

SOCIOLOGY 929
Reading Interrogations, session 2
September 12, 2006
Marxist Tradition of Class Analysis: Marx's Approach to Class

EOW comments inserted in red.

1. You-Geon Lee: Labor and Labor power

In the *Wage Labour and Capital* (p.73), Marx insists that “the capitalist...buys their labour with money. They sell him their labour for money. But this is merely the appearance. In reality what they sell to the capitalist for money is their labour power....Labour power...is a commodity.....” Why does Marx try to differentiate labor power from labor, itself? The difference between labor and labor power seems to be important in his argument in that, by distinguishing between them, Marx seems to be able to explain the concept of surplus labor, of exploitation, the relation between the bourgeois and the proletarian, and so on. As Cohen (2001, p.43) pointed out, this distinction enables Marx to explain “how it is that the worker receives less than the value of what he produces.” Theoretically, this distinction seems to be extremely brilliant. However, I’m still struggling to reach the full understanding of this distinction in terms of empirical level. What does labor as laboring activity and labor power as a commodity exactly mean? What is the relation between them? Cohen (2001, p.43) said, according to Marx, that “labour (=labouring activity)...itself has no value.” So, “exchange-value of labour is a meaningless expression. What has value is not labouring but labour power, that which is exercised in labouring.” Then, any labour with exchange-value can be referred to as labor power? Then, how about some kind of labor with latent exchange-value, which could be a commodity if workers want (but they cannot or don’t doing this due to several reasons) such as household labor?

EOW: This is indeed a murky set of concepts. The classical understanding of the contrast is that what workers actually do in production is labor: this is an activity that takes place in time, thus the present participle *laboring*. They don’t exchange an activity for a wage, they exchange their ability or capacity or power to perform such activity, thus the term “labor power” is used to designate that which they exchange. However, it is not so obvious that this is really a correct characterization of the transaction between worker and capitalist. Some people have argued, in fact, that labor power cannot be a commodity because the worker doesn’t actually sell anything to a capitalist. What the worker does is agree to work under the supervision of capitalists in exchange for a sum of money. The worker gets a sum of money, which the worker really does own: the worker controls the actual use of those funds. But what does the capitalist actually get? The argument here is that the capitalist doesn’t actually *own* the workers *capacity* to work – the labor *power* of the worker. If capitalists actually owned this, they could set it in motion themselves, which they can’t. They can try to do this – and they might succeed – by telling the worker to work. But since workers retain full *possession* of themselves they still have to themselves set their muscles and minds into motion. The capitalist surely does

own the fruits of labor – what workers actually do produce. And they have some effective powers over workers through various kinds of threats (especially the threat of dismissal). What the capitalist “owns” in a sense is the opportunity to try to get workers to work, but it is a bit loose to say that they have actually purchased and thus own the actual labor power of workers. So, you are right that there is something elusive here.

2. Adam Slez

Though there certainly isn't enough space in this interrogation to adequately develop a Marxian framework for understanding the production and exchange of concepts, I think that a valid distinction can be made between the exchange-value and the use-value of a concept. Insofar as we understand sociology as a scientific endeavor, it is the latter that we should be most concerned with: how well do our concepts illuminate empirical phenomena? In practice, however, we have to admit that the rise and fall of a given concept in the literature does not necessarily correspond to the scientific merits of the concept in question. This is exemplified by Marxian theory which, by most accounts, can be characterized by a declining intellectual exchange-value in recent years. As noted by Cohen (2000), there has been something of a mass exodus from the Marxian camp in sociology. While Cohen is right to note that many of the predictions of classical Marxism have yet to prove true (or, more accurately, the conditions on which they might prove true cease to exist), I am not convinced that only the normative goals of the Marxist agenda are worth salvaging.

Simply put, given the arguments and predictions made by Marx (e.g., Marx 1848), classes only **very rarely** do in practice what they are supposed to do in theory. **[EOW: I think this is a little too strong a claim, although I understand what you are getting at. Most days capitalists do precisely what a class analysis of capitalism says they will do: the make investments, worry about profits, engage in competitive strategies with other capitalists, try to extract effort from employees, etc. etc. And the same is true for workers. So, if by “what classes are supposed to do” includes “what the individuals that make up a class are supposed to do by virtue of being in the class,” then I think the predictions hold strongly. The problem comes with the actions of collectivities based on class – basically the problem of class formation and collective struggle.** Much of trouble with Marxian notions of class stems from the difficulties associated with distinguishing between what classes *are* and what classes *do*. Does a Marxian concept of class necessarily imply a statement about the potential for class-based action? As noted by Elster (1985: 319), Marx never provided a clear definition of the concept of class. Judging by subsequent writings, it is still unclear whether class-based action is **inherently part of the concept of class.** **[EOW: I am probably being picky here, but there is a distinction between something which is “inherently part of a concept” and something which is a central part of the theory within which the concept is located.]** At least three distinct positions can be derived with respect to this point. On the one hand, Cohen provides a purely structural definition of class, noting that “class position strongly conditions consciousness, culture, and politics” (Cohen 2001: 73) and thus cannot be defined in terms of them. On the other hand, Thompson rejects the idea

that class can be understood as a “thing,” arguing that “class is a relationship...defined by men as they live their own history” (Thompson 1963: 11). Whereas Cohen’s definition of class makes a distinction between what classes *are* and what classes *do*, Thompson’s definition implies that classes *are what they do*. Finally, Elster contends that “A class is a group of people who by virtue of what they possess are compelled to engage in the same activities *if they want to make the best use of their endowments*” (Elster 1985: 331).

[EOW: The highlighted part of the phrase is crucial to Elster’s claim here. He is not saying that people do in fact make the best use of their endowments, or even that they want to do so, but simply that IF the they, then they are compelled to act in a particular way. This is really not different from Cohen’s view, I think. This is a purely theoretical claim about the logical implications of having certain endowments which you can use within particular “rules of the game” – i.e. social relationships.]

Elster appears to occupy a middle-ground between the positions taken by Cohen and Thompson, in that his definition attempts to provide a general specification of the link between structural endowments and the potential for collective behavior (also see Elster’s discussion of class mobility [342-344] where he engages Cohen and Thompson directly).

While there isn’t space to adjudicate between these three positions, it is worth noting the variation between them, in that it reveals an important point of contention in the Marxian concept of class. The scientific use-value of a concept such as class depends on our ability to differentiate between the outcomes which we are trying to explain and the concept we are using to explain them. In line with this argument, scholars have proven particularly wary of purely practice-based notions of class such as that suggested by Thompson (see Calhoun 1982; Katznelson and Zolberg 1986; Biernacki 1995). That being said, even if primacy of a structural definition of class can be justified on logical grounds, it is not immediately clear how such a definition can be operationalized for the purposes of empirical research (see Manza and Brooks 2003 [1999]).

3. Johannes Glaeser

According to Marx, classes are originated in the economic structure. Therefore I want to give some statements to Marx analyses of the economy. I will give some remarks about his theory of exploitation.

It must be discussed, if profit is really a surplus value (“Mehrwert”), which depends on the degree of exploitation of labour. Or in other words: Is profit really non-paid work (or working time)?

According to Marx labour is the only good in the society, which has the capacity to create extra-values. That is the use-value of the good labour. But the wage of the worker is the exchange-value (Tauschwert) of the worker or the value of the good “labour power” (Arbeitskraft), which he/she receives on the market. (In accordance to the classical economic school) for Marx the exchange value or the wage corresponds to the reproduction costs of the worker, his or her wage of subsistence. The employer, by owning the means of production, is able to buy the labour power of the worker and the products produced by it, but has only to pay the exchange value. The difference of the

exchange-value of the product, produced by the labourer, and the exchange-value of the labour power is where, according to Marx, surplus (Mehrwert) comes from.

Quantitatively he measures that by unpaid working hours. The worker is not treated unfair, he or she got what he or she deserves in the economic system. What is unfair is rather the structure of the system itself.

If we really go to the core of Marx analysis of the distribution of value, or the distribution of parts of the realized price, between the classes (modern said the production factors), there might be some mistakes. With core I mean his theory of labour-values.

First it can be doubted that only labour generates value. Is it maybe possible that also other means of production, in the modern world for example automatic machines (what Marx calls indirect or dead labour), are creating value. In other words: Maybe also machines are goods with the use-value of creating new values? At least labour alone is not able to produce the technology intensive goods we consume today. **[EOW: This observation is absolutely right, but it need not contradict the labor theory of value. That is: improved technology can enable us to produce more things with the same amount of labor, but this could just mean that each thing produced is less valuable – i.e. each thing embodies less labor values – not that the machines themselves add value to the things produced. Machines are “valuable” in the sense of being incredibly useful – and thus they have great use-value to people, but this need not imply that using the machine to produce things makes the things more valuable. This point does NOT establish the correctness of the LTV, but merely that it isn’t contracted by the high productivity of machines.]** Marx helped himself by arguing that the machines (constant capital) are only crystallized labour from former production periods that now enters the production as indirect or dead labour. Indirect labour is for him not able to create new values, but only passes on values to the new products (depreciation). Isn’t that an assumption? How can we prove that? **[EOW: Marx offers only the weakest attempt to defend the substance of the LTV. He argues that for things to have a exchange value there must be a common substance that varies quantitatively that the things have in common, and he then asserts that the only candidate for this common substance is that they are products of labor. This is not an assumption, it is an observation and a proposition. The observation is correct: things that are exchange are products of labor, but the proposition is false: it is not true that the only quantitative thing commodities have in common is being the products of labor.]**

If the other production factors, like estate and capital, are also creating values Marx surplus theory must collapse. I am not arguing that the concept of class collapses, but profit or surplus is than not only caused by unpaid labour. More probably it could also come from the exploitation of estate. For example isn’t it the natural property of soil to let things grow (with the help of sun and water)? Than also estate creates new values (goods) or more than it’s own reproduction costs. **[EOW: I think the modern view of most defenders of “theories of value” is that one can create an indefinite number of “theories of value” with different metrics so long as the metric – or “value numeraire” as it is sometimes called – is itself an input into every output. One can**

therefore talk about the exploitation of energy, for example. Or as someone once said, the exploitation of peanuts (since workers eat peanuts it is probably an input in the manufacture of cars!) But note: this does not undermine the claim that profits would disappear if labor was not exploited. This claim is true of every “basic good” (a basic good is a good that is an input into every output). Labor Exploitation is therefore a necessary condition for the existence of a surplus product, and a surplus product is a necessary condition for profits.]

And also class struggle would also be different, depending on who is exploited, since labour would not necessarily be the only one exploited or would not be the only mean of production which leaves unpaid value. Or more extreme, maybe as the neoclassical argue, everybody gets what he or she **deserves** (the marginal product) by fulfilling each role in the production process. **[EOW: “deserves” is usually taken to be a moral claim. Paying people their marginal product may be efficient in some sense, but it is hard to see how it defines desert since one cannot be fully responsible for one’s marginal product – it depends on a wide range of contextual factors over which one has no control.]** I think it would be worth to start a discussion about the idea of use-value (that is completely missing in the neoclassical theories and in the case of Marx maybe not developed enough, but together with Ricardo the only one who does?

Second: Even if soil is also creating values, the person who own it personally did not add any value. Maybe a capitalist can deserve a wage for, lets say, his work as a manager. But are people allowed to become the owners of material things. Maybe John Locke helps here when he says property is allowed, when the property has been made through the owners own work (Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*). Is than the owner of the property, let it be machines, allowed to receive the values created by it? Maybe he did not receive the property by work, but simply through the interests, or heritage, or whatever be the origin. **[EOW: There is a very complex set of philosophical issues around the question of property rights and whether one has a “right” to the products of one labor. From a theory of justice point of view the problem is that the results of one’s labor always involves more than one’s labor – it requires means of production and raw materials, and it is a very tricky matter to argue for the legitimacy of absolute property rights over those conditions of production since this involves appropriating things from Nature. Locke proposed solution to this (the “Lockean proviso” in which it is OK to take own nature so long as you leave “as good and as much” for everyone else, but since this is in fact impossible if you consider future generations, it is no longer so clear that full private ownership of natural resources – and thus of the things that contain natural resources – can be justified.]**

My arguments are mainly based on Marx original texts, but also in Cohens text you can find paragraphs mentioning Marx value theory:

Cohen, Karl Marx’s Theory of History, see p.40f, 43, 52f, 82, 104.

4. Hsing-Mei Pan

Marx considers a society as a structure, or say as a class structure, constituted by social relations in specific material conditions of production. It is clear that he defines “the concept of society” and “the concept of class” in terms of economy (in terms of economic activities of human being). [EOW: I am not so sure that Marx would define the “concept of society” in terms of the economy. He might argue that the economy is the foundation of society in some sense, but I am not sure he would define society in terms the economy.] However, the possible categories of people’s social life are not limited to economy. They include at least cultural and religious concepts and practices. How do categories of social life outside economy affect economic activities of people? Marx does not take account of these other categories, so his concept for society and class is limited. It is important to extend our observation to various categories of social life and explore mutual influences between them to make a contribution to the concepts of society and class.

According to Marx, on the principle of “dominance”, the economic structure, the social form, has coherence. [EOW: Where does Marx declare a “principle of dominance”? I am not completely sure what you mean here. However, what is not presented in the argument is the objective interpretation of the oppressed in the process of production. Do people selling their labor power for wages really sense that they are in coercive situations? On the other hand, a more recent understanding is that the principle of coherence of a society is more complicated than “dominance”. So Marx fails to predict the historical development of political economic structure in the western world. In fact, capitalism does not bring death to itself.

On the issue of equality, Cohen does not really outline an ideal picture of equal distribution in materials in society. Instead, he mainly makes efforts to revise the limited vision of Marx regarding equality? What is the ideal picture of equal distribution in materials in society? [EOW: Marx’s egalitarian ideal is captured by the aphorism “To each according to needs, from each according to ability.” I take Marx to mean by “according to needs” that some people may indeed consume more than others, but this is just only if it reflects greater their needs. Another interpretation is that this is a demand that all people have “equal access to the social and material means to live flourishing lives” – i.e. “needs” refers to the “means to live a flourishing life.”]

5. Michael Callaghan Pisapia

In Cohen’s reconstruction of Marx, class refers to a social rather than a material characteristic of society (Cohen 2001: 88). Productive forces, including human beings, raw materials, machines, land and space are the materials of society (Cohen 2001: 55), but none of these, insofar as they are only indicated by a simple description of their simply being there – “Sven and Lars regularly saw logs together” – reveal anything about the economic characteristic of society (Cohen 2001: 111). The material facts of their laboring may remain the same even though their social class relation has changed. Sven

and Lars may saw logs together as members of a slave class that has no effective control over productive forces, *for* a master class in a slave society; or they may do so as proletarians as members of proletarian class that has effective control over labor power, *for* capitalists in a capitalist society. Class is *an* aspect of a *system* of social production relations, or a system of social classes. The sum set of social production relations, or the sum set of social classes, is the economic structure of society. The economic structure is the network of relations of effective control over the productive forces. There are variable **levels** of such control; class is the variable. **[EOW: It is probably a little more precise to say “variable forms of such control. The difference between being a slave and a member of a workers coop is not so much the degree of control as the form.]** Particular individuals, such as Sven and Lars, participate in those variable levels of control. By virtue of that participation they are members of a particular class.

Whereas Cohen’s reconstruction of class develops out of Marx’s account of history as the development of productive forces, Elster’s definition of class is developed in order to accommodate Marx’s claim that all history is the history of *class struggle* (Elster 1985: 318). It is unclear to me whether these two accounts are compatible. Developing a theory of social conflict is primary for Elster, and it is important in his theory that not all social groups stand in a direct relation of social conflict: the landlord never encounters the factory worker, for example. Elster’s concept of class figures “centrally” into a theory of social conflict insofar as it used to call attention to social relations that take the form of a “transfer of surplus value from below and the exercise of power from above” (Elster 1985: 341). Elster’s definition makes it possible to predict coalitions between different social groups who figure variably (more variably than Cohen allows) into the economic structure. Although a head laborer and his subordinates are members of the same “class” (as Cohen defines class), they may not be members of the same coalition in a political class struggle (as Elster defines it), because their relations involve no transfer of surplus value from the subordinate workers to the head laborer, even though they involve an exercise of authority on the part of the head that limits the autonomy of the subordinates. **[EOW: I think the issue of a head laborer in Elster & Cohen’s analysis is more a question of the level of abstraction at which they are discussing class than it is a disagreement. Elster is proposing a more fine-grained concept with more relational categories, whereas Coehn is talking about the contrasts between different kinds of class systems – capitalist vs feudal, etc.]**

Does the theoretical point of difference between Cohen and Elster’s conceptions of class turn on Marx’s distinction between “class-in-itself”, which is primary for Cohen, and a “class-for-itself”, which seems primary for Elster? For Cohen, the strength of Marxist social criticism depends on its theoretical emphasis on a “class-in-itself” (Cohen 2001: 74-5, 107). If we agree with Cohen, Elster’s theory, though more nuanced, is less critically acute: it is better equipped to explain the phenomena of head laborers (or management?) aligning themselves in social conflict with capitalists, but it drops the idea, which Cohen might push, that head laborers act against their ‘real interests’ in forming such a coalition. **[EOW: I think we really need both of these kinds of concepts – one focused on the system-level contrasts of class structures, and those focused on explaining behavior of people located within those structures. This is partially the**

in-itself/for-itself distinction, but one can also have a for-itself discussion at the higher level of abstraction.

6. Elizabeth Wrigley-Field

I'm going to focus my response on the Elster reading. While I appreciate the project of formulating the concepts of Marxist theory precisely, I found many aspects of the Elster unconvincing or dissatisfying.

For one thing, 6.1 consists of various attempts to provide a reductive definition of "class" that would suit the theoretical uses Marx intends class to serve. I am not convinced, though, that such a reductive definition is necessary (or possible). To understand what "class" is in Marx's theories, I am inclined more toward an approach roughly like one taken by some philosophers (such as Donald Gillies and Elliot Sober) to probability, which is to take the concept as an irreducible given, formulate theories using our intuitions and assumptions about it, and then test and adjust those theories based on how well they seem to explain the world.

Although I've just put this as a meta-methodological point, I think the project of looking for a reductive definition leads Elster to substantive choices as to how to conceive of class that I disagree with. Chief among these is Elster's rejection of exploitation as central to the Marxist conception of class. Elster's attack on including exploitation in the "definition" of class mostly consists of showing that it is insufficient (in the coarse-grained version; I agree with Elster that the fine-grained "degree of exploitation" proposal is much too gradational and non-categorical). But that is no reason – particularly if we've given up the project of giving a reductive definition – that exploitation status cannot be taken to be necessary to class distinctions. **[EOW: I think part of the issue here is whether we want to treat the exploitative relation between classes as a *discovery* or do we want to pack it into the very definition of the concept. Elster is arguing for the former. This does not deny the deep structural relation between class and exploitation, but it treats this as a discovery about consequences of having a social structure of production where one category of people are in a position to appropriate the products of labor of another.]**

One component of Elster's argument against the centrality of exploitation raises a further point of departure for me. Elster's argument here is that exploitation status cannot motivate collective action since no one knows "exactly" where the dividing line between exploiters and exploited falls in any given society. More generally, Elster takes collective action to be the explanandum that Marxist theory is supposed to be explaining. I think this explanandum (at least as he conceives it) yields a conception of class that is both too subjective and too narrow.

Taking the latter point first, in several places (when justifying "immediate transfer of surplus value" as the primary relation underpinning class conflict, rather than, e.g., "net exploitation") Elster makes the point that people tend to focus their ire on those most immediately involved in controlling and exploiting them. But it seems to me that this is not always the case, and moreover, that struggles that confined themselves to immediate supervisors (or even high-level executives in one's own company) would be taken by Marx to display less political class consciousness than ones that generalized to exploiters

in general (or the particular exploiting class(es) relevant to a particular exploited class). And furthermore, that Marxist theory would be more likely to take the latter kind of larger-scale struggle to be explainable in terms of class, as opposed to smaller struggles. Elster's sense of what class is supposed to explain seems (implicitly) to be something more like, "Why do people begin to struggle in the first place?", which I think is the wrong explanandum. **[EOW: You are certainly right – I think – that the loose relationship of "exploitation status" to "motivation" does not provide good grounds for rejecting the centrality of exploitation to class. However, we would still want there to be a causal linkage between exploitation and struggles, even if it didn't work in the simple way Elster specifies (i.e. the content of motivations is directly about exploitation). So it is necessary to postulate the mechanisms through which exploitation would have a tendency to generate struggles in concrete conditions, right?]**

More generally, I think the explanandum Elster is seeking is too subjective. I think objective interest, rather than collective action, ought to be the explanandum sought by Marxist theories using class. This needn't, and will not, always correspond to members of the class's subjective sense of their interest (why Marx makes the distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself, etc). However, I think a theory taking objective interest as its primary explanandum can also explain the emergence of collective action, by adding additional premises about the circumstances in which people become cognizant of their interests. In other words, without taking class consciousness to be either automatic or inevitable, I do think Marxist theory must hold that the objective class structure in some sense, and at least partially, creates the conditions for class consciousness (making this more precise is much of the challenge of figuring out how to conceive of historical materialism). **[EPW: Of course, the idea of "objective interests" is a thorny one. I use the concept, but I am always a little queasy about it. Objective interests seem to require a certain kind of counterfactual claim: these are interests actors would hold under condition X. The problem, then, can become circular if X turns out to be "conditions in which they adopt the theoretical understanding of society which specifies these as their objective interests."]**

This is really a wider issue I have with Elster's analysis: he ascribes to Marxist theory a level of determinism that I think Marxists must reject. This is expressed in the two propositions he gives at the top of page 391, supposed to be summing up "Marx's central intuition." But I don't think Marxists should accept either of these as stated.

I would want to reformulate the first, perhaps, to say something like "exploiter classes tend to acquire class consciousness or disappear" (I'm not sure this is the right reformulation, especially because I don't know a lot about class struggles in pre-capitalist societies, but my idea is that the working-class, for example, need not be class-conscious in order to continue to exist; the consciousness of the capitalists is sufficient). This is essential to leaving room in the theory for collective action to fail to correspond to objective interests at particular moments in time. **[EOW: This is a very nice asymmetry in class analysis – that the demands of dominant/exploiting classes for their reproduction are different than on subordinate classes. I think this implies that social reproduction of exploitative class structures requires the collective, not just individual, agency of the dominant class. Individual capitalists do not need to be class conscious to survive – they just need to be concerned with profit maximization,**

good competitive strategies, technical change, etc. So the issue is whether collective action by capitalists on behalf of capitalism is a necessary condition for the reproduction of the economic structure within which they are the exploiting class.]

As to the second proposition, that “non-class collective actors become increasingly marginal over time,” I believe that this needs to be tempered by the recognition of the above point. Particularly in the absence of widespread class consciousness or class struggle, any variety of struggles might predominate. Again, I think the way that Marxist theory can accommodate this while still holding onto the centrality of class is to see the primary explanandum as being objective interest rather than subjective identification (or struggle). I think this allows further substantive claims about the course that different kinds of struggles will tend to take without requiring the

Allowing room in the theory for this kind of indeterminism seems to me to resuscitate the “divide and conquer” argument that Elster rejects on p. 393. It need not, as Elster suggests, be a choice between “Pessimist Marxism” and “traditional progressivist Marxism”; we ought to be able to have a non-deterministic Marxism with room for multiple possible outcomes in the realm of struggle. (I also disagree with Elster’s other argument against the divide-and-conquer idea, that this is unacceptable functionalism: the theory ought to be able to suggest mechanisms by which the resulting employer benefit of working-class division yields or enhances such division, for example, through consideration of ruling-class control of means of propaganda.) **[EOW: I agree that D&C need not be functionalist so long as individual capitalists own profit-maximizing interests are furthered by the strategy. What one then has is an agency explanation of the strategy which generates the functional relation. This seems quite plausible to me: racism and other forms of division are profit-enhancing at the micro-level, not just stabilizing at the macro-level.]**

Having said all that about my disagreements with Elster, I wanted to make a smaller point about his mobility discussion (section 6.1.4). I appreciate Elster’s separation of the question of what constitutes class from the question of mobility between classes. A lot of empirical sociology that I have seen tends to conflate the question of where individuals fall in a particular distribution (and what are the determinants of that) with the question of what the distribution is. (For example, analyses that show that education is a major determinant of whether someone gets a high-paying job, and conclude that if everyone had a good education everyone would have a high-paying job.) Actually, Elliot Sober has said that Darwin’s main contribution was making what I take to be an analogous distinction, between explanations of why particular organisms have the traits they do, and why the pattern of traits in the population is what it is. I raise this because it is a distinction I want to keep in mind for more of the theories we read.

Elster says the main intuition pushing toward including mobility in the definition of class is the idea that the increased mobility inherent in class as opposed to caste is what differentiates them. I wonder if you could instead say that it’s not the *fact of greater class mobility* (an empirical matter) but the conceptual point that the level of mobility is definitional for caste but not class (so that changing all the individuals in a group would change a caste into a different one, but not so for class). In that case, the same extensional group could be both a class and a caste (but its constituting each will have different contrast spaces). Does that work? **[EOW: I do think this works. In the case of class we**

can have a distinct theory of the mechanisms that sort people into classes from the theory of the mechanisms that generate the categories into which people are sorted. For caste, in general, it seems that the mechanism that creates the categories also sorts people, at least where caste is based on ascriptive characteristics. If, however, class boundaries were extremely permeable so that people could basically choose which class they wanted to be in and adopt a strategy with a good probability of achieving that destination, then wouldn't this also impact the very meaning of the category? If – as you suggest – the anchor for the category is “objective interests” isn't it the case that the objective interests attached to the class location worker in a world in which you have a 50% chance of exiting the class if you want to is different from the objective interests of being in the worker class location if the probabilities are 5%? If objective interests have a time horizon to them, and the relationship of persons to positions is temporally that fluid, I think it means the interests change objectively, and thus the class structure must be different.] Even smaller point: when Elster says that flow rate is relevant to “class structure” if not class, I would add “flow patterns” more generally: other facts about who has what kind of mobility seem like they may often be relevant in class-based theories but not constitutive of class.

7. Adrienne Pagac

In this week's readings, we explore the basis that comprises the foundation of the Marxist tradition of class analysis. Foremost in this undertaking is the attempt to fashion a working definition of 'class'. Though Marx himself may not have literally (or perhaps, consistently) put forth such a meaning (as evidenced by our readings of Jon Elster and G.A. Cohen), I had thought what was understood of Marx's conception was enough: very simply put, classes are predicated upon who owns/controls the means of production and who does not. I still do believe this conception sufficient and hence my problems with the Elster reading.

While I think that Jon Elster's arguments concerning the conceptualization of class and class struggle are worthwhile as a thought experiment, I do not agree with his conclusions. Yes, it is important to recognize that Marx was not consistent in his application of the word class throughout his body of work, and as such, it is helpful to reconstruct the category using additional criteria, *i.e.*, property, power and exploitation. However, I don't think these categories need be mutually exclusive ones, as I think G.A. Cohen's readings prove (Table 1); it is possible for a person to have some of control/ownership of their own labor power (market behavior) and yet not own the means of production (property). **[EOW: of course, it is also possible for people to have some control/ownership of means of production and yet not complete or absolute control. The issue is whether these complications affect the the explanatory mechanisms connected to “class”.]** My understanding for Elster's inclusion of these criteria was to avoid applying a dichotomy to relationships that exist in economic structures because not all interactions are based on market relations (priest and layman).

But why can't the above criteria be subsumed under a dichotomy of 'haves' and 'have nots'? Some people have power over others and some do not. Some own property (read: the means of production) and some do not. Moreover, the application of this

allows for a more inclusive category of class. As it seems to be of utmost importance for the working class, i.e., **those who do not own the means of production**) to unite together against the class that does own those means, the capitalists, in order to safeguard its agenda, it seems counterproductive to split hairs concerning the degrees to which an individual belongs to one class or another, right? **[EOW: If you define the working class simply as “those who do not own the means of production,” and by this you mean “those who must sell their labor power in order to obtain a living”, then something like 85% of the labor force is in the working class. Is this what you intuitively feel constitutes the collectively whose interests are polarized to those of owners? If, on the other hand, you define the working class as “those who own absolutely no means of production” and thus you exclude people with some stock, then the working class shrinks to perhaps 35% of the population or so. In order to resolve these issues, I think you may have to engage in some sort of “hairsplitting” in the sense of figuring out exactly what the pivotal mechanisms are and how different social positions are linked to those mechanisms.]**

I also am not convinced with Elster's proposition that class is not absolutely central to social conflicts. He provides myriad examples that he claims prove the growing importance of non-class elements in conflicts displacing the position of class. If anything, I think that it is equally possible that such conflicts have the *appearance* of “national, regional, religious, linguistic and ethnic” divisions, but that they are intrinsically conflicts **concerning** the ownership/control of resources and wealth. **[EOW: a perhaps picky point here: You might want to distinguish a statement that a conflict *concerns* ownership, and a conflict is *shaped by* class structure. Many conflicts are heavily shaped by the structural realities of class and the pressures they create on people without the conflicts being oriented towards class relations.]** As a disclaimer, I do not know whether this claim is applicable to all conflicts in the history of the world, but I do believe it is for those occurring “over the last century”. See Elster 392.

Despite the fact that I have other problems with the Elster reading, such as his treatment of state managers, I will stop with the above two. However, I do have some “stupid questions” that I would appreciate discussion of during our session. They are: Elster's meaning of “endowments”? **[EOW: I think this just refers to the economically relevant assets that people own and control. This term can be used to indicate both external resources – capital, land, etc. – and “genetic endowments” which affect how easy it is for a person to develop skills and acquire knowledge.]** Elster's meaning of “to optimize”? **[EOW: to optimize means to make the best use of something, all things considered. A person optimizes their use of endowments/assets when they use them in such a way as to generate the highest economic returns – in the simplest formulation, the highest flow of income, in a more complex formulation, the highest flow of the full package of material conditions of life (income, leisure, security, etc.). Elster's view is that given a person's endowments/assets, and given the rules of the game by which one turns those assets into a flow of future resources, people are compelled to act in a particular way if they are to use the endowments optimally.]** Concerning Cohen's first reading, in his discussion of the exploitation of the serf, he suggests that “the effective possession” of land does not mean that the serf is independent from the noble. He must be forcibly squeezed for his tribute to the lord. Where does use of the commons fit in? Why does access to the commons not make the serf somewhat

independent? **[EOW: I think the commons does make the serf somewhat independent of the Lord, and where the commons are safeguarded and very productive, this could conceivably pose a problem for lordly extraction.]**

8. Rahul Mahajan

PREFACE TO INTERROGATION

I need to preface comments on the readings with an analysis of some comments of Erik's in the first class that relate closely to key concepts that need to be explored.

He talked about the various theoretical frameworks – Marxian, Weberian, etc. – and emphasized that we are looking at a single “concept” and tracing its lines in many different theories.

Epistemologically, this seems uncomfortably Platonic and essentialist – the fact that we use the same *word*, class, when talking about each of these theories hardly means that we are tracing some unitary concept whose essence lies beyond any of the theories. Methodological nominalism would suggest that we have a bunch of theories, T1, ..., Tn, and in each theory we define a term, “class.” This gives us n different concepts – class1, ..., classn. It doesn't give us one concept, “Class,” with some supatheoretical existence and theoretical manifestations class1, ..., classn. We could, of course, talk about a meta-theory (MT) and define Class in MT, but we don't really have one. Sociology as a whole is far too diffuse to serve as such a meta-theory. **[EOW: In my formulation of “If Class is the Answer, what is the Question?” I am agreeing with you – mostly – that different concepts of class are designed to answer different questions, and thus there isn't a single unitary concept over which there are disagreements about definitions. Sometimes this is the case – my debate with Poulantzas, I believe – was a debate over the proper way to define a single concept. But the full array we are discussing is indeed of different concepts. BUT, the concepts are also overlapping. They constitute a kind of family of concepts with loose edges and overlaps, and this makes the simple equation N theories therefore N concepts not quite right.]**

This is not a crippling objection if we settle for a pragmatic (not necessarily pragmatist) approach. In mathematics, once one develops a feel for the structures therein, one comes to see that there are indeed better and worse definitions. A definition is “right” insofar as it helps to reveal deeper structures, leads to more powerful techniques and results, and establish links with related fields of inquiry; it is “wrong” insofar as it makes all of those things more difficult. This notion depends on a certain naïve Platonism regarding mathematical structures and, of course, on knowledgeable individuals' subjective (but hopefully highly replicable) evaluations.

In sociology, analogically, we can hope to come up with some loosely understood notion of what class “really” is based on empirical knowledge of society and important social

processes. Again, this approach requires the combination of a certain philosophical naivete, an implication of a large, shared and agreed-upon knowledge base, and some level of agreement on what we're trying to understand.

All of this suggests to me that when addressing the question "If class is the answer, what is the question," we always keep firmly in mind the foundational question, "If class is the answer, what is class?"

For me, the questions are two: On the basis of what should I base a normative analysis of society, dividing between the oppressed, the oppressors, and various kinds of in-betweens? What structures and histories of structures are important in determining political consciousness and mobilization – in particular, as regards class, what primarily economic structures and histories?

INTERROGATION

Below are three points relating specifically to the readings. Each of them suggests questions that regard specific aspects of the questions above.

Questions (each question relates to the corresponding point below):

- 1. Even given a narrow economic definition of class and unreconstructed Marxist ideas of the connection between structure and consciousness, given Cohen's caveat example regarding ownership of the means of production, how can we define the working class? This is antecedent to more sophisticated questions like those dealt with in the Wrightian notion of contradictory locations.**
- 2. In terms of production of class consciousness, even if the answer is some combination of structure and history, how do we arrive at general principles for disentangling the two and even for attempting to establish primacy of one or the other in a specific case?**
- 3. Two questions: a. Elster attempts to get at class by adducing to his analytical Marxist framework some pretty common-sense ideas of how consciousness could be formed in an actual person, which lead him to rule out formulations of class based on exploitation or on Roemerian counterfactuals. Can't we do better than this – isn't there something in the Marxian paradigm that enables one to go beyond common-sense with regard to this fundamental question. b. Insofar as normative notions get divorced from notions of class and class consciousness, what should we be emphasizing as political beings (even if as academics we focus on the intellectual side of the political question)? Does it make more sense to refocus political efforts on the normative issues, and leave the class framework a bit to the side? Cohen correctly, in my opinion, argues for the inclusion of normative arguments in Marxist analysis, but I think there is more to be said, especially about primacy of normative vs. class considerations.**

1. In the long Cohen reading, there is an interesting example of a textile worker forced to own his (with Cohen, it's always "his") means of production, a condition which actually makes him worse off than if he was Marx's idealized dispossessed proletarian.

For me, if class is to be meaningful, it must involve power imbalances and at least the perception of traceable power flows (as opposed to diffuse power flows that the disempowered individual cannot locate in any person or identifiable group of persons). That is because it is supposed to be the engine, or at least one engine, of driving political change in society.

From this point of view, it's clear that ownership of the means of production is not quite the right criterion. In Cohen's example, the capitalist "owns" or has exclusive access to the means of distribution, i.e., in Marx's terminology, the means to realization of value (and in particular surplus value). What the economists call "monopsony," being the only buyer of a product, is a case in point. Production can be distributed how you wish, the power is with the monopsony (or oligopsony) buyer (or buyers). The buyer is the one alienated from the means of production, but he is the exploiter and the producers, with their own means, are the exploited (insofar as exploitation can be considered a bilateral relation). **[EOW: I think you are absolutely correct here. The tailor who "owns" the sewing machine, but has no way of buying the raw material inputs or selling the products, does not actually own the means of production of exchange value, but only the means of production of usevalue. That ownership becomes no different from the tailor owning his/her own labor power: it generates no exchange value unless it is hired by the capitalist. Still, one might consider the fact of tailors owning a component of the total means of production relevant for possible courses of class struggle, for under these conditions – for example – it might be easier for a union of tailors to form a workers production coop than if they didn't.]**

This is not at all an unrealistic case. Consider WalMart's relationship to its suppliers, which it squeezes unmercifully. Or Standard Oil – Rockefeller didn't build it up by trying to buy up all the oil wells. He bought up the means of distribution – pipelines, exclusive freight contracts with the railroads, etc.

In some cases like this – individuals who have the right to go and spend all day panning for gold, own their own equipment, etc., but are effectively forced by circumstance to sell all the gold to one businessman at the price he sets – it is perverse to consider this, as Marx's general theory would require, to be a case of numerous small capitalists, with one big "parasitic" retail capitalist sitting on top of them. Rather, it resembles much more closely a capitalist-proletarian relationship.

Of course, the standard situation is the one in which the worker doesn't own the means of production. The problem is simply that Marx shifts back and forth in a very undisciplined fashion between effective descriptions implicitly founded on deep empirical observation and supposedly fundamental and absolute abstract theoretical formulations. **[EOW: These kinds of complications are precisely why I introduced the concept of contradictory class locations. The existence of self-employment in advanced**

capitalism generates a series of relational variations from purely fictional self-employment, which is basically a tax dodge on the part of employers since they don't have to pay SSI for a subcontractor, to genuinely independent self-employed who have much more room to maneuver than they would have as true proletarians.]

2. Cohen, I think, rather cavalierly dismisses Thompson's critique of fixed-time-slice structural definitions of class. His argument seems to miss the point. He argues that one can easily define class structurally without assuming that it mechanically determines consciousness. This is true. What Thompson is getting at is that he doesn't find this particularly important. For him, the historical process that produces (or doesn't produce) consciousness is what is truly important and presumably what actually structures society. He is not necessarily saying that the structural definition is wrong in the sense of leading immediately to gross error, but rather that it is the wrong definition, in the sense suggested above – that it doesn't give any insight into answering what is for him the question, and is thus not the answer.

To rebut Thompson would require more than a statement that a structural and ahistorical definition of class doesn't necessarily lead into gross error, but rather an investigation that starts with determining whether he and Thompson are asking the same question and then some sort of argument, with examples, that he is answering it better. **[EOW: we will discuss this throughout the semester I am sure, but I don't see how a Thompson-type process definition actually helps explain consciousness and action since consciousness and action are built into the categories that need explaining. Some kind of structural concept is needed to provide nontautological explanatory weight to the analysis. It may be that for some reason we might want to call those structures something other than class structures. This is what Przeworski does: he talks about how economic and political structures determine class formation, not how class structure determines class formation. But then, in practice, his description of that economic structure looks a lot like a description of class structure.]**

3. Elster, to his great credit, explicitly addresses this lacuna in Cohen (and, he implies, Roemer) He states the question to which he believes class needs to be the answer: roughly, what is the between-group distinction in society, rooted primarily in economics, that leads most directly and fundamentally to collective action? There are a few details that need cleaning up, but basically this is the heart of it.

Thus he derives an interesting distinction between the normative components of a Marxian economic/class analysis and the components that lead to class antagonism, class consciousness, and the motor that drives political change.

In his analysis of exploitation, which he puts forth, as the normative basis of a Marxian analysis, he clearly deduces that exploitation is not in general a bilateral relationship and also that in the circuits of exploitation there are middling or contradictory positions. This notion actually follows easily from Marx's remarks on circulation in vol. 2 of Capital. If a retail capitalist basically derives his profit as a share of or a claim on the surplus extracted by an industrial capitalist, there is no intrinsic reason that the **consumer of the**

retailer's product is not also sharing in the retailer's claim on this surplus value. [EOW: The consumer may not be appropriating any surplus at all by purchasing the item. All of the surplus is appropriated by the retailer and the industrial capitalist. So I do not see how the consumer is "sharing" the surplus value. Now in special circumstances this is possible. The superexploitation of labor in the third world can lead to prices sufficiently low that the best description is that capitalists distribute super-profits to consumers in order to increase the market – and thus there can be global redistribution of surplus to workers. This is basically (as I understand it) Lenin's theory of the aristocracy of labor.] If surplus can be realized in selling, it can equally be realized in buying (just imagine the retailer squeezing her supplier, then passing on some of the savings to the buyer – see WalMart, again). Thus, a sensible definition (like Elster's) of exploitation would conclude that WalMart shoppers are benefiting from the exploitation of Chinese workers.

But, as Elster correctly points out, when exploitation becomes this diffuse process, it can hardly then serve as the basis of building political resentment leading to mobilization. [EOW: What you have just shown is NOT that the concept is diffuse, but that the complexities and contradictory relations within exploitation processes can help explain why conflicts do not erupt over exploitation. If workers in the US are second order exploiters of Chinese workers, this could be part of the explanation of their passivity.] There is no clear enemy for the worker to mobilize against, in general (there may be in specific cases, of course). Thus, he locates class relations in direct transfers of surplus, which concept now lacks a fundamental normative upshot.

9. Charity Schmidt

***In part 1 of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx is essentially describing the process of globalization ("Just as [the bourgeoisie] has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the east on the west", etc). While he points to the eventual rise of an international proletariat, the general tendency of class analysis literature is to view classes and the social conditions of classes within a national framework. This creates difficulties in analysis, creates more and more confusion as globalization gains momentum. It is not until Cohen's piece: *Equality from Fact to Norm* (p. 111) do we find a discussion on the current relevance of class in contemporary society in this weeks readings. Perhaps this highlights a challenge for sociologists; how do we discuss the meaning of 'class' in a global society, where national borders become increasingly irrelevant? [EOW: we might want to distinguish the issue of the relevance or meaning of class as a micro-concept and the more macro-concepts of class. As a micro-concept class describes mechanisms that impinge directly on the lives of individuals that are bound up with the way means of production and means of distribution are owned and used. I don't think globalization reduces the potency of these mechanisms – it just transforms the geographical configurations of the social relations that define these mechanisms, In terms of more macro-concepts like class formation globalization might actually affect the character of the concept, or at

least the theories we develop around the concept, since class formations are historically directed at either employers or states, and if the state is no longer a relevant object of class struggle than this would profoundly affect the character of class formations.]

With a global perspective, we see how relative the meaning of class really is. For example, a person who lives under the poverty line in the U.S. and may live from paycheck to paycheck, has only minimum access to a health clinic, no access to job training or quality schools for their children. They should be considered a part of the working class, or working poor, however, when we compare them to, say, a farmer in Guatemala, who has zero access to health care, transportation, education for their children or sanitary water, the magnitude of difference within the concept of “the working class” expands. The worker in the U.S. may still have a television, a car, and heating during the winter, luxuries by the farmer’s standards. **[EOW: I thought you were going to raise the issue about the *social relations* that might link the lives of poor workers in the US – via cheap imports – to poor workers in sweatshops in Guatemala. That surely does have implications for class analysis. But the simple comparison of the standards of living of a poor person in the US and Guatemala does not necessarily have anything much to do with differences in the character of the social relations that define their class locations.]** While, of course, such things don’t necessarily signify a higher quality of life, they do signify more consumption of the supplies of production. Such an example highlights the difficulties in analyzing class in contemporary society. What does this mean for the potential of class solidarity across national boundaries when the experiences among the modern ‘proletariat’ may be so distinct?

***Following up on the previous question, I refer to Marx when he says that “Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. (*Communist Manifesto*, part 1).” Do we believe this is actually happening within a global framework? With the range of potential variance among the global proletariat, is the creation of a sense of class consciousness and solidarity among them even possible? Is society polarizing into “two great hostile camps” as Marx predicted, or are the variances among workers so great that no one knows to which camp they belong? **[EOW: This is, of course, one of the most pervasive criticisms of Marx – that the class structure has not polarized in the way he describes. There are ways of defending his characterization by arguing, for example, that while there is differentiation at the level of *status* and stratification of living standards, there is *relational polarization*, but this is not very convincing.]**

***As my current research deals with Urban Land Committees in Venezuela that were originally created for the purpose of distributing land titles amongst barrio residents, essentially giving the land back to the families who have built their homes on it, I have been struggling with the concept of individual land ownership/titles vs. collective. When discussing the right to personally acquired property, Marx rejects the idea that Communists aim to destroy it; “Hard-won, self-acquired, self-earned property!... There is no need to abolish that; the development of industry has to a great extent already

destroyed it, and is still destroying it daily (*CM*, Part 2).” Marx does not continue to discuss the meaning of individual property, leaving us unsure as to his viewpoint. He goes on to discuss bourgeois property, the destruction of which he confirms as an aim of Communism. What is his distinction between these types of individual property; the form that preceded the bourgeois and the bourgeois form itself? He writes that the bourgeois form of property creates capital, which then exploits wage labor. “Capital is, therefore, not a personal, it is a social power”. Is that the acceptable distinction he makes between individual and bourgeois property; the potential for land-holding as a social power? **[EOW: the pivotal issue here is whether owning something confers on you the capacity to appropriate the products of labor of others. If it does, it is capital. Owning a car, for example is not capital in this sense if you use it to get around; it is capital if you use it as a taxi and hire drivers to drive it. For land, in general land for one’s own home is not capital, but land that is used to build rental units would be. Things can be a little more complicated than this if your own home becomes sufficiently valuable that you can use it as collateral for acquiring credit which could be used to hire other people for some economic activity. Then land probably is at least latent capital.]**

In discussing possible definitions of class, Ester (*Making Sense of Marx*, 6.1, page 322) reminds us that “Marx warns against any attempt to define classes in terms of the *kind* or the *amount* of property owned.” How important then is the concept of property-ownership to the analysis of class and class relations? What form should individual land-ownership take in a contemporary revolution, be it communist or socialist, in order to prevent the ownership of land as potential social power and thus exploitative power? **[EOW: if one really wants to be anticapitalist, then land that is to be used for productive purposes should be socially owned in common, not privately owned, and probably not even cooperatively own. A farming coop would then lease the land from the broader community. Some people have argued that all land should be held in the form of common land trusts – even urban housing land –so that the price of land is decommmodified, taken out of the market. The kibbutz is another model: the land is owned in common and no one has any private rights to any income generated by its use.]**

10. Rudolfo Elbert

Many times one hears that social scientist should make a clear distinction between political and scientific analysis. How does this distinction apply to class analysis of capitalist societies? The Communist Manifesto is a good example of Marx’s political interventions, in the sense that it is directed to class political mobilization. However, it is also an instance of theory building and empirical analysis. While addressing the political agenda, Marx raises and tries to answer the following questions (among others): What is a class? What classes exist in capitalist societies? How we identify those classes? What is the relationship between the economic and political dimensions of class? How was the historical formation of the present classes in capitalist societies?

These questions are fundamental for any project in Class analysis, in particular those that self-identify with the Marxist tradition. The question I would like to raise after reading this week's material is about the possibility (or necessity) of developing the answer to these questions in the frame of a political discussion and party formation; or instead, trying to answer Marx's questions in the framework of the scientific framework provided by the social sciences. Is it that a political concern (dissatisfaction with capitalist inequalities) leads to a scientific analysis (the identification of classes and the mechanism of class formation in capitalism)? Or is it possible to develop a scientific analysis of class divisions while making a political statement about the necessary destruction of those divisions? **[EOW: Her is my general take on these issues: a political frame on the sorts of questions you pose may provide you with the motivation for asking the questions in the first place, but if the questions are meant to be about causal mechanisms, explanations, consequences of different strategies, etc., then the answers to the questions must be sought through social scientific methods and arguments. WQhen the political frame also shapes the answers, not just the question, it is likely to give you bad answers – bad, in the sense, that they do not give you a solid understanding of how the world works. Now, in the list of questions you present above, not all of them seem to be about explanation, identification of mechanisms and causal processes, etc. “What is a class?” could be a purely symbolic question for producing solidarities in a particular context. It may not be a question about structures, mechanisms, processes, etc. The political frame says “we want a concept that will help forge solidarities between small farmers and factory laborers” and someone says, “the definition of the working class as those who do physically demanding manual labor for a living will unite farmers and industrial laborers.” The concept of the working class as all manual labor, then, is a response to a political requirement, not a social scientific one. But if you want to explain things, then the best way to do this, I think, is through social scientific analysis.]**

11. Joe Ferrare Interrogation 1: *Exploitation and Marx's class analysis*

In his writings and lectures Marx presented the relationship between the capitalist class and working class as dialectical. By this he meant that the existence of the capitalist class presupposes the existence of the working class, and more importantly presupposes a specific set of relations between these classes. The fundamental relation between these classes is one of exploitation. However, if exploitation is a key relation between the capitalist class and the working class, then is one's class position determined by the extent to which one is either exploited or an exploiter? **[EOW: There are two ways of formulating this: (a) one's ability to exploit others (or one's status as being exploited by others) depends upon one's class position – some classes are able to do this, others are not; (b) one's class position is determined by one's ability to exploit (or one's status of being exploited by) others. Roemer argues that class should be defined in strictly structural-relational terms, and then the fact of exploitation be demonstrated, rather than class being defined in terms of exploitation in the first instance.]**

Marx argues eloquently that the capitalists profit only as a result of the exploitation of the working class and their labour power. In essence, then, one could say that, according to Marx, the fundamental imperative of the relationship between the classes is exploitation. However, the water becomes a bit more muddied if we introduce the property owners into this critique. For example, it could be argued that property owners (often referred to as landlords) directly exploit the capitalist class through the collection of rent. The landlords profit from the **work of the capitalists** and not through their own labour (unless, of course, you count general upkeep of the property, though no one would argue that the value of this “work” is equivalent to the price paid). **[EOW: Landlords can certainly be said to exploit the “tillers of the soil” through the collection of rents, since those rents will embody social surplus. But in general it would not make sense to say that the landlord exploits the pure capitalist farmer: the capitalist farmer hires farm laborers to do the work on the land, and then the surplus that is extractewd is divided into a portion that is transferred to the landlord through rent and a portion that is retained by the capitalist. This is not exploiting the capitalist; it is forcing the capitalist to redistribute a portion of capitalist exploitation to the landowner. They are joint exploiters of the farm workers.]** Further, the land owners do not directly exploit the working class, though the exploitation of the working class by the capitalists seems to be prerequisite to the landlord/capitalist relationship.

At first this appears very similar to the relationship between the capitalist and the working class. If this were the case, then relying solely on the exploiter/exploited dichotomy would place the capitalists and working class in a similar position since both are exploited, yet it would be ludicrous to suggest confounding the two into one class.

The above example suggests the need to further complicate the idea of exploitation. One’s relation to the exploiter/exploited dichotomy is not enough to determine a person’s class position. Yet exploitation seems to be the most fundamental component of Marxian class analysis. Even those who suggest that class position is determined through one’s relationship to property or means of production are, in essence, making a claim about exploitation. If we use exploitation as the fundamental guide to one’s class position, then how can we develop further criteria to distinguish the degree to which a class is exploited, or exploits, and come up with distinct classes that make sense analytically, methodologically, and from the perspective of social change?

12. Fabian Pfeffer

I am presenting three comments on this week’s readings, going from broad to more specific and ending with a potentially naïf observation:

1. One broad question which I expect to emerge throughout the whole seminar is about the possibility of a class scheme that is not / not solely / not mainly based on **occupational** categories. **[EOW: I take it that here you are using the expression “occupational categories” to mean “work-process related categories.” In the rhetoric of class analysis class is often contrasted to *occupation*. Occupations are defined by the technical mix of activities within a job; classes by the social relational and power aspects of jobs. Thus the occupation “engineer” could be a capitalist, a manager, a**

worker, a petty bourgeois, etc. depending upon these relational issues. This is not what you mean here, I presume.] Applied to the Marxian class concept one might ask: could exploitative relations outside of economic production form the basis of class relations? Marx alludes to the existence of such forms of exploitation in the *Communist Manifesto*: “No sooner is the exploitation of the labourer by the manufacturer, so far, at an end, and he receives his wages in cash, than he is set upon by the other portions of the bourgeoisie, the landlord, the shopkeeper, the pawnbroker, etc”. **[EOW: There is a long tradition in class analysis for people to distinguish between the primary determinations of class and a wide range of secondary determinations – often linked to various circuits of capital, mechanisms of redistribution, etc. In Poulantzas, for example, the productive vs unproductive labor distinction revolves around this kind of issue. And there are passages in Marx in this spirit. In these cases the concept of class is anchored in the labor process, inside of production, but it is not restricted to production.]** Nevertheless, given the centrality of the relations of production for the whole body of Marxist theory it seems clear that the classical Marxist view would negate the question posed above. I was surprised, then, that Elster’s reconstruction of a Marxist definition of class (p.330-1) clearly incorporates non-production relations. **[Elster is here trying to say what he thinks Marx should be saying, or perhaps what he is saying “between the lines”. rather than, strictly, what he does say. He is trying to give the best reconstruction of a Marxian concept of class that will do the work it is supposed to do, rather than relying strictly on the explicit pronouncements by Marx.]**

2. The next comment might appear primitive to someone who has used Marxist concepts to draw up a modern class map. Nevertheless: it seems to me that in at least one sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* Marx himself hands out the keys for an extension of his binary class scheme. About proletarians he notes: “As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants”. Marx seems to point towards an additional dimension of stratification, namely authority. While he failed to see the possible bourgeois strategy of transferring authority to and differentiating it within the proletarian class (i.e. of creating a middle class), I feel that Marx hands out another tool for the remodeling of his class scheme in *Wage Labour and Capital* where he basically introduces the concept of Relative Deprivation when he talks about the mutual dynamics of labourers’ wages and capitalists’ profits. A stable middle class can arise where the next higher authority group serves as the reference group and thus prevents class consciousness among the proletarian class at large. **[EOW: There are certainly passages throughout Marx’s writing in which he invokes various principles through which nonproletarian/noncapitalist class locations can be defined, and authority is one of them. None of these discussions really gives these dimensions clear theoretical standing, but they are suggestive.]**

3. One more specific comment on Elster’s approach to defining classes based on shared endowment structures that necessitate certain behaviors. Unfortunately he fails to incorporate the nature of class relations (which he later nicely summarizes as “transfer of surplus value from below and exercise of power from above”) into this definition. In my opinion he thereby exposes himself to Parkin’s classical objection that “inside every neo-Marxist there seems to be a Weberian struggling to get out”. Shared endowment

structures are not really distinct from life chances as defined by Weber - which is not the problem, but rather the problem is that he excludes the specifically Marxian concept of class relations from the definition. **[EOW: I think he would argue that the shared endowment structure is what generates a generally shared position with respect to the process of exploitation, and this, in turn, contributes to the dynamics that are set in motion by the individual strategies adopted in light of those endowments. The life chances approach fails to see the exploitation component of life chances; all that is specified are income-opportunities. But the pivotal opportunity opened up (or closed off) by the endowment structure is the opportunity to exploit others. That would be the nonWeberian aspect of the conceptualization.]**

And here comes the naïf observation inspired by the second Cohen reading. Is social democracy and the social democratic welfare state at the same time a Marxist's enemy and friend? By destroying the coincidence of the four features of the proletarian class (majority, production, exploitation, need) it challenged Marxism and prevented its predictions from coming true (brilliantly seen by conservative politicians such as Bismarck) on the one hand, and on the other hand by virtue of this it also necessitates intellectually rigorous work in the field of egalitarian theory that has long been absent from Marxist thought. **[EOW: Social democracy is only one of the processes which has undermined the predictions of the polarization thesis, and thus reduced the congruence of the four features of the proletarian class location – the development of capitalism itself has added complexities to employment structures in way that confuses this polarization. Still, social democracy does reduce the sharpness of class antagonism and in so doing may weaken class struggle. This is a problem, however, only if our prime concern is proving Marx right, not improving the lives of people. If one mainly cares about flourishing lives, then one would need to add an additional proposition here: If polarization of the sort predicted by Marx had occurred, then not only would capitalism have been overthrown, but a democratic egalitarian socialism based on comprehensive central planning would have been created (for this was the kind of socialism that Marx predicted). There are other reasons to be skeptical about the prospects for that vision of socialism.]**

13. Ann Pikus

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx suggests that although the lower strata of middle class may sink down into the proletariat, upward mobility is not possible for members of the proletariat who can never become masters of the productive forces of society (p.45). In addition, Elster argues too much social mobility would threaten class consciousness and ultimately, collective action. Yet, Elster also recognizes that there can be opportunity to improve one's "endowment" (i.e. their tangible property, intangible skills and cultural traits) despite one's status. Can upward social mobility be reconciled with Marx's conception of class? **[EOW: Some degree of fluidity between classes – or permeability of class boundaries as I have out it – is certainly possible within a Marxist class framework. But a high level of fluidity not only threaten class consciousness, it would – in my judgment – constitute an actual change in the nature**

of the class structure itself. Remember: there are two main causal mechanisms through which being “in” a class location shapes a person’s life – 1) by generating a set of lived experiences (things happen to you by virtue of your class location), and 2) by shaping class interests (what you have to do to satisfy your material conditions of life depend upon your class position). Both your lived experiences and objective interests would be affected if it were the case that there was a very high level of permeability of class boundaries. This permeability changes the nature of the structure itself.]

On another point, in his article, *Equality from Fact to Norm*, Cohen seems to concede that material abundance could be a necessary and sufficient precursor to equality if Marx’s prediction of abundance had been realized. However, though Cohen is likely correct about the ecological crisis, there is no indication that when something (i.e. food) is abundant, it would ever be evenly distributed, either within a wealthy country that controls the resource or certainly not globally. By what mechanism would overabundance actually bring about an end to the class struggles? Who can be trusted to distribute goods and services evenly? **[EOW: This is why a deep equality of political power is a necessary condition for sustainable socialism: only in a vibrant, participatory democracy is it plausible that a relatively egalitarian distribution of burdens and benefits would be sustained.]**

14. Jorge Sola

The first impression one has after reading these readings (in my case it’s exacerbated by my poor English comprehension level) is that the “class” question in Marx’s works makes for a very complex puzzle. Anyway, I think that looking for or reconstructing the Marx’s “single” view of class is not only unessential, but is useless. We can use different class’ concepts depending on what are our researching purposes are or on what their abstraction level is. Hence, and despite Marx’s assertion in the *Manifesto* (“The history of all hitherto existing society...”), it perhaps is convenient to restrict the use of (one of the) class’ concepts in social research to use in the discussion of capitalist society. I say this because one of the most important keys of class relations is the **wage-labour relation, where the labour power is a commodity**. **[EOW: It turns out, I think, that it is not so easy to simply define class in terms of the wage labor relation, since in contemporary capitalism this apparently simple relation takes a variety of rather different forms, and – at least some people argue – this means that the “relations” are not the same. This wouldn’t matter if this variation was irrelevant for the sorts of things class is mean to explain, but this is not the case. So, while I agree the wage-labor relation is at the core of the concept of class in the Marxist tradition, it is less certain that it is sufficient to specify this concept.]** And this relation is specific to capitalist society: that’s the form which is adopted by the majority of labour relations within capitalism. In fact, we can read Marx’s works like an effort to show how under capitalism this relation of social domination appears as a relation of freedom.

Of course, the analysis of the wage-labour relation involves a problem: the empirical non-correspondence of Marx’s predictions on deep antagonism between bourgeoisie and

working class with the current social reality, characterized by **the emergence and consolidation of the middle class**. **[EOW: But what, precisely, does this idea “the middle class” even mean if you adopt the narrow wage-labor relation definition of class relations?]** In spite of this, it may be useful to focus on Marx’s treatment of class in terms of opposition between capitalist and working class, and to analyze its struggles in terms of decommodification and recommodification of labour-power, which is related to the strength of “domination” (I mean *social* domination, not just authority in the workplace) and, therefore, “exploitation” (however we define it) in this social relation (which also may be connected with normative issues, such as to what extent we are free working men in a capitalist society).

15. Assaf Meshulam

One obstacle in the way to defining class lies in the shift from looking at class through the prism of the individual, who is a member of a class, to the broader prism, the social definition of class. This shift should be what bridges between the individual members of a class of individuals and turns them into collective actors. I find the absence of such a path, from the individual to the collective, makes the definition of class thinner and flawed. **[EOW: You are right on target that this is a key question, and I think you are also right in posing it as an individual/collective issue. I like that formulation better than the standard class-in-itself and class-for-itself. I think the issue is more class-at-the-micro-level of individuals living their lives, and class-as-a-collective-force as those individuals are reorganized into collectivities of various sorts. But I think you understate the existence of lots of pathways between these two levels of class analysis. Perhaps in these readings this was not so clear, but much has been written on how class as micro-lived experience and interests is transformed into class as collectivities in struggle.]**

Both Cohen’s definition of class and Elster’s definition lack an adequate explanation of the motive, or engine, driving the formation of a collective out of individual class members and their subsequent collective action. **[There are other places in Elster’s book – and to a lesser extent Cohen’s – where the issue of class consciousness is centrally discussed. This is not folded into the *definition* of class, but both writers have arguments about how the lived experiences, interdependencies, and interests of actors contribute to forming solidarities and actions.]** Cohen tries to remain as loyal as possible to Marx in his definition of “a person’s class” as “established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations” (p. 73). This structural conception of class completely ignores the issue of what drives (or should drive) the individuals who are objectively and externally assigned class membership to act as a collective. Elster, for his part, although he maintains that “this event [when the individuals in classes turn into collective actors] should not be made part of the definition of class,” (p. 343) partially addresses the issue of collective group in his definition of class as “a group of people who by virtue of what they possess are compelled to engage in the same activities if they want to make the best use of their endowments” (p. 331). This is an elegant way of integrating (certain extents of) the four categories he used to explain class: property, exploitation, market behavior, and power (the first and third to a

greater degree than the second and fourth elements). However the use of “compelled” to indicate the motor that binds individuals together to act collectively alongside “if they want” leaves too much space for subjective decision on the part of the individual. **[EOW: This form of Elster’s argument is meant to provide a firm foundation for a definition of what other people call “objective interests” – these are the interests actors would hold given their endowments (i.e. their location within the ownership relations in Cohen’s terms) if they try to optimize the economic returns on the use of those endowments. This is not a way of talking about how they would form collective actions to transform the rules of the game within which they use their endowments. This is mainly just a way of talking about how a class location determines opportunities for making money for people. A capitalist with a vast fortune *could* go to work in a factory for wages, but Elster says this would not make that person a proletarian because he/she is not optimizing the use of endowments.]**

If we accept the battle-language used by Marx, then the best way to integrate the fact that “a common enemy galvanizes solidarity” (p. 337) as a motive for collective action into the definition of class is to build on Elster’s definition: a possible, not yet fully formulated definition of class might be “a group of people who experience a similar and constant threat to their possessions that **forces** them to engage in the **same activities** to secure and improve their endowments.” **[EOW: I think a tricky issue here is whether we believe that this applies equally well to *collective actions* as to *individual strategies*. The “modal definition” of classes Elster offers applies strictly to *individual choices* that do not themselves require coordination with others nor which face various kinds of collective action dilemmas. I think when some Marxists claim not merely that socialism is in the interests of workers, but that *revolution* is in their interests – i.e. joining together to overthrow capitalism – they are making a move of the sort you suggest. The complexity of collective choice, however, makes this more problematic, I think.]** In this definition, the “threat” can express power relations between class members (although threats sometimes exist amongst members of the same class as well) and the violent aspect of market behavior. This threat is not only an expression of the potential of exploitation of the class members, it also gives a place to the necessary solidarity that serves as a motive for them to engage in collective activity against a shared enemy.

16. Sarbani Chakraborty

“The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority” (Communist Manifesto; p. 45).

“In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will [...]” (Marx, as cited in Cohen, p. 28).

On the one hand Marx is arguing for a *self-conscious* movement *in future*, and yet the same people who are to carry on the futuristic movement are at *present* in relations of production that are not of their will. How do we deal with this contradictory notion of

agency? **[EOW: This is not inherently contradictory. The second quote only says that people into relations that are independent of their will, not that everything that they do, once in those relations, is independent of their will. One the things you can do in such relations is struggle to transform them if you are willing to enter some other kind of relations – a collective movement – which is not independent of your will..]**

There seems to be an assumption of an inherently and naturally present agency (as understood here as a property of agents to /cause /an event by some action/intervention/voice) with respect to particular classes, which may remain dormant at a particular time and can be activated at some other point. When activated change will be brought about in (terms of the current prevalent word) mobility or in the conditions of a class. If proletarians have agency, why then are they in relations, independent of their will? **[EOW: As a general sociological proposition I would say that agency always presupposes existing in relations that are independent of the will of te agent: you exist in a world not of your making, and this is a necessary condition to survive as a social being, but this does not block the possibility of acting on those relations.]** Do we need to question the idea of agency as natural and given and more importantly as a category of direction-bound action? The fact of not ‘acting’ toward self-fulfillment, realization of capabilities or change may itself constitute a form of agency. Also, when we discuss agency, we talk about it with respect to particular purpose or agenda. Humans act and (do not) act in their every day lives over various issues. But agency seems to ignore such a comprehensive view. Class and agency seem to be used interchangeably in the sense that one’s actions (past and present) induce or keep the possibilities of that induction of her/him into a class, irrespective of his/her self-identification with that class. **[EOW: I couldnt quite understand this last statement.]**

If agency is currently dormant, how can a revolutionary change/break be brought about without any current intervention/action for any futuristic purpose? Also, if the relations are indispensable, how and at what point do the possibilities of dispensability of relations occur, without a continual work (thereby taking the risk of losing work) on the current conditions of production? Indispensability, which may be an important determinant of exploitation, however seems to require certain ‘action’ that would render the current relations as dispensable.

But the issue of agency and class need to be examined closely as too often and through history, poor (or often victims of systemic discriminations) have been conveniently blamed for their predicament in the name of agency and their supposed non-action thereby blocking the way to their own ‘mobility’. There often seems to be a neglect of the extra-economic coercions. **[EOW: I think what is in play here are different kinds of agency, some of which are always possible, some of which are only episodically possible. Ordinary mundane human activity involves agency in the sense of conscious meaningful action involving choice, intention, anticipation of the future, etc. This can be considered agency within a given set of rules of the game – agency over the “plays in the game.” Then there are periodically collectively organized agency which tries to transform the rules of the game under which ordinary agency takes place. And finally there is what might be called revolutionary agency which tries to change the game itself, not just its rules. That is rare, and rarely successful**

in its ambitions. All of these forms of agency occur within relations not of ones choosing, but again to exist in a relation not of ones choosing is not to also claim that those relations dictate everything that one chooses, thus negating all agency.]