

The Marx-Weber Debate, edited by Norbert Wiley
(Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987)

Chapter 3

THE NEO-MARXIST SYNTHESIS OF MARX AND WEBER ON CLASS

VAL BURRIS
University of Oregon

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN COMMENTED that the bulk of Weber's sociology represents a prolonged "dialogue with the ghost of Marx" (Giddens, 1971, p. 185). Today it could equally be said that the bulk of contemporary Marxist writing represents a prolonged dialogue with the ghost of Weber. Without always acknowledging the fact (or even necessarily being aware of it), contemporary Marxists have drawn heavily upon Weberian concepts in their effort to adapt classical Marxism to the conditions of late twentieth-century capitalism. This tendency is particularly characteristic of recent Marxist writings on the state, bureaucracy, legitimation, and the class structure. Theoretical viewpoints that were once "external" to Marxism and that commonly served as the basis for criticizing or rejecting Marxism, have thus been incorporated (albeit in an altered form) within Marxist theory itself. At the same time, there has been a parallel, if less pervasive, trend among Weberian theorists to reinterpret Weber's sociology in a manner that renders it more compatible with the premises of Marxism. This "de-Parsonizing" of Weber, as it is sometimes called, has entailed a deemphasis of the subjectivist themes in Weber's methodological writings and an elaboration of the social-structural dimension implicit in his later substantive works (Collins, 1980; Turner, 1981). As a result of these twin developments, it has now become necessary to reassess the relationship between contemporary Marxist and Weberian theory so as to clarify both the tendencies toward convergence as well as the remaining areas of disagreement.

In this essay I examine the present state of Marxist and Weberian theories of class and class structure. My primary concern is with the articulation of Weberian concepts in the recent development of Marxist theory, or what I shall refer to as the development of a “neo-Marxist” theory of class. As a counterpoint, I shall compare the work of several theorists who, even though they share much in common with contemporary Marxists, nevertheless remain more firmly within the Weberian tradition and thus serve to illustrate the present differences between the two perspectives. No attempt will be made to systematically defend one theoretical perspective or another, although at points I shall have things to say about the relative strengths and weaknesses of different theories on specific issues.

One of the main points I wish to make is that, given recent theoretical developments, many of the traditional Weberian critiques of Marxism, as well as the traditional Marxist critiques of Weberian theory, are no longer accurate. In order to sustain their traditional arguments against Marxism, Weberian critics have been forced to become increasingly selective in their targets, ignoring much of the most important of recent Marxist theory. Conversely, in repeating their traditional charges against Weberian theory, contemporary Marxists have often opposed themselves to forms of theorizing that, today, are no less characteristic of Marxism itself.

To begin, let me set out what I consider the four most important distinctions between the classical Marxist and Weberian theories of class. (1) Marx conceptualizes class as an objective *structure* of social positions, whereas Weber’s analysis of class is constructed in the form of a theory of social *action*. (2) Marx holds to a *unidimensional* conception of social stratification and cleavage, with class relations being paramount, whereas Weber holds to a *multidimensional* view in which class relations intersect with and are often outweighed by other (nonclass) bases of association, notably status and party. (3) In Marx’s theory, the essential logic of class relations and class conflict is one of *exploitation*, where political and ideological domination are interpreted as merely the means by which exploitation is secured, whereas for Weber *domination* is conceived as an end in itself, with its own independent force and logic. (4) For Marx, classes are an expression of the social relations of *production*, whereas Weber conceptualizes classes as common positions within the *market*.¹

In the following pages, I survey a range of recent Marxist theory to demonstrate how perspectives traditionally associated with Weber have

been incorporated into contemporary Marxist analyses of class. In the process I show how Marxists and Weberians alike have exaggerated or oversimplified the differences in their theoretical perspectives. In the conclusion of this essay I summarize what may be described as the emergence of a “neo-Marxist” theory of class. This neo-Marxist perspective occupies a middle position between the classical Marxist and Weberian theories of class and forces us to rethink some of the traditional oppositions between these two theoretical schools.

STRUCTURE VERSUS ACTION

One of the most fundamental differences between classical Marxist and Weberian theory is the different importance they assign to human agency in the explanation of social phenomena. In the analysis of social class, as in other areas, Marxist theory places much greater causal weight on the functioning of objective structures that constrain human behavior in predictable channels. Such structures are viewed as being imbued with a substantial capacity for self-reproduction, but also as giving rise to developmental tendencies that, in the long run, are contradictory. The most important such structure is the “mode of production,” which Marx conceives as a historically specific complex of social relations through which human societies collectively produce their material means of existence. Social classes are defined in relation to the mode of production as an objective structure of positions, related to one another in terms of the production and appropriation of a surplus product. Marxists often speak of class as a structure of “empty places,” in the sense that class positions entail material interests, capacities, and constraints that exist objectively and independently of the particular persons who occupy those positions and that condition their behavior. In this manner, Marxist class theory abstracts from the consciousness or motives of concrete human agents to the logic of the supraindividual structure.

By comparison, Weberian theory assigns a much greater causal importance to human agency. Supraindividual structures are either rejected as legitimate explanatory concepts on the basis of a commitment to methodological individualism, or treated as merely the provisional outcome of contingently reproduced patterns of social action. In Weberian theory, classes are not the effect of an objective structure, such as the mode of production, but an outcome of the motivated

behavior of knowledgeable human actors. More specifically, classes are identified with a particular form of social action—namely, action that, from the standpoint of its subjective meaning, seeks to restrict access to valued resources with an orientation to maximizing their return on the market. The nature and effects of social classes therefore cannot be deduced from the logic of the mode of production, but must be studied in terms of the meaning systems implicated in social action.

At the risk of oversimplification, this difference between Marxist and Weberian theory can be viewed as a disagreement over the possible and appropriate forms of abstraction in social theory, with Marxists defending a higher level of abstraction (and a different form of causality) than Weberians are willing to accept. Marxists would not necessarily claim that there is nothing to be gained in studying social classes from the standpoint of social action, but would argue that restricting the analysis solely to this level precludes an understanding of the underlying causal forces, thereby producing an exaggerated impression of the indeterminacy of social phenomena. Weberians, on the other hand, believe that Marxist theory promises more than it can possibly deliver and thus that it will be forever caught up in a fruitless process of seeking to impose objective patterns on what are, in fact, only the diverse and contingent outcomes of human agency.

Weberian critiques of Marxism often take the structuralist aspect of Marxist theory as a reason for its rejection, arguing that Marxism gives insufficient attention to the role of conscious agency and volition in the shaping of social events. Indeed, two of the most influential recent Weberian critiques of Marxism—Frank Parkin's *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique* (1979) and Anthony Giddens' *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism* (1981)—make this a central point in their indictment of Marxism. These authors make essentially two kinds of arguments. First, they maintain that the framing of Marxist explanations in terms of the logic of the mode of production constitutes a form of functionalism, which they reject on a variety of grounds: Functionalist explanations are teleological; they falsely impute "needs" to the social system; and so on. Second, they argue that Marxism reduces human actors to the passive "bearers" of social relations, lacking any knowledge or intentionality. This they claim is especially problematic for a theory, such as Marxism, that also purports to be a guide to political action.

Several things can be said about these criticisms. First, they ignore the extensive debate within Marxism during the last decade over the

legitimacy of functionalist explanations.² Although functionalist arguments can indeed be found in Marxist writings (Giddens cites the example of Marxists “explaining” unemployment in terms of capitalism’s “need” for a reserve army of labor), I think it is fair to say that most contemporary Marxists would themselves find such explanations if not illegitimate then certainly incomplete. Much of recent Marxist theory and research can be seen as an attempt to go beyond simple functionalist arguments about the place of particular institutions or practices within capitalism to more specific explanations of the *mechanisms* by which those institutions or practices are created and reproduced. In some cases the intentionality of human actors is invoked to account for the functionality of a given institution, as for example in “instrumentalist” explanations of why the state functions in the interests of the capitalist class. Here the effectivity of the social structure operates primarily by conditioning the interests and capacities for action of contending social classes. In other instances the functional correspondence between certain institutions and the logic of capitalism is explained by selection mechanisms and feedback processes in which intentionality plays a much more restricted role, as in explanations of capitalist behavior in terms of a natural selection model of competition between firms or explanations of state policy in terms of the constraints of business confidence. Structural explanations of this kind may be correct or incorrect, but they cannot simply be dismissed on logical grounds.³

Second, such critiques ignore the variation in the extent and manner in which human agency is incorporated in contemporary Marxist theory. Although extreme structuralist versions of Marxism can be found (Althusser is the favorite target of Weberian critics), most substantive Marxist investigations ascribe a significant role to human agency in their explanation of social events. This is particularly true in the area of class analysis.

At the one extreme, Marxists such as Thompson analyze social classes almost exclusively in terms of human agency. Consider, for example, Thompson’s definition of class in his *The Making of the English Working Class* (1964, pp. 9-11).

By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is an *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a “structure”, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to

have happened) in human relationships. . . . Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.

One could not ask for a stronger statement of the primacy of agency over structure in the formation of social classes.

Other Marxists place a more equal emphasis on objective structures and human agency, viewing the two as reciprocally conditioned by one another. A good example is Przeworski, who analyzes classes as the effect of concrete historical struggles that are conditioned by objective structures but also react back upon and transform those structures. In Przeworski's words (1977, p. 343),

Classes must thus be viewed as effects of struggles structured by objective conditions that are simultaneously economic, political, and ideological. . . . Precisely because class formation is an effect of struggles, outcomes of this process are at each moment of history to some extent indeterminate.

Thompson and Przeworski are perhaps exceptional among Marxist theorists in the importance they attribute to human agency, but even when Marxists ascribe a degree of primacy to structural factors this seldom means that human agency is omitted from their analysis. A survey of recent Marxist writings on class reveals a variety of ways in which human agency is incorporated within a broader structural framework. In the first, important aspects of class relations are seen as structurally *underdetermined* in the sense that objective structures merely impose a general directionality upon social development and/or constrain social patterns within certain limits, whereas the pace and concrete form of that development and/or the selection among possible outcomes is determined (through struggle) by human agency. A good example would be my own study of the variation in the size and composition of intermediate classes among advanced capitalist societies (Burris, 1980). There I analyze the structural basis of developmental trends that are common to all advanced capitalist societies (e.g., the growth of the new middle class), but I also emphasize the manner in which those trends vary among societies as a result of distinctive national patterns of class struggle.

A second approach treats certain aspects of class relations as structurally *overdetermined*—that is, as subject to multiple and contradictory determinations and therefore, to some extent, indeterminate. A good example is Wright's (1978a) conception of intermediate class positions as "contradictory class locations." In Wright's view, such

positions as managers and professionals are “objectively torn between class locations” in the sense that they occupy contradictory positions on different dimensions of capitalist class relations. For this reason, Wright argues, their place in the class struggle is objectively indeterminate and therefore especially susceptible to political and ideological forces.

According to a third view, the structural determination of class is *mediated* by human agency in ways that are more than epiphenomenal. A good example is the Ehrenreich’s analysis of the formation of what they call the “PMC” or “professional-managerial class.” The Ehrenreichs identify a number of structural tendencies that condition the formation of this class—notably, the growth and concentration of a social surplus in forms that allow it to be strategically used for the reproduction of capitalist class relations—but go on to argue that the institutional changes associated with the emergence of the PMC “do not simply ‘develop,’ they require the effort of more or less conscious agents” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1979, p. 16). Like other Marxist instrumentalists, the Ehrenreichs view structural factors as important only insofar as they shape the interests and political resources of contending classes. Whether or how those resources are actually mobilized in the service of class interests can only be understood from the standpoint of an analysis of human agency. The focus of their research is therefore upon the historical process by which specific actors (mainly far-sighted capitalists and middle-class reformers) consciously engineered a transformation of the class structure.

Finally, even when it figures nowhere else in the analysis, human agency almost always assumes an important role in contemporary Marxist accounts of the process by which structurally defined classes are formed (or fail to be formed) into organized collectivities. Whereas classical Marxism treated this transition as relatively unproblematic, even inevitable, contemporary Marxists have tended to view it as much more indeterminate. Typical in this regard is Wright’s statement of the relationship between class structure and what he calls “class formation”—that is, historically specific forms of class organization.

The class structure itself does not generate a unique pattern of class formation; rather, it determines the underlying probabilities of different types of class formations. Which of these alternatives actually occurs will depend upon a range of factors that are structurally contingent to the class structure itself. Class structure thus remains the structural foundation for class formations, but it is only through the specific historical analysis of

given societies that it is possible to explain what kind of actual formation is built upon that foundation (Wright, 1985, p. 124).

Overall, it would appear that contemporary Marxists are by no means reluctant to incorporate human agency into their analysis of class, the exact mix between structure and agency to be decided by the nature of the topic under investigation. Their work may be criticized on many grounds. The precise relationship they envision between structure and agency is sometimes poorly or incompletely theorized. But, whatever their shortcomings, they cannot be accused of ignoring the role of human agency in social life.

By contrast, among the Weberian critics of Marxism one often encounters an a priori refusal to entertain any form of structural explanation. Whereas Weberian arguments for the importance of human agency served as a useful corrective to the more one-sided structuralist versions of Marxism, in relation to the greater part of contemporary Marxist theory it is the Weberian critics who appear one-sided. This is particularly true of Parkin, who rejects any structural basis to class (such as property relations, bureaucratic authority, or the division of labor) and seeks to ground classes purely in the exclusionary endeavors of human actors. This leads to an entirely circular form of argument in which class relations are seen as providing the bases of power that are mobilized in exclusionary actions, which in turn produce social classes.⁴ Compared with Parkin, Giddens' theory of "structuration"—seeking as it does to combine both structure and agency within a single theoretical framework—is more consistent with the spirit of contemporary Marxism, even though, as critics have noted, his rather frail conception of social structure tends to collapse into his more robust conception of social action.⁵

UNIDIMENSIONAL VERSUS MULTIDIMENSIONAL VIEWS

A second difference between the classical Marxist and Weberian theories of class concerns the relative importance of class as compared with other forms of oppression or other bases of association and struggle. For Marx class is the single most important division around which social groups organize and contend for political power. Class struggle is therefore the primary vehicle of epochal social change. For

Weber, the importance of class divisions is historically variable and contingent. Class relations coexist with other forms of oppression and other bases of association that are independent of class and potentially no less important for the organization of particular societies or the transition between types of society.

Contemporary Weberian critics of Marxism have made the primacy of class one of the main targets of their critique. Parkin, for example, begins his assault on Marxism with the assertion that “now that racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts have moved toward the centre of the political stage in many industrial societies, any general model of class or stratification that does not fully incorporate this fact must forfeit all credibility” (Parkin, 1979, p. 9). Giddens is more sympathetic to the Marxist view that class relations have a “centrality in the dynamics of power” within capitalist society, but denies that this was true of pre-capitalist society. He also criticizes Marxism for what he claims is its inability to accommodate nonclass forms of domination (e.g., national, ethnic, and sexual oppression) in anything other than a “class reductionist” way (Giddens, 1981, p. 242).

Although the primacy or otherwise of class remains a major point of disagreement between contemporary Marxists and Weberians, the distance between them on this issue is no longer as great as the above critiques imply. Most Marxists would continue to defend some notion of the primacy of class relations; nevertheless, the thrust of contemporary Marxism has been decidedly in the direction of a more multi-dimensional viewpoint. A brief survey of recent Marxist writings on race and gender will illustrate this point. In both instances contemporary Marxists have accorded a considerable degree of autonomy to nonclass forms of oppression. Disagreements remain as to the most appropriate way of conceptualizing these forms of oppression, their degree of autonomy, and the precise manner in which they are articulated with capitalist class relations, but few Marxists today would argue that such forms of oppression can be treated as a mere reflex of class relations.

Among Marxist feminists there is by now a well-established tradition of analyzing women’s position as an interaction between two distinct but interconnected structures: capitalist class relations and patriarchal gender relations. Mitchell (1974) was among the first to elaborate such an analysis. In her view the distinctiveness of women’s oppression is located in the formation of sexual identities that, following Althusser, she conceptualizes as an ideological process that is “relatively autonomous” of the production relations that define social classes. A more

systematic presentation of this view is found in McDonough and Harrison's (1978) essay "Patriarchy and Relations of Production." They argue that "women are placed simultaneously in two separate but linked structures, those of class and patriarchy." The former they conceptualize as a structure of exploitation based in the appropriation of surplus labor through the social relations of production; the latter is conceptualized as a separate structure based in the control of female sexuality and fertility through the "social relations of reproduction." The form of each of these structures varies historically, they argue, within the limits set by the influence of the other structure. This perspective is developed further by Barrett (1980), who makes the additional point that the articulation of patriarchal relations within the capitalist mode of production must be conceptualized as the outcome of structurally conditioned but historically contingent patterns of struggle that can never be reduced to a simple functional logic.

A similar trend toward a more multi-dimensional view can be found in recent Marxist writings on race and ethnicity. Indeed, many Marxists make a direct analogy between racial divisions and sexual divisions, arguing, as does Edwards (1979), that both of these divisions reflect historical processes that are distinct from those of capitalism as a mode of production.

The histories of racism and sexism, intimately linked though they are to that of capitalism, are not subsets of the latter. Accordingly, the dynamics of racial and sexual divisions require separate analyses (Edwards, 1979, p. 195).

The same point is underlined by Wright in his discussion of the relation between race and class in the determination of income inequality.

The underlying premise of a Marxist class analysis is that, while the diverse dimensions of social inequality cannot be reduced to class inequality, class relations nevertheless play a decisive role in shaping other forms of inequality. ... The empirical and theoretical problem is to sort out the complex interplay of racism and class relations, not to absorb the former into the latter (Wright, 1978b, p. 1368).

Where Marxist analyses differ from Weberian analyses is not over the question of whether racial divisions are in some measure autonomous of class divisions, but over how the distinctiveness of racial divisions is to be conceptualized. Weberian theorists typically subsume racial

divisions under the general category of *status* group formation, whereas Marxists tend to conceptualize racial oppression as a variant of *national* or colonial oppression.

Just as Marxists hold different conceptions of patriarchy as the distinct basis of women's oppression, they also disagree over the nature and implications of national oppression in specific historical contexts. For example, at an earlier point in American history Marxist analyses of the oppression of Blacks tended to build upon the concept of a "Black Nation" as a distinct territorial entity, whereas more recent Marxist analyses have tended to favor some conception of "internal colonialism." Despite these differences, there is at least one common thread running through most contemporary Marxist analyses of race and ethnicity. This is the notion that the situation of racial minorities must be treated as an *interaction* between class and national oppression, neither of which can be subsumed under the other. This viewpoint is perhaps best summarized by Geschwender in his book *Racial Stratification in America*:

There are valuable features incorporated in both the internal colonial (or submerged nation) model and the capitalist exploitation (or class) model. Each describes a portion of reality and provides valuable insights regarding the American system of racial stratification. Neither is sufficiently general to subsume the other. Therefore it is necessary to select elements from each of these two models to develop a comprehensive model with utility for the analysis of racial stratification in America (Geschwender, 1978, p. 262).

Similar statements can be found in Baron (1975), Reich (1981) and other recent Marxist writings on racial inequality.

If there is a weak point in these analyses, it is not the one alleged by Giddens: that Marxists are incapable of addressing nonclass forms of oppression in anything but a class reductionist manner. It is rather that, having abandoned class reductionism, contemporary Marxists are hard pressed to explain why class should be accorded *any* degree of primacy over other bases of political struggle. One can indeed point to a growing number of "post-Marxist" theorists for whom the rejection of class reductionism served as merely a stepping stone to the abandonment of the class primacy thesis altogether (Cutler et al., 1977; Albert and Hahnel, 1981; Aronowitz, 1981; Cohen, 1982).

Among contemporary Marxists, one encounters a number of non-reductionist arguments for the primacy of class, none of which is

without problems.⁶ First, there is the simple empirical claim that Marxist class categories can be shown to have stronger effects on life chances, cultural patterns, or political consciousness than alternative bases of stratification. Much of the recent effort in Marxist class analysis has been devoted to demonstrating this fact, and the results are generally impressive,⁷ but this is ultimately a weak defense of the class primacy thesis. Many Weberians (Giddens, for example) would not dispute the centrality of class in contemporary capitalist society, but would argue that this is a wholly contingent state of affairs and indicates nothing about the general primacy of class.

Second, there is the evolutionary claim that only class relations have an internal logic that generates systematic tendencies toward cumulative and progressive social change. This is a much stronger argument for the class primacy thesis and is defended by such Marxists as G. A. Cohen and Erik Olin Wright. The problem with this defense is that it typically requires placing the development of the productive forces at the center of the historical process—a thesis that most contemporary Marxists are reluctant to advocate because of its association with “technological determinism” and its vulgarization in official Soviet Marxism.

Third, there is the straightforward materialist argument that, however autonomous and consequential various nonclass forms of domination may be, control over the material means of production remains the basic source of power in society. Whatever their motives or origins, effective political struggles must therefore assume a class form in the sense that they must ultimately draw upon and seek to restructure access to these material resources. My impression is that this is the version of the class primacy thesis that most contemporary Marxists would adhere to, at least implicitly. The problem with this defense is that it presumes precisely what is most contested by Weberian theory: that material resources are necessarily more important bases of power than political or ideological resources. As we shall see in the next section, this claim is often compromised by Marxist themselves by the importance they assign to political and ideological relations in the definition of social class.

EXPLOITATION VERSUS DOMINATION

A third difference between classical Marxist and Weberian theory concerns the relationship between exploitation and domination, or

more generally between economic relations and political/ideological relations. By “exploitation” I refer here to the capacity of an individual or class to appropriate the labor of another, whereas “domination” refers to the ability to command the obedience of another. For Marx, class relations, conceived as relations of economic exploitation, are clearly paramount. Relations of political and ideological domination are secondary in the sense that they arise either as a means of securing the conditions for exploitation (as in the laws that guarantee the rights of private property), as a means of realizing or intensifying the degree of exploitation (as in the various forms of capitalist domination over workers at the point of production), or as a means of stabilizing and reproducing the relations of exploitation (as in the powers that capitalists exercise through the state, the media, etc.).

For Weber, relations of domination are in no sense subordinate to the goal of exploitation. Individuals sometimes seek dominance over others as a way of exploiting their labor, but they also pursue it for the social prestige it entails, and sometimes they pursue it purely for its own sake. If anything, domination is the more fundamental concept in Weberian theory. In Weber’s writings the meaning systems that underpin different forms of authority (traditional, charismatic, rational-legal) are more important in defining the nature of societies than any typology based on forms of exploitation. Economic conflicts between classes are seen by Weber as merely one instance of the more general phenomenon of political struggles between dominant (privileged) and subordinate (disprivileged) collectivities. Following in this tradition, modern Weberians such as Parkin (1979, p. 46) and Giddens (1981, p. 60) treat exploitation as but a subspecies of the more general phenomenon of domination.

Although classical Marxist and Weberian theory present a clear choice between an exploitation-based and a domination-based theory of society, recent developments in Marxist theory have tended to blur this distinction. This is especially true in the area of class analysis and, more specifically, in the analysis of what is commonly referred to as the “new middle class.” One of the main concerns of recent Marxist theory has been to clarify the class position of such groups as salaried managers and professionals. The classical Marxist definition of “ownership versus non-ownership of the means of production,” understood as the foundation of capitalist relations of exploitation, offers little help here, since by this criterion all wage and salary earners would be classified as working class. Yet, common sense suggests that this is too

heterogeneous a concept of the working class to be of any use in predicting the actual or potential organization, consciousness, and political behavior of social groups in capitalist society. Most contemporary Marxists have responded to this problem by proposing more elaborate criteria of class position by which certain groups of wage and salary earners could be distinguished from the working class. The various efforts in this direction differ considerably in the precise criteria they propose and thus in the boundary that they identify between working-class and non-working-class positions. Yet, virtually all of them share one thing in common: In each instance the operative criterion is defined more in terms of domination than in terms of exploitation, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by recent Weberian commentators (Parkin, 1979, p. 25; Turner, 1981, p. 356).

The class theories of Guglielmo Carchedi, Nicos Poulantzas, and Erik Olin Wright all illustrate this point. For Carchedi (1977), the criterion that divides wage and salary earners into working-class and new-middle-class components is the distinction between what he calls the "function of the collective worker" and the "global function of capital." The former is defined by Carchedi as "the production of use-values within a complex and differentiated labor process"; the latter is defined as "the control and surveillance of the labor process"—a form of control that Carchedi interprets as essential to the expropriation of surplus value and not merely a technical condition of production. Workers and the new middle class are alike in that both are separated from ownership of the means of production; however, the latter are distinguished from the working class by their participation (in varying degrees) in the global function of capital—that is, by their exercise of supervisory authority.

In Poulantzas' (1975) theory the working class is distinguished from the new middle class (or what he calls the "new petty bourgeoisie") by three criteria. In addition to the basic economic criterion of class position (which he defines as the distinction between productive and unproductive labor), Poulantzas maintains that political and ideological relations also enter into the structural determination of class. By political and ideological relations he means those relations which secure the reproduction of the dominant mode of exploitation. At the political level this is accomplished through the relations of supervision and authority within the capitalist enterprise, which Poulantzas, like Carchedi, interprets as involving not just the technical coordination of labor but also the enforcement of capitalist domination over workers. This places managers and supervisors in an antagonistic relation to the working

class. At the ideological level Poulantzas identifies the basic class relation as the division between mental and manual labor, which he claims reinforces the subordination of workers to capital by excluding them from the “secret knowledge” of production. As the bearers of this relation of ideological domination, professionals, technicians, and other mental workers are classified as part of the new petty bourgeoisie along with managers and supervisors.

In Wright’s (1978a) original theory of contradictory class locations, class positions are defined by a combination of three criteria: control over investment capital, control over the physical means of production, and control over labor. Among wage and salary earners, this yields three types of class locations. The working class is defined as that group which occupies a subordinate position (no control) on all three of these dimensions. Managers and supervisors occupy a contradictory class location in that, like workers, they are excluded from control over investments, but unlike workers they exercise a degree of control over the physical means of production and over the labor of others. “Semi-autonomous workers” (essentially non-supervisory professionals and technicians) occupy a distinct contradictory class location. Like workers they are excluded from control over both investment capital and the labor of others, but unlike workers, they retain a degree of control over their immediate physical means of production and over their own direct activity within the labor process.

What characterizes all of these theories is the tendency for relations of exploitation to be displaced by relations of domination and subordination, at least insofar as the definition of the new middle class is concerned. Weberians such as Parkin (1979) have interpreted this as a tacit admission by contemporary Marxists of the superiority of Weberian theory. Whether or not this conclusion follows, it is certainly true that the increased importance these theorists attach to authority relations does not square easily with some of the traditional arguments for the superiority of Marxist class analysis. For instance, Marxists often criticize Weberian and other non-Marxist conceptions of class for their *gradational* nature. This, they argue, generates an indeterminate plurality of positions with no meaningful boundaries between classes as discrete social groups. Yet criteria such as the exercise of supervisory authority, control over the physical means of production, or autonomy in the labor process are also matters of degree. Virtually all workers retain some minimal control over their own labor or their immediate

instruments of production. At what point then does the level of control become sufficient to exclude them from the working class?

Second, Marxists often claim as a virtue of their theory that it yields an unambiguous asymmetry of material interests from which one can deduce probable patterns of political opposition. This is arguably true for the concept of exploitation, but it is less clear that relations of domination and subordination entail any necessary asymmetry of interests. A plausible case can perhaps be made that the domination of managers over workers is asymmetrical in this sense. Whether the "semi-autonomy" or "secret knowledge" of non-supervisory professionals means that their interests are inherently opposed to those of workers lacking such authority is much more questionable.

Finally, there is the problem to which I alluded in the previous section. To the extent that Marxists integrate relations of domination into their definition of class, it becomes increasingly difficult to defend either the general primacy of economic relations over political and ideological relations or the more specific claim of the primacy of class over nonclass forms of domination. This is especially true when, as is the case in all three theories examined above, differences in authority take precedence over similarities of economic characteristics in defining the boundaries between classes. It should be noted that one of the three theorists examined above has concluded that the problems associated with incorporating domination into the Marxist conception of class are so great that such efforts should be abandoned. In his latest writings, Wright (1985) has rejected his earlier theory of contradictory class locations and proposed an alternative way of conceptualizing the class position of salaried managers and professionals. As we shall see in the next section, however, this has resulted merely in the substitution of one form of convergence with Weberian theory for another.

PRODUCTION VERSUS MARKET RELATIONS

A final distinction between classical Marxist and Weberian theory concerns the relative importance of production versus market relations in the definition of class. Whereas Marx locates the basic class division in the relations of production, Weber defines classes in terms of the differential access to market rewards. In a sense, this difference condenses within itself each of the three previously discussed distinctions. Marx conceptualizes production as an objective structure of

relations between classes, whereas Weber analyzes market relations from the standpoint of the motives and strategies of human agents as they struggle to increase their share of societal rewards. Marx's concern with exploitation also leads him to focus on production, since he views market transactions as relations of free and equal exchange and argues that it is only in the process of production that the appropriation of surplus labor takes place. Finally, production relations are conceived by Marx as polarized along a single dimension between exploiters and exploited, whereas Weber sees a multiplicity of bases around which groups organize in their struggle to gain privileged access to the market.

In this instance, it has been primarily Weberians who have been criticized by Marxists for the deficiencies of their conception of class. By focusing on the myriad strategies by which groups compete for market rewards, Marxists argue, Weberians fail to appreciate the even more fundamental conflicts that characterize the relations of production. A representative statement of this critique is presented by Crompton and Gubbay in their book, *Economy and Class Structure* (1977, p. 17-18).

Our major criticism of the Weberian approach to social class centers on the starting-point of his theoretical analysis of the class structure of capitalist societies—the market. . . . Property relations logically precede market relationships, and therefore in order to understand the nature of class structures we must direct our attention in the first place to this underlying structure—the capitalist mode of production, and its associated relations of production. Putting the same thing in a slightly different and simpler way, we feel that to study the market without also taking into account the relations of production which underlie the market gives at best an incomplete, and at worst a misleading, account of the class structure.

Most contemporary Marxists would defend some notion of the primacy of production relations over market relations. Once again, however, recent developments in Marxist theory have tended to undermine the distinctiveness of the Marxist perspective in the direction of a greater openness to Weberian viewpoints. Among Marxist political economists, for example, there is a growing school of “Sraffian” theorists who argue that capital accumulation is better analyzed from the standpoint of market phenomena (wages, prices, etc.) than in terms of production values as defined by the labor theory of value (Steedman, 1977). In one of the more provocative works of recent Marxist theory, John Roemer (1982) extends this perspective to the analysis of class and exploitation. Through a detailed analysis of the flows of surplus

labor from one category of actors to another in the course of various exchange relations, Roemer shows that, given an unequal distribution of property rights in the means of production, market exchange results in an exploitative transfer of labor from the property-poor to the property-rich, regardless of the nature of the relations of production. From this he concludes that the institution of wage labor and the domination of capitalists over workers at the point of production are incidental to the functioning of exploitation and the definition of classes in capitalist society. What matters is the institution of market exchange and the unequal distribution of different forms of property.

It is on the basis of Roemer's work that Erik Olin Wright has sought to reconceptualize the class position of salaried managers and professionals. Wright (1985) now argues that class is exclusively a relationship of exploitation, rather than a complex unity of exploitation and domination relations. The dominant form of exploitation in capitalist society is that based on the private ownership of the means of production, but there are also subsidiary forms of exploitation that derive from the unequal distribution of other productive assets. One such asset is skills—especially those whose supply is artificially restricted through credentialist mechanisms. A second is what Wright calls “organization assets,” by which he means control over the conditions for the coordination of labor. Within this framework, salaried managers and professionals are distinguished from the working class by their disproportionate share of one or the other (or both) of these subsidiary assets. Such differentials in skill and organization assets, Wright argues, enable them (via the mechanism of market exchange) to exploit the labor of other workers, even as they themselves are exploited by capitalists.

Whether this reconceptualization successfully exorcizes the concept of domination from the Marxist definition of class is an open question, given that by Wright's own admission the “ownership” of “organization assets” is rather difficult to distinguish from the exercise of hierarchical authority. But even accepting this distinction, it is clear that Wright has closed one door to Weberianism only by opening another: He has eliminated domination from the definition of class only by elevating the importance of market relations. Wright (1985, p. 107-108) defends the Marxist pedigree of his new theory by arguing that Weberians treat market relations from a culturalist standpoint (i.e., in terms of the meaning systems that shape social action), whereas he conceptualizes market relations from a materialist standpoint (i.e., in terms of objective

patterns of exploitation that exist independently of the subjective states of actors). Yet the very introduction of such concepts as “skills” and “credentials” into the definition of class produces an inevitable slide toward a culturalist form of analysis. As both Marxists and Weberians have argued, what passes for “skill” in a given society or what is certified by credentials is very much a social construction and therefore dependent upon the subjective states of actors (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Larson, 1977; Collins, 1979).

At the present time, few Marxists would be willing to follow Roemer and Wright in redefining class divisions from the standpoint of market exchange; however, there is another way in which market relations have assumed a more widespread importance in Marxist class analysis. This is in the analysis of fractional divisions *within* classes, and especially within the working class. During the past decade Marxist theorists have elaborated the concept of “labor market segmentation” in an effort to account for persistent divisions within the working class. According to this perspective, the failure of workers to unite as a class reflects more than just cultural divisions or false consciousness; it is rooted in objective differences in the conditions under which various fractions of workers sell their labor and corresponding differences in the nature of the jobs they come to occupy (Gordon, Edwards, and Reich, 1982). Different variants of this theory propose different explanations for the existence of segmented labor markets. Some theorists follow the traditional Weberian perspective in attributing split labor markets to the exclusionary efforts of more privileged workers (Bonacich, 1976). Others attribute labor market segmentation to the divide-and-rule strategies of capitalists or to preexisting differences in the structure of jobs (Edwards, 1975; 1979). But regardless of whether labor market segmentation is viewed exclusively as a product of market competition or as a derivative of the underlying structure of production, market relations *per se* occupy an important place in the analysis, as only through the segmentation of labor markets are differences in the nature of jobs translated into divisions between concrete fractions of workers.

Contemporary Marxists have thus broadened the focus of their analysis from the traditional Marxist concern with production relations to give greater attention to the social relations of the marketplace. To understand the reasons for this shift one need only look at the substantive issues that have preoccupied Marxist class analysis in recent years. First is the question of the class position of salaried managers and

professionals. However one locates these groups within the social relations of production, it is clear that market phenomena, such as the closure of mobility opportunities through credentialism, play an important role in the recruitment, legitimation, and reproduction of these class positions. Second is the problem of the political disunity of the working class, which, as we have seen, has been addressed through the concept of labor market segmentation. Third, is the related issue of the gender and racial divisions and their articulation with capitalist class relations. Here too the closure of market opportunities has been seen as a crucial link between nonclass forms of inequality and the structure of class positions. One occasionally hears solemn pronouncements from certain Marxist quarters to the effect that market relations belong to the realm of "mere appearances," whereas only production relations reveal the "inner essence" of capitalist society. If this is true, however, then Marxism itself has become increasingly entangled in the web of "mere appearances."

CONCLUSION

In this essay I have shown how concepts and perspectives traditionally associated with Weber have been incorporated into contemporary Marxist analyses of class. The result is what I would describe as the development of a "neo-Marxist" theory of class. By way of summary, let me sketch what I see as the basic features of this neo-Marxist perspective. Individual Marxist theorists would probably take exception to one or another of the points enumerated below. Nevertheless, I believe that they capture the general thrust of contemporary Marxist (or what I am now calling "neo-Marxist") class analysis.

According to the neo-Marxist perspective, the basic class antagonism between capitalists and workers is held to be structurally determined by the mode of production. Structural factors play an important role in conditioning the interests and capacities for action of contending classes and also set objective limits upon the possible variation of key institutions and practices within capitalist society. At the same time, many of the specific features of the class structure, such as the formation and transformation of intermediate classes or the fractional divisions within classes, are viewed as the relatively contingent outcome of concrete historical struggles. Moreover, the formation of objective class positions into concrete collectivities and their mobilization behind

specific political projects is also held to be, at least in part, an historically contingent process that must be studied from the standpoint of a theory of social action. Class relations, conceived as relations of economic exploitation, are held to be the primary basis of epochal social change, but in a much weaker sense than in classical Marxism. Nonclass relations (e.g., race and gender) and noneconomic practices (e.g., political and ideological domination) are accorded a considerable degree of autonomy and effectivity in the functioning and historical transformation of class societies. Finally, whereas class divisions are understood as rooted in the social relations of production, considerable attention is given to market relations, especially in the analysis of intermediate classes and intraclass cleavages.

In each of the above areas contemporary Weberian theorists hold somewhat different views. By and large, Weberians continue to reject all but the weakest notions of structural causality. They deny any trans-historical primacy to class, although some are willing to grant the centrality of class relations in capitalist society. Domination remains a more fundamental concept for them than exploitation, and market relations are seen as more basic to the constitution of classes than production relations. These differences are not unimportant. Nevertheless, in each of these areas the difference between contemporary Marxist (or neo-Marxist) theory and Weberian theory has become more a matter of the relative weight accorded to different explanatory concepts than a qualitative difference between distinct modes of explanation.⁸ Indeed, in terms of the classical definitions, it is impossible to classify many contemporary theorists as either Marxist or Weberian in any unambiguous sense. This becomes even more true when one moves from abstract theory to more concrete investigations of social class. Thus although classical Marxist and Weberian theory remain important as markers of the general terrain of class analysis, providing the raw concepts and indicating the basic choices in possible modes of analysis, it is no longer possible to draw a sharp line between opposing theoretical schools.

NOTES

1. In this paper I shall limit my attention to Marxist and Weberian theories of the class structure of *capitalist* society. Of course, Marx and Weber also have different conceptions of the nature and importance of class relations in noncapitalist societies. Marx conceives

of a sequence of different types of class society culminating in capitalism, each with its own dominant class principle, whereas for Weber it is only with capitalism that class becomes a central principle of stratification. Here also one could cite trends in contemporary Marxism that have brought it closer to the traditional Weberian perspective. For example, contemporary Marxist analyses of existing socialist societies, such as those of Ernest Mandel (1968) and Paul Sweezy (1982), implicitly acknowledge that noncapitalist forms of oppression do not necessarily avail themselves of analysis in class terms.

2. Much of this debate has centered on the functionalist character of Althusser's Marxism (Thompson, 1978; Appelbaum, 1979; Anderson, 1980; Clarke, 1980; Benton, 1984) and on G. A. Cohen's defense of functionalist arguments in Marxist theory (Cohen, 1978; Levine and Wright, 1980; Elster, 1982; Cohen 1982; Van Parijs, 1982; Berger and Offe, 1982).

3. For further discussion on this point, see Cohen (1978), Wright (1983), Van Parijs (1982), and Callinicos (1985).

4. For an elaboration of this critique of Parkin, see Burris (1983) and Barbalet (1982).

5. See, for example, the critiques of Habermas (1982), Archer (1982), and Callinicos (1985).

6. The discussion here follows closely that of Wright (1983).

7. See, for example, Wright and Perrone (1977), Wright (1978b), and Johnston and Orstein (1985).

8. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization. The more extreme structuralist versions of Marxism and the more extreme subjectivist versions of Weberianism do indeed pose a qualitative difference in methods of analysis. Neither of these, however, are especially prominent in contemporary class analysis.

REFERENCES

- Albert, Michael and Robin Hahnel. 1981. *Marxism and Socialist Theory*. Boston: South End Press.
- Anderson, Perry. 1980. *Arguments in English Marxism*. London: New Left Books.
- Appelbaum, Richard. 1979. "Born-again Functionalism? A Reconsideration of Althusser's Structuralism." *The Insurgent Sociologist* 9:18-33.
- Archer, Margaret S. 1982. "Morphogenesis versus Structuration: On Combining Structure and Action." *British Journal of Sociology* 31:401-418.
- Aronowitz, Stanley. 1981. *The Crisis of Historical Materialism*. New York: Praeger.
- Barbalet, Jack M. 1980. "Social Closure in Class Analysis." *Sociology* 16:484-497.
- Baron, Harold M. 1975. "Racial Domination in Advanced Capitalism," in Richard Edwards, Michael Reich, and David M. Gordon (eds.), *Labor Market Segmentation*. Lexington Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company.
- Barrett, Michele. 1980. *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis*. London: New Left Books.
- Benton, Ted. 1984. *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Berger, Johannes and Claus Offe. 1982. "Functionalism versus Rational Choice?" *Theory and Society* 11:521-526.
- Bonacich, Edna. 1976. "Advanced Capitalism and Black/White Relations in the United States: A Split Labor Market Interpretation." *American Journal of Sociology* 41:34-51.

- Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. 1976. *Schooling in Capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Burris, Val. 1980. "Class Formation and Transformation in Advanced Capitalist Societies: A Comparative Analysis." *Social Praxis* 7:147-179.
- 1983. "Review of Frank Parkin's *Marxism and Class Theory*." *The Insurgent Sociologist* 11:117-120.
- Callinicos, Alex. 1985. "Anthony Giddens: A Contemporary Critique." *Theory and Society* 14:133-166.
- Carchedi, G. 1977. *The Economic Identification of Social Classes*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Clarke, Simon. 1980. "Althusserian Marxism," in Simon Clarke, Terry Lovell, Kevin McDonnell, Kevin Robins, and Victor J. Seidler (eds.), *One-Dimensional Marxism*. London: Allison & Busby.
- Cohen, G. A. 1978. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 1982. "Reply to Elster on 'Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory.'" *Theory and Society* 11:483-495.
- Cohen, Jean. 1982. *Class and Civil Society*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society*. New York: Academic Press.
- 1980. "Weber's Last Theory of Capitalism: A Systematization." *American Sociological Review* 45:925-942.
- Crompton, Rosemary and John Gubbay. 1977. *Economy and Class Structure*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Cutler, Anthony, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst, and A. Hussain. 1977. *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara and John Ehrenreich. 1979. "The Professional-Managerial Class," in Pat Walker (ed.), *Between Labor and Capital*. Boston: South End Press.
- Edwards, Richard. 1975. "The Social Relations of Production in the Firm and Labor Market Structure," in Richard Edwards, Michael Reich, and David M. Gordon (eds.), *Labor Market Segmentation*. Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company.
- 1979. *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books.
- Elster, Jon. 1982. "Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory." *Theory and Society* 11:453-482.
- Geschwender, James. 1978. *Racial Stratification in America*. Dubuque Iowa: William C. Brown.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1971. *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory*. New York: Harper & Row
- 1981. *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gordon, David M., Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich. 1982. *Segmented Work, Divided Workers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen. 1982. "A Reply to My Critics," in John B. Thompson and David Held (eds.), *Habermas: Critical Debates*. London: Macmillan.
- Johnston, William and Michael Ornstein. 1985. "Social Class and Political Ideology in Canada." *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 22:369-393.
- Larson, Magali Sarfatti. 1977. *The Rise of Professionalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Levine, Andrew and Erik Olin Wright. 1980. "Rationality and Class Struggle." *New Left Review* 123.

- Mandel, Ernest. 1968. *Marxist Economic Theory*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- McDonough, Roisin and Rachel Harrison. 1978. "Patriarchy and Relations of Production," in Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe (eds.), *Feminism and Materialism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mitchell, Juliet. 1974. *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Parkin, Frank. 1979. *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Poulantzas, Nicos. 1975. *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. London: New Left Books.
- Przeworski, Adam. 1977. "Proletariat into a Class: The Process of Class Formation from Karl Kautsky's *The Class Struggle* to Recent Controversies." *Politics and Society* 7:343-401.
- Reich, Michael. 1981. *Racial Inequality: A Political-Economic Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Roemer, John. 1982. *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Steedman, Ian. 1977. *Marx After Sraffa*. London: New Left Books.
- Sweezy, Paul. 1982. *Post-Revolutionary Society*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Thompson, E. P. 1964. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- 1978. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Turner, Bryan S. 1981. *For Weber*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Van Parijs, Philippe. 1982. "Functionalist Marxism Rehabilitated." *Theory and Society* 11:497-511.
- Wright, Erik Olin. 1978a. *Class, Crisis, and the State*. London: New Left Books.
- 1978b. "Race, Class, and Income Inequality." *American Journal of Sociology* 83:1368-1397.
- 1983. "Giddens's Critique of Marxism." *New Left Review* 138:11-35.
- 1985. *Classes*. London: New Left Books.
- Wright, Erik Olin and Luca Perrone. 1977. "Marxist Class Categories and Income Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 42:32-55.

Neo-Marxists thus agree with liberals that freedom of the individual is the most important political value, and that modern capitalism delivers it to all members of society, including proletarians, in several important ways. First, all members of a capitalist society (worker and capitalist alike) are legally free. Second, any particular worker is always legally free, and often economically free, to leave the proletariat and become a petty bourgeois or even a capitalist. But, within a capitalist society, although most proletarians are free to escape the proletariat, indeed even if all are, the