

Exploitation

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In the most general sense, to exploit something means to make use of it for some particular end, as in the exploitation of natural resources for social benefit or for private profit. Insofar as this use takes advantage of other people, exploitation **also** implies something unscrupulous. If the other people are endemically powerless, as in the case of the poor in relation to their landlords, creditors and **the** like, then the term exploitation takes on the connotation of oppression.

Marx uses the word exploitation in all the above senses. But he also defines anew concept, the exploitation of *labour*, which refers specifically to the extraction of the surplus plus upon which class society is founded. In this latter sense, exploitation becomes one of the basic concepts of the Marxist theory of social formations.

EXPLOITATION AND CLASS. Society consists of people living within-and-through complex networks of social relations which shape their very existence. Marx argues that the relations which structure the social division of labour lie at the base of social reproduction, because the division of labour simultaneously accomplishes two distinct social goals: first, the production of the many different objects which people use in their myriad activities of daily life; and second, the reproduction of the basic social framework under which this production takes place, and hence of the social structures which rest on this foundation. Social reproduction is always the reproduction of individuals as *social individuals*.

Class societies are those in which the ruler of one set of people over another is founded upon a particular kind of social division of labour. This particularity arises from the fact that the dominant class maintains itself by controlling a process through which the subordinate classes are required to devote a portion of their working time to the production of things needed by the ruling class. The social division of labour within a class society must therefore be structured around the extraction of *surplus labour*, i.e. of labour time over and above that required to produce for the needs of the labouring classes themselves. In effect,

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it is the subordinate classes which do the work for the reproduction of the ruling class, and which therefore end up *working to reproduce the very conditions of their own subordination*. This is why Marx refers to the extraction of surplus labour in class societies as the exploitation of labour (Marx, 1867, Part 3 and Appendix). It should be clear from this, incidentally, that the mere performance of labour beyond that needed to satisfy immediate needs does not in itself constitute exploitation. Robinson Crusoe, labouring away in his solitude in order to plant crops for future consumption or to create fortification against possible attacks, is merely performing some of the labour necessary for his own needs. He is neither exploiter nor exploited. But all this changes once he manages to subordinate the man Friday, to 'educate' him through the promise of religion and the threat of force to his new place in life, and to set him to work building a proper microcosm of English society. Now it is Robinson who is the exploiter, and Friday the exploited whose surplus labour only serves to bind him ever more tightly to his new conditions of exploitation (Hymcr, 1971).

Although the exploitation of labour is inherent in all class societies, the form it takes varies considerably from one mode of production to another. Under slavery, for instance, the slave belongs to the owner, so that the whole of his or her labour and corresponding net product (i.e. product after replacement of the means of production used up) is ostensibly appropriated by the slave owner. But in fact the slave too must be maintained out of this very same net product. Thus it is the surplus product (the portion of the net product over that needed to maintain the slaves), and hence the surplus labour of the slaves, which in the end sustains the slave-owning class. In a similar vein, under feudalism the surplus labour of the serf and tenant supports the ruling apparatus. But here, the forms of its extraction are many and varied: sometimes direct, as in the case of the quantities of annual labour and/or product which the serf or tenant is required to hand over to Lord, Church and State; and sometimes indirect, as in the payment of money rents, tithes and taxes which in effect require the serf or tenant to produce a surplus product and sell it for cash in order to meet those imposed obligations.

The material wealth of the dominant class is directly linked to the size of the surplus product. And this surplus product is in turn greater the smaller the standard of living of the subordinate classes, and the longer, more intense or more productive their working day. Both of these propositions translate directly into a higher ratio of surplus labour time to the labour time necessary to reproduce the labourers themselves, that is, into a higher rate of exploitation of labour: given the productivity of labour and the length and intensity of the working day, the smaller the portion of the product consumed by the producing class, the greater the portion of their working day which is in effect devoted to surplus labour; similarly, given the consumption level of the average peasant or worker, the longer, more intense and/or more productive their labour, the smaller the portion of their working day which has to be devoted to their own consumption needs, and hence the greater the portion which corresponds to surplus labour.

Because the magnitude of the surplus product can be raised in the above ways,

it is always in the direct interest of the ruling class to try and push the rate of exploitation towards its social and historical limits. By the same token, it is in the interest of the subordinate classes not only to resist such efforts but also to **fight** against the social conditions which make this struggle necessary in the first **place**. The exploitative base of class society makes it a fundamentally antagonistic mode of human existence, marked by a simmering hostility between rulers and ruled, and punctuated by **periods** of riots, rebellions and **revolutions**. This is **why** class societies must always rely heavily on ideology to motivate and rationalize the fundamental social cleavage upon which they rest, and on force to provide the necessary discipline when all else fails.

CAPITALISM AND EXPLOITATION. Capitalism shares the above general attributes. **It** is a class society, in which the domination of the capitalist class is founded upon its ownership and control of the vast bulk of the society's means of production. The working class, on the other hand, is made up of those who have been 'freed' of this self-same burden of property in means of production, and who must therefore earn their livelihood by working for the capitalist class. As Marx so elegantly demonstrates, the **general social condition** for the reproduction of these relations is that the working class as a whole be induced to perform surplus **labour**, because it is this surplus labour which forms the basis of capitalist profit, and it is this profit which in turn keeps the capitalist class willing and able to reemploy workers. And as the history of capitalism makes perfectly clear, the whole process is permeated by **the struggle** between the classes about the conditions, terms and occasionally even about the future, of these relations.

The historical specificity of capitalism arises from the fact that its relations of exploitation are almost completely hidden behind the surface of its relations of exchange. At first glance, the transaction between the worker and capitalist is a perfectly fair one. The former offers labour power for sale, the latter offers a wage rate, and the bargain is struck when both sides come to terms. But once this phase is completed, we leave the sphere of freedom and apparent equality and enter into 'the hidden abode of production' within which lurks the familiar domain of surplus **labour** (Marx, 1567, ch. 6). We **find here** a world of hierarchy and inequality, of orders and obedience, of bosses and subordinates, in which **the** working class is set to work to produce a certain amount of product for its employers. Of this total product, a portion which corresponds to the materials and depreciation costs of the total product is purchased by the capitalists themselves, in order to replace the means of production previously used up. A second portion is purchased by the workers with the wages previously paid to **them** by their employers. But if these two portions happen to exhaust the total product, then the capitalists will have succeeded in producing only enough to cover their own (materials, depreciation and wage) costs of production. **There would be no aggregate profit.** It follows, therefore, that for capitalist production to be successful, i.e. for it to create its own profit, workers must be induced to work longer than the time required to produce their own means of consumption.

They must, in other words, perform surplus labour time in order to produce the surplus product upon which profit is founded.

The above propositions can be derived analytically (Morishima, 1973, ch. 7). More importantly, they are demonstrated *in practice* whenever working time is lost through labour strikes or slowdowns. Then, as surplus labour time is eroded, the normally hidden connection between surplus labour and profit manifests itself as a corresponding fall in profitability. Every practising capitalist must learn this lesson sooner or later.

Orthodox economics, encapsulated within its magic kingdom of production functions, perfect competition and general equilibrium, usually manages to avoid such issues. Indeed, it concerns itself principally with the construction and refinement of an idealized image of capitalism, whose properties it then investigates with a concentration so ferocious that it is often able to entirely ignore the reality which surrounds it. Within this construct, production is a disembodied process undertaken by an intangible entity called the firm. This firm hires 'factors of production' called capital and labour in order to produce an output, paying for each factor according to its estimated incremental contribution to the total output (i.e. according to the value of its marginal product). If all goes well, the sum of these payments turn out to exhaust exactly the net revenues actually received by the firm, and the ground is set for yet another round.

Notice that this conception puts a thing (capital) and a human capacity (labour power) on equal footing, both as so-called factors of production. This enables the theory to deny any class difference between capitalists and workers by treating all individuals as essentially equal because they are all owners of at least one factor of production. The fact that 'factor endowments' may vary considerably across individuals is then merely a second-order detail whose explanation is said to lie outside of economic theory. Next, by treating production as some disembodied process, the human labour process is reduced to a mere technical relation, to a production function which 'maps' things called inputs (which include labour power) into a thing called output. All struggle over the labour process thus disappears from view. Finally, since capital and labour are mere things, they cannot be said to be exploited. However, to the extent that the payment for some factors falls short of equality with its particular marginal product, the *owner* of this factor may be said to be exploited. In this sense, exploitation is defined as a discrepancy between an actual and an ideal 'factor payment' (it can be established that a very similar construction underlies notions of unequal exchange such as those in Emmanuel, 1969). More importantly, exploitation as defined above can in principle apply just as well to profits as to wages. Capitalism thus emerges as a system in which capitalists are just as liable to be exploited by workers as vice versa (Hodgson, 1980, section 2). With this last step, the very notion of exploitation is reduced to utter triviality.

EXPLOITATION, GROWTH AND INEQUALITY. We have focused on the notion of exploitation as the extraction of surplus labour because this relation is the foundation upon

which class society is built, in the sense that the other legal, political and personal relations within the society are structured and limited by this central one. This does not mean that these other relations lack a history and logic of their own. It only means that within any given mode of production, they are bound to the system by the force field of this central relation, and characteristically shaped by its ever present gravitational pull.

In the same vein, the notion that class society is marked by oppression along class lines obviously does not exclude other equally egregious forms of subjugation. It is evident, for instance, that the oppression of women by men is common to all known societies, and to all classes within them. Thus any proper understanding of the oppression of workers by capitalists must also encompass the oppression of working-class women by men of all classes, as well as the oppression of ruling-class women by men of their own class.

But even this is not enough. It is not sufficient to say that class and patriarchy are coexistent forms of oppression. We need to know also how they relate to one another. And it is here that Marxists generally give preeminence to class, not because class oppression is more grievous, but because of the sense that it is the nature of the class relation which modulates and shapes the corresponding form of patriarchy. That is to say, Marxists argue that capitalist patriarchy is distinct from feudal patriarchy precisely because capitalist relations of production are characteristically different from feudal ones.

Needless to say, there is still considerable controversy about the exact relationship between patriarchy and class (Barrett, 1980), as there is about the relation of race to either of them (Davis, 1981). These are issues of great theoretical significance. Most importantly, a united struggle against these various forms of oppression has truly revolutionary potential.

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