

INTRODUCING RETHINKING CLASS AND SOCIAL DIFFERENCE: A DYNAMIC ASYMMETRY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Social class has long existed in tension with other forms of social difference such as race, gender, and sexuality, both in academic and popular debate. While Marxist-influenced class primacy perspectives gained prominence in US sociology in the 1970s, they faded from view by the 1990s, replaced by perspectives focusing on culture and institutions or on intersectional analyses of how multiple forms of social difference shape durable patterns of disempowerment and marginalization. More recently, class and capitalism have reasserted their place on the academic agenda, but continue to coexist uneasily with analyses of oppression and social difference. Here we discuss possibilities for bridging the gap between studies of class and other forms of social difference. We contend that these categories are best understood in relation to each other when situated in a larger system with its own endogenous dynamics and tendencies, namely capitalism. After providing an historical account of the fraught relationship between studies of class and other forms of social difference, we propose a theoretical model for integrating understandings of class and social difference using Wright et al.'s concept of dynamic asymmetry. This shifts us away from discussions of which factors are most important in general toward concrete discussions of how these factors interact in particular cases and processes. We contend that class and other forms of social difference should not be studied primarily as traits embodied in individuals, but rather with respect to how these differences are organized in relation to each other within a framework shaped by the dynamics of capitalist development.

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INTRODUCTION

Social class has long existed in uneasy relation to other forms of social difference such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and more. The tension exists both in scholarly and popular debate. Such debates tend to take the form of arguments over which aspect of social difference matters most in explaining a particular social outcome or social inequality more broadly. For example, this very volume emerged out of discussions that occurred in the aftermath of Donald Trump's unexpected victory in the 2016 US presidential election. At the time, analysts seeking to explain Trump's victory were divided over whether "economic anxiety," particularly among the much-discussed "white working class," or social divisions, particularly racism, delivered Trump the White House (Ferguson et al., 2018; Oberhauser et al., 2019; Schaffner et al., 2018; Tankersley, 2016).

Without rehashing the argument, what is striking is the degree to which these two factors were counterposed to each other. Those pointing toward economic factors risked being accused of downplaying Trump's appeal to racism, while those highlighting Trump's racism and misogyny risked being accused of overlooking the real economic challenges that shaped many voters' choices. While some of the stark counterposition between "identity" and "economic anxiety" resulted from the way that political campaign coverage paints participants into opposing camps, it betrayed a more fundamental problem: a basic misunderstanding of what class is, how it works, and particularly how it relates to other categories of social identity like race and gender.

For its part, "class" was understood either as an amalgam of income and education levels or as a set of cultural markers. In either case, "class" was understood as a trait largely, if not explicitly, assigned to white people, particularly white men. Voting analysis focused on the plight of the "white working class" for those advancing the "economic anxiety" argument, while those focused on racism and misogyny centered their analysis on people of color and women. Left out of this framing was the idea that women and people of color could be part of the group called "the working class" or that racism and misogyny could also be bound up with what people need to do to survive, what we typically think of as a class issue. As a result, most analysts missed one of the most salient features of the 2016 election: the sharp drop in Black working-class voter participation, particularly in key states like Wisconsin and Michigan, which exceeded Trump's margin of victory (Krogstad & Lopez, 2017).¹

This is merely one example, but it is symptomatic of a broader tendency that also surfaces in academic circles. At its most general level, it takes the form of a

¹For examples of analyses that resist the counterposition of "race" and "class" as factors explaining Trump's election, see (Bhambra, 2017; Davis, 2017; McQuarrie, 2017).

debate over “class primacy” or the degree to which class does or does not serve as the fundamental driver of political and social conflict (Wright, 2005). Implicit in this debate is the question of the degree to which class and other dimensions of social difference such as race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, or ability are autonomous from—or reducible to—each other.

Within sociology, class primacy has largely been identified with the Marxist tradition. It is a perspective that gained prominence in a number of subfields throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, generating a rich and wide-ranging body of scholarship. However, critics attacked class primacy perspectives for being “class reductionist,” inattentive or even dismissive of the explanatory role of other forms of social difference. Moreover, they challenged the notion that class could serve as a fundamental basis of identity or social action, arguing that it was necessarily constructed out of cultural narratives and institutional contexts.

By the 1990s, arguments for class primacy in sociology were rare, superseded on the one hand by “middle-range” forms of explanation, where culture and institutions took center stage (Adams, Clemens, & Orloff, 2005; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991), and on the other hand by more multifaceted analyses of how gender, race, nation/citizenship, colonial legacies, and other forms of social difference shape durable patterns of disempowerment and marginalization. In particular, scholars focused on how multiple forms of oppression and marginalization often intersect with and amplify each other (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Such accounts took issue not only with class primacy but also with the concept of causal primacy in general. Instead, they focused on multicausal pathways to explain the effects of inequality and oppression. Class did not disappear as a category of analysis, but did greatly recede in importance. Even for those who did not go so far as to proclaim “the death of class,” it became one among many competing and overlapping categories of inequality.

Not coincidentally, this shift in academic research happened in tandem with a sharp decline in class-based political organization. Across the industrialized world, labor union strength diminished, while labor and socialist parties, traditional representatives of the working class, distanced themselves from class-based rhetoric and policies. With working-class political and economic organization in disarray, and its social clout reduced, its analytical salience declined as well.

By the early 2010s though, class was forcing itself back on both the political and academic agendas. The aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis exposed the yawning gap between a global “1%” elite and the rest of the world. Meanwhile, movements like Occupy and Black Lives Matter touched a nerve far beyond their US origins, raising distinctly class-based issues among their demands. As for academia, Thomas Piketty’s work chronicling the evolution of inequality across industrialized countries reached a mass audience, while sociologists renewed and refocused their attention on issues of class and inequality. One telling academic indicator of this was the founding in 2011 of the Section on Inequality, Poverty, and Mobility of the American Sociological Association.

At the same time, these developments also exposed the chasm that existed between discussions of class and other forms of social difference. On the

movements side, Occupy was criticized for reproducing the patterns of hierarchy and marginalization of women and people of color that it criticized in the broader society (Gould-Wartofsky, 2015; Juris et al., 2012). For its part, Black Lives Matter has faced internal class tensions as the movement has developed. Some work to retain its grassroots, inclusive character, framing issues such as police brutality, housing, and the Fight for \$15 as issues of class and racial justice. Meanwhile, others have been drawn toward mainstream politics, including electoral campaigns, policy work, and professionalized forms of organization. Additionally, access to foundation money and fundraising have proven to be flashpoints exposing class divisions within the movement (Ransby, 2018; Rickford, 2016; Sands, 2017).

In academia, the new research on inequality has developed in uneasy coexistence with literatures on oppression and social difference. Some critics argued that the inequality literature was insufficiently attentive to issues of “categorical complexity,” where multiple forms of oppression interact with each other to produce specific forms of inequality (McCall, 2005). Likewise, within the social difference literatures, some theorists of intersectionality contended that class remained poorly integrated into studies of the intersection between race, gender, and class (Anthias, 2013; Walby et al., 2012).

Is it possible to bridge the gap between studies of class and other forms of social difference? If so, how? Does class primacy necessarily entail class reductionism, or can it account for other axes of domination and oppression without marginalizing them? Likewise, how might integrating class into studies of other forms of oppression and domination change or enhance our understandings of these forms? These are the questions that lie at the heart of this special issue of *Political Power and Social Theory*.

In our view, the dynamics of class and other forms of social difference are best understood in relation to each other when situated analytically in a larger system with its own endogenous dynamics and tendencies, namely capitalism.

This special issue brings together a group of scholars grappling with these questions in their empirical work. Here, in the introduction, we offer a theoretical framework to begin thinking through them systematically. We start with an assessment of the fraught history of debates surrounding class primacy, its critics, and efforts to theorize class in relation to other forms of social difference. Our particular focus is on assessing how understandings of the causal role of class have evolved over time. Here we trace the development of critiques of class reductionism that challenged class’ causal primacy both in relation to other identities or axes of social difference and in relation to other factors like cultural narratives.

While these approaches offered a needed corrective to the overly structural models of explanation common in most forms of class analysis, we contend that it was at the cost of analytical clarity and explanatory power. In arguing for multicausal pathways, it became more difficult to assess competing explanations or discern broader patterns. Instead, the focus shifted to more particular interpretive or narrative accounts, which some criticized as veering into “just-so” models of explanation. In other cases, the broader goal of explanation through identification of key causal factors was called into question.

We contend that recognizing multiple and overlapping forms of social difference and multicausal pathways need not come at the cost of giving up on capitalism as a central analytical category or on causal explanation more broadly. Building on the work of [Wright, Levine, and Sober \(1992\)](#), we argue first for replacing the concept of *class primacy* with that of *class pervasiveness*, the idea that “mechanisms identified in class analysis have considerable importance across a wide range of explanatory problems” ([Wright, Levine, and Sober \(1992\)](#), p. 175), while also understanding that “there is no principle that warrants the conclusion that class considerations always comprise the primary determinants of social phenomena” ([Wright, Levine, and Sober \(1992\)](#), p. 174). Our analytical move, along these lines, is to shift from how class experience informs and shapes the conditions of other forms of social difference to show how all forms of social difference, class included, are shaped and conditioned by patterns of capitalist development itself.

Second, we provide a theoretical model for integrating understandings of class and social difference using Wright et al.’s concept of *dynamic asymmetry*. The *asymmetrical* part of the term does not refer to the idea that certain causal factors always matter more, as a crude class primacy argument would hold. Rather, it refers to two forms of asymmetry. First, asymmetries in the level at which potential causal factors operate. More structural factors that we can identify in the basic patterns of capitalist development tend to serve as limiting factors, providing the range of options available to actors at a given moment. More contextual factors, such as other forms of social difference, contingent events, and strategic patterns of political mobilization, help to select from that range of options. Second, within the realm of contextual factors, there are asymmetries in the degree to which potential causal factors are salient in any given situation.

The *dynamic* part of the term refers to the degree that structural factors are driven over time by endogenous sources of dynamism. With respect to capitalism, one need not ascribe to a full-blown theory of historical materialism for this to hold. One must simply be willing to accept three basic propositions that constitute capitalism as an endogenously dynamic system of change: (1) that the structural interdependence between exploiters of labor and those whose labor is exploited creates an inherent conflict; (2) that competition and conflict between firms on the market creates dynamic patterns of corporate governance, technological change, and growth; and (3) that the competition within the labor market itself over scarce jobs and resources creates inherent conflict between and within working-class communities. We see these as entirely endogenous processes within capitalism. Other factors, such as state policy environments, play similar limiting roles, but are driven by exogenous sources of dynamism. That is, they change in response to external forces.²

²In the case of state policies, this lack of endogenous dynamism can play a critical explanatory role, as with instances of “policy drift,” where policies work differently at different times precisely because they do *not* change to adapt to new situations ([Hacker & Pierson, 2010](#)).

This dynamic asymmetry framework shifts attention away from general discussions of which factors are most important overall toward concrete discussions of how these factors interact in particular cases and processes. The many forms of social difference that concern us in this volume, including class, can operate asymmetrically, at the structural-limiting level or the contextual-selecting level, depending on the question or case at issue. In exploring the relationship between kinds of social inequality, we contend that the key analytical move involves shifting from analyzing class and other forms of social difference as individual traits embodied in individuals to focusing on how these forms of social difference are organized in relation to each other. At its core, this involves shifting attention to developmental dynamics within capitalism itself.

THE FRAUGHT HISTORY OF CLASS PRIMACY

Amidst the social upheaval of the 1960s, class analysis saw a resurgence in American sociology. The resurgence was in reaction to dominant mid-century schools of thought such as structural functionalism, pluralism, and stratification theory, which did not account sufficiently for the role of structural power imbalances in shaping social and political outcomes. Even among the subset of mid-century scholars who took power seriously, they viewed contemporary power struggles as occurring within a framework of regulated capitalism managed by pluralist institutions. While these would allow for winners and losers, the lack of deep, enduring cleavages and stability of democratic institutions would ensure that structural inequalities would not persist over time (Bendix, 1964; Dahrendorf, 1959; Lipset, 1963).³

The “new” class analysis built on the mid-century power scholarship, but took a more critical stance. Much of it was explicitly rooted in the Marxist tradition, focused on explaining how capitalist (and pre-capitalist) economic relations produced and reproduced structural relations of domination and exploitation. Exploring a wide range of empirical territory, its rise was not bound by method. Erik Olin Wright’s quantitative analyses of class established both an empirical and theoretical foundation for understanding middle classes (Wright, 1985, 1997). Frances Fox Piven’s historical studies of labor and protest movements laid the foundation for subsequent studies of social movements and contentious politics (Piven & Cloward, 1977). Michael Burawoy’s ethnographic study of the workplace provided insight into intraclass relations and the microfoundations for consent, while Paul Willis’ study of working-class British schoolboys detailed how class structures are reproduced across generations (Burawoy, 1979; Willis, 1977). Edna Bonacich developed a theoretical framework for understanding the shape of modern labor markets and their role in producing racial conflict (Bonacich, 1972).

³The notable exception here would be C. Wright Mills, who while eschewing the Marxist label himself, nonetheless, took structural power imbalances based on class very seriously in his work (Mills, 1948, 1959).

What this wide array of work shared in common was an approach that put a relational, oppositional conception of class front and center. As distinct from the stratification approach, captured so elegantly in Blau and Duncan's status attainment model (1967), which focused on the social causes that best explain why people end up in the positions they do, the emergent relational view asked how the material advantages and power resources of some groups are causally related to the material disadvantages of others. More specifically, it assigned to class a primary causal role in explaining the social phenomena under investigation. Counter to mid-century scholarship, which tended to view class either as a descriptive category or one among many competing and overlapping sources of social cleavage, this scholarship viewed class as a fundamental organizing principle.

There was also an important and influential left-Weberian variant to this new wave of class analysis (Goldthorpe, 1987; Mann, 1986; Tilly, 1998). Drawing from the work of Max Weber, these thinkers tended to emphasize processes of social closure and opportunity hoarding. In these accounts, the mechanism for transforming a disadvantage for some groups into an advantage for others was exclusion from opportunities, as can be seen clearly in the cases of redlining in housing and color bars in occupations. The Marxist variant, which will be our main focus, did not preclude such relational mechanisms. Rather, instead of arguing that class was relational with respect to the exclusion of certain advantages held by some groups, it went further, arguing that the source of material gain for some classes were the other classes themselves. In other words, in the Marxist approach to class, the mechanism that turned a material disadvantage for some groups into a material advantage for others was their exclusion from certain property rights and their subsequent work effort for the advantaged classes. The Marxists, then, argued that relational patterns of domination and exploitation were core to understanding class.

Throughout the 1970s, the new class analysis developed an ambitious and generative research program (see Manza & McCarthy, 2011 for an overview). Its apogee was perhaps a 1982 special issue of the *American Journal of Sociology* organized around the theme of "Marxist Inquiries: Studies of Labor, Class, and States" (Burawoy & Skocpol, 1982). Co-edited by Michael Burawoy and Theda Skocpol, it showcased the breadth of this scholarship, with papers addressing classic Marxist questions such as proletarianization, the labor process, and the changing class structure of capitalist and state-socialist societies, along with broader issues such as the relation between the state and class formation in developing countries, drivers of state military expenditures, and the political economy of the global food order. In his sweeping introductory essay to the volume, Burawoy offered a confident assessment of where the new generation of scholarship fit into the evolution of the discipline:

Just as sociology responded to the call of the immediate postwar era, Marxism has now taken the baton, trying to piece together a coherent analysis of these interconnected transitions [related to the breakdown of the postwar social and political order] (Burawoy, 1982, p. S28).

But for all the scholarly ferment the new class analysis generated, within a few years of the *AJS* issue, the resurgence had largely subsided. Critics charged scholarship based on the primacy of class with being “class reductionist” and inattentive to other axes of social difference. Even worse, Marxism was criticized for engaging in the great sin of functionalism. While socialist feminists and anticolonial Marxists had long raised such critiques within Marxism itself, as we shall see further below, these critiques progressively distanced themselves from Marxism, giving greater causal weight to other forms of social difference such as race and gender, and often outright displacing class as irrelevant. Even as the class primacy of the Marxist scholarship of the 1970s faded, questions about how to understand class inequality and other dimensions of social difference, such as race, gender, sexuality, citizenship, or ability, persisted. To what extent are other forms of social difference autonomous from class? How might they be reducible to one or the other? Which is the most important for explaining durable disempowerment and marginality?

TURNING TO THE PRIMACY OF CULTURE

At its core, the cultural turn in sociological studies of inequality was not simply about “bringing in” new and understudied dimensions of social life. While the study of nonclass forms of social difference was in part a matter of filling in gaps, much more fundamentally culturalists argued that social positions (including class itself) do not determine social dynamics but rather had to themselves be formed through processes of meaning-making (Adams et al., 2005, p. 39). The cultural turn at its core was a challenge to the causal primacy of class, which in many respects reversed the causal arrow and elevated the status of culture to that of causal primacy in its place.

Margaret Somers’ work, in particular, developed unambiguously cultural critiques of class itself. Her work does not simply foreground cultural processes, but rather is framed around an explicit critique of the Marxist causal emphasis on class. There are three broad approaches within cultural analysis. The first is the investigation how extra-cultural factors, such as structure, institutions, and demography, bear on the production of cultural phenomena, an intellectual corner in which many of the Western Marxists found themselves (cf. Williams, 1958). A second endogenous subfield identifies the ways that cultural processes condition and produce other cultural processes. Consider, for example, Sewell’s work on how meanings are attached to cultural symbols (1999). And finally, the strongest version is the study of how cultural factors make and condition extra-cultural phenomena. Sewell summarizes this turn in *Logics of History* saying that “[e]ven social and economic structures, which appear to be the concrete foundations or bony skeletons of social life, are themselves the products of the interpretive work of human actors” (2000, p. 42). Structures such as class and capitalism do not precede culture, they themselves are culturally produced. Somers’ work, as well as the other strong defenders of the cultural turn, is unambiguously situated in the latter approach, making a clear case for the causal primacy of culture.

Somers' earliest work critically reevaluated class formation theory (Somers, 1992, 1993). Her analyses of English working-class development criticized theories that explained worker behavior by pointing to their economic interests. Instead, Somers emphasized the formation of narrative identities, the narrative processes through which selves were constructed and action mediated. This line of argumentation was a direct reversal of views that made class processes causally primary to social action. In this new account, the question of why people act in the way they do is a matter of identity driven by processes of meaning-making that have only a tenuous relationship to actual socioeconomic position. She argues that "the narrative dimension of identities presumes that action can be intelligible only if we recognize the one or many ontological and public narratives in which actors identify themselves" (1992, p. 607). This emphasis on the cultural processes driving identity-making and social action is a dominant strand in the cultural primacy research.

For the culturalists, conceptual categories, such as those attached to identity (race, sexuality, gender, citizenship), are historically variable and social in their origin, but again irreducible to social position. Capitalism as a system of constraints derived from its particular class structure almost entirely falls from view in this approach. It is hard to see the relevance of class at all from a strongly culturalist perspective.

THE MULTICAUSAL APPROACH OF INTERDEPENDENCE AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Emerging alongside the new culturalist scholarship was a rich and varied literature that sought to understand how multiple and intersecting identities, embedded in individuals and broader social structures, worked to reproduce and reinforce systems of social inequality. Challenging the causal primacy of class, this scholarship insisted:

...that race, class, and gender are interconnected and that they must be understood as operating together if you want to understand the experiences of diverse groups and particular issues and events in society (Andersen & Collins 2015, pp. xi–xii).

Scholars have also added other axes of social difference to this "trinity," including sexuality, gender identity, ability, citizenship, immigration status, and more (Anthias, 2013; Dhamoon, 2011).

If there is an overarching concern uniting this sprawling literature, it is the effort to capture the complexity of humans' lived experience, which cannot be reduced to any one aspect of one's individual identity (McCall, 2005). As a result, antiessentialism is a core tenet of intersectionality, challenging the idea "that people who share assigned social classifications also share basic biological or cultural attributes" (Collins, 2019). Additionally, there is a normative commitment to social justice and "centering" the voices of those whose identities place them at the margins of society (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008). It would be impossible to offer a comprehensive assessment of such a vast

body of scholarship. Rather, our concern here is specifically the relation between theories of intersectionality and theories of class and capitalism.

While Kimberlé Crenshaw is credited with coining the actual term “intersectionality” in her influential 1989 and 1991 law review articles (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), the tradition has much deeper roots in Black feminist thought (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Earlier articulations such as the writings of the Combahee River Collective and Angela Davis explicitly engaged with the Marxist tradition (Davis, 1981; Taylor, 2017). They sought to address the blind spots of 1970s class analysis with regard to race and gender within a systemic critique of capitalism.

Although this approach did not completely disappear as the scholarship developed, it diminished. Crenshaw’s own work was in the realm of employment discrimination law, which both takes capitalist social relations for granted and does not include class as a protected category. This makes it understandable that her analysis of class and capitalism would not be as developed as her analysis of the intersection of race and gender discrimination. But more generally, class as a category of analysis and capitalism as a system of exploitation and oppression remain relatively neglected in intersectional analysis (Walby et al., 2012). Indeed, Anthias (2013) notes that debates around class and those around intersectionality “rarely meet or occupy the same terrain, with distinctive writers, bibliographies, and primary sources of citation” (pp. 121–122), even as class is ostensibly part of the race/class/gender trinity.⁴

Even as theorists of intersectionality have interrogated ever more deeply the contested and constructed character of race and gender as categories, class remains surprisingly taken for granted. Intersectional scholars use terms like “working class,” “middle class,” and “affluent” without fleshing out what those categories mean or how they relate to each other (see Andersen & Collins, 2015 for examples). To the extent that class is defined, it is usually synonymous with income, as when Andersen and Collins advise that “class is not only about the poor” and that “it is important to study...the experiences of the affluent when analyzing class” (p. 3). Class is theoretically reduced to an individual trait, not a social relation.

As with class as a category, capitalism as a system has faded from view within intersectionality. While certainly referenced, it tends to be reduced to one among many different systems of power, operating together in what Patricia Hill Collins famously referred to as a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000). In Collins’ account, each system of power organizes a separate category of social difference: white supremacy for race, patriarchy for gender, and capitalism for class (Collins, 2019, p. 39). Focusing on capitalism and class then amounts to a “monosystem analysis” that fails to capture the multiple and complex dimensions of social inequalities (Collins, 2015, p. 5).

⁴There are important exceptions, such as the work of Joan Acker (2006a, 2006b). Ashley Bohrer (2019) has also recently sought to integrate Marxist critiques of capitalism within an intersectional framework.

Collins insists on this point, arguing that:

Marxism's traditional emphasis on capitalism and class analysis provided scant interpretive space for analyses of racism, colonialism, and similar systems of power. Then and now, Marxist intellectuals who prioritize capitalist class analysis as explaining everything have been ill-positioned to hear the demands of liberation movements that organize around categories of racism and colonialism (Collins, 2019, p. 303 n. 26).

Such remarks would surprise Marxists in the Black Radical Tradition described below and in more detail by Edwards in this volume, many of whom led antiracist, anticolonial liberation movements explicitly influenced by Marxist ideas. But more importantly, they highlight tensions within theories of intersectionality that spread beyond Collins' own fundamental work.

Conceiving of capitalism as one of many overlapping and intersecting systems of power, with each system organizing a separate category of social difference, risks undermining intersectionality's commitments to antiessentialism and to understanding forms of oppression as mutually constitutive. Whether intended or not, the framing suggests that capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy can exist independently of each other prior to intersecting, as if capitalism in its concrete reality is not fundamentally shaped by white supremacy and patriarchy. Likewise, it suggests that class exists as a purely economic category, prior to intersecting with race and gender. Only in such a framework would it make sense to argue that a focus on capitalism fails to leave space for analyses of racism and colonialism.

Certainly, not all intersectional theorists share Collins' crisp differentiation between multiple systems of power. Indeed, one of the key axes of debate within intersectional theory is precisely around the question of how stable or fluid analytical categories should be (Walby et al., 2012). The tension goes back to the canonical metaphors Crenshaw initially laid out in her foundational articles, the "traffic intersection" and the "basement." While trying to capture dynamic interactions between multiple, overlapping identities and forms of oppression that are not simply the sum of the different forms of oppression (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Dhamoon, 2011; Hancock, 2007), much of the language of intersectionality implies an "ontological atomism" whereby "*independently constituted* relations of oppression..., in some circumstances, crisscross each other" (McNally, 2017, p. 96)—and, in the case of the basement metaphor, literally pile on top of each other.⁵

The result is a lack of conceptual clarity around figuring out which axes of social difference are most salient in which contexts when explaining dynamics of inequality. First, there is debate around whether or not particular categories of difference can be analytically prioritized in different contexts, or if all must be treated equally (Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005). Then there is debate around the number of analytically relevant axes of difference. By default, race, gender, and

⁵In some cases, the ontological atomism is not just implied, but asserted, as when Yuval-Davis (2006, pp. 200–201) states that "it is important to remember that the ontological basis of each of these [social] divisions is autonomous."

class are assumed to be relevant, but evolving scholarship has focused attention on other differences, including age, ability, religion, culture, and more. Some researchers have proposed up to 16 discrete “vectors of difference” (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Figuring out a research strategy capable of integrating such complex and interrelated forms of difference presents practical, methodological challenges (McCall, 2005; Walby et al., 2012). Unless one maintains a staunch commitment to treating all categories of difference equally at all times, the core challenge entails determining which differences are most salient in the context under consideration (Ferree, 2011). This involves identifying *causal asymmetries* across axes of identity. Without denying the complexity of identities and overlapping systems of oppression, certain facets and systems matter more at different moments and in different contexts.

Also vital is an ability not only to identify and describe systems of power but also to offer an account of what is driving them. Unless we are prepared to accept that social divisions not only naturally occur and perpetuate themselves but also naturally develop into relations of domination and inequality, this is key. Capitalism’s quest for accumulation provides such an internal and endogenous mechanism, a source of dynamism that shapes and reshapes different systems of power. Recentering intersectional analysis around a critique of capitalism, in line with the approach taken by some of intersectionality’s originators, suggests a promising avenue for resolving some of the field’s persistent ambiguities.⁶

THE BLACK RADICAL CHALLENGE

A core hypothesis attributed to Marx and Engels was that capitalism would rationalize social relations. As they wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed once become antiquated before they can ossify” (1998[1848]). A truly reductionist economism, the kind that Marx’s critics often attribute to him, holds that the development of capitalism should have done away with pre-capitalist forms of social difference to the extent that people increasingly interact as buyers and sellers, workers and capitalists, and those identities become salient and displace those of bygone eras. This view was not epitomized so much by Marx, but rather by the Chicago school economist Gary Becker in *The Economics of Discrimination* (1957). There Becker argues that market competition punishes actors, such as firms, that engage in discriminatory practices and in turn will root them out over time. Nonracist companies, so the story goes, would have a competitive advantage over their racist counterparts because they would have access to larger pools of labor and a larger pool of consumers. As Becker’s markets were progressively unleashed from the

⁶Recent scholarship has sought to integrate insights from Marxism and intersectionality, particularly within the social reproduction theory school of thought (Bhattacharya, 2017; Bohrer, 2019).

postwar compromise in which they were put in check by unions and a modicum of government regulation in the 1980s and 1990s, his theory of racial uplift by markets found little support.

Cedric Robinson's critical *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition* (1983) mounts a strong challenge to that claim that capitalism rationalizes society and decouples it with race. Capitalism and race, according to Robinson, were coeval systems, with the former being largely built upon the inequalities bound up with the latter. As Robinson writes:

The bourgeoisies that led the development of capitalism were drawn from particular ethnic and cultural groups; the European proletariats and the mercenaries of the leading states from others; its peasants from still other cultures; and its slaves from entirely different worlds. The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate - to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into "racial" ones (1983, p. 26).

Robinson's work helped produce a conceptual turn to the heuristic concept of "racial capitalism." As Jodi Melamed writes, the "antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires" (2015, p. 77). Racial capitalism then suggests that accumulation under capitalism is not simply about the production of profit but also that processes necessarily deepen, reinforce, and promote forms of social isolation and separateness that produce the social relations that best reproduce accumulation itself. Melamed further suggests that, following the critical geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism, in capitalism racism is a technology of antirelationality that breaks apart collective forms of social relations in ways that are part and parcel of accumulation.

Thus, in the black radical tradition, race is an ideology necessary to the functioning of capitalism itself. Robinson's argument suggests that our racial categories were derived from the social and cultural terrains of feudal European civilization. Others, however, view race as a uniquely modern phenomena, people grouped together based on a socially believed common descent and socially perceived physical similarities (Morning, 2005). This modern, more biologically tinged, view of race is quite distinct from the largely ethnic and cultural divisions that characterized pre-capitalist social differentiation, which mapped onto the economic categories and groups that Robinson studied. But the key is that what is "perceived" as race itself has no biological basis in reality. What is perceived as race is in fact culturally differentiated subgroups.

One solution to this problem is to argue that in fact race itself is solely a cultural construction. But this view is inadequate. What processes could we turn to in this event to explain cultural differentiation taking the form of race in the first place? Many scholars are developing more dynamic theories of race as ideology which roots those racial perceptions in material processes specific to inequality, class, and, contemporarily, capitalism. As the historian Barbara Jeanne Fields wrote in her pivotal 1990 *New Left Review* essay, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America":

Ideology is best understood as the descriptive vocabulary of day-to-day existence, through which people make rough sense of the social reality that they live and create from day to day. It is the language of consciousness that suits the particular way in which people deal with their fellows. It is the interpretation in thought of the social relations through which they constantly create and re-create their collective being, in all the varied forms their collective being may assume: family, clan, tribe, nation, class, party, business enterprise, church, army, club, and so on. As such, ideologies are not delusions but real, as real as the social relations for which they stand (p. 110).

Race is cultural, in that it is based on perceptions and social interpretations that then guide action or at least become tools in our toolkit for social action (c.f. Swidler, 1986). But, further and more to its materialist roots, it must emerge from and be reproduced by experiences that will have the effects they have regardless of the actors interpretations of them. W.E.B. Du Bois cut to the core of this insight in *Dusk of Dawn* when he wrote that “the black man is a person who must ride Jim Crow in Georgia” (1940, p. 77).

We can’t simply leave the story here, though. What are the mechanisms that might generate such a flourishing of material inequalities and hence racial ideologies? What dynamics shape the terrain upon which such a race ideology is called into life? Chief for Fields is the great American nightmare of slavery. She writes:

Africans and their descendants might be, to the eye of the English, heathen in religion, outlandish in nationality, and weird in appearance. But that did not add up to an ideology of racial [i.e. biological] inferiority until a further historical ingredient got stirred into the mixture: the incorporation of Africans and their descendants into a polity and society in which they lacked rights that others not only took for granted, but claimed as a matter of self-evident natural law (106).

As she writes:

...racial ideology supplied the means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights; and, more important, a republic in which those doctrines seemed to represent accurately the world in which all but a minority lived (p. 114).

Such ideologies need a material basis; they need to be renewed, verified, and created in the social life of a society. How might such a process occur in contemporary capitalist societies where *de jure* bondage has long been abolished? Howard Botwinick’s neglected book, *Persistent Inequalities: Wage Disparities Under Capitalism* (1993), offers an analysis of capitalist markets that is of use here.

Botwinick’s book asked a simple question: what determines wages? And, critically, why do we find that similarly skilled workers are paid at disparate rates? Botwinick argues that instead of producing homogenization in labor markets, capitalist markets produce profound *differentiation*. This finding is highly consistent with Robinson’s insights about race. The argument goes that at an aggregated level, wages tend to increase as investment levels increase due to the labor market tightening, and that these rising wages begin to eat into profits, incentivizing the adoption of labor-saving technologies that lead to firings and

layoffs. The aggregate effect is again a general decline in wages due to the swelling of labor available.

However, on an industry and firm level, this process is highly uneven and differentiated. Firms adopt new technologies at different rates, labor processes are developed in distinct ways, and as a result wages across particular firms and industries are constantly moving in different directions, not because of skill but because of firm and industry competitiveness. Competition, far from homogenizing workers income and experiences, becomes a powerful source of differentiation of incomes and work experiences.

This dynamic process occurs atop a class structure whose positions are already filled with racialized groups. Slavery in America created the *perceived* biological categories we call race, but capitalism *reproduces* those categories, extends, deepens, and creates them anew. Under capitalism, a dynamic system that assigns wages less on the basis of skill and more on the basis of dynamic processes of accumulation, workers at the bottom of the labor market, who are disproportionately black and brown, are the first to be fired because of recessions and the last to be hired back in a recovery. Here capitalism and race ideology are co-constitutive, with the former laying down limits on the latter. That is, class and culture are themselves interdependent once mutually existing social processes become mutually reinforcing. Capitalist market processes reproduce multiple inequalities and, in turn, create the conditions for the ideology needed to make sense of capitalism's own irrationalities.

A DYNAMIC ASYMMETRY?

Where does work influenced by the black radical tradition leave us? What insights might it have on other forms of social difference? Assessing causal primacy is hard work and depends entirely on the empirical problem that we are trying to explain. But with respect to the debate about class and other forms of social difference, while the social scientific context is often particular empirical problems, the explananda, the ultimate goal for many social scientists is identifying which has greater relative causal importance more broadly.

But as we have suggested, for the large part, social scientific theory is split on the issue of causal primacy or remains ambiguous. Most are either entrenched into one of the many camps arguing that X form of inequality has more causal potency than Y or have adopted a decidedly multicausal approach that abandons the aim of identifying causal primacy in favor of giving equal causal weight to class and other forms of social difference, or at least remaining agnostic to assigning relative weight. In the causal primacy approach, each form of social difference might be exerting some socially relevant causal force, though one is stronger than the others. In the multicausal approach, several forms of social difference are operating independently of or interactively with one another and the net result is the outcome. But are these two modes of social scientific causation—causal primacy on the one hand and multicausality on the other—the only options available to us? Even though other causal structures have been

identified, they have largely been ignored in these debates (Stinchcombe, 1968; Elster, 2015).

We believe that considering alternative modes of causation can breathe new life into the debate about class and other forms of social difference. In particular, there is much of use in Erik Olin Wright's exploration of "dynamic asymmetry." As Wright, Levine, and Sober write:

...claims for dynamic asymmetry generally occur in explanations that combine *dynamic endogenous* causes with *contingent exogenous* causes or in explanations that postulate a number of endogenous causes, not all implying the same dynamic trajectory (1992, p. 166).

The problem, they reason, is that the distinction between systemic and contingent is always relative to the description of the system itself, making the distinction essentially arbitrary.

With respect to the social scientific study of capitalism, class, and social difference more broadly, of potentially greater use to us may be the way in which dynamic and synchronic factors interact. As Wright, Levine, and Sober write:

Suppose that the nature and condition of the economy limit state policies, while state policies limit economic forms and initiatives. Suppose too, as Marxists believe, that capitalist economies contain an engine of social change, rooted in capitalist exploitation, competition and accumulation that explains the central tendencies of capitalist development from merchant capitalism to competitive industrial capitalism to multinational global capitalism. Suppose, finally, that there is no systemic engine of change internal to state institutions. While the state grows and develops into particular ways, its course is driven by causes external to it. If this characterization of the dynamic forces operating between the state and economy is correct, then even if it were true that state institutions and economic institutions constrain each other in a systemic way (thereby constituting two interconnected elements in a social system), there would still be a dynamic asymmetry: the trajectory of the development of the state and the economy would be driven by dynamic causes operating in the economy but not by dynamic causes endogenous to the state (1992, p. 170).

This insight merely formalizes, in social scientific terms, many of the theoretical insights we have already explored in the black radical tradition above. However, this formalization could prove powerful in deepening our understanding of how capitalism, and the class structure its dynamics are built upon, is causally related to other forms of social difference.

Though not about class and other forms of social difference, McCarthy's (2017) analysis of the development of the American retirement system since the New Deal period is illustrative of this form of dynamic asymmetry. It shows how dynamic processes in capitalist development, endogenous to accumulation and economic downturns, impose underlying constraints on policy making in capitalist democracies that then interact with more synchronic and contingent processes related to interest group influence and strength.

He shows that the range of possible policy paths that policymakers typically see as viable is *limited* by their need to promote growth and accumulation and steer clear of crises. However, there is a dynamic asymmetry in his causal story. Left at this, such a reductionism would only account for policymaker's *general* motivation to encourage capitalist growth. But, as he finds, the general theory does not tell us why policymakers try to encourage growth in the *particular* ways that they do. Instead,

the capitalist context produces constraints on policymakers, but more contingent processes then bear on why policymakers choose one path over another within those constraints. In the case of the marketization of pensions, contingent events within these conjunctures channeled retirement policy down particular paths. Constraints on policymaking that were dynamically endogenous to capitalism established a range of possible policy paths. Contingencies that were not dynamically endogenous to the state, but rather exogenous to it, selected the path from within that range.

Though the above example, like Wright, Levine, and Sober's book, is primarily concerned with the relationship between the state and a mode of production, we believe this form of causality can be analogously extended beyond politics and applied to class and social differences. Capitalisms vary, but they share some similar characteristics across their contexts. In particular, all capitalisms have four basic features:

- (1) Production of the things we need to live is for exchange (not consumption) and profit (not barter);
- (2) The assets that we use to produce the things we need are privately owned by a minority of the population;
- (3) There are markets for labor where the majority of people need to work for someone else to survive;
- (4) There is a monetary system that produces bank credit money.

From these basic characteristics of the capitalist system, we get what the historian Robert Brenner termed "rules of reproduction," which are basic strategies for survival that are determined by the relations of appropriation and production that vary across societies and time (1986).

The combination of these four characteristics in a society generates certain endogenously dynamic regularities and tendencies, which we find expressed more intensely in hypercapitalist societies like that of the United States and more tepidly in ones that are less capitalistic such as the Nordics. But while such dynamic regularities vary in their intensity, they persist nonetheless across all varieties of capitalism. Capitalism endogenously produces and reproduces *at least* six types of dynamic processes:

- (1) Competing classes with distinct interests relative to the distribution of the social product. In this view, classes are relational groups, where the extraction of profits and resources are characterized by an "inverse interdependence of well-being" (Wright, 1997).
- (2) Competition between capitalist firms generates patterns of economic development. These include the tendency toward technical dynamism, the spread of capitalism globally into noncapitalist spaces, the concentration of capital into bigger enterprises, the elaboration of a division of labor and the creation of class fractions, and periodic crises and breakdowns because of falling rates of profit and crises of overaccumulation.
- (3) Because of the incentives, firms have to lower costs and produce more efficiently. Without strong labor organization, work is often subject to deskilling

- and workers themselves will be subject to managerial control whose particular form can depend on gender, race, and nationality (Bank Muñoz, 2008; Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979).
- (4) Inequality in the labor market will be mapped onto groups and articulated through racial categories that firms will use to both to divide their workforces and to segment the labor market (Bonacich, 1972; Fields & Fields, 2014).
 - (5) Family life and sexual roles are in turn informed and shaped in ways that contribute to the reproduction of capitalist social relations and reflect them (Bhattacharya, 2017).
 - (6) The profit drive of firms generates ecological breakdown and environmental catastrophes as accumulation grows exponentially in a world of finite resources (Foster, Clark, & York, 2010; Moore, 2015).

How might these dynamic processes in capitalism, processes that we believe are produced from the class structure unique to capitalism, causally bear on forms of social difference? “Structural limitation,” as Wright, Levine, and Sober argue, is a form of causation where some causes “determine the conditions under which other causes generate their effects” (1992, p. 146). What is distinct about the capitalist mode of production, in our view, is that it imposes structural scope conditions on class dynamics and other forms of social difference, which can then in turn come to bear on the development and character of capitalism and class itself. When a new technology is adopted and employees are laid off or at least under the threat, such dynamic processes not only shape employment relations but also life and forms of inequality far beyond the shop floor.

Does bringing this capital-centric analysis back into our theories of social difference simply result in crude economic determinism and functionalism in the way that Theda Skocpol once warned (1980)? Not at all. Our argument is not that social dynamics related to all forms of inequality can simply be explained by the needs and demands of capitalist accumulation. Such an argument reproduces a very problematic form of functionalism (Elster, 2015). Our argument is simpler. Capitalist social relations impose underlying constraints and developmental dynamics that lay down structural scope conditions on the dynamics we observe in seemingly noneconomic forms of inequality. But, and this is crucial, other processes unfold within the constraints of that dynamic endogeneity that in turn shape it. This is precisely the insight of scholars working in the black radical tradition, broadly conceived. Race is produced, deepened, and extended by seemingly race-neutral market processes. But race, in turn, shapes how those markets then work when we see discrimination in hiring practices and black and brown people the last hired and the first fired.

Considering capitalism at a lower level of abstraction than Marx conceived in *Capital* entails understanding how society is organized at the level of a nation-state and amongst other things, examining national institutions, social policies and welfare states, patterns of racial formation, the conditions for social reproduction and gender inequality, immigration politics and the flow of migratory

movements, and how a society's institutions are integrated with others globally. The upshot of our view is that each of these areas occurs in relative autonomy to the basic dynamics of capitalism but is nonetheless constrained by its developmental dynamism.

LAYOUT OF VOLUME

The papers assembled in this volume each explore different dimensions of the effort to rethink the relation between class and other forms of social difference. Geographically, they span the globe, focusing on the US (Gottschalk, Maich, Schradie), India (Vijayakumar), Europe (Desan), and the Middle East (Harris). Thematically the papers range from questions of understanding mass incarceration in the United States (Gottschalk) to dynamics of middle-class formation in Iran and the Global South (Harris) to right populism in France (Desan) to sex work in India (Vijayakumar) to an exploration of the Black Radical Tradition (Edwards) and more. The goal was to suggest promising avenues for rethinking the relation between class and other forms of social difference across a wide array of empirical settings and questions.

Marie Gottschalk's exploration of the US carceral state pushes for a multifaceted understanding of the problem of mass incarceration that goes beyond the traditional focus on race. Her analysis shows how, "as the racial order continues to invent new ways to target African Americans, it has generated punitive policies and practices that diffuse to other groups in the United States"—particularly in rural America. She shows the imperative of integrating class into an analysis of mass incarceration and provides a concrete strategy for doing so.

Mathieu Hikaru Desan examines current debates surrounding right-wing populism in France, arguing that class remains central to explaining the rise of the Front National (FN), although in a peculiar way. While it is true that appeals to ethno-cultural identities, particularly in opposition to immigrants, are key to the FN's appeal, he shows that these appeals only found resonance in a context where neoliberal depoliticization of the economy disarticulated class identities, leaving native-born working-class French available to be brought into the FN coalition. The analysis has relevance to understanding the relation between the right and the working class in the United States today.

Existing scholarship on the "digital divide" has pierced the techno-utopian bubble, showing the limits of online access as a tool for flattening hierarchy and mitigating class inequalities. But, as Jen Schradie shows in her contribution, the class analysis of the "digital divide" scholarship focuses too much on individual attributes such as income and educational attainment, ignoring broader structural power imbalances. As a result, it gives the erroneous impression that bridging the divide is simply a matter of access to resources and technology. She shows how a relational theory of class can offer an accurate account of the causes underlying the digital divide and point toward solutions.

One of the most widely used but poorly understood concepts for explaining recent waves of unrest in the Global South has been that of the "rising middle

class.” But as Kevan Harris shows, the murkiness of this concept conceals more than it reveals. Starting with a detailed analysis of original empirical data on Iran and then expanding his analysis outward, Harris calls for a rearticulation of theories of class formation in the Global South. The result is a more sophisticated class analysis that deepens our understanding of global protest waves and the relation between class and politics in the Global South more generally.

Sex work presents theoretical and political challenges for feminism and feminist scholarship, particularly around questions of exploitation and women’s agency. As Gowri Vijayakumar argues, current intersectionality theory has lost its earlier focus on structural oppressions in favor of a version that focuses on overlapping personal identities. This leaves it ill-equipped for making sense of sex work. Using narrative studies of the lives of three Indian sex workers, she makes a case for centering class as key to understanding sex work, particularly in the Global South. But, as she is careful to argue, it is a class analysis that is in conversation with intersectionality and Marxist feminisms.

As discussed above, the Black Radical Tradition provided powerful analytical tools for integrating race and class in studies of capitalist development. But in a wide-ranging survey of development studies, Zophia Edwards argues that much of this tradition was set aside. Mid-century development theory incorporated class analysis, while stripping away race. Post-1990s ethnicity-based analysis excised both race and class. Edwards calls for “excavating” the Black Radical Tradition, drawing on its insights to inform a new generation of development scholarship.

Domestic workers have long fallen through the cracks, both of scholarly analysis and policy protections. They straddle the boundaries between productive and reproductive labor, home and work, home country, and country of immigration. Recent organizing in the United States has won landmark protections for domestic workers, most notably the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, passed in New York State in 2010. While the law was ambitious in its scope, Katherine Maich shows that it has fallen short of its goals. Using detailed qualitative interviews with domestic workers along with legislative analysis, she shows how the law’s embeddedness within a broader legal and political context that continues to marginalize domestic workers makes it hard for the law to work.

Taken together, this group of papers suggests important ways to reintegrate class analysis into studies of other axes of social difference.

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