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# Reconstructing Class Analysis

*Abstract:* This article offers a reconceptualization of class-in-capitalism and its articulation with racialization and gender that builds on critical strands of Marxian thought and integrates insights from Black radical and feminist socialist traditions. Rather than a transhistorical *materialist* conception of class *simpliciter*, we develop a *historically-specific* conception of class embedded within an analysis of *capitalist social relations*. The result is an account of class based not on the appropriation of a "material surplus," but on *asymmetrical social relations in the division of labor and disposition of its fruits*. Developing this conception along three key axes of asymmetries—property, production, and personhood—we show how the dynamics propelled by capitalist social relations are co-constitutive with those of racialization, while both the privatization of reproduction and gender-based super-exploitation are systemic features of these dynamics. We emphasize law's role in the history of these relations, and end with implications of our analysis for their transformation.

*Keywords:* social theory, critique of political economy, capitalism, class, racialization, gender, legal theory

## I. Introduction

Attempts at integrating analyses of racialized and gendered subordination in capitalism with those of class, always high on the agenda of the Left, have become an urgent priority (Haney-López 2019; Dawson and Francis 2016; Roy et al. 2018; Harris 2009; J. Williams 2010; Fraser 2020). Yet they remain notoriously fraught (Fraser 2019; Raine 2019; Camp, Heatherton, and Karuka 2019; Robbins 2019). One source of the difficulty, we believe, may stem from the conceptions of class handed down from the classical Marxist tradition to enter into dialogue with those of racialization and gender from the Black radical and feminist traditions. Specifically, two key flaws have marred standardly received conceptions of class.

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First, in an understandable desire to underline their distance from *individualist* liberal conceptions of class as about mobility or opportunity, Marxists have classically tended to stick to untenably *materialist* conceptions of class, as anchored in production and appropriation of a "surplus."[1] Yet all attempts at specifying a wholly "materialist" conception of class in terms of "material production," and "exploitation" as "surplus extraction," will tend to be question-begging: there is no prepolitical way to specify what a "surplus" or "exploitation" is, because there is no prepolitical, transhistorical essence to what "production" is. These are all questions going to (fully political) *social relations*. Thus, instead of unduly materialist conceptions, we need to build on what is the truly fundamental Marxian insight—namely, that *class is a social relation*—and develop it in the direction of a subterranean tradition of Marxian analysis: class pertains to *asymmetrical social relations in* both *the division of labor* and *the disposition and distribution of its fruits*.[2] Here, we develop such a conception based on asymmetrical social relations along three axes: property, production, and personhood. These asymmetries reflect differential power over material and knowledge resources in production, and differential recognition as bearing full juridical personhood. Mobilizing such a conception of class within an analysis of capitalist dynamics shows, we argue, how it directly articulates with both racialized and gendered relations of super-exploitation and with gendered divisions of labor inside and outside the commodity form.

Second, fully internalizing a conception of class as *an asymmetrical social relation* also allows us to confront another legacy of traditional socialist views: the championing of a group—the working class—as the privileged agent of change. But class is not a "group" whose identity is to be valorized; it is an oppressive *relation*, to be transformed. Having one's daily life activity shaped by such a relation—especially behind the veil of formal equality of opportunity that is the hallmark of class-in-capitalism—is no guarantee of any specific sort of emancipatory or even oppositional consciousness. A clear-sighted analysis of how class operates in capitalism puts the lie to any notion of spontaneous or even likely class resistance to capitalism per se.[3] Indeed, *there has never been a revolt against capital*. Building resistance is the task of coalitional politics. This applies not just to the US but more generally. What is special to the US is the lack of any genuine social democracy as a third option on the political spectrum, of the Left as opposed to only a conservative Right and liberal Center. And the key to that, as Du Bois taught us, lies in racialization (Du Bois 1935).[4]

At the outset, we wish to underline two important limits on our analysis. First, given the breadth and depth of scholarship on each of these dimensions of exploitation, expropriation, and domination, any effort at synthesis will necessarily be wrong in ways critically important to some set of readers and critics. We do not claim to, nor could we, offer a definitive synthesis on the vast literatures on race and racism, feminism, sexism, and heteronormativity. Rather, we focus here primarily on developing

[1] We emphasize that this classical Marxist conception, while the prevailing one among most Marxist scholars and the one standardly entering into dialogue with feminist and Black radical analyses—as indicated below at notes 18–25—is not the only one derivable from the Marxist tradition. Our own revised conception remains fully anchored in Marxian analysis: see notes 4 and 17 below.

[2] This conception draws upon submerged strands in Marx's own analysis, ones being revived today by the turn toward a *critique* of political economy, rather than a "critical political economy." See note 17 below and accompanying text.

[3] This of course has been a—one might say *the*—central preoccupation of Marxist analysis over the last century, from Lenin on "trade union consciousness" on to Lukacs on "reification" effects on class consciousness, Gramsci on the role of "organic intellectuals" in forging a hegemonic ideology to counter that of "spontaneous common sense," the Frankfurt School on "the culture industry," and Althusser on "ideological state apparatuses." We briefly situate our analysis in relation to this rich literature in Part II-C below.

[4] As Michael Dawson puts it: "Social Democracy in the United States was (and is) doomed to be at best a secondary player in American politics if it cannot incorporate opposition to racial oppression within its theoretical framework or practical program." (Dawson 2013, 15). We return to this in Part III-C below.

an understanding of class-in-capitalism that is richer and more analytically complete than what we believe the state of the art is, and that builds in racialized and gendered class relations at the ground floor of the basic model. Second, we especially want to underscore that we are *not* trying to explain race or racism, or gender and patriarchy. We are trying to understand *class* (in capitalism), recognizing that it is impossible to do so without integrating the role of atavistic status subordination, particularly racialized and gendered subordination, in the construction of capitalist social relations.

Our analysis proceeds as follows. Part II situates our reconceptualization of class-in-capitalism within the literature on class analysis. Part III develops our alternative conception within an analysis of capitalist dynamics, to draw out the constitutively racialized character of those dynamics. Part IV turns to how capitalist dynamics constitutively separate the spheres of paid production and unpaid reproduction work, and how they articulate with gendered divisions of labor inside and outside the market. Part V takes up programmatic upshots of our analysis.

## II. Class as Relation

For all that it has been the subject of extensive scholarship and activism for going on two centuries, class remains analytically fuzzy and contested in contemporary literature. Following Erik Olin Wright, we focus on three central approaches (each with internal variations): liberal, Weberian, and Marxist (Wright 2005).[5] The following situates our analysis in relation to each.

The core of our reconceptualization of class consists of three linked claims. First, *class is a relation* and not, as the liberal and Weberian traditions have it, about mobility, opportunity, or stratification. Second, *class is a social relation of production* and not, as the central strand of the Marxist tradition has it, such a relation simply with respect to a "material" surplus. Finally, *class is an asymmetrical social relation*, one that is exploitative and alienating—in a word, oppressive—and not, as a central strand of the socialist tradition has it, a group (the working class) whose cause is to be championed. As opposed to an identity to be valorized, class is a *relation to be transformed.*

Fully fleshing out these three elements effects a fundamental reorientation of class analysis, away from liberal emphases on "opportunity," classical Marxist emphases on the "means of production," and classical socialist emphases on "the proletariat." In their stead, we have an analysis that emphasizes the fundamentality of (a) class structure (b) as asymmetrical division of labor and disposition of its fruits, (c) which merits transformation (at the limit, dissolution).

### *A. Class as Opportunity (Liberalism)*

Liberal and Weberian approaches are usefully grouped together, being united in their focus on *barriers to a fair process of competition* (variously conceived in terms of "mobility" or "opportunity"), rather than on the *end structure* of the resulting positions.

[5] As Wright noted and explored, there are also lines of Durkheimian work that resolve almost to occupational groups; and of course there is a whole line of work characterizing class based on culture and consumption patterns—most prominently Bourdieu—that we treat here within the Weberian approach, with culture and status signaling through consumption providing the primary mechanism for opportunity hoarding; it is also partly a variant of the class-as-identity socialist strand we focus on in Part II-C, but without the valorization.

Liberal approaches to class focus on *individual* income or market-relevant skills, and devise various schemes of *stratification* or gradation, which may be as simple as describing income percentiles or combinations of deciles (for example, lowest quintile or top 1 percent), that mark off sets of individuals as occupying different *groups*. Class in this sense means a "group" of individuals who share certain market-relevant attributes (for example, an education of high school or less; a bachelor's degree or higher). Attributes are "market relevant" when they render the individuals who possess them eligible for certain occupations. These occupations, in turn, are paid income assumed to reflect the marginal value of their work—income determined by efficient labor markets.[6]

Some such conception underpins the entire oeuvre of liberal theory, across the spectrum. Given its focus on individual attributes, even conservatives can agree, with social mobility seen as the essence of—not only necessary, but also sufficient for—a classless society (Mitnik, Cumberworth, and Grusky 2013; Chetty et al. 2014). At one end of the spectrum lies the view that if in principle anyone in their own lifetime could, through their own choices, end up anywhere in the range of deciles or percentiles through hard work and "merit," then that society is not a class society. It may be unequal in results—but it is not unjust. At the other, more egalitarian end, some liberals, most prominently Rawls, focus on providing some sort of insurance for bad luck—for being born with poor attributes and poor prospects for acquiring better ones (Rawls [1971] 1999). Others build on this baseline to introduce a role for desert, by developing a "moral hazard" skin-in-the-game insurance scheme (Dworkin 1981a; 1981b), or, more generously, making sure that public policy actively invests in erasing bad luck in the initial distribution of education, family endowments, or smarts (Ackerman 1981; Ackerman and Alstott 1999).

Unifying these views are two features: (a) methodological individualism and (b) related, a failure to interrogate the structure of the positions on offer in social relations of production. These views fail to ask whether injustice resides merely in unequal access to opportunities to be on top, or also in the very inequity of the positions themselves, vis-à-vis each other, no matter how fair the opportunities to achieve them. Rendered invisible by this view is the injustice of a system that structures asymmetric social relations such that a small number of people are on top and a large number underneath. Those at the top occupy positions of great wealth, meaningful work, and authority over the lives of others. Meanwhile, most others wake up in the morning unsure whether they will have a job next year or whether it will cover the rent or medical bills, and can only look forward to a day of drudgery, following someone else's orders and exhibiting subservience to the boss. The substantive justice of that end state, rather than the procedural question of whether positions at the top are equally open to all, is off the table for liberals.[7]

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[6] At their limits, these kinds of approaches reach situations where they might proliferate the definition of class to be almost coterminous with occupation (Grusky and Sørensen 1998; Mitnik, Cumberworth, and Grusky 2013).

[7] The case of Rawls—as the limit case of liberalism pushed to its most "democratic egalitarian" extreme—is instructive. In the middle of *Theory of Justice*, seemingly out of nowhere, Rawls states that "what [people] want is meaningful work in free association with others" (Rawls [1971] 1999, 257). Yet this admission seems almost to play the ideological role of a Freudian confession and avoidance, since it has little bearing on the core argumentative structure of his theory or its resulting principles of justice. These provide for: (1) a scheme of fully adequate equal basic liberties for all (the familiar liberal ones of bodily integrity, speech, religion, political participation, and so forth), as lexically prior to (2) fair equality of opportunity in the competition for offices and positions of authority and responsibility, as lexically prior to (3) the difference principle, whereby inequalities in income and wealth are justified only when they work to the benefit of the least advantaged group (ibid. at 266–67). Direct appraisal and reform of the class structure of a capitalist economy—in the sense specified in the text—is off the table. It remains an open question how this tallies with Rawls's own rich discussion of the "Aristotelian principle"—that persons tend to value the development and exercise of their powers for its own sake (374–80).

A related but distinct family of approaches may be called "Weberian." Retaining the focus on "opportunity," what distinguishes these views is an emphasis on groups or networks rather than isolated individuals. To be sure, Weber himself distinguished class from status by insisting that "[c]lass situation is ultimately market situation" (Weber [1922] 1991, 182), and, as the founder of methodological individualism (Weber [1922] 2013, 4–28), conceived the mechanisms of market position in terms of more or less efficient labor markets, assigning more or less efficient wages to individuals who possess given attributes. But the key distinctive move of Weber*ian* class analysis is in how individuals come to possess (or not) said attributes: because of *opportunity hoarding* by networked groups, whose power and location is largely a function of ascriptive or inherited caste-like status. Positions in social status relations become levers to engage in hoarding of opportunities to obtain attributes that, in turn, translate into unequal occupations paying unequal wages (Wright 2015; Sørensen 2005, 119).

Weberian approaches tend to focus on the distinct credentials and advantages that accrue to individuals by dint of being born and raised in a given "class" (that is, rung on a stratification ladder), marked by attending the right institutions, following the right consumption habits, and acquiring the right social manners (Bourdieu [1979] 1987; [1980] 2008)—all of which are treated by potential employers as attributes relevant to getting a job. Again, as with liberals, what the job pays is what the market assigns it more or less efficiently. The problem here is *social closure*, or opportunity hoarding. Graduates of Harvard College send their kids to private schools, pay for fancy SAT prep courses, contribute to the annual fund. Their kids, lo and behold, turn out to be smart enough to get into Harvard, which in turn makes them eligible for all sorts of fancy jobs. The solutions proposed for addressing these inequities are to change college admissions standards, drop the SAT, abandon testing in schools at the elementary and high school levels, etc. This Weberian approach is most apt for integrating mainstream "equal opportunity" conceptions with racialized and gender relations. It is the critique of the "old boys club," the lily-white law firm. Its solution is, in the first place, equal opportunity in education, hiring, and promotion and, later, expanded to include affirmative commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. And as with liberal views, Weberian ones are fine with highly unequal social relations of production, so long as the opportunities to occupy wealthy, powerful, high-status positions are not successfully hoarded by incumbent heirs of caste and class.[8]

### *B. Class as Surplus (Classical Marxism)*

In contrast to liberal and Weberian approaches, the fundamental feature of Marxist views is of course precisely to focus on *class as a social structure*. Specifically, for Marxism, class is *a social relation of production*,

[8] For a striking expression of this view, pushed to its limit yet still caught within its horizons, consider the following critique of "equality of opportunity" made ostensibly in the name of "equality of outcomes": "Equality of opportunity has been a mainstream policy goal for years now . . . But a different mainstream operated in the mid-1960s, one that saw equal opportunity as the means to the end of equal outcomes. That goal appeared in a famous commencement address Lyndon Johnson delivered at Howard University in 1965 . . . Johnson defined equal opportunity as the gateway to equal results. This could not mean that every individual would end up with equal resources, but it did mean that equal outcomes should hold across racial groups. . . . If a social system is producing unequal group outcomes, the only reasonable conclusion is that opportunities are not distributed equally" (Newfield 2023). The article is part of a *Boston Review* series aimed to challenge "neoliberal" views that "emphasize personal responsibility and individual merit" by "explor[ing] debates about what an opportunity society should look like" (*Boston Review* n.d.).

set in train by the differential ownership and control of "the forces of production."[9] And within capitalism, the fundamental classes are two: (1) those who own nothing but their own labor and so must work for a living ("working class"); and (2) those who own enough "means of production" to be able to hire others and not work themselves ("capitalists").[10] Whatever mobility between such positions market competition may (or may not) foster, the end positions remain the same: those who must work for a living, and those who need not and hire others. To be sure, gradations and variations may exist along this axis of ownership—such as a middle class of small business owners ("petty bourgeois") who own enough capital to hire others but not so much as to not have to work themselves and a class of "rentiers" who clip coupons but do no hiring—but the fundamental axis remains that of ownership and its fundamental differentiation a binary.[11]

The basis of this conception lies in Marx's analysis of the twofold "secrets" underlying, first, all class societies in general and, second, capitalist society in specific: (1) The secret of all hitherto-existing class societies is that some produce and others appropriate "the surplus." Those who appropriate are expropriators of the labor of others, or *exploiters*, while the others the *exploited*. The exploiters are able to do so via effective control over the forces of production, be it simply "the means" of nature and tools or also the additional "force" of labor itself (as under slavery and feudalism). This ownership is typically secured, in noncapitalist societies, by a mixture of force, custom, and ideology. Penetrate the

[9] It is notorious that Marx himself never elaborated a general conception of class, with the relevant passage at the end of volume 3 of *Capital* breaking off just at that point (Marx [1894] 1981, 1025–26) ("The owners of mere labour-power, the owners of capital, and the landowners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent—in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and land-owners—form the three great classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production. . . . The question to be answered next is: 'What makes a class?', and this arises automatically from answering another question: 'What makes wage-labourers, capitalists and landowners the formative elements of the three great social classes?'"). Nevertheless, the conception of class as anchored in relations of ownership and control vis-à-vis the forces of production— that is, natural resources, labor, and tools—is the overwhelmingly dominant one among Marxist scholars. For two of the most comprehensive treatments of the issue—reconstructing Marx's conception from the letter of his texts and spirit of his theory, and then setting it to work across large swathes of history—see De Ste. Croix (1981, 31–111); Cohen (1978, 63–114). See also Wright (2009, 108) ("Within this [Marxist] approach, the central class division in capitalist society is between those who own and control the means of production—capitalists—and those hired to use those means of production—workers.") and references cited below in notes 10-16.

[10] It is precisely this classical Marxist conception that has tended to enter into dialogue with feminist and Black radical analyses. See Reed (2002, 270) ("class identity and practice . . . emerge and operate within capitalist social structures [that] originate from an essential, materially demonstrable foundation . . . —the social organization of labor on more or less coercive bases for the production of privately appropriated value"); Wood (2002b, 277) (defining "class relations" in capitalism as "between producers and appropriators, and specifically the relation between capitalists and wage laborers"); Fraser (2014, 57) ("For Marx, the first defining feature of capitalism is private property in the means of production, which presupposes a class division between the owners and the producers."). We hasten to add that Fraser is consciously adopting what she says "will appear at first sight to be [a] very orthodox" conception, only to then "'de-orthodoxize' by showing how [it] presuppose[s] other features, which in fact constitute their background conditions of possibility." Her analysis of the latter, in terms of "backgrounded" aspects of expropriation, extraction, and social reproduction, is groundbreaking. Our present point, however, concerns her discussion of the former—the "foreground" of exploitation—which remains within the classical Marxist analysis of class that we wish to shift away from, on its own terrain of class-in-capitalism (ibid. at 57, 60–61).

[11] This applies even for those Marxists who seek to take into account the existence of various "intermediary" classes, but do so by reducing them, ultimately, to variations along this one fundamental axis. See Poulantzas (1973, 37–38) (assimilating a subgroup of intellectual workers into a "new petty bourgeoisie," since recognition of a "new class" per se is "unthinkable for Marxist theory"); Wright (1979, 193) (intellectuals occupy a "contradictory class location," with one foot in the camp of workers [since they must work for a living] and one in the camp of capitalists [since the work they do involves managerial authority]); Carchedi (1977, 84ff) (identifying as a new "middle class" those who partly perform the "function of capital" and partly the "function of labor"). For further discussion of the relation between New Left analyses of a "new class," classical Marxism, and our view, see notes 16 and 33, below.

secret, says Marx, and you have the key to the anatomy of that society—its structure and motion—by way of tracing out the appropriation, distribution, and expenditure of the surplus, and the reproduction of the relations that sustain it.[12] (2) The secret of capitalist society is that the surplus takes "value-form," such that the appropriation—now taking place via mediation by the market—is hidden behind the veil of "exchange-value," or obscured by the fact that it results from "free and fair" transactions among juridically "free and equal" agents.[13]

The floodlights of illumination cast by these insights is epochal. In tandem, they have launched a thousand ships of inquiry, into societies past and present. Yet they are only the beginning of the analysis. Why? Because ultimately the analysis stumbles upon closer inspection of its fundamental basis: "the surplus." This has tended to be conceived in a wholly *material* way, as if it were obvious (1) what "the surplus" is and (2) who participates in its "material production." But neither is. What counts as "necessary" versus "surplus" is, beyond the most basic of caloric, etc., needs, *socially* negotiable.[14] And similarly so for what counts as "production."[15] The upshot? Three-fold: (1) Even with respect to distribution of the surplus—or "exploitation" as "appropriation" of the fruits of "labor"—there is no way to determine whether and how much said appropriation and so exploitation is going on outside some *social evaluation*. (2) Second, and more fundamentally, to say that some set of agents are exploiting others requires here that the former provide no "productive" contribution themselves—something bound to be rare in most societies. (3) Finally, once we recognize that there is plenty of interproducer "exploitation," a further, equally fundamental, question comes to the fore: What about the *division of labor* itself, rather than simply the distribution or disposition of its fruits? Be it exploitative or not, might that not also be troubling on other grounds ("alienation"), and serve as an important explanatory "secret" to boot?

Yet the analysis of class as anchored in the production by some and appropriation by others of a surplus remains deeply embedded in—indeed, lies at the very heart of—classical Marxism.[16] The

[12] "The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude . . . It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers . . . in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice" (Marx ([1894] 1981, 927).

[13] Marx ([1867] 1976, 163–77) ("The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret"); Marx ([1894] 1981, 957–58) ("We saw also that capital . . . pumps out a specific quantum of surplus labour from the direct producers or workers, surplus labour that it receives without an equivalent and which by its very nature always remains forced labour, however much it might appear as the result of free contractual agreement. This surplus labour is expressed in a surplus-value, and this surplus-value exists in a surplus product.").

[14] The *locus classicus* here is Pearson (1957), tracing back to Veblen ([1899] 1994). It bears emphasizing that while such Veblenian and Polanyian institutionalist critiques were aimed simultaneously at classical Marxist "materialist" and neoclassical "individualist" targets, their own emphases on the *sociohistorical* character of the questions find their strongest bases in other strands of Marx's thought, precisely those that we seek to build on here. See Polanyi (1948, 207) and note 17 below.

[15] See Anderson (1976, 115) ("the distinction between productive and unproductive labour . . . although essential" to "the whole theory of value" "has never yet been codified theoretically or established empirically by Marx or his successors").

[16] Shared across different schools of Marxist thought as well as disciplines of Marxist inquiry, such a conception is common to, for example, Althusserian, Analytical, and Political Marxists, and to Marxist historians, philosophers, sociologists. For Althusserian Marxism, see Balibar ([1965] 1970, 212–16) (specifying "modes of production" in terms of combinations of five elements: producers, nonproducers, means of production, property, and appropriation); for Political Marxism, see Brenner (1976, 11) ("It is around the property or surplus-extraction relationship that one defines the fundamental classes in a society."); for Analytical Marxism, see Cohen (1978) and Wright (2009). For historians, see for example De Ste. Croix (1981), and Anderson (1980, 64–65); for philosophers, see for example Cohen (1978) and Balibar ([1965] 1970); and for sociologists, see for example Wright (2009) and Poulantzas (1973; 1975). And it is this same conception that served as the

reasons lie in two fundamental aspects of the classical Marxist view, each presently undergoing a crucial transformation by some Marxist scholars.[17] The first goes to the classical understanding of Marx's project as a "critical political economy," one that joins classical political economy in its analysis of a "material" field of inquiry, but radicalizes the classicals' surplus-based analysis of growth, distribution, and classes by refining and extending it in the form of a labor theory of surplus value, profits, and exploitation. Yet on an alternative emerging view, which we join here, Marx's project was less a critical political economy than a *critique of political economy* (Heinrich 2016; Bellofiore 2018; Bonefeld 2014; Postone 2003; Murray 2018). Marx's aim was less to join classical political economy in its analysis of a naturalized field of inquiry than to delimit the conditions of possibility of the field itself, in terms of the *historically-specific social relations* of capital that constitute its proper object of inquiry.[18] His focus is best understood not in terms of a Ricardian analysis of property-based distribution, but in terms of an analysis of the social relations of production themselves (Rowthorn 1974). In Diane Elson's illuminating encapsulation, we need to shift from a "labor theory of value" to a *value theory of labor* (Elson 1979, 115).[19] The first refers to an attempt to take over the surplus-based analysis of classical political economy and provide a quantitative theory of price, profit, or exploitation—an attempt ill-fated in both its explanatory and evaluative facets (Steedman 1981). The second refers to an analysis not of the "material content" of "value" in labor, but rather of the *social form* taken by labor (and utility) under capitalist social relations[20]—that is, a qualitative analysis of how human powers, needs, and relations are shaped by generalized commodity production and subjected to its impersonal imperatives of ceaseless expansion of exchange value for its own sake (Ollman [1971] 1976; Mau 2023).

This takes us to a second transformation of the classical Marxist view, also partly underway, which is to shift from transhistorical conceptions of class, grounded in a "materialist" analysis, to historically-specific analyses of social relations. A key danger of the "historical materialism" of classical Marxism is its tendency to project onto history as a whole—and thereby hypostasize—"materialist" dynamics that are, in fact, historically-specific products of particular social relations. Two central examples:

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common basis for New Left efforts at theorizing "intermediary" classes: presupposing the producer/nonproducer division as basic, these sought either to identify "compromise" or "contradictory" positions along that one division—see references cited in note 11 above—or to overlay "noneconomic" taxonomic refinements on top of it: see discussion in note 33 below.

[17] By "classical Marxism" we mean that tradition of Marxist analysis, descending from Engels on, in which the core of Marxism is understood to center on a "theory of history"—the "materialistic conception of history" or "historical materialism"—and a "political economy" of capitalism based on "the labor theory of value." This is related to what others have designated as "worldview" or "traditional" Marxism, but does not include here their additional element of "dialectical materialism" as a theory of nature or a philosophical backdrop to the theory of history: Heinrich ([2004] 2012, 24–27) ("worldview Marxism") and Elbe (2013) ("traditional Marxism"). Each of these classical aspects is undergoing a crucial transformation at the hands of two overlapping lines of critical Marxian scholarship, which we distill in this paragraph and the next: (1) a *critique of political economy* that reorients away from "material factors" to *social forms*, descending from the work of Isaak Rubin and finding its fullest development in the work of value-form theorists and Diane Elson; and (2) a *historicist conception of materialism* that emphasizes *historical specificity* in the analysis of social forms, descending from the work of Karl Korsch and finding its fullest development in the work of Political Marxists Ellen Meiksins Wood and Robert Brenner. We hasten to add that neither line of theorists would necessarily agree with our analysis of the implications of these transformations of Marxian thought for the analysis of class-in-capitalism: see discussion in notes 21 and 22 below.

[18] As such, it was a critique in the Kantian sense of delimiting the conditions of possibility of the object of critique.

[19] Elson is drawing on, while deepening, the analysis of Rubin ([1928] 1973, 62) ("The usual short formulation of this theory holds that the value of the commodity depends on the quantity of labor socially necessary for its production; or, in a general formulation . . . value = 'materialized' labor. It is more accurate to express the theory inversely: in the commodity-capitalist economy, production-work relations among people necessarily acquire the form of the value of things.").

[20] Marx ([1867] 1976, 173–74) ("Political Economy has indeed analysed, however incompletely, value and its magnitude, and has discovered what lies beneath these forms. But it has never once asked the question why labour is represented by the value of its product and labour time by the magnitude of that value.") (internal footnotes omitted).

locating the "motor force of history" in either (1) a technological dynamism (development of the "material forces") that is in fact specific to capitalist social relations (Wood 1984; Brenner 1986); or (2) "class struggle" on a model of surplus production and appropriation that, taken over from classical political economy, was likely most apt for feudal relations and dynamics that it then naturalized. Rather than a "materialist conception of history," we need a *historicist conception of materialism*. That is, once we shift from "material factors" to *social forms* as our unit of analysis, this brings in tow a second, related shift: from transhistorical notions to *the principle of historical specification* (Korsch 1938, 12). What this means at present is two things: (a) first, we need to shift from a transhistorical focus on class *simpliciter* to a historically-specific analysis of class-*in-capitalism*; and (b) second, prior to any analysis of capitalist *classes* must be one of *capitalist social relations* of production *simpliciter*.[21] Any analysis of capitalist class relations must be embedded within an analysis of capitalist social relations in general—specifically, an analysis of how "horizontal" relations of universal market dependence intertwine with "vertical" ones of class to set in train the systematic imperatives and dynamics distinctive of capitalism.[22] It is only by *starting from within* an analysis of capitalist social relations in general that we can work out which such vertical relations merit singling out as "class."

Finally, to answer which vertical—or asymmetrical—social relations of production merit special analytic focus under the rubric of "class" requires first asking what is *the point* of any given conception of class, the motivation for any given form of class analysis. In Ellen Meiksins Wood's incisive formulation, the guiding aim of Marxian analysis is "to provide a theoretical foundation for interpreting the world in order to change it" (Wood 1981, 66).[23] In other words, the project is a dual one, of simultaneously *understanding* social relations, for the sake of identifying points of possible and desirable *transformation*. And from either vantage point, a Marxist "surplus" analysis anchored in "the means of production" is wanting. From a purely explanatory point of view, Robert Brenner has shown that to understand the onset and reproduction of capitalist dynamics requires as much of a focus on the "means of subsistence" as those of production (Brenner 1976; 1982; 2001). And the point generalizes: building on Brenner, our analysis below of capitalist class dynamics emphasizes not only the need to expand, along the property axis, the purview of relevant "resources" beyond the "means of production," but also to fold in a second, similarly fundamental axis: that of the division of labor itself (as opposed to only the disposition of its fruits). Absent an analysis of how capitalist relations foster certain characteristic divisions of labor, we will be at a loss to understand the shaping of the economic *and* political capabilities, resources, and outlooks of actors central to capitalist dynamics. And, to turn from explanation to evaluation, we will miss significant targets for transformation.

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[21] See Heinrich (2004, 191–92) (contrasting the central role accorded "[c]lasses and class struggle" in the *Communist Manifesto* with that of *Capital*, where "a systematic treatment of classes is not the precondition of Marx's depiction, but rather . . . its result"). We should note that despite Heinrich's reorientation of how the analysis of class-in-capitalism should proceed, his own resulting conception of class remains classical or unclear (ibid. at 193).

[22] See Brenner (2007, 58, emphasis in original) (emphasizing that "it is necessary not only to lay bare the structuring or constraining effects of *vertical* class . . . relations" but "if anything, even more critical to bring out the structuring or constraining effects of the *horizontal* relationships"); and Wood (1999) (emphasizing the centrality of horizontal relations in the analysis of capitalist dynamics). In sharp contrast to this emphasis on social-production relations *simpliciter*, and on historical specificity in their analysis, is Erik Olin Wright's more classical conception of Marxism as, in its explanatory facet, a theory of class as "the independent variable" of a "theory of historical trajectory" Wright (1993, 17–18). We should note that despite their embedding of class within a broader analysis of capitalist social relations of production in general, both Brenner's and Wood's own conceptions of class remain quite classical: Brenner (2007); Wood (2002b).

[23] Wood is of course adverting to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, which crystallize the fundamentally *practical* orientation of Marxian thought, as captured in Labriola's and Gramsci's brilliant epigram of it as "the philosophy of praxis." Labriola [1897] (2013), 53-54; Gramsci (1971), 381-472. See also Tronti [1959] (2016); Musté 2021).

In sum, the classical Marxist analysis of class—as a differential property relation going to the extraction of a surplus—suffers from analytical and programmatic flaws traceable to its misplaced "materialist" emphases. In its stead a better conception of class, one also truer to Marxism's own explanatory and transformative ambitions, would center not on a *material surplus* but, rather, on *the social division of labor and the disposition of its fruits*. Such a conception takes the central Marxian insight—that class is a *social relation*—in a direction at once analytically less question-begging and politically more apt: from a *materially exploitative relation* over a surplus, to *asymmetrical social relations* with respect to both the division of labor and the disposition of its fruits.

### *C. Class as Identity (Classical Socialism)*

A conception of class as an asymmetrical social relation with respect to both the division of labor and its fruits *may* carry with it some uneasy implications for a classical socialist conception of the project of transformation, as group emancipation. In another typically crisp formulation, Ellen Meiksins Wood characterizes "[t]he Marxist conception of that project" as "the abolition of class carried out by means of class-struggle and the self-emancipation of the working class" (Wood [1986] 1998, 90). We wish briefly to point out—we can do no more than that here—some points of contact between the present conception of class and aspects of this formulation, going to class *identity*, class *interests*, and class *agency*.

The first concerns the "abolition of class" as the ultimate goal of socialist politics. We agree of course. Or, more cautiously, we agree that the successive erosion of class dynamics and, at the limit, their dissolution is one of the lodestars of progressive politics. What else could it mean to say that *class is an asymmetrical social relation*, one that is exploitative and alienating—in a word, oppressive—if not that it ought to be transformed, ideally out of existence?

Yet lurking in this conception of class—as *an oppressive relation to be transformed*—is an implication that some might find uneasy, and this is the disavowal of class as a fixed *identity of a group to be valorized*. The point has been developed most powerfully and pungently in a landmark essay by Gaspar Tamás:

> All versions of socialist endeavour can . . . be classified into two principal kinds, one inaugurated by Rousseau, the other by Marx. The two have opposite visions of the social subject in need of liberation . . . . It must be said at the outset that many, perhaps most socialists who have sincerely believed they were Marxists, have in fact been Rousseauists. . . . One of the greatest historians of the Left, E. P. Thompson, has synthesized what can be best said of class in the tradition of Rousseauian socialism which believes itself to be Marxian. *The Making of the English Working Class* is universally—and rightly—recognized to be a masterpiece. Its beauty, moral force and conceptual elegance originate in a few strikingly unusual articles of faith: (1) that the working class is a worthy cultural competitor of the ruling class; (2) that the *Lebenswelt* of the working class is socially and morally superior to that of its exploiters; (3) that regardless of the outcome of the class struggle, the autonomy and separateness of the working class is an intrinsic social value; (4) that the class itself is constituted by the *autopoiesis* of its rebellious political culture.
>
> Whereas Karl Marx and Marxism aim at the *abolition* of the proletariat, Thompson aims at the *apotheosis* and triumphant survival of the proletariat. (Tamás 2006, 228–29, emphasis in original)

Similarly uneasy thoughts may apply to certain notions of class *interests* and *agency*. With respect to the first, a cornerstone of classical Marxism has been that the working class has "objective material interests" in bringing about socialism.[24] Treading lightly over a century's worth of debate on this score, we wish merely to make two points especially germane here: First, once severed from its underlying anchor in an untenable conception of a "material" surplus, all talk of "material interests" must be reinterpreted as claims concerning apt forms of the social division of labor and the disposition of its fruits, claims inescapably social or political in character. Second, no such claims can be evaluated outside of the possibilities of their realization, and in that regard, surely one of the biggest lacunae in the Marxist tradition has been the lack of a plausible program of institutional change.[25] In its absence, talk of transformative "interests" is hard to credit. And just as class interests must be informed by a class program, so class agency can only effectively pursue those interests that are plausibly implementable. Our sense of the initial outlines of such a program, and the coalitional politics it will require, are set out in Part V.

Reflecting on a century of historical developments and theoretical debates, Eric Hobsbawm offered the following resume of the legacy of Marx: while "a number of central elements of Marx's analysis" of capitalist social relations and dynamics "remain valid and important," nevertheless "his prediction [of] the 'expropriation of the expropriators' through a vast proletariat leading to socialism was not based on his analysis of the mechanisms of capitalism, but on separate a priori assumptions" (Hobsbawm 2011, 14). Those a priori assumptions, we suggest, were a holdover from that phase of Marx's thinking in which a "materialistic conception of history" and a "critical political economy" formed a seamless web. Once we replace these with a properly sociohistorical and political conception of the relations, dynamics, and interests involved, the task of forging links between an explanatory account of capitalist social relations and dynamics and a program for their transformation may be resumed on firmer, if more contestable, ground.

## III. The Three Axes of Class-in-Capitalism

What distinguishes capitalism from all other societies past and present is that social relations of production take the form of "generalized markets" to produce historically unprecedented dynamics of (a) productivity;[26] (b) hidden exploitation, behind a veil of free exchange among juridical equals

[24] See for example Wood ([1986] 1998, 14) ("the working class is the social group with the most direct objective interest in bringing about the transition to socialism"). As André Gorz pointed out long ago, some such premise has underpinned the entire line of Marxist analysis we advert to in note 3 above. Gorz (1982, 21–22) (Classical Marxism's "examination of facts always starts from the following premise: 'given that the proletariat is and must be revolutionary, let us examine those facts which lend support to its revolutionary will and those which frustrate it.' The terms of the problem govern the inquiry into its solution.").

[25] A point recognized by even the stoutest of the more sophisticated defenders of the classical tradition of historical materialism: see Anderson (1981, 99) ("The institutional terrain" of a "tangible socialist future" "has been characteristically neglected throughout" the Marxist tradition, from its founders through to the Classical generation and on to Western Marxism). Anderson's assessment stands in need of little modification today, owing to deep-seated reasons for the hostility to programmatic thinking in Marxism, some sound (a skepticism toward blueprints), others less so (a "materialist" understanding of interests rooted in a "surplus"-based model of class as "production/appropriation," and thus of transformation as "expropriate the expropriators").

[26] By "productivity" we mean the continuous growth in the capacity to turn nature into more of what people need and want with a given set of resources and labor. Growing more grain and fruit from a given number of acres, by fewer people; building more houses; making more clothes; etc. We do not mean the increase in market transactions, which is the normal

enjoying formal opportunities/mobility; and (c) alienation of social powers and relations, as the ceaseless expansion of exchange value for its own sake subjects human needs and powers, human relations, and the Earth to ever more extensive and intensive instrumental quantification. "Generalized markets" describes the conjoined phenomenon that both (1) most of the population live in households that depend on commodity exchange to satisfy most of their basic needs and wants (market dependence for subsistence), and (2) most of those who organize production obtain access to the resources, labor, and credit required for production through commodity exchange (market dependence for production) (Polanyi [1944] 2001; Wood 2002a). Because most of the population must obtain most of its access to basic goods and capabilities through market exchanges, most households need to have members who engage in wage labor to make money to buy access to basic goods and needs. If they do not sell their labor, they will starve. Because most of those who organize production need to make money to buy access to the resources and labor they need to combine into production, they must orient their production to making more money. If they don't make money, they will lose their ability to organize production and be forced to sell their labor to someone who does have the money to buy access to the necessary resources.

This historically unique combination of market *freedom* combined with generalized market *dependence* marks a society as a market society, a capitalist society. It reflects the combination of freedom to participate in markets as an *opportunity* with an *imperative* to go to markets to acquire the basic necessities of life—food, clothing, energy, shelter—and the basic inputs into production—labor, land and other natural resources, knowledge, tools or machines, and credit (Wood 1994; Brenner 1982; 2001). Market dependence of those who organize production, not only those who must sell their labor, is critical to the dynamic of growth. It is fear of losing out to competitors—of being unable to make enough money to continue to obtain access to production inputs and being declassed—that drives those who organize production to escape competition whenever they can. This drive kicks off the Red Queen dynamic: "Here, you see," the Red Queen tells Alice in *Through the Looking Glass*, "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to go somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

Running twice as fast means markets are never efficient in the mainstream neoclassical sense, nor do they tend toward static equilibrium. Rather, they cycle in long and short waves of boom and bust around a long-term trend of technologically driven productivity growth and a double movement of periods of heightened inequality, its episodic political containment, and the escape of capitalists from that political containment to a new regime within the broad parameters of generalized market dependence. With Schumpeter, we begin with the observation that the persistent pursuit of power to create and extract quasi rents is the driving force of continuous innovation (Schumpeter [1942] 2008). With Minsky, we add that in an economy with true uncertainty, successful creation and maintenance of quasi rents is a precondition to financing business of the scale and style that has

measure of productivity growth; nor do we mean to imply that productivity is necessarily a positive—the remainder of the clauses in this sentence directly associate it with increasing exploitation, alienation, and senseless pursuit of "more," all at the expense of extracting and burning fossil fuel and bringing our planet to a critical breaking point as a habitat. But it is simply untenable to deny that human societies today can feed, clothe, heat, house, transport, and connect billions more people than they could two hundred years ago, and that that fact is a defining characteristic of capitalist social relations and is driven by the dynamics of capitalism those social relations produce: continuously bringing more of nature into a system of production and continuously squeezing more out of nature for human use and exchange.

characterized capitalism since the 1870s (Minsky 1986).[27] Both innovation and finance under uncertainty depend on the capacity of productive enterprises to create and reap rents, rather than receive efficient prices in perfectly competitive markets.

*Power seeking, or escape from competition, is the animating spirit of capitalism*. Capitalists invest in new technologies and organizational strategies in order to escape competition. In doing so, they create the long-term trend of continuous productivity growth that is the defining feature of modern market society. But market-dependent enterprises have no systematic reason to prefer productivity-enhancing strategies (technological and organizational innovation) to escape competition and increase the magnitude and duration of quasi rents over power-enhancing strategies. Profit-seeking firms are agnostic between what Veblen called "business sabotage" and what he thought of as technical efficiency (Veblen [1923] 1997; Knoedler 1997; Dillard and Ruchala 2011). What matters is maximizing the value of anticipated quasi rents. Firms pursue both power and productivity in various measures that depend on how useful they are in creating, increasing the magnitude of, and extending the duration of the quasi rents obtainable from their activity. This results in episodic eruption of new methods of production and exploitation that result in rapid productivity growth and increasing inequality, followed by catch-up by other firms to the technological frontier and political realignment to redress the resistance that growing inequality triggers. Once the regime starts to provide fewer profits from both productivity and the power to extract rents, capitalists seek to escape it through new combinations of technology, institutions, and ideology, to spur a new wave of increased productivity and growing inequality (Benkler 2021).[28]

Because quasi rents are ubiquitous and normal in markets, rent distribution is integral to prices in labor, factor, and product markets. Bargaining power and socialized expectations regarding the division of labor and distribution of rents are central to the dynamics of relations among classes of people who stand in systematically asymmetric positions vis-à-vis each other in their bargaining power. In capitalism, these asymmetries are produced, reproduced, and leveraged not by direct violence conceived as legitimate, but veiled as free exchange among juridical equals, coming to these market exchanges with different institutionally and ideologically inherited entitlements to the means of subsistence, resources in production, and recognition as juridical equals. Their entitlements along all three dimensions shape their staying power and withholding power.

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[27] The basic point is as straightforward as it is fundamental. True uncertainty—uncertainty not only about the outcomes but also about the probabilities of different outcomes—cannot be priced efficiently ex ante. Any claim that there can be a price placed efficiently on all potential future states of the world—a central assumption of the Arrow-Debreu model—simply assumes away true uncertainty. It assumes that all uncertainty is simply an aggregation of a large number of calculable risks. This certainly makes neoclassical modeling feasible, but it is systematically mistaken as a model for a world in which true uncertainty is a common feature of real-world investment decisions. To compensate for the component that cannot be priced efficiently ex ante, finance of projects that include true uncertainty requires that the outcome of the investment include meaningful pricing power to avoid being a price taker at efficient prices: prices that reflect only knowable, rather than unknowable, costs.

[28] The Schumpeterian side of this dynamic, focused only on the drive to innovation in this cyclical pattern, is well developed in the literature on Kondratiev waves (Freeman and Soete 1997; Perez 2003). Our folding of Veblen's analysis of business sabotage into these same cycles, as an alternative strategy responding to the same challenge of cyclically falling profits, is distinctive to our analysis here; it challenges the secular progressive implication of the Schumpeterian dynamic in its original form, and integrates cycles of regimes with new models of exploitation, through novel configurations of power dynamics, with those of new models of productivity, with new technologies and organizational strategies. Of course, even productivity *simpliciter* remains subject to the alienation qualifications we emphasize in note 26 and accompanying text below.

Class within this historically-specific dynamic of capitalism is systematically asymmetric *staying power* and *withholding power* that people possess under a specific regime of institutions, ideology, and technology along three critical axes: (1) resources in production, (2) embodied knowledge, or skill, in the division of labor, and (3) recognition as juridical equals. All three axes are structured and legitimated by the legal order of each regime in capitalism: setting out claims structured as entitlement-disentitlement relations among people over material resources in production (property-type laws); training, application, and control over knowledge—both embodied and codified, its use, and its fruits (education, apprenticeship, vocational training, licensing, intellectual property); and differential recognition of full juridical personhood, particularly along dimensions of racialized and gendered subordination.[29] The same incessant drive to escape competition that drives innovation and continuous productivity growth also drives the systematic institutional and ideological production, intensification, and leveraging of asymmetries along all three dimensions that define the class structure of capitalist societies.

By "staying power" we mean the capacity to walk away from a relation. In business jargon, this is the BATNA (Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement) (Fisher 2011). People who depend on markets for subsistence must enter relations through which to generate market income. Markets for them function as imperative, rather than opportunity (Brenner 1976; Wood 2002a). Staying power for most people therefore depends on the degree to which they are market dependent for subsistence. In transitions of agrarian capitalism when the majority of the population still lived in regions that could provide subsistence farming opportunities, laws expropriating use privileges that rural working households relied on for subsistence played a core role in cutting off the possibility of rural smallholding to force working households into wage labor.[30] Since direct peasant access to land for growing food and fiber, collecting energy, etc. is no longer relevant in contemporary urbanized economies, market dependence for basic goods and needs largely depends on the degree to which access is privatized or socialized, usually through the state (Esping-Andersen 1990).

By "withholding power" we mean the capacity of people occupying different positions to withhold inputs necessary in production: particularly labor and resources, both material and cognitive. Withholding power is a function of property rules and rules governing collective action: labor, corporate, antitrust, criminal conspiracy, etc. (Forbath 1991; Orth 1987; Klarman 1989; Barenberg 1993; Horwitz 1994, 65–107; Paul 2019b; 2020). In combination, staying power and withholding power determine the power different classes have to influence the division of labor, in particular the degree of alienation or meaning associated with different tasks in production, and the division of the fruits of production.

Parts III and IV work out the details of an analytic framework for reconstructing class analysis along these three dimensions, rather than only along the single dimension of ownership over the means of production. While the parts weave in historical descriptions of the salience of the class structure this

[29] On the structure of legal claims as social relations structured as rights, that is, entitlement-disentitlement relations that govern resources and recognition, see Syed (2023). For a review of how different regimes in capitalism structured power through assigning different entitlement-disentitlement frameworks to resources for subsistence and production, knowledge, and juridical personhood, see Benkler (2023).

[30] On the role of the parliamentary enclosures in proletarianizing women and children, and through them all rural households in the Industrial Revolution, see Neeson (1996); Humphries (1990). On the role of intentional changes in trespass, game, and open range laws in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South designed to force formerly enslaved workers into sharecropping, rather than independent subsistence, see Sawers (2018). For an overview of how these operated in conjunction, see Benkler (2023).

analytic framework produces, the class structure we define is analytically derived from the model of power in social relations of production, along three axes that shape withholding power based on how readily replaceable any class of actors is in relation to others, not a descriptive overlay on observed historical social relations. We refer to the history as a mode of validation: the model is useful to the degree it can explain historically observed patterns of social relations and distributions of power better than other models of class can. Moreover, we claim that the model provides useful prescriptions for transformative institutional change and identify the plausible cross-class political alliances feasible in any given inherited regime in capitalism, with its particular configuration of more or less salient class composition.

### *A. Property in the Means of Subsistence and Resources in Production*

Staying power is fundamentally a function of the degree of market dependence for subsistence. Before the parliamentary enclosures in mid-eighteenth-century Britain, women and children working the commons produced roughly half of rural household subsistence, partly through direct use—collecting fuel and gleaning grain—and partly by household production, primarily dairying of cows pastured on the commons (Neeson 1996; Humphries 1990; Pinchbeck [1930] 2004). The parliamentary enclosures expropriated these use privileges, transferring exclusive rights to the landed gentry and aristocracy who controlled Parliament in order to create a fully market-dependent proletariat.[31] Women and children were forced to become the primary workforce in factories of the first wave of the Industrial Revolution (Pinchbeck [1930] 2004; Berg 1991; 1994). After white Southern resistance defeated Reconstruction, Southern states embarked on a systematic campaign to deny the formerly enslaved Black workers access to the means of subsistence that white rural households had used throughout the antebellum period. They passed statutory, regulatory, and common law changes in trespass, open range, and gaming laws, sometimes applied only in majority-Black counties to avoid white resistance, designed to prevent formerly enslaved workers from having an alternative to hiring themselves out to former plantation owners (Sawers 2018).

In Britain, these changes converted the majority of rural households from smallholding quasi-peasant households with significant market opportunities, reflecting the highest or near-highest wages in Europe by the middle of the eighteenth century, into an impoverished rural proleteriat forced to migrate to newly industrializing cities and experiencing a century of falling or at best stagnant wages during a period of sustained growth in British GDP per capita (Allen 2015; Broadberry et al. 2015, 258). In the American South, expropriating access to the means of subsistence forced formerly enslaved Black workers into sharecropping, as removal of the means of subsistence was reinforced by contract labor, false pretense, vagrancy, and other criminal laws that prevented escape from debt peonage (Stelzner 2019; Sawers 2018).

In urban societies, direct access to land is no longer relevant for the overwhelming majority of households, but rules regarding entitlements to some level of provisioning by the state or other social provisioning produce parallel effects. The distinctive institutional feature of Nordic social democracies as compared to corporatist European market societies and Anglo-American models is universal eligibility to quite high levels of public or regulated utility provisioning of core components of basic

[31] Neeson documents the extent to which proponents of enclosures explicitly emphasized forcing a more docile and lower-wage workforce as a core benefit of enclosures (Neeson 1996, 28) (for example, "The farmers in this county are often at a loss for labourers: the inclosure of the wastes would increase the number of hands for labour, *by removing the means of subsisting in idleness*.").

needs and goods—housing, health, education, energy, transportation, and communications, coupled with active labor market policies and a generous social safety net (Esping-Andersen 1990; Thelen 2014). In combination, these increase the staying power of working-class families by comparison to the tighter and more punitive social welfare approach in the United States.

Withholding power is a function of rules assigning control over resources in production. These include property in natural resources or processed material inputs into production, knowledge (codified and embodied), and technology. Property laws of various kinds, including intellectual property and regulations that affect control over diverse resources, shape control over use of these resources in production. We think of these generally as "property": laws governing social relations with respect to resources (di Robilant and Syed 2018). This ability to control resources by claim of legal right gives capitalists power: *both* over society, to constrain efforts to limit market dependence for subsistence, *and* in production, over workers who cannot meet their basic needs without access to these resources.

In addition to property, laws structuring collective action play a central role in allocating withholding power. The most obvious are rules shaping labor coordination, from common law conspiracy and statutory prohibitions on labor combinations, through the war the judiciary waged on labor during the second industrial divide (Forbath 1991; Klarman 1989), to the sustained assault on labor organizing in the United States in the past four decades (Mishel, Rhinehart, and Windham 2023). But, as Sanjukta Paul's recent work underscores, corporate and antitrust law also structure coordination and collective action (Paul 2020; 2019a). So too do securities laws and a myriad of sector-specific regulations from agriculture to energy that make it easier or harder for those who control their own labor and embodied knowledge, and, opposed to them, those who possess the means to buy control over material and knowledge resources in production, to collaborate and pool their respective contributions to production. Whoever can coordinate their actions with respect to whatever resources or labor they control can increase their ability to control access to those types of resources, and consequently their relative power vis-à-vis those who do not have access to these resources but need it in order to engage in the market-oriented production necessary to meet their basic needs and wants. This is true whether we speak of capitalists coordinating their control of resources, like the Oil or Sugar Trusts of yore or the megamergers of today, of unionized workers, or of smallholder farmers' cooperatives.

In sum, property-like rules structuring social relations with respect to resources, and coordination rules structuring collective action within classes that occupy systematically different positions in social relations of production, shape the pattern and degree of asymmetry in social relations of production. The relative ease with which those who can raise capital, as opposed to those who bring their labor, can pool their resources produces a systematic asymmetric power relation in favor of the former over the latter. This power is expressed both in the division of labor—who does what with whom, and with what degree of meaning or alienation; and in the division of its fruits—who gets what from the joint efforts. The relative ease with which capitalists and the professional and managerial class (PMC) can coordinate within corporate frameworks relative to smallholders makes the power of the former over society, through politics, and their power within markets over smallholder suppliers or customers, larger.

Yet, as we explained in the introduction to this Part, for all their power vis-à-vis workers, as long as capitalists and smallholders depend on markets to obtain their control over resources, they *too* remain subject to the imperatives of generalized market competition. They too are subject to the Red Queen dynamic. And in their drive to escape competition, to create and extract rents, they are indifferent as to whether they pursue improvements in efficiency or in mechanisms of exerting power over others:

sabotaging competitors; creating bottlenecks to control suppliers or customers; and producing, finding, and exploiting every avenue to gain power over competitors, workers, suppliers, or customers (Benkler 2021). The vertical, asymmetric relations of class-in-capitalism explain much of the structure of instrumentalization and exploitation, but horizontal dynamics across classes and within the profit-reaping classes too drive dynamics of alienation and self-instrumentalization in modern market society.

### *B. Division of Labor: Manual and Cognitive*

Property in resources necessary for production is only one dimension along which different people occupy different positions in asymmetric relations. A second, similarly fundamental axis of distinction is the division between manual and cognitive labor.[32] Skill, or embodied knowledge, translates into position in social relations of production because of scarcity and substitutability. Knowledge is a resource, and control over knowledge is a source of relative withholding power in social relations of production for those who possess it, which in turn depends on how easy it is to replace their embodied knowledge.

Because embodied knowledge and skill are difficult to codify for commodification, the degree of embodied knowledge different classes possess has always translated into withholding power. The iron molders' union was the most powerful in postbellum Chicago because it took six years of apprenticeship to become an iron molder who could produce iron that could reliably make railroad tracks or cast-iron pots. Their skill anchored working-class bargaining power in Chicago for nearly two decades during and after the Civil War, as their gains set improved benchmarks for others (Ozanne 1967, 4). The central goal of the new unionism in Britain in the 1890s (Klarman 1989), as it was for the Knights of Labor (Goodwyn 1978), the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and eventually the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) (Forbath 1991; Wertheimer 1977), was to regularize this cross-class coalition of skilled with semiskilled and unskilled workers. They did so to counteract the efforts of businesses to use technology to formalize and externalize the embodied knowledge of craft workers, and displace it to machines, newly "scientific" industrial processes, and the rising managerial class.

Business has always invested in technological and organizational transformations designed to weaken labor's withholding power over skill and embodied knowledge: the self-acting mule (Bruland 1982; Berg 1994), iron-molding and tin-capping machines (Ozanne 1967; Bowles 1989), scientific management (Braverman 1998), automobile automation (Sugrue 2014, 130–43), computerized numerically controlled machine tools (Noble 1984), or present-day digital surveillance techniques applied both to workers and customers (Levy and Barocas 2018; Levy 2023). Moreover, conflicts *within* the working classes, between skilled/craft workers and unskilled or semiskilled workers, repeat throughout the history of capitalism, whether in the form of early conflicts over replacement of male apprenticed weavers with unapprenticed youths, demobilized veterans, and women that resulted in the first of the combinations acts in Britain in 1721; conflicts over the new unionism and the split between the cross-class CIO or IWW and the skilled-guild, racialized, and gendered model of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in the decades around the early twentieth century (Dawson 2013; Wertheimer 1977); or today's conflicts over licensing and training requirements in diverse service

[32] Our insistence on this as a second, equally fundamental, axis of class division within capitalism, one anchored firmly in production itself and generated by skill differentiation, rather than seen as an overlay of "nonmaterial" production having to do with general "ideological and political" reproduction or "authority" at the workplace, differentiates our conception from those of New Left analyses that we otherwise build on: see note 33 below.

industries. The legal structure of access to training and licensing and certification requirements shapes the relative power and degree of conflict or congruence between skilled and semi- or unskilled workers.

Of particular significance since the 1870s has been the rise of the professional and managerial class (PMC) as a distinct class from capitalists,[33] and alongside them a clerical class. By "capitalists," we mean those who *both* possess property in resources necessary for production *and* actively engage in cognitive work to manage the enterprise in which they possess property. This in contrast to the increasingly less important class of "rentiers"—who possess property in resources in production, but engage in no production role—and the PMC, who engage in cognitive work in and for enterprises without having property rights in the enterprise or resources it uses in production. From sixteenth-century sea captains and *boekhouders* managing Dutch privateering enterprises and lawyers or Caribbean plantation managers working for absentee owners in seventeenth-century English capitalism, there has always been a class of people in capitalism who did cognitive and managerial work without ownership of the enterprise. They have always played a distinct role in relation to capitalists and workers. As the capital costs of railroads and large-scale industrial processes required ever-larger capital pooling, the PMC became more independent and powerful relative to rentiers and capitalists. The development of the modern corporation, in particular, required extensive legal changes to make it possible for these nonowners to possess the kind of control that would become the Berle and Means corporation (Chandler 2002; Horwitz 1994, 72–79). Alongside them, the stockjobbers and brokers of the Amsterdam Bourse and Exchange Alley in early modern Amsterdam and London turned into the stockbrokers and financiers, today's hedge fund managers and managers of major institutional investors, who own little of the financial assets they manage.

Alongside and generally subordinated to these were those Upton Sinclair called "white-collar" workers: "the petty underlings of the business world, the poor office-clerks, who are often the worst exploited of proletarians, but who, because they are allowed to wear a white collar, and to work in the office with the boss, regard themselves as members of the capitalist class." He also described them as the "most bitter despisers" of "every union working man" (Sinclair 1920, 77–78). They are

[33] Our analysis of the PMC is heavily indebted, of course, to the work of Barbara and John Ehrenreich, along with that of their predecessors in New Left analysis of a possible new class, Nicos Poulantzas and André Gorz: Poulantzas (1973; 1975); Gorz (1968; 1972); Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (1979). A key point of departure, however, is that these analyses accept the classical Marxist understanding of class as pertaining to production and appropriation of a "material surplus" anchored in differential ownership of the means of production, and then layer over top of this core "economic" division a second more "ideological" or "cultural" or "political" one, between those engaged in "productive" (commodified) versus "nonproductive" (noncommodified) or "material" versus "ideological" or "technical" versus "social" labor (Poulantzas 1973, 38; Poulantzas 1975, 26; Gorz 1968, 120–25; Gorz 1972, 27–28; Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979, 12). By contrast, our view directly locates class asymmetries in the division of productive labor itself, and we pinpoint a factor—skill differentiation—that we believe is truly generative, leading us to different explanatory and evaluative conclusions, as discussed in text accompanying note 34 below. In this respect, it also remains firmly distant from the earlier efforts by Erik Olin Wright to fold managers and professionals *into* the property axis (instead of on top of it as a noneconomic division), as a "contradictory" location within it: see discussion in note 11 above. But it inches closer to Wright's later efforts to relax the classical Marxist framework, by allowing "authority and skill" distinct, albeit secondary, roles in class division (Wright 1997, 20–26). Wright's analysis of the sources of these differentiations remains, however, tied to an underlying "surplus appropriation" model of class that, for reasons set out above, we think needs to be fully jettisoned in favor of a "division of labor and disposition of its fruits" model. See Wright (2009, 108) (managers and professionals' "positions within the class structure draw their specific character from their relationship to [the] basic division . . . between those who own and control the means of production—capitalists—and those hired to use those means of production—workers"); and note 22 above, and accompanying text (differentiating Wright's transhistorical materialist approach to class analysis from a historically-specific analysis of capitalist social relations of production).

distinguished from the working class by the fact that the labor they do is cognitive, rather than manual; from the capitalists, rentiers, and smallholders by the fact that they own no property in the resources deployed in production or in the enterprises that coordinate the production from which they make a living; and from the PMC by the comparatively lower skill or embodied knowledge their tasks require, making them more readily substitutable and leaving them with systematically less withholding power than the PMC possesses to shape both the dignity and intrinsic interest of the daily work they do and in their ability to obtain a large share of the fruits of their labor.

Recognizing and understanding the distinctive class position of the PMC is particularly important today, if we are to understand the specific form of capitalism that has developed under neoliberalism.[34] Beginning in the 1970s, free global financial flows and privatization of pensions policies increased the supply of financial capital in the hands of investors in search of diversified holdings, rather than control of enterprises. Increasingly, the class of people who manage the enterprises and these financial flows has become the dominant class in contemporary capitalism (G. F. Davis 2009; Krippner 2011; Foroohar 2016). Managers, professionals in the financial sector, and (benchmarking to keep up with their college roommates) doctors and lawyers saw their share of national income grow the most in the past forty years (Bakija, Cole, and Heim 2012). At the same time, even in the top 0.5 percent of income distribution labor income is still a larger share than capital income, which only comes to dominate in the top 0.1 percent (Piketty 2014, figs 8.9, 8.10). Now, power is not absolute power. Like workers and capitalists, the PMC too are subject to the imperatives of generalized markets. The rat race ensnaring PMC children from cradle to grave is familiar to most readers of this piece: the late nights of associates in Big Law; the frustrations of physicians unable to spend time with their patients because they rush to increase their billable time (Markovits 2019).[35] But subject to these impersonal market imperatives, the *relative* power of the PMC gives them relative power to structure their own time, to direct their efforts to intrinsically meaningful work, and to exercise power over other classes in the social division of labor and its fruits.

### *C. Personhood: The Production and Function of a Racialized Underclass*

Perhaps the most widely used concept from W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935) is the wages of whiteness. As Du Bois put it: "the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white . . . . Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect on their economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them" (ibid. at 700–01). Less often cited is Du Bois's description of this system as "a carefully planned and slowly evolved method, *which drove such a wedge between the white and black workers that there probably are not today in the world two groups of workers with practically identical interests who hate and fear each other so deeply and persistently and who are kept so far apart that neither sees anything of common interest*" (700 (emphasis added)). "Emancipation," he had argued earlier in the book, "left the planters poor, and with no method for earning a living except by exploiting black labor and their only remaining capital—their land" (671). "The race element was emphasized in order that property-holders could get the support of the majority of white laborers and make it more possible to exploit Negro labor. . . . So long as the Southern white laborers could be induced to prefer poverty to equality with the

[34] In this respect, our judgment departs quite sharply from that of the Ehrenreichs, owing to the underlying analytic differences in our conception of the PMC (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 2013; Ehrenreich and Press 2019).

[35] While we obviously disagree with Markovits's interpretation of the relation between high pay and productivity, his phenomenology of the alienation of the American PMC is perfect.

Negro, just so long was a labor movement in the South made impossible" (680). Early in the book, Du Bois argued:

> [I]n order to maintain its income without sacrifice or exertion, the South fell back on a doctrine of racial differences which it asserted made higher intelligence and increased efficiency impossible for Negro labor. Wishing such an excuse for lazy indulgence, the planter easily found, invented and proved it. His subservient religious leaders reverted to the "Curse of Canaan"; his pseudo-scientists gathered and supplemented all available doctrines of race inferiority; his scattered schools and pedantic periodicals repeated these legends, until for the average planter born after 1840 it was impossible not to believe that all valid laws in psychology, economics and politics stopped with the Negro race.
>
> The espousal of the doctrine of Negro inferiority by the South was primarily because of economic motives and the inter-connected political urge necessary to support slave industry. (Du Bois 1935, 38–39)

Du Bois's magnum opus was the first in a rich series of works by American and Caribbean Black Marxists starting in the 1930s and 1940s (James [1938] 1989; E. E. Williams [1944] 2021; Boyce Davies 2007; Jones 1949; Cox 1959; Hall 1980; Patterson 1982; A. Y. Davis 1983; Robinson 2000). By the late 1980s this tradition encountered dissatisfaction with its heavy focus on the economic dimensions of racialization and racism, best expressed in Cornel West's explicit break with the Marxist tradition and his insistence on the priority of explaining anti-Black racism as a first-order phenomenon in Western culture (West [1987] 1999). Since then, much of the work on race and racism in America, with notable exceptions following the work of Barbara Fields and Adolph Reed Jr. (Reed 1999; B. J. Fields 1990; K. E. Fields and B. J. Fields 2014; Johnson 2007; 2016; Dawson 2013; 2016), has followed West's approach: emphasizing the independent, prior existence of racism, in particular anti-Black racism, in Western and American culture and law.

We reiterate what we stated at the outset. Our purpose here is not to question contemporary prioritization of explanations of racism; we make no claim to explain racism or to reject the prioritization of the study of the role of racism in American or Western culture, society, and polity more generally. Rather, we seek to excavate from the rich Black radical tradition a better understanding of *class*-in-capitalism, in particular of *racialized class relations*—one that incorporates at its foundations the influence of this rich vein of mid-twentieth-century scholarship.

Three fundamental power dynamics drive the need of oligarchic elites—rentiers, capitalists, and the PMC—to produce, through institutions and ideology, a racialized underclass vulnerable to super-exploitation. The first is the need to define or identify a set of persons whose outputs can be either fully expropriated without pay or differentially super-exploited with substandard pay, in ways that do not trigger revolt within the system of commodified relations, in particular in ways that destabilize the veil of free exchange among juridical equals central to legitimation of the exploitation of those workers recognized as full juridical persons. The second is the need to maintain discipline in labor markets, as the super-exploitative conditions of the racialized underclass place downward pressure on wages and division of labor for the majority of workers in the normative (white) working classes. The third is the divide-and-conquer strategy most explicit in the quotations from Du Bois: the need to create and sustain cleavages within and among the other classes in order to prevent the formation of effective political and economic coalitions that could counter the power of the profit-reaping elites.

The first goal is not as trivial as it sounds. Free exchange between formal juridical equals is the foundational ideological pillar of capitalist social relations, legitimating both asymmetric social relations of production (the labor contract that reifies social relations as commodity exchange) and the modern state as the repository of legitimate violence deployed to structure and enforce those relations through law (social contract). It is not empty rhetoric, but an ideology, the shared common sense in a society that governs how its members understand how the world works. Finding ways of marking populations of workers as suitable targets for super-exploitation or expropriation to increase profits above those available from employing "normative" workers possessing recognition as full persons within that core legitimating ideology is a major pathway of power seeking to increase profit. What Adolph Reed Jr. called ascriptive hierarchies of civic status (Reed 2002, 265) are as much a product of the Red Queen dynamic as is continuous technological or institutional innovation. The effort to obtain higher profits than those obtainable under the present political-institutional settlement of class struggle obtained in past struggles by the "normative" working classes drives profit-reaping classes to invent and reinforce atavistic lines of distinction with which to mark subpopulations of potential workers, domestic and global, for denial of recognition as full persons, and thus as suitable objects of expropriation or super-exploitation.

Capitalism produces racialized class relations to cover populations atavistically marked as "outside" recognized full juridical personhood alongside, in conjunction with, and as part of its production of the veil of free exchange to cover class relations among those who are on the "inside" of the population recognized as bearing full personhood. While the driving dynamic of racialization is to create and exploit lines of super-exploitation, its practice as ideology depends on the production of atavistic markers of subordination, or denial of recognition of personhood, that cross class lines. To produce differentiation stable enough to counter the ideology of full juridical equality as the "norm" in wage labor, atavistic status subordination cannot be contained purely to the racialized underclass, or else it will collapse into class and lose its naturalizing effect. To produce a public consciousness that naturalizes race, or, as Fields put it, to produce race as an ideology, racialization must necessarily be deployed in laws and social norms that produce continuous public humiliation *across classes*, Jim Crow–segregated first-class rail cars being the most obvious example, so as to preserve the atavistic line of status subordination as independent of the class structure drawn along the dimensions of property and knowledge alone. Once atavistic lines of status subordination are established as a governing ideology in a society, they shape perceptions of merit and productivity and set benchmarks for roles in production and wages, exerting a gravitational pull on location in the division of labor and the share in the distribution of its fruits up and down the class hierarchy. Moreover, racialization of class relations dynamically reinforces status subordination as class-based strategies of exploitation, such as siting environmental hazards in impoverished neighborhoods (Banzhaf, Ma, and Timmins 2019) or marketing exploitative credit offerings, like subprime mortgages, to impoverished borrowers (Baradaran 2018), differentially burden racialized groups while reinforcing perceptions of demerit and low status.

Following the Black Marxian position, then, we treat *capitalism as constitutive of racialization*. By that we do not mean that all instances of atavistic status subordination marked along lines we would recognize as "racialized" occur only in capitalism. Rather, we mean that the dynamics of capital as a social relation, the interaction of the Red Queen dynamic with the centrality of the veil of free exchange among juridical equals, internally and repeatedly produces racialized class relations whose contours may change from place to place and time to time, depending on inherited social relations and new opportunities for super-exploitation. While this does not (indeed cannot) "refute" the position that European anti-Black racism is a distinctive force in Western civilization independent of but central to

capitalism from the outside in, along the lines West and others have developed over the past four decades, it certainly provides sufficient explanation, internal to the dynamics of capitalism, for the actually observed dynamics of racialized class relations that have pervaded capitalist societies since early modernity.

In particular, it provides a single, consistent explanation of repeated recurrence of racialized underclasses outside of the Western versus African, white/Black dichotomy, both before enslavement of Africans by Europeans, as both Robinson (2000, 67)[36] and Cox (2000, 14–30) argued and showed, and alongside it and since. The Ukrainian and Polish serfs in the second serfdom who fed the Dutch Republic through the Baltic grain trade; the German peasant seasonal migrant workers who manned the Dutch herring fleet and the ships of the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) until conflict with England and France undermined Dutch manufacturing in the late seventeenth century and left Dutch workers little choice but to take those jobs on the degraded terms available to those foreign workers; the Irish migrant workers in emerging capitalist English agriculture imported to depress wages of rural workers, or the mid-eighteenth-century offshoring of linen thread production to Ireland for the explosively growing Lancashire fustian industry, the precursor to its cotton industry. The racialization of Irish workers in both British and American capitalism in the nineteenth century; the racialization of the working class by British "scientific racism" of the nineteenth century; the racialization of Slavs in Western Europe; of Italian, Jewish, and Chinese workers in the second industrial divide in America; of Turkish guest workers in Germany since the 1960s; and of South and Southeast Asian and African *kafala* workers in the Gulf states in the twenty-first century. All these line up in ways that are entirely predictable and consistent with each other within a framework that sees racialization as a necessary product of capitalist social relations of production, while requiring adaptation and extension by a psychological or cultural theory focused on racism as distinctive to the relation of Western civilization to Africa.

Moreover, contra Ellen Meiksins Wood's Marxian assertion in her debate with Reed that "[c]apitalism is conceivable without racial divisions, but not, by definition, without class" (Wood 2002b, 276), we incorporate from the Black radical tradition that *racialization is constitutive of capitalism*. That is, not only is racialization a product of profit seeking in capitalism, but its pursuit, production, and exploitation has been repeatedly created and deployed by the profit-reaping classes in capitalist societies as a degree of freedom in their incessant effort to escape competition and the pressures of cyclically falling profits in each regime, that is, the Red Queen dynamic. This claim is analytically derived from the centrality of the ideology of juridical equality and the constraints that both it and class struggle, in which the normative working classes episodically gain partial victories, place on the degree of exploitation feasible in any given historical period.

In the specific American context, as Barbara Fields put it memorably, "Those holding liberty to be inalienable and holding Afro-Americans as slaves were bound to end by holding race to be a self-evident truth" (B. J. Fields 1990, 101), echoing Du Bois's explanation that "[t]he South had but one argument against following modern civilization in this yielding to the demand of laboring humanity" (Du Bois 1935, 38).[37] Yet the tension between the ideology of juridical equality and the profitability of

[36] Robinson described the racialization dynamics internal to emerging European capitalism that were, as he put it, grafted onto non-Europeans with "the incorporation of African, Asian, and peoples of the New World into the world system emerging from late feudalism and merchant capitalism," forming "the dialectic of colonialism, plantocratic slavery, and resistance from the sixteenth century forward, and the formations of industrial labor and labor reserves" (2000, 67).
[37] Cox too adopted a similar understanding (Cox 2000, 17–19).

enslavement of workers in British commodity export–oriented plantations was already central to conflicts over enforcement of property claims in workers for well over a century before the American Revolution, and racialization was its resolution (Brewer 2021). In Stuart Hall's classic formulation, addressing racialized class relations in Caribbean and Latin American, as well as British and American, societies, "race is the modality in which class is 'lived'" (Hall 1980, 341)[38] within the historically-specific relations of capitalist accumulation.[39]

Integrating racialization as a foundational dynamic of capitalism does not, then, require one to abandon an explanation of capitalism as a global phenomenon and insist on the distinctiveness of American capitalism (or that of any other country), as Reed argued and Wood feared. Rather, we see racialization as analytically necessitated by the pervasiveness of both the ideology of juridical equality and the drive to maximize profits through super-exploitation wherever possible, and historically validated by the pervasive role that racialized class relations, both domestic and global, of those subject to heightened lawful violence, "vulnerability to premature death," as Ruth Wilson Gilmore put it (Gilmore 2007, 28), and through it expropriation and super-exploitation, have played in every regime in capitalism since its early modern origins.[40] In addition to Marxian conceptions of juridically free labor and its sale as commodity as central to the definition of capitalism, then, profitability under conditions of class conflict that capitalists do not always win outright requires the continuous production of some class of subordinated person who can be expropriated through direct violence or repressed violently into super-exploitability[41] to circumvent the constraints of periodic partial successes of cross-class coalitions that strengthen the "normative" working classes.

Leveraging racialized us/them, here/there distinctions of juridical personhood continues to play a central role in global trade. The persistent exclusion of labor and environmental standards from permissible bases for exclusion of imports supports global firms' power arbitrage, structuring their manufacturing networks to harness particularly weak or desperate, usually racialized, workers in situ. As with the domestic racialized underclass, so with global trade, the exploitation both provides cheap inputs and disciplines labor in domestic labor markets: the threat of offshoring disciplines labor's demands and places downward pressure on wages in trade-exposed sectors (Rodrik 2021, 5–6). And as with the domestic underclass, so too with global networks, racialization joins conceptions of sovereignty or foreignness to mediate between the liberal ideals of economies at the core of the global

[38] The full sentence that includes this classic formulation is "Race is thus, also, the modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'" (Hall 1980, 341).

[39] We recognize that it is possible to read Hall's discussion more narrowly, as one that uses the term to describe only the relations of the Black "fraction" of the working class, leaving the impact on the "white fraction" focused solely on the "the internal fractioning and division within the working class," but we think a better reading to be one that aligns Hall's brilliant crystallization with that of Robinson, Reed, and Fields, only now on a broader canvas than American capitalism alone, and that emphasizes his conclusion that "racism is also one of the dominant means of ideological representation through which the white fractions of the class come to 'live' their relations to other fractions, *and through them to capital itself*" (Hall 1980, 341, emphasis added).

[40] "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation" (Marx [1867] 1976, ch. 31). See Table 1.

[41] Elizabeth Hinton, for example, described the mutation of the War on Poverty into the violent policing and mass incarceration model that has characterized the American state's control over much of its Black population (Hinton 2016). Loïc Wacquant similarly described parallel increases in violent coercive policing across diverse neoliberal polities, in Europe as well as the United States (Wacquant 2009).

network of trade and the reality of super-exploitation of workers in global supply chains at levels politically and morally intolerable domestically (Du Bois 1935).[42]

The production of a racialized underclass also serves as a source of discipline over those members of the working classes who are part of the dominant majority. Harnessing a class of institutionally and ideologically status-subordinated workers provides a consistent and elastic supply of labor, particularly at the lower end, to reduce the bargaining power workers might gain in tight labor markets. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines and measures three categories of potential workers not currently employed, which roughly correspond to Marx's "floating," "stagnant," and "latent" reserve armies of labor (Marx [1867] 1976, ch. 25). What the BLS calls "unemployed" are workers actively looking for a job. They function as the floating reserve army of labor; their primary role is to maintain downward pressure on wages during upswings of short-term business cycles. The Fed actively manages the size of the floating reserve army in order to put downward pressure on wages.[43] By one account, artificially high unemployment shaped by monetary policy was the primary driver of wage inequality among men in the bottom half of the income distribution in the past forty years (Mishel, Schmitt, and Shierholz 2014).

The BLS also defines a category of workers as "marginally attached to the workforce." These include "discouraged workers" who think there are no jobs available for which they would qualify, including because of concerns about discrimination. This category also includes those workers whose "full-time" job gives them less than thirty-five hours per week. These kinds of workers play the role of the stagnant reserve army of labor: they put downward pressure on wages at the low end of the labor market, and provide a labor force that, through low socialized wage expectations and lack of options, is more susceptible to acquiescing in new, more exploitative labor processes. To a degree, they are also part of the latent reserve army of labor: their labor supply kicks in primarily over longer-term cycles or during emergencies. Racialized minorities—Black Americans and Latin American immigrants and their descendants in the United States, and North African, sub-Saharan African, and Middle Eastern immigrants in Europe—provide a major reservoir of people sufficiently weak politically and economically to be forced to absorb this position at higher rates than majority groups. Racialized immigrant groups, particularly guest workers and even more so undocumented, hypervulnerable immigrants, play an outsize role as the workforce that makes up this stagnant reserve army of labor. Their juridically subordinate status operates to produce low socialized wage expectations, exclude them from better forms of employment, and render them particularly unable to organize politically and economically to build collective counterpower. These underclasses are the targets of hypertrophied policing systems and overbearing welfare systems (Wacquant 2009).

The first power dynamic surrounding the institutional and ideological imperatives of racialization was the creation of a set of people susceptible to super-exploitation. The second was downward pressure on the wages and conditions of work for the normative, or white, working class. The third power dynamic is divide and conquer. We began with Du Bois's emphasis on the political dimension of

[42] "Home labor in cultured lands, appeased and misled by a ballot whose power the dictatorship of vast capital strictly curtailed, was bribed by high wage and political office to unite in an exploitation of white, yellow, brown and black labor, in lesser lands and 'breeds without the law'" (Du Bois 1935, 634).

[43] The Fed works with a concept of the "non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment" (NAIRU), which is to say the level of unemployment necessary to suppress wage growth to a level that will not drive inflation up. When the economy heats up and demand for labor increases to the point that labor's short-side power increases enough to demand higher wages, the Fed tightens the money supply to slow down growth and maintain a sufficiently high level of unemployment to put downward pressure on wage growth, and hence on price inflation.

racialization. It is impossible to look at how the party of business harnessed the white working class to its cause since the 1970s and fail to see in the rise of American neoliberalism the same dynamic that Du Bois described as driving the defeat of Reconstruction. Nixon's Southern strategy and the racialized War on Crime and Reagan's racialized welfare queen, racialized War on Drugs, and embrace of the Moral Majority's backlash against the women's movement proved decisive in shifting the allegiance of the white working class. These allowed the party of business to retain white working-class votes while devastating their life prospects by extracting almost all productivity growth into the hands of the oligarchic elites. Against them, large parts of the PMC and smaller parts of the capitalist class allied with racialized elites to shape the Democratic Party as an oppositional cross-class coalition, which maintained its alliance largely by focusing away from economic class politics and toward fighting, and achieving substantial gains against, race and gender subordination (Reed 1999; Johnson 2007).

Beyond political power, in earlier chapters of *Black Reconstruction*, focused on the antebellum period, Du Bois also emphasized the role of race and racialized immigration in making it difficult to organize labor as an economic power, independent of its destructive effects on political power (Du Bois 1935).[44] It is to the inability to see past the racial divide and forge a single workers movement that DuBois also attributes the postbellum concentration on skilled workers' unions and the racially exclusionary policies of the American Federation of Labor (ibid., 22–25). Oliver Cox underscored the systematic resistance to education of Black workers as a means of maintaining and reproducing the weakness associated with unskilled labor in the division of labor (Cox 2000, 26–28). For their part, liberal abolitionists, both antebellum and during Reconstruction, opposed racial juridical status subordination, but ignored the class divide. As Michael Dawson put it, "the racialized nature of capitalist society in the United States undermines the potential unity necessary for effective resistance" (Dawson 2016, 146). It is simply impossible to understand the unique weakness of American social democracy as a historical matter, Dawson argues, or to construct anything like a meaningful social democratic program, without incorporating an understanding of race and racism into both its core theoretical framework and practical programmatic design (Dawson 2013, 12–15).

## IV. The Articulation of Gender and Class in Capitalism

Patriarchy long preexisted capitalism, and is pervasive in capitalist and noncapitalists countries in modernity. Sexual violence and heteronormativity are common across cultures and societies, historical and modern. As with race, we do not presume to offer a theory of gender or intervene in longstanding debates among feminist scholars regarding what aspects of gender theory and explanations of

[44] Du Bois writes:

> Here, then, were two labor movements: the movement to give the black worker a minimum legal status which would enable him to sell his own labor, and another movement which proposed to increase the wage and better the condition of the working class in America, now largely composed of foreign immigrants, and dispute with the new American capitalism the basis upon which the new wealth was to be divided. Broad philanthropy and a wide knowledge of the elements of human progress would have led these two movements to unite and in their union to become irresistible. It was difficult, almost impossible, for this to be clear to the white labor leaders of the [eighteen] thirties. They had their particularistic grievances and one of these was the competition of free Negro labor. Beyond this they could easily vision a new and tremendous competition of black workers after all the slaves became free. What they did not see nor understand was that this competition was present and would continue and would be emphasized if the Negro continued as a slave worker. On the other hand, the Abolitionists did not realize the plight of the white laborer, especially the semi-skilled and unskilled worker. (Du Bois 1935, 20–21)

gendered social relations should take priority (MacKinnon 1982; Butler 1997; Fraser 1997). Our goal is narrower: to describe the historically-specific articulation of gender subordination with class-in-capitalism. Specifically, we underscore three dynamics: the separation of (paid) production from (unpaid) reproduction work and domestic labor coupled with the privatization of reproduction; the extension of the dynamics of status-subordinated labor to women's work in commodified labor markets; and the leveraging of racialized class in the commodification of privatized reproduction in care work.

### *A. Privatized and Atomized Reproduction Under Patriarchy*

Ivy Pinchbeck's groundbreaking work in 1930 (Pinchbeck [1930] 2004), and Jane Humphries's updated analysis over thirty years ago (Humphries 1990), made clear that the central effect of the parliamentary enclosures, the final separation of most households from direct access to their means of subsistence, operated through women's work—the separation of household production of food, household production of fuel, and market-oriented smallholding production (dairy and other home products for local markets) from reproduction—bearing, nursing, and raising children. In pre- or noncapitalist societies where most households have direct access to the means of subsistence, production and reproduction are integrated in the household production system. As households became wage-dependent and labor relations subject to the logic and discipline of profit maximization, inherited patriarchal division of labor in care work, childrearing, and domestic labor; the valorization of "making money" in a commodified economy; and the systematic underpayment of women in commodity labor markets following the status subordination dynamic we discuss in Part IV-B combined to create a positive feedback effect between gender subordination in the household, reinforced by wage dependence; and subordination in labor markets, reinforced by patriarchal division of unpaid reproduction and life-maintenance labor in the household (Fraser 2014; Folbre 2020). The dynamic is, of course, not limited to the Industrial Revolution or Britain, but rather is driven by the combination of inherited patriarchal relations in the family with one of the defining characteristics of capitalist social relations—universal market dependence for subsistence. If market dependence for subsistence is constitutive of capitalism, so too then is the separation of commodity production from reproduction, and with it the distinctive, historically-specific articulation of gender in capitalism as a bidirectional positive feedback effect between subordinate position in the family and subordinate position in commodity labor markets.

This distinct articulation of social relations of reproduction with capitalist social relations of production has been central to Nancy Folbre's work for over three decades. Folbre's focus is not primarily on women as subordinated labor within commodified labor markets, but on the privatization of social relations of reproduction, its exploitative structure for parents in general and women in particular, and its reinforcement of patriarchal relations within households subject to generalized market imperatives for subsistence (Folbre 1994; 2009; 2008; 2020). Over this same period, Joan Williams has explored the role of law and the ideology of domesticity in structuring and legitimating this dynamic (J. Williams 2001b; 2010; 2001a).[45] The basic point is that without labor, capital is merely a pile of ore, a stretch of land, a hunk of metal (Marx [1867] 1976, ch. 33). Labor does not spring forth from the forehead of Zeus at age twenty, but is conceived, carried, born, and raised by adults understood in any given society as bearing special relation to and responsibility for raising children. The relations among these adults make up social relations of reproduction: who may, who must, and

[45] For a review of the extensive literature that developed on the role of privatized reproduction work, see Harris (2009, 44–48).

who must not or need not have sex with whom; have children with whom; care for which children, how, and for how long.

The distinctive characteristic of capitalism is that it atomizes and privatizes (as opposed to socializes) the process and costs of reproduction, and separates the sites of reproduction and life-maintenance care work (cooking, cleaning, etc.), marking them as sites of unpaid labor, from the sites of waged production. In a society dependent on generalized markets for the satisfaction of basic needs and wants, the economic burden of childbearing and childrearing falls on those most directly responsible for caring for and socializing children based on inherited social norms and legal obligations.[46] In a society that conceives relations as market exchange among naturally free and equal individuals, centripetal forces disrupt norms of kin networks and social responsibility for childrearing, atomizing these to the nuclear family and, since the sexual revolution, increasingly to single-parent households, usually headed by single mothers, in turn overrepresented among households below the poverty line.[47] The separation of the sites of production and reproduction externalized the costs of life-maintenance, producing, as Williams underscored, a normative male wage-earning worker supported by a flow of unpaid domestic services produced by a status-subordinated worker "outside" the commodity relation, the wife, disciplined by economic dependence and an ideology of domesticity backed by domestic violence treated as legitimate in the quintessential private sphere, the family home (J. Williams 2001b; Folbre 2009).

As with liberalism generally, so with gender, atomization and privatization produce new forms of both liberation and oppression. The same ideological dynamics that erode patriarchy, heteronormativity, and gender conformism also erode the socialization of childcare in kinship networks. As Nancy Fraser lamented in *Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History* (Fraser 2013, 214–21), capitalism has left women in particular, both PMC and working class, more exposed to market imperatives in an ideological framework that valorizes paid labor and, as she puts it, "Once the centerpiece of a radical critique of androcentrism, [women's liberation through access to and success in commodified workplaces] serves today to intensify capitalism's valorization of waged labor" (ibid., 221). This, argues Folbre, leaves parents in general, and women in particular, to bear the full social cost of raising the next generation of labor in increasingly atomized private relations, conceiving even the children as becoming free working adults with no reciprocal care obligations toward those who raised them.

Parents in general, Folbre argues, and women in particular, subsidize businesses that need not pay the cost of reproducing the adult, well-socialized workforce, as well as subsidizing nonparents who, as consumers, need not pay the full price of producing and maintaining the labor force because the businesses externalize it to the parents, mostly mothers (Folbre 1994). On the background of generalized market imperatives, this not only produces a subsidy from parents to nonparents, but also forces women into subordinate positions within markets. Women are increasingly forced to live with, on the one hand, the demands of an "ideal worker" supported by a steady flow of domestic services (J. Williams 2001b), and in relations of dependence and power within families along the fault lines of who earns what in money (Folbre 2020). As Williams found, in working-class families that cannot afford to purchase care, this results in, ironically, a mixture of formally asserted patriarchal relations

[46] On the early struggles over the legal structuring of household labor and women's property claims, see Siegel (1994).

[47] Thirty percent of households where mother and children are coresident are headed by a single mother, whereas the proportion for single fathers is one in ten (US Census Bureau 2022). The poverty rate of female-headed families with children has longest been the highest among all household composition, with poverty rates of Black single-female-headed households with children have consistently been higher than average among these households (Gould 2012; Creamer and Mohanty 2019).

but functionally more gender-balanced roles in childcare, while in the PMC the opposite is true: formal affirmations of gender-balanced responsibilities, coupled with functionally gender-unequal roles in care made up for in commoditized care work (J. Williams 2010; 2017, 80–82). It is in this commoditization that gendered asymmetric social relations of reproduction articulate most directly with racialized class, to which we return in Part IV-C.

### *B. Leveraging Gender as a Component of Status-Subordinate Labor*

Just as profit seeking drives capitalists to seek out, produce, and exploit racialized underclasses, so too capitalists have always leveraged preexisting patriarchal relations to use women's work under super-exploitative conditions that did not destabilize liberal personhood, because men did not treat women as full juridical persons, and neither did law. A major focus of Pinchbeck's work had been to document the central role of women's proletarianization under super-exploitative conditions as the first industrial workforce (Pinchbeck [1930] 2004). Maxine Berg updated and extended Pinchbeck's work in the 1990s, showing that women offered early industrial producers two major advantages. One was wage: women's wages were customarily one-third to one-half those of men (Berg 1994, 193; Pinchbeck [1930] 2004, 56, 193–94). The second was that employing women and children enabled factory owners to introduce new, more regimented and disciplined organizational techniques that "bypassed traditional artisan customs and arrangements"(Berg 1994, 205). Jane Humphries and Sara Horrell produced detailed documentation of the far larger role of women and children in early capitalism both before and after industrialization than most of the economic history of industrialization had recognized (Humphries 2013; Horrell and Humphries 2019). Barbara Wertheimer's classic 1977 history of women's industrial labor and the alliances and conflicts with men's unions surrounding unionization, suffrage, and strategy laid out the dynamics of divide and conquer and the challenges of economic and political collective action in the teeth of patriarchal relations in both the first and second industrial divides in the United States (Wertheimer 1977).

A primary dimension of gender subordination in wage labor was not only low pay for women, but systematic compulsion to work under surveillance and discipline more constraining and alienating than employers could impose on men. Abject necessity forced by the parliamentary enclosures combined with broad patriarchal culture to underlay factory owners' beliefs that women were more pliable workers. Pinchbeck quotes industrialists opining that women were less "difficult to manage," and men were "more likely to cause trouble by their combinations" (that is, to form unions and organize as workers), while the industrialist finds that "a child or a woman was a more obedient servant to himself, and an equally efficient slave to his machinery" (Pinchbeck [1930] 2004, 187–88). These beliefs provided the impetus for the adoption of some of the most significant technological innovations of the era, including the self-acting mule, the cylindrical copper roller, and wool combing in worsted, all of which were originally developed and deployed in order to replace organized craft male workers with women and children (Bruland 1982, 91–121; Berg 1994, 200–03, 209–11). The leveraging of gendered status subordination was the framework for the entire industrial organization model of the Lowell system, the heart of industrialization in New England. As profitability declined in the first wave of industrialization and leading sectors shifted into the carrier industries of the second industrial divide, women were the quintessential homeworkers of the sweated trades throughout the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century (although racialized Eastern European Jews also occupied that role in England, as did Jews and other racialized immigrants in the United States), providing a pathway for milking declining industries, particularly textiles, even as factory work

was taking over a growing portion of newly expanding industrial sectors (Morris 1986; Blackburn 1997).

When the rise of managerial capitalism demanded an expansion of clerical labor, and clerical labor was mechanized (typewriters, adding machines, telephone switchboards) and reorganized from a semiprofessional position into routinized and semiskilled work on a mass scale, women's proportion of clerical and sales workers increased twentyfold—indeed, 59 percent of the total growth in the share of white-collar workers among women between 1870 and 1970 had already occurred by 1920 (Goldin and Katz 2010, 168, 172–75). By 1970, status-subordinated "pink-collar" workers could be a distinctive subject of analysis within the clerical class. Erin Hatton's *The Temp Economy: From Kelly Girls to Permatemps in Postwar America* (2011) documents how, as declining profits in industrial production led the profit-reaping classes to offshore industry and to shift domestic investments into services in the 1960s, employers actively produced and leveraged rapidly changing gender norms between the 1950s and 1970s to use married women as the core labor force induced and forced into the kinds of insecure labor relations that characterize today's fissured workplace, initially evading labor unions' concerns by emphasizing that this was women's work, and leveraging the asymmetric obligations of childcare and unpaid domestic labor to fix norms that emphasized flexibility over security of work and wage to develop the contemporary precarious workweek. Moreover, these asymmetric obligations of unpaid reproduction and care work funneled women into education and care occupations—most prominently teachers and social workers—where not only did feminization of the occupation depress wage benchmarks, but the high levels of embodied knowledge that these sectors required was itself discounted because of its association with unpaid, hence "unskilled," labor in prevailing patriarchal ideology.

This economic history shows how the profit-reaping classes took extant patriarchal norms that denied women full juridical personhood and leveraged them within commodity labor markets along all three dimensions that leveraged the racialized underclass. Women could be differentially super-exploited without destabilizing the veil of labor as contract between "naturally" free and equal juridical individuals, because patriarchy limited that status to men. Women could place downward pressure on wages, and circumvent and discipline men's resistance to changes in the division of labor that made work more alienating and alienated. Finally, as Wertheimer's work documented extensively, gender was a perennial dimension along which to divide and conquer working-class collective action throughout the history of labor.

Returning to the BLS and the reserve army of labor, the BLS defines categories of workers working part-time for noneconomic reasons or who are marginally attached to the workforce (want a job but did not search for a job in the past four weeks) because of childcare and family responsibilities, obligations disproportionately borne by women (Folbre 1994). As Joan Williams emphasized, it is precisely the conception of an ideal worker as one supported by a steady flow of domestic services that reinforces women's subordination *both* in the workplace and in the family (J. Williams 2001b, 1). Moreover, the role of women's labor in the Industrial Revolution and the transition to a services economy and fissured workplaces underscored that women, particularly married women, have been the quintessential *latent* reserve army of labor. That is, that portion of the labor force that can be mobilized and demobilized for long periods, during wartime and as regimes in capitalism transform the kind of labor capitalists seek to exploit and new terms of division of labor they seek to impose over the objection of working-class opposition. Since the Industrial Revolution women were called into industrial work to fill in for men who had gone to war—from the Napoleonic Wars in Britain of

the early nineteenth century to Rosie the Riveter in World War II—and were then demobilized and "sent back" home (Santana 2016).

More systematically, women played a major role as the latent reserve army of labor in two of the five major transitions in capitalism: the first industrial revolution and the transition to the neoliberal postindustrial order in the 1970s. In both cases, the new work arrangements were unacceptable to men who remained in, and jealously guarded their privileged access to, the shrinking number of jobs in high-skill or highly paid work processes (craft in the early nineteenth century; unionized industrial manufacturing in the 1970s–1980s) and were filled by women (factory work in the Industrial Revolution; fissured services workplaces in the 1970s–1980s). Again, the role of the latent reserve army is not regulation of wages continuously or over short-term business cycles, like the floating reserve army, but as a wedge to break through into new patterns of economic processes at moments of regime transition and as a buffer against major demand shocks that push the demand for labor upward for a brief period, mostly wars. Table 1 provides a summary overview of the combined utilization of various instances of the racialized underclass described in Part III, and emphasizing the super-exploitation of women as a subordinated labor underclass, over five major regimes in capitalism since the Industrial Revolution. In all these cases gendered status subordination was distinct from racialized status subordination in that the patterns of work leveraged, intensified, and shaped asymmetric roles in reproduction.

**Table 1. Subordinated Racialized and Gendered Underclass Across Five Regimes**

Source: Adapted from Freeman and Soete's tables tracing Kondratiev waves since the Industrial Revolution (Freeman and Soete 1997, 65–70).

| Wave | Technologies | Carrier industries | Status-subordinated workers | Organizational transformation (power-seeking technologies) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **First: The Industrial Revolution ~1780s–1850s Great Britain (US South for raw materials)** | Arkwright's mill; Crompton's mule; Whitney's cotton gin | Mechanized cotton manufacture; Wrought iron | **Women & children in UK primary vector of proletarianization** Enslaved Black workers in the US South **Young women + immigrants in New England** | Factory System Domestic slave trade; intensification of legal degradation of free Black people The Lowell system (self-acting mule; cylindrical copper roller) |
| **Second: The Age of Steam and Railways Great Britain, spreading to US and Europe 1830s–1890s** | Steam engines Steam ships and railroads; Iron and Coal; Early American system of replaceable parts | Railway construction; Rolling stock manufacture; World shipping; Machinery | Irish Catholic immigrants in East and Midwest Black enslaved workers into sharecroppers and share tenants in South Chinese workers in West **Women in the sweated trades** | Integrated national markets through transportation and shipping networks South after Reconstruction: sharecropping |
| **Third: Belle Époque; Gilded Age 1880s–1940s US and Germany overtake Great Britain** | Steel; Electricity; Chemistry; Finance | Heavy engineering; Chemistry and civil engineering; Electrical supply and distribution; Canned and bottled food | Until 1916: Southern European (Italians); Eastern & Central European (Jews) **Women in the sweated trades** After 1916-1924 (immigration exclusion): Black workers: the Great Migration & still sharecroppers in the South **Women flooding low-end clerical work** | Modern corporation; Consolidation and scale; Global markets Dense urbanized manufacture; sweatshops & tenements; displacing craft unionized workers with unskilled and semiskilled immigrants (capping machines; McCormick reaper iron-molding machines) |
| **Fourth: 1920s–1980s US, spreading to Europe** | Assembly line; Internal combustion engine; Petroleum and petrochemicals | Automobiles; Energy (oil); Electrical appliances | Treaty of Detroit constructed around the ideal male head of family earning family wage Black workers excluded **Rosie the Riveter mobilized/demobilized Expansion of pink collar work** | Fordism |
| **Fifth: 1970s–? US, spreading to Europe and Asia** | Telecommunications; Computers; Information technology | Services | **Women moving into services "flexibility", leading edge of part-time & precarious work**; immigrants; undocumented in US; guest workers in mainland Europe; MOSTLY: offshoring to harness workers in the Global South | Globalized supply networks; (harnessing the Global South) Financialization (disinvestment from labor and production capital) Fissured workplace |

### *C. Leveraging Racialized Class in the Commodification of Privatized Reproduction*

Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke's *The Bronx Slave Market* (1930) laid bare the dehumanizing urban day-labor market for Black women domestic workers, portraying the humiliation and exploitation at the hands of middle-class white women seeking the cheapest labor, using the desperation of the Great Depression to harness the hands and backs of the most insecure as domestic workers. A decade later, Claudia Jones decried the hypocrisy of progressive women as they preached consciousness to their employees in a condescending mistress-maid relation, rather than seeking to organize Black women workers at the forefront of worker mobilization efforts (Jones 1949). In more recent decades, work by Dorothy Roberts (Roberts 1997) and others has continued to explore and underscore the harnessing of working-class women in general, in particular racialized immigrant women of color, to provide the core of the workforce for commodified care work and suffer the worst of the "natural" consequences of a society with a highly unequal gender division of labor and a racialized underclass (Harris 2009, 46–47).[48] As more married women entered the commodified labor markets since the 1970s, the racialized class structure of labor markets generally interacted with the gendered socialized structure of care work to produce the predictable patterns. In 2022, 91.5 percent of domestic workers were women, and 52.4 percent were women of color—Black, Hispanic, or Asian American/Pacific Islander. Their median hourly pay was $12.01, and even when controlling for demographic characteristics, domestic and care workers make three-quarters of what similarly situated workers earn outside the care economy. These workers were three times as likely to live in poverty than other workers (Wolfe et al. 2020).

The programmatic implication seems clear, as distilled by Angela Davis in her conclusion to *Women, Race, and Class*. Davis insisted there that only full decommodification of housework and care work could address the soul-crushing alienation of domestic labor forced on women in general and, as domestic workers, on Black women in particular. As she bracingly put it:

> For Black women today and for all their working-class sisters, the notion that the burden of housework and child care can be shifted from their shoulders to the society contains one of the radical secrets of women's liberation. Child care should be socialized, meal preparation should be socialized, housework should be industrialized—and all these services should be readily accessible to working-class people. (A. Y. Davis 1983, 133)

> The abolition of housework as the private responsibility of individual women is clearly a strategic goal of women's liberation. But the socialization of housework—including meal preparation and child care—presupposes an end to the profit-motive's reign over the economy. . . . Working women, therefore, have a special and vital interest in the struggle for socialism. (A. Y. Davis 1983, 139)

## V. A Reconstructed Class Structure, with Programmatic Notes

Parts III and IV laid out an analytic framework for reconstructing class analysis along three dimensions of asymmetric power over property in resources, knowledge in the distribution of labor, and recognition of full juridical personhood, rather than only along the single dimension of ownership over the means of production. The class structure we derive is the analytic implication of shifting from

[48] Citing work of Glenda Labadie-Jackson, Dorothy E. Roberts, Angela Onwuachi-Willig, and others exploring the dynamic of racialized commodification of domestic labor and the care economy.

conceiving of class as conflict over material surplus to conceiving of class as asymmetric positions in social relations in the division of labor and the disposition and distribution of its fruits, asymmetries defined by holding institutionally structured asymmetric power in the constituent dimensions of those relations: property, knowledge, and recognition. We have relied on historical evidence to validate the reality and significance—in social and political struggles throughout the history of capitalism—of the class structure our model produces, but the model itself is not an abstraction of the historical descriptions.

The three axes that define asymmetric social relations of production in capitalism resolve into eight classes in total, of which six remain the most important in today's conflicts. First, ownership over the means of subsistence and resources necessary in production, whose combination triggers the imperative of generalized markets, defines the staying power of differently positioned classes in society as a foundational driver of power in social relations of production, and defines the withholding power of those who do own property (capitalists, rentiers at one remove, and smallholders to a degree) vis-à-vis those who do not.

The importance of smallholders has materially faded in the past century, but they continue to be somewhat prevalent in sectors that require relatively low capital investments for access to basic resources and tools necessary in production, and either a relatively high degree of embodied knowledge in labor trained in apprenticeship structures (electricians, plumbers, etc.), or relatively low labor requirements with high trust requirements (small shopkeepers). But as or more important is the ideological grip of this position: the consciousness of the "independent producer" is deep-seated in capitalism, and "petty commodity production"—or generalized "markets without class"—has provided a recurring imaginary ideal by which actual capitalism is either legitimated (by neoclassical economists) or reproved (by critics ranging from Jefferson to Proudhon).

The second axis is the division of labor between cognitive and manual labor, which is a continuous rather than discontinuous axis and includes in "cognitive" the degree of embodied knowledge, or skill, that separates craft or skilled workers from unskilled workers within the working classes, and the PMC from the clerical class among those who do cognitive work, as well as distinguishing the latter two from both manual working classes, skilled and unskilled. Because knowledge is embodied, it is an independent vector of withholding power, and makes those who possess it more powerful vis-à-vis those who require their cooperation, more so than those whose knowledge, and hence cooperation, is readily substitutable. A craft worker is harder to replace than a low-skill clerical worker. Conflicts over access to apprenticeships and training or the deskilling of labor through mechanization have existed within the working classes and between these and capitalists throughout the history of capitalism.

Conflicts over division of labor between skilled and semiskilled or unskilled workers, both manual, in manufacturing, and cognitive, in services, carried on by capitalists and the PMC against both skilled labor and the clerical class, have played a major role in the pattern of work and upward distribution of its fruits in the past forty years. Karen Levy's work on the transformation of trucking from high-skilled, autonomous labor to deskilled, highly regimented labor, and on similar changes ongoing in retail sales, offers the most detailed examples of this dynamic for both blue- and white-collar workers (Levy 2023; Barocas and Levy 2016). Automation and offshoring of clerical work (call centers) contributed to the stagnation of incomes of nonsupervisory workers with increasing returns to capitalists and the PMC. But the dynamic also manifests as conflict between the PMC and capitalists, potentially with capitalists allied with an upskilled clerical class. We already see struggles over

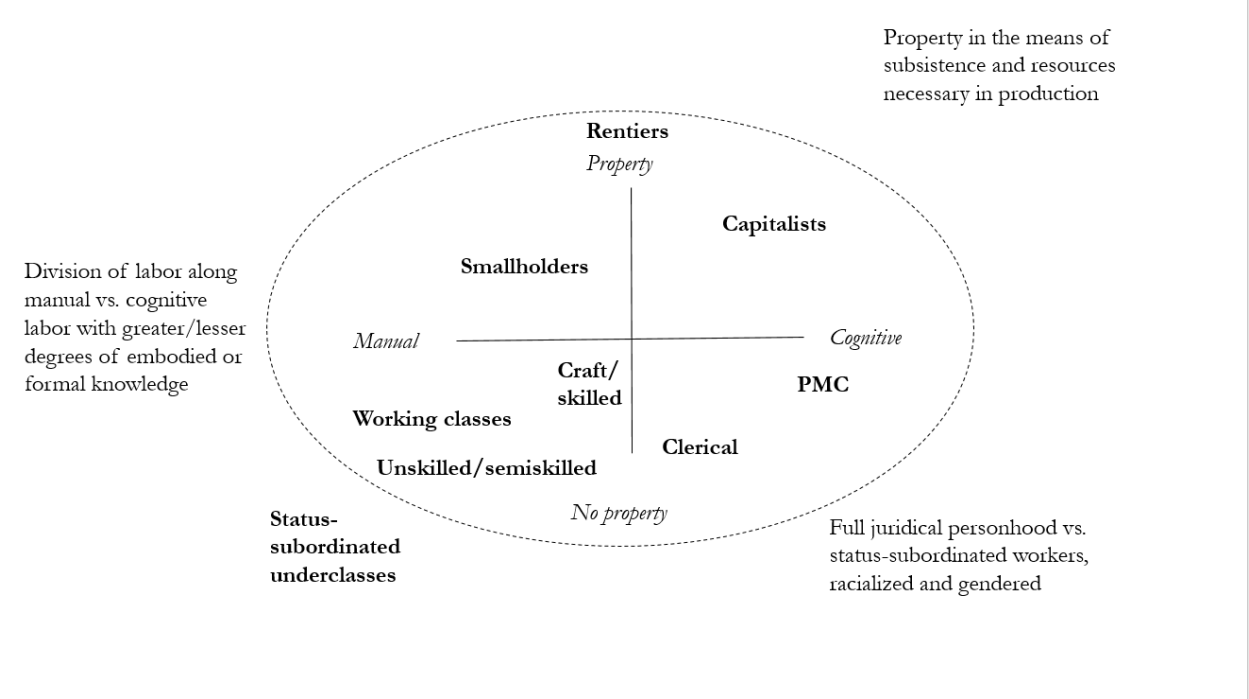
technological and institutional structures between capitalists and the PMC, and the PMC and clerical class. Private equity is taking over physician groups in an effort to partially replace PMC workers with clerical class workers upskilled to paraprofessional status, significantly weaker and more replaceable than the PMC workers they replace. Corporate legal services firms emerge where legal licensing regimes have opened legal practice up to competition from capitalists, generally combining smaller numbers of high-skilled lawyers with larger numbers of permanently mid-skilled paraprofessionals. We also see new efforts at organizing cross-class labor coalitions of unskilled and super-skilled workers (Amazon workers and graduate student unions). While the PMC and capitalists are often aligned, conflicts between these two rent- and profit-seeking classes have been pervasive since at least the emergence of the Berle and Means corporation.

A critical programmatic objective of struggle must be to eliminate the skilled/unskilled class division upward, equipping all workers to be skilled, rather than the obvious devastating opposite, which has perennially been a significant objective in capitalists' selection of technologies and organizational innovations. The dimension of the knowledge quotient of labor, how it is developed, and who controls it is likely to be a critical dimension of struggle in the coming decades.

The third axis of distinction is between those bearing full juridical personhood in a given social order and those for whom that social order denies it. This third axis developed to resolve the conflict between the ideological role of juridical equality in masking asymmetric power relations in production, and the opportunities for super-exploitation opened up by maintaining a weaker, subordinated underclass. The solution is the continuous production and reproduction of a status-subordinated underclass that can offer a pool of super-exploitable workers, impose wage and work-process pressure on the working class, and divide the working classes to prevent sustained coalition formation to build economic and political power. This role is common to both the racialized underclass (Part III-C) and the leveraging of gendered status subordination with respect to women's work in commodified labor markets (Part IV-B).

In combination, Figure 1 sketches the relation of these three dimensions and the eight classes that emerge out of their interaction.

**Figure 1. Class Analysis in Three Dimensions**




The primary programmatic implication of the framework we offer here is that the core of any program that can describe itself as transformative has to be meaningful decommodification of access to basic needs and goods. Since market dependence for subsistence is the mainspring of the entire system, holding in its grip directly both the racialized underclasses and the working classes, the smallholders, and at one step removed the PMC, capitalists, and rentiers, and undergirding the separation of production from reproduction foundational to the patterns of gendered subordination specific to capitalism, the most foundational programmatic focus must be on partial decommodification of access to basic needs and goods. Adequate food and water, clothing, housing, energy, sanitation and healthcare, childcare, and physical security from violence or abuse within the household or outside it seem most fundamental. The central role of power along the knowledge dimension requires us to add the education and lifelong training required to be a self-directing adult possessing sufficient ~~adequate~~ embodied knowledge to exercise power in one's social relations of production, in particular to demand and engage in intrinsically meaningful work. Transportation and communications capabilities, and opportunities to engage in meaningful work under dignified conditions in the day-to-day complete this initial set. To maintain the diversity of pathways open to people in society and the capacity of market dynamics to satisfy diverse preferences, these basic goods must also include a universal means of acquiring additional income necessary to pursue diverse, self-directed goals.

Whether this latter takes the form of a universal jobs guarantee, universal basic income, or some Nordic flexicurity-style program, the function is to provide a universal partially decommodified mechanism for obtaining income to pursue our diverse life plans and desires beyond those we all agree are basic. That function, while its fruits are not basic, is itself a basic need. Again, though, the centrality of knowledge in production and the division of labor leads us to see models integrated with lifelong training as preferable to those that simply focus on distributing money for consumption, like Universal Basic Income (UBI). For our purposes it is unnecessary that every reader agree with every component

of what we describe as "basic needs." All that is required is that one agree that there is some core of basic requirements of living a decent life in early-twenty-first-century America. If one is to transform a system whose mainspring is market dependence for subsistence, then one must pursue institutional transformations oriented first and foremost toward decommodification of those and their socialization to provision these needs for all.

Such a framework would transform class relations, because it would remove the whip of hunger. It would transform racialized class relations because, again, it would eliminate the class dynamics associated with racialization. It would not eliminate racism. It would not eliminate the myriad indignities racialized minorities experience in the day-to-day across class positions. We claim no panacea for racism through the transformation of class relations. But a central source of insecurity, misery, and humiliation in the day-to-day of millions does come from occupying the position of racialized underclass in capitalist society. *That* source of racialized immiseration must be transformed if it is to be possible to transform class relations at all. This is, fundamentally, the approach of the *Freedom Budget for All Americans* (Randolph and Rustin 1967). Darrick Hamilton and collaborators have developed contemporary mechanisms of universal access to basic needs and goods that offer ample examples of such an approach to transforming racialized class relations through transforming class relations more generally (Collins et al. 2019; Hamilton and Darity 2009).

The articulation of gender in class demands that decommodification of basic needs prioritize universal decommodified childcare and eldercare. These could take the form of (a) cradle-to-grave public, unionized, care work, converting it into paid work by professionals whose cost is socialized through the tax system (more or less the Nordic system) or (b) a strong public-option childcare system combined with strong protection for part-time workers (this is one interpretation of the Dutch system, where one-and-a-half-income households are common). A less transformative approach would be to provide realistic levels of public subsidy payments to caregiving households, per child, with the risk that that gets racialized and marginalized à la Aid to Families with Dependent Children. None of these approaches will eliminate all forms of gender subordination. But the more robust these are, particularly the option of a universal cradle-to-grave unionized care sector socialized through the tax system, the more they could transform the severe gender asymmetry of the present system of unpaid or underpaid reproduction and life-maintenance work. This would also directly transform commodified care work, where racialized and gendered status subordination interact most directly.

Beyond the foundational implication of the centrality of a broad, deep programmatic dedication to partial decommodification of access to basic needs and goods, several additional implications present themselves. These are not exhaustive, but rather suggestive of the kind of analysis that would tie programmatic goals to our analytic model of capitalist dynamics and the class structure they imply. A major class of programmatic goals *within markets* would focus on the collective action of those whose existing property and embodied knowledge make their individual withholding power weak. Specifically, labor laws that make it easier for workers to build power collectively are critical to counter-balance the power of capitalists and the PMC; and laws that find mechanisms of collectively regulating the terms of employment at the sector level, including in smallholder establishments and households, where organizing is particularly difficult, are of the first importance.

Industrial policy in turn, particularly in its parts oriented toward innovation, must be oriented to channel innovation toward increasing productivity through complementarities with skilled workers, rather than toward increasing profits through displacement of skilled workers and leveraging of unskilled workers. More generally, a reorientation toward *socialized markets* would emphasize industrial

policy aimed toward increased capacity to provision globally universal access to basic needs and goods over status goods and ever-finer satisfaction of luxury desires.

Capitalism emerged when economic compulsion driven by separation from the means of subsistence for most of the population replaced direct violent coercion as the organizing principle of social relations of production. The same processes that separated the peasantry from the means of subsistence also liberated feudal elites from the fetters of lineage-based property, but in turn subjected them to the new discipline of markets in factors of production: in labor and in the resources necessary to organize production. It was this second form of market dependence, market dependence for access to the resources necessary in production, that drove the new classes of rentiers and capitalists to continuous improvement and continuous production, identification, and exploitation of opportunities to extract higher rents, now as profits. These twin processes—of productivity seeking and power seeking—became the animating spirit of all three historically unprecedented attributes of capitalism: continuous productivity growth, exploitation masked as free exchange among free and equal juridical persons, and the ceaseless expansion of exchange value. These dynamics produced, and depend on continuously reproducing and leveraging, a historically-specific form of class relations—asymmetric social relations of production organized around the three dimensions we identify here: property over the means of subsistence and resources in production, knowledge in the division of labor, and recognition of full juridical personhood. Transforming those class relations is a precondition to escaping the grip of the overwhelming pursuit of ceaseless expansion of exchange value at the expense of human needs and powers, human relations, and the Earth.

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