

**SOCIOLOGY 929**  
**Reading Interrogations, session 4**  
**September 26, 2006**  
**The Marxist Tradition III:**  
**Resnick & Wolfe's Post-structuralist "class processes" approach**

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**1. Michael Callaghan Pisapia**

In contrast to Erik Olin Wright's structural theory of class, Resnick and Wolff offer a process theory of class, in which class figures as one 'entry-point' in the exploratory project of uncovering "overdetermined" social reality. They hold that different theories of class turn on alternative entry-point concepts: property, power, consciousness or surplus labor. Whereas Wright's theory of class is a composite of property-power theories, they offer a theory of class that depends on the concept of surplus labor. Surplus labor is the labor done in excess of the labor needed keep laborers alive. The theory of surplus labor also stresses the distinction between fundamental classes, the key appropriators and producers, and subsumed classes, defined by the process of distributing the surplus labor value. Their argument is that which theory of class the social scientist employs has political consequences. My first question is how theorizing about managers, for example, differs across Wright's and Resnick and Wolff's analyses? Do the various entry-points into discussing the economic dimension of social life lead us to understand differently **how a manager is positioned**? If so, how? **[EOW: One of thinking about the answer to this question is to ask: what sets of positions are seen as sharing a common relation to class processes – fundamental and subsumed? Both Resnick & Wolfe and I see managers as distinct from workers, but who do each of see as being like managers? What is the pivotal characteristic of managers that enables us to locate them with respect to "class processes"? and what other sorts of positions share that attribute?]**

My second question relates to their point about overdetermination. Resnick and Wolff seem to have several aims in stressing overdetermination. First, I think it is supposed to free up agents from structures, although it does this in an odd way. The theory of agency turns not on a negative conception of liberty, in which agents are more free because they are subject to fewer social forces; it turns instead on a positive concept – agents are more free precisely because they are determined by many social forces, and not simply one grand economic force – because there are many dimensions of their identities instead of one central dimension, there are more possibilities for who they may become. Who they may become takes the form, I guess, of a creative re-alignment and of those several dimensions. **[EOW: You are making a nice formulation here. I am not sure if this is exactly what R&W would say, but it is an interesting point: multiple complex determinations open (possibly) more space for underdetermination. That is, the claim that agency involves "creative realignment" by an agent implies that the identities, strategies and choices of agents are underdetermined by social processes (i.e. they cannot be fully explained by social determinations) so that there is room for what we might call "creativity" to play a role here. I am not sure that this is a logically necessary stand – it could be that even with some unifying singular determination there could still be room for this. But perhaps the possibility of contradictory determinations in this multiple-complex-determinations makes such space easier to**

**understand.]** So, there is a theory of human becoming involved in Resnick and Wolff's. They want to move passed economic factors to other dimensions of human being that connect up with the dimension of class. In my view, they seem confused about the relationship between theory and reality. Instead of taking theory to be a tool used to better understand reality, they take theory to be constitutive of reality. They take more seriously than Wright the argument that theories (as interpretations) actually create social reality.

**[EOW: there are two different claims you might be making here: 1) that theories matter because people in the world take them seriously, and, in acting on the basis of the theories they constitute reality in particular ways. Economic reductionism as a theory of how the world works is consequential because people come to believe this and act on its basis, thus marginalizing in their practices other bases for identities, etc. 2) Theories determine what the theorist can see and understand. They thus constitute the reality for the theorist. Different points of entry make certain things difficult or impossible to see. Which (if either of these) are you saying here?]** In other words, talking about 'proletarians' means emphasizing the aspects of reality that have gone into the definition of proletarian; and, insofar as people exclusively use that concept to understand their position in society, they limit the possibilities of who they may become. The argument is not only that a structural based theory of class constrains personal reality according to the structural constraints of the theory; the claim is also that the structural theory necessarily marginalizes and ignores many dimensions of social reality that ought to matter for the theorist. By stressing overdetermination and dispensing with a structural theory of class, Resnick and Wolff aim at opening up social possibilities that may have been eclipsed by the structural theory. But this is confusing: is the point of emphasizing dimensions other than economic exploitation to say that there are different ways of becoming happy than to diminish the form of effective control over the forces of production that appropriates of labor effort hold? That is certainly true! My second question is how other dimensions of social reality (race, gender, etc.) figure into structural theories of class; or if they are totally absent, or simply have to be added onto such structural theories as Resnick and Wolff seem to suggest. **[EOW: you are raising two different issues here: 1) the relationship between class, however it is defined, and nonclass processes/relations (gender, race), and 2) the relationship between the kind of class concept used by Resnick & Wolfe – singular class processes – and agency. I don't think these are exactly the same problem.]**

## 2. Ann Pikus

Resnick and Wolff frame class not in terms of capitalist versus proletariat but rather as two class processes: capitalist fundamental and subsumed. The fundamental class process is the appropriation of surplus value. In contrast, the subsumed class process involves providing for the specific conditions of the existence of the capitalist fundamental class process. **[EOW: I am not sure that everything that provides "conditions of existence" for fundamental class processes would be called a "subsumed class process" (although I may be misremembering their argument). I thought subsumed processes had to do with the disposition and distribution of the surplus appropriated in the fundamental processes. This indeed does contribute to the conditions of existence of the fundamental processes, but many other things do as well which may**

**not involve distributions of surplus.]** Therefore, capitalists, who are obviously in the fundamental group, also participate in the subsumed class process as distributors of surplus value. **[EOW: But are their “capitalists” who are exclusively in subsumed class processes?]** To perpetuate the appropriation of surplus value, they must distribute some of it to employees, including both those who directly produce surplus value for the employer (productive labor) and those whose role is more indirect such as managers, legal services, personnel (unproductive labor). **[EOW: The ordinary wages distributed to productive labor are NOT distributions of surplus value in R/W’s analysis. Some productive labor may also control access to skills in ways which give them access to some surplus, but in general workers are paid the value of their labor power, which does not contain any surplus.]** In addition, surplus value must be distributed to nonemployees such as moneylenders, merchants, shareholders, and landlords as well.

For me, the theory of the subsumed class helps to reconcile Marx’s view that capitalists do no labor with the reality that a business could not be successful (at least in a capitalist economy) without someone at or near the top expending some effort to invest money in the start-up, market the product, supervise employees, etc. **[EOW: What is confusing in RWs analysis here is that the human being who is a “capitalist” could indeed perform labor – and possibly even labor identical to the productive labor of workers. But in so doing they are not “personifications of capital” and thus acting in their role as “capitalist” – this means that they are in a different relation to the fundamental class processes when they do such labor.]** However, although this theory clarifies a business owner’s relation to the class processes, it seems to obscure distinctions among everyone else involved in the subsumed class process. Resnick and Wolff mention that it is important to explore the relations among the class processes with processes of power, property ownership, and consciousness but fail to do that with their theory. Are they arguing that these relationships should only be studied empirically? Also, they argue against **collapsing** differences in power, property ownership and consciousness into identities (p.20) but surely complex categorization schemes can have been developed that preserve the essence of these distinctions. **[EOW: What they are worried about is any view which claims that identities or interests or anything else can be read off of these “structural” properties. They reject in causal connection that has the form property X generates effect Y, because Y is always “overdetermined” by a myriad of complex determinations.]**

Secondly, can we flesh out what overdetermination means as used in the readings? At one point, Resnick and Wolff state: “In our reading, Marxian theory has a particular way of conceiving how these process [economic and noneconomic processes including natural and social processes] actually occur and interact in constituting society: overdetermination. The class process, like any and every particular social process, has no existence other than as the site of the converging influences exerted by all the non-class processes. All the other processes that combine to overdetermine it are its conditions of existence” (p.116). That is the closest I found in their reading to a definition but I still don’t really understand the concept. Does this simply mean that although people try to explain things via class process, in reality the influence of non-class processes controls? Or that one needs to account for both class and non-class processes at all times? **[EOW: Their concept of overdetermination is indeed murky. There are a variety of ways this can be understood – we should explore this in class.]**

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### 3. Charity Schmidt

Resnick and Wolff describe their definition of class: “Class is for us the concept of a particular social process. Marxian class analysis is then the theorization of the overdetermination of that social process, that is, its interaction with all the other processes that comprise its conditions of existence (A Marxian Theory of Classes, p. 111)” They also say that “class aspects interact with non-class aspects; power, property and consciousness interact with class. (The Diversity of Class Analyses, p. 20).” They use such descriptions of class to show how it is unnecessary and even incorrect to develop composite theories of class, preferring to stick with a singular view as determined by the production, appropriation and the distribution of surplus. **[EOW: I am not sure they ever say it is “incorrect” to have composite concepts or theories, since their argument is about “points of entry” to an analysis. They may feel that their point of entry provides the best political lens for looking at social processes, but I don’t think they would say that (for example) my theories are “incorrect” in and of themselves.]** Although Resnick and Wolff view class as one of many social processes which exist as subsets, meaning that none are more important than another, yet each is effected by the others (A Marxian Theory of Classes, p. 116), they continue to insist on the theoretical isolation of class from other social processes. **[EOW: I am not sure what you mean by “theoretical isolation”: They insist that every aspect of class processes are overdetermined by everything else, so how is this “isolation”?]**

If they recognize the complex nature of class in relation to other social processes, why their insistence of a singular definition of class? What is the explanatory potential of a theory of class if it does not reflect the interplay between Resnick and Wolff’s privileged concept of surplus and processes such as power, consciousness and property relations? Is their theory of subsumed classes, as determined by the relation to the distribution of already appropriated products or surplus labor, an attempt to integrate the roles of other social processes influencing (and being influenced by) class (A Marxian Theory of Classes, p. 118)? Is it not a composite theory, posing subsumed classes in addition to the fundamental classes, that attempts to integrate other social processes into the structure of class formation? **[EDOW: The theory may be composite, but the concept of class itself is not. I don’t think they are claiming that a composite concept would necessarily be inferior to a singular concept, although perhaps they would argue that singular concepts are better since composite concepts may imply more rigidity to the ways different elements get combined.]**

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### 4. Sarbani Chakraborty

In this reflection, I shall focus my attention briefly to some of the broader (and perhaps seemingly abstract) issues that contrast between Prof. Olin Wright's conceptualization of class with that of Resnick and Wolff's (R&W), which I think are important for discussions on 'class'. The first distinction between the authors seem to be that of their conceptualizations based on process (R&W's) versus that of mechanisms (EOW's). The process analysis of R&W allows the development of the concept of “overdetermination”, whereby history, context, continual change can be 'accounted' and a priori assumptions can

be discarded. Most importantly, according to me, a point of origin for analysis (as opposed to an 'entry-point') is disallowed. For mechanisms to operate, there seems to be an existence of that point of origin, a starting point from which some correlational aspect for 'stable' outcomes (as opposed to a continual change) can be explained. That may inadvertently generate some deterministic analysis of class, because of its probably intrinsic logic of stability, which in turn may be counter-productive to the class analysis itself. Mechanisms involve processes but it is not just a process. There needs to be a point of analysis X for the outcome Y to happen and which then needs to be explained. However, mechanisms do not preclude an iterative process of analysis but such analysis is rare in social sciences. Demands for empirical observations most often seem to make theories dependent on observations where observations are made just to prove respective theories. EOW himself rightly steers clear from this situation but his analysis may inadvertently fall prey to this trap. **[EOW: I am not completely sure that the ideas of process and mechanism are inherently in tension. And also I am not sure that the idea of mechanisms is inconsistent with “overdetermination” (or perhaps this depends upon precisely what one means by “over-determination”). To talk about a mechanism is to identify how something works and thus to analyze the *process* by which an effect is generated by the postulated mechanism. This effects can be viewed as *tendencies* since there are always other mechanisms at work in any situation which, because of complex interactions, can block the actual effect. To talk about a class process, in R/W's terms, is – in my terms – to identify the mechanisms through which surplus labor is produced and appropriated. How are these different?]**

R&W's papers also seem to bring out the problem of independent variables and the processes of interactions, intersections and transactions. R&W eloquently challenges conceptualization of class as an independent variable. Class an IV does not just have effects on dependent variables (they can be called non-class mechanisms, which may be autonomous but may not be so as well). So-called DVs may have effects on IV (i.e. Class). **[EOW to say X generates effects on Y is in no way inconsistent with saying Y generates effects on X. No one who talks about mechanisms rejects the idea of reciprocal effects in complex causal processes.]** Also, DVs can themselves interact with them in a way that produce outcomes which are entirely different from what the class as an IV can explain. More importantly, IVs in the social realm may themselves interact variously in various contexts. These complexities therefore push us toward analyses of affects, effects and probable causes. This therefore seems to bolster R&W's emphasis on looking at class as an adjective rather than a noun, as a process comprising of ideologies, subjecthoods/subjections, identities and that of an economic process embedded in wider societal processes. **[EOW: I think everything you have said – if I understand your argument – is consistent with saying that class identifies a set of mechanisms which, in the world, always interact with other mechanisms in generating the empirical observations we study. If all that is in play here are really interactive effects and reciprocal effects, then I do not see where the difference between mechanisms and processes lie. Postulating the existence of “Mechanisms” does not imply a commitment to an additive view of how causes work.]**

A critical comment of R&W with respect to EOW's understanding of “effort”, which we discussed briefly in the last class, is something which in my opinion warrants more



discussion. In my opinion the word effort needs to be more carefully deployed, that is because intention and conditions of production are intrinsic to the idea of effort. A labourer in a sweat-shop may put in effort to produce a product by expending certain amount of time, with the intention of producing a good, but it is not the effort measured in time that is valued but the amount/quantity and quality of product that s/he ultimately produces which counts and dependent on which is his/her wage. To explain further, I as a researcher may have all the intention and therefore expend my time to produce a research analysis according to my satisfactoral level of quality. But it is neither my time nor my effort and nor my intention of producing a research paper that counts. What may count is the product that is perceived as a 'product' by the institution. **[EOW: You are correct about this – that what matters to an employer of labor is the product – the amount of the product and its quality – not the effort that goes into making it. However, the claim of the labor theory of value is that on average in any economy the value of the products produced is a function of the amount of abstract labor time that they embody, and this is labor time expended at a socially average level of intensity, which is basically a measure of “effort” in an abstract sense. If that effort produces inferior products (i.e. below the socially-required quality to be sold on the market) than that effort is wasted from the point of view of generating value.]**

This also brings to another observation (a contrast rather between R&W and EOW) – and that of the *purpose* of respective analyses of the authors. R&W seemed consciously focusing on the political changes as implications of their class analysis, an analysis to bring to fruition a political project of non-essentialism. EOW's analysis focuses both on theorization of class as well as on the policy implications of that analysis and empirical research for that very purpose. Reading of the idea of the mechanism of class structure of EOW as opposed to social formations within the theory of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus value and overdetermination of R&W is driving me to tentatively understand their purposes. Another extremely interesting aspect of both R&W's and Wright's analyses were their respective inclusion and exclusion of Foucault in their analyses of power.

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## 5. Elizabeth Wrigley-Field

Resnick and Wolff define their goal as being to provide a formulation of Marxist theory (which they see as very much in Marx's own writings) that avoids what they identify as two competing Marxist analyses. One is what they call the “essentialist” position that sees the “big picture” as being two antagonistic classes, a picture that can be complicated by the recognition of various alternative influences (economic and non-), but that “in the final analysis” is most fundamental. **[EOW: What precisely is the accusation of “essentialism”? Is essentialism a reductionist claim about some single cause being ultimately determinant of empirically observable phenomena (or something like that)? Or is it a claim about the inherent causal powers of some postulated mechanism without the additional claim that this mechanism always generates the effects identified with it? I am anti-essentialist in the first sense, but not the second.]** The other is a view in which everything influences everything else and class has no special explanatory or theoretical status. **[EOW: They do not claim, I think, that class has no**

special theoretical status. It is the “entry point” which is a “special” theoretical status. The justification for that entry point is not a claim about class having explanatory primacy, but rather (I think) the political purposes for which the theory is being developed. I am also not certain that while they affirm “everything causes everything” (in the form of the claim “everything is a condition of existence for everything else”) I think they also believe that not every connection is relevant for every analysis. Or at least this is what I think they say.] Moreover, they argue that the empirical limitations of the first have led people unwittingly into the second, as they retain a “narrow” view of what class is and are forced to accommodate empirical reality only by limiting the applicability of class-based explanations.

My main critique of their theory is that I don’t think it really avoids the second problem they identify, **of making everything equally important.** [EOW: This is indeed very confusing. There are several possible interpretations: 1) everything is equally important in an a priori sense: you cannot say one process is more important than another in general, only with respect to a specific investigation; 2) if a system has multiple “conditions of existence” and each of these conditions of existence is *required* by all of the others, than none is more important in a meaningful sense. It is like saying which is more important for human life, water or air. If overdetermination means multiple necessary conditions, then all are indeed necessary. 3) some other interpretation?] This gives their work, on my reading, a very strange quality of combining an attempt to draw out technical concepts and categories *from Marx’s own work* – they clearly define part of their project as exegetical in a way that, say, Wright doesn’t – while also giving up the core explanatory tasks that Marx’s theory was meant to fulfill. Perhaps I’m misunderstanding them (actually this seems pretty likely since the view I’m ascribing to them is so puzzling), but I don’t understand, on the theory they lay out, what is explanatorily distinct about what they call their “class processes” from anything else in the “social totality.” I’m fundamentally unconvinced by their “anti-essentialist” reading of Marx, and I think it unjustly straw-mans the “two-class picture.”

## 6. Joe Ferrare

Before I interrogate this week’s readings, I find it necessary to briefly outline the authors’ claims. This will help me write a more coherent critique, and will hopefully make the reading of this critique a bit more coherent as well.

Resnick and Wolff propose a singular notion of class based on the idea of *surplus*, “its production, appropriation, and distribution,” and one that “locates individuals and groups in relation to those three aspects of the economy,” (2003:19). The authors juxtapose their singular notion of class with composite notions of class, though they fall short of arguing one is necessarily superior to the other. According to Resnick and Wolff, class processes can be broken down into two sub-processes: Fundamental and Subsumed. *Fundamental* class processes refer to the production of surplus by one class for another, whereas *Subsumed* class processes refer to the subsequent distribution of the already appropriated surplus to other classes.

Fundamental and Subsumed class processes are not mutually exclusive; one process implies the existence of the other. For example, a capitalist occupies a specific location within each of these processes: within the fundamental class process they

appropriate surplus labor produced by (productive) workers, and in the subsumed class process they subsequently distribute that surplus. In order to sustain their existence as capitalists both processes must occur. Workers, too, occupy a specific location within each of these processes: within the fundamental class process productive workers produce surplus, and in the subsumed class process non-productive workers make “possible the receipt of distributed shares of that surplus value...” (Resnick and Wolff, 1989:134).

Such a conception of class is too narrow and fails to capture the complexities of present day capitalist relations. Resnick and Wolff’s distinction between productive and non-productive workers assumes that there are no shared objective interests between the two. **[EOW: Do they ever use the term “interests” or “objective interests” in the analysis? I think they would reject that formulation of the problem.]** Their distinction brings to light the limitation of relying solely on surplus value for a notion of class. For example, according to their conception, the shared objective interests between, say, a non-skilled worker and a skilled worker exist only when both produce surplus value. Yet if one produces surplus value (thus part of the fundamental class process) and the other does not (subsumed class process), but both workers are subjected to similar forms of domination in the workplace, can it not be stated that they share a set of objective interests (i.e. more authority over their labor or improved working conditions)? **[I think that R/W would describe authority as a nonclass process, and indeed this might be important for forging solidarities between the people in these two position in class the class processes, but this would not necessarily mean that their position in these processes should be treated as the same.]**

As another example, consider a worker who produces surplus value, and a manager who produces no surplus value and is actively involved in supervising the productive worker to maximize the surplus value created by that worker. In a way, the manager is acting as a proxy capitalist in that he/she is a necessary component of the surplus extraction. In this sense, the worker and the manager share antagonistic objective interests. However, with respect to their relation to the means of production, both the worker and the manager share a similar set of objective interests (i.e. they do not own any means of production). It is examples such as these that show the usefulness of Wright’s contradictory class locations within the class structure. Unfortunately, the authors do not offer a coherent critique of EOW’s contradictory class locations, other than to say his concept is essentialist, and more or less Weberian in that it places power at the fore and property and income as secondary considerations.

Resnick and Wolff, while arguing for an “anti-essentialist” notion of class, simultaneously promote a notion that reduces class to the processes of surplus value—its production, appropriation, and distribution. In doing so, they diminish the explanatory power of class by offering no clear way to empirically examine the concept. Instead, their approach seems to limit class analysis to theoretical considerations. While theoretical understandings are an essential part of class analysis, divorcing them from empirical investigation would have disastrous consequences. **[EOW: You are correct that they create a thinner concept of class – or class process – but this does not inherently mean that the explanatory power of the theory within which this concept is used is diminished, particularly since they have no objection to combining the analysis of class processes with various kinds of nonclass processes. The fact that managers dominate workers can still be part of their analysis, it just would not be viewed as a feature of the class process that characterizes managers position within social**



processes. Still, the issues you raise are good ones: does the productive/unproductive distinction give you any explanatory capacity around the practices of agents?]

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## 7. Rahul Mahajan

### Questions

1. (related to point 1) What use is the concept of overdetermination?

2. (related to points 2 and 3) Why the constant focus on production as **primary**? [EOW R/W emphatically do NOT regard production as “primary” – nothing has primacy. Class processes include the production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor/value/products. There is nothing primary about the point of production here. The only point about production is that the surplus must be produced before it can be appropriated, but not that the moment of production is “more important” than the other two. It is of course very misleading for them to call the production and appropriation of surplus “fundamental” and the other process “subsumed”, but they provide some justification for this.] There is simply no coherent way to try to define exploitation as related only to bilateral transfers at the site of production. Easy thought experiments (some of which I have mentioned in class) will show the incoherence. How can one keep coming back to this entirely production-centered notion of exploitation? Doesn't it make much more sense to take reproduction as the primary underlying necessity and then look at the processes it entails? [EOW: Their language is “conditions of existence” rather than production/reproduction. All of these processes and subprocesses constitute conditions of existence for all of the others: production is a condition of existence for distribution and vice versa.] If the idea is somehow that a narrow bilateral production-based notion of exploitation is necessary to understand political dynamics, can one honestly say that the existence of WalMart or the price of gasoline is irrelevant to political dynamics or that it is entirely a non-class issue? The IMF helped overthrow Suharto by forcing the government to dramatically raise the price of fuel. This kind of purely economic process (which is, according to some Marxist conceptions, neither fundamental nor class-based) has a hell of a lot to do with revolutions in the modern era – supposedly the kind of thing a Marxist class analysis should be concerned with.

1. **Overdetermination** – This word annoys me every time I see it in the Marxist or Marxist-influenced literature. As far as I can tell, it is used with two very distinct (and even somewhat opposed) meanings:

- If one process or fact has overwhelming significance for a given phenomenon, it “overdetermines” the phenomenon. I.e., “the process of state formation in the Third World has been overdetermined by imperialism.”
- If there are many powerful processes, all involved in a given phenomenon, we say that the totality of processes “overdetermines” the phenomenon. This is the way Resnick and Wolff use it. [EOW: Sometimes R/W seem to be using the term just to be complexly-multiply determined. But sometimes they seem to suggest something a little different, when they use the formulation of “everything being a condition of existence for everything else” – this seems more like a notion of a functionally integrated system within which there are many

**conditions of existence none of which can be assigned any greater importance than others.**

- **Another meaning of overdetermination = redundant causes: multiple sufficient causes for something. Thus underdetermination means insufficient causes, determination (as in “determined”) means necessary and sufficient causes, and over-determined means, surplus causes. A revolution, for example, would be *social structurally* under-determined if it occurs only when an earthquake destroys the army. This just means that the social conditions were not sufficient by themselves to explain the revolution.]**

As I understand Althusser’s formulation (borrowing from Resnick and Wolff’s characterization), the basic point is that any social phenomenon has so many different facts and processes as inputs into it that it would be quite possible to construct a story whereby some subset of those processes (or just one for the great uncausal theorists) actually determine the whole thing, while someone else could do the same with a different subset. This is great if the purpose is being able to write many different books about a phenomenon, but not so great for actually understanding things.

This seems like a really obvious point. Does one then constantly throw around the idea that something is “overdetermined” in order to tell people to be sure they’re looking at all the possible factors, the way some admonish people to be “dialectical” when they merely mean that one should be nuanced? What exactly is gained by the promiscuous use of the concept, especially when there’s such lack of clarity about its meaning?

As an aside, to a physicist or mathematician, the word seems ridiculous. If you have a system and you impose so few conditions that the solution is not uniquely determined, you say the system is underdetermined. If you impose just enough conditions that it’s uniquely determined, then the system is determined. If you impose too many conditions or conditions that are mutually incompatible so that no solution exists, it’s overdetermined. Since history did actually happen, there’s no phenomenon that is overdetermined in that sense. **[But there can be in the surplus determination sense: a strike occurs because working conditions were bad, wages were low, the boss was an asshole, and a skilled agitator came to town. You take away any one of those causes, and you would still get the strike; you take away any two and you won’t. The strike was overdetermined.]**

2. Caveats about the annoying use of language aside, even though I don’t quite agree with Resnick and Wolff, I was pleasantly surprised to find their formulation understandable, lucid, and, I think, very valuable.

Interestingly, given their post-structuralism and emphasis on the multiplicity of locations of conflict, they go back to Marx in a much more hard-core way than Wright or Roemer, and even, I would argue, more than Cohen and Elster. And their final product, I think, is much more true to what Marx would have actually meant if he had formulated things coherently and consistently, than any of those others – which is not the same as saying that it’s better.

They divide economic processes into class and non-class processes. Class processes are divided into fundamental and subsumed, and non-class processes into those which involve money transfer and those that don't.

They privilege production as the fundamental economic processes and all else – distribution and all those processes, like supervision or education, that are necessary to enable production but aren't actually production. Furthermore, only labor that is done for a capitalist and directly involves production of goods – i.e., is involved in what they call the fundamental class process in capitalism – is considered productive labor; all else is unproductive. If your job is to carry water so that the factory workers can keep working all day and don't die of thirst, you are an unproductive worker. **[EOW: This isn't so obvious: If you carry water to keep the machine from overheating you are productive, but if you bring the water so that the workers don't overheat you are unproductive? The labor actually embodied in the product of the factor contains the labor of cooling the machines so they don't break down, so why doesn't it include the other? And what possible explanatory use would this have?]** If you are a self-employed artisan and sell your crafts on the market, again, you are unproductive.

Oddly, this seeming privileging of production over all else enables them to distance themselves from narrowly production-centered notions of exploitation (like Wright's). They go about it pretty much backwards from the way I would. I would consider wages and profits as fixed and then derive surplus extraction through adding various correction terms; they consider the value of labor-power and the surplus value as fixed and derive wages and profits through adding correction terms. The approaches are mathematically equivalent, but they involve rather different terminology.

So anyway for them wages are the sum of the value of labor-power (which embodies the fundamental class process) **[EOW: What does this really mean? The value of labor power is the historically and morally determined cost of reproducing the labor power used in the fundamental class process, but what does it mean to say that it "embodies the fundamental class process"?)** plus correction terms that may come from various subsumed class processes plus (in the case of unproductive workers) a correction from a non-class process. Similarly with profits.

This once again (in my view correctly) takes into account the embedding of a given productive unit in an economy, mediated through distribution and other subsumed class and even non-class processes. It also allows, unlike Wright's formulation, a precise mathematical definition of exploitation in quantitative terms, which would be exactly the definition I've been advocating, which adds up the **net surplus in each economic exchange for any given person** **[EOW: They would reject this since for them, surplus does not in any way come from exchange: it can be distributed through exchange but it does not come from exchange.]** (if I have to spend the wages of two hours of labor time to buy something that cost 20 hours of Chinese labor, I'm gaining surplus). Resnick and Wolff might not call it exploitation, but that would be merely a terminological difference, not a mathematical one. Of course, an actual calculation of exploitation is hard to operationalize because we're talking about an unmeasurable standard, which also has serious definitional questions surrounding it (socially necessary labor time), but at least there is a definition to

operationalize. There's no way to try to even think about empirically measuring the degree of Wrightian exploitation. **[There are two rather different things in play here. I am prepared to say that an unproductive worker is still exploited and still faces the same pressures for work intensification as a productive worker: there is still a meaningful sense in which their labor effort – the abstract labor time they are performing – is being appropriated by their employers, regardless of whether or not they are producing a surplus product in R/W sense. In a surplus product accounting sense, the exploitation of unproductive labor enables the capitalist who employs them to grab more of the total social surplus product than would otherwise be the case. When we shift attention to the surplus product – and thus to the productive labor part of the phenomenon -- my “appropriation of effort” is not really different from appropriating the “abstract labor time” in the surplus product. As far as I can tell the only thing that really differs here is that in a surplus product framework, you cannot talk about unproductive workers being exploited because no product is appropriated from them, whereas in my terms you can. I use the effort-appropriation framework because I think a truck driver in a goods producing factory and a truck driver in retail trade are in the same class situation, have the same interests, etc.]**

3. I like Resnick and Wolff's mathematical structuring of economic processes but not their terminology. I see no reason conceptually to consider production as fundamental and other processes that are equally necessary to capitalism or any other system as not fundamental. A focus on reproduction rather than production seems more profound and more analytically coherent. Reproduction of capitalism requires distribution, supervisory processes, education, certain government functions, etc. Production no more distinctively characterizes capitalism than these other features; indeed, one could argue that market distribution is more fundamentally linked to and constitutive of capitalism (there are also counter-arguments). Other systems, including socialism, will have all of these processes, although, one hopes, in highly different forms.

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## 8. You-Geon Leen

In the Resnick and Wolff's framework (1987), the focus on the distinction between the production and appropriation of surplus labor and the distribution of the fruits of that surplus labor seems to be quite interesting in that it serves as a basis of the distinction between their elaborated concepts: 'the fundamental class processes' and 'the subsumed class processes' (p.131). They also emphasize 'the nonclass processes' as 'the conditions of existence' of the class process, which may be political, economic, cultural, or natural. Furthermore, the concept of 'overdetermination' of all these process implies that all phenomena have multiple causes, so that "all aspects of society are approached as distinct processes such that each is overdetermined by all others (p. 109)." In this vein, with a notion that "class is for us the concept of a particular social process", they are unwilling to use the term 'class' as a noun, rather prefer to use it as an adjective because individuals are usually in multiple class processes, so that they seem to be reluctant to designate a particular group of people as a class. This kind of framework seems to be helpful for explaining complexities of contemporary society in class processes in that individuals usually participate in involved social processes in terms of production, distribution, and

exchange of value (or surplus value). However, this seems to have a difficulty of explaining class self-consciousness and class struggle. If people do not or cannot recognize themselves as a particular class, and if they are in multiple class processes, how can they obtain their class self-consciousness and antagonism against other class? With a Marx' famous notion that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, how can they explain class struggle and furthermore its consequence, social change? **[EOW: One of the central themes in the R/W framework is that you cannot explain any empirical outcome from any specific process – empirical patterns are the result of the interactions among all of these processes. So to study them, you have to see how these different processes concretely interact rather than derive "consciousness" for any one.]**

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## 9. Adam Slez

Resnick and Wolff reject the determinism of essentialist notions of class, arguing instead that in general, class is "a particular social process," and that in particular, "Marxian class analysis is...the theorization of the overdetermination of that social process, that is, its interaction with all the other processes that comprise its conditions of existence" (Resnick and Wolff 1987: 111). The notion of overdetermination is defined in terms of the idea that "each identity or event can be understood as constituted by the entire complex of natural, social, economic, cultural, political, and other processes that comprise its conditions of existence" (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000: 7). In adopting the premise of overdetermination, Resnick and Wolff explicitly refuse to grant class causal primacy on the grounds that class is neither given nor known, noting that "what is given...is something *to be* known" (Gibson-Graham et al. 2000: 7). According to Resnick and Wolff, classes are "subdivisions among people according to the particular positions they occupy in the class process" (Resnick and Wolff 1987: 117). With respect to class processes, Resnick and Wolff are fundamentally concerned with the processes by which surplus labor is produced, appropriated, and distributed. It is on this basis that they distinguish their approach from alternative conceptualizations of Marxian class analysis (see Resnick and Wolff 2003).

While Resnick and Wolff (2003) explicitly draw a distinction between their work and that of Wright, it is worth noting the basic similarity between their argument that "individuals within a social formation usually occupy multiple, different class positions" (Resnick and Wolff 1987: 124), and Wright's notion of "contradictory class locations" (Wright 1985). More generally, both Resnick and Wolff and Wright set out to resolve the problems associated with the traditional two-class model. Resnick and Wolff appear to differ from Wright in their willingness to attribute locational multiplicity across the class spectrum. As Wright (1985) notes, he developed the notion contradictory class locations specifically for the purpose of dealing with the problem of the middle class(es). Touching on this issue, part of Resnick and Wolff's (2003: 22) critique seems to point to Wright's failure to recognize that capitalists can also occupy multiple class locations. I am not certain that Wright would deny the possibility that capitalists can fact occupy multiple class locations so much as he would argue that the locations that they occupy are not of an inherently contradictory nature. **[EOW: But how does R/W's notion of the multiple**



**class location of a capitalist help explain anything? For them the fact that capitalists are involved in the appropriation of surplus and the distribution of surplus means that they are in multiple class positions. Does this help explain anything? What? That is a very different idea from contradictory class locations.]**

On a final note, while I like Resnick and Wolff's willingness to reject the assumption of class as a given, and think that their distinction between the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor is analytically useful, I find the notion of class processes to be exceptionally vague. More specifically, I would argue that Resnick and Wolff fail to specify the mechanisms by which individual positions in class processes potentially translate into the existence of classes. **[They would deny the question itself: class processes do not contain mechanisms that "potentially translate" into collective actors – there is no such translation process in their framework, for to see one would be to claim that there was some privileged causal connection between class process and class formation, which there is not (for them). Note the side comment in their piece where they criticized me for claiming that class structures imposed "limits" on class formations and class struggles. Such a claim – they argued – implied a reintroduction of essentialism since I was positing that limiting class formation was an essence of class structure (or, equivalently I think, that one of the essential properties of class structures was the property of imposing limits on class formations). They reject such statements, and thus would reject the question you pose.]** To use their terms, what is the rule by which individual positions in class processes are translated into subdivisions? Even more problematic is their tendency to describe class processes as if they were independent from individual patterns of action. **[EWO: remember – individuals are "personifications" of processes. I am not sure that agency has anything to do with this. They reject entirely the structure/agency framework of analysis.]** It is unclear how an argument based on the assumption that class processes are autonomous is any less deterministic than one framed in terms of class structure. While the notion of class processes is arguably more dynamic than the idea of class structure, the potential benefits of the former concept, as defined by Resnick and Wolff, are minimized due to their failure to acknowledge the relationship between patterns of individual action and the dynamics of the process in question.

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## 10. Adrienne Pagac

Studying the concept of class (whether treating it as an adjective or a noun) is much like looking through a lens of a camera—depending upon the area observed as seen through the viewfinder, one might note specific phenomena or draw certain conclusions about 'reality'. If the focus of that lens is either narrowed or enlarged, the observed 'reality' may, in fact, change. This lengthy analogy summarizes one of the aims of the Resnick and Wolff readings. Very generally, the conceptualization of class will help to highlight certain relationships/aspects of individuals with one another while marginalizing others. For Resnick and Wolff, it is important to recognize how the 'entry point concept[s] of class' will have social and political consequences. Perhaps this point is only important if one views Marxian theory as a way of devising a strategy to promote and realize social change rather than an analytical tool alone.

In the readings, Resnick and Wolff's entry point of choice involves the theory of surplus value—its production, appropriation and distribution. Participation in class processes brings about this value (though they are not the only processes). Defining class concepts as deriving from this process is a very compelling one, primarily because it seems to be able to explain the locations of individuals/groups that we have already seen are problematic: the middle classes, CEOs, etc. **[EOW: but their analysis also results in treating managers and janitors and typists as all being unproductive laborers in subsumed class processes. Does this clarify what we want a class concept to clarify?]** Moreover, they seem to be able to support their conclusions from Marx himself. But, can this really account for systems or modes of production that are not capitalist? They say they do—fundamental and subsumed class processes do not have to be specifically capitalist—in the feudal fundamental class process, the lord appropriates a share of the crops grown by his peasant (the direct producer) which he can then distribute to his knights (subsumed class process) who exist in order to assure the lord gets his share (they are one of the lord's conditions of existence). But, how exactly is *surplus* value generated in this instance? **[Surplus value is not generated in feudalism. Surplus value is a property of appropriation only in capitalism. Surplus labor is appropriated, but it does not take the form of value.]** The crops are worth no more to the lord once he has appropriated them than they were before...unless he then takes them to market to sell (in which case isn't that a capitalist fundamental class process?). Doesn't Marxian theory also require that it can 'explain' the variety of economic processes throughout history?

Resnick and Wolff's examination of productive and unproductive labor as elaborated by Marx (and as a facet of their surplus value entry point) also allows for the inclusion of the problematic categories of people above-mentioned. But, it seems to me that the definitions of productive and unproductive labor limit the generation of surplus value to only that category of productive labor (that which produces a good to sell). If generating surplus value means having more value at the end of the process than what was initially put in, how is that not surplus (even if a good/commodity is not the end result)? For example, while working at a law firm, I earned so much money per day as a salaried employee. The firm charged the client so much money per hour that I spent working on their case; it so happens that the money I was paid per day for my work product was equivalent to one hour of my time billed to the client—meaning, the firm therefore earned additional value based on my work for the remaining six to ten hours left of my working day. How is this not conceptualized as surplus value? **[EPW: The idea here is that the law firm is a recipient of distribution of surplus value that is generated in the productive segment of capitalism. You didn't produce any surplus value whatsoever (alas), but you did enable your bosses to grab some of the distributed surplus value. The harder you work, the lower you are paid, the more they charge, etc. the more surplus value they can grab, but it is surplus value already appropriated by capitalists who employ productive labor.]** Would Resnick and Wolff see this as merely commodity exchange? Granted, I suppose working at a law firm would fall under the subsumed class process because firms exist to adjudicate suits between capitalist firms (at least ours did) and therefore operate as a condition of existence for fundamental class processes of capital. But, according to Resnick and Wolff, individuals/groups can participate in more than one process...

Some last closing remarks: If Resnick and Wolff's treatment of the concept of class is post-structuralist, does this necessarily mean that they do not recognize/believe that

processes are shaped or limited (I won't say determined) by current systems (natural, social, economic, political, etc.). I would call these systems 'structures'—entities that enable individuals/groups (actors) to select from a 'menu of options' that is available to them as a result of their location in that structure. Is 'exploitation' understood in their entry point of theory of surplus value as a means of understanding class or do they not think it important? Stupid question: what is constant capital? **[EOW: NOT a stupid question; just a question. Constant capital is Marxist lingo for means of production, raw material, etc. It is contrasted to "Variable capital" which is capital used to purchase labor power. Variable capital is "variable" because it is this form of capital which generates increases in the value of output when the labor power purchased with it is set in motion – surplus value. The constant capital simply transfers its value to the final product, but creates no new value.]**

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## 11. Hsing-Mei Pan

In the article, a Marxian theory of classes, the concept of class is defined as a process in which surplus value is produced, appropriated, and distributed. The surplus value indicates the difference between the value of a commodity and a wage paid to the worker for the production of the commodity. In other words, surplus value is created by laborers who are directly involved in commodity production. In fact, it seems that there exist **complicated mechanisms** outside the process of direct commodity production through which a value of a commodity is determined. So how can we say that surplus value is merely from labor involved in direct production (in fundamental class process)? It seems that the creation of surplus value also occurs in subsumed class process. So is it appropriate to categorize some labor as productive labor and some as unproductive labor since the creation of surplus value occurs in different forms of labor? In short, is the division between fundamental and subsumed class process presented in the article appropriate? **[EOW: What you are suggesting here is that the labor theory of value is unsatisfactory, and this they would deny. But note: they are adopting the labor theory of value as a way of characterizing the relationship between labor and the surplus product in capitalism, not as an "essentialist theory of value" (which they would reject). Only activities which produce products can produce surplus products, so labor outside of product-production is necessarily nonproductive in the sense they are using these terms.]**

Resnick and Wolff focus on the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value to sketch "class" as a social process. They argue that there exist conditions of the existence of fundamental class process in a society, and these conditions cannot be considered as part of class process. But, in my opinion, there are still some other relevance between the fundamental and subsumed class processes and the conditions that make the two class processes possible. For example, the appropriation and distribution of surplus value is somewhat determined by owners of the means of production. So is it appropriate to ignore the effect of ownership of property on the production and appropriation of surplus value? **[EOW: They don't argue that property relationships should be ignored. Their point is just that this constitutes one of a variety of processes that constitute "conditions of existence of class processes" and that none of these should be built into the concept of class processes itself.]**

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## 12. Fabian Pfeffer

I believe that Reskin&Wolff's concept of class processes does not provide a comfortable point of departure for (empirical) sociological analysis. At the basis of the problem is the disposal of the understanding of class as a 'noun' (1987: 161). Such neglect of social structure as the fundamental aim of explanation (2000: 11), I think, evades the central challenge that any modern Marxist class concept has to face: the conciliation of the 'middle class problem' with Marxist theory. R&W's dismissal of such enterprise as 'empiricist' (2003: 16) seems cheap. The value of their concept of class cannot be established by its potential for reinterpreting other concepts (e.g. wages and profits) alone but ultimately also needs to face empirical validation. **[EOW: One could argue, of course, that while any class concept may need to face empirical validation, their concept does not need to face the specific empirical validation you invoke because they are not trying to explain or characterize the things you think class should explain. Mind you, I am not entirely clear on what they want to use the concept for; this remains obscure to me.]**

The charge against R&W cannot be that they do not provide a clear class map but that their approach does not offer adequate tools for understanding the middle class location of the great majority of people. Accepting their 'point-of-entry' via the concept of surplus value, the idea of subsumed class processes seems attractive at first sight. Capitalists are forced to share the extracted surplus value. But, strikingly, most of R&W's attention goes to the redistribution towards capitalists' accomplices (land owners, creditors, etc.) rather than their counter-players: the 'subsumed classes within the industrial capitalist enterprise'. This latter process of "vertical" redistribution is not fleshed out well - corresponding to their evasion of the middle class problem. Why do capitalists share the surplus (divide and conquer? principal/agent or loyalty rent?). Isn't it conceivable that they would also share some of it with productive laborers, i.e. surplus-producers? **[They acknowledge this – this is their  $w^2$  component in the wage, the component productive laborers can get when they restrict access to their labor. That is indeed redistributed surplus, so it constitutes a subsumed class position for those productive workers.]** Their focus on high-level corporate managers (and misrepresentation of EOW's scheme as having such focus) is revealing in this regard. And, finally, what is the basis for a conflict perspective of this process? It might just be my unfamiliarity with Althusser's work, but how does 'overdetermination of class positions' implicate their contradictory character (1987: 122, 159)?

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## 13. Joge Sola

First of all, I must warn that I didn't like so much these three readings. I say it because it's possible that I haven't understood the authors' arguments or, at least, some important details, and therefore, my interrogations are due to some misunderstanding. Anyway, I have these interrogations: the first one concerns the using of the concepts, the second is related to the usefulness of their substantive proposals, and the last one has to do with the political utility of this proposal.

1. I do not understand very well what “overdetermination” and “essentialism” means. The former is an Althusserian concept (I mean: it’s not a Marxian concept) and it seems a sophisticated way to say “everything has to do with everything”. Actually, almost everything has to do with everything. But it seems an useless, multi-causal point of view: the question is finding out to which extent and how – i.e., which mechanisms – something has to do with something. **[EOW: They, of course, don’t like the word “mechanism” because it smacks of “essentialism”. And as I have suggested in some earlier comments, they may be saying something a little more specific than just “everything affects everything.” The idea of providing “conditions of existence” seems to suggest something more like a functioning system with multiple necessary conditions.]** Likely, Resnick and Wolf would agree with this claim; what I don’t understand is why they give so importance to one concept as vague as “overdetermination”. The latter –essentialism– has become something common in certain postmodern discussions, but most times it is used as a delegitimization without a thorough meaning . I think that is one of these times. They say (MTC, 114) that choosing one feature (economics, politics or culture) which determine the contours of social change is essentialism. Maybe, but maybe not. That is just one theoretical choice which doesn’t involve the belief in any kind of essence. Finally, their argument could turn against them. I mean: Why is their singular class definition (in contrast with composite Wright’s class definition; TDCA, 20) not essentialist insofar as it reduces the class definition to the position in the fundamental and subsumed class process? I don’t think this, but it could derivate of such use of “essentialism”. **[EOW: They would deny their class process concept is essentialist because they make no claim that this by itself explains anything, that it has any inherent consequences; its effects are always in combination with all other processes.]**

2. In relation with their theoretical proposal, I don’t have a clear opinion. Their goal of distinguishing fundamental and subsumed class processes can be interesting, but I think that the utility of their Marxian framework should be judged seeing their pay-offs in empirical and historical researches. Whatever the case may be, I have some doubts. One of them is that Resnick and Wolff stress that the “commodity exchange is an economic process” but yet “a nonclass process” (MTC, 121). As we know, labor power is a commodity under capitalism, whose exchange takes place in the labor market. But, according to them, “as the seller of labor power, the laborer occupies a nonclass position” (MTC, 151). Therefore, the struggles over labor market laws (insofar they are neither fundamental nor subsumed class process struggles) are not class struggles. For instance, the recent strikes and demonstrations of French young people against the CPF (a new kind of labor contract which allows capitalist to fire them freely and without any reason in the two first years of this job) is not, within Resnick and Wolf’s framework, an example of class struggle. This is very counterintuitive, and, indeed, useless from both a theoretical and political point of view. **[EOW: To the extent that these struggles affect the value of labor power and thus the appropriation of surplus labor, perhaps they would count as class struggles for R/W. I recall that somewhere in one of the pieces they made some comment along those lines – about struggles which adjust the division of necessary and surplus labor.]**

3. Finally, this idea contrasts with their emphasis in the “performative and interpellating



potential” of the analytical categories defended by them in one of the other readings (CPF). I perceive a discontinuity between this one and the first one (MTC). Although I absolutely agree in trying to connect the theoretical and empirical works with the real movements and struggles, as well as to consider the different aspects often neglected in class analysis (“the others”), I do not understand how their theoretical framework will help achieve it. What I want to say is that it’s difficult to see how categories like “productive” and “non-productive” laborer, which are non-experiential categories, might help to forge common projects and identities among the workers.

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