sufficient for understanding concrete struggles. Class formation is a process that involves both the aggregating of members’ common interests and the collective defining of group identity.

BRINGING AGENCY INTO CLASS ANALYSIS:
INSIGHTS FROM THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT LITERATURE

It is necessary then to consider the contexts and circumstances that give rise to collective identity formation and collective action mobilization. What conditions are necessary for concerted class struggle? The answers to this question are complex. We can gain valuable insights by critically assessing the three main paradigms of social movement theory — (1) structuralism, (2) voluntarism, and (3) constructionism — and integrating them into an analysis of class formation (Suh 2009).

Structuralists analyze structural relationships that are fundamental to determining a social movement’s emergence, dynamics, and outcomes. Though structural aspects of social movements are important, overemphasizing them can lead to a “structural bias,” in which there are two main theoretical implications (McAdam 1994). First, such an overemphasis tends to consider (either explicitly or implicitly) collective mobilization and identity formation as wholly dependent on structural relations and dynamics, wherein actors’ cognition and
propensity to join in political protest are also structurally determined. Second, theoretical biases that favor the structuralist approach tend to underestimate the significant role played by individuals or collective agents in forming collective identity and mobilizing collective action.

Nevertheless, the significance of social structures cannot be dismissed altogether. While structures do not dictate agents’ collective behavior or cognitive orientation, they are important in setting limits, creating possibilities, and offering choices to agents in social movements. Social structures exert both constraining and empowering effects on causes, strategies, and impacts of social movements (Rucht 1988). The role of collective agents in shaping group identity and mobilizing collective action is thus semi-autonomous, as social structures both constrain and provide opportunities to social movements. Many cases in which overtly favorable political conditions do not lead to political protest, or deteriorating political opportunities provoke protest, betray collective agents’ semi-autonomy in leading social movements (Snow and Benford 1988).

Unlike structuralists, voluntarists emphasize the active role played by social movement organizations. Voluntarists use rational choice and resource mobilization theories to underline the vital function that individuals have in social movements. In particular, they emphasize, individuals use diverse assets and formulate strategies to achieve movement goals (McAdam 1982). Voluntarist paradigms thus consider the structuralist understanding insufficient to explain the meso- and micro-level factors that influence agents’ choice to join social movements. Instead, they argue, professional “movement entrepreneurs” acquire and implement the essential resources, strategies, and tactics necessary for successful social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). In fact, most indigenous social movement organizations have scarce resources and rely on the support of professional organizers for their operation.

However, voluntarist paradigms tend to rely on deductive, a priori reasoning to explain actors’ motivation and hold theoretically narrow conceptions of both pragmatic rationality and private interest. Voluntarism thus has two important insufficiencies. First, voluntarist perspectives fail to consider that collective action and group consensus need to be compatible with individual interests — whether economic, political, or ideological. Indeed, social movement actors attribute meanings to events and interpret situations before joining social movements or engaging in collective action (Klandermans 1992). Second, voluntarism largely assumes that consensus formation and action mobilization are isolated from social structures that often enforce environmental parameters and influence agents’ interpretive frames. Participants’ perspectives often change with their structural location and social movement experience.

Constructionists regard social movements as socially constructed. Within this paradigm, collective agents are not mere embodiments of structural conditions. Rather, collective agents actively work to define external environments and the meaning of collective action. That is,
constructionists emphasize the crucial role of agents’ cognitive interpretations in filtering structural relations, organizational activities, and concerted actions of social movements. The relationship between external structures and social meanings attached to them is not isomorphic—this relationship varies with the interpretative frameworks applied by collective agents in social movements (Snow and Benford 1988). Therefore, a given set of structural conditions does not yield identical collective identity among actors; depending on the interpretive frameworks of agents, a structure can have varying and diverse impacts on collective action mobilization. Collective action reflects actors’ understandings, not simply their structural (dis)location or predetermined rationality (McAdam 1996). Collective action requires collective agreement that: a structural injustice exists; collective demands accurately reflect group grievances; and collective action will redress these issues (Klandermans 1992). Consensus on the goals and the means of social movements is thus a major precondition for collective action. The formation of a collective identity precedes the mobilization of collective action.

Although constructionist paradigms are able to redress a number of structuralist and rationalist biases, they also tend to overemphasize the ideational factors of social movements, focusing excessively on the role of organization in forming consensus and mobilizing action. Constructionists often ignore the important shifts in structure and collective identity that affect change in social movement dynamics. Consensus formation and action mobilization are not immune to influence from material structural conditions, which can provide an objective basis for forming and remaking of an interpretive framework. Constructionists pay little attention to the transformative potential of an interpretive framework. Within a constructionist paradigm, diachronic analyses are rarely applied to a social movement group’s collective identity formation and re-formation through time. A more interactive and dynamic framing perspective might consider, for instance, the possible delegitimizing and facilitating influences the countermovement can have on the framing tasks of a social movement organization (Cohen 1985).

This critical review of the three main theoretical perspectives within the social movement literature reveals that each one has strengths and weaknesses. Explanations of class formation and the origins of social movements require a blend of both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. Though temporally constrained, a synchronic analysis is able to integrate multiple social relational factors, analyze how they interact, and identify the effects of their causal confluence on the origins of a given historical event. Such an approach is multi-level, embracing macro-, meso-, and micro-relations to analyze social movements. It thus combines analytically separate but theoretically interwoven structural relations, organizational activities, and cognitive systems. Isolated from one another, these three analytical perspectives do not identify any independent causality. Instead, combined and integrated, this analytical approach proposes a “multiple conjunctural causal structure” (Ragin 1987). A synchronic approach
regards any aspect of social movements and class formation as “an outcome of temporal conjunctures between multiple causal structures” (Sewell 1990: 73). To recapitulate, the conjunctural causal structure of synchronic analysis proposes a framework wherein each analytic dimension is semi-autonomous, necessary, and combinatory — not decisive or independent.

By contrast, diachronic analyses propose a process-oriented and time-sensitive view of an event, its causal effects, and its trajectories (Sewell 1996). Diachronic analysis is essential because collective identities — which determine whether and how social structures and organizational activities translate into collective action — often de-form and re-form in the course of social movements. A diachronic approach (1) analyzes change in collective identity (and thus collective action orientation), and (2) identifies the origins of cognitive transformation. Past repertoires of collective action and organizational activity may generate an institutional legacy that influences subsequent stages (McAdam 1995). Cognitive frameworks that operate while social movements emerge similarly may provide appropriate foundations for new frameworks in subsequent situations (Snow and Benford 1992).

An explanatory framework that adopts both synchronic and diachronic perspectives is able to accommodate multiple dimensions and temporal changes in social movements. Such a perspective might prove useful in remedying the essentialist and deterministic defects of structural Marxist class analysis and also contribute to the study of class formation by bringing agency back in.

**CONCLUSION**

The central aim of this essay is to critically examine key Marxist theories of social classes. Class analysis is the main research focus for the investigation of social structure as well as for the study of social change. In this sense, class analysis is both analytical and political. Class analysis usually comprises three dimensions: class structure, class formation, and class struggle. The three sectors are far from independent or separate from each other. Each dimension can be studied individually, but logical interrelations must be elaborated if we accept the basic supposition that class is both a categorical entity and a political agent.

The “boundary problem” debate among structural Marxists surely constitutes the starting point of class analysis. It is also a necessary and fundamental analysis of current class structure. However, class structure cannot be deterministically regarded as a direct cause of class movements (especially from the traditional Marxist perspective of class polarization). Nor can class politics be economistically characterized solely on the basis of the social relations of production (as, e.g., Poulantzas, Mallet, and Carchedi did). If we perceive class as a socially and historically formed social relation, class structure cannot be endlessly categorized
according to theoretical sophistication (see, e.g., Wright and Carchedi).

Class should be understood as an entity that undergoes continuous formation, de-formation, and re-formation. This process is influenced by the objective conditions of capitalist development and structural character. In addition, more concrete events and subjective conditions determine the process of recruiting class members, obtaining class identity, and developing class consciousness. Thus, ideological, political, institutional, and organizational factors are no less important than a systematic and economistic analysis of class structure. Moreover, classes naturally have a relational character. The relations of class capacities that embody the features of social structure are far from zero-sum. Thus, the investigation of one class or class characteristic, its formation, and the possible exercise of class powers cannot be pursued independently from analyses of other classes. Based on these theoretical premises, I therefore believe that class analysis can develop further by incorporating the diverse theoretical paradigms advanced in the social movement literature and embracing both synchronic and diachronic methodological perspectives. Such theoretical elaboration and methodological innovation would illuminate the processes of forming class consciousness and mobilizing class struggle, which ultimately result in the structuration of class relations.
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