

POWER FROM BELOW: POWER, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIALIST THEORY

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation reframes socialist theory through the concept of power. The goal of this reconceptualization is to overcome the main limits of Marxism on issues of usefulness for activists, of accessibility for ordinary people, of the integration of feminist and anti-racist perspectives, and on its relationship to democracy. By building upon the implicit theory of power within the works of contemporary Marxists, such as Ellen Meiksins Wood, Alex Callinicos and G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, this dissertation proposes a new set of concepts that seeks to overcome these limits. By reframing Marxism through a theory of power, we can deepen our criticism of modern societies: the problem is not limited to exploitation, but more broadly tied to inequalities of social power. It allows an understanding of each phenomenon in their specificities, and linking them back to their commonalities, their effect on power inequalities. From there it also unlocks a more precise way of defining the social alternative around the principle of radical democracy. This theory of power can provide tools to analyze inequalities of power in small organization, just as well as the societal scale. Since this theory of power slightly decenters Marxism from the traditional materialist definitions, this dissertation also looks at the question of consciousness and the role of ideas. It proposes to think these questions with the principles of the primacy of practice and the centrality of trust.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the contemporary academic context ruled by authorship, competition and the desire to join the pantheon of great minds, the acknowledgement section of a dissertation aims to unburden one's debt to others, and then set one free to claim the rest as his own ideas. Yet, I believe that intellectuals are mainly the product of their social context. The creative process is not a solitary act. Authors deserve recognition of their work in clarifying, synthesizing and communicating new ideas. But those ideas are ultimately born in daily life, among ordinary people. The intellectual is the midwife of new ideas.

This work is no exception. I spent years of my life working on this project, but the ideas presented here belong to the communities in which I was immersed. They belong to the ordinary folks of Montreal and Toronto, to the Quebec student strikers of 2005 and 2012, to the academic circles of Université du Québec à Montréal and York University, to the public sector workers fighting against austerity, to the union militants confronting the bosses every day, to the feminists and anti-racist organizers, to the socialist comrades across the world and to the youth fighting for climate justice.

This being said, I must convey special thanks to those who supported me during those years. I warmly thank David McNally and Alan Sears for their insightful supervision during the writing process. The comments and discussions with Terry Maley, Lesley Wood, Stephen D'Arcy and Shannon Bell were also very helpful. I am also grateful to have spent my time in Toronto sharing ideas and housework with my friends and fellow doctoral students Maïka and Christian. And finally, I thank my family Linda, Louis-Christian, Stéphanie, Christian, and Dominique, and especially my partner Elisabeth for her unconditional support.

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## INTRODUCTION

The first time I tried to read Karl Marx, I was fifteen years old. I borrowed the Maspero 1972 French edition of *Capital* from my stepfather's library and tried to decipher the first few chapters from the back of my mathematic classroom. I read and re-read the first few pages but never quite got it. I got confused and eventually bored with the details on the yards of linen and its equivalent in coats. My parents were communists, but I did not really understand what it meant.

In post-secondary school, I participated in a number of student strikes. On the picket lines, I learned organizing, mobilizing, direct democracy, co-optation, direct action, compromises, mass movements, defeats and victories. In a university class, I then encountered Marx again. This time, I got it: history as class struggle, commodity fetishism, value theory. The demonstration on the origins of surplus value struck me for its elegance. I remember having a similar feeling to finally catching the underlying proof of a mathematical equation.

But as I continued to be active in various social struggles, student strikes and labor organizing, I end up relying very little on the Marxist concepts I learned. I liked them, but I could never quite find a way to use them in practice. Yet, I thought of myself as a socialist, and I really wanted to integrate some grand socialist theory to my day to day organizing. I became obsessed with this gap.

In 2012, I was part of the core organizers Quebec student strike. 200 000 students went on strike for six months, confronted a repressive state, held out until the government called a general election to solve the crisis—which it lost. In the lead up to this strike, and its unfolding, I took part in an incredible amount of debates, on questions that are transversal to contemporary social movements: communication and mobilizing strategies, the place of democracy and autonomy within the movement, the place of women, of people of color, the integration of feminist and anti-racist components to universal demands, diversity of tactics, media image and violence, tactical alliances with traditional lobbyist student federations, the

relationship between a movement and political parties, the relationship of movements with elections, and so on. Again, the Marxism I knew was useless in most of these debates. And yet, by the end of this strike, I was more convinced than ever that socialism was necessary. I just felt it was not framed the right way.

I therefore tried to solve the riddle. My master dissertation tackled the first problem I kept encountering: how to combine Marxist class theory with other sorts of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism or heterosexism? And more importantly, could theory find an answer to the tension between the need for recognizing the specificity of each oppression with the need for prioritization required in any successful political strategy?

I was researching this question when I read Ellen Meiksins Wood *Democracy against Capitalism*. For the first time, I thought I found the key to my problems. By replacing the concept of *mode of production* by *mode of exploitation*, and by counterposing *exploitation* to *democracy*, I got the intuition from which this whole dissertation flows: to reframe socialist theory around the concept of power. I decided to undertake a PhD specifically to take the time to explore it.

But deploying this intuition took unhealthy proportions. My friend, comrade and coadvisor Alan Sears told me repeatedly not to write a “theory of everything”. And of course, I did not listen to him. I continued to be involved in various political projects while working on this project. My union went on strike, I helped the Quebec student movement from afar, I got involved in anti-racist and ecological campaigns, I started a rank-and-file union network and started a socialist group. And I was excited, because I could use tools from my theoretical framework in my daily activism, I could tie those tools to a general theory, which could fit in a general understanding of capitalism and a global strategic perspective. I could understand and *feel* those connections well before I could put them all on paper. And for my very own sanity, I felt like I needed to write it down.

The result is this dissertation. I tried to find a compromise between a systematic discussion with the relevant literature and a good overview of all the important ramifications this theory of power could have. I felt like this overview was important, because it is the most exciting part of the theory for me: how those tools can tie the global project, the strategy, macro analysis, microanalysis and tactics. But by definition, a broad overview of this sort is necessarily impressionistic.

I therefore present this work with both ambition and modesty. I have a gut feeling that it contains the seeds of important theoretical and practical developments. But I also know that it is far from finished, and because of its preliminary nature, I might very well be wrong without realizing it yet. For rhetorical purposes, I might sound very convinced and categorical at time, but I know that all theory is a work in progress.

### Overview

The main point of this dissertation is to reframe socialist theory through the concept of power. By doing so, it is not clear how loyal I am to the Marxist tradition. Since Marxism is my main source of inspiration, especially political Marxism, I prefer locating the present theory in its continuity. I also believe that the present theory of power was often implicit among Marxists, and that reframing them through the lens of power slightly shifts the conceptual apparatus without undermining their main conclusions. But I do turn on their heads many fundamental concepts of Marxism which could legitimately expel me from the family. I therefore leave the verdict to the reader.

To operate this reframing, I define power in terms of capacity to transform the world. This positive definition of power is strongly tied to the notion of labor and human activity in general: all labor is an act of power.<sup>1</sup> Any power is therefore a sum of human activity and various resources used by those activities. Power *over others* appear as a specific subset of

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<sup>1</sup> As we will see in chapter 4, I use the term labor in the broadest sense. This is similar to the concept of labor in Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2d ed (New York: Norton, 1978), 75–76.

power in general. It is the capacity to control decision-making processes over collectivized power. This allows us to tie the “political economic” orientation of Marxism to the emancipatory language of freedom and democracy.

The title of this work, *Power from Below*, has a dual meaning in this context. It stresses the fact that social power is ultimately only an “appropriation” of labor and resources from below. Power does not “emanate” from a center, it originates from each worker, from each subject, and concentrations of power “above” always depend on the power below and its obedience. The second meaning is tied to the strategic implications that I derive from this theory: fighting for socialism requires to build “power from below”, to build the capacities for self-organization of ordinary people to disobey, strike and fight for change.

The first obvious impact of shifting towards the concept of power as a central category concerns the place of *materialism* in Marxism. At first, I framed the project in terms of replacing the “materialist ontology” of Marxism with an “ontology of power”. But I decided against this approach for two reasons. Firstly, I realized that there is no sufficient agreement among Marxists on what would constitute a materialist ontology. No matter how I would define it, I ended up making up a theoretical straw man. Secondly, this would necessarily antagonize other Marxists instead of laying out the ground for a healthy debate. Therefore, while I rarely use the terminology of materiality, as it seems to be a source of confusion rather than clarification, I think many strands of materialists will find themselves at home in the present theory.

On this issue, the most important impact concerns the categories of production and mode of production. Building upon my master dissertation, I question the usefulness of distinguishing a core of “productive activities” from what would be deemed “unproductive”. This discussion was largely inspired by feminist contributions on domestic labor and Ellen Wood’s argument against the base-superstructure metaphor. From there, the whole notion of “mode of production” becomes shaky. But I found that Wood’s reformulation in terms of mode of exploitation held the keys to a Marxist solution. Her shift away from *how things are*

*produced* and towards *how the ruling class extract the surplus* opened the way for an understanding of the class structure of society that did not have to qualify certain activities as “unproductive”, or “part of the superstructure”. Instead, the activities that are “core” to a certain class structure are the ones that are constitutive of the exploitation process.

By reframing this very formulation in terms of power was therefore easy. Since power is constituted of labor and resources, Marxist demonstrations of processes of surplus extraction could be simply reframed in terms of “power appropriation”. Modes of exploitations are modes of power. At this point, one could wonder if the whole project is not simply a rebranding operation. Part of the project is, indeed. I have a feeling, through my various implications in Quebec and Ontario’s mass struggles, that the language of power *resonates* more with our contemporaries. But reframing through the present conception of power has other, less cosmetics, implications.

A main one concerns the integration of feminist and anti-racist considerations. The language of production and exploitation tended to relegate the oppression of women and people of color as a fundamentally different phenomenon. Class relations were based on exploitation of workers, while racism and sexism were oppressions. My love of elegant theories was bothered by the ontological gap between exploitation and oppression. Social reproduction theory offered a good alternative to bridge that gap when it comes to understanding the place of domestic work, but it offered limited tools, in my opinion, on the questions of racism because it stays too close to the concept of production (and reproduction). Reformulating the question in terms of power allows us to specify more clearly the place and processes of the various “non-class” oppressions. In doing so, we can more clearly separate processes of power appropriation proper to things like class exploitation, from the transversal processes of selections and stratification which define racism and sexism. Doing so allows us to recognize some subtleties that are often lost in the language of activism. Things like colonialism and slavery belong to the processes of power appropriation, while the racism they embed is a transversal process that select and stratify “who” is on which side of the appropriation process. The patriarchal family reveals itself as a small-scale process of power

appropriation, which contributes to the oppression of women within the large, more transversal process of selection and stratification that relegates women in inferior strata of capitalism and state organizations.

Another important implication of the present theory is related to the definition of the socialist project. By reframing Marxism through a theory of power, we can expand our understanding of the problem: it is not only exploitation, but more broadly *inequalities of social power*. Capitalist exploitation is an important dimension, but it is only one aspect of unequal social power. By extending the analysis to all forms of social power, the proposed framework can integrate more easily power inequalities embedded in other social structures such as the state, systemic racism and patriarchy. It allows an understanding of each phenomenon in their specificities, and linking them back to their commonalities: power inequalities.

From there it also unlocks a more precise way of defining the social alternative, the project of a free and egalitarian society. The socialist horizon is defined by the idea of an equal distribution of social power. And this definition—the idea that each and every one should have a similar influence on the decision-making process of social resources as a whole—is the very core of radical democracy. While historical materialism has no clear tool to define how an emancipatory organization should work, and what would be the “just” forms of organization in a socialist society, this theory of power can provide tools to analyse inequalities of power in small organization, just as well as the societal scale.

Working with transhistorical concepts is always a risk—the present theory of power is susceptible to an infinite source of criticism because of this (all of human history can be used against it). Yet, I believe it is necessary to work with concepts of that scope for the very task of defining the emancipatory project. Because the free and egalitarian industrialized society never existed, and because we will have to *invent it*, we need concepts and theories of society that are transhistorical, so that they could possibly apply to the undefined future. A theory limited to explaining capitalism, for example, would offer tools to criticize the system, but

not to propose how we could live differently because its concepts would specifically be invalid outside of capitalism. Avoiding the creation of new inequalities in the revolutionary process is therefore a core task of socialist theory. This is the main reason I decided to build the present theory of power with the broadest scope. As we will see in the last part of this dissertation, I do not, however, leave the concept of power in its most abstract level. Using the concept of power to understand capitalism, colonialism, states and patriarchy requires historicizing it, revealing the specific forms it takes. The validity of the transhistorical definition of power is tied to its fruitfulness and solidity in explaining the specific forms it takes across history.

### Method

This dissertation is mainly about building concepts and demonstrating their potential usefulness to understand and change the world. It is not about interpreting previous political theory, nor is it about explaining a specific historical case. I could have built the concepts of power through doing any of those two approaches—and some might have found the demonstration more convincing if I had done so. But the sheer scope of the concepts I was seeking to construct proved to be enough work by itself for a doctoral dissertation. I therefore decided to concentrate myself on the conceptualization of power, leaving in-depth discussions on specific applications for another time.

My process of theory building takes roots in three main sources: social theory, history and political practice. Because this is a work of social theory, I inevitably discuss at length with other leading authors of the field. The main body of theories I engage with is Marxism, mainly because it is my main inspiration and because it is on this body of work that I seek to improve. Among those, I took my main theoretical insights from Ellen Meiksins Wood, Robert Brenner, Alex Callinicos, G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser, Antonio Gramsci, Vivek Chibber and Hal Draper. Among non-Marxists, I discuss mainly with Michael Mann, Margaret Archer, Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault because of their importance in their field and their influence on the current project. For specific parts of this dissertation,

I also briefly engage with social theorists specifically useful on the topic: theoreticians of power, epistemologists, intersectional theorists, specialists of social movements, and so on.

The concepts I build here aims to have the same kind of transhistorical reach than the core concepts of historical materialism. They should therefore be able to shed light on different parts of human history, from antique to contemporary societies. Therefore, having a broad knowledge of history was essential to the concept building process. Therefore, I spent much more time than apparent reading the extensive works of historians like Chris Wickham, G.E.M. De Ste Croix and Michael Mann. I also delved into some specific historical debates: the analysis of modes of production in ancient Rome and Greece<sup>2</sup>, the nature of “feudalism” in the European Middle Ages<sup>3</sup>, the transition from Feudalism to Capitalism/the Great Divergence debate<sup>4</sup>, the relationship of slavery to capitalism in antebellum America<sup>5</sup> and the origins of democracy and the modern state<sup>6</sup>. While I wrote the dissertation with this

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<sup>2</sup> G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World: From the Archaic Age to the Arab Conquests* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1989); Perry Anderson, “Class Struggle in the Ancient World,” *History Workshop Journal* 16, no. 1 (October 1, 1983): 57–73, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/16.1.57>; Clifford Ando and Seth Francis Corning Richardson, eds., *Ancient States and Infrastructural Power: Europe, Asia, and America*, First edition, Empire and After (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Social Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); M. I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy*, Updated ed, Sather Classical Lectures, v. 48 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); François Louis Ganshof, *Feudalism*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964); Benno Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations* (London: Verso, 2003); Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: NLB, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nisancıoğlu, *How the West came to rule: the geopolitical origins of capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2015); Robert Brenner, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism,” in *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, ed. T. H Aston and C. H. E Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 213–327; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, The Princeton Economic History of the Western World (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class-Structure, Economic Development, and Political Conflict, 1620-1877* (Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2012); Richard Follet, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (LSU Press, 2007); John J. Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery,” *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (September 2015): 281–304; Robin Blackburn, *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern ; 1492 - 1800*, Repr (London: Verso, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*, Rev. pbk. ed, Studies in Social Discontinuity (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the*

historical scope in mind, I only bring forth historical examples that are immediately useful to sketch the main lines of the theory.

Finally, political practice has been a third but not less important source for this project. My own experience in organizing student and worker strikes, in participating in feminist and anti-racist struggles, in working with anarchists, socialists and reformists have taught me a large set of implicit knowledge that guided what I understood as “useful” for a socialist theory. This will not be made explicit in the dissertation, since it does not have a lot of value from an academic perspective.<sup>7</sup> Yet, I believe that the problems I encountered as an organizer and that I sought to solve are widely spread among contemporary activists.

Many times in my experience of social movements, I witnessed vigorous debates on democracy and centralization of power; tensions on the inclusion of women, minorities and the articulation of their issues within broader struggles; confusion on the notions of privilege, oppression, exploitation and class; and blind spots in the understanding of state policies and its relationship with capitalism. Often, those problems were answered with theoretical eclecticism. Such patchwork can work, but it obfuscates the big picture. It makes it harder for activists of different communities to speak a common language and it tends to explain specific situation in isolation from the larger issues. The intuition underlying the present dissertation is that a theory of power built upon Marxism can provide a unifying

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*Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, Revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: N.L.B, 1974); Heide Gerstenberger, *Impersonal Power: The History and Theory of the Bourgeois State* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> For readers curious of my writings as an organizer, here is a small selection of articles: Alain Savard, “Quebec’s Wave of Resistance: From the Maple Spring to the General Strike,” *International Socialist Review*, no. 101 (2016): 23–38; Alain Savard, “Keeping the Student Strike Alive,” *Jacobin*, September 2016, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/09/quebec-student-strike-tuition-austerity-protests/>; Alain Savard, “How Seven Thousand Quebec Workers Went on Strike against Climate Change,” *Labor Notes*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.labornotes.org/2019/10/how-seven-thousand-quebec-workers-went-strike-against-climate-change>; Alain Savard and Marc-André Cyr, “La Rue Contre l’État, Actions et Mobilisations Étudiantes En 2012,” in *Un Printemps Rouge et Noir: Regards Croisés Sur La Grève Étudiante de 2012*, ed. Marcos Ancelovici and Francis Dupuis-Déri (Montréal: Éditions Écosociété, 2014), 59–86; Alain Savard, “Allier Pouvoir et Démocratie : Pistes Américaines Pour Renouveler Le Syndicalisme,” *Nouveaux Cahiers Du Socialisme*, no. 19 (2018): 74–83.

framework to solve those problems. The knowledge I acquired as an activist guided the concept building processes at every step.

The general method that led me to the current set of concepts is therefore different from the way it is presented in this dissertation. Over the past seven years, I went back and forth between reading social theory, organizing strikes, reading on history and writing preliminary sketches of theory. This dissertation does not go through the process, but rather tries to expose its intermediate result as of 2020.

The scope of this theory is probably a bit too broad for my own knowledge and skills. And it probably is for any individual theorist. Building concepts of that scope requires extensive knowledge of history, sociology, philosophy, politics, economics and so on. It requires challenging decades of theory across all fields, exploring its impact in widely different context across the globe, examining its implication in different spheres of life. Because this cannot be done in a single dissertation, I cannot claim that this result is “final” in any way. But one has to start somewhere. By definition, I therefore had to restrict my choices when it comes to the authors I discuss, to the problems I address and the historic elements I invoke. I tried to keep only the essential elements so that I could finish a first sketch of this theory of power that could adequately convey its potential and scope. Specific theories are therefore selected strategically to either explain a problem I seek to solve, an idea that I borrow or a contrast I wish to make. Historical cases are used when it helps clarify an argument. I never delve deep in the interpretation of an author or the analysis of a case to keep the thread on the theory of power.

Finally, some might wonder what place I make of Marx’s dialectic method given that I rarely use its terminology in the current dissertation. While I believe that I do have a dialectic approach, I did not feel that using the Marxist-Hegelian terminology enlighten what I was trying to explain. For one, there is too much disagreement over the meaning of dialectics to allow me the unambiguous use of its terms. Second, I feel that the language of dialectic is rarely mastered even among academics, and this is far worse among organizers of the radical

left. If there is a way to tell the same thing in a simpler way than I usually choose to do so. By using other images, such as the “force field” in chapter 4, I end up conveying the spirit of a dialectical way of understanding reality in an image that is easier to grasp. When I do reference dialectics, I will specifically use the concepts from Bertell Ollman’s *Dance of the dialectic*.<sup>8</sup> This will be specifically useful to discern the “levels of abstraction” to which different part of this theory belongs.

### Plan

The first part of this dissertation lays out the problems I seek to address. Chapter 1 sets the debate over the problems I identify within the Marxist tradition and explains why it needs a theory of power to overcome its current limitations. This is where the main criticism on the notion of production is exposed, and where I explain why, without a theory of power, Marxism offers limited tools to guide day-to-day political strategy.

Chapter 2 examines existing theories of power and explains why those are not sufficient for the needs of a socialist theory. I first review the theories of power by Lukes, Foucault, Mann and Bourdieu, explain their limits and their contributions. I then work with the implicit theory of power present in the Marxism of De Ste. Croix, Wood and Callinicos.

Chapter 3 discusses the general criteria according to which one must judge a socialist theory. In this chapter, I establish my epistemological grounding and define five criteria of validity for socialist theory: verisimilitude, compatibility with the principle of equality, accessibility to the majority, emphasis on the role of collective action and the capacity to provide tools to understand both micro and macro levels.

The second part of the dissertation defines the proposed theory of power. It forms the core of my theoretical contributions. Chapter 4 defines power and its relationship with classes, production, exploitation and inequalities. This is where I define the concepts of collective

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<sup>8</sup> Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

power, social power, the structures of power appropriation, and the processes of selection and stratification.

Since this theory of power slightly decenters Marxism from the traditional materialist definitions, Chapter 5 looks at the question of idealism, the role of ideas, and rethinks this question on the basis of contemporary social theory. The principles of the primacy of practice and the centrality of trust are explained and are tied into the proposed theory of power.

In the third and final part of this dissertation, I seek to demonstrate the usefulness of this theory of power. Since the implications are far-reaching and the subjects touched are broad, this part does not constitute an in-depth examination of each issue. The goal is to illustrate the potential of a renewed Marxist framework integrating the proposed theory of power. This part is therefore necessarily weaker in terms of the solidity of each argument, but I believed it was necessary for me to expose, at least preliminarily, the full potential of this reformulation based on power. Had I tried to fully demonstrate each point, the project would have become a book series. But if I had skipped this part, many would have wondered what the point of all this reconceptualization was.

Chapter 6 discusses social reproduction theory and the theories of intersectionality. In this chapter, I propose to integrate domestic production and community-based production in the general picture of contemporary societies. I also elaborate the concept of structure of subordination to distinguish systemic forms of selection and stratification from systemic forms of accumulation.

Chapter 7 reframes the Marxist theory of capitalism through the lenses of power. I explore two main impacts. The first concerns the analysis of the state as an analytically separate, but deeply intertwined, process of power appropriation alongside capitalism. The second is an exploratory discussion on value, and the possibility of building a theory of price, wages and profits based on the concept of power.

Chapter 8 explores how the present framework can generate useful tools for social movements and guide strategies for socialists. It draws upon the literature on social movements and the writings of union organizers, and demonstrates how existing tools and techniques can be integrated within the broader theoretical frame.

Finally, chapter 9 is a quick overview of how we can reframe the socialist project in terms of power equality and democracy.

# PART I

## PROBLEMS

### Chapter 1: Limits of Marxism

Marxism has been the dominant framework of emancipatory politics for a broad range of movements, informing revolutionary communists, trade union leaders, community organizers and reformist politicians. Even if the degree of adhesion to the Marxian framework could vary, it still provided for a long time the language of resistance and rebellion. The strikes organized, the revolutions made, the elections won are all proofs of the relative strength of the Marxist framework—at least at the time it was used. It offered a theory on how society works that was close enough to reality to guide the actions to its users. The building blocks it used were close enough to the common sense to resonate with wide-enough layers of the population.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, Marxism has been on the decline for some time now. In western social movements and political parties, only handful of activists still uses it. For most, it is a foreign language. The language of socialism used to flourish in industrial working-class communities, but as Alan Sears puts it, “the communities in which it once thrived have been torn apart [by a] deliberate project by corporations and governments to undercut working-class power. [...] Over the last 35 years, neoliberalism has deliberately reorganized work and life to weaken social capacities”.<sup>10</sup> The communities where Marxist ideas are still taught, debated and reproduced in the west are now restricted to the academic world and small socialist groups. The former benefits from the institutional resources of universities to reproduce themselves, while the latter can survive through Leninist forms of organizing, where constant recruitment and

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<sup>9</sup> Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 33–46.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Sears, “Who Speaks Socialism These Days?,” *Briarpatch Magazine*, January 4, 2016, <https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/who-speaks-socialism-these-days>.

training ensure the survival of a small set of dedicated activists who share a Marxist analysis. But despite their best efforts, neither group is able to resonate very far beyond themselves.<sup>11</sup>

No clear alternative frameworks have emerged to fill the vacuum left by the decline of Marxism. Bourdieu and Foucault inspired approaches have had some success in the educated left, but even those cannot completely replace the role Marxism played. Where Marxism could provide an understanding of the world, a critique of exploitation, a guide for strategy and an emancipatory project, contemporary popular approaches are usually stuck at the level of criticism. On a practical basis, the consciousness of contemporary organizers is therefore rather eclectic. They often draw their understanding of the economy and build their demands by relaying on neo-Keynesian reformist economists—which are seen as radicals in a world dominated by neoliberals. They rarely draw from sociology to inform their approach to mobilization—the understanding of how to organize and mobilize people is transmitted as an undertheorized practice, which follows lineage of different militancy traditions. There is no real alternative to capitalism envisioned, as emancipatory politics are now framed in terms of resistance and reforms.

I believe there is a value to an integrated framework, a unified language like Marxism. A theory with a broad scope can more easily tie local actors to global changes. A theory of global history is necessary to understand the various forms of oppression and sketch an alternative project. A unified conception of oppression is necessary to make parallels between their different forms and clarify what freedom and equality really means. Such grand theory does not have to explain the totality of social phenomena, but it should be able to provide knowledge, criticism, strategy and alternatives for the most common and important issues. And a large number of historical accounts, of economic analyses, of strategic debates, of philosophical inquiries performed from a Marxist perspective are among the best we have. This why this dissertation takes its roots in this tradition and seeks

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<sup>11</sup> Razmig Keucheyan, *Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2013), 7–33.

to extend it. But I believe the decline of Marxist influence is not solely a conjectural affair — it reveals problems that require answers. The main point of this dissertation is to solve those problems by reframing Marxism through a general theory of power. The pretension is that it could renew socialist theory in a way that improves its strength, resonate better with contemporary popular classes and provides better tools to guide day-to-day strategy.

This chapter will therefore analyze the current limits of Marxism. I identified 5 themes to structure this critique: (1) the question of the mode of production, (2) the notion of totality and the difficult integration of other forms of oppression such as women's oppression and racism, (3) the lack of a microfoundation to guide day-to-day strategy, (4) the problem related to the notion of material interest, and (5) the absence of embedded tools to define radical democracy.

## **Marxism-s**

The definition of Marxism is contentious among Marxists. At the very least, it entails an ontology based on the “material conditions” of life, a certain primacy of economic activity and the social relations built around it. But aside from this, its content varies according to different Marxist traditions. One could argue for the need to go back to Marx's texts to find the right one, but our approach is not interested in what Marx really said and meant. The historical materialism under inquiry here is not the *one* produced by Marx, but rather the ones that have effectively been used and built by organic intellectuals since the days of the First International. The validity of those Marxisms is unrelated to their fidelity to Marx's intent, as the German philosopher did not have a mystical privileged access to the criteria of validity for socialist theory. Those theories are located in the broad field of Marx-inspired frameworks, they have often been built in contexts where referencing Marx's text was primordial to legitimate a new idea inside socialist parties, but they are theories of their own.

This is important when discussing debates on Marxism. Socialists are often quick to dismiss criticisms on the basis that detractors are beside the point because they misunderstand

Marx. Yet, even if one proves convincingly that Marx was not a techno-determinist reducing human history to a succession of evolving modes of production, this does not negate the fact that Stalin's Marx which came to dominate communist parties after 1945 *did* imply such conception of historical materialism. Anti-communist intellectuals of the cold war rebuked this dominant trend, which they saw as the immediate threat, and pragmatically neglected to address the more nuanced but much less influential variations of western Marxism—such as the Frankfurt School. Even today, when non-Marxist academics teach Marx to university students, the dominant reading offered is what they learned from the mainstream anti-Stalinist trends. The disconnection between this reading and the current state of the debate among contemporary socialists is not obvious to students because of the tininess of socialist groups and their weak capacity to reach out to a mass audience.

We won't spend much time discussing the classic Marxist orthodoxy that took shape from Kautsky to Stalin. This "materialist conception of history" was deeply influenced by a positivist conception of social sciences and claimed that "scientific socialism" had discovered the "laws of motion" which predicted the fall of capitalism. Under this framework, class struggle played a role only as the political manifestation of those deep economic transformations, and the political organization of the working class aimed at shortening and softening the transition to socialism.<sup>12</sup> The development of productive forces—that is the improvement of productivity through new technologies and forms of division of labour—was seen as the main driving force of history. These beliefs in the imminent breakdown of capitalism and the inevitability of socialism were consistent with the quick rise of the SPD, the upsurge of working class militancy and the rising tensions between imperialist powers. Once the defeat of the revolutionary wave in Europe shook this conviction, the USSR took the relay, as Stalin continued to use this kind materialism to legitimize its regime. Even if this orthodoxy has now fallen in disgrace, one must acknowledge that this was indeed an

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<sup>12</sup> G. D. H Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Volume III: The Second International 1889-1914 Part 1*, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1963), 278.

important form that historical materialism took and it left a deep imprint on socialist traditions.

Since then, many have attempted to rebuild Marxism on new bases. Those processes often implied rereading Marx's texts, using new sources as they became accessible in the 1930s such as the *German Ideology*, the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse*. New brands of socialist theory in rupture with the USSR emerged from this process. And even though the standard procedure of such reconstruction was to reclaim the true heritage of Marx, they were in fact new theories. In a similar fashion to what will be attempted in this dissertation, those re-foundations of Marxism were questioning and changing the fundamental concepts of historical materialism, while keeping the works they deemed still strong on political economy, imperialism, exploitation, etc.

### **Modes of Production Are Modes of Power**

This being said, while contemporary Marxists departed from what is considered "crude materialism", they still place an important emphasis on the question of production. For E.P. Thompson, for example, the determination of the mode of production is less understood as a "law of motion", and more like a constraint—restraining the choices of individuals and groups, defining the available resources of groups on which they can act, and orienting their respective interests. Classes and their antagonistic relationship are defined out of this determination, and the course of history is the historical result of class struggles.<sup>13</sup> Alex Callinicos, in his critique of orthodox materialism defines an alternative that he calls "classical historical materialism". In this version, the tendency of productive forces to develop still exist, but it is understood in its weak sense: it is a minimal pressure that can be observed historically. The centrality of production operates in two ways. The level of development of productive forces does *not* determine the relations of production, but it *limits* the kinds of arrangements that are possible. And those relations of production

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory, or An Orrery of Errors*, New ed (London: Merlin Press, 1995), 10.

determine the shape of social classes. Those classes have their interest shaped by their position, which fuels the class struggle as a motor of history.<sup>14</sup>

Those approaches have several obvious advantages over the orthodox version: it brings human agency back in the understanding of historical processes and it is much more open to the contingencies of history when investigating the outcome of class struggles. But the notion of production without a clear theory of power<sup>15</sup> suffers from some inconsistency and blind spots.

In *Democracy against Capitalism*, Wood argues that the base-superstructure metaphor perpetuated “the rigid conceptual separation of the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ ”<sup>16</sup>. Drawing from the historical research of Brenner and the insights of Thompson, she asserts that this separation is actually contemporary to capitalism:

“[...] capitalism differs from pre-capitalist forms in which the fusion of economic and political powers meant not only that surplus labour—whether it belonged to the state of a private lord—was bound up with the performance of military, juridical and administrative functions.

In a sense, then, the differentiation of the economic and the political in capitalism is, more precisely, a differentiation of political functions themselves and their separate allocate to the private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state. [...] This formulation [suggests] that the differentiation of the economic is in fact a differentiation within the political sphere.”<sup>17</sup>

Wood does not only state that economic and political sphere were *fused* before capitalism: she argues that they were indistinguishable. The activities we now see as separate were operating inside a sphere that was purely and clearly political. Therefore, there was no such thing as an “economic base” that would have had primacy over the political structure under

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<sup>14</sup> Alex Callinicos, *Making History: Agency, Structure, and Change in Social Theory*, 2nd rev. ed, Historical Materialism Book Series 3 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2004), 106.

<sup>15</sup> We will discuss the implicit theory of power present within some blends of Marxism in Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Wood, 31.

feudalism. For Wood, the “economical” in contemporary society is a privatization of the political, it is the delegation of powers that used to be managed by state-like apparatus:

The process by which this authority of private property asserted itself, uniting the power of appropriation with the authority to organize production in the hands of a private proprietor for his own benefit, can be viewed as the privatization of political power. The supremacy of absolute private property appears to have established itself in large part by means of political devolution, the assumption by private proprietors of functions originally invested in a public or communal authority.<sup>18</sup>

This provides a crucial insight on contemporary capitalism: it reveals the relationship of power that is hidden beneath formal market equality. But Wood’s insight has potentially far-reaching impacts for socialist theory: it displaces the focus away from material production towards a more general perspective based on *power*. This is almost explicit in the following passage:

A mode of production is not simply a technology but a social organization of productive activity; and a mode of exploitation is a relationship of power. Furthermore, the power relationship that conditions the nature and extent of exploitation is a matter of political organization within and between the contending classes. In the final analyses the relation between appropriators and producers rests on the relative strength of classes, and this is largely determined by the internal organization and the political forces with which each enters into the class struggle.<sup>19</sup>

By moving away from the orthodox conception of the “mode of production”, and redefining historical materialism around the “mode of exploitation”, understood as a “relationship of power”, Wood hints at the reframing of Marxism through the lenses of power. However, neither her, nor Brenner did take the full measure of such a proposition. The concepts that became canon in political Marxism are rather Brenner’s formulations on “social-property relations”, “surplus extraction” and “rules of reproduction”.

In Brenner’s words, social-property relations are defined as:

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<sup>18</sup> Wood, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, 27.

the relations among direct producers, relations among exploiters, and relations between exploiters and direct producers that, taken together, make possible/specify the regular access of individuals and families to the means of production (land, labour, tools) and/or the social product per se. The idea is that such relations will exist in every society and define the basic constraints on the possibilities and limits of individual economic action. They form the constraints because they define not only the resources at the disposal of individuals but also the manner by which individuals gain access to them and to their income more generally. They define the resources at the disposal of individuals and the manner by which individuals gain access to them and to their income more generally because they are maintained or reproduced collectively, that is beyond the control of any individual, by political communities which are constituted for that very purpose. It is because political communities constitute and maintain the social-property relations collectively and by force-by executing the political functions that we normally associate with the state-defence, police, and justice-that individual economic actors cannot as a rule alter them, but must take them as a given, as their framework of choice.<sup>20</sup>

Brenner implicitly defines transhistorically two dimensions of human activity: an economic dimension comprising direct producers, their labour, the means of production and the social product, and a political dimension, that enforces the rules of access to means of production and the social product. He recognizes that those dimensions are not necessarily institutionally separated. This is the point of his analysis of feudalism, in which the political and economic functions are fused.

In a way, Brenner undoes the Wood, and brings back the base-superstructure distinction by the back door. This version of base-superstructure is similar to the way Terry Eagleton defines it. For him, the economic base is constituted by the activities and institutions that characterize production, upon which the process of exploitation occurs, and a ruling class can arise, while the superstructure is defined by the set of institutions that enforces and legitimate the power of a ruling class.<sup>21</sup> Alex Callinicos builds on a similar definition by including within the conception of superstructure the “non-economic” elements of popular resistance. Therefore, the superstructure is not only what enforces and legitimate ruling

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong,” in *Marxist History Writing for the Twenty First Century*, ed. Chris Wickham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 58.

<sup>21</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 81–87.

class power, but also the working class institutions and practices that seek to undermine it.<sup>22</sup> This echoes implicitly Brenner's idea of a political function that regulates the economic basis. Analytically, these interpretations of the base-superstructure analogy are not devoid of sense. They imply a separation between general production on one side, and social control on the other. But I believe it is not so easy to relegate war, coercion, judicial apparatus and managing activities outside the sphere of production.

It is true that war tends to destroy the means of production of an enemy without building new ones. From the standpoint of humanity taken as a whole, wars can be seen as destructive of production capacities: it reduces both the overall available labour and means of production for other purposes. Yet, the sphere of production cannot be defined from this abstract ahistorical point of view. Actors who engage in a specific kind of human activity do so in order to accomplish socially defined goals. And as much as those goals can be deemed absurd from our point of view, there is no absolute, meta-human universal yardstick<sup>23</sup> from which we can measure the productiveness of a social practice. Resources spent for religious practices will always be deemed unproductive for the non-believer, just as time volunteered for a revolutionary party will be understood as counterproductive for someone who is attached to the status quo. Wars alike always have sufficient reasons to be conducted from the point of view of those who lead them. The fact that they only benefit one side does not fundamentally change their status, just like resource extraction that pollutes the land of a neighbour is not deemed outside the "sphere of production" because of its negative consequences on someone else.

Coercion cannot, neither, be qualified as "outside the realm of production" on the basis that it acts as a constraint rather than "providing" something. This would neglect the stabilizing role coercion can have (even in an egalitarian society—as the way to enforce democratic

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<sup>22</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, 201.

<sup>23</sup> A point famously made by Weber's discussion on the impossibility for science to find a meaning to life in its lecture "Science as a Vocation". See *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David S. Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 2004), 15–18.

decisions). If coercion can contribute to the stability of social relations and provides the basis on which mutual trust and division of labour can occur, then it cannot be simply dismissed as unproductive either. In other words, social cohesion is crucial to the reproduction of society as a whole, and therefore any social production.

Another set of problems arises when one seeks to delimit “productive activity” from managerial and supervisory activity.<sup>24</sup> In essence, this is supposed to separate the workers of the “base” from overseers, policemen and civil servants of the “superstructure”. It supposes that only being “on the production line” is participating in production, and that planning, coordinating and making sure information flows between the components of production is not part of the productive activity. This is a reductive approach to production and neglects its fundamentally social aspect. Social innovations in the organization of labour is as important as technical inventions of new machinery: it has dramatically increased the productivity of labour across history. And just as engineers and technicians are necessary to the conception and maintenance of machines on the production line, planning and coordination is necessary in the conception and maintenance of the complex social division of labour. The fact that contemporary jobs implied in this coordination have a higher hierarchical standing in terms of power and remuneration is contingent to the social arrangements of capitalism: one could easily imagine this kind of job performed on a more egalitarian basis, with rotating responsibilities, increased transparency and accountability, for example. Therefore, one can hardly sustain that management is fundamentally separate or secondary to direct production. And if this is true inside the factory, it is also true at the level of society. Many of the functions of contemporary states are of this nature: they provide a social infrastructure that facilitates the coordination of direct production at a wide scale. One could argue that contemporary states are fundamentally tools of working class repression, which aims to safeguard capitalist property, but we cannot easily disentangle the

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<sup>24</sup> This distinction is present in Marx’s text, see interpretation by Jacques Bidet, *Exploring Marx’s Capital: Philosophical, Economic and Political Dimensions*, English ed., Historical Materialism Book Series, v. 14 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007), 116–17.

repressive function of the state apparatus from its coordinating function. Tribunals, laws and taxation are also used to streamline exchanges, favouring wide-scale decentralized division of labour and providing state-funded infrastructure to palliate for market deficiencies. In other words, state regulations have been essential and constitutive of market stability. And if this *did* protect capitalist interests, it also proved to be a backbone to productive activity in general. It is, therefore, hard to relegate managerial and “political” activities, as well as policing, in a clearly distinct sphere, that would be only subordinate to production.

The distinction between productive and unproductive activities is also sometimes used to distinguish what is productive *from the point of view of capital*, from the rest—what produces value from what does not. This distinction is useful to understand the dynamics of capital accumulation, but it does not provide the kind of general definition historical materialism needs to understand capitalist *and* precapitalistic societies. It cannot, therefore, enlighten the present discussion about base and superstructure.

Brenner’s formulation on the “rules of reproduction” and the feminist approach in “social reproduction theory”<sup>25</sup> goes a long way into expanding the notion of “what is productive”. Instead of focusing narrowly on material production, the idea of analyzing the “social reproduction” of a society as a whole allows for the inclusion of all and any work that is constitutive of the reproduction process of a specific social order. This step is not explicitly taken by Brenner, nor the feminists of social reproduction theory, but the very idea of taking into account all that is necessary for the reproduction of a specific social order holds the key to a genuine understanding of the internal logic of a society.

On this basis, one must recognize that feudal lords did perform productive functions, just like most contemporary capitalist do. A defining feature of the ruling class is therefore not their complete parasitic nature, but the disproportionate amount of the social product they receive for their social contribution. This is the general idea of exploitation, or “surplus

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<sup>25</sup> Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017).

extraction” as used by Brenner and Wood. Yet, Marxists recognize that inequalities of income are not, in themselves, enough to qualify a relationship as one of exploitation. The communist motto “from each according to their capacity, to each according to their needs” assumes an inequality in distribution, both in absolute and relative terms to one’s social contribution. Unequal valuation of some type of works can be deemed legitimate by a community, which could democratically decide to give higher rewards for one’s work on the basis of its highly valued work. Therefore, *what is constitutive of a ruling class is not solely the higher share of social products they receive, but rather the relationship of power that allows them to “extract”, to coerce others into handing them this share.*

This brings us back to Wood’s statement: “a mode of exploitation is a relationship of power”. The theory of power that will be elaborated in the next section will not fundamentally undermine Brenner and Wood’s work—it rather seeks to build on this statement.

### **Totality and the Integration of Non-Capitalist Practices**

The second critique concerns the tendency in Marxism to identify capitalism as *the* mode of production or exploitation, and to argue that all societies are characterized by a single core that is constitutive of class-exploitation dynamics and around which all other social practices revolve.

These questions came to the forefront in feminist circles through the debate between social-reproduction theories and dual/multiple-system theories. In *Towards a Unitary Theory*, Lise Vogel makes explicit the position of Marxists:

the social-reproduction perspective starts out from a theoretical position—namely, that class struggle over the conditions of production represents the central dynamic of social development in societies characterized by exploitation. In these societies, surplus-labour is appropriated by a dominant class, and an essential condition for production is the constant presence and renewal of a subordinated class of direct producers committed to the labour-process. Ordinarily, generational replacement provides most of the new workers needed to replenish this class, and women’s capacity to bear children therefore plays a critical role in class-society.

[...] Female oppression in these classes derives from women's involvement in processes that renew direct producers, as well as their involvement in production.

[...] Presented in crystallized form, the distinction between the dual systems and the social-reproduction perspectives is relatively clear. Of the two, the social-reproduction perspective accords most closely with Marx's analysis of the workings of the capitalist mode of production, particularly as elaborated in *Capital*.<sup>26</sup>

Vogel then explains women's oppression primarily through the capitalists' need to ensure the reproduction of the working class in order to maintain the condition of their exploitation. The problem with this kind of explanation is not, in itself, the centrality it gives to capitalism, but the theoretical assumption on which capitalism is presumed to be central: it still identifies capitalism with production, and assumes that "material production" is always the determining aspect of human life. This is why Vogel needs to relegate domestic work to another sphere:

Despite the linguistic similarity of the terms production and reproduction, the processes that make up the reproduction of labour-power and those that form part of a society's production are not comparable from a theoretical point of view. Reproduction of labour-power is a condition of production, for it *reposes* or *replaces* the labour-power necessary for production. Reproduction of labour-power is not, however, itself a form of production. That is, it does not necessarily involve some determinate combination of raw materials and means of production in a labour-process whose result is the product labour-power.<sup>27</sup>

This distinction between production and reproduction is problematic: bearing, feeding, protecting, educating children does take raw materials, means of production and a labour process. The organization of a kindergarten, a school, a children's hospital and a cafeteria makes it obvious that this work is no less a work of production than any other. The fact that the labour of the mother is unpaid and the means of production (the house, the domestic tools, etc.) are privately owned does not change its productive nature. If reproduction is used to specify the kind of production that maintains the social conditions of the past, then

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<sup>26</sup> Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 135–36.

<sup>27</sup> Vogel, 144.

repairing roads, sewing clothes or growing food is not less “reproductive” than bearing children. The separation between a work site based “sphere of production” and a domestic “sphere of reproduction” is therefore untenable: there is no fundamental difference between the nature of paid work and unpaid domestic labour, except for their direct integration to the market.

By abandoning this distinction, and keeping in mind the previous argument that most human activity is productive labour in one way or another, the question that arises is: on what ground, exactly, is capitalism defined as *the* contemporary mode of production?

The institutions described by Marx—wage labour, market exchange, capital accumulation—are but one aspect of contemporary “material” production: a large range of productive activity are performed outside market relations. This is true for domestic labour, but also networks of informal economy, volunteer organizations, family and friends-based mutual aid, etc. Even work performed inside contemporary states, although it is paid in wages, does not correspond to capitalistic social relations: it does not need to produce commodities to be sold on the market, and it is not organized by proprietors of capital. The money used to pay state workers is rather collected through taxes, levied by state power. Historically, capitalistically organized labour has also co-existed with other ways to organize labour, such as small self-sufficient peasant production, slavery and feudalism.

The traditional escape route from this problem is to define capitalism, not only as the social relations based on wage labour, market exchange and capital accumulation, but rather as the totality of social relations. The argument is that, because all social relations are now influenced by the institutions of wage labour, market exchange and capital accumulation, then we can analyze the whole social structure under the light of capitalism. A good example of this comes from Tithi Bhattacharya:

The fundamental insight of SRT [Social reproduction theory] is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. [...] social reproduction theorists perceive the relation between labor dispensed to produce

commodities and labor dispensed to produce people as part of the systemic totality of capitalism.<sup>28</sup>

Social reproduction of the capitalist system—and it is to explain the reproduction of the system that Marx uses the term—is therefore not about a separation between a noneconomic sphere and the economic, but about how the economic impulse of capitalist production conditions the so-called noneconomic. The “noneconomic” includes, among other things, what sort of state, juridical institutions, and property forms a society has—while these in turn are conditioned, but not always determined, by the economy.<sup>29</sup>

But why wouldn't one turn the argument around, and claim that the mode of production is statist, because the state performs a crucial core of social production and its institutions now influences all other social relations? Or patriarchal, since the family form is central to the sustenance of all contemporary societies? Why is it that capitalism should be taken as the defining feature of the whole—a feature so central that we ought to call the whole system *capitalist* even if only part of it bears its fundamental characteristics?

The orthodox Marxist answer to those questions was easy, because one would restrict the notion of production to the economy and the economy to capitalism. Therefore capitalism was the defining feature of the *economic base*, which characterized the society. But if we expand the notion of production to domestic work, care work, work performed inside the state, then these questions require a new answer.

The way one articulates a solution to these problems is characteristic of the distinction between Neo-Weberians from contemporary Marxists. The Neo-Weberian author Michael Mann, for example, argues that the economy is only one out of four networks to analyze when trying to characterize the main dynamics of a society. While class relationships are defined by economic networks, he stresses the importance of ideology, politics and military as three

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<sup>28</sup> Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Tithi Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class,” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017).

analytically separate networks of power that cannot be reduced to the economy.<sup>30</sup> This is a good example of what Ellen Wood calls “causal pluralism”<sup>31</sup> and Callinicos calls “explanatory pluralists, who [...] refuse to give causal primacy to any one of the sources of power or forms of domination”. Marxists argue rather that “there is a general ordering among these practices that is reflected in the explanatory primacy that historical materialism gives to the forces and relations of production”<sup>32</sup>. The debate on the nature of feudalism between Brenner and Mann reveals the roots of this distinction.

For Mann, Marxist approaches cannot account for the dynamic of the late feudal period in which constant warfare competition led to state building, because it cannot be derived from the economic networks of the Middle Ages. Only a specific focus on the political and military networks of the feudal period can uncover the specific dynamics of this period. He also argues that the “separation between economic and political functions/organizations was clear and symmetrical—states were political, classes were economic”<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, one could not derive war and state building from economic activity, because both were strongly separated.

Yet, for Brenner, the political and the economical were fused under feudal social-property relations, because the lords would extract surpluses directly from their subordinate — the serf — through extra-economic coercion. Since most production was agricultural, and since most lords got their surpluses directly out of this agrarian activity, commerce was marginal to the feudal “economy”. Gains in productivity were also rare, and lords did not have a direct control over the labor activity of the peasants. Increasing a Lord’s capacity to extract surpluses could therefore not be done by reinvesting its surpluses into research and productivity gains. The best way for him to increase his surpluses was war and conquest. This led Brenner to argue that the relations of production must also include horizontal class

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power v1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, vol. 1 (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 22–30.

<sup>31</sup> Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, XLII.

<sup>33</sup> Mann, *The Sources of Social Power v1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, 1:17.

relations: the way competition was structured among the members of a class.<sup>34</sup> For Callinicos, this approach successfully “explains the military conflicts of pre-capitalist social formations in terms of the relations of production prevailing within them and therefore provides a rebuttal of the claim that Marxism cannot account for such conflicts”.<sup>35</sup>

While both approaches seem antagonistic, part of the distinction arises from a definitional issue. Micheal Mann defines economic networks in terms of power derived from production and exchange, while he defines political networks in terms of power derived from domestic coercion. Therefore, the coercive extraction of agrarian surpluses is political for him. The economic networks under feudalism are related to commerce and merchants, and are somewhat peripheral. Yet, it is only because he restricts class to economics networks, and economic networks to commerce that the relationship between serfs and lords are understood as political strata rather than economic classes. On the other side, it is because Brenner defines all relations of surplus extraction as a relationship between classes that any type of extraction can be constitutive of class relations. And the fact that Brenner qualifies the feudal extraction process as “extra-economical” indicates he is not so far from Mann.

Disentangling this linguistic conundrum reveals that Marxists can claim a monistic approach to causation by subsuming the plural factors of the Weberians to a single system. Where Mann sees a political relationship between lords and serfs, distinct from the economical networks of merchants, Brenner sees a feudal mode of production characterized by the exploitation of the productive activity of serfs by lords, which he also distinguishes from the commercial activities of merchants which are marginal to the relations of production.

I believe that a better conception of power can clarify this misunderstanding. What Michael Mann separate into 4 “sources of social power” is unified under contemporary Marxism by the more encompassing term “forces of production”, “mode of exploitation” or “social-property relations”. This is not true of all brands of Marxist theory, but those which accept a

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<sup>34</sup> Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong,” 64–74.

<sup>35</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, 186.

larger definition of “production” and “exploitation” implicitly use a theory of power in their understanding of what “extraction of the social surplus” means. And ultimately, Micheal Mann’s distributive power is specifically this—it represents the elite’s capacity to “extract” labour and resources from its population—therefore *power*. Mann identifies four “means” of extraction, which corresponds to its four networks. Ideological networks describes how distributive power can be achieved by the monopolization of *norms*, economic networks describe social power accumulation through the monopolization of means of production, distribution, exchange and production. Both military power and political power is about the monopolization of means of coercion—the latter being focused on day-to-day internal administration, while the former is about military intervention proper. Those components are also present in Marxist analysis—they are simply embedded into a single system: the organization of the relations of production. In describing how a ruling class is able to build and maintain its domination, Marxists will generally look at the same factors: how it is able to control the ideological means, the military, the state and the economic activity. When those means are embedded in different institutions, with their own elites, Marxists will generally see “factions” in the ruling class. The Clergy and the Nobles in the European Middle Ages had organizations of their own, one with a more important role on the ideological side, the other with a more important role in the control of military means. They therefore had some autonomy from one another, could have their own agenda, and could enter into conflicts against one another (the Protestant wars being a good example of local lords supporting the dissidents in order to secure more independence from the Catholic Church). The same goes when looking at members of a ruling class sharing the same kind of “power base”—lords could enter into conflict against one another (Brenner emphasizes this dimension), just like capitalist do, or modern states.

The same debate occurs on the question of the state in capitalist societies. A common trend among Neo-Weberians like Mann<sup>36</sup> and Skocpol is to stress the autonomy of the state elite in

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State : Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984): 30.

its action on society. For them, state elites and topside military officers have their own agenda, and the specific institutional arrangements of the state have unique impacts on historical trajectories that cannot be derived from the characteristics of the capitalist economy. Skocpol explicitly builds her theory *against* the Marxist theory of the states.<sup>37</sup> Yet, Marxist formulations such as Miliband's "relative autonomy of the state"<sup>38</sup> imply that the action of state leaders are not direct functional puppets of capitalist interests. This autonomy is qualified as "relative", because the state is dependent upon the continuing accumulation of capital to sustain its activities. This is not contested by Neo-Weberians, as they agree that state autonomy is constrained by its dependence on the economy. But Marxists that recognize a certain autonomy to the state must necessarily recognize that state action can occur without direct functional "requirements" from the capitalist class interests and that this state action will have an effect on the historical trajectory.

The problem with classical Marxism is that, if it includes everything that "produces" something useful for society — including the state, corporations and families —, then there is no reason to characterize the relations of production with the sole dynamics of capitalist enterprises. They neither produce something more "fundamental" than the other, and all are required to each other, shaping their conditions of existence and reproduction.

I suspect that most Marxists implicitly acknowledge this problem. When analyzing conjunctures, they will look at the specific configurations of families, at the main beliefs of the population, at the configuration of state power, at the factions contending of the state, at the factions among the capitalist class, at the geopolitical situation. And to return to the passage quoted earlier from social reproduction theorist Bhattacharya:

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<sup>37</sup> Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*, 36. print (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1969).

The so-called “noneconomic” [...] includes, among other things, what sort of state, juridical institutions, and property forms a society has—while these in turn are conditioned, but not always determined, by the economy.<sup>39</sup>

Once this is admitted, those “noneconomic” dimensions become “factors” that are not always determined by the economy—and therefore have some level of autonomous impact. What gives primacy to capitalism is not its exclusive control over production (since there is production outside specifically capitalist institutions), but rather its *relative weight* in the social whole. It is, therefore, not so far from the causal pluralism for Weberian. The focus of Marxists on how those dimensions are always intertwined and embedded is precious, but historical materialism lacks a way to clarify the status of those factors because its pretension to explain social dynamics through the primacy of production ultimately fails to isolate what “production” means consistently, and why it would be restricted to market-related activity under capitalism. This is where a theory of power comes crucial.

To make things clear, this thesis does agree that capitalist social relations are central and crucial to understand contemporary society. Yet, capitalism does not hold its centrality to a special control of the productive sphere. Instead of focusing on the supposed primacy of material production that would somewhat be exclusive to the work site, this dissertation argues that *the extent to which a set of social relations can affect, influence and transform other social relations is in direct relation to its capacity to accumulate of power*. In other words, capitalist social relations are a central driving trend of contemporary society, not because they are characterizing the “mode of production”, but because they are the main way through which the ruling class accumulates power. They constitute the main “mode of power”. In many ways, this is closer to the illumination metaphor in Marx’s *Grundrisse*:

In all forms of society there is a specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a

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<sup>39</sup> Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class.”

particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.<sup>40</sup>

Even if it is not perfect, this image is much better than the base-superstructure analogy. First, Marx talks of “a specific kind of production which predominates over the rest”, which presupposes that: (1) the central social relations that we are looking at when we characterize something like capitalism are a set of central dynamics, but they are not the only dynamics at play, and (2) the other set of social relations are not ontologically less significant in terms of materiality: they are other *kinds of production*. Second, the centrality of the capitalist dynamic here is explained as “gravity” or an “illumination” that *affects* everything else. The power that is embedded in capitalist structures makes capitalist social relations more central in this way: it becomes a brighter light, or a bigger source of gravity which strongly affects the rest. This does not mean, however, that other social structures could not have their own core dynamics, their own “light”, their own source of gravity. They may be less central—but they can also be understood as having some influence and some autonomy, even if they are not as determinative as capitalist social relations. This influence could be reciprocal or mutual, but asymmetrical. Instead of ontologically assuming the centrality of capitalism because of its organization of material production, this metaphor allows for the cohabitation of multiple “systems”, which are intertwined. The primacy of one over the others is a matter of historical investigation rather than an assumption.

This “light” or “gravity” metaphor<sup>41</sup> implies that one needs to take into account the main center of gravity to explain the rest, but it also means that one cannot *derive* everything from the center. Many social phenomena have their own set of norms and principles of reproduction, which can sustain themselves over time on a more or less autonomous basis.

We therefore propose to reframe the question of the totality by refraining from assuming that there is a single, clearly identifiable core to the “mode of production”. Instead, it would

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<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 106–7.

<sup>41</sup> This metaphor inspired the *force field* analogy used in chapter 4.

be more fruitful to recognize that there are multiple set of practices that organize different spheres of production, some of which—like capitalism—are clearly dominant. The totality is the result of their complex intertwining.

This would resolve the dichotomy between social reproduction theory and dual/multiple system theory when it comes to the relationship between the oppression of women and capitalism. It can recognize that (1) the structure of women's oppression is not simply a functional need of capitalism to divide and stratify the working class, neither a simple functional need to ensure the reproduction of the working class. It has a deeper history that predates capitalism, and it benefits men as a group, who derive a systemic power from this relationship—notably in the form of sexual domination, a form of violence that cannot be understood in terms of needs for capital accumulation. (2) And, that the oppression of women is not structured in a way that would be independent and separated from capitalism. It is deeply intertwined and shaped by capitalist social relations. In a similar way, if the social reproduction of labour power has indeed been delegated to the domestic labour of women, it is also because patriarchal social relations influenced the way in which capitalism could ensure this social reproduction.

In many ways, the most nuanced versions of dual-system theory<sup>42</sup> and of social reproduction theory<sup>43</sup> both ended up agreeing on those two elements. The only difference being a matter of emphasis in relation to the object of analysis.

This would also solve some inconsistencies with the understanding of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the formation of nation states and the co-existence of slavery and capitalism in the 19th century United States. Every of these cases imply the co-existence of distinct dynamics that are sometimes mutually reinforcing, sometimes contradictory. The question of the state, for example, is crucial here. The emergence and consolidation of

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<sup>42</sup> Danièle Kergoat, "Dynamique et Consubstantialité Des Rapports Sociaux," in *Sexe, Race, Classe: Pour Une Épistémologie de La Domination*, ed. Elsa Dorlin, 1re éd, Actuel Marx Confrontation (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2009), 112.

<sup>43</sup> Johanna Brenner, *Women and the Politics of Class* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 39.

contemporary states cannot simply be derived from capitalist social relations, it needs to be explained as a semi-autonomous process. states are ways to organize power and production that predates capitalism. As we will see in chapter 7, historical evidence points out that the state structure was crucial to understand *how* capitalist social relations were exported from England to the rest of Europe and then to European colonies. states sought to consolidate their own power, employing the tools at their disposition and their own basis for power, copying and implementing capitalist social relations. During this process, it was neither “feudalism”, nor “capitalism” that was the central means of power accumulation, but the state itself (this is especially true for France and Germany during the 18th and 19th centuries).<sup>44</sup> The transition to capitalism did, however, transform the state in return. By basing its power on capital accumulation, the new form of the state now had a relation of dependency to capitalism. But the dynamic of capital accumulation and the extension of market dependency did not obliterate the specific dynamics in which states accumulate and wield power. To that extent, understanding historical phenomenon such as imperialism or the economic rise of China since the 1990s requires us to understand how the state is not simply functional to capitalism. It can wield its power in unique ways, in relation to specific political agendas of those who control it.<sup>45</sup>

These questions—on women and race, on the state and on the co-existence of other “modes of production”—will be more lengthily discussed in chapter 6 and 7.

### **Marxism and the Micro Level**

Marxism is mainly a macro-social theory. In and of itself, this is not a crucial problem. But for social movement building, the lack of micro-social foundations has real problematic implications.

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<sup>44</sup> Robbie Shilliam, *German Thought and International Relations: The Rise and Fall of a Liberal Project*, Palgrave Studies in International Relations Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> The most interesting versions of Marxist State theory actually agree with this. For a recent exemple, see Stephen Maher and Scott M. Aquanno, “Conceptualizing Neoliberalism: Foundations for an Institutional Marxist Theory of Capitalism,” *New Political Science* 40, no. 1 (2018): 33–50.

At its core, historical materialism is a theory of class struggle, of large transformations through history, of dominant ideological formations, of long-term goals for global emancipation. It works best when analyzing social transformations over decades and century-long trends, and it can provide overarching explanation of complex social phenomena by abstracting specific actors and understanding them through the collective behaviour of classes. Marx's work is almost exclusively geared to understand society in such terms, and all of the fundamental concepts of historical materialism are forged with this level of analysis in mind.

This does not mean that Marxists have never analyzed micro and mezzo-social phenomena, but when they did, they could not rely on the fundamental tools of their theory. Short-term conjuncture analysis and strategic discussions on how to lead the struggle therefore had to rely on other bases. Sidney Tarrow makes an interesting typology of the evolution of Marxist theories of social movements. He shows that Marx's own account was mainly structural: the proletariat would rebel when the contradictions of the capitalist system would provide the crisis that leads to the revolution. This left widely un-theorized the role of organizational work: struggle was a product of the structure.<sup>46</sup> Reading the political interventions of Kautsky, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky or Gramsci reveals a large number of ad hoc analyses, based on the practical knowledge they acquired through their years of political experience in addition to the Marxist framework itself. Confronted with problems common to most social movements—propaganda, recruitment, formation, mobilization, internal democracy and discipline—, they could not rely on the tools of Marx's historical materialism to guide their decision. Tarrow notes that Lenin's theory of the vanguard party is a step forward in the theory of social movements. He emphasized the important role a small, disciplined organization of well-trained revolutionaries could have to lead the revolution. A proposition that his opponents criticized as "voluntaristic". Gramsci's intervention was also an innovation on the understanding of social movements: he emphasized the role of culture and

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<sup>46</sup> Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Rev. & updated 3rd ed, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17–18.

the necessity of a long-term strategy for counter-hegemony, which was required to transform worker consciousness. Gramsci's addition revealed that structural crisis and contradictions were not sufficient to lead workers to a communist revolution, and in western societies where the bourgeoisie had developed strong cultural institutions to maintain hegemony by consent, it was impossible for a vanguard party to lead the way without building a working-class cultural counter-hegemony.

The fact that Marxists did create interesting innovations regarding social movements is not a proof of historical materialism's capacity to provide tools for this purpose. Both the Leninist approach and the Gramscian concepts show a disconnect between the practical tools they develop and the materialist ontology. This gap is not fatal in itself. One could argue that it is not necessary to have a one-size-fit-all theory, and if the ontology of Marxism is built to analyze large-scale phenomena, it could simply be seen as complementary with other compatible frameworks for conjectural questions of strategy. In many ways, the idea of Marxism-Leninism is specifically to combine the practical insight of Lenin with the theoretical framework of Marx. An integrated tool could be more elegant, but the tidiness of a framework is neither the only nor the prime criterion of selection.

However, the lack of micro-foundations is problematic for its consequences on the questions of justice, equality and democracy. Marxism is a normatively grounded and charged theory, geared towards the socialist idea of human emancipation. Yet, if it lays down some very broad principles for a classless society, it does not provide guidelines that could indicate how, concretely, this would occur in organizations. Organizing an equalitarian society is not only a problem of distribution of the means of production: it is also a concrete problem of day-to-day management. Similarly, Marxism does not offer any tool to guide the acceptable practices inside transitional organizations, such as labour unions or political parties. Globally, this gap between a broad goal and an undefined vision on how this goal would look on a daily basis or what is acceptable inside socialist organizations have paved the way for the instrumentalization of Marxism to legitimize fundamentally authoritarian and deeply hierarchical organizations and regimes. That is not to say that Marxism necessarily leads to

authoritarian regimes—there are good grounds on which one could argue that the USSR or communist China actually betrayed the principles of Marxism. The argument here is rather that, because historical materialism offers no guideline on what equality and democracy looks like inside medium-sized organization such as workplaces, labour unions or political parties, it could be used to legitimate authoritarian practices in the name of an unspecified larger goal of “socializing the means of production”. Furthermore, without a good idea of how it would be possible to organize medium size organizations on egalitarian and democratic basis, it is unlikely that the end result at the large scale will be emancipatory.

The theory of power proposed here seeks to provide micro foundations to Marxism that will overcome these problems. By linking daily-life phenomena, day-to-day political events with medium-term strategies and large-scale phenomenon, a theory of power can bridge the gap between grand theory and down-to-earth political practice. It will also offer a guide to egalitarian politics that can be applied both to transitional organizations and post-capitalist societies. These questions will be discussed in Chapter 8 and 9 respectively.

### **Socialism, Objective Interest and the Instrumental Approach to Democracy**

This brings us to the question of democracy and the ambivalent relationship socialism entertains with it. From its very roots, the socialist tradition was based on a criticism of the limits of political revolutions, and the necessity to address the “social question”. Yet, this question was often thought in terms of extending and radicalizing the republican perspective rather than in terms of democracy.

According to Draper<sup>47</sup>, the word “democracy” had two broad meanings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One was rooted in the traditional Greek meaning, referring to a kind of government, but most specifically, to the *social content* of a regime. It did not so much refer to a set of rules or procedure, but more broadly to a regime in which the people had a great weight in it. This

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<sup>47</sup> Hal Draper, *State and Bureaucracy*, Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution, Hal Draper ; 1 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 84–86.

conception of democracy was not positive, even among the left—as it was associated with demagoguery and manipulation. The understanding of “who” were the people was also unclear, varying from the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois strata, to the poor masses below them. The other definition had no relationship with government: democracy referred to the movement of the people, of the masses themselves. Protests, riots, revolutions were manifestations of democracy, and a democrat was one who had sympathy for the masses.

Rather than democracy, the core concept that dominated the American and the French Revolutions was republicanism. The American “founding fathers” worked hard to contain demands to expand the right to vote.<sup>48</sup> Their goal was to secure their independence from British colonialism, not to hand it over to the “people”. As for the French Revolution, it is notable that its main principles, as crystallized in the “Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen”, do not include a single mention on democracy, or any explicit decision-making process. Only article 6 actually addresses indirectly this question: it prescribes that the law should represent the “general will”, and that public offices should be accessible on the basis of virtues and talents (not nobility of birth, therefore). This kind of formulation is closer to the general principles of republicanism than democracy.

This republicanism is also better described as liberal rather than egalitarian. The main concern of 18th century republican revolutionaries was not the distribution of power among citizens, but rather, the protection of private liberties from state intervention (freedom, property, safety and resistance to oppression in the French case). The republican understanding of equality was therefore an equal protection *from the state*, and the abolition of state-related privileges to the nobility. Cole notes that:

It has to be remembered that in the first half of the nineteenth century “the State” was thought of by most advocates of social change — and indeed by most people — as an

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<sup>48</sup> Keyssar, *The Right to Vote*.

external power set over its *subjects*, and not as an agency representing a broad mass of *citizens*.<sup>49</sup>

This is important for the origins of socialism, since it crystallized the idea of the “withering away of the State”. Blanqui, whose strategy was based on taking state power through a *Coup d’État* performed by a small, well-organized group of workers, believed that the end goal, after a period of dictatorship, was to reorganize the economy through self-governing associations and, slowly, the state would wither away, being no longer useful.<sup>50</sup> Fourier and Owen, despite their respective differences, both argued for a transition process that did not involve the State, but rather voluntary associations of workers, who would slowly restructure the economy from below and without concentration. Here again, the newly created structure did not need a “State” and would supersede both capitalism and the 19th-century state<sup>51</sup>

There is a strong link between the trust in reason and science, and the general idea of a “dissolution of politics” that supports the idea of the withering away of the state. The belief that reason can solve social problems and conflicts is a common characteristic of most early socialist. Fourier, for example, thought that self-management of his phalanstères (his utopian communities which provided work and produced goods for all its members) was possible because reason would guide its members to common conclusions. His goal was harmony, and he believed that the human nature, when inserted into good social structure, would tend to produce this harmony. In some ways, Fourier believed in a consensus democracy, which would emerge spontaneously if given the right conditions. Cabet shared a similar belief: he argued that the decision-making process of his utopian communities would not have to decide on much issues—it would be mostly administrative tasks, since political conflict would have disappeared with the kind of equality he proposed.

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<sup>49</sup> G. D. H Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Volume I the Forerunners 1789-1850*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1953), 202.

<sup>50</sup> Cole, 1:165.

<sup>51</sup> Cole, 1:3.

Saint-Simon also believed that science and reason would make conflicts wither away. And a similar idea led Owen to believe that he could *convince* capitalists to let go their power and accept the principles of his villages of co-operation, on the basis that his system was simply more rational, more efficient. Owen believed that a scientific economy could only prevail within a cooperative model, and that such an approach would eventually free mankind of the need to work altogether<sup>52</sup>.

Even Proudhon, while his critique of the state was different, believed that under the right conditions, social problems would disappear, because individuals would participate in a “‘natural’ economy based on mutual exchange which will secure a balance of interests”<sup>53</sup>. Politics, for Proudhon, only existed when a form of centralization prevailed. His alternative was based on a generalized contract-based society, in which all associations would be voluntary and temporary, preventing any kind of centralization. Here again, there is a dissolution of political conflict, being replaced by a completely decentralized, but “natural” management of the economy. It must be noted, however, that Proudhon did not believe his model would end all contradictions and that this model would be guided by science. What he believed is that political processes would stop playing a role in solving the conflicts and the natural economy would balance the interest of each.

Therefore, when Engels wrote that under socialism the government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and [the state] withers away, he restated a somewhat usual idea among socialists of his time. And for both Marx and Engels, Socialism was a science that revealed the problems of society and could guide the struggle for emancipation.<sup>54</sup> A contemporary Marxist like Terry Eagleton still shares a similar understanding in 2016, when

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<sup>52</sup> Cole, 1:94, 125.

<sup>53</sup> Cole, 1:213.

<sup>54</sup> G. D. H Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Volume II: Socialist Thought Marxism and Anarchism 1850-1890*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1964), 311–12.

he argues that “Once there is enough of a surplus to be equitably shared, there is no more foundation for social classes, and consequently no more need for ideology or the state.”<sup>55</sup>

Across the different tendencies of 19th century socialists, from Saint-Simonians to early Marxists, there was a strong underlying trend seeking to resolve the “social question” by focusing on the question of exploitation. It assumed that the satisfaction of the economic needs of the masses and the creation of humane conditions of work would resolve political conflicts and make the state useless. Therefore, the question of *how we govern* society, of *who* makes the decision became secondary, as many socialists believed that by abolishing exploitation through the abolition of private capitalist property, there would be no political decision to make anymore: only technocratic choices would have to be made to administer production. This led Marxists like Kautsky to advocate for a highly centralized and planned economy once socialists would be able to take state power.<sup>56</sup> The Party was understood as the genuine representative of the worker’s interest, and guided by the scientific approach of Marxism it could therefore act on its behalf and plan a just economy, free of exploitation.

Underlying this whole line of thought is the more or less implicit idea that it is possible to discover scientifically the “objective interest” of the workers and to find the best solutions to satisfy these interests through scientific inquiry. Marx’s *Capital* was celebrated as a great scientific discovery that “revealed” the nature of the problems under capitalism—exploitation—and pointed towards the right policy to solve it: socializing the means of production. Whether this was Marx’s intent or not is irrelevant: the main socialist traditions that took inspiration from his works were influenced by the German social democrats and the Russian communists, which both justified a highly centralized and hierarchical vision of the Party and of the state after the revolution on the basis of this line of reasoning.

That is not to say that Marxist revolutionaries did not favour democracy, but the democratic centralism of Lenin and Trotsky, as well as their support for the soviets, were based on an

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<sup>55</sup> Eagleton, *Materialism*.

<sup>56</sup> Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Volume III : The Second International 1889-1914 Part 1*, 3:269–70.

instrumental rather than an intrinsic consideration for democracy. Democracy was seen as a tool for party building: freedom of discussion allowed for the circulation of information and experience across branches so that the party could take the right decisions and internal debate aimed at creating unity among members by winning consent over strategies and programmatic elements.<sup>57</sup> The role of democracy inside the party was to make it more efficient in bringing about a socialist revolution. The Bolshevik's slogan proclaiming "All power to the Soviets" was also motivated by strategic consideration rather than a genuine appreciation of Soviet democracy: it was not an important element of their strategy before soviets were already operating across Russia and provided the crucial base for revolutionaries.<sup>58</sup> Cole also notes that:

Lenin believed in "class", rather than in "party", dictatorship; but with this went a firm belief in the Party as the true representative of the class and in a party discipline which, in effect, involved the dictatorship of the Party rather than of the class. Certainly he did not believe that any proletarian, by virtue of his class, had a right to deviate from the correct class doctrine embodied in the decisions of the Party; and, within the Party itself, he laid the greatest stress both on ideological correctness, as against individual judgment or opinion based on individual experience, and on the need for the party leadership, at every moment of crisis or important decision on policy, to take full authority and responsibility into its own hands. After Lenin's removal, the party leadership more and more replaced the Party as a whole as the designated representatives of the proletariat as a class.<sup>59</sup>

This being said, there is no necessary link between historical materialism as a general framework and the Bolsheviks' politics of centralization. Many Marxists have stressed the centrality of democracy for the realization of the socialist project and as a foundational principle of Marxism. This is central, for example, to the readings offered in Hal Draper's *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*<sup>60</sup> or in William Clare Roberts's *Marx's Inferno*<sup>61</sup>. In both works,

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<sup>57</sup> Dianne Feeley, Paul Le Blanc, and Thomas M Twiss, *Leon Trotsky and the Organizational Principles of the Revolutionary Party* (Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2014), 14–21.

<sup>58</sup> G. D. H Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought Volume IV: Communism and Social Democracy 1914-1931 Part 1*, vol. 4 (London: Macmillan, 1958), 77–78.

<sup>59</sup> Cole, 4:22–23.

<sup>60</sup> Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: State and Bureaucracy*, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Hal Draper ; 1 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977).

<sup>61</sup> William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*, 2018.

Marx is read as deeply embedded within the radical republican traditions that does value radical democratic perspectives. It is in this sense that one must appreciate the general idea of the self-emancipation of the working class. I do not contest this reading: it is very well possible that Marx had such perspective in mind. The problem does not lie with Marx's intentions, but rather with the relative weakness of the conceptual tools left by historical materialism to characterize what is democracy, what it implies in terms of social institutions, and how to distinguish it from the various historical forms of non-democracy.

This weakness does not mean that some socialists using Marxist perspectives did not defend democratic tendencies with conviction. For example, Rosa Luxemburg's diatribes against Lenin's vision of party discipline and the authoritarian turn of the Russian revolution offers an exemplary defence of revolutionary democracy.<sup>62</sup> But because Marxism offers few embedded concepts to think democracy, socialists who value democracy will tend to borrow their conception of democracy from other traditions. Luxemburg uses left republican reference to democratic rights for example, speaking of the right to vote, and the freedom of the press as key points. Others, such as C.L.R. James in *Every Cook can Govern* mobilize the Athenian conception of direct democracy to supplement his political perspective.<sup>63</sup> The present dissertation aims to embed tools to think democracy directly within the core concepts of socialist theory.

### **On the Notion of Interest**

An important shift to abandon centralizing technocratic visions of socialism is to abandon altogether the very idea that there is such a thing as an "objective interest" that could be used to determine "scientifically" the best policy on behalf of the majority. Contemporary Marxists such as Vivek Chibber and Alex Callinicos have redefined the notion of interest in a way that escapes the mechanical conception of classical Marxism. I believe it is better, however, to

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<sup>62</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution, and, Leninism or Marxism?*, ed. Bertram D Wolfe (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> C. L. R. James, *A New Notion*, ed. Noel Ignatiev (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010).

speak of *structural interest* rather than *material interest*, and to understand that *structural interest* gives us a range of possible values and norms for individuals and groups.

In *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, Vivek Chibber defends the notion of material interest against the “culturalism” of subaltern theory. His goal is to defend the Marxist analysis according to which capitalism, as a universalizing phenomenon, creates similar patterns of class interest across the globe. To do so, he defines the notion of material interest as “some goals [...] that are independent of culture”<sup>64</sup>. If one, at least minimally, recognizes the “*objective need*” for “physical well-being”—then there is a basis for a materialist accounting of agency. He proceeds to show that the examples used by Subalternists are all compatible with this idea: the Indian rebellions and the migrations used as examples by his adversaries are not purely explainable by the internal logic of local cultures, they are decisively understandable in terms of preserving one’s well-being. Chibber argues that in those instances, Indian peasants and workers actually “rejected their [cultural] codes when these codes undetermined the conditions for their physical well-being”<sup>65</sup>. His argument is that there is a universal drive for a minimal satisfaction of needs and that “culture cannot extinguish people’s regard for [those] basic survival needs”<sup>66</sup>.

I find this argument limited, however, since restricting the definition of interest to the satisfaction of basic needs is barely helpful. In any situation of scarcity, there is rarely a single, clear strategy that is available to actors. People will attempt to do what they *believe* will wield the desired result, but they might be wrong, and the course of action might not be shared by others. The very weakness of social sciences to make accurate predictions reveals the gigantic uncertainty most people face when they have to step outside of their routine, and collective action will often take place inside a range of “tried and tested” repertoire of strategies. Such a repertoire is deeply linked with the local culture of struggle (or to the absence of struggles) and can hardly be said to be a universalizing feature of capitalism.

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<sup>64</sup> Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2012), 197.

<sup>65</sup> Chibber, 198.

<sup>66</sup> Chibber, 199.

Furthermore, recognizing that threatening one's physical integrity is likely to provoke a reaction that overrides the adhesion to the dominant cultural code actually tells us little most of the time, when physical well-being is not threatened. In most of the western world, where standards of living are well above the minimum, collective action is rarely activated by life-threatening situations. It is rather a culturally defined level of expectation that fixes the threshold under which resistance starts organizing on "economic" questions. Other kinds of conflicts are also likely to appear: clashes on religion, on values, on gender, on language, on immigration, on race, on sexuality, and so on.<sup>67</sup> Narrowly defined in terms of basic needs, the notion of interest has next to no explanatory power on any of these issues.

In *Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn*, Chibber recognizes those problems. Personal individual advancement or the use of racial, national or religious networks are among the possible strategies that workers will use to improve their conditions. Therefore, there is an inevitable "cultural" element that explains the strength and form of class conflict. This is why Chibber concludes that:

class identities are not a natural or necessary outgrowth of the class structure. Indeed, the implications of my argument turn the classic Marxist account on its head. In the classical account, the class structure is taken to generate class consciousness, which in turn induces workers to build class organizations. I have tried to argue that, in fact, class consciousness is the consequence of class organization. Since the latter is an arduous process, highly vulnerable to disruption and precarious at its foundation, so is the formation of class identity.<sup>68</sup>

The same actually goes for the capitalist class itself. There are various philosophies of worker management, various ideas about the ways to invest, and multiple factions on the best macro-policies to ensure capital accumulation. Assuming that every capitalist seeks to maximize its profits tells us little about *how* they intend to do it, and they actually disagree with one another on those questions. In retrospect, it is easy to say that political decisions such as the "New Deal" served capitalist's interest in maintaining the conditions of

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<sup>67</sup> Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 140–53.

<sup>68</sup> Vivek Chibber, "Rescuing Class From the Cultural Turn," *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no1/cultural-turn-vivek-chibber>.

accumulation. But in the midst of the economic crisis of the 1930s, there was no certainty that this policy would actually work. The same is true of the global slump after 2008: it is not clear that the massive stimulus followed by the wave of austerity measures were the best policies for the long-term stability of capital accumulation, and the rise of a right-wing nationalist faction across the west that attacks free trade reveals a division inside the capitalist class about the way to move forward.

But if interests are always mediated by culture, what prevents us from falling back to a culturalist position, in which culture operates as a contingent, independent factor that can, in the end, override any universalizing tendency of capitalism? Here again, it is the notion of *power* that explains the centrality of capitalism. If “class structure [is also] a cultural fact”<sup>69</sup>, it is a cultural fact that becomes central to social life, and that eradicates incompatible cultural elements because it embeds so much social power.

For example, if a capitalist would stop adopting practices that allows him to make profits, his company would eventually be bankrupted by competition and he would lose his status as a capitalist. He *could* actually do this. Yet, structurally, he will simply be replaced by another capitalist, at the head of another corporation which was more profitable. Therefore, all those occupying the structural position of capitalists must behave in a manner that conforms themselves to the structural imperatives of capitalist profitability. If they fail to do so, they are simply expelled from their structural positions, and replaced by others. All members of the capitalist class share a set of interest based on what they must do to keep their position in the structure. The same goes for the worker, but the consequences are more dramatic. For the majority—those who do not own means of self-sustenance—failure to accept the norms of wage labour will result into acute economic deprivation.

This leads Chibber to argue that:

The causal relation between the economic structure and the agents’ meaning universe is one of negative selection—it simply selects against those desires that

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<sup>69</sup> Chibber.

would motivate the agent to ignore or reject the structures demands. [...] The class structure selects against those aspects of the local culture that inhibit workers and capitalists from conforming to their economic roles. This means that aspects of the normative field that are not directly implicated in economic action have only a contingent relationship to the class structure. They might remain unchanged; they might change due to some unintended downstream consequences of class action; or they might change because of social dynamics utterly unconnected to the economic structure. The point is that there is no systematic causal connection between the two phenomena. Hence, the direct pressure exerted by capitalist relations on the surrounding culture can be quite limited in scope.<sup>70</sup>

This passage from Chibber is an important admission for the current project. First, it recognizes that capitalism as an economic structure does not explain the totality of social relations: there is an exterior to capitalism, at least in terms of culture. Second, if identities and understandings of the world are also shaped by these “exterior” cultural elements, then the specific cultural context in which capitalism evolves has an impact on its trajectory. But for the purposes of the discussion on interest, the point here is that capitalism is a set of practices that reproduce themselves, that are *cultural*, but owe their centrality to the constraint they impose on agents.

Chibber, however, tries to distinguish the centrality of capitalism from other social structures such as religions on the nature of the constraints each structure has. In a classical Marxist move, he argues that:

Whereas every structure has consequences for the actors who participate in it, the ones attached to class carry a special significance—they relate to actors’ economic viability and, in this capacity, they set the rules for what actors have to do to reproduce themselves. This endows class structure with the ability to influence people’s motivational set in a very different way from other social relations.<sup>71</sup>

I do not want to spend too much time here on this passage, as its criticism is a larger theme of this dissertation. Let’s just say that the distinction he makes between economic structure and other structures is not so clear, but it is not needed to use his insights on the notion of

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<sup>70</sup> Chibber.

<sup>71</sup> Chibber.

interest. For example, he compares the economic structures of interest with the structure of a religion, by arguing that the former does not constraint the actors by active monitoring and through agent-imposed sanctions, while the latter does.

The proletarian's acceptance of her role is effectuated by a coercive pressure from her class position. It is a kind of structural coercion. What I mean by that is that the pressure to accept the role does not require conscious intervention by another person—it is imposed simply by her circumstances, by the choice set that her location offers her. In the case of the potential member of the congregation, there is no parallel structural force pulling him back toward the church if he rejects the codes and meanings attached to it. [...] Now it is of course possible that some kind of sanctions are also placed on him, in a manner reminiscent of the proletarian, that impose costs on him should he choose to reject his role. He might be ostracized by the community and experience other kinds of social pressure or perhaps even physical punishment. But this is not in fact a parallel at all. In this latter instance, what we have are instances of agent-imposed sanctions. They require some kind of monitoring by social agencies dedicated to preventing transgressions of just this kind and, on top of that, willful intervention by individuals or the community.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, it ignores the fact that the very basis on which capitalism can operate its structural constraint *is* the agent-imposed sanctions and constant monitoring for agents by the state in order to protect private property. It also ignores the structural constraint religion can have in many communities and across the world, and it minimizes the importance of the need for belonging to a community. Of course, in the western context, where religious diversity is relatively accepted and churches are relatively weak institutions, he is right that the impact of religion and capitalism cannot be equated. But this is due to their relative power and importance in the social structure, not the kind of coercion on which they operate.

To return to our main discussion here, the link, between agents, capitalism as a power structure, and the shaping of interest is well articulated by Alex Callinicos in the following passage:

agents draw their powers in part from structures (the forces and relations of production) which divide them into classes with conflicting interests. The fact [...] that agents have shared interests by virtue of the structural capacities they derive

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<sup>72</sup> Chibber.

from their position in the relations of production, makes it essential to consider to forms of collective organization through which they seek to pursue these interests.<sup>73</sup>

Here, instead of explaining interest from material need, interest is understood as a product of the social structure of power. It might be better, therefore, to speak of *structural interest* rather than material interest. This would be coherent with Callinicos, Chibber, and many contemporary Marxists.

In this perspective, the *objective structure* of interest is shaped by the structures of power, but it does not create an *objective* interest. The structure of power, the class structure, shapes the field in which antagonism will rise. But the translation of a situation of subordination into the articulation of *interest* requires the mediation of ideas. Those ideas are not purely discursive, they have a large share of practical, implicit knowledge and morality to them. Their emergence, their shapes, depends on a variety of cultural practices, of institutions, of networks, or pre-existing conceptions that must be historically understood. These are also *objective* conditions for the individuals, but they are not reducible to the fundamental dynamic of capitalism. They are cultural in so far as we include within culture the totality of what shapes consciousness. For example, the propensity of workers to strike is not only a factor of the working conditions. It is largely shaped by the expectations of workers, their sense of injustice and the, fundamentally, their belief that striking is an efficient tactic to achieve what they want. These can be deeply influenced by the historical and institutional context: for example, the existence of a well-structured and combative labour union which organizes successful strikes will create favourable conditions for future strikes. But more generally, norms of *what is worth fighting for* will be defined by a wide range of non-capitalistic cultural beliefs and practices: religion, language, nationalism, tradition, habits, etc. However, capitalism, through its intrusive institutions in daily lives, *does* shape culture and norms.

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<sup>73</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, 152.

Such a Marxist theory of structural interest can help us understand the broad tendencies of class-compatible ideas. It does not explain, however, the diffusion and variations of norms, values, beliefs and identities within these broad tendencies. The socialist revolution is not the *objective interest* of the working class, and the working class is not behaving against its objective interest when they adopt reformism because we cannot pretend to know *objectively* that a socialist revolution will change the world in ways that would really answer their aspirations. The socialist project is still a hypothesis, and the historical attempts has not been positive successes so far. That socialism is in the interest of the majority is a proposition that must be tested and we must try to convince others of its viability. I believe, with many others, that it *will* be better, but we cannot pretend to know this *objectively* and we cannot hope the conclusion of socialism would naturally arise from the antagonism of the capitalist power structure. A socialist theory must therefore understand the variations of norms and beliefs and the processes of their formation to formulate adequate strategies that can win over working-class people to socialist politics. It must also seek to understand the origins and dynamics of ideas that are not strictly functional to the capitalist system. Chapter 5, on practice, trust and consciousness seeks to provide these foundations.

## Chapter 2: The Limits of Contemporary Theories of Power

One might ask, if I seek to build a theory of power to transcend the current limitations of Marxism, how different will it be from other approaches to power in the social sciences? Would Foucault's ontology of power be the solution to those problems? Isn't Michael Mann's history of social power providing this kind of theory? Or Lukes' seminal work on power? This chapter will briefly answer those questions before exploring the implicit conceptions of power within some of the most interesting Marxist theories. We will then head towards the second part of this dissertation, where we will define our theory of power.

### Lukes and the Classical Conception of Power in Political Science

Lukes' *Power: A Radical View* was originally published in 1974 and has since been a point of reference in debates on the question of power in political science. A revised edition was published in 2004, in which the author expends substantially his first work (from 64 pages to 200 pages), criticize his own work and review the discussions on power since. His work is interesting because his definition of power is rooted in a somewhat conventional understanding of power in political science, yet his book was controversial because the "third dimension" of power he adds to the conventional view was accused of implicitly drawing from Marxism.

In its original essay, Lukes accepts the pluralist definition of power: that "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests"<sup>74</sup>. In the hands of Robert Dahl, this definition is, however, restricted to a single dimension: when there is actual conflict over a policy. For Dahl, without explicit observable conflicts, one cannot assume that there is a conflict of interest, and therefore, we cannot scientifically identify a relation of power. Lukes places Dahl in dialogue with Bachrach and Baratz, who argue that Dahl's view is too restrictive. For them, power can also manifest itself in the control of the agenda. Bachrach

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<sup>74</sup> Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd ed (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 30.

and Baratz are still committed to Dahl's positivist and methodological individualism, but they argue that we can study the processes in which:

A devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A<sup>75</sup>

For Lukes, this adds a “second dimension” to power. While the first dimension focuses on open conflicts and seeks to characterize the inequalities during a decision-making process, the second dimension focuses on covert conflicts and non-decisions—when an elite manipulates the field to suppress latent discontent and prevent a debate from arising.

Lukes's contribution in this first essay is to add a third dimension: the capacity of an elite to shape interests and preferences of the population against their “real” interests. He argues that those committed to an individualist methodology cannot see this dimension, since they neglect the processes through which individuals are shaped by social structures inherited from history. Yet, looking at this third dimension is essential because “the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place.”<sup>76</sup>

Lukes's third dimension of power is still compatible with the definition of power inherited from pluralists, that is “A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests”, but it requires to distinguish a “true” underlying interest from the conscious interest. A exercises power over B if it can convince B that his interest is different from his real interest. This therefore opens the way to a theory of “false consciousness”—when B accepts A's defined interest, he is *wrong* about his own interest.<sup>77</sup>

My main contention with Lukes and the classical conception of power he draws comes from their very definition of power: it fundamentally relies on the notion of interest. And because of this, Lukes's extension of the notion of power requires us to delve into the questionable

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<sup>75</sup> Lukes, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Lukes, 27.

<sup>77</sup> Lukes, 26–30, 38.

notion of false consciousness. Fundamentally, this problem is linked with the restriction of the notion of power to the power of *over someone else*. Since all social relations imply co-influence between individuals, their definition seeks to identify which portion of these interactions is “power” and which is not. Using the notion of interest can seem like a good guideline, but distinguishing what is power from what is not becomes relative to the very definition of interest—and there can be no final, decisive, objective definition of this notion. Even Lukes agrees with this in his 2004 revision:

There is no reason to believe that there exists a canonical set of such interests that will constitute “the last word on the matter”—that will resolve moral conflicts and set the seal on proffered explanations, confirming them as true.<sup>78</sup>

Relying on a definition of power that is dependent on a normative definition of interest renders the concept of power an ineffective tool to understand society, since what is identified as an effect of power or not will be mainly dependant upon the observer. Mouffe and Laclau’s post-Marxist understanding of subordination, oppression and domination relies on a similar basis:

We shall understand by a relation of subordination that in which an agent is subjected to the decisions of another—an employee with respect to an employer, for example, or in certain forms of family organization the woman with respect to the man, and so on. [...] We shall call relations of oppression, in contrast those relations of subordination which have transformed themselves into sites of antagonisms. [...] Finally, we shall call relations of domination the set of those relations of subordination which are considered as illegitimate from the perspective, or in the judgment, of a social agent external to them, and which, as a consequence, may or may not coincide with the relations of oppression actually existing in a determinate social formation.<sup>79</sup>

In these definitions, Lukes would say that subordination is not a form of power, since it might not be acting against one’s interest. Oppression is related to the first two dimensions of power: it is revealed by the presence of conflicts (overt or covert). Domination is the largest

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<sup>78</sup> Lukes, 148.

<sup>79</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed (Londres: Verso, 2001), 153–54.

form of power that only the third dimension can really fully uncover. Yet, it relies on the “judgment, of a social agent external to them”. This kind of notion can be useful—in Mouffe and Laclau, it is the basis of a constructivist understanding of politics, in which the “popular” subject must be discursively constructed before it can enter in conflict. Yet, it is analytically useless: domination is not a meaningful social category to understand society if its existence depends on the normative evaluation of the observer. The same goes for Lukes third dimension of power: it ultimately relies on an external observer to define a set of real interests, observing that a given population is being denied those interests and therefore identifying an ongoing power relationship involving an elite able to manipulate the masses.

To be clear, I agree with Lukes that shaping interest and building consent is an important feature of power structures, and that this can systematically benefit a given elite. Yet, Lukes first definition of power is a dead end to identify structures of power, because it fails to untie power from the normative definition of interest. I seek to resolve this problem by using a definition of power that does not require the notion of interest.

In his 2004 revision, Lukes recognizes some mistakes from his first proposition. First, contrarily to his initial formulation, he argues that “power refers to an ability or capacity of an agent or agents, which they may or may not exercise”<sup>80</sup>. This is an interesting insight that will be used later in this dissertation. Essentially, it entails that the power of an individual might be revealed by the acts of power, but even when one does not use its power at some point, it does not mean that this power does not exist. Just like the “power” of a car’s motor is a potential capacity: it can deploy up to 200 horsepower, for example, even if it is not doing so at the present.

Lukes then proposes a new definition of power, as the “agents’ abilities to bring about significant effects, specifically by furthering their own interests and/or affecting the interests of others, whether positively or negatively”<sup>81</sup>. This new version escapes the

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<sup>80</sup> Lukes, *Power*, 63.

<sup>81</sup> Lukes, 65.

binarism of the first version: the “less powerful” agent in the relationship can still have *some* capacity to bring effects that will further his own interest. It is also less dependant on the *content* of interest—since it describes a capacity to affect the interests of others negatively *or positively*. The exact evaluation of *what are the interest* is therefore not as important, since what is under inquiry is the *effect* on others. This also opens the way for conception of interest that might not be unitary (taking into account unconscious interests and contradictory interests).

By broadening his definition of power to what can *positively* affect others, power becomes a capacity to affect society in general, and is no longer charged with the negative notion of constraint upon someone else. Lukes could have used this, tie it to power as a broader capacity to affect the world, and build a general theory of power upon it, but he did not take that road. Instead of exploring the far-reaching impacts of this shift, he recognized that his first inquiry on power was not about power itself, after all, but about a facet of power: domination. He therefore shifts the discussion on domination, by defining this new term basically as he defined power the first time. Domination is power when it acts *against* the interest of someone. Therefore, his discussion on domination is riddled with the same problems of his initial definition of power.

### **Foucault’s Ontology of Power**

While Foucault never offers a clear, systematic theory of power on which one could build on, the very idea of an *ontology of power* is immediately associated with his name. Reconstructing this ontology is not easy, however, since Foucault leaves somewhat contradictory cues along his work. It would be presumptuous to pretend to fully reconstruct the complexity of Foucault’s thought from these fragments in the scope of this small section, but we can address some important features of his vision.

First, his association with an ontology of power is rooted in its explicit Nietzschean<sup>82</sup> vision of history: “The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning.”<sup>83</sup> For him, “power is ‘always already there’, that one is never ‘outside’ it”<sup>84</sup>. It is on this primacy of power, penetrating all social relations, all practices, all meaning, all truth, and being the motor of history, that we can speak of Foucault’s theory of power as an *ontology*. And, indeed, any consequent “materialist” vision of history must accept this: if there is no God, no supreme meaning, no ultimate direction, no inherent force of reason, no *telos* to guide the development of mankind, then the unfolding of history is necessarily the product of contingent, continuous shock between individuals, organizations and societies. Meaning does exist, but it is discursively produced in the web of power. The meaning that prevails is a contingent, historical product of power struggles.<sup>85</sup>

Where Foucault truly innovates is in its study of local mechanisms of power, and the history of innovations in techniques of power. Through his study on madness<sup>86</sup>, on sexuality<sup>87</sup> and on prisons<sup>88</sup> he comes to the conclusion that the juridical-liberal understanding of power as “emanating” from a sovereign and the Marxist approach locating power in the capitalist class are missing a key feature of power.

[The analysis of power] should be concerned with power at its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “Prison Talk” in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, 1st American ed (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 53.

<sup>83</sup> “Truth and Power” in Foucault, 114.

<sup>84</sup> “Power and Strategies” in Foucault, 141.

<sup>85</sup> To accept this does not imply a nihilistic morality: an egalitarian world is not less valuable, nor less possible—but in order to win the forces of equality will have to prevail by accumulating power against its enemies. Also, it does not imply that there is no discernable order in human history. Social structures are relations of forces that create understandable patterns of actions.

<sup>86</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

<sup>87</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I : La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

<sup>88</sup> Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir : Naissance de La Prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>89</sup> “Two Lectures” in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 96.

This focus on “power from below”, on the mechanisms of control and discipline at a micro level, drove Foucault’s extremely interesting study of modern forms of power. Yet, it is not always clear if this signifies a complete departure from the study of power in its higher forms or a simple research focus motivated by the relative absence of other scholarship on the issue. His work includes contradictory statements, sometime criticizing large-scale theory which seeks to explain power at the macro level, and sometimes implicitly acknowledging the state and the capitalist class as, ultimately, central actors wielding power and benefiting from those local mechanisms.

For example, when he argues that:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain . It is never localised here or there , never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads ; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.<sup>90</sup>

he seems to erase the possibility of an elite or of a ruling class able to accumulate power, and influence large swaths of society. But on the other hand, he argues that:

I don’t want to say that the State isn’t important [...] [but] the State , for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and further because the State can only operate on the basis of other , already existing power relations. The State is superstructural in relation to a whole series of power networks that invest the body, sexuality, the family, kinship, knowledge, technology and so forth.<sup>91</sup>

Here, Foucault recognizes the importance of the state and brings a precision in his methodology: his goal is to demonstrate that state power is not all-encompassing, that many forms of power exist and evolve outside of it. In a similar vein, when Foucault analyzes the evolution of techniques of discipline in schools, prisons and asylums, he is interested in the concrete way they are developed and applied for reasons that are unrelated to the needs of

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<sup>90</sup> “Two Lectures” in Foucault, 98.

<sup>91</sup> “Truth and Power” in Foucault, 122.

the bourgeoisie or the economic system. Yet, he argues that once these techniques are developed on this local, autonomous basis, they are adopted, promoted, exported, generalized by the capitalist class who recognizes their usefulness.<sup>92</sup>

Foucault's understanding of power is therefore not reduced to the completely decentralized network that some critiques and followers often see. However, he does not offer any clear tools to tie his observations at the local level to more general dynamics. His account of power never explain how accumulation and centralization is possible. This makes it possible to incorporate Foucault's historical work, but it leaves his theoretical contribution on power rather unfinished. A major conclusion that must be drawn, however, from his theory, and that is shared by social historians, is the importance of looking at society "from below". This is where he locates the processes of innovations that ended up becoming generalized features of modern power, and this is where one can learn of the deep, structuring operation of power.

Foucault's understanding of power is also still rooted in the *power over* tradition, and while he offers glimpses of connection with the *power of*, those are never clear, nor systematic. At times, he speaks of the "productive" aspect of power, which he contrasts with its "repressive" aspects. He is forced to make such a move because of the pervasive aspect of his power. Since power structures everything, including local practices, meaning and truth, then power necessarily *creates* the norms on which humans act:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.<sup>93</sup>

In stating this, Foucault reveals that his vision of power is still a form of imposition, a *power over*—or else there would be no need to "make it accepted". But in Foucault's hands, *power over* becomes the whole social structure. All relationship, all norms, all practices are

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<sup>92</sup> "Two Lectures" in Foucault, 100–101.

<sup>93</sup> "Truth and Power" in Foucault, 119.

penetrated, constituted by power. And since the social structure is the basis of human activity in general, Foucault's end up attributing social production as a corollary of power. Therefore, when Foucault speaks for power's *productive* effect, he is barely revealing a truism of his own system, without really enlightening the connections between power as general human capacity and power as a control of others' capacity.

Finally, even if Foucault's lack of a macro-social theory of power weakens his work as a potential tool to understand major historical changes and to guide the activity of those who wish to bring about such change, his work does shed an interesting light on the question of discourse and practice. His method of historical investigation — genealogy — is built against semiotic traditions: it understands culture primarily as a set of *practices* rather than discourse or signs. Those practices are understood as evolving in their practical contexts, in relationship with their local challenges and struggles in the wider nexus of power. Underneath the level of discourse, the place where society changes, where culture deeply mutates, is at the level of practice, and this what Foucault sought to uncover. This work on innovations "from below" of new ways to control and discipline masses is an interesting model for the study of social innovations. The history of science from below reveals similar processes of invention and diffusion in different contexts. We will come back to this in chapter 5.

### **Mann and the Sources of Social Power**

Michael Mann's magnum opus, *The Sources of Social Power*, is a major contribution to the theories of power and the neo-Weberian tradition. It is probably the most interesting, most complete alternative to a Marxist understanding of power that takes root in historical analysis and that seeks to provide a general theory of history.

Michael Mann's theory of power takes Parsons as a starting point to specifically tie *power to* (collective power) to *power over* (distributive power):

In its most general sense, power is the ability to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one's environment. Social power carries two more specific senses. The first restricts its meaning to mastery exercised over other people. An example is: Power is the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance (Weber 1968: I, 53). But as Parsons noted, such definitions restrict power to its distributive aspect, power by A over B. For B to gain power, A must lose some—their relationship is a “zero-sum game” where a fixed amount of power can be distributed among participants. Parsons noted correctly a second collective aspect of power, whereby persons in co-operation can enhance their joint power I over third parties or over nature (Parsons 1960: 199-225). In most social relations both aspects of power, distributive and collective, exploitative and functional, operate simultaneously and are intertwined.

Indeed, the relationship between the two is dialectical.<sup>94</sup>

In other words, Mann starts from “power in general” as a capacity to “master’s one environment” to attain some goals. He then categorizes social power in two broad perspectives: a collective power that emerges from co-operation and that multiplies the power of its participants, and a distributive power that emerges from hierarchies and is a zero-sum game implying the transfer of power from some to others. However, most of his account of social power is focused on distributive power. His four *networks* of power (ideological, economical, political and military), which are understood as *sources of social power*, are in fact different ways through which elites can accumulate distributive power, and therefore wield collective power. For example, when describing ideological power, he explains that, since knowledge and meaning is necessary to social life, “collective and distributive power can be wielded by those who monopolize a claim to meaning.”<sup>95</sup> The same goes for the other networks: they are identified in relationship to *what is monopolized* in order to allow a group to wield power over society. On economic power, he states that

Those able to monopolize control over production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, that is, a dominant class, can obtain general collective and distributive power in societies.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Mann, *The Sources of Social Power v1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, 1:6.

<sup>95</sup> Mann, 1:22.

<sup>96</sup> Mann, 1:24.

Military power is defined in terms of “the necessity of organized physical defence and its usefulness for aggression”, and again “those who monopolize it, as military elites, can obtain collective and distributive power.”<sup>97</sup> And finally, on political power, he also specifies that “those who control the state, the state elite, can obtain both collective and distributive power and trap others within their distinctive organization chart.”<sup>98</sup>

Mann does not make explicit the theoretical foundations that would justify this fourfold separation of power—his method is historically focused, and this separation is the one that fit best to his historical inquiry. Yet, there is a valid rationale to separate the sources of power like he does.

For an unequal society to subsist, it is often argued that any elite will require either to secure consent or to coerce its subordinates into accepting this inequality. Securing consent requires the shaping of norms to render inequality acceptable, and those means of *norm-shaping* can be controlled by organized institutions such as schools, churches, or media. This is the sense of Mann’s ideological power, and it is close to Lukes third dimension of power. Mann, however, avoids Lukes definitional problem by foregoing any reference to a notion of interest. Ideological power is revealed by the monopolizing of norm shaping institutions, independently from the *content* of norms that are transmitted (whether it is compatible or not with a so-called objective interest).

Coercion can imply a range of methods: it can be direct physical coercion, but it can also imply any kind of threats against anything that a group or individual values. Obviously, physical coercion is the terrain of the military and the state’s domestic repressive capacity. Any threats related to “economic needs” could be tied with economic power: removing access to products that are necessary or wanted can coerce others into compliance. To remove this access, one can either control the point of production, of distribution, of exchange or consumption. The threat of social shaming can also be effective, yet this one is

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<sup>97</sup> Mann, 1:25–26.

<sup>98</sup> Mann, 1:26.

harder to place in Mann's taxonomy. It would probably fall into the ideological power to shape norms (setting outer boundaries on what is "acceptable").

Yet despite the fact that we can effectively find different "roots" of power that can be tied to each network, this categorization is at risk of "fixing" transhistorically the analytical framework, and presupposing a sort of constant separation between each. Even if Mann stresses their interrelation, he often ends up disentangling them much more than they ought to be. The example of the feudal economy, given earlier in the discussion with Brenner, is a good one to stress this problem.

Because Mann's understanding of the economy is mainly turned toward market exchange, he does not see the relationship between the Medieval serf and the lord as an economical one, but rather as a political one, based on state coercion. While it is true that lords could use direct physical violence to make peasants comply in their duty to provide him agricultural surpluses, it is not clear why this relationship could not be qualified as economical. The seigneurial domain clearly organizes the "extraction, transformation, distribution, and consumption of the objects of nature"<sup>99</sup>. The fact that this organization is not *independent* from the state form does not erase its economical nature. And even if peasants were free of physical violence, the threat of economical privation also existed, in situations where they could not find free land not already owned by a lord. The power of lords therefore not only rested on their use of physical threat, but also on the monopolization of means of production (lands)—which is supposed to be a feature of economic power for Mann. This might seem like a simple taxonomic issue, but it shows how Mann is getting caught into its own categories.

But most importantly, organizations often embed at the same time the dimensions of meaning, production and coercion that are supposed to separate the networks identified by Mann. Modern corporations, for example, shape public norms through advertisements and

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<sup>99</sup> Mann, 1:24.

the marketing effort to promote certain practices related to their products. An iconic brand, like Apple, will seek to monopolize norms related to social standing in the possession of smart devices. The shaping of norms also occurs in the workplace—modern management techniques implies various ways of developing fidelity, belonging and intrinsic motivation to perform for the enterprise's sake. And while modern states are supposed to hold a monopoly of legitimate violence, many corporations hire private security that can apply physical constraints to defend corporate property (in case of theft, for example). The same goes with modern states, which play a fundamental role in the shaping of norms (through schools and the legitimation effort for the respect of laws) and significantly take part into the economic processes.

Ultimately, Mann's separation of the 4 networks of power can induce more confusion than clarification, by artificially disentangling processes that belong to embedded dynamics. Instead of fixing transhistorical "sources of power", it seems more prudent to characterize historically the different ways in which power is structured. This does not mean that the voluminous historical account of Michael Mann's 4 volume length *Sources of social power* is wrong—many of his historical insights are invaluable. But even through his own historical descriptions, Mann treats his networks of power not as "sources" of social power, but rather as typical institutions that share similar patterns across history: the state, the military, the merchants and the church (or something that plays primarily an ideological role in its place).

The other major point I wish to stress on Mann's theory of power is that it is first and foremost a macro social theory. It was shaped as a tool to understand social phenomena of power over centuries and across the globe. Mann does not root theoretically his concept of power in micro foundations. While this is not problematic for the broad history he undertook, it reduces the usefulness of his theory of power for social movements and radical politics.

For these reasons, Micheal Mann's work stand as an important contribution for his broad historical overview and his connection between "power in general", collective power and

distributive power. Yet, a better theory of power can be developed to offer a more precise account of contemporary power and a more useful framework for those who wish to transform society from below.

### **Bourdieu and the Notion of Capital**

If Bourdieu does not have an explicit theory of power, a close reading reveals that the concept of capital in his work is essentially a synonym for social power. In *Le sens pratique*, he argues that Marx is reducing social domination to the accumulation of economic capital. In order to have a more complete view, one must acknowledge the role of symbolic capital in the meta-field of power. Capital, therefore, becomes a catch-all term in Bourdieu, designating any form of power accumulation.<sup>100</sup> Since it is implicit that capital is power *over* others—Bourdieu stays within the traditional definitions of power with Lukes and Foucault.

Bourdieu's various types of power are, ultimately, defined by the varieties of "fields". A field exists when actors within a given sector of social activity enter into competition with each other to achieve a dominant position within the field. This struggle is structured as a "game", a set of rules according to which each participant must play with in order to increase their status and accumulate capital. The kinds of capital are therefore tied to the properties of the field in which one participates, and the different kinds of capital have different values in the wider metafield of power.<sup>101</sup> Bourdieu talks of an exchange rate between forms of capital, which correspond to the relative position of a given field within society.

For him, ultimately, symbolic capital is the ultimate form of capital, against which all other forms are evaluated and exchanged.<sup>102</sup> Symbolic capital is linked with his concept of symbolic violence: it is the capacity to define what is acceptable, what is natural. In some sense, it is a theory of ideology in the strong sense of alienation: symbolic capital is a capacity

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<sup>100</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique* (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 1980), 209–11.

<sup>101</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et Structure Du Champ Littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Pierre Bourdieu, *La Noblesse d'État. Grandes Écoles et Esprit de Corps* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1989).

<sup>102</sup> Pierre Mounier, *Pierre Bourdieu, Une Introduction*, Série "Une Introduction" 231 (Paris: Pocket/La Découverte, 2001), 88.

to define social hierarchy as natural, apolitical, unchangeable. The only difference from classical theories of ideology is that Bourdieu's conception is deeply rooted in an understanding of the *sense pratique*. Therefore, symbolic violence is not the domination of ideas, but rather the normalization of daily practices that are part of the overall system of domination.

Because Bourdieu's understanding of human behaviour is mediated by the concept of *habitus*, which downplays dramatically human's capacity of self-reflexivity, his overall model of power is a top-down one.<sup>103</sup> The possibilities of change for Bourdieu are exclusive to the few who manage to reach the top of their fields and, from there, change the "rules of the game". Resistance from below and collective organization of the powerless rarely appear in his model. Furthermore, the Bourdieu reader is given the impression that only social sciences are a space of real reflexivity, while the rest of society is a mere reproduction of existing habitus.<sup>104</sup>

Bourdieu does not provide us with a systematic tool to evaluate the structure of a given society as a whole. The conceptual tools of field, capital and rules are geared towards understanding the reproduction of a given social hierarchy in a sector of society. It is assumed that the aggregation of those field-specific dynamics perpetuates the social reproduction of inequalities at large and creates a "ruling class"—which refers to an elite of people who hold the most capital.<sup>105</sup> Yet, each field tends to be analyzed in separation of each other, with its own autonomous dynamic.

To sum up, his notions of capital, habitus and field require a specialized university training to be understood, his theory does offer tools to understand the reproduction of hierarchy, but none to change it, he offers no real understanding of self-activity from below and, crucially, no theory of social change. For those reasons, while Bourdieu might have produced

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<sup>103</sup> Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 88–99.

<sup>104</sup> Dilan Riley, "Bourdieu's Class Theory: The Academics as Revolutionary," ed. Robert Brenner and Vivek Chibber, *Catalyst* 1, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 121–23.

<sup>105</sup> Mounier, *Pierre Bourdieu, Une Introduction*, 47–48.

interesting research from an academic point of view, his terminology and concepts are of a limited interest for the renewal of socialist theory.

### **Implicit Power Theory in Marxism**

A key inspiration for this dissertation comes from the implicit conception of power that already exists within the most interesting variants of Marxism. I will not try to reconstruct what I think is the “implicit theory of power within Marxism”—I do not think a coherent one actually exists, and my goal is not to make another exegesis of Marx. I will rather shed light on some specific Marxist texts which implicitly use a notion of power, upon which I will build in Chapter 4.

#### De Ste. Croix’s Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World

British historian G.E.M. De Ste. Croix offers a rich Marxist analysis of ancient Greece and Rome in his masterful *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. While his historical investigation is, by itself, impressive, the interest of his work here lies in how he came to use Marx’s concepts for the purpose of his book.

De Ste. Croix starts from Marx’s *relations of production* as the foundational notion on which class and class struggle occurs, but he understands the concept of production in a very broad sense. For him, it includes direct production, distribution but also the acquisition from others of everything a society *needs or desire*. It includes biological reproduction, education and even the defence of a society against its enemies.<sup>106</sup> He separates what he calls the direct production to fulfill necessities from the surplus production that can be directed towards organization, administration, protection, arts and science. Those later functions are still deemed productive, but they are understood as secondary in the sense that, especially when looking at ancient civilizations, they require the existence of a surplus of primary staples—especially in terms of agriculture.

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<sup>106</sup> De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 35.

But as De Ste Croix argue, “there is no necessary connection between the existence of a surplus and the exploitation of man by man: there may at first be exchanges considered profitable by both sides”<sup>107</sup>. Therefore, De Ste Croix does not see administration, policing or defence as intrinsically parasitic or unproductive. The existence of those functions and their use of the primary surplus created by others is not indicative of a class division or the presence of a relation of exploitation. What, then, characterizes class society? The defining feature of exploitation is not unequal distribution, but rather the “special control over the process of production through property rights” that a group wields to “appropriate the fruits of ‘surplus labour’” and “reproduce the conditions of a new extortion of surplus labour from the producers”<sup>108</sup>. In other words, exploitation occurs when the process of surplus distribution is no longer done for the good of the community, but is controlled by a minority who appropriate the surplus by constraint and use it for their own purpose.

De Ste Croix uses the concept of *property rights* to designate this “special control” over the surplus. He therefore defines class as:

a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of ownership or control) to the conditions of production (that is to say, the means and labour of production) and to other classes [our emphasis]<sup>109</sup>

This definition is interesting for two reasons. First, the idea of a degree of ownership *or* control of the *conditions* of production makes it clear that class relationship is ultimately a relationship of power over collective production, taken in its broadest sense. Second, De Ste Croix implies that class is not *only defined* by ownership. He argues, for example, that state taxation in the ancient context can be understood as a form of exploitation, even if it does not imply a direct ownership or control over the production process:

The exploitation may be direct and individual, as for example of wage labourers, slaves, serfs, “coloni”, tenant farmers or debtors by particular employers, masters,

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<sup>107</sup> De Ste. Croix, 37.

<sup>108</sup> De Ste. Croix, 37.

<sup>109</sup> De Ste. Croix, 43.

landlords or moneylenders, or it may be indirect and collective, as when taxation, military conscription, forced labour or other services are exacted solely or disproportionately from a particular class or classes (small peasant freeholders, for instance) by a State dominated by a superior class.<sup>110</sup>

It follows that the main characteristic of a class society and its class struggles is not the *mode of production* in terms of how the bulk of production is done, but rather a *mode of exploitation*—that is, how the bulk of surplus extraction is done.<sup>111</sup> In terms of production, ancient societies are peasant societies: most of the population is composed of small independent farmer families. However, during the Classical Greek and Hellenistic period and the age of the Roman Republic expansion, the ruling class derived their wealth mainly from the slave labor. Furthermore, the profitability of this slave labour was fuelled by the imperialist expansion of Greeks and Romans states: most slaves were foreigners of working age captured by war and conquest. Therefore, the social cost related to biological reproduction and education was supported by another society, a fact that made the use of captured slave particularly profitable for Roman and Greek ruling classes. During this period, the key feature of class exploitation was therefore between a slave-owning ruling class and a privately “owned” slave population which constituted only a minority of the population.

Yet, De Ste Croix resisted the common Marxist tendency to homogenize the different forms of exploitation into a single “ancient mode of production”. While he argues that slavery was the main source of wealth for the ruling class of Greeks and Romans during this period, other forms of direct exploitation coexisted, with their own dynamics and parameters, such as debt bondage and quasi-serfdom. De Ste Croix also speaks of *indirect* exploitation—exploitation done through state means for the benefit of the ruling class. He distinguishes three processes of indirect exploitation “(1) taxation, in money or in kind: (2) military conscription; or (3) compulsory menial services”<sup>112</sup>. One important thesis of his work to understand the rise and fall of the Roman Empire is that the main mode of exploitation actually shifted over years. As

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<sup>110</sup> De Ste. Croix, 43.

<sup>111</sup> This necessarily raises the question of the relation between modes of production and modes of exploitation, and the degree to which we can separate one from the other. Chapter 6 and 7 will discuss this.

<sup>112</sup> De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 205–6.

the targets for conquest were being exhausted, the importance of the surplus derived from foreign-captured slave declined. The profitability of slaveholding therefore dropped, as the cost of biological reproduction and education could no longer be externalized. The financial base of the Roman State shifted towards taxation and compulsory menial services of independent peasants at large<sup>113</sup>, and the ruling class derived an increasing portion of its wealth by capturing state positions from which they could use a portion of taxation for their individual benefit.

De Ste Croix's analysis therefore opens the way for an understanding of the state that goes beyond a transhistorical dichotomy between the political and the economical. Classes are not solely based on relations of production in the sphere of private property, and states are not simply the political body that defends a given class structure. In the case of the ancient states, it is clear that the state itself is constitutive of a relation of exploitation and is, *itself*, a structure of class exploitation.

Yet, if one admits this for ancient society, it opens the way for a potential admission that modern states are also constitutive of a distinctive process of exploitation, since they are also based on mandatory taxation of the working class, many of them still use military conscription and forms of forced menial labor still exist (in American prisons, for example). The question, to speak in De Ste Croix terms, is whether this surplus extraction is done for the good of the community or if it is controlled by a minority who appropriate the surplus by constraint and use it for their own purpose.

De Ste Croix himself does not offer an answer to this, and there is a tool missing from his study to answer the question properly. De Ste Croix still largely defines class in terms of accumulation of private wealth. It is easy to see how the taxes extracted by the Roman imperial state could enrich personally its elite. Such occurrence in modern states is rarer and is often frowned on as a form of corruption. The main purpose of modern taxes is to pay for

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<sup>113</sup> De Ste. Croix, 207.

the functions of the state. If a ruling class benefits from it personally in terms of wealth, it is indirectly through the political “service” the modern state performs in terms of protection of private property. Yet, I believe there is something more, but this requires an extension of the understanding of the ruling class that does exist implicitly in De Ste Croix. The ruling class does not have to *own* its wealth, it can also be defined by its “degree of [control over] production”<sup>114</sup>. And this is specifically where we can reveal the centrality of power in a Marxist framework. A community that controls *what is to be done with surplus production for its own agenda* is a ruling class even if it does not use this surplus for its personal enrichment. A modern statesman who possess personal power over state policies can direct the surpluses extracted by the state for his own agenda.

We can therefore bridge the notion of exploitation with the notion of power. Private ownership is privatized power, while the indirect processes of exploitation defined by De Ste Croix are forms of “public power” exclusive to the minority who controls the state. A ruling class can be based on both.

#### Political Marxists and the Transition to Capitalism

Because the Political Marxist tradition emerged out of a debate over the transition to capitalism, it developed a brand of Marxism whose tools are geared toward distinguishing capitalism from pre-capitalist modes of production. Its focus on the early history of capitalism not only contributed significantly to our understanding of the said transition, but it also fuelled theoretical changes. Among those changes we have already discussed Wood’s critique of the base-superstructure metaphor, their analysis of the separation of the economical from the political as contemporary to capitalism, and their proposal — similar to De Ste Croix — to understand capitalism as a mode of exploitation, in terms of social property relations, rather than a mode of production (that is, focusing on surplus extraction

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<sup>114</sup> De Ste. Croix, 43.

rather than production in general). A good summary of these points can be found in Xavier Lafrance's study of the French transition to capitalism:

Our analysis must begin with the multi-layered and complex configuration of social power that shapes how classes reproduce themselves while allowing one class to appropriate a surplus at the expense of another (or several others). Put another way, we begin with an assessment of social property relations — which always involve horizontal relationships of competition and collaboration within classes as well as vertical conflicts between classes—that impose “rules of reproduction” on social agents and consequently orient macro-level social and economic phenomena. In pre-capitalist modes of production, class exploitation took an extra-economic form—the ruling class relied on a superior socio-legal status granting privileged access to state coercive powers used to directly appropriate surplus labour. [...]

Under capitalism, by contrast, exploiters and direct producers are both market dependent—all economic actors must (directly or indirectly) rely on market exchange to gain and to maintain access to the means of life and the means of production. Both exploiters and producers can be “formally” free—though this has historically always been the result of struggles from below, and many remain unfree—without compromising the extraction of surplus labour. In this case, the surplus acquires the form of surplus value appropriated through an “economic” process of exploitation.<sup>115</sup>

Key to this vision is the concept of social property relations, which Brenner defines as:

the relations among direct producers, relations among exploiters, and relations between exploiters and direct producers that, taken together, make possible/specify the regular access of individuals and families to the means of production (land, labour, tools) and/or the social product per se. The idea is that such relations will exist in every society and define the basic constraints on-the possibilities and limits of individual economic action. They form the constraints because they define not only the resources at the disposal of individuals but also the manner by which individuals gain access to them and to their income more generally. They define the resources at the disposal of individuals and the manner by which individuals gain access to them and to their income more generally because they are maintained or reproduced collectively, that is beyond the control of any individual, by political communities which are constituted for that very purpose. It is because political communities · constitute and maintain the social-property relations collectively and by force-by executing the political functions that we normally associate with the state-defence,

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<sup>115</sup> Xavier Lafrance, *The Making of Capitalism in France* (BRILL, 2019), 6–7.

police, and justice—that individual economic actors cannot as a rule alter them, but must take them as a given, as their framework of choice.<sup>116</sup>

A major point of this dissertation is that an approach like this one would gain in strength and accessibility if it used the concept of power which is already implicit in those definitions. On one side, Brenner uses the economistic language of property, economic action and producers to define the “social property relations” constitutive of capitalism or feudalism, and on the other, the language of coercion and power to designate the “political communities” whose role it is to “maintain the social-property relations”. This perpetuates the economical-political separation beyond capitalism, and it leads them to say that precapitalistic “class exploitation took an extra-economic form”.

Yet, if exploitation took an “economic form” only within capitalism, then what is the economic form of exploitation if not the capitalist form of exploitation? It would be tautological, but truer to their own approach, to simply say that precapitalist social property relations were based on non-capitalistic forms of exploitation.

Furthermore, the very concept of social property relations does not have to be defined economically—I believe it actually weakens politically the Marxist approach to do so. If *property* defines who has access to land, labour and tools, then it is a specific distribution of *social power*. The limits imposed by forms of property or ownership don’t only impose constraints on *economic action*, but on human action in general. The strength of Marx’s *Capital* is to demonstrate how under the apparent equality of market relations is hidden deep inequalities of power that allows the capitalist class to *rule*. Marx is at its best when he reveals how unequal economic exchange *is* a political relationship that *can* be changed by collective action. Instead of maintaining a division between an economic sphere of production and political sphere of state control, it would be more fruitful to systematize the continuity of power relationship from private property to state control.

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<sup>116</sup> Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong,” 58.

For example, when Brenner defines feudal social-property relations, he says that:

What enabled lords actually to succeed in taking a surplus by extra-economic coercion was their constitution of self-governing political communities or states, however large or small. These communities made possible lords' application of force and, in that way, the performance of the set of key political ("governmental") functions that enabled lords to make regular, coercive transfers of wealth from peasants, as well as from other lords.<sup>117</sup>

In this passage, it is clear that the lords' "ownership" of land and his rights over serfs is a question of power. The social-property relationship is institutionalized in "self-governing political communities" of lords who personally control the military force to coerce reluctant peasants. The process of surplus extraction is said to be extra-economic, because "the ruling class relied on a superior socio-legal status granting privileged access to state coercive powers used to directly appropriate surplus labour"<sup>118</sup>. The term "extra-economic" could be simply replaced by "political" or "explicitly based on the threat of coercion". The social-property relation is clearly a relation of power. Power over labor, over the use of land, a power derived from a control of military might by lords. This is even more explicit in Benno Teschke's *Myth of 1648*:

Class relations in pre-capitalist society are never economic relations (they are economic only in capitalism). They are best defined in terms of property in the means of violence that structure the relations of exploitation.<sup>119</sup>

When looking at capitalism, political Marxists argue that it is a unique form of social-property relation in human history because it is the one and only class relationship in which the exploiting class does not have direct access to the means of coercion to extract surpluses. This is the basis on which they affirm that the separation of the economic sphere from the political one is contemporary to capitalism. Because they basically define the economic/extraneous distinction on the absence/presence of coercion, then capitalist

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<sup>117</sup> Brenner, 63.

<sup>118</sup> Lafrance, *The Making of Capitalism in France*, 6.

<sup>119</sup> Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, 55.

exploitation becomes “economic”, divorced from the “political” functions that are kept within the state—where the coercion power remains.

While I agree with the general argument about the uniqueness of capitalism, I think it is unhelpful to define the “political” with the criteria of coercion. On this issue, Wood’s framing of the differentiation process opens a better perspective:

the differentiation of the economic and the political in capitalism is, more precisely, a differentiation of political functions themselves and their separate allocate to he private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state. [...] This formulation, suggesting that the differentiation of the economic is in fact a differentiation within the political sphere<sup>120</sup>

The implicit idea here — and this is the idea on which I wish to build — is that *capitalist private property is but a specific form of power distribution*. It was formally *depoliticized* by separating it from the state, and therefore shielding it from the ongoing democratization process that swept western societies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It took a form that could *appear* as private, as a relationship between equals, as devoid of “power”. But the task of a socialist theory is specifically to reveal the profound political nature of the capitalist form of private property. And Wood’s formula is interesting for that: what appears to be the domain of modern economies is but a part of what “life in common” means, it has always been organized “politically”, subject to debate, struggle and resistance. Strikes, struggles on the minimum wage, on the taxation of the wealthy, on rent control, on projects of expropriation are all daily examples of breaches that reveal the true political nature of capitalist markets. Still, a systematic theory of power and the connection between power and production is missing from political Marxism.

#### Alex Callinicos, Social Theory, Power and Marxism

Alex Callinicos’ *Making history* offers a more systematic integration of the notion of power, which fits very much with the Marxist approaches we’ve just discussed. His book offers the

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<sup>120</sup> Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 31.

most comprehensive discussion assessing seriously the contemporary social theory of Anthony Giddens, Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, and Micheal Mann from a Marxist perspective. He takes seriously their contributions and places them into an enlightening debate within Marxist tendencies: Althusser's structuralism, Cohen's analytical Marxism, and Brenner's political Marxism.

Through those debates, he imports Anthony Giddens conception of power and connects it with Erik Olin Wright's understanding of structures in a very helpful way:

The strategy I adopted consisted in taking seriously the apparently platitudinous thought that, in acting, agents exercise powers. Some of these powers are the ones standardly possessed to a greater or lesser degree by any healthy adult human organism: being a human being might indeed be said in part to consist in having these powers (though, given the problematic and contestable nature of normality, this is a claim that must be framed with care). Other powers are, however, structurally determined: that is, they depend on the position that the actor in question occupies in prevailing social structures. I borrowed an expression coined by Erik Olin Wright — structural capacities — to refer to these powers. What social structures do, then, is to give agents powers of a certain kind. The connection between structures and powers is particularly close in Marxism: here the most important single social structure is the relations of production, which Cohen compellingly analyzes as “relations of effective power over persons and productive forces”<sup>121</sup>

This perspective is getting very close to the theory of power I am defending here. Power, ultimately, is defined as the very capacity of act. *Production*, in its fundamental sense of transforming nature for human purposes, shares its identity with *power*. And it is on the basis of this common root that we can claim that a general theory of power is a natural extension of materialism. Modes of production *are* modes of power.

At the end of his book, Callinicos makes this abundantly clear:

(1) An adequate theory of agency must be a theory of the causal powers persons have.  
[...]

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<sup>121</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, XX.

(2) Structures play an ineliminable role in social theory because they determine an important subset of human powers. [...] Viewing structures from this perspective involves breaking with the idea of them as limits on individual or collective action, providing a framework within which human agency can then have free play. [...]

(3) Historical materialism is itself a theory of structural capacities. [...] The productive forces are thus best understood as the productive powers of humanity, reflecting a particular, technically determined form of labour-process. But the relations of production also involve particular kinds of powers. This is clearest in G.A. Cohen's analysis of production relations as the powers agents have over labour-power and the means of production, but this is one version of a theme going back to Marx, according to which property-relations are to be understood as relations of effective control. Agents' structural capacities are thus determined by their relative access to productive resources, to labour-power and means of production.<sup>122</sup>

When Callinicos argues that "property-relations are to be understood as relations of effective control", he follows through the argument made in the previous section on political Marxism. Property is but a modality, within a given structure, that sets the parameters of access to "productive resources, to labour-power and means of production". Possessing property is not an individual endowment, but rather a *position* in the structure.

Alex Callinicos' propositions also implies a shift away from understanding societies and modes of productions as closed totalities and accepting:

Mann's [...] alternative conception of overlapping networks of social power, even though his argument was directed against Marxism as much as anything else. This need not be too painful a process: after all, Marxist political economy that treats the underlying unit of analysis as the capitalist world system rather than individual social formations is at least halfway there. [...] Historical transformation is then seen less as a relatively determinate endogenously driven process in which the development of the productive forces within a relatively stable social formation precipitates successive social revolution according to the schema of the 1859 Preface and more as one in which coexisting nodes of power change thanks to both internal contradictions and their mutual interactions, creating occasional opportunities to install progressive production relations that may transform the context of these interactions, and, as capitalism develops, increasingly do so, but also leaving behind dead-ends of different

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<sup>122</sup> Callinicos, 274–75.

kind—cases of stagnation or regression or even “the common ruination of the contending classes”.<sup>123</sup>

Without having to adopt Mann’s transhistorical four-partition of the networks of power (military, political, economic and ideological), Marxism can — just as De Ste Croix did for ancient societies — accept the different forms of power accumulation as layered processes, historically distinguished, sometime co-constitutive of each other’s, sometime in outright opposition.

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<sup>123</sup> Callinicos, XXVII.

### Chapter 3: The Challenge of Critical Theory<sup>124</sup>

Given the limits that we discussed in the first two chapters, what does it mean to build a *better* theory to inform socialist politics? This chapter aims to clarify the ontological and epistemological basis of the current dissertation. I argue that there are five general criteria that should guide any socialist philosopher: (1) *truth* or *verisimilitude*, (2) *compatibility* with the principle of equality, (3) *accessibility to the majority*; therefore simplicity and proximity with the common sense of our time, (4) *emphasis on the role of collective action* and (5) *capacity to provide tools to understand both micro and macro levels*.

#### Truth and Usefulness

To explain the relationship of critical theory with truth and usefulness, I find that Michael Polanyi's metaphor of the map is particularly enlightening:

All theory may be regarded as a kind of map extended over space and time. It seems obvious that a map can be correct or mistaken, so that to the extent to which I have relied on my map I shall attribute to it any mistakes that I made by doing so. A theory on which I rely is therefore objective knowledge in so far as it is not I, but the theory, which is proved right or wrong when I use such knowledge.<sup>125</sup>

What this analogy reveals is that a map, much like any theory, is a symbolic representation. It is objectified on a medium, but its signs have only meaning when read by a person that seeks to interact with the geographical space represented. To be useful, the map must have a certain degree of *correspondence* to the geographical reality of this area. Without this correspondence, the map would lead one into error—it would not provide a reliable guide for one to reach its destination. Yet, the usefulness of this map entails that it cannot simply be a perfect copy of the reality it seeks to represent. A map that would represent every single detail of a city would be too large and impossible to read—it would be useless for the

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<sup>124</sup> I use the term critical theory in the broadest sense of a reflective assessment and critique of society and culture by applying knowledge from the social sciences and the humanities to reveal and challenge power structures. This chapter is therefore not specifically about the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

traveller. A map *must* be schematic. It must choose to represent the meaningful elements, and leave out the rest. What is chosen depends on the context of its use: is it the map of a city, a province, a national park or a rural area? Is it meant to be used by pedestrians, cyclists, public transit commuters or car drivers? Depending on the answers to those questions, the meaningful elements to represent on the map are not the same. Several maps of the same area might all have the same degree of verisimilitude, but may be very different because they emphasize different dimensions of a terrain to suit better their specific purpose.

In many ways, theories in social sciences are similar: competing approaches might have a similar level of verisimilitude, but be very different from one another because they serve different purposes. This does not entail that all theories are similarly true however, just like not all maps are good. Maps can be plainly wrong; they can misrepresent reality in such a way that they will systematically lead their users to error. The same goes for theory. This analogy enlightens the relationship of theory with truth and usefulness.

This relationship is a major issue dividing the correspondence theory of truth from instrumentalists (pragmatists). For instrumentalists, theories are but tools created to identify means-ends relations. A theory is true in so far as it informs what kind of interaction will have a specific effect on reality. Experiments are but instances of interaction, which can test the reliability of the theory. The model that is produced has nothing to do with reality itself—it does not “correspond” to the real. It does not “reveal” the hidden mechanisms of reality. It is a human-generated mental model that can be shared through language. It is true in so far as it is useful for the purpose it was created.

But the instrumentalist stance leads to a relativist understanding of reality because they reduce truth to a means-ends relationship. The truth of a statement will therefore vary in relationship with the ends of the person formulating it. This is not obvious for many common statements that are related to near-universal ends, such as “one cannot pass through a wall”. Human societies have not generated “ends” that would disregard the usefulness of such statement. But as we go into the realm of more “politically charged” statements, or

statements with which the means-ends implications are more distant, the relativism implied by instrumentalism becomes more evident. The statement “the earth revolves around the sun”, for example, had little practical consequences before modern space flight. Yet, it had a profound political impact for European Christian societies: it ran contrary to the vision of the world which supported the Church and the nobility’s divine right to rule. The means-ends implication of this statement was therefore not limited to its astronomical use. When answering William James’ classical pragmatist question: “Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life?”<sup>126</sup>, the church saw that it would undermine the authority of Christian dogmas. And even without examining the political interest in protecting such dogma, the belief in Christian holy scriptures was constitutive of identities and morality. Therefore, accepting the statement “the earth revolves around the sun” went against the “end” of being a good Christian. Since “usefulness” is always measured from the standpoint of concrete human beings, we arrive at the conclusion that this statement was *hurtful* for most nobles, churchmen and devout Christians—and therefore false from a pragmatist standpoint. On the other side, it was true for astronomers. Such conclusion runs against the common understanding of truth, because it runs against commonsense realism. The reality of the earth revolving around the sun does not change according to moral beliefs of the person examining this question. But since instrumentalist knowledge is essentially “problem solving”—then the veracity of knowledge depends on the problem in the first place.

This is even more obvious on truth claims in social sciences: most theories are normatively charged from their creation. Marxism, post-colonialism, Keynesian economics, feminist studies, public choice theory, marginalist neoclassical economics have all been built for a political purpose and they attract researchers that share the same aspirations. Cross-

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<sup>126</sup> William James, “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth,” in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Longman Green and Co, 1907), 76–91.

theoretical debates are rarely fruitful, because the opponent's school is often rejected on the basis of its normative premises.

Even though instrumentalists are right to say that theories are tools aimed at understanding the world in order to transform it, the adequacy of truth with usefulness is misleading, for it erases reality as a measure which does not bend to our human goals. Popper's distinction between truth, verisimilitude and usefulness can disentangle this problem, without losing the crucial insight from pragmatists.<sup>127</sup> By doing so, one does not deny that we often have an instrumental relationship with knowledge, but there is a value in separating the "usefulness" of a statement from its "correspondence" with the world.

"Correspondence" does not mean that a statement is actually a mental "copy" of the outside world—it is still merely a model, a symbolic representation like the map is. The underlying reality that governs the world of appearances is still accessible to us only through the acuity of the predictions of the model. Yet, the usefulness of the statement is a separate thing from the correspondence of the predictions with the test. Therefore, Copernicus's heliocentric model might have been hurtful to the church, but the predictions it made in astronomy corresponded nevertheless with more observable facts than the geocentric model<sup>128</sup>. In Popper's definition, objective truth represents the theory that would predict all the relevant outcomes adequately. Verisimilitude represents the level at which a theory is able to do so.<sup>129</sup>

This discussion assumes that it is very well possible that we might never have an objectively true theory, but it is possible to approach this truth, by creating theories that have a higher degree of verisimilitude. And since theory is always a form of abstraction, a way to simplify the totality of the real into a model manageable by the human mind (like a map), there is a limit to the verisimilitude achievable. This opens the space for a legitimate theoretical

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<sup>127</sup> Karl Popper, *A Pocket Popper*, ed. David Miller (Fontana Press, 1983), 181–84.

<sup>128</sup> Yet, as Polanyi shows, these facts were not available at the time Copernicus formulated its theory. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 160.

<sup>129</sup> Popper, *A Pocket Popper*, 194–96.

pluralism in social sciences: different problems might not be solvable by the same tools. Such a vision does not lead us to an epistemological relativism however: an objective reality remains the yardstick of truth. Theories must always be both true and useful.

Distinguishing truth and usefulness also helps to recognize that the usefulness of truth is not universal—a point that is crucial to understand why one with deep religious beliefs can refuse a scientific statement. Adherence to the scientific method and rationalism is “a moral decision” <sup>130</sup>, one that human can choose not to make. An example of complete correspondence of truth with usefulness would be the devoted scientist—the person who values only the discovery of truth. But even from a more politically involved point of view, there is generally a fairly high level of adequacy between truth and usefulness. This is because a “truer” understanding of the world allows more accurate predictions, and therefore, increases one’s capacity to control physical and social outcomes. Contradiction occurs only when accepting a theory with a higher verisimilitude would go against one’s “goal” and/or would only be marginally useful for other purposes. The clash on the heliocentric model of the solar system is a good example of this. But there are more mundane cases; for example, someone might refuse to believe that their own chances of becoming a successful and rich entrepreneur are slim if their identities and goals are built around this possibility. Similarly, belief in the imminence of a social revolution might become a dogma for a communist group whose capacity to attract membership is based on the effervescence induced by the illusion of this proximity.

### Truth and Emancipation

The relationship between truth and usefulness is a delicate one, since most of the time, scientific research—especially in social sciences—is not motivated by the discovery of *truth* for itself, but rather by finding the solutions to a specific problem: economic development of the global south, homelessness in western cities, growing domestic inequalities, cultural

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<sup>130</sup> Popper, 36.

assimilation of Native Americans, etc. Truth becomes instrumental, and part of it might be ignored if it contradicts the fundamental motivations of the searcher. The present dissertation is not exempt from this tension.

Any motivations rooted in the normative principle of equality *must*, however, strive for the truth. It must adhere to the general principle of scientific rationalism, according to which the best method to discover the truth is through critical rational discussion based on refutable claims. It is not so because other methods are unable to discover truths. In fact, a revelation could, by chance, hit someone with a truth nobody discovered before.<sup>131</sup> Yet, scientific rationalism is the best procedure we know of to verify, on an intersubjective and collective basis, the verisimilitude of a theory. All other procedures imply a certain level of assumed inequality, i.e. the authority of the one for whom the truth was revealed. Of course, the scientific method is not perfectly egalitarian either, especially as the problems investigated requires an increasing amount of resources to examine (to buy expensive equipment for example, or to perform large scale surveys). Yet, the principle of evidence-based rational discussion is the most egalitarian—it is the only one based on free criticism and the public character of the evidence.<sup>132</sup>

This being said, it is important to recall that this dissertation is primarily moved by the ambition of finding a *useful* framework for the advancement of the emancipatory project. Commitment to *truth* is a corollary to the egalitarian root of socialism, and therefore a constraint upon the instrumental role of this work.

#### Criteria of Usefulness for Emancipation

The present project has additional constraints: it aims to provide concepts that are *useful* for a movement that would be profoundly egalitarian. This does not solely imply to create solid

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<sup>131</sup> For a solid demonstration on the role of intuition in great discoveries and a good debunking of the myth of empiricism in science, see Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*.

<sup>132</sup> Transparency of the procedure and of the data to allow counter-verification and replication is therefore necessary. Science is *in principle* more egalitarian, but those conditions are not often met in modern sciences, especially with the multiplication of copyrights and the private property of data.

concepts that could be wielded by expert organizers: the concepts must be easily understandable and usable by the masses that would participate in such a movement. The problem is that most social theory operates at such a high level of complexity inside the academia that most people cannot understand it, and even less make use of it. This is not a dismissal of the intelligence of the majority, but rather a recognition that the way academics are writing is arcane for those who do not share their references and their jargon. If the social theory of contemporary emancipatory politics is to inform a successful revolutionary democratic mass movement, it needs to be formulated in concepts that are close to the common sense, explainable with examples of everyday life, analytically applicable to current events and useful to formulate strategies for those with little power.

Of course, the complexity of reality makes it impossible to formulate a “true” social theory in a set of very simple concepts. As we simplify elements of a theory, we lose in granularity and in specificity. It is hard to imagine an escape from this, and therefore, the vulgarized version of a theory will always have a lower degree of verisimilitude than its full-blown version. What can be done, however, is to (1) make sure the full-blown version is as easy to understand as possible and (2) create the theory in such a way that the most accessible version is still quite true.

The present dissertation aims to generate a theory that corresponds to these criteria. However, given the constraints of a doctoral dissertation, this essay will not achieve this level of accessibility. This is because the target public of this dissertation are other academics, and especially a jury composed of professors, who will judge the arguments presented here by contrasting it with the other theories competing in the field. I am therefore forced to step into the jargon of other social theories to compare and argue for my approach. This is a good thing, in so far that it measures the truthfulness of the proposed frameworks in relationship with other leading competing theories. Nevertheless, the theory does not need this to stand on its own, help explain the social world and guide activists. This dissertation will present how the concepts elaborated here *could* be explained in a more commonsensical way, but a separate work would be required to actually make the theory accessible.

Two other important criteria that must guide an emancipatory theoretical framework are the role of collective action and the relationship between the micro and the macro level. But before delving into those criteria, a discussion on the notion of ontology is necessary.

### **Ontology and the Levels of Abstraction**

Ontology is the field questioning the very nature of reality. The level at which ontological questions operate, however, varies according to the discipline.

In natural science and philosophy, for example, debates on ontology are related to the very fabric of the objects we interact with. These kinds of questions are still not settled and might never be. Quantum mechanics and general relativity are two theoretical models with their very own “ontologies”. The standard model of quantum mechanics uses a number of elementary particles that constitute “matter” (quarks and Lepton) and a set of fundamental forces with which matter interact (Electromagnetism, weak and strong). This set of elements is used with success to explain a wide range of phenomena at the subatomic and atomic level. When scientists need to explain larger phenomena where the main factors to take into account are mass and gravity, then quantum mechanics ontology is no longer relevant because it precisely misses the component needed: a theory of gravitation. This is where Einstein’s general relativity is used. Its ontology is quite different, however: the fundamental elements on which the theory is built are based on the notions of gravitation, of mass and energy.

These two ontologies are, for now, incompatible. Scientists have yet to find the general unifying theory that would derive its entire model from a common ontological basis. This does not mean that they are invalid, however. For all we know, operating with the two ontologies, accepting both of them as true, is the best solution scientists have found.

Disciplines outside of physics also have their ontologies, even if these are understood by scientists themselves as “derived” from the models of physics. Chemistry, for example, study molecular reactions. What happens inside the atom is not the main concern for chemists—

they leave this field to the quantum physicians. And while they accept that atoms are fundamentally composites of quantic elementary particles, their ontology is built at a slightly higher level of abstraction. The world of chemistry involves electrons, protons and neutrons, and looks at the *emergent properties* of their different configuration in the forms of atoms interacting. This ontology is then used in their models to explain the formation and properties of molecules.

The same kind of leap can be seen when moving from chemistry to biology. Once again, new properties emerge as we observe organic macromolecules. Biology studies this, and its ontology, once again, moves to a higher level of abstraction. The basic units of biology are atoms arranged in chemical compounds. The biologist does not need to delve into the properties of electrons, their various levels, etc. It can take the properties derived from chemistry as its starting assumption.

Of course, except in the case of the two branches of physics, all other “ontologies” in science are, in fact, a set of rules that can be derived from the previous level. In this sense, these are not ontologies in the proper sense. But it is important to remember that for the practitioners of their field, they do function as ontologies—they are the set of basic assumptions and elements that constitute the fabric of the reality they study, and from which they can work. In a way, we could define the ontological level of a discipline as the level at which exist the basic elements the searcher needs to take in account in order to make its analysis and predictions.

As we move up the ladder of complexity, natural scientists speak of the “emerging properties” of matter. New phenomena arise when one moves from quarks to protons to atoms to molecules to macromolecules to cells and so on. Those new properties must be analyzed as specifically new to the higher elements. Therefore they require their own field of study, which must take for granted what was discovered in fields operating at lower levels of complexity.

In a philosophical sense, science operates on a general “materialist” ontology. It assumes that all that is real is composed of a set of elementary particles that us, common mortals, name “matter”. Therefore, even if natural sciences does not provide an explanation for human consciousness, it is assumed, because of the ontological model, that the human mind is simply the emerging property that occurs at our level of complexity, given the proper arrangement of bio-molecules.

Natural sciences, therefore, also operate on the principle of reductionism. A model is considered coherent in so far that it can be explained with fundamental mechanisms that can be reduced to its components at lower levels, and so on, until we reach the lowest level of all. This is partly why the incompatibility of gravitation theory with quantum physics bothers scientists so much: it violates the principle of reducibility.

Neuroscience is probably the main discipline that studies the boundary between natural and human sciences. While its project is still highly unaccomplished, it seeks to understand and explain human behaviours through an ontology working at the level of biochemistry and biology. It seeks to bridge our understanding of human behaviour with our understanding of biology and chemistry in order to be able to make possible the reduction.

But this project as yet to yield results and we do not know if it will ever successfully build a model that can explain human creativity and consciousness from the biochemical properties of the brain. After all, the materialist/mechanical model of the universe used by natural sciences is but a very efficient model, but we do not know for sure that the universe operates in this way. It is the best we have in terms of verisimilitude, but there is no certainty that it will ever find a resolution to this problem. Therefore—at least for now—there is a fundamental gap between natural sciences and social sciences. When studying human behaviour—in behavioural psychology or with a micro-interactionist approach for example—we cannot start from the properties discovered at a lower level, because there is a wide range of unexplained phenomena that occurs in the brain that we can simply not translate at the level of behaviour.

This opens the space for debates on the ontological nature of the human being.

### Ontology in Social Sciences

If we take for granted the ontological materialism of natural sciences, human behaviour should be explainable as emerging properties derived from the increasing complexity of matter. Those emerging properties are observable, but the bridge with natural sciences does not readily exist. Therefore, social sciences must generate their ontologies with very little input from lower-level complexity models. This fog implies that the validity of an ontology in social science cannot be derived or tested for coherence with natural-science ontologies. It must be built from scratch, starting with the observable elements working at the human level.

There is also a difference between the properties at the micro-social level (the human being and its immediate surroundings) and the properties of macro-social entities—the level of society. In other words, the macro-social level has emerging properties that are absent from the micro-social level. The agent-structure debate is often entangled in the problems related to these different levels of complexity.

The new properties that emerge at the human level are numerous: self-consciousness, adaptive learning, symbolic thought and communication, community building, etc. Several or all of these exist in other animals, but animals have never developed these capacities in such a way that would allow them to build the next layer of complexity—that of macro-societies.<sup>133</sup>

Those new properties pose the fundamental questions of philosophy and social theory. The problem of freedom is one—the ontological break between the mechanistic models of natural sciences and the ontology of social science leaves a space for indetermination. We do

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<sup>133</sup> Following Bookchin, we could argue that ecosystems are representative of such complexity, and the absence of deliberate self-reflection on the organization of ecosystems from other animals does not mean that this level is fundamentally different from a human society. But this is a subject for another dissertation.

not know how creativity and intuition works. Even mechanistic models involving machine learning do not offer a great explanation, since those models are based on very rapid repetition and learning through random variations—a process we know can create “new” things over the long term, but that cannot explain how a human brain can “invent” new solutions through a very narrow range of trials (compared to what machines do).<sup>134</sup>

A second problem is the determinations of nature and culture. Since we cannot explain the specific mechanism of the brain, it is very hard to separate what is rooted in the specific biology of an individual (that is, related to its genetic code and biological mechanism that derive from the cell system thus created, but also its direct physical environment) from what comes from its culture (what one learns from other human beings).

The various ontologies in social theory are aimed at providing answers to those questions. They try to provide social scientists with a “model” of the human being that can then be used for each specific field. In psychology, for example, the main questions on which the discipline focuses are clinically oriented. The psychologist is guided by the social norms as a standard behaviour, and seeks to help abnormal persons (and therefore, often socially dysfunctional according to dominant standards) to correct their behaviours. In order to do this, the psychologist needs a “model” of how human works. Freud produced one, and while it is often looked at with suspicion in the scientific community, it is “good enough” to help some people. Psychiatry, on the other hand, is much more focused on what we understand of neurochemistry, and therefore intervening through medication. In both cases, their model of the human being is different.

Neo-classical economics also have their own model of human beings: it assumes that individuals are utility maximizers and pays very little attention to the social processes involved in the construction of the “preferences” that they simply take for granted. Here, as in psychology, the model is ontological in nature: it is the deepest level at which this field

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<sup>134</sup> For a discussion on this, see Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*.

operates. Even if its approach looks way too simplistic, rational choice theorists argue that this model is sufficient in so far that it can predict human behaviours adequately.

In fields and disciplines that are concerned exclusively with macro-social phenomena—such as international relations, historical sociology or comparative politics for example—the “ontological” level is at a much higher level of abstraction. Instead of starting from an ontology of human beings, these approaches often start from higher social categories, such as “states”, “societies”, “classes”, “cultures” as their starting point. It is not that they neglect the impact of individuals, but as with any discipline, it “economizes” the difficult process of linking large phenomena of the macro-social level with the individual behaviour of millions of persons. It is deemed reasonable therefore to “assume” that we can describe the main characteristics of macro-social events by using ensembles of individuals as our starting point. The “fabric” of reality at this level is therefore no more individuals, but collective actors who can be treated as entities with their own set of properties. Just as the biologist study cells without paying too much attention to the millions of quantic elements that operate inside of it, realists in IR assume that we can study states as basic entities that interact with each other. This is possible because of the emerging properties that arise between the micro-level of human interaction and the macro-social level.

The most sophisticated ontologies in social science usually try to bridge the macro and micro level. We can cite Bourdieu’s theory of practice or Giddens’s structuration theory as examples of systematic models built in this way. They are based on a set of complex propositions interweaving individuals’ agency, the social construction of human beliefs and values, and the persistence of overarching social structures. This kind of holistic approach necessitates operating at both the micro and the macro level, because both levels are co-constitutive.

This codependence creates a set of unique epistemological problems for social science that are not present in natural sciences. The method in natural science favours the isolation of elements in order to study their unique property. This is the fundamental process that

renders reductionism possible. But in social science, the “human being” as an individual (in the *atomistic sense*, that is, non-divisible, as a fundamental irreducible element of reality) cannot be isolated without being “denatured”. This is an idea that goes back to Aristotle’s *men as a political animal*. If one isolates a human being from birth to prevent any contamination of society, the properties that will be observed will hardly be useful to deduce anything about the constitution of society itself. In other words, the emerging properties of society at the macro-level modify fundamentally the way human beings act at the micro-level. Therefore, one cannot simply deduce macro-social rules out of micro-social observation.

### **Agency, Structure and Collective Action**

Except for narrow-minded versions of rational choice theory, most social theories recognize the necessity of combining micro and macro social levels. Most recognize the social determination of individuals by the wider society, but also the impact of “agency”, of the choices by individuals that do affect and build the wider social structure. Yet, there is an endless debate since the foundational moments of social sciences in the 19th century between positions on the agent-structure spectrum. Among Marxists, the base-structure orthodoxy, which sees history as the succession of modes of production propelled by the development of technological change, constitutes the perfect example of a theory that prioritizes the determination of social structure over human agency.<sup>135</sup> On the other side of the spectrum, historians such as E.P. Thompson have emphasized class struggle as the motor of history, which requires a special understanding of agency of those who belongs to a class in the *making* of this very class.<sup>136</sup> In terms of *verisimilitude*, contemporary social theory tends to gravitate towards a middle ground between structure and agency, but the range of “acceptable” positions is still quite wide.

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<sup>135</sup> This kind of interpretation usually takes its roots in the famous preface Marx wrote for his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 4–5.

<sup>136</sup> Edward Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

A framework for an emancipatory movement must draw from this rich tradition and offer a theory that falls within the range of acceptable positions in the agent-structure debate. In terms of *usefulness*, however, radicals should favour a theory that tends to emphasize collective action and the role of agency in the making of history. A theoretical tool aimed at providing a framework to the oppressed so that they can free themselves must explain *how* collective voluntary actions can lead to social changes. Also, it must be clear that the forces that sustain systematic oppression are not an impersonal and abstract social structure, but actual human beings who benefit from this state of affairs and who work daily to sustain it. This is the essence of a class struggle oriented framework.

Of course, the structural determination under which this confrontation of agencies occurs is fundamental to both understand history and to provide a guide for successful political strategies. This is the fundamental meaning of Marx's famous quote from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>137</sup> Therefore, one cannot ignore structural constraints, but one must be cautious not to reify them and place them beyond the realm of human action.

Providing a useful tool for struggles from below cannot be limited to recognizing the role of agency in history. A theory must also be able to explain the mechanisms operating at the micro level, at the level at which immediate political organization occurs, in order to guide political action on a day-to-day basis. It must link the processes of this micro level to the social processes of higher levels, in order to link strategically what limits local political action encounters on a wider level and what impact it can have. As it will be discussed in the next chapter, this is something Marxism has difficulties to do. Practical guides for daily political action were developed *ad hoc* by socialists militants and revolutionaries, but the ontology built by Marx is foremost a macro-social theory. In other words, the value of micro-foundations is not only a theoretical requirement: it also has a practical value. Micro-

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<sup>137</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 595.

foundations can guide day-to-day political organizing, and help link it to its effect at societal scale.

### Ollman's Dialectics and Levels of Abstraction

To enlighten this complicated relationship is specifically the point of the dialectic method. Ollman explains that Marx's approach always keeps in mind that each part contains the dynamics and property of the totality. It is therefore impossible to start by analyzing the parts separately to then add each element statically together and hope to reconstitute the whole:

most people try to make sense of what is going on by viewing one part of society at a time, isolating and separating it from the rest and treating it as static. The connections between such parts, like their real history and potential for further development, are considered external to what each one really is and therefore not essential to a full or even adequate understanding of any of them. As a result, looking for these connections and their history becomes more difficult than it has to be. They are left for last or left out completely, and important aspects of them are missed, distorted, or trivialized. It's what might be called the Humpty Dumpty problem. After the fall, it was not only extremely hard to put the pieces of poor Humpty together again but even to see where they fit.<sup>138</sup>

A helpful tool developed by Ollman to conceptualize this relationship is his seven "levels of abstraction". Each level corresponds to a level of generality at which a specific set of concepts operate. The first level is the most specific, relating to what is unique about individual persons, while the last is the most general, abstracting what is common to humankind and nature taken as a whole. In some ways, Ollman subdivides the micro/macro levels into several levels, which allows him a greater granularity in situating Marx's concept along the lines. Briefly enumerating those will help us situate the concepts of chapters 4 to 8 along the same scale.

As stated, the first level is the level of individuals, where each human being is seen in all the details that make them differentiated persons. The second level distinguishes "what is

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<sup>138</sup> Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic*, 156.

general to people, their activities, and products because they exist and function within modern capitalism, understood as the last twenty to fifty years”<sup>139</sup>. At this level, we make generalizations for one or a few countries at most. The third level is the level at which “capitalism” in Marxist theory is located. This is the level at which the concept of “mode of production” in classical Marxism exist. It includes large areas and long historical periods of several centuries. The fourth level concerns class society in general and stretches of tens of thousands of years, across the globe. This is where generalization about what is common to all class societies can be made. Levels five, six and seven are less interesting for our purpose, but they respectively constitute what is common to all human society, to humans and nature and to the natural world in general.

The imbrication of each level clarifies the status of the “totality”. Most Marxist assume either implicitly or explicitly that this totality is located around level 3—the mode of production. But Ollman’s systematization reveals that any serious dialectical approach can only take level 7 as the *whole*. All inferior levels are but parts that are linked together. Social research using the dialectic method is therefore a “dance”, moving from one level to the other, since it is impossible to define the characteristics of one level in isolation to the others. One must investigate one level, discover partial truths that can be used to investigate another level, which findings will shed led to the previous level and change its initial conclusions. Given this, I find that many Marxists are too quick to assume things about capitalism in general—fixing the concepts of level three and deriving properties of lower levels of abstraction from it.

The problem of identifying capitalism—or any single “mode of production”—as *the* central logic of a given society also reveals a gap between level one and level two. Ollman jumps from individuals to modern capitalism without allowing space for a conceptual level that would analyze the parts that are linked in between. This is the level of organizations, the variations of the way relations of production and exploitation are structured *within* a given country, the

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<sup>139</sup> Ollman, 88–89.

variations of the organization of resistance. This level is essential to tie the “micro level” (level one) to a large social level (level 2).

When I discuss a concept that I qualify as “transhistorical”, I generally refer to concepts located at level 4: generalizations valid for all class societies. A point I made in chapter 1 was to demonstrate that, if the concept of production and economic relations were defined within capitalism (level 3), then they cannot be used as a core concept for historical materialism to make generalizations for human history (level 4). This is problematic not only to understand history before capitalism, but also to anticipate a path beyond capitalism. In some ways, the present theory of power seeks to provide a better set of concepts to understand class societies in general (level 4) and tie these concepts with each inferior level. Chapter 4 and 5 are mainly concerned with defining power, practice and trust at levels five and four. Chapter 6 and 7 explore the specific forms power take at levels 2 and 3 (i.e. the transition to a capitalist society, the creation of the modern state, the specific variations and configuration of racism and patriarchy). Chapter 8 looks at the strategic implications for organizers. This is located at the level I identify between level one and two—the mezzo level of organization.

## PART II

## POWER

Now that I have laid out my general concerns about the limits of Marxism and of the existing theories of power, it is time that I present the core of my theoretical proposition. This second part of the dissertation will sketch the core concepts that I believe could improve socialist theory in relationship to the criteria of validity discussed in chapter 3.

To this effect, chapter 4 will define the concept of power and its relationship with classes, production, exploitation and inequalities. I will define and introduce the notions of collective power, social power, the structures of power appropriation, the processes of selection and stratification and the infrastructure of power.

Chapter 5 then makes a slight digression to address some key concerns that arise as this theory of power decenters Marxism from the traditional materialist definitions. It will look at the question of idealism, the role of ideas, and rethinks these problems on the basis of contemporary social theory. The principles of the primacy of practice and the centrality of trust will be explained and tied to the notion of power accumulation.

### Chapter 4: The Accumulation of Power

Marx's starting point in the *German ideology* offers a strong anchor to link power and production. All human beings are characterized by their interaction with the world. The very condition of our continued existence is our interaction with the external world, appropriating part of it in order to reproduce our metabolic integrity—our life. This transformative process is constant, it is required to sustain and reproduce human beings. And since the production of “new needs is the first historical act”<sup>140</sup>, human interaction with

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<sup>140</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 156 (The German Ideology).

the world is not limited to life-sustaining activities. Anything that one might want (or socially need)—whether the object of this desire is “necessary” or not for life—requires an interaction with the world, and its corresponding transformation.

*Power* can be defined from this fundamental and universal interaction: it is the capacity to transform the world to achieve *any* goal. This definition of power is not new. Anthony Giddens implicitly uses it when he argues that “the notion of human action logically implies that of power, understood as transformative capacity”<sup>141</sup>. Micheal Mann, drawing from Parsons and Weber, also describes power in its most general sense as “the ability to pursue and attain goals through mastery of one’s environment”<sup>142</sup>. In this sense, power is a positive capacity of all human beings: all individuals have some capacity to transform the immediate world in which they live and all human activity is the embodied manifestation of power. Even the simplest and most mundane daily tasks are part of it. From the cultivation of land to the act of eating food, all parts of the process required for humans to get their daily intake of calories is constituted of acts transforming the surrounding world, appropriating part of “nature” to achieve its goal. Even the simple act of breathing slightly transforms the world, capturing oxygen and releasing carbon dioxide to sustain one’s life.

From this perspective, all human activity is an act of power over the world. From the miner to the school teacher, from the housewife to the factory worker, all labour transforms the world, and must be seen as acts of power. This cannot be restricted to “economic” activity in its narrow sense, neither can it be restricted to the production of what modern observers can deem useful. Power, as a capacity to transform the world, can be applied to any goals, through any means available to humans.

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<sup>141</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, Contemporary Social Theory (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 256.

<sup>142</sup> Mann, *The Sources of Social Power v1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, 1:6.

Therefore, all human activity *is* power over the world. This means that there is an inextricable link between labour and power—and here lies what we could call a “materialist definition of power”.

Human activity (and thus, human labour) is the substance, the source of all power. The magnitude of *change*, however, is not equal for all human activity: while aiming for a similar result, skills and tools can make human activity more efficient. Broadly speaking, magnitudes of power can be measured in terms of the magnitude of the impact, of the change human activity can provoke. If this process of quantification is by no means an easy task, it is possible to define preliminarily that, for a given goal, a number of factors can multiply the efficiency of human activity, allowing one to achieve it by using a smaller fraction of its total resources (such as labour time) and therefore freeing up resources for different or larger goals (increasing the total impact for the same amount of resources). There is, therefore, a close link between power and productivity—and between the Marxist notion of forces of production and magnitude of power.

One cannot analyse power by starting from an abstract individual, separated from society. Human capacity to transform the world has always been realized through collective organization. And while this collective power *is* bound by the immediate power of individuals assembled—since no “community” has an existence outside the real, physical, human beings that compose it—one must be cautious not to presuppose an individualistic methodology that would simply combine atomized individuals, each possessing an amount of power to be added up. Across history, power has been mostly of a social nature: the skills and techniques were learned from others, the infrastructures were built through collective effort and transmitted to future generations, and the very organization of the division of labour played a crucial role in increasing collective capacities. If individuals always concretely possess a fraction of humanity’s collective power, they do not possess it independently of it. This was well argued by Giddens’ theory of the “duality of structure”. For Anthony Giddens, social structure cannot only be understood as constraints over individuals.

While they *do* impose constraints, they are also *enablers*—agents can act through social structures, which provide means of power.<sup>143</sup>

The idea of *collective* power can be used to describe the capacity of any community: from a single family to humanity taken as whole, passing by tribes, corporations, Nations and states. It does not necessarily imply inequalities: it simply describes what effective capacity a community has to transform its world. The magnitude of collective power can be characterized by the combination of an amount of human activity (which could be counted in available labour time), of skills, tools and machinery, of a specific social organization and division of labour, of infrastructures and the general environmental and social conditions.<sup>144</sup>

I propose to name those variables the *factors of power*, but they are ultimately similar to the notion of *forces of production*. They encompass three broad categories:

- 1 - Individual factors, including skills, information, knowledge and physical characteristics of individuals
- 2 - Physical factors, including tools, machinery, non-human sources of energy, physical infrastructure and the environmental conditions
- 3 - Social factors, including the organization of labour and the social conditions

*1 - Individual factors* have a somewhat special status in this list, since they are the hardest factors to separate from abstract “human activity”. Skills imply a certain *know how*, it is the practical knowledge that allows a person to do certain things, or to do it efficiently. It applies to *any* kind of activity: singing, mining, cooking, teaching, writing, reading, convincing others, etc. Skills can be thought and transmitted, but they can only be developed by an individual through practice and they can hardly be unlearned once acquired.

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<sup>143</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]: Polity Press, 1984), 25.

<sup>144</sup> For a similar notion of collective power, see Mann, *The Sources of Social Power v1: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760*, 1:6–7.

Information is also a factor of power, since one is more likely to transform the world in the desired way if he has adequate knowledge of what he seeks to transform. Skills in rhetoric, for example, are of a limited use if the person that seeks to convince a crowd has no information on the crowd he will speak to, on their motivations, their sensibilities, the type of argument that moves them. A peasant arriving on a new land must gather information on the soil and the climate to properly use its farming skills. Of course, gathering information is a skill in itself, but access to information must be treated separately, since a common feature of many forms of domination is based on secrecy of information.

The physiological differences between human also influence power: some physiognomies are more adapted to specific tasks. This can be related to physically demanding tasks, such as sport competitions or heavy construction work, or it can be related to social norms—such as the role of beauty standards in many service jobs. The biological disposition for child bearing is also an example of this. These differences are not necessarily “natural” or “innate”: bodies can be transformed over time through diet, physical conditioning, makeup, natural environment, surgery, hormones, etc.

2 - *The physical factors* of power include the various tools, machinery, infrastructures, sources of energy and environmental conditions that can be used to accomplish a goal. Before discussing these, a few remarks are necessary on the inclusion of “environmental conditions” as a factor of power. First, the idea of factors of power must be understood as “all of which modifies the impact of human activity”. To that extent, for a given activity, it is not only the human-made tools and machinery that affects the result. With similar equipment and techniques, a labourer in a fertile region will yield better results than one in a less fertile region. Second, the environmental conditions are not simply natural factors. In fact, especially today, it is very hard to distinguish what part of the environment is natural, and what part is the product of human activity. For this reason, the concept of environmental conditions is broader than simply natural conditions—it includes the physical environment “as is”, whether we are in an urban context or a remote forest. In limit cases, the environment might blend with human infrastructure. For example, the creation of human-made canals

might increase the fertility of surrounding lands. But in other cases, human activity can degrade environmental conditions—pollution being a clear example of that. In either case, environmental factors are crucial in any human activity, and cannot be reduced to infrastructure and tools. Including environmental factors allows to specify the context of human activity at a geographical level: they play a key role to understand migration, imperialism, urban concentration, rent and patterns of transportation.

That being said, physical factors include all the non-human things and beings that can be used by human activity to achieve a specific transformation of the world. This can be tools, land, plants, animals, machines, fuel, rivers, etc. Like skills, information and labour organization, each of these elements have both a quantitative and qualitative effect on human activity. Some goals are simply out of reach for one without the appropriate tools, or the appropriate environment.

It could be said that machinery and infrastructure are but specific categories of tools, and this is partly true. The enumeration aims for clarity, but ultimately, any “object” that facilitates a goal is a form of tool. That being said, the point here is to stress that all kinds of tools, whether they are powered by direct human activity, animals or other sources of energy, whether they can temporarily operate autonomously from human input or not, must be included as a “physical” factor of power. From this perspective, some animals must also be included as *tools*. As crude as this could appear, one must remember that we are looking at reality through the lenses of power: what are the factors that affect *human* capacity to transform the world? From this point of view, animals that are used to perform labour must be included in the physical factors.

For example, tools used for transportation include a variety of elements such as shoes, bicycles, horses, sailboats, cars and planes. The non-human source of energy that is required to fuel the horse, the car or the plane must also be included in this general category. The infrastructure such as roads, ports and runways are also modifiers on the “power to move

around". And finally, the geography of land itself, as well as the meteorological conditions, deeply influences the overall result.

Physical factors have the particularity to be more easily alienable from individuals and organizations. Skills and knowledge can be transmitted or spied on, but not easily *removed* from an individual. The same thing goes for modes of labour organization: it can be copied, disrupted, but not removed. Of course, humans and organizations can be appropriated directly, but their skills, knowledge and methods of organizing are not separated from individuals. One must take control of the human bodies to control these factors.

The elements of the physical factors, on the other hand, are physically embodied in objects or non-human beings. They provide their increase of power only to the individual or organization that can physically use them. To that extent, they can be physically stolen, appropriated, exchanged and destroyed separately from the individuals. The possibility of physical appropriation of this important set of factors of power, and their potential scarcity, makes these elements central in the analysis of private property as a structure of social power. Marx's depiction of the capitalist class as one who wields the power to exploit the masses because of their private control of the means of production is directly related to this.

*3 - The social factors* include two major elements. The first is the organization of labour: the way human activity is divided, coordinated, and disciplined. Like knowledge and skills, modes of organizing labour are a form of "social technology". They must be invented, developed, tested and perfected over time. And while their practice can only be embedded in collective organization, the knowledge and skills to maintain it is detained by individuals. It therefore requires mechanisms of knowledge transmission to persist over time.

The second element is the "social situation". Analogous to the environmental conditions, the social situation is defined by the social context in which an individual or organization is located. To affect other human beings, it is obvious that the relative efficiency of a group will be related to the social conditions in which its actions take place. The social situation is

always relational. It embeds trust relationships with others, common norms and beliefs, relative strength of other actors, etc. The corporation trying to sell its products, for example, must be located in its social situation. The trust in its brand, its relationship to competitors, the price of other products, the available money of its consumer, the norms of consumption, are all part of the social situation of the company. Chapter 5 will elaborate on the question of trust, and will explain in more details how trust relations are an important factor of power.

It is important to keep in mind that individual, social and physical factors are often intertwined. Tools, machines and modes of organization are dependent upon specific techniques and knowledge. They are developed to fit the particular environment in which they are used. Skills are also often specific to tools and modes of organization. This means that it is hard to isolate the contribution of each of factor, but they still have different social dynamics that needs to be characterized.

Many goals are simply impossible to accomplish without a minimal and specific combination of those factors. To that extent, factors of power are not only a quantitative multiplier: they can also be qualitative thresholds. Also, factors of power are always linked to a specific goal: they do not affect the capacity to transform *in general*, but for a specific function and purpose.

As a general term, we will call *power resources* any combination of labour and the factors of power that can be mobilized to transform the world.

This very principle, according to which developing power for a kind of goal does not directly translate into power for other goals, opens the way for an understanding of different kinds of power in a similar fashion to Bourdieu's notions of field and capital. A corporation's power on the market, for example, does not operate on the same "field" as a state's military power. Their power is therefore hard to compare. Comparisons are more easily made among activities of the same kind: corporations operating in the same sector (i.e. real estate companies, labour unions, news organizations) or organizations aiming for similar goals (i.e. states). We can abstract the kinds of activities to generate common metrics, but such

abstraction must take into account that converting what kind of power into another is always done with a loss of efficiency. This follows the Bourdieusian idea of “exchange rate” between types of capital. In many ways, money under capitalism, operating as the “general equivalent”, becomes an abstract measure of power that allows efficient conversion of one type of power into another. A car-making corporation can channel its profits into electoral politics and lobby lawmakers to influence the state, a state can use oil-derived taxes to finance foreign militias, a real-estate magnate can buy a news organization to influence public opinion, a labour union can use its member’s dues to launch worker controlled factories, etc.

### Collectivized Power and Organizations

We can define the concept of ‘organization’ as any pooling of human activity and resources under a common decision-making process to achieve a collective goal. This can be a family unit, a school, a state, a corporation, etc. It does not refer to vague sociological entities such as a “society”, a “nation” or an “economy”: the concept of organization is useful insofar as it refers to entities of concrete collaboration, which have identifiable boundaries.

Organizations are defined by the pooling of power resources. Organizations are therefore always *collectivized* power, and from the moment power is collectivized, there is a form of organization that is created. Such organization does not need to be formalized to be considered as such. A household of roommates is an organization with the purpose to share resources for housing. It entails rules for common spaces, a certain amount of shared domestic labour to maintain the household and a shared pool of money to pay for the rent and bills. That informality does not negate the fact that roommates in a household are aware of this process. Their goal—sharing resources for housing—is explicit.

Organizations can be short-lived, such as the previous example. Some, however, are resilient, and exist in a more or less unaltered form despite the passing of individuals. Organizations that are able to persist in this way must have “reproductive” functions: a part of their

activities is dedicated to incorporating new individuals, to transmit knowledge, techniques, methods of labour organization, codes of conduit, norms of productivity, interpretations of the purpose of the organization, etc. In other words, all organizations that are stable over the long term have a capacity to transmit norms and knowledge, in order to conform new generations of individuals to the requirement of the organization. Of course, this is not the “will” of the organization as an abstract being, but the result of its decision-making process.

Organizations are *made of* human activity and resources, but they are *not* the actual human beings that perform this activity. A school, for example, is embodied in the human activity of its teachers that accomplishes its function. The individuals who happen to teach at a school do not embody the organization when they perform activities for other purposes. In some ways, it could be said that organizations are made of the portions of individuals’ total human activity that are dedicated to them.

Organizations also have material resources (part of the factors of powers). These are tools, infrastructure, machinery, and an environment. We can identify the resources of an organization by simply looking at the resources that are mobilized by the human activity that is performed for the purpose of the organization. This means that such resources are not necessarily governed according to formal rules of ownership. The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Basque fishing expedition, for example, was a form of organization with the purpose fishing ships in the Northern Atlantic. While the vast area in which it fished was not owned by the fishermen, it was still a component of the organization’s activity, in so far as they had access to it. In most contemporary organizations, the formalized rules of ownership identify more clearly the material resources accessible to the organization—but this is not a requirement.

As a whole, this pooling of power resources constitutes a collective power, it constitutes the organization’s capacity to accomplish its purpose, to “transform” the world in order to reach its goals.

## Decision-making Processes

A crucial element enters at this point: who controls the collective power embodied in an organization? All organizations have some sort of decision-making process to direct the human activity and the material resources that compose it. This process is sometime formalized, sometimes not. And this process can be fairly egalitarian or highly hierarchal. Inequalities in the decision-making process over collective power embodied in an organization is the root of *social power*. This is the realm of what Mann calls “distributive power”. It is a zero-sum game where accumulating power for some necessarily means taking away power from others.<sup>145</sup> And this is where the classical notion of power *over* others comes into play.

This is not restricted to formal decision-making: it includes all the formal and informal relationships that leads an organization to use its collective power in a specific way. By characterizing how decisions are made, and who is central in the decision-making process, we can analyse who concentrates social power.

The decision-making process as a whole can broadly be divided into three components:

- The *internal relationships* among the members of the organization—to which is linked the different factors of power related to the purpose of influencing the decision-making process
- The *relations of dependence* between the organization and the external organizations and individuals
- The *external constraints* imposed by the social structure in which the organization evolve

Both the *relations of dependence* and the *external constraints* are components that limit the range of possible decisions by the organization itself. If they are analytically separated, it is

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<sup>145</sup> Mann, 1:6–7.

because their impact is different. External constraints imposed by the social structure are indirect. This is, for example, the competitive imperative most private corporation must face on the market. It is not a constraint imposed by a direct relation of subordination, but rather by a large number of organizations which constitute and support the social structure of the market. Relations of dependence, on the other hand, are direct constraints imposed by another organization to which the organization in question is dependent. This is the case of sub-divisions and subsidiaries inside a corporation, of public schools and hospitals in relation to the state, of locals in relation to their union, etc. In each of these cases, the higher-level organization (the corporation, the state, the union) can impose goals and limits to the lower-level organization. If the latter fails or go outside its boundaries, the higher-level organization can impose penalties, legally impose changes or simply take direct control of the operations. The “strength” of these external constraints partly depends on the level of dependency that ties the lower-level organization to the higher-level organization.

That being said, if we take for granted that there is a set of external constraints, how to characterize the *internal relationships* of an organization?

The first and easiest method to characterize the internal process of decision-making is to analyse the formal decision-making structure of an organization—if it exists. In most contemporary organizations—from state agencies to private corporations, passing by churches, charities and associations—, this formal structure is pyramidal. A higher body composed of a handful of administrators have the final say on all matters, and they delegate day-to-day administration to a CEO or a director. The pyramidal structure delegates many day-to-day decisions to lower-level administrators, but higher levels always keep a formal right to override or fire a lower-level administrator. At the bottom of the pyramid, employees and simple members of the organization have very little autonomy: they are to do what they are told to. If they are consulted, it is often in non-decision-making meetings, aimed at collecting information for higher-level decision-making bodies. In such cases, the formal analysis would reveal a strong inequality in the decision-making process. The individuals at

the top of the pyramid have a much greater capacity to decide what is to be done with the collective power embedded inside the organization than those at the bottom.

*This inequality transforms the collective power of the organization into a social power wielded by a small number of topside individuals.*

However, the formal analysis of decision-making processes is not enough. In many organizations, the decision-making structure “on paper” does not perfectly reflect what happens in real life. It might be a good approximation, but there are often specific kinds of relationships that create “distortions”. For example, a very competent and trusted low-level administrator can have influence over its superior, while another of the same level might not. An analysis of what really happens inside an organization is sometimes necessary to understand its dynamics.

The analysis of factors of power is necessary to assess individuals and groups within the decision-making process. Skills, knowledge and information possessed by an individual will impact its capacity to affect the process. His location in the social structure of the organization and his relations of trusts and distrust inside of it will have a major impact on his influence. If he is part of an organized group trying to influence the organization, the organization of labour among this group can multiply their power. The physical tools to which one has access can also be important: is there a physical place to access other key-decision makers and have a discussion? Does he have access to means of communication with other members of the organization?

The informal relationships are especially important to analyse when it comes to resistance and disobedience. Despite having no formal take in the decision-making process, the individuals at the lowest levels can disagree with decisions taken at the top, and they always have some tools to protest. They might lobby the decision makers, they can sabotage equipment, slow down their work, strike or quit the organization. These methods can be employed by a lone individual or a group, within the legal framework, or not. Their efficiency

will depend on a wide array of factors, which is highly dependent upon the context. In any cases, one cannot ignore these actions “from below”, and they rarely figure in the formal decision-making structure.

As stated, any account of the social power accumulated through the centralization of decision-making processes must take into account the external constraints that apply on the organization. For example, a car-making corporation must meet the demand of the market at a competitive price. This means that, however centralized is the decision-making process, the “range” of decisions that can be taken is not infinite inside the corporation. Even the highest bodies of the corporation are limited to use the large amount of collective power at their disposal for the purpose of making profits. This effectively diminishes the range of what they can do with their social power, but it does not change the impact of the collective power of the organization on society as a whole. For example, a car-making corporation embeds a certain amount of collective power to produce cars. This collective power might have been used for something else, but as long as the resources and labours are embedded in that particular corporation, what they are used to build cars. It impacts society by using a particular amount of the global resources to make the automobiles. The constraints that bounds the CEO to this mission does limit the range of what he can do with this collective power, but it does not limit the global impact of the corporation itself.

Since we are now discussing relational aspects of power, it is a good moment to specify that power, *as a capacity*, needs to be “activated” by actions. And for any “set” of resources, for any kind of organization, many choices are possible. Choosing a specific course of action can be understood as a “strategy”. When human actions are clashing against one another, the result is not determined by “who is more powerful” in terms of total resources. It depends on the specific strategies used by each actor, the context of its use, and the relative efficiency of the type of resources controlled for those strategies. This is crucial to understand how the weak can win struggles in asymmetric conflicts.

## Ownership, Property and Monopolization

Organizations are defined by a pool of power resources: labour, tools, machinery, access to an environment (including land and infrastructures), etc. While the access to those factors can be informal, it is, in many class societies, codified by the principle of ownership—the social recognition of an exclusive right to decide.<sup>146</sup>

Ownership it is the social recognition that the *decision-making process* to which something, like an object, is subjected is the decision-making process of its owner (within a given set of parameters). If the owner is an individual, then this decision-making process is the direct will of the owner. If it is an organization, then it is the decision-making process of the organization.

The modern concept of capitalist property is a specific variant of ownership: it is characterized by an almost absolute control over what is to be done with the owned thing.

What is owned is never the object itself—it is a certain kind of right on the object. Since these rights can be segmented, a single object can have multiple forms of ownership at the same time. In other words, it can be subjected to different decision-making processes related to the different socially defined uses of the object. The tenant of an apartment, for example, as a right of usage on the apartment. The rent agreement transferred right from the landlord to the tenant. The landlord keeps the right to make profits from the apartment, to sell it and to transform it. Another example would be public roads. It is the government that decides the conditions of their use, and that keeps the right to close them or to transform them. These are facets of ownership that he maintains. Public roads are, however, accessible to all—the government does not enforce a form of ownership on usage, he leaves it open.

In so far as the things that are owned are power resources (labour, tools, land, roads, machines, etc.), then *ownership is a specific way to organize social power*. Ownership is the

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<sup>146</sup> This concept can even be used to understand ownership and property in tribal societies, as Sahlin uses it in *Stone Age Economics* (London ; New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2017), 83–87.

social recognition of a monopoly of decision over the specific use of the power resources that are owned. The case of slavery is the most explicit: the immediate labour power of the slave is under the control of its master. Wage labour, in this perspective, is a specific and more limited type of ownership: the employer “owns” the labour force of the employee only for a limited period of time and under some limits in exchange of a salary. For this period, the employee must use its time and skills for the purpose of his employer.

Ownership is not only applicable to objects, but also to more abstract concepts such as knowledge and techniques. As factors of power, they can also be subjected to limitations, allowing a group to control them. Since knowledge and techniques are always tied to individuals, their ownership doesn’t imply the social recognition of control over an object. Instead, it is a social recognition of the right to prevent human activity aimed at transmitting and applying this knowledge outside the parameters decided by the owners. In this form, ownership fully reveals itself as a form of social power.

As it will be explored in chapter 5, trust relationships are also conveyors of social power. The control of those relationships can also be subjected to ownership and exchanges. A trusted brand, for example, can be owned and exchanged for the power it gives to market new products.

Ownership, however, is only effective if it is widely recognized. In contemporary societies, modern states are the guarantors of this recognition: they enforce and reproduce the rules of ownership and property. They provide the backbone on which other forms of power accumulation can operate.

Ownership does not automatically imply inequalities. An egalitarian collective could *own* power resources and submit them to an egalitarian decision-making process. However, ownership provides the tool that enables large-scale power accumulation. All modern organizations can be defined in terms of ownership, in terms of the factors of power that are recognized under their control.

At a large scale, ownership allows a group to monopolize specific kinds of resources. Monopolization can then be used as leverage over those who need those. The class of feudal lords, for example, could draw their power from the monopolization of land: peasants could not easily find free land outside of their domain. Modern corporations can leverage innovations by monopolizing their use through patents and copyrights. Professional orders can increase the price of the work of their members by monopolizing certain professional “acts” and by restricting the access to the order (monopolization of a skill). The capitalist class draws its power through the monopolization of capital, of “means of production”, forcing those without access to those means to sell them their labour force.

Political Marxist are right, therefore, to stress the importance of *social relations of property*. When one recognizes that ownership is not strictly an “economic” category, but rather a general social right on the use of factors of power, then ownership is a good starting point to characterize the infrastructure of power. For a given society, one can identify the rules governing ownership, the main groups who own the main factors of power and the way they leverage this ownership to extract more labour power and resources from others. Of course, this includes the Marxist concept of means of production, since means of production *are* factors of power.

## **Class Power and the Structures of Appropriation**

### Mechanisms of Structural Stability

The question therefore arises: why and how are inequalities created inside the decision-making process? Why do most people seem to accept unequal distribution of decision-making over collective power?

The most common answers to this question revolve around the coercion-consent tandem: inequalities are sustained because the masses consent to it or because they fear repression. Consent and coercion are part of the answer, but this dichotomy does not quite reveal the

mechanisms of a structure's stability. Between enthusiastic approval for a social order and active fear of the consequences of revolt, there is the vast realm of passive resignation.

In most cases, I believe, inequality is not *accepted* as legitimate. But in the absence of an organized alternative to a given system, the only reasonable solution is to submit to the unequal structure. The consequences of defection do not have to be terrible to discourage alternatives: the cost in time, resources and energy required to organize a political movement and the incertitude in its chances of success simply needs to be high enough so that fighting for an alternative seems out of reach. The potential benefits are so improbable, so far, that it is simply not worth it for most people. The more a given group is organized, the less costly it becomes for an ordinary person to join in.<sup>147</sup> Therefore, what any ruling group has to do — and this is true for small scale organizations as well as society-wide systems of hierarchy — is to keep their opposition disorganized. This idea is very well captured by Michael Mann, when he says that, in most human history, the subordinates stayed quiet because they were “organizationally outflanked”.

Of course, any elite would prefer to simply prevail ideologically, and make their rule perfectly legitimate by consent. Resources are consistently spent to this end and do have an effect. But as it will be argued in chapter 5, masses never lose their agency and the lived experience of subordination can never be fully erased by ideological propaganda. Coercion is not *that* efficient either in suppressing revolt. It can, to the contrary, embolden a sense of injustice and give more legitimacy to an ongoing opposition. Most of the day-to-day subordination rather rests on maintaining the organizational high ground.

We will come back to this in chapters 6 and 7, but I propose to classify the methods to achieve structural stability in four categories: *coercion*, *normative adhesion*, *privilege distribution* and *organizational supremacy*. Coercion includes violence and all forms of threats against individuals to keep them in line. The classical conception of *consent* is broken down into two

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<sup>147</sup> Further discussions on the implication of this “economy” of organization will be presented in chapter 8.

distinct dynamics. “Consent” can be achieved via privilege distribution, that is, securing co-operation of individuals by granting them some power or privilege. In this case, we can say that the individuals will consent to a given social hierarchy, but this consent will be tied to the continuous access to the privileges. The other part of “consent” is straight out normative adhesion—where the individual cooperates because he shares the goals of an organization. Organizational supremacy consists in facilitating the coordination of a ruling group, while preventing the development of a challenging power and reducing the chances of contending collective organizations. Those four methods are often used in conjunction but depending on the context and the type of organization, some will have a greater weight in the process.

Maintaining inequalities is itself a product of power: it requires human activity, skills, knowledge, tools, etc. It is a *product* of human activity. Like any other *forces of production*, techniques of control can be improved and are changing across history. Innovations in *means of social power* must be developed, taught, transmitted and reproduced. And in any complex society, organizations are not standalone structures of power which embed their own capacity of stability. They exist in a network of organizations, which “structures” the realm of possibility, and rely on each other for the stabilization of the system. Therefore, within a single organization, some means of structural stability might exist, but a single organization’s stability largely depends on forces exterior to itself.

### Structures as Force Fields

The concept of social structures in social theory aims to capture these larger dynamics. It reveals the informal, hidden processes that explain why society can somehow “magically” appears to work as it should. As Bourdieu puts it, it illustrates how action is “orchestrated collectively without being the product of the organizational action of a conductor”.<sup>148</sup> This concept is, however, often shrouded in a mystic aura that seems to give to the structure a

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<sup>148</sup> Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 88 [Our translation. “...collectivement orchestrées sans être le produit de l’action organisatrice d’un chef d’orchestre”].

will of its own. To demystify the concept of social structure and to clarify its relationship with agency, I propose to use the metaphor of the *force field*.

In this metaphor, every human being is like a polarized molecule emitting a small quantity of power through its activity. Any other human being in its direct vicinity is affected by this power, but this effect is reduced as we move “away” in time and space. When humans pool their labour and resources, creating an organization, they multiply their power. This is similar to a magnet: each atom produces a very small magnetic field. It is only when many atoms are grouped *and* aligned in the same direction that the agglomeration creates a significant magnetic field. Organizations are analogous: they *polarize* human beings, getting their power vector in a similar direction, and creating a force field that reaches further. This force field is a form of pressure, which will affect all other humans in its radius. It embeds norms, practices, ideas; it shapes the environment, uses resources. Many similar organizations, operating on shared norms and practices, on similar ways of accumulating power, on similar ways of legitimating their existence, generate an even stronger force field that *structures* the society they are in.

*A social structure is the force field.*

Analytically, to present this *social structure as a force field*, we started from the individual, then looked at its association in an organization, then looked at the constellation of organizations to picture the field. Yet, in reality, the *structure is always already* there. Human beings are born within pre-existing fields/structures, which limits and orient the way they can live and organize themselves.

This metaphor is useful on a number of levels. First, it is a way to understand social structures that acknowledge the dialectical relationship between structure and agency. The structure is not autonomous from agents, since it is the result of collective action. However, each person is quite weak individually when compared to the massive network of organizations that generates the structure. Therefore, the structure appears impersonal. It

appears out of reach, it seems to impose itself on agents. Yet, since it is the product of collective human activity, it can be changed by collective action.

An elite can harness the collective power of organizations through social power. When this occurs (as it is the case in most of human history), the capacity to affect the social structure is therefore unequally distributed. Those with large amount of social power can use it to “shift” large organizations. Since those large organizations have an important effect on the force field, it can change the nature of the field itself, cascading into changes in other organizations and ultimately modifying the social structure itself. On the other end of the spectrum, those with little power need to act collectively if they want to modify a social structure. They can pool resources and labour on their own basis, to create their own organizations with the goal of projecting their own power, and transforming the social force field. They can also withdraw from the participation of organizations controlled by the elite, through revolts, strikes, disobedience and boycotts. This shift of collective power weakens the elite, and strengthen new entities, operating along new decision-making processes, which can play a decisive historical role. Slave revolts, popular insurrections, and mass strikes are episodes where common people withdraw their immediate power from the organizations of the ruling class and create their own. They collectivize their immediate power in new forms, for new purposes, while weakening their enemies at the same time.

This is not a simple division between the “powerful” and the “powerless”, for immediate power, as the direct product of human labour, can never be completely alienated from individuals. It can be difficult to organize a successful resistance to a ruling class, but the possibility of a revolt, strike or escape can never be completely negated. Furthermore, even when an act of open rebellion is not ongoing, there is no historical example of organization which have completely removed *all* social power from a social group. Even in the most extreme forms of domination, such as American slavery of the 19th century, slaves had small spaces of autonomy.<sup>149</sup> They usually could manage a small garden to grow food in addition

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<sup>149</sup> Follet, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860*.

to the common meals, they had days off for Afro-American festivities and religious practices, they received small wages for personal consumption and they usually had some autonomy on affective and sexual relations. This means that they could shape some small part of society at their level—they had some autonomy as to how some part of their daily life was organized. Of course, all of these could be overridden by the slave master—and were in many cases—but the very existence of these spaces of autonomy was the historical result of slave resistance. The fear of a Haitian-inspired full-scale slave revolution, the occasional revolts, the possibility of sabotage and the spread of slave escapes forced the slave masters to make compromises. It is in this sense that the inalienable power of resistance is important: it forms the basis on which elites are obliged to compromise, even in the most extreme forms of domination. A similar argument is made by James C. Scott in his seminal *Weapons of the weak*.<sup>150</sup>

The *intensity* of social power wielded by a ruling class must not be overstated either. What Micheal Mann calls the infrastructural power of the state is the level of “penetration” of state power in people’s lives. He makes a convincing argument that, for most of history, this power was quite weak. Feudal kings could extract parts of peasant production, but they had a hard time supervising production, controlling the daily life of its subjects and imposing a common language, culture and ideology. If modern states are much stronger, thanks to the penetrating power of disciplinary institutions<sup>151</sup>, they still leave wide gaps of autonomy to individuals. This is the space where the organization of dissent and revolt is possible. The same could be said for non-state based elites.

The fact that everyone has “some” power does not mean that society is a network of power relations without any identifiable centre (as some interpretations of the Foucauldian framework often presume implicitly).<sup>152</sup> Those who are at the top of the decision-making

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<sup>150</sup> James C Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>151</sup> Foucault’s work can be integrated in the history of the development of such power.

<sup>152</sup> Asef Bayat, “From ‘Dangerous Classes’ to ‘Quiet Rebels’: Politics of the Urban Subaltern in the Global South,” *International Sociology* 15, no. 3 (September 2000): 544.

process over large amount of collective power have decidedly more influence on society. If emphasis is put on the non-binary nature of power, it is because that is a necessary component to understand resistance and social transformations.

But how to identify social structures then? How to divide parts of society in a meaningful and helpful way? A main hypothesis of the current framework is that any society can be characterized by *identifying the characteristics of the most powerful organizations and the most powerful modes of resistance*. In short, *by analyzing the class structure of a society—*where classes are understood in relationship to the processes of power accumulation.

### Power Appropriation and the Infrastructure of Power

In Marxist theory, what characterizes fundamentally a mode of production is the processes of surplus-labour extraction. Slavery as a mode of production in the ancient Roman Republic, for example, was based on the ownership of foreign slaves conquered in war by a ruling class extracting a surplus by forcing them to work longer hours than the time required for their own sustenance.<sup>153</sup> The Imperial Roman State is later characterized by a mode of production based on the widespread taxation of the peasantry as the main way to extract a surplus. Feudalism is often depicted as a surplus-labour extraction performed by lords who controlled locally their means of coercion over their serfs. Capitalism is the mode of production under which surplus labour is extracted through market relations by returning to the workers less value than what they produce.

If we reframe those modes of production into modes of power, we can clarify some of the dynamics. Since labour *is* power, any processes that Marxism depicts as allowing a ruling class to control, for free, labour or its product is a process allowing a ruling class to control

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<sup>153</sup> The centrality of slavery in the Greek and Roman mode of production is not a consensual position among Marxists. This has little importance, however, for my point here. While I prefer the position of De Ste Croix, Ellen Wood's position on this issue is also worth reading. For more information: De Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*; Wood and Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory*; Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, Paperback edition (London New York, NY: Verso, 2011).

collective power. The classic definition of *exploitation* is therefore referring to a form of social power. Wealth accumulation through exploitation can be revealed to be not strictly a form of ostentatious consumption for the rich, but more importantly a form of *power resource appropriation*, since wealth is propriety, and propriety is control over factors of power. Therefore, instead of “mode of production” or “mode of exploitation”, I propose to use the term *structure of power appropriation*.<sup>154</sup>

Because the semantic field of appropriation and accumulation is symbolically tied with the imagery of material wealth, it might seem stretched to think of power as something that could be appropriated and accumulated in the same manner as gold, land or money. Yet, to rethink class division in terms of power appropriation is a conceptual improvement specifically because it reveals the nature of appropriation and accumulation. Even in Marxian terms, to accumulate capital, dead labor, has never been about piling money in a safe. The wealth a capitalist possesses has never been embodied in its material goods. Accumulation of capital is the accumulation of the social recognition that one has the right to decide and direct the social resources he possesses. This social recognition is the very definition of social power.

The analysis of the factors of power reveals that *labour* is not the only type of resource that can be extracted in order to accumulate power. Land, natural resources, physical infrastructures, organizations, information, skills can be appropriated in a systemic way to accumulate power for a ruling class. This echoes Marx’s primitive accumulation, or David Harvey’s notion of accumulation by dispossession. Settler colonialism, for example, is a systemic, ongoing process of power accumulation based on the displacement of populations and the appropriation of land *as a factor of power*. Waves of public asset privatization after

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<sup>154</sup> For stylistic reasons and because this name is a bit long, I will also use “structure of power”, “mode of power” and “structure of accumulation” as general synonyms.

Note that I sometime use power accumulation and power appropriation as two interchangeable terms. But power accumulation refers to any systematic process of power resource extraction that fuels an organization. Power appropriation refers to the same process, but is used specifically when the decision-making process in this organization is hierarchical. Therefore, power appropriation is a specific subcategory of power accumulation in general.

economic crises are also processes of accumulation that does not extract “surplus labour”, but nevertheless allows a minority to accumulate power at the expense of the majority by appropriating for themselves factors of power that used to be owned collectively.

At the level of a society as a whole, there is rarely only one kind of mechanism that explains how power is appropriated and one kind of organization that embeds social power. Multiple structures of power appropriation can co-exist and be intertwined. Their combination produces large agglomerations on which powerful elites build their capacities to shape the world. The total result is the *infrastructure of social power*. We use this term as a clearer term than the *mode of production* when trying to understand the “form” of society as a whole, its distribution of power across wide ranges of organizations, the many rules and norms that maintain the social structures on which these organizations can exist. The organizations and social structures that characterize it are not necessarily compatible, and their confrontation can create a crisis (which some Marxists would call “contradictions”). Yet, every society as a core set of structures of power accumulation which constitutes its main characteristics. They are constitutive *because* they concentrate the most power, and therefore, generate the most powerful force field that affects the entire social structure.

## **Production and Power**

The present definition of power is intrinsically linked with the concept of production—at its root, the power to transform the world *is* a form of production, and any production is a form of power. I have abstracted the different kinds of production into the general language of power to outline the common characteristics of power accumulation, but any analysis of a power structure requires the analysis of the specificities of production it entails. I do not wish to elaborate too much on this issue, because this is a part that Marxist historians do extremely well, and to which I do not have a lot to add. I mainly want to stress how these social economic histories fit into the present model.

Social production, taken as a whole, constitutes the sum of the collective power of a society. The concentration of social power, fundamentally, is the capacity of an elite to use part of this collective power for its own purpose. Therefore, when analyzing a concrete situation, the terrain on which classes struggle and power is accumulated is the realm of production taken in its totality.

One must therefore look at the production and consumption of this society: what are the needs that must be fulfilled, what are the main ways of fulfilling them, what is the technological level, the development of techniques, the division of labour, which sectors are prominent, etc.<sup>155</sup> This analysis must look at all forms of work, including unpaid domestic work and other forms of work that are “invisibilized” by contemporary capitalism. What is produced, how it is produced and what is expected to be consumed constitute the concrete limits, the reality in which power struggles occur.

The division of labour within a society will create different “functions” that must be filled in the global chain of production to satisfy the totality of social needs. This includes traditional sectors that are considered “economic”, such as agriculture, transport, commerce, education, health, construction, entertainment, etc. But it also includes other functions necessary to the stability of a social structure: childbearing and care that are often performed within the family, or law making, law enforcement and military defence which are often taken care of by a state. The specific way in which social needs are filled, the way the functions are differentiated and categories, and the kind of organization to which they are devolved depends on the social conditions.

I use the concept of *social relations of production* to specifically distinguish the organizational conditions under which production occurs—the type of organization that typically take charge of a given sector, their typical size, their constraint, their ties with other sectors, etc. In contemporary societies, for example, we can distinguish at least four major different

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<sup>155</sup> In other terms, one must look at what Marx called the “forces of production” if we understand production in its broadest sense.

conditions in which production occurs: it can be market-mediated, state-organized, domestic/kin-based or community/voluntary-associative. These constitute four broad “spheres” of production, four kinds of social relations of production which are tied to each other. A given set of social relations of production does not necessarily entail any form of power accumulation, but power appropriation structures will restructure and shape to its imperatives the layouts of relations of production. We will come back to this in chapters 6 and 7.

All organizations, in any set of social relations of production, embed certain power resources (labour, tools, etc.). Those organizations are subject to a decision-making process which *can be* hierarchical, which allows for a then-created elite to accumulate social power. The size of the organization itself gives power to its elite. Yet, since this power is derived from organizations that are embedded in the circuit of production, the position they occupy act as limits to what can be done with the organization itself: it must keep fulfilling its function. The relative power of an organization is therefore related to its place in the production as a whole. This position acts as a limit, but also as an enabler.

Because the requirements of production in a sector<sup>156</sup> are often the product of other sectors, all parts of the whole are interdependent. In a given sector, depending on the way those organizations are arranged and distributed, and depending on the relative importance of this sector, organizations can leverage their position. If a sector is occupied monopolistically or oligopolitistically, it is much easier for organizations to use their position to obtain social power. They can easily coordinate themselves and use their position to influence others. At the opposite, doing this will be almost impossible for highly decentralized sectors—unless those in this situation associate themselves and create organizations enabling concerted action.

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<sup>156</sup> When I speak of a *sector* of production, I refer to the functional category of production, not the social relations of production (in terms of the kind of organization that organize this sector).

The relative power given by a kind of production is also tied on how it influences other sectors by shaping the way it provides what others need. And to that effect, the different kinds of production are not equal. Everything related to the transmission of norms, beliefs, knowledge and information hold their power on their capacity to shape consciousness rather than to their potential of disruption. The “production” of coercion also has very particular characteristic. Coercion is socially needed to enforce common laws and protect against foreign armies. This would also be true in an egalitarian society, even if coercion would probably take a very different form. Because coercion is the required component in the application of laws, controlling coercion opens the possibility of *de facto* creating laws.

The form of power accumulation varies across sectors, societies and history. Directly extracting resources has been a straightforward way to accumulate power: state taxation, monopoly prices, and rent taken in money or in kind are all examples of this. But we cannot reduce an organization’s power to the labour and resources it extracts. Resource extraction is a good indicator of social power, because the resources that are transferred become subjected to the decision-making process of their owner. But a powerful group can influence the decision-making processes of others without an explicit transfer of ownership, and therefore accumulate power by proxy. Shaping knowledge, information, beliefs and norms is a good way to do this, for example. Shaping the legal framework has also been a deciding form of social power. In both cases, the control over a segment of social production (knowledge, beliefs, laws) allows a group to shape society. There is no explicit transfer of ownership, but there is a modification of the social conditions which allows the group in question to increase its influence over other decision-making processes.

### The Capitalist Society

I can give a quick overview on how these concepts would apply to contemporary societies. As stated previously, we can identify four major different conditions in which production occurs: market-mediated, state-organized, domestic/kin-based or solidarity/volunteer-based. Market mediated production is inscribed in what is generally understood as the

capitalist economy. Productive activities can subsist in this sphere in so far as they can generate sufficient market revenues. The typical organization of market mediated production is the corporation. State-organized production is based on state-derived incomes—mostly taxes. Their existence is not dependent on profitability, but rather on the state-based decisions and capacities to sustain it. The typical organization of state-organized production is the state and its subsidiaries. Domestic production revolves around the family unit and is based on a principle of mutual obligation and responsibility towards each member. The typical organization of domestic production is the family. Finally, solidarity/volunteer-based production cover the kinds of production that entails voluntary pooling of resources for common goals. A church, an association, a union or a political party are examples of this kind of production. But this also include the type of “production” that is performed on the basis of friendship—taking care of friends emotionally, helping them to move, connecting them to job opportunities, organizing parties, etc. This list is not exhaustive nor transhistorical, it simply describes the main logic operating in western capitalistic societies.

Out of these different spheres of production, only two allows for a systematic, large scale process of power accumulation to take place. Market-based production is the site on which capital accumulation can occur, while state-based production is the site on which state power is produced. Families *can* become very powerful, but reaching a status of national or world power for a family requires accumulation through capital or the state (in terms of wealth or position). They cannot become powerful on the basis of the *domestic activity* they structure. Families can be described as sites of power appropriation on a small-scale: it is so to the extent that patriarchal forms of families allow a certain supremacy of the male head over the decision-making process concerning the domestic goods and human activity of their wife (sexuality, cleaning, cooking, care of children, affective care, etc.). Voluntary association has a greater potential for growth in terms of relative power, but rare are those that reach significant power on the basis of pure voluntary adhesion. Political parties, for example, become significant players when they can get power resources from states. Occasionally,

large-scale voluntary associations *can* gather significant amount of power (we will see how in chapter 8), but this is rare and unstable in contemporary western societies.

We will discuss the question of the state and capital accumulation in more details in chapter 7. On the question of capital, Marxism has generally done a pretty good job in revealing its fundamental processes of power appropriation. But if we are to understand contemporary power appropriation processes, then we must acknowledge that the contemporary state cannot be reduced to the superstructure of the capitalist economy. It cannot be reduced to a *function* of capital accumulation. Even if states *do* perform useful functions for the capitalist class, many parts of *what a state does* are related to agendas that cannot be derived from the interest of the capitalist class. Political factions struggling on questions of religion, sexuality, nationalism, language, morality, race and culture are seeking state *power* to influence society in ways that are not *functional* to the capitalist processes of accumulation. This does not mean that capitalists are not involved in those debates, and are not using their greater amount of social power to pull the state towards their own considerations. But since the state can be a tool for those issues, then this means that actors controlling the state can seek to develop state power and autonomy in order to better achieve those goals.

Since states use a distinct process of power accumulation through taxation and coercion that predates capitalism, it is legitimate to understand states has a distinct structure of power accumulation. And if the transition to capitalism did change the parameters of this taxation and made state power dependent upon corporate profitability, it did not eliminate the possibility of state elites to establish agendas of their own. The division of the capitalist class on issues like wars or immigration, for example, opens space for a relative autonomy of state actors, even when there are important implications for the capitalist class.

The fact that barely any organization can exist outside state influence, as the modern state is now an (almost) universal structure of human life, that almost all habitable territory on earth is governed by a state, strongly suggest that the state-system should be considered as a *mode of power* or a *structure of power appropriation* of its own, analytically distinct from the

process of capital accumulation. This does not mean that they are not profoundly compatible and co-constitutive. And for matters of simplification, since capitalism has never existed without states, it is linguistically easier to include both capitalist and state power appropriation within the name of “capitalist society”. Yet, it is important for strategic debates and social analysis to understand states in the distinctiveness of their processes of power accumulation. *Capitalist society* is an appropriate name for the contemporary infrastructure of power by metonymy: not because the capitalist social structure of accumulation explains all social phenomena, not because it is the only process of power accumulation, but because the process of capital accumulation has the greatest weight in the infrastructure and it has reshaped almost all other institutions under its influence.

### **Processes of Selection and Stratification**

The tools detailed up to now can identify the main centres of power appropriation and the decision-making processes that create specific positions of power inside those organizations. Yet, it does not describe *how* specific people are chosen to occupy the different positions inside them.

Another good metaphor to visualize social structures is borrowed from Alex Callinicos and Erik Olin Wright: a social structure is a *set of empty places*.<sup>157</sup> The social structure defines organizations, their hierarchies and the respective power of the positions inside those hierarchies. Those positions can be understood as “empty places” because they are not strictly dependent on *who* actually occupies them. The structure reproduces those positions over time, and will embed mechanisms aimed at filling them in a way that will perpetuate the stability of the structure. Alex Callinicos also argues that one must not counterpose agency with structure, because agents act *through* the structure. More specifically, they act with the powers given to them by their structural “position”. Therefore, understanding processes of power accumulation allows us to understand how the power structure fuels its

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<sup>157</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, xxv.

hierarchy. But processes of selection allow us to understand how those “empty places” are filled.

To identify the processes responsible for this selection, one must look at the factors that reproduce, over time, a specific category of people for a kind of position in the overall social structure. These processes can be related to a variety of factors: selection can be random, it can be based on skills, on social origin, on skin colour, on religion, on gender, on sexual orientation, on filiation, etc.

Those processes can therefore be intimately linked with forms of discrimination such as sexism and racism, but not exclusively. For example, the reproduction of the capitalist class does not occur by any explicit “classist” process. It is rather through the logic of *filiation*: inheritance is a major way by which future members of the capitalist class are “selected”. This process can, however, have corollary selective effects: for example, if the members of the capitalist class were originally white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, selection through filiation is likely to reproduce a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant capitalist class over time. This practice can also be joined with other forms of discrimination: boys can be privileged over girls in inheritance.

Discriminatory practices in selection processes are not isolated practices: they must be understood inside the larger social structures. This is what words such as *patriarchy* or *racism* designate. By looking at selection processes, one can identify the existence of such systems, but it does not depict them in their entirety, nor does it tell us their core mechanism of reproduction.

The *strength* of those systems is related to their embeddedness in the major *force fields* generated by the main structures of power appropriation. Racism in the US, for example, was strongly tied with slavery in the 19th century. Slave plantations, as the main source of exports and as the structuring economic activity of southern states, generated a huge force field. This social structure of accumulation was based on racism, and therefore constituted a

powerful reproduction mechanism of racism. But even once slavery had disappeared, capitalist corporations used their power in ways that perpetuated racism and maintained blacks in a situation of subordination that they could exploit since they were controlled by whites who grew up under the influence of racist practices and ideas. They were likely to apply racist policies, to make racist advertising, to have racist management practices—therefore reproducing racist ideas and practices by the projection of a capitalistic field force that also embedded racism. We will come back on this and define more clearly in Chapter 6 how we can understand those dynamics as *structures of subordination*.

### Defining Class and Stratum

The distinction between processes of power appropriation and processes of selection allows for a clarification between class and stratum. Through the present theory of power, classes can be slightly reframed from the Marxist tradition. Let's take, as a point of departure, De Ste. Croix's definition of class:

A class (a particular class) is a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production, defined above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of the degree of ownership or control) to the conditions of production (that is to say, the means and labour of production) and to other classes.

Since the “conditions of production” are factors of power, and the “degree of ownership or control” is social power over those factors of power, than class can be defined, not strictly as an *economic* category, but rather as the position of a group inside the infrastructure of power.

Now, this being said, the way one defines class is also tied to the uses he makes of this concept. If we look at the broadest understanding of class, which seek to delimit politically who has a vested interest into a given system and who would theoretically benefit from an egalitarian change, then the drawing line of class is related to the overall position in the infrastructure of power as a whole. The ruling class includes those who control decision-making processes in powerful organizations (i.e. Corporations and states), while the working

class is the rest. In a definition like this, not all ruling class members in a capitalist society are owners of capital, or even controllers of capital. High-ranking civil servants and military officers, for example, will play important roles in the decisions of a state. They should be included in the ruling class because of their power, notwithstanding their actual wealth. The same goes for a topside manager of a large corporation.

It is useful, however, to differentiate the specific process of power appropriation in which a group is involved. To that effect, the more restricted definition of class, which focuses on the direct relationship of exploitation between two groups can enlighten some specific dynamics. For example, within the capitalist process of accumulation, the distinction between those who own capital (the capitalists) and those who sell their labour (the proletariat) expresses a direct relationship of exploitation. When Marxists argue on the centrality of the working class, because of its power to strike—the definition of working class is taken in this more restrictive sense. It includes exclusively those who have waged jobs, who are embedded in the active process of capitalist accumulation. In this restricted definition of class, the capitalist class only includes those who control or own capital. This helps circumscribe the specific dynamics and imperatives to which they are subjected.

However, the relationship of power appropriation operating within states is more complicated and less intuitive to define in terms of class. On one side, the state elite is identifiable by its formal and informal control over decision-making capacities of state power. But which group forms the opposite class? Analytically, there are three ways to define this group. (1) Those from whom labour and resources are extracted to fuel state power, (2) those who work for the state, and therefore have the capacity to strike against it or (3) those who are affected by the state.

Technically, those three definitions could have been applied to a corporation also. The basic Marxist theory of value implies that 1 and 2 are the same: surplus value comes from the work of the corporation's workers, and therefore the group from which labour and resources are extracted is the same then the group that work for the corporation. Yet, even with Marx's

theory of value, surplus value circulates, and can be absorbed elsewhere in the economy then where the worker works. This is the case when Marx argues that the variations of the rate of exploitation transfers surplus value away from sectors with a low organic composition of capital to those with a high organic composition of capital. Rent and financial sectors also operate in this way: surplus value is “pumped” away from a given “productive” corporation, and redistributed to the owners of land and financial assets. A deeper discussion on value theory will take place in chapter 7, but the point here is to argue that, even with Marx’s theory of value, there is not a perfect equivalence between group 1 (those who are exploited by the corporation) and group 2 (those who work of a corporation).

Even in a corporation, the main antagonism and the main source of resistance can come from other sources than its own workers. A Canadian oil company operating in Alberta will give excellent working conditions to its workers to ensure their loyalty and will extract part of its surplus value from the mass of consumers through its oligopolistic control of gasoline production. When the limits to its profits come from its export capacity, the resistance to the construction of new pipelines does not come from the workers (who will actually share an interest with the company to keep their good jobs), but rather from group 3 (a community impacted by the corporation).

Therefore, the relationship of corporations to group 1, 2 and 3 is not so different than the state. In both cases, the 3 groups are somewhat distinct and can all be in an antagonistic relationship. The difficulty to clearly define *which of those groups* constitute *the* antagonistic “class” disappear, however, if instead of taking *a* corporation or *a* state individually, we look at the whole. What becomes common to the three groups when looking at the whole is their relative *lack of power* in the decision-making processes of states and corporations.

For this reason, it seems to me preferable to keep the definition of class in its broad sense. To paraphrase De Ste Croix: a class is a group of persons in a community identified by their position in the whole system of social production and the infrastructure of power, defined

above all according to their relationship (primarily in terms of social power or control) to the collective power (that is to say, the means and labour of production) and to other classes.

The ruling class would therefore be defined as the groups that accumulate the most social power. They are the ones who control decision-making processes of powerful organizations. In a given society, the groups composing this ruling class have their defining feature based on the social structures of power accumulation that define the main “type” of organizations in which power is concentrated. These can be capitalist corporations, states, churches, slave plantations, fiefdoms, etc. In a capitalist society, the ruling class is therefore the class that holds the main levers of power: capital and states.

The working class is defined as the groups from which the ruling classes extract labour and resources to fuel the organizations they control. This is roughly the process of *exploitation* that Marxists use, but it also includes other phenomena. The colonial expropriation of indigenous land in North America, for example, was not a process during which natives labour force was used, but rather a process that chased them from lands they used to be privately owned by American settlers and investors. This “primitive accumulation” or “accumulation by dispossession” was constitutive of a specific class relation, in which an important factor of power, land, was extracted away from natives to fuel early agrarian capitalism and slave plantations. Working classes are defined in relationship to the specific social structures of power accumulation that characterize their alienation. In 19th century America, black slaves, expropriated natives, small farmers indebted to land speculators and urban factory workers were not unified by the way through which they were dominated, but they shared a common condition of power deprivation in relation to the ruling class. In each case, at different levels of intensity, their labour and the resources they used to control were extracted and put under the control of the ruling class.

This distinction, between ruling and working classes, is based on their respective position in the overall process of power appropriation. The groups of the ruling class concentrate social power; they have the capacity to make the important decisions concerning the use of

collective power resources. The groups of the working class have little power, and a part of their own labour force and resources are collectivized and put under the decision-making process controlled by the ruling class.

Class definition is therefore separate from the actual level of income received by individuals. Some members of the ruling classes can live an austere life but control vast amount of social power. Similarly, a section of the popular classes can receive material privileges without controlling much social power. This is how ruling classes can co-opt key segments of their subordinates, buying their loyalty without actually distributing their power.

*Stratification is the distribution of privileges without significant distribution of power.*

Stratification may not be explicitly planned by the elite to divide the workers among themselves. In many cases, privileges are not given, they are fought for. And often, distributing some privileges is a good deal for the ruling class: it defuses contestation without undermining the root of their power. Over time, this allows for key segments of the popular classes—those who are hard to replace, who are in key articulations of power accumulation processes, who are influent over others—to secure privileges. And by giving those key segments a *stake* in the sustenance of the system, the ruling classes can ensure to some level their loyalty (this is tied to the privilege distribution mechanism of structural stability identified earlier).

The *processes of selection* ensure both the selection of those who access the ruling class and those who access the various positions of privilege among the popular classes. The nature of those processes can profoundly alter the configuration of the stratification. For example, the segregation of black people after the abolition of slavery in the US ensured a certain security for a certain stratum of the white middle class. By excluding blacks from middle-class jobs, it increased the overall chances of whites to access those privileged positions by lowering competition. From a stratification that could have been based solely on skills and capacities, this process of selection adds a layer of racism to the very existence of those privileges. It

entailed a dynamic in which white workers could feel a common interest in defending segregation, even if they were not part of those who received the privileges.

Disentangling the phenomenon of power appropriation, stratification and selection is helpful to understand the difference of political demands and their impact on social justice. Removing explicitly sexist selective processes, for example, can allow more women to access positions of privilege and/or power. Yet, it does not change the very distribution of positions of privilege and power: the same proportion of people will receive those. Similarly, winning union fights over wages can secure higher privileges for a segment of the workers, but it will not change the fundamental distribution of power in society. The very core of the socialist project is linked to the processes of power appropriation: the abolition of classes means to abolish the very existence of a ruling class, and distribute power equally amongst the members of society. This does not mean, however, that the abolition of sexist barriers or the wage increases from union strikes are not a good thing, to the contrary. But still, *what distinguishes reform from revolutionary change is the challenge to the infrastructure of power*. What needs to be prioritized and what is accessible in a given context is a matter of strategy: holders of the socialist project have often chosen reformist fight for valid strategic considerations.

## **Chapter 5: Practice, Trust and Consciousness**

Reframing Marxist theory through the lenses of power has important implications for how we explain ideas, consciousness and ideology. While this is not the focus of this dissertation, we cannot neglect these implications. The processes of norms and knowledge transmission are fundamental to the reproduction of any social structures, and the control of these processes are potential sources of power for a ruling class. Furthermore, understanding interest, norms and knowledge acquisition and change is fundamental to any group seeking to transform society. It is therefore necessary to any useful socialist theory. For this, I propose to use two core concepts to reframe a socialist theory of ideas: the primacy of practice and the centrality of trust.

In this chapter, I will therefore begin with a brief discussion of classical Marxist theories of ideas and the evolution of the debate against idealism today. I will then proceed to explain what I mean by primacy of practice, centrality of trust and their respective implication for the proposed theory of power. The implications of those concepts will also be made more explicit in part 3, especially to understand the rise of modern states (chapter 7) and the dynamics of social movements (chapter 8).

### **Classical Marxist Theory of Ideas**

Marxist theories of ideas are often embedded within a theory of ideology. The goal is to explain how some ideas become dominant and justify a given political order, especially towards those who are oppressed. Alex Callinicos argues that Marx sketches two mechanisms to explain this. The first comes from the *German Ideology*, where Marx states that:

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it<sup>158</sup>

Marx never really defines the “means of mental production”, and therefore the mechanism in question remains relatively vague. If there is some truth to the principle that the diffusion of ideas does require material infrastructure, and that the control of this infrastructure allows the ruling class a certain influence over ideas, it is not a sufficient explanation. Especially since, as Alex Callinicos argues, this model supposes a certain passivity of the lower classes, as if it was an empty receptacle waiting to be filled with ideas from the ruling class.<sup>159</sup> If we acknowledge the possibility of ideas emerging “from below” and spreading with very little resources (such as early socialists or early Christians), then the focus on the control of the “means of mental production” is clearly deficient.

The second mechanism found in Marx’s text is implicit within his theory of commodity fetishism:

According to this theory, the fact that, under capitalism, social relationships between producers are mediated by the exchange of commodities means that “the definite social relation between men themselves...assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things”. As a result, the historically specific phenomenon of capitalism is universalised, naturalised. [...] Far, therefore, from depending on some conspiracy by the ruling class, the acceptance of ideological beliefs is spontaneously generated by capitalist relations of production themselves.<sup>160</sup>

This second mechanism contains more fruitful intuitions on the origins of ideas and the explanation of their diffusion. Ideas are embedded in practice. Specific forms of social relations therefore diffuse corresponding set of ideas. The best theories of contemporary “neoliberal subjectivation” borrow from this. The modern worker can *become* an *homo economicus*, interiorizing the calculation of its “human capital” and maximizing his utility on the market, not through propaganda, but through the daily experience of a market that

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<sup>158</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*, Great Books in Philosophy (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 1998).

<sup>159</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, 159.

<sup>160</sup> Callinicos, 159.

colonizes all spheres of life through the extension of commodification. Callinicos recognizes that this understanding has the advantage of not requiring any “conspiracy” from above. Both capitalists and workers are subjected to the same mechanism, both will interiorize the ideas embedded in the practice of capitalist markets. Yet, this is not a general materialist theory of ideas either: it does not explain the resistance to market norms and the production of alternative ideas.

For Callinicos, the common problem of those two propositions is that they are framed within a “dominant ideology thesis”: they are built with the premise that the stability of social structures of domination always relied on the *acceptance* of those structures by a majority who are “dominated” ideologically. This claim is however dubious. It is clear, on one side, that precapitalist elites never had the capacity to impose beliefs on the masses, and studies on medieval popular culture demonstrate a high heterogeneity of beliefs. The strength of Christian churches on the beliefs of peasants, for example, has largely been overstated according to Abercrombie, Hill and Turner: it was, in fact, a minority belief in Europe.<sup>161</sup> On the other side, even today, studies show that there is little homogeneity in the beliefs of the working class. Even popular support for capitalism had been generally weak—with some brief exceptions.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, stability of structures of domination does not require widespread acceptance, and we do not have to explain how an “ideology” comes to dominate, since it does not.

The mechanisms explored by Marx can therefore be used within limits: means of mental production are a factor in the diffusion and adoption of ideas, and ideas embedded in practice does influence the worldview of individuals. Without a dominant ideology thesis, we do not have to reduce *a priori* the agency of actors into the development and the adoption of ideas. Still, the question remains open: what explains the adoption of a given norm or belief? A

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<sup>161</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill, and Bryan S. Turner, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, [Repr. d. Ausg.] London, Allen & Unwin, 1980, Routledge Library Editions Social Theory 18 (London: Routledge, 2015), 75–76.

<sup>162</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, 166–67.

socialist theory must answer this question minimally to account for *how* the idea of a socialist revolution could, one day, be adopted by a majority.

### **Confronting Contemporary Idealism**

The crucial point of contention between contemporary materialists and currents like postmodernism and liberal “rational choice” is not on the importance of ideas themselves. It is rather on the importance of *discourses*, and the confusion between ideas and discourses.

Many authors have stressed the importance of not reducing ideas to discourses: Polanyi separates *tacit knowledge* from *articulate knowledge*, Giddens separates *practical consciousness* from *discursive consciousness* and the *unconscious*, while Archer separates *embodied, practical* and *discursive* knowledge. There are conceptual differences between each of those typologies, but they all entail that a major part of human thinking occurs in non-discursive ways. And more precisely: they all agree that non-discursive consciousness and knowledge pre-exist to linguistic capacities. They also agree that the ability to use speech is, itself, based on pre-linguistic knowledge. In other words, the *meaning* of words and grammar is rooted in pre-linguistic notions forged in *practical activity*.

Postmodern theories, on the other hand, have a tendency to understand language as a self-contained, self-referring structure of words and meanings. In the Saussurian tradition, *meaning* is derived from an internal system of difference, where words are defined by other words, and the relationship with reality is external to language itself. In this perspective, a dictionary and a grammar book contains the linguistic rules and the definitions of words, which *constitute* the linguistic system in use. A language then *informs* its users of the nature of reality. The way the concepts are built and the way reality is depicted in the definition of words influence the way humans behave with reality. Language is therefore subject to a power struggle, since concepts and definitions forge social behaviour. In many versions of post-modern theories, truth becomes an invalid concept in itself: truth is nothing but the hegemonic interpretation of reality, which serves those in power. Since all knowledge and

practice is reduced and identified with discourses, language becomes the main battlefield of history. Therefore, a great deal of energy is targeted towards deconstructing the language of the oppressors: undermining the great concepts of modernity in the famous works of its philosophers, revealing how popular culture productions perpetuate oppressive concepts, examining how major shifts in history can be linked to great conceptual inventions. The strategy for social change is therefore also predominantly oriented towards the production of alternative concepts and words: it assumes that by changing language, one can fundamentally undermine oppression.

I do not disagree that language is a battlefield and that the way concepts are built do have an impact on behaviours. The problem with postmodern theories is more fundamental: it is rooted in their very understanding of language. By radically disconnecting language from pre-discursive practice, by reducing *meaning* and *knowledge* to linguistic facts, they are ignoring a vast segment of social reality. This causes problems in both their understanding of history—as primarily moved by and through discursive acts—and in their strategy for social change.

Consciousness must have a central place in social theory, but it must be understood in both its linguistic and non-linguistic forms. The works of social theorists on non-discursive consciousness is therefore crucial. It puts in its place the realistic power of discourses as *one* of the many areas of social practice.

The opposition is therefore not so much between the relative strength of ideas in the trajectory of history against the material factors. Ideas are not less material, since their embodiment is always physical. Moreover, no human being can act without ideas—especially when one recognizes that every action—linguistic or not—presupposes a form of knowledge that might not be stored or used in linguistic form. Therefore, the very materiality of every human action is partly a manifestation of his ideas. *The real cleavage between “materialism” and “idealism” is on the place of discursive activity.*

This leads us to another form of contemporary idealism, one that is much more widespread: the liberal fiction of the rational human being. Again, it would be a misnomer to counterpose this stance to materialism. The idea that is prevalent from mainstream economics to modern liberal philosophy is not that material factors are secondary, but rather that, because human beings are rational, *truth* has strength of its own. A well constructed, well-argued discourse based on reason will, in the end, prevail against false ideas. Many advocacy-based community organizations, optimistic academic activists, and lobbying pressure groups operate on this principle: priority is given to research and the production of discourse to convince the public and the policy makers of the rational superiority of their position.

This approach is problematic for two reasons. First, it assumes that discursive consciousness operates on the basis of rationality and can perfectly reorder non-discursive behaviours if it is given sufficient proof. This places discourse in a position of primacy over the rest of consciousness. Second, it assumes a shared interest in acting upon the discovered truth. Both assumptions are, however, severely undermined by what we know of human beings: phenomena such as cognitive dissonance, the epistemic requirements of belonging to a community or one's vested interest in the status quo can all prevent the acceptance of a discourse, however rational and true it might be.

A strong model, able to understand social reality, its history and ways to affect it, must be based on a robust understanding of the relationship between non-discursive and discursive consciousness, and the process that leads one to adopt a set of norms and beliefs. I propose to simplify this through the lenses of two simple principles: (1) the primacy of practice and (2) the centrality of trust.

### **The Primacy of Practice**

Without having to delve in the complexities of human consciousness, I propose to simply distinguish practical consciousness from discursive consciousness, and recognize that the latter is a sub-product of the former. By recognizing that *speech* is a sub-category of human

activity, one can reveal the role of non-discursive social practices in the transmission and the reproduction of normatively oriented behaviours. The norms and beliefs that sustain the practices constitutive of any social structure also, and often primarily, take non-discursive forms. This practical foundation of social structures can be translated into words and be revealed to the discursive consciousness in a formalized manner, but its reproduction does not require such translation and the discursive description will never be exhaustive of practice.

The proposition, in short, is to say that *the largest part of what a human being knows is embedded at the level of practical consciousness*. We do not want to venture into the complex debates about whether it is better to keep this as a single level (like Polanyi's *tacit knowledge*), to distinguish practical consciousness from the unconscious (like Giddens)<sup>163</sup> or embodied knowledge from practical knowledge (like Archer). For the purposes of socialist theory, it is sufficient to define *practical thought* as the broad pre-linguistic layer on which the human brain operates and builds *discursive thought*. This layer can be partially unconscious to the individual, and can derive its content from either direct interaction with the natural world or imitation of social practices.

It must be specified that the content of practical consciousness is not only knowledge. It does include a vast array of *know how*—practical information on how to act in the world—, but it also includes norms, values. The very adhesion to a *way* of doing things, the identification to those behaviours, and the emotional reactions to changes or confrontation with alternative practices are all manifestations of those “practical norms”.

Therefore, practical thought includes both a set of *know how* and *norms* that can guide the daily behaviour of an individual without being thought of in linguistic terms. The *discursive*

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<sup>163</sup> I give the example of Giddens here because he is an important theoretician of the distinction between discursive and practical consciousness—and his specific classification implies the distinction with the unconscious. Of course, Giddens is not an important reference on the theories of unconscious in general. His own reflection is inspired from Freud. For a Marxian take on the unconscious, I would rather recommend reading Hebert Marcus's *Eros and Civilization*.

*consciousness* emerges from this primary layer. As Archer puts it, synthesizing conclusions from Giddens, Bhaskar and Merleau-Ponty:

“To speak a language, an individual needs to know an enormously complicated range of rules, strategies and tactics involved in language use. However, if that individual were asked to give a discursive account of what it is that he or she knows in knowing these rules etc., he or she would normally find it very difficult indeed.” The reason why it is so difficult, at least in our mother tongues (for most of us are more grammatically proficient in our second languages, whether living or dead), is that our corpus of shared meanings was not constituted solely by speech acts but by other types of bodily action. As Merleau-Ponty argued, our desks and chairs do not only become meaningful through being named in speech. Instead, they gain their meaning from the fact that in practical action we sit in them and write at them, that is we use them and are seen to use them meaningfully.<sup>164</sup>

Or, in the words of Polanyi: “To know a language is an art, carried on by tacit judgments and the practice of unspecifiable skills”.<sup>165</sup> This idea is the second basis on which it is possible to assert the primacy of practice: not only is the domain of practical consciousness much larger than the discursive one, but the latter is also intrinsically built on the former. Language is foremost a *practical skill*, on which arises the possibility of formalized discursive knowledge. Or, put another way, the meaning of ordinary words is primarily tied to a tacit practical understanding of what the concept means in relationship with one’s daily activity rather than a formal word-based definition. This is why someone can learn the definition of a word without quite understanding what it means.

This does not imply a unidirectional understanding of causality, in which discursive consciousness would be reduced to the linguistic manifestation of thoughts and emotions of its “infrastructural” level. It is quite clear that humans are capable of modifying their practical activity on the basis of rational discursive thought, therefore determination goes both ways.

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<sup>164</sup> Margaret Scotford Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 156–57.

<sup>165</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 219.

The idea of the *primacy of practice* is that no human knowledge, no norms, no social structure lives only or primarily in the discursive world. Even science, as Michael Polanyi brilliantly demonstrated, is first and foremost a vast array of practices, of tacit knowledge and norms, which are reproduced and transmitted through mentor-apprenticeship relations oriented towards the transfer of its practice.<sup>166</sup> Archer has a similar argument on the realm of religious knowledge:

Knowledge in the religious realm entails experience, illumination and ecstasy rather than explanation [...] Like all practical knowledge, it entails a “feel for” the sacred, rather than propositional knowledge about it: it is quintessentially a matter of doing, of spiritual “know how”. The consolidation of “a religion” is the codification of practice [...] In prophetic religions, the prophet’s own practices and practical injunctions constitute the exemplary, ascetic, regulative and normative model of the good life, whose impetus in the practical order is to generate rites whose quintessential purpose is that of anamnesis, a symbolic remembering which sustains the vibrancy and salience of the prophetic life-practice. Religious practice elaborates upon material culture [for Archer, material culture is the material objects that embed cultural practices] to inscribe its memories, encode its ritual means of continuity and enduring contact, and to express its lasting illumination.<sup>167</sup>

It is a corollary to the *primacy of practice* that the main mechanisms of reproduction of social structures are therefore operating primarily through practice rather than discourse.

This does not mean that there is no agency or no self-reflexivity implied in the process of learning the practical knowledge constitutive of social structures. Archer demonstrates that even logic is rooted in pre-linguistic consciousness. Therefore, a form of rationality exists in the development and acquisition of practical skills. It is on this very basis that one can eliminate bad practices or even innovate new techniques without formalizing the practice in a linguistic form. However, the *primacy of practice* means that the capacity of modifying one’s own practice or someone else’s practice through discourse is inherently limited.

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<sup>166</sup> Polanyi, 52–64.

<sup>167</sup> Archer, *Being Human*, 184.

This insight is crucial to understand historically the spread of scientific discoveries, of technical innovations, of modes of social organization: it was never sufficient to have the right *idea*. The tacit knowledge on how to manipulate new tools, or on how to manage the daily obstacles of new forms of organization, requires much more than what is available in even the most detailed books. Often, only a master-apprentice relationship can transmit rapidly all the required aspects of a technique (or else, it must be rediscovered through trial and error). This applies as much to new technologies as to tactics employed by social movements or ways to take decisions in large organizations.

The primacy of practice also has important implications on the relationship between truth and values. When evaluated as a discursive-logical construction, prescriptive statements on what one *should do* are derived as corollaries from statements describing the reality on which one seeks to act and value statements giving the desired goal. The rationalist-idealist understanding assumes that human consciousness is built as a logical tree of descriptive and normative statements, deriving layers of corollaries from a set of primary axioms. Yet, humans don't manifest such a level of internal coherence. First, the internal cohesion of beliefs—either practical or discursive—is not a natural achievement for human beings. Individuals can only summon a limited part of what they believe and value to their minds. When taking a decision, discussing, or acting in general, individuals are likely to follow acquired routines, which might be contradictory on a logical standpoint to decisions and acts at another point in time. Yet, unless this contradiction is specifically examined, the person might never see it as a contradiction. Critical self-examination is an activity of its own, that requires specific know how and dedicated time. Second, the motivations of individuals are often disordered and change over time. Individuals can come to grow fond of habits, of *ways of doing* that were initially acquired for other purposes. Deeper, long-term motivations are often overridden by stronger short-term desires. Individuals can fail to analyse their own motivations, stating they act according to some moral principles, but really acting on other bases and failing to see the contradiction.

Notwithstanding the question of coherence, individuals do have norms, values or goals that are more important than others. Norms that are more superficial are easier to challenge and change, while the deeper ones are much more bounded to one's identity. Superficial norms can be derived from deeper ones. For example, someone who values family will adopt a series of norms related to "how to take good care of one's family". The latter are shallower than the former—they can change, because they are corollaries to the deeper value. However this relationship is not necessarily stable—as it has been said, one can become attached to a *way of doing* for its own sake.

But core norms, motivations and values have a particularity: they are hard to challenge because they are ultimately self-justifying. They can change, but the process often implies a profound crisis of identity. Typically, one challenges its own deep motivations only when confronted by a situation in which he can no longer find satisfaction because the conditions of realization has changed, or were always out of reach. This type of crisis naturally occurs as individuals go through the different stages of life, and have to adapt their identity to the social expectations.<sup>168</sup> Society is built in a way to smooth those transitions, but deeper crisis occurs when radical, unexpected changes happen: the death of a partner, a serious professional failure, a major economic crisis that drives one jobless in his domain.

The principle of the primacy of practice therefore offers a basis on which we can build a model of consciousness that is rooted in the material conditions of daily life, that gives to discourse a moderate importance and that does not rely on the liberal fiction of the rational individual.

### **The Centrality of Trust**

Our second principle is the centrality of trust: that the prevalent social mechanism used to transmit knowledge and norms—either practical or discursive—is *trust*. Here, trust is

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<sup>168</sup> Archer, 290–94.

defined as the propensity to accept someone else's practice or belief as valid (true or good), before or without self-validation.

Self-validation is itself defined as the process through which an individual assesses the validity of a norm, a practice, or a belief by his own experience or judgment. The most basic form of self-validation is related to the direct relationship with the external world. Basic practical activity, such as walking, eating, avoiding obstacles, recognizing objects, identifying the smell of food, are forged and continually validated by direct experience.

The importance of trust in the transmission of *know how* can be first examined in the master-apprentice relationship of learning practical skills. As Polanyi puts it:

To learn by example is to submit to authority. You follow your master because you trust his manner of doing things even when you cannot analyse and account in detail for its effectiveness. By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of the art, including those which are not explicitly known to the master himself. These hidden rules can be assimilated only by a person who surrenders himself to that extent uncritically to the imitation of another.<sup>169</sup>

This does not mean that the apprentice is devoid of critical thought: he might very well challenge some techniques or improve them. But the largest part of the transmitted practical knowledge is accepted *because* the apprentice trusts the master.

Trust does not only explain transmission of knowledge between a person explicitly willing to learn from someone who practically demonstrate its *know how*. The will to imitate is necessary to learning, but it exists even in cases where there is no awareness that this process will actually be useful to the learner. The relationship between a child and its parents are of this kind: he imitates his parents, not consciously knowing that he is learning the necessary skills to be part of society, but rather because of the deep emotional bond existing. The child wants to be like his parents, he identifies himself with them and he deeply trusts them. And even as an individual grows up, he inevitably develops a sense of belonging, an

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<sup>169</sup> Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, 55.

emotional bond with a larger group of people. This might be a group of friends, a musical subculture, the colleagues of a workplace or a nation. In each case, belonging requires to adopt a certain number of behaviours, of norms, of ways of doing which are practical knowledge. Integrating such group requires an act of learning, mostly by imitation, and these groups create networks of trust.

The whole process of education, from pre-school to university, is based on a relationship of trust between the student and the educator. At first, this trust must be imposed. Parents expect their child to do well at school, to obtain good grades. The trust between child and parents is used to conform the young to the teacher's authority. The student must accept his own ignorance and accept a priori the validity of what he is taught. This knowledge is then practically validated by tests and grades. Over time, this self-validating procedure builds a practical experience of trust with school as an abstract social institution. All teachers will be deemed trustworthy by virtue of their belonging to a trustworthy institution. The same kind of trust is given to priests, scientific, experts, etc.

Trust does not only convey practical and discursive *knowledge*, but also norms and moral judgment. Social *know how* is deeply intertwined with an implicit definition of *what is good*, of *what ought to be done*. And just as the chemist is recognized as an authority on the knowledge of chemistry, the priest of a given religion is recognized by its followers as an authority on the knowledge of morality. And this morality is deeply *practical*, it is *a way* to behave in society that is not always clearly codified in a discursive manner.

By extension, even when there are no clear hierarchical relationships, the very principle of specialization in a large community entails a mutual trust in the knowledge of the specialist. Polanyi gives the example of mathematics where:

...no single mathematician can fully understand any longer more than a tiny fraction of mathematics. Modern mathematics can be kept alive only by a large number of mathematicians cultivating different parts of the same system of values: a community which can be kept coherent only by the passionate vigilance of universities, journals

and meetings, fostering these values and imposing the same respect for them on all mathematicians.<sup>170</sup>

This is true for every domain of human knowledge, since “the amount of knowledge which we can justify from evidence directly available to us can never be large”<sup>171</sup>. Therefore, “nobody knows more than a tiny fragment of science well enough to judge its validity and value at first hand.”<sup>172</sup> When a political scientist reads the work of an historian, for example, he must place his trust in the rigour the archival work of his fellow professor and in the peer-review process that validated the results. But even in the same field, one must continually rely on second-hand knowledge, since it is impossible for a single person to personally attest for the totality of what he thinks he knows.

Whether or not the contemporary scientific community is reliable is not the issue here. The centrality of trust is a phenomenon inherent to any amount of knowledge larger than what is testable for a single individual. The accumulated social knowledge necessary to maintain societies has long passed that cap. Therefore, one can point out deficiencies on the various social mechanism of knowledge validation (the fact that a large community self-validate a certain belief does not necessarily make that belief true), but this does not change the fact that even the most knowledgeable persons of any society has to rely on second-hand knowledge, validated by social institutions.

This applies to practical knowledge just as much as discursive knowledge. Any form of division of labour entails a practical specialization and a recognition that those who are specialists possess a *know how* against which non-specialists have very little legitimacy to challenge.

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<sup>170</sup> Polanyi, 205.

<sup>171</sup> Polanyi, 221.

<sup>172</sup> Polanyi, 173.

The sum of practical and discursive knowledge embedded in any society is therefore necessarily distributed across a wide number of people, who must trust each other in the validity of their specialization.

The self-validation of a complex belief is a skill that must be learned and developed. Moreover, even contemporary scientists cannot claim to have discovered the perfect procedure of self-validation: epistemological debates are still alive and the practical standards of the scientific community are still prone to error. We can recognize that they are among the closest to verisimilitude that humankind has achieved, but the fact that there is room for improvement reveals just how complex self-validation can be. It takes years of training to reach sufficient proficiency in the application of scientific norms, and a good part of these are embedded in implicit practices.

The same goes for moral judgments: the believer of a religion must develop its capacity to judge whether an act is moral or not. In hierarchical religions, such as the Catholic faith, believers are taught to rely on the judgment of specialists, priests, that also require years of training. The same thing goes for any sort of moral judgment. Modern criminal laws require the same kind of skill: the interpretation of jurisprudence and laws is only a different, more institutionalized form of exegesis. When common citizens have to judge whether something is legal or not, very few have the skills to validate this information by themselves. They therefore defer their judgment to professionals: they call a lawyer to make the appropriate research and give a legal opinion or they look up to websites dedicated to legal education. Rarely will they look at the laws directly, because they are hard to interpret.

Self-validation is not a binary state. Except for the direct bodily experience of the world, rare are the beliefs and practices that can be verified in isolation of others. Therefore, even scholars, in the field of their expertise, must rely on trust for the necessary knowledge and practices that are prerequisite to the very subject they are investigating. Beliefs on large social questions can almost never be self-verified by most people. What most people call fact-checking, or rigour, is not the direct validation of belief, but rather the verification of the

quality of sources, the correspondence of those sources with socially acceptable standards of research. What is taken for self-validation of facts is most often self-validation of the trustworthiness of a second-hand information.

Self-validation of complex beliefs is therefore always on a scale: from believing what a friend said, to looking it up on Wikipedia, to reading it in a scholarly book, to making an opinion on comparing several scholarly books and articles, to making a full-scale research to verify the question first hand, each step requires more time, more skill, more resources and can be said to increase one's "rigour".

There are, however, many situations of conflicting norms and knowledge. From mundane questions of nutrition (what's the best diet to lose weight?) to large-scale questions such as global warming or the appropriate economic policies to reduce poverty, there are many issues on which societies are divided. The hypothesis of the *centrality of trust* is that in a given conflict of beliefs, in a situation where someone does not have the possibility to verify the question by themselves (either by scarcity of time and resources or by lack of skills in the appropriate domain), one will rely on people and institutions they trust to take position. The centrality of trust does not mean that beliefs conveyed in trust networks are truer, but simply that one is more inclined to accept a belief conveyed by people he trusts over those he does not when he is not able to validate this belief by himself.

Gramsci observed this phenomenon in his reflections on hegemony. He noticed that most people are not able to withstand a thorough critique of their worldview, but they won't change their mind only because they are proven logically wrong. Thus, the way common beliefs operates is not conform to the idealistic schema of reasonable dialogue, but is rather a matter of trust in the social group to which one belongs:

The man of the people thinks that so many like-thinking people can't be wrong [...] while he himself, admittedly, is not able to uphold and develop this arguments as well

as the opponent, in his group there is someone who could do this and could certainly argue better than the particular man he has against him<sup>173</sup>

On a larger scale, this is what happens with “climate-change deniers”. Even if the scientific community has a pretty strong consensus that climate change occurs and is caused by human activity, there is an alternate discourse, with a sufficiently strong science-like discourse, conveyed by trusted politicians, television stars, religious leaders and important businessmen, to convince a wide layer of the population of the contrary. The hypothesis of the *centrality of trust* is that belonging to one group or the other on this issue is less a matter of being wrong or right. One’s position is not a factor of his intelligence, but rather linked to the contingencies of one’s social position, his affiliations, identity, and the network of people that one is involved in, which defines who is trustable on different issues. This does not mean that there are no wrong or right positions on climate change. But the amount of work and resources required to verify this question is available only to a few scientists. In the current situation, what determines one’s belief is his trust or distrust in the mainstream community of scientists. This is why the tactic used by the leading climate deniers is specifically to undermine the credibility of those scientists, by depicting them as individuals following a specific political agenda which goes against the norms of the community they are speaking to.

The importance of trust is also recognized in some of the most effective tactics used by the labour movement. Union organizer Jane McAlevey notes that, in a union campaign:

As you talk to [the workers], you ask them a series of questions that help you assess who their actual organic leaders are in each department and shift. You might ask which person on a shift the others would go to if they wanted to learn how to do things better. Or whom they would talk to if they had a problem with their supervisor or a coworker. You proceed systematically, really listening to what people say. Organizers call this process leader ID.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 339.

<sup>174</sup> Jane F. McAlevey, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2014), 38.

These informal leaders, whom I will call organic leaders, seldom self-identify as leaders and rarely have any official titles, but they are identifiable by their natural influence with their peers. Knowing how to recognize them makes decisions about whom to prioritize for leadership development far more effective. Developing their leadership skill set is more fruitful than training random volunteers, because these organic leaders start with a base of followers. They are the key to scale.<sup>175</sup>

McAlevey's observation is pragmatic. Her concept of "organic leader" is a tool to help union organizers to achieve supermajorities in strike votes and similar difficult tasks. But her approach, synthesizing methods used for decades in union organizing, reveals a truth about the most effective way to convince individuals to change their practice, their routine and take important risks against their employer. She uses the already-existing networks of trust, identifies the leaders of those networks, builds a relationship of trust with them, and mobilizes their influence to convince a majority of workers to take part in a union campaign. It is a process that aims to shift the *hegemony* (the leadership) on the workplace away from the boss and to the union organizer.

It must be said that a relationship of trust does not entail a homogenous propensity to accept all of the trusted person's beliefs and practices. If the young child will tend to trust his parents on every subject, adults are likely to trust the specialist on the subject he is recognized as trustable and not necessarily on the rest. Yet, trust as a tendency to "spill over" the specific subjects of expertise. In McAlevey's example, the informal leader is trusted because of her expertise in the workplace. Colleagues trust that person because she is reliable and efficient in the work place. This does not make that person an expert on union strategy, and yet, other workers will also tend to trust her on this subject. The same can be said for professors who are trusted by the public to speak on issues outside their field of expertise, of friends whose opinions are valued by its network, etc.

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<sup>175</sup> Jane F. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Guilded Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.

But if *trust* is a central factor in the transmission of beliefs, how is trust formed in the first place?

### The Formation of Trust

Trust is defined as the propensity to accept someone else's practice or belief as valid, before or without self-validation. From the examples given before, it is possible to identify 3 main factors that lead to the establishment of a trust relationship: (1) the desire for recognition, (2) the correspondence to trustworthiness standards and (3) the practical experience of trustworthiness.

1 – *The desire for recognition* is a vector of trust anytime someone adopts norms, beliefs and practices from someone else in order to be appreciated, accepted, included, loved or generally “recognized” by a person or a group. The trust relationship is therefore not based on the expected validity of practices and beliefs by *themselves*, but on the effect that accepting those *as valid* will have on the person or the group that the individual seeks recognition from. This includes early leaning process of a child, which imitates its parents to be like them, to be recognized, and to receive marks of appreciation.

It also includes all forms of norms and practice adoption of someone seeking to be included in a “group”: a group of friends, a sports team, a religious community, a cultural identity, a professional network, a sexual identity, a scientific community, a gender, the inner circle of a political party, etc. Any group is defined by a set of norms, practices and beliefs—some of which will be considered as “core” to the identity of the group, while others are more peripheral. These do not have to be clearly defined: they are implicitly known by the “members” of the group—that is, those who identify as part of the group and are seen by other members of the group as peers.

The desire for recognition does not have to be for the sake of “belonging”. One can seek acceptance in a group to access a position in the social structure or any benefits derived from the fact of belonging to this group can give. Groups can be very formalized in this way.

A professional order, for example, is a group of workers monopolizing certain acts, which gives its member leverage to increase the market value of their professional activity. The professional order will gate keep the entry into the group with a formal process of recognition that depends on tests. What those tests measure is the conformity of the members to the practices and beliefs that are considered essential to membership.

Conventional education systems are therefore in good part based on the mechanism of recognition to transmit practices and beliefs. The grading system and the diplomas are measures of conformity for the job market. Receiving a high school diploma, for example, is not only an indicator of skill and knowledge, it is also an indicator of good behaviour, of a sufficient internalization of discipline. A young person that seeks to be accepted as a good citizen, that seeks to be recognized as valuable on the job market to be able to receive benefits in this way, must conform himself to school discipline, schedules, rules of behaviour and accept what is taught as *valid* in order to pass the tests. Of course, the younger the child, the more likely this calculation is not explicitly made—it is rather the desire of recognition from its parents that will impose, or not, a desire to perform at school.

The processes of recognition can be only partly formal, and can involve broad vaguely defined groups. Gender, for example, has been historically an important part of one's identity. Legally today, recognition is given on official papers from the state: a person is either a man or a woman—as determined at birth by the nature of its sexual organs (a state of things that can be changed now in some countries). But feminists have demonstrated that being recognized as a man or a woman implies more than legal recognition. The norms and good behaviours to “perform” one's gender is taught and enforced from birth onward. Deviation from these norms leads to mis-recognition by others. A girl will be a “tomboy”, a man will be “effeminate” if they do not act in the way they are supposed to be. Of course, like any norms, what is considered core to gender identity changes across history and societies.

Nations and cultural groups are of a similar nature. Nations, when tied to a state (whether sovereign or not), will have a form a legally sanctioning criteria to determine who is part of

the national group, and who is not. The state is also likely to enforce and promote some norms, behaviours and beliefs that are considered as “core”, as “defining” of national identity: language, religion, values enshrined in laws, a historical narrative, etc. But what is considered as part of a national identity is likely to involve more than what is state-sanctioned. Individual members of the national group will have some understanding, most often implicit, of what it means to be part of the nation. And this recognition can come with substantial benefits—not just in terms of legal citizenship, but also in terms of networks, employment, etc. The desire for recognition therefore plays a major role for the newly arrived immigrant in the acquisition of new norms and practices.

We can say that, in general, identities are sustained by groups adopting them and promoting them. They are *structured, produced*, by means of power. The desirability of an identity can give a form of power to those who possess it, and who keep the gates of this identity. Some identities are linked to the belonging to organizations or to access of formal status. They are reserved to those who are in a certain position, and they code the behaviour of those in this position.

The fact that one adopts behaviours, norms, beliefs and practices to be *recognized* does not destroy one’s capacity for self-reflection. Like any relation of trust, what is transmitted is accepted prior or without self-validation, but self-validation is still possible afterward. Contradiction can therefore occur if one arrives at the personal conclusion that a belief that is core to his group’s identity is wrong. The individual will basically have three choices: ignore his contradiction and act as if he accepted the group’s belief, voice his disagreement and risk being excluded or judged negatively by other members of the group or try to change the group’s belief. This last option’s chance of success depends on the relative social power of the dissident, and as any process of contestation, the individual choice to join such a process depends on the level of organization of dissidents.

2 – By *correspondence to trustworthiness standards* I refer to the trust based on one’s conception of *what kinds of sources and individuals are trustworthy on a given issue*. This is

different from the practical experience of trustworthiness, because it is based on general criteria that one can use without knowing personally someone or a source, without past experience. The nature of those criteria can vary. The scientific community, for example, has fairly high standard concerning the methodology and institutional recognition necessary to consider a source trustworthy. Socially, the trust in the scientific community then attributes a high trustworthiness to the scientist by virtue of his inclusion in this community. An ordinary person is therefore likely to trust the information given by the scientist because he accepts scientificity as a standard of trustworthiness. In contemporary societies, scientificity is an institutionalized standard. By extension, however, it becomes an interesting strategy for any group seeking to convince others to imitate scientific language and attitude to *appear* trustworthy. This is not necessarily done consciously. For example, the scientific discourse on the importance of facts and statistics will be recuperated by non-scientists who believe that, because they can include facts and statistics in their argument, then it is more “scientific”. As long as it works, this tactic becomes validated by the practical experience of those who use it.

Media are another example of institutionalized recognition of trustworthiness. Contemporary society reproduces the idea that news corporations are a reliable source of information because journalists are committed to discovering the truth, and that they have a social responsibility to do so. There is a widespread attitude of trust—if it is reported on the news, it is reliable. Of course, there has been an erosion of trust towards traditional media and a rise of alternative media politically oriented both on the far left and right. This is changing the standards of trustworthiness—what is therefore considered trustworthy is no longer the media in general, or the rigour of journalists in general, but more specifically a kind of media or certain specific media. Yet, it does not change the nature of the trust relationship: the trust in those alternative media is based on their *correspondence to trustworthiness standards* by a given community.

This kind of trust is not only true for abstract beliefs. For example, the trust of a patient for the advice and the medication prescribed by his doctor is based on one’s trust into the

medical community as a standard. The same goes for the trust in the advice of a nutritionist on what is good to eat, or the trust in the practical advice of a “do it yourself” video realized by an expert. The apprentice-master relationship of trust is partly based on a desire for recognition, partly based on the standards of reliability which recognizes the expertise of the master.

What is considered to be an acceptable “standard” will vary across history and communities. Recognized expertise in a domain is an often used standard. But beyond modern standard of scientificity, expertise and media objectivity, there are also numerous implicit standards that people use to evaluate the trustworthiness of a source. Sexist, nationalists, religious and racist conceptions, for example, can lead one to attribute a greater reliability to man, to someone from its own religion, its own nation, its own culture, its own skin colour. One can also give its trust according to political belief—an anarchist will distrust a socialist because of their political differences. There is, therefore, a strong link between identity and standards of trust. If trust can be established in the process of being recognized by a group, the norms of this group can imply standards on who and what is trustable. I believe that the concept of *epistemic community* makes the most sense in this understanding.

3 – *The experience of trustworthiness* refers to the inference that, if someone was right and reliable in the past, then chances are that he will be right in the future. It is based on acquaintance with this person over a certain period of time. McAlevey’s example of the informal leader on the workplace is of this type: the trusted colleague has shown in practice his reliability. When he gave advice, they worked. Therefore, if this leader takes an initiative and propose something to his colleagues, the propensity of others to accept it is greater than if the relation of trust based on experience did not exist. This kind of trust can also imply groups or organizations. One can trust a car company, because it has been reliable in the past. Or someone can distrust a political party because it has betrayed its principles in the past.

In those three cases, I focused on positive trust relationship, but centrality of trust also implies distrust. Desire for dissociation, norms of distrust, negative experiences can all lead

someone to distrust a person, a group, an institution. Since trust is always a level of confidence, comparing various sources, then distrust is just a name for low level of trust.

### **The Practical Embeddedness of Trust in Power Structures**

The simple fact that a society is stable, that most of its members act according to the general rules that ensure the stability and continuity of its essential components, indicates that most children in such a society are socialized with compatible norms. This transmission is *practical*: it is a set of attitudes, of proper behaviours, of skills, and a way to interact with the world. It is a functional acquisition of the required skills and an understanding of the behaviours that are expected. Stability does not require that most of the population believes that these expectations are just—as explained in chapter 4, it must simply be too costly and too uncertain to fight for an alternative that most people will *submit* to these norms.

This large-scale process of socialization ensures that, when individuals join an organization, they already share practical skills that correspond to the norm, and which makes them “compatible” with the position they are to occupy in the organization. Organizations also have their own mechanism of reproduction, which trains and incorporates the new members to ensure their co-operation and competency.

Large-scale processes of socialization are not necessarily explicitly planned by any single group. Conservative elites have known for a long time that they don’t necessarily *have* to know and shape every detail of society in order to keep control. Across history and until very recently, elites had actually very little knowledge of how exactly their own capacity to accumulate power worked. But they acknowledged that it worked and they generally understood that, as long as it was not broken, it was best not to try to fix it. It is therefore important not to overstate the capacity of elites for social engineering. Even today, the powerful are not always right as to which policies, which decisions will allow them to keep their power on the long run. Mistakes are made, conflicts occur, unexpected effects arise. The conservative tendencies of elites is a recognition of those limits, and this is why the power of

large organizations is more often used to reproduce the practices that were key to their success in the past.

That being said, even if they were not always *purposely designed*, it is crucial to understand the fundamental mechanisms of social reproduction. For this purpose, the works of Foucault on biopower and the role of disciplinary institutions<sup>176</sup>, for example, are important. He explains how an institution like a school “encodes” power into social *practices* by controlling bodies on a large scale. The Foucauldian focus on the practical rather than discursive aspect of this power is crucial: it shows that the effect of school is much more than the process of learning discursive ideas. It is a fundamental institution, deeply entrenched in the infrastructure of power, that embeds *ways* of doing things, that inculcates proper *behaviour*, which are practical embodiments of the appropriate norms.

Individuals are not passive in the process: as they develop, they also learn to challenge these norms, to test alternative practices, and to formulate new ways of thinking. However, single individuals, especially those at the bottom of power structures, do not have the means to implement, by themselves, their new ideas. They either need to gather the support from individuals in higher positions, or to gather a wide support from their colleagues. But their capacity to do so is tied with the strength of the *infrastructure of dissent*: the available resources for ordinary individuals to build networks of solidarity and challenge the status quo through collective action. Often, it is the lack of sufficient means of collective organizing that will close the opportunities for contestation and change from below. They are “organizationally outflanked” as Mann puts it.

Organizations accumulating power are therefore shaping knowledge and beliefs in ways that generally reproduce the required beliefs for their own reproduction. In order to do this, they need to shape the relations of trust and maintain *hegemony*—both practical and discursive—on those with little power. Those who seek to change the world “from below” must build

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<sup>176</sup> Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir : Naissance de La Prison*; Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*.

alternative networks of trust—this is the very idea of the gramscian counter hegemony and this is key to any viable infrastructure of dissent.

The mechanisms used to achieve hegemony are varied, but processes of monopolization are key here. Any relationship of trust *embeds* a certain power on the trusted over the trusting. Because the trusting is willing to accept norms and beliefs from the trusted as valid *without* self-validation, the trusted can use this relationship to shape the norms and beliefs of the trusting. In many ways, *trust is a delegation of judgment*. Since the complete self-validation of knowledge is impossible, the sole existence of a trust relationship is not an indicator of a power trying to shape beliefs. However, any process for which trust is required in the transmission of information, knowledge or practices can become an instrument of social power if a group manages to take control of it. Furthermore, by removing the skill, the resources, the means or the will for self-validation, it is possible to force someone to rely on trust rather than self-experience. When this occurs, it is possible to identify clear dynamics of power inequalities.

#### Dynamics of Monopolization and the Power of Trust

The same dynamic of “monopolization” identified in chapter 4 is key to the dynamics of power in trust relationship. Controlling key information *forces* those who do not have access to the relevant information to rely on the judgment of those who have it. Judgment of complex situations is also a *skill* that can be developed and monopolized. For example, the entrepreneur culture relies on the principle that good companies are successful because of the unique decision-making skills of their leaders. Many employees come to believe that their subordination is legitimate because they have no idea how they would take decisions for a whole business: their bosses seem to have a secret skill out of their reach. They *trust* the decision-making skills of their chief. Yet, one must wonder how the bosses came to develop those skills in the first place?

The hierarchical nature of contemporary organizations centralizes the decision-making process into the hands of a tiny group. Since decision-making skills must be learned through practice, only those who are trained and put in a situation of management do develop them adequately. Therefore, hierarchy produces the circumstances that justify hierarchy: by giving a minority the occasion to develop those skills, it allows those in power to justify their position *because* others lack the skill necessary to take the right decisions. This is not only true in capitalist corporations. Labour unions and left-wing political parties tend to justify power centralization for the same reasons: members are not qualified to take adequate decisions, and the leadership must therefore be reserved to those who have the proper skill to lead them to victory. Yet, the exclusion of the rank-and-file from political decision-making perpetuates their incompetency. Of course, openness and direct democracy does not guarantee excellence: the point here is rather that structures that restrict decision-making to a tiny group tends to limit the possibility of development of decision-making skills to the tiny group who can access it. Chapters 8 and 9 will discuss more the question of skill development and democratic organization.

This idea is also present in Gramsci's concept of the *organic intellectual*<sup>177</sup>. For the Italian philosopher, what separate those who are engaged in theoretical activity from the rest is not their intellectual faculties per se, but their social position. While this is not explicit in the Prison notebooks, Gramsci strongly suggests that organic intellectuals have the function of intellectuals because they are in a position of organizers. This is why Gramsci's enumeration of organic intellectuals includes capitalist entrepreneurs, industrial technicians, specialists in political economy, priests, teachers, doctors, administrators and political party leaders<sup>178</sup>. What unites those functions is the fact that, in the realization of their task, these persons have some autonomy, they are required to solve problems, to innovate, and they have the task to organize the beliefs of the masses. Thereby, theoretical activity is strongly bounded to organizational practices and leadership. While not all intellectuals are social and political

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<sup>177</sup> Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 9.

<sup>178</sup> Gramsci, 5, 9, 12–15.

organizers, it is quite clear for Gramsci that all social and political organizers are intellectuals. This is where Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* has a strong link with its original meaning of *leadership*: the dominant class organizes the ideas of the mass to obtain their consent through their very function of leaders.

The hierarchical organization of moral judgments also entails a dynamic of monopolization. The Catholic Church, for example, is organized along this principle: members of the clergy are said to have an authority in terms of moral judgment. This authority does not rely on skills—even though the faculty to adequately judge a situation in regards to the norms of the Catholic Faith is indeed a skill—, but rather on the social position of the priesthood. Catholic believers accept, as a norm, that the hierarchy of the clergy, from the Pope to their local priests, is more “right” on judging what is good from what is evil. Two dynamics operate here. First, in a Catholic community, children will be taught to trust the moral judgment of the priest—just like children are taught to trust the knowledge of the teacher. This is a standard process where the power of the church as an organization is reproduced by the transmission of a trust relationship from the parents to their child. Second, even if someone disagrees with the priest, the widely shared belief, in a given community, that the priest as an authority on moral judgment will deter dissent. The individual who disagrees will fear exclusion or at least negative judgment from his peers because accepting the trustworthiness of the priest's moral judgment is a core feature of the group's identity. Even if his peers might agree with him, if they all think that others are likely to follow the shared norm, they are likely to *act* as if they respected the norm—hence the problem of disorganization.

This leads us to a second aspect of monopolization. The first dynamic was linked with the monopolization of skills—people came to trust a group of people because they had unique skills to make judgments. The power structure can harness this dynamic by centralizing the development of skills. The second dynamic, as seen in the case of the Church, rather relies on the norm that certain persons *must be trusted* as a fundamental element of one's identity and sense of belonging. Contrary to the first dynamic, the trust relationship is not a side effect of the centralization of decision-making, but rather the very goal of the centralization of power.

The power of an organization like a church largely depends on a widespread belief in its trustworthiness, and the corresponding fear that dissent will provoke marginalization from one's own community. In order to secure that kind monopoly, the standards of trustworthiness must be shaped within a given community and be rendered as "core" parts of the group's identity.

The capacity to make adequate decisions for an organization does not only rely on skills, but also on the availability and the capacity to collect information. A third dynamic of monopolization of trust can be identified in the monopolization of information, which forces those who do not have access to information to rely on those who do. To concentrate information, one must devote more resources to data collection and enforce rules to prevent their divulgation. In many cases, political organizations and labour unions legitimize this concentration of information on the basis that a successful strategy requires secrecy to prevent the enemy from anticipating your actions. Legitimate or not, this does force the rank-and-file of an organization to trust their leadership to deploy the most effective strategy.

The last but not least of those processes uses the desire for recognition as a conveyor of trust-based power. Any group or individual that owns or control a key amount of necessary resources, who have the power to give to others desirable positions in the social structure, can use this power to shape norms and practices of those who seek to occupy those positions. Therefore, the desire to be recognized as a good candidate, and then to maintain this recognition as a good holder of a position, will lead one to adopt the appropriate practices and norms. The requirements for conformity are usually greater as we climb the ladder of positions-to-be-filled. This is true for jobs in private enterprises, for positions of power inside political parties, and even for associations and labour unions.

We have therefore identified 4 mechanism of trust monopolization that can be used by a group seeking social power: (1) the monopolization of skills, of expertise, (2) the shaping of standards of trustworthiness in order to monopolize trusted positions, (3) the

monopolization of information and (4) the control over access to good positions in order to shape those who seeks to get them.

### **The Sources of Dissent**

Together, the centrality of trust and the primacy of practice offers a strong alternative to postmodern discursivist and liberal rationalist models. It also provides a clearer basis for a socialist theory of ideas.

It is important to stress the fact that, despite our rejection of the rationalist liberal model, truth still plays a role as a factor in the diffusion of ideas. Self-reflection and validation are never obliterated. The daily interaction with reality keeps a practical check that strengthen the conceptions that makes sense on a day to day basis and eliminate those that don't fit practical experience. Ideas, practices and norms that are easy to validate first hand, that are integral to one's daily activities, are therefore less likely to be "imposed" through trust-based power relations. The same goes for moral principles: one's immediate needs and its immediate bond with family members, with neighbours, with coworkers, with friends, constitute an immediate experience of affection, of care, which generates a practical sense of morality. Self-reflection will refer to one's own needs and its ties with others, and one is likely to resist norms and values that contradicts this too much. This limits the capacity of a ruling class to impose a form of morality for their own sake.

Therefore, an implicit conception of reality and morality — rooted in daily life, immediate experience and self-reflection — is likely to persist and to resist attempts of a ruling class to change it. This poses an important limit to the power of trust-based transmission. Any ideology — defined as a coherent set of ideas — seeking to gain widespread popular adhesion, whether for the benefits of an elite, a particular group or for the sake of the working class, must "fit" with those immediate conceptions. These conceptions embed a certain "truth". Not a truth in the scientific sense, but rather a pragmatic truth, that is

validated on a mass scale by the daily life of workers. It is truth in the sense that the correspondence with reality is sufficient to sustain the underlying practices.

On this basis, it is possible to understand why ruling elites have never been able to really “alienate” working classes ideologically and obtain complete, willing submission. Among the direct experience lived by popular classes in class societies is the shared experience of exploitation, of inequality, of powerlessness and at times of suffering and death. This experience does not generate spontaneously conceptions of equality and a will to fight for liberation. Especially since the immediate morality generated by proximity bounds will be focused on the care of the members of one’s community, rather than a universalizing principle of solidarity and equality. It does, however, provide the backbone of dissent in its multiple forms. This dissent is not necessarily “active”, in the sense that the non-acceptance of the legitimacy of given social order does not necessarily lead to an active resistance and the feeling of dissatisfaction and injustice is not necessarily organized within a coherent ideology. In addition, this dissent can take forms that would be deemed aberrant for contemporary socialists. Dissatisfaction can be framed in racist, in conservative, in religious or in reformist terms, for example. It can also be extremely “corporatist”, in the sense that it prioritizes one’s own community, with little to no consideration for others sharing a situation of oppression. Nevertheless, whatever form it takes, this dissatisfaction is the basic fuel of disobedience, revolts and revolutions. This is the motor of what Gramsci called the contradictory consciousness of workers—divided between a conception of the world generated by the worker’s own experience and a conception of the world that the ruling class tried to impose.<sup>179</sup>

However, as it has been said, going from dissatisfaction to active political participation is far from automatic. Changing a given social structure requires a significant amount of social power—the actual level depending on the kind of change one seeks. The deeper the change, the more social power is likely to be needed. For small changes, it is possible that a given

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<sup>179</sup> Gramsci, 327.

ruling group will concede reforms if the opposition gathers just enough power to be a sufficient nuisance. For changes that would fundamentally undermine the ruling class's power, the social power required by the opposition will be massive since the ruling class will resist it to its last breath.

For ordinary people, however, social power is hard to build. By definition, in a class society, most of their time and resources are spent reproducing their own life and the rest is appropriated by the ruling class. Each individual has a low amount of residual labour time and resources to use for political change. They must therefore act collectively, and pool small amounts of time and resources into autonomous organizations dedicated to this end. But if these organizations either don't exist yet or are small, the "cost" of building the organization and convincing others to join in can seem prohibitive given the uncertainty of its chances of success. Furthermore, collective organizing requires skills, practical knowledge, that are often not "taught" by the structures controlled by the ruling class. They must be developed independently and transmitted among members of the working class. In a situation where those skills are rare, members of the working class are likely to waste energy, to have to learn by trials and errors, and make mistakes along the way which all raises the cost of organizing. In addition to this, canalizing dissatisfaction into a common project for change requires a common understanding of the source of dissatisfaction and its corresponding solution. Chances are that this common conception does not exist prior to the organization process—it must be created and then used to convince others.

At the centre of this process, especially in situations where the level of organization of dissidents is weak, are the ideologically motivated organizers. These are characterized by a motivation that goes beyond the immediate gains possible through the struggle. They identify themselves with the struggle, with the project of change. As the project becomes core to their identity, they feel that political organizing is a duty, notwithstanding their concrete chances of success. These "militants" are therefore likely to ignore the high costs of organizing and the high chances of failure. Doing so, they are the ones able to lay the long-term groundwork on which large popular organization can someday grow.

As organizations of resistance grow in power, as common conceptions on what is problematic and how to change it becomes widespread, as organizing skills are taught and diffused, the cost of getting involved in a project of change becomes more accessible and the chances of success seem greater. Popular organizations, as they mature, become a reservoir of skills, of knowledge, of information necessary to organize resistance. A great deal of these are practical and are transmitted in the practice of struggle from experienced organizers to newcomers. Like science and technology, to know *how to organize struggles* is not a theoretical knowledge that can be easily written in books and transmitted discursively. It requires the formation on a mass scale of working-class people, who will be able to organize their colleagues and transmit this knowledge themselves. Organizations *embed* these practices in their norms, in their processes of reproduction, in their way of operating. They act as a practical embodiment of this knowledge over time. The *infrastructure of dissent*, to use Alan Sears expression<sup>180</sup>, represents those organizations, those skills, those common conceptions which provide the basic resources to fuel a popular movement.

Dissatisfaction does not only fuel struggles endogenous to popular classes. Factions within a ruling class or groups seeking power can tap into dissatisfaction to provide for themselves a popular base for change that will benefit their own agenda. While groups who already control large amount of social power will not depend as much on mass popular support then working-class groups, this kind of support is useful to undermine the power base of other members of the ruling class.

The principle of the centrality of trust helps us understand how and to whom is directed popular dissatisfaction: is it neutralized, organized by a faction of the ruling class against another, or channelled by working-class organizations? A given configuration of trust relationships in a society constitutes a major explanatory factor of the dissemination of the political positioning of segments of the working class. The battle for “hegemony” is therefore not a simply a battle of ideas, but rather a long-term, infrastructural struggle for trust, for

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<sup>180</sup> Alan Sears, *The next New Left: The History of the Future* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2014).

*leadership.* Groups seeking change seek to undermine the trust in ruling class institutions and build trust relationship between their organization and segments of the working class.

## **PART III**

# **POTENTIAL**

The third part of this dissertation aims to provide examples and clarifications on the potential uses and developments for the concepts developed in chapters 4 and 5. Because the implications are far-reaching, it will not be possible to cover all the topics I would like to cover, and many of the topics covered here are treated superficially. I am conscious of this, but the goal is to demonstrate the potential fruitfulness of such a theory of power. If I am right and convincing to this effect, much more work will be needed to fully deploy this framework in the future.

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate more specifically how the theory of power can deploy itself when investigating the contemporary capitalist society. It seeks to solve some common problems encountered by contemporary organizers regarding our understanding of the multiplicity of oppressions, of the state, of the political economy of capitalism and the relation between those dimensions.

Chapters 8 and 9 are focused on the question of social change and revolution. They explore how the concepts of power, trust and practice change our understanding of social movements and revolutionary processes. They discuss the very definition of the socialist horizon, the ethical frame that should guide political action and sketches some broad strategies for organizers.

### **Chapter 6: Power and Intersectionality**

One of the most common charges against Marxism within contemporary activist circles concerns its class centric and capital reductionist approach. Many feel that such class-centric approach side steps their struggles as women, queer, black, Muslim, disabled or indigenous

persons. For the sake of inclusion and equality, it became essential for many to consider all forms of oppression as equal. This is embodied in long enumerations on leaflets, in political discourses and list of demands that acknowledges each particular form of domination. In this perspective, class becomes one factor among many.

This development poses a clear challenge in terms of strategy. Notwithstanding the legitimacy to consider equally each “oppression”, by elevating this logic to every statement and every action, militant groups become paralyzed by their own criteria of virtue. Furthermore, what constitutes an oppression and how to address it remains generally undefined. As we will see, even the most advanced theories of intersectionality, which fuel this trend, offers no real tool to identify the sources of oppression that should be the target of social movements.

Yet, despite these problems, we cannot simply toss away the contributions of intersectionality. Many of their criticisms are serious and must be addressed. This section seeks to demonstrate how Marxism reframed through the present theory of power can address both the limits of intersectionality and of Marxism on these issues. After discussing intersectionality, I will integrate some key insights from social reproduction theory and I will elaborate on the key new concept of this section: the structures of subordination.

### **Mainstream Intersectionality and the Matrix of Oppression**

Since the 1990s, the intersectional framework has probably become one of the most influential theoretical apparatus to inform left-wing activists. It gained traction as an elegant and practical way to solve the problems arising from the multiplication of claims of oppression.

In its original formulation, Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality did not aim at providing a universalizing framework to understand and challenge oppression. It was rather built to shed light on groups of people located at the “intersection” of multiple oppressed categories for which we could not account by the simple “addition” of already recognized oppression.

Therefore, Crenshaw did not provide a theory of what constituted a system of oppression nor a typology of existing oppressions and their sources. She rather led an inquiry on specific categories of people, such as specific communities of black working-class women, to reveal that their lived experience of oppression could not be summarized by the addition of the kinds of oppressions lived by working class people, by black people and by women in general.<sup>181</sup> In itself, this idea was not unheard of when Crenshaw published her original article. Ange-Marie Hancock demonstrates that it has a long history among activist circles<sup>182</sup>—as exemplified by the 1827 speech from Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” or the black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective Statement in 1974. The contribution of Crenshaw was to document this reality on an academic basis and coining the term *intersectionality*.<sup>183</sup>

Three decades later, the concept of intersectionality has significantly grown out of these bounds. In their introductory book on intersectionality, Sirma Bilge and Patricia Hill Collins, present intersectionality:

...as an analytic tool examines how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructing. Race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, ethnicity, nation, religion, and age are categories of analysis, terms that reference important social divisions. But they are also categories that gain meaning from power relations of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation.

One way of describing the organization of power identifies four distinctive yet interconnected domains of power: interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural.<sup>184</sup>

Here, intersectionality does not only investigate the *intersections*, but rather seeks to provide a global understanding on how multiple systems of oppression such as “racism, sexism,

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<sup>181</sup> Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

<sup>182</sup> Ange-Marie Hancock, *Intersectionality: An Intellectual History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 57–58.

<sup>183</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality*, Key Concepts Series (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016), 81.

<sup>184</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, 7.

heterosexism and class exploitation” are “intertwined and mutually constructing”. This is supplemented by a whole range of concepts defining power in four domains and tied with the idea of a “matrix of domination” as the key metaphor to explain the overall arrangement.

Despite this ambition, few texts from the intersectional literature really define the different systems of domination at work and provide criteria to identify and distinguish systems of domination. On these questions, the 2016 Bilge and Hill Collins book *Intersectionality* is probably the clearest, and yet, it leaves many concepts undefined. For example, they write that:

people’s lives and identities are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. Moreover, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, disability, ethnicity, nation, and religion, among others, constitute interlocking mutually constructing or intersecting systems of power.<sup>185</sup>

Yet, they never really explain what motivates this specific enumeration, how we define each of those terms and how they can be all considered *systems of power*. The underlying assumption in this enumeration, and in much of the intersectional literature, is that a system of power or domination is *any factor that contributes to discrimination*. It is implicitly attached to a liberal conception of justice, in which social hierarchies are not questioned in and for themselves. What is considered problematic are the unequal chances to access privileges. Bilge and Hill Collins use the sport metaphor of a “fair level field” to explain their understanding of social justice:

It doesn’t matter how you got to the field: all that matters once you are on the field is what you do on the field. The sport metaphor of a level playing field speaks to the desire of fairness. Whether winners or losers, this team sport rewards individual talent yet also highlights the collective team nature of achievement. When played well and unimpeded by suspect officiating, football rewards individual talent. In a world that is characterized by so much unfairness, competitive sports such as football become important venues for seeing how things should be.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, 26–27.

<sup>186</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, 8.

The World Cup case suggests that *competition is not inherently bad*. People accept the concept of winners and losers if the game itself is fair.<sup>187</sup>

What this conception of justice and oppression reveals, is that the tools developed by intersectional theory are not geared towards the understanding of power accumulation, in the sense of the current dissertation, but rather towards processes of selection and stratification. A good example of this is their conception of class. As most other intersection theorists, Patricia Hill Collins define class as “social groups differentiated from one another by economic status, cultural forms, practices, or ways of life. Social class refers to a group of people who share a common placement in a political economy”<sup>188</sup>. Class is therefore thought of in terms of socio-economic status, as professional groups. McCall, for example, uses the “wage ratios between college- and non-college-educated workers as a proxy for class inequality”<sup>189</sup>. Winker and Degele explicitly use a bourdieusian definition of class:

Class is derived from the social origin of a person, the cultural resource of education and profession as well as the resource of social networks and relationships (see Bourdieu, 1986). From this understanding of class, we deduce classisms, namely power relations perpetuating considerable income and wealth inequalities on the foundations of social origin, education and profession (see Weinbach, 2006: 89–101). Classisms explicitly do not relate themselves exclusively to economics and politics, but instead affect all areas of society including family, living conditions, voluntary work and, of course, housework (see also Walby, 2007: 458—61)<sup>190</sup>

Defined in this way, class becomes a factor of discrimination based on the skills, education and professional origins of one’s parents, rather than a relationship of exploitation. It describes the segmentation of the labour market rather than the relationship between employees and employers.

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<sup>187</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, 29.

<sup>188</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 300.

<sup>189</sup> Leslie McCall, *Complex Inequality: Gender, Class, and Race in the New Economy* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 33.

<sup>190</sup> Gabriele Winker and Nina Degele, “Intersectionality as Multi-Level Analysis: Dealing with Social Inequality,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 2011): 55.

Another clue that intersectional theory of power is mostly a theory of discrimination and stratification resides in the definitions of the four domains of power by Bilge and Hill Collins. The interpersonal domain of power is defined as “how people relate to one another, and who is advantaged or disadvantaged within social interactions”, how the “multiple nature of individual identities and how varying combinations of class, gender, race, sexuality, and citizenship categories differentially position each individual”, and “influence one another to shape each individual biography”<sup>191</sup>. The disciplinary domain of power includes processes that “operates by disciplining people in ways that put people’s lives on paths that makes some options seem viable and other out of reach”. It is responsible for the “different treatment regarding which rules apply to them and how those rules will be implemented”<sup>192</sup>. The structural domain of power is about how “social institutions are organized to reproduce [...] subordination over time”. And subordination is exemplified as “exclusion from the best jobs, schools, health care, and housing”.<sup>193</sup> The cultural domain of power is the power to produce ideology in a conventional sense: masking inequalities and legitimizing the other powers by manufacturing “messages that playing fields are level, that all competitions are fair, and that any resulting patterns of winners and losers have been fairly accomplished”<sup>194</sup>. The unifying theme of those definitions of “power” is discrimination and stratification. These are processes that make the “playing field” unequal for individuals, based on a combination of “class, gender, race, sexuality and citizenship”. Interpersonal, disciplinary and structural domains of power are essentially different social levels where this discrimination occurs: between individuals, within organizations, and across society.

Intersectionality, as a framework for social justice, is therefore implicitly biased towards a liberal conception of “equality of chances”. It has the merit of revealing how contemporary societies do not live up to the standards of the liberal meritocratic ideals, that advantages and disadvantages are unevenly distributed along a multiplicity of factors. Understood from

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<sup>191</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 7–8.

<sup>192</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, 9.

<sup>193</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 277.

<sup>194</sup> Hill Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 10–11.

the perspective of real, lived forms of discrimination, marginalization and exclusion, it makes sense that many theorist of intersectionality insist that all “categories” of oppression are equal:

What is more interesting, however, is the way in which Sandoval forces an ontological equality of gender, race/ethnicity, and class rather than subordinate positions for one or more of them [...] The shift forced social movements to rethink their previous notions of oppositional group consciousness. This ontological shift that emanates from activists’ unwillingness to subsume their contestation of multiple oppressions under a single axis of marginalization—and a more expansive list of said categories—has a very specific ramification for intersectionality.<sup>195</sup>

This equality between oppressions, taking the rhetorical form of an often repeated “list of oppressions”, is a central tenet of intersectionality. It makes sense, from a mainly anti-discrimination point of view, to argue for this equality, since no discrimination of this list is more or less legitimate than another. However, while each factor might seem as equivalent in the selection and stratification process, using a uniform and undertheorized conception of “system of oppression” hinders our capacity to seriously address them.

Furthermore, because intersectional theory does not specifically look at how social power, in the sense of control over human activities and resources, is shaped and accumulated, it tends to erase capital accumulation and state power from its theory. Class is not understood in relationship to the control of capital, but rather a category of job stratification, among other factors. As for the state, it is understood in a quasi-pluralist manner

as a secondary institution whose role is to strengthen the systems of domination or to curb their most pernicious effects [...] The state is criticized for the harmful influence it exercises as an institution on the race-class-sex systems of domination and unequal power relations, but not for being itself a system of domination.<sup>196</sup>

These gaps don’t invalidate intersectional theory. I believe the present theory of power can clarify many of these questions while incorporating the most illuminating aspect of

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<sup>195</sup> Hancock, *Intersectionality*, 59–60.

<sup>196</sup> Francis Dupuis-Déri, “Is the State Part of the Matrix of Domination and Intersectionality? An Anarchist Inquiry,” *Anarchist Studies* 24, no. 1 (2016): 38–42.

intersectional research. In order to do this, we can recognize that the writings of authors such as Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlee Crenshaw are important to understand stratification and selection processes described in chapter 4. Yet, their failure to understand the specificities proper to power accumulation, stratification and selection seriously undermines their theory as a general framework that could be used strategically for emancipatory politics.

### **Social Reproduction Theory and Power**

The recent development of social reproduction theory (SRT) offers a much better starting point to clarify the nature, the ties and the co-constitution of racism, sexism and capitalism. SRT offer a solution that is broadly compatible with the present theory of power, and on which we can build to solve analytical and strategic challenges inherited from the “multiplication of claims of oppression” puzzle.

Social reproduction theory starts from a recognition that the definition of production and class was too narrow within mainstream Marxism. Tithi Battacharya explains that:

The fundamental insight of SRT is, simply put, that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole. The notion of labor is conceived here in the original sense in which Karl Marx meant it, as “the first premise of all human history”—one that, ironically, he himself failed to develop fully.<sup>197</sup>

Therefore, if historical materialism is concerned by the reproduction of society as a whole, and must include human labour in its broadest sense of “ ‘practical human activity’ that creates all the things, practices, people, relations and ideas constituting the wider social totality”<sup>198</sup>, then wage labour only captures a fraction of the total labour that is required to reproduce capitalist societies as a whole. More specifically, the very reproduction of the

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<sup>197</sup> Battacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* Introduction.

<sup>198</sup> Susan Ferguson, “Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms,” *Historical Materialism* 24, no. 2 (June 30, 2016): 48.

labour power bought through wages is dependent on this unwaged labour. This is the point of Nancy Fraser when she defines social reproduction:

The work of birthing and socializing the young is central to [the process of social reproduction], as is caring for the old, maintaining households and family members, building communities, and sustaining the shared meanings, affective dispositions, and horizons of value that underpin social co-operation. In capitalist societies, much, though not all, of this activity goes on outside the market—in households, neighborhoods, civil-society associations, informal networks, and public institutions such as schools; relatively little of it takes the form of wage labor.<sup>199</sup>

SRT therefore provides a key insight on articulations of sexism and capitalism. By including feminized unwaged labour as a fundamental type of work without which the capitalist society could simply not function, it reveals that capitalist production and social reproduction performed outside wage labour are dependent on each other, and neither can be fully explained without taking the other into account. Furthermore, if reproductive labour must always fulfill the reproductive needs of society, the way it does so is not functionally determined by capital. It is rather shaped by unique combinations of precapitalistic forms of families<sup>200</sup>, of norms and ideologies<sup>201</sup>, of woman struggles and state interventions<sup>202</sup>.

The definition of class and class struggle is therefore expanded:

The working class, for the revolutionary Marxist, must be perceived as everyone in the producing class who has in their lifetime participated in the totality of reproduction of society—irrespective of whether that labor has been paid for by capital or remained unpaid.<sup>203</sup>

With this definition, the working class is no longer restricted to wage labourers, and class struggle is not restricted to struggles on the workplace. Struggles on broad issues that affect

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<sup>199</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>200</sup> Ferguson, "Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms," 50.

<sup>201</sup> Salar Mohandesi and Emma Teitelman, "Without Reserves," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>202</sup> Serap Saritas Oran, "Pensions and Social Reproduction," in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>203</sup> Bhattacharya, "How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class."

the living conditions of the working class as a whole are class struggles, “from the struggles for water in Cochabamba and Ireland, against land eviction in India, and for fair housing in the United Kingdom and elsewhere”<sup>204</sup>.

At the core of SRT lies the very definition of *social reproduction*. This definition is not always clear, and there is often an implicit association of social reproduction with biological reproduction and domestic work. Most contemporary authors of SRT seek to go beyond this, but expressions such as “social reproduction labour” is often associated with unwaged labour, as if social reproduction corresponded to the non-waged sphere, and production to the market-mediated sphere. A better and clearer definition comes from Bhattacharya. She defines social reproduction by counterposing the circuit of capital reproduction to the circuit of labour power reproduction. Capital reproduction requires the realization of surplus value, while labour power reproduction requires the satisfaction of the workers' needs. In this perspective, social reproduction is not a separate sphere from capitalist production—it includes some of the same processes but looks at them from the point of view of the worker. For example, from the point of view of capital, a given product is a means to make profit. The circuit of production starts with money, buys labour and means of production, and ends up with more money. From the point of view of the worker, the same product is embedded in a circuit of reproduction. The worker gains money from wage labour, spend it buying the product, consume it to fulfill its needs and lives to sell his labour another day. This is why “the same for labor power, commodities themselves reveal their dual functions”<sup>205</sup>. But from the point of view of the worker, the circuit of labour power reproduction is not completely fulfilled by capitalistically made products. This is where unwaged work comes into the picture. If this unwaged work could be labelled “reproductive labour”, one must remember that this kind of work is not ontologically less productive than waged work. The use value it creates is ultimately of the same nature.

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<sup>204</sup> Bhattacharya.

<sup>205</sup> Bhattacharya.

There is a general compatibility of these stances with the theory of power exposed in Part II of this dissertation: labour is understood in the broad sense of *human activity*, capitalist production is understood as a fraction of the total productive activities, the definition of the working class is not based on the specific status of the waged worker, but rather in the social position in the overall structure, and a partial autonomy is recognized to spheres of activities that fall outside direct capitalist control.

### **Spheres of Production and Structures of Appropriation**

Social reproduction theory offers a powerful expansion of Marxism and a good starting point to understand the relations between capitalism, sexism and racism, but the present theory of power can provide some clarifications to improve on it. More precisely, I believe it is useful to distinguish structures of power appropriation, like capitalism and the state system, from structures of subordination like racism and sexism, and situate their relationship within the reproduction of society as a whole.

In chapter 4, we tied the notion of power to production, to human's practical activity. Collective power arises from human collaboration and the pooling of resources. From there, we defined social power as the control over decision-making processes of collective power embedded in organizations. Power appropriation occurs in organizations that systematically appropriate social resources and labour under the control of a minority. A structure of power appropriation is the *force field* created by a large number of organizations operating along similar processes, and structuring society along their norms and practices. Structures of power appropriation are the armatures of hierarchy—they create the possibility of positions of power and their subordinate counterpart.

In contemporary societies, as it will be explained in further detail in the next chapter, there are two main organizational forms in which power is accumulated: capital and states. These are distinct structures of power appropriation, but their historical constitution is so mutually nested that they form an inseparable tandem within capitalist societies. States are

characterized by the *way* in which power accumulated: territorial control over a given population with a capacity to legislate and tax. Capital, on the other hand, is power accumulated in the form of private property exchangeable on the market and valued for its capacity to extract profits.

In addition to these *forms* of power appropriated, we must characterize the *processes* by which their power is accumulated. Contemporary states' main power source comes from its capacity for domestic taxation, but they can also engage in imperial and colonial extractions. Imperialism and colonialism are state-driven forms of accumulation. The capitalistic process of accumulation is characterized by exploitation of wage labour within seemingly fair voluntary market exchanges.

Capitalist corporations and states do not subsume the totality of production, however. Households, communities and associations are also sites of production. They are forms of collective power which fulfill social needs, as demonstrated by social reproduction feminists. I do not feel the need to label the labour performed outside capital and the state as "reproductive" since its ontological status is not fundamentally different.<sup>206</sup> For example, the need for education will be fulfilled, regardless if a child is educated by its family, a community volunteer-run school, a church-backed school, a state-funded school, or a private-for-profit school. What differs is the kind of organization in which labour takes place and the relations that structure it within the broader process of social reproduction.

Household deserve a mention, because even if the average family organization rarely accumulate much power (the free-time workforce of a few adults at most, and their immediate material possessions), they are fundamental to the lived experience of the vast majority. No single family can accumulate a significant amount of power on the basis of kinship. Powerful families are powerful because they accumulate power in the form of capital or access to the state, not from the control of a family member's workforce, or the use

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<sup>206</sup> As this might become clear since Chapter 1, I think we could simply abandon the distinction between productive and unproductive labour.

of immediate material possessions within the family residence. Households are sites of production, they are forms of collective power, and as we will see, those are sites of gendered subordination. Yet, contemporary households are not significant forms of power accumulation, because they do not allow significant recursive process of power accumulation. The patriarchal household can be considered a minor form of power appropriation, because the patriarch is predominant in the decision-making processes over collectivized labour and resources. The tradition patriarchal marriage would be the main process through which the patriarch acquires control over the body and labour of his wife and her future children. Yet, feminist struggles have significantly reduced this possibility in many places on the globe.

Churches, civil associations and political parties are, for their part, forms of collective power organization that are different from capital and states. Their power is mostly derived from the informal influence their organization hold over others. In other terms, most of their power is accumulated in the form of “social factors”—they tap into trust networks to achieve their goals. Lobbying groups will establish trust relationships with individuals wielding state power, while social movement organizations seek mass support to organize counter-movements and acts of disobedience. Political parties, likewise, are relatively powerless until they can tap directly into state power. Until then, they are primarily based on the power of informal influence, competing with rivals to access the state—notably by converting their influence into votes. Churches, civil associations and political parties are therefore “minor” processes of power accumulation.

Contemporary societies could therefore be characterized by four main spheres of production, with their corresponding form of power, processes of accumulation and relative power.

### Spheres of production and power accumulation

<b>Sphere of production</b>	<b>Form of power accumulation</b>	<b>Process of power accumulation</b>	<b>Relative power <i>per unit</i></b>
Market-mediated	Capital	Exploitation and monopolization	Major
State-organized	State	Taxation, colonialism and imperialism	Major
Personal/Domestic	Patriarchal household	Patriarchal marriage	Negligible
Community-based	Churches, associations, political parties	Trust and influence building	Minor

This does not imply that all production would necessarily be embedded in a power-appropriating structure. Collective power, in the sense of “production in common” can exist without being embedded in a power-appropriating and centralizing structure. But power appropriation is impossible without an anchor in collective power. The proletarianization of workers, the privatization of common lands, of public assets, and the growth of capitalism in general is a sort of “colonization” of the capitalist power structure over previously “non-capitalist” forms of production. And in the same way that a power structure can take over parts of collective power, it is possible through struggles and social changes to liberate portions of production. Domestic production, for example, is now less subjected to a patriarchal form of appropriation than it was 50 years ago, thanks to feminist struggles.

The different spheres of production are not transhistorical—they represent specific social arrangements in which a given activity is usually performed in a given setting. The four spheres identified here is a specific typology for contemporary western capitalist societies.

Social reproduction feminists focus a lot on non-capitalist forms of production to reveal the centrality of public schooling, domestic work, social welfare, church communities and so on. But by labelling all these phenomena as “social reproduction”, one cannot reveal their

specific dynamics. I believe, therefore, that there is a significant advantage in identifying these four spheres to understand how production and reproduction of the totality are done, specifying the context of each work.

### **Structures of Subordination**

Now, the question is: where do things like sexism, racism, heterosexism or ableism fit into this picture? My proposition is to consider them as transversal *structures of subordination*. But before delving into this concept, some preliminary remarks are necessary.

First, race has become a catch-all term that goes far beyond discrimination based on skin color. The idea of “racialization” imply that discrimination based on religion, language, skin color, cultural features such as food or clothing, can all be understood under the umbrella term of “racism”. The basis on which a group becomes “racialized” must necessarily be historicized to be understood, especially since racialization is not a unidirectional process, and groups that were once considered “subaltern” can be reintegrated into the majority.

Secondly, the relegation of racialized minorities to an inferior stratum does not necessarily have a single source, a single explanation, easily identifiable by a system that we could name “racism”. States, for example, can engage in power accumulation through colonial and imperial practices which subject foreign and indigenous populations to violent extraction of resources and labour. These processes of accumulation will create stratification between citizens, indigenous and foreign dominated populations. As these groups are also defined by differentiated cultures, colonialism and imperialism are likely to be legitimated on a racist basis, and it is likely to create racist institutions as a by-product. Churches, in their rivalry for practitioners, can also fuel religious hatred to achieve positions of power. In the process, they can *racialize* the followers of another religion and infuse other institutions with their “racist” norms and practices. The racialization of Muslims in the United States (and much of the western world) is fuelled by both dynamics today. And yet, this form of racism has a very different institutional basis than racism against Afro-Americans. Abolishing “racism” has

therefore different meanings and targets depending on which groups seeks to free itself. Afro-Americans had to abolish slavery and legal segregation, and now they have to take on the racist carceral system, the informal segregation, and the wealth gap. As for American Muslims, they rather face religious hatred, imperialist interests and its corresponding propaganda. Different forms of racism might also share common dynamics and sources.

Third, terms like *racism* and *patriarchy* refer to something more than discriminatory processes. While race and gender are factors of discrimination, racialized minorities and women also experience their subordination in dimensions that go beyond being allocated to inferior positions within the state and private corporations. Police brutality against Afro-Americans and sexual violence against women, for example, are not forms of “discrimination”. They are both means of active subordination and products of the relative power deprivation produced by discrimination.

Fourth, as mentioned earlier, the oppression of women is also realized through the family household *as a power appropriation process*. Within the emblematic patriarchal household, women are subjected to the decision-making process of the patriarch—the male head of the house. Her activity, including domestic labour, sexuality, care work, and childbearing, is subjected to the decisions of her husband. While this patriarchal form has been considerably eroded by feminist struggles, most western households are still characterized by inequalities in favour of men in the decisions related to collectivized labour and resources of the household. Even if each household is quite weak in the big picture of power accumulation, the spread of “domestic” patriarchy creates a force field strong enough to reproduce itself. Taken individually, there is no reason that could explain why any particular man could impose its will in this manner on any women. But the combined effect of discrimination against women within private corporations and states, and the domestic patriarchal force field, creates the conditions in which men are tangentially advantaged within a couple, and can leverage these advantages to gain more control over the household.

Something like *racism* and *sexism* are therefore not clearly defined social systems, with their own autonomous logic. They are rather transversal dynamics, which anchor themselves in power structures. They are mainly processes of stratification and selection, but they are also variously shaped forms of violence and discipline. And as stressed by theoreticians of intersectionality, they do not affect uniformly one “category” of people. The sexism is experienced differently by Muslim women, black women, wealthy CEO women and poor working-class white women.

From these observations, we can define a *structure of subordination* as any set of norms and practices that are embedded within collective organizations, that defines a social group and discriminates against it in the process of filing the strata of hierarchal organizations, and uses the different disciplinary processes to ensure the co-operation of the subordinated group. Structures of subordination are always attached to structures of power and always tied to processes of selection and stratification. Yet, they are not *reducible* to them. They exist with and through them.

They are *structures* because they are *force fields*. They are norms, practices and ideas, embedded in a large number of organizations, which shapes and structures the environment. Their influence on society *as structures* depend on the power of the organizations that sustain them, and the proportion of organizations that embed their core norms, practices and ideas. Because of the principle of the primacy of practice, one must remember that those norms, practices and ideas are much more than “discourses”. They are embedded in power structures at the level of daily practice, in the very way of doing things and taking decisions.

Because all structures of power appropriation create unequal positions of power and privilege, they must necessarily embed sets of norms and practices that assign individuals to the different positions. Therefore, *all structures of power appropriation embed structures of subordination*—they require them. They don’t necessarily require a *specific form of subordination*, but some form of discrimination *must* exist to fill the spots. Furthermore, maintaining the stability of the structure requires the employment of different mechanisms

of stability (coercion, normative adhesion, privilege distribution and disorganization) along the logic of the structure of subordination, to legitimize the principles of subordination and discipline the subordinated. Therefore, if a specific form of power appropriation does not necessarily require a specific form of subordination, once the two structures are linked they fuel each other.

For example, the Afro-American structure of subordination changed over time. Originally, slave trade from Africa and the slave-based structure of power accumulation created and sustained this form of subordination. Because the plantation system was the main motor of accumulation in antebellum America, it projected its racist norms across the United States. Structures of subordination, to reproduce themselves overtime, must affect the socialization of all relevant participants of this structure. Subordinated groups must be disciplined, coerced and disorganized, to prevent resistance to their subordination. Potential allies to the subordinated must be discouraged from making alliances or co-opted by the distribution of privileges. Those who participate in the process of subordination, such as law makers, law enforcers, managers, and, in this case, slave masters, must adhere to the core principles of this subordination or be given substantial privileges for their adhesion. The combined and differentiated effects of coercion, disorganization, norm shaping and privilege distribution irradiated the practices and norms of Afro-American subordination way outside the slave-based structures of power accumulation. It infused (to different levels, and in dialectical relationship with those who resisted) states, capitalist corporations, households, civil associations, churches and so on. When slavery was abolished, the core motor of Afro-American subordination disappeared, but the structure of subordination subsisted through the other organizations it had irradiated. Especially since plantation owners lost their right to use slavery, but not the ownership over their plantation, they remained in a powerful position<sup>207</sup> while deeply infused by racist norms and practices. The subsequent persistence

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<sup>207</sup> Philipp Ager, Leah Platt Boustan, and Katherine Eriksson, "The Intergenerational Effects of a Large Wealth Shock: White Southerners After the Civil War" (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, March 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3386/w25700>.

of Afro-American subordination demonstrates that, even if the capitalist economy does not have, strictly speaking, a functional *need* for racism, racist norms and practices, once embedded into powerful organizations of the capitalist society, reproduce themselves overtime *through the organizations in which they are embedded*. Therefore, if capitalism can theoretically exist without racism, the structures of power accumulation in America were built *as* racists from their origins. It makes sense therefore, to use an expression of Cedric J. Robinson, to speak of “racial capitalism”.<sup>208</sup>

If slavery was a powerful source of racism in America, many other modern racist structures of subordination are historically fuelled by colonial and imperial state-driven accumulation. In other words, Western state colonial and imperial enterprises, aimed at capturing resources and cheap labour abroad, embedded, within the state and its collaborators, a powerful set of practices and norms that were necessary to maintain this kind of power accumulation. The subjects of colonization and imperialism were de facto constructed as subordinated subject, in practice and in the norms and beliefs. Like the end of slavery, the decline of colonization removed a central power-accumulation structure that embedded those norms and practices. Yet, imperialism simply changed its face, as private corporations continued to seek cheap resources and labour abroad. In this context, Susan Ferguson explains that:

Depending upon which spaces different bodies occupy within this hierarchical world-system, they have greater or lesser access or entitlement to quality education, healthcare and neighbourhoods, to safe workplaces and commutes to and from work, to basic rights and freedoms. As a result, people’s labour and lives are differently valued within capitalism [...] In other words, the socio-geographic location of bodies — and the labour involved in socially reproducing those bodies — matters: ostensibly similar and equal bodies become different, and differently valued, bodies within capitalist societies. Existing discourses and practices of racialisation and racism are reshaped to help justify and systematise this inequality, just as new such discourses and practices are invented.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 42.

<sup>209</sup> Ferguson, “Intersectionality and Social-Reproduction Feminisms,” 53.

Structures of subordination are therefore not simply add-ons to power structures. The concept of power appropriation structure aims to specify the organizations in which power is accumulated and the process that fuels this accumulation. This process partly shapes the hierarchical structure of organizations, and allows a minority to amass vast amounts of power. But structures of subordination will have a determining effect on the way stratification occurs within those structures, and will shape the selection processes. They have a recursive effect if they “help” the structure of accumulation to become more efficient: they fuel the accumulating structure in which their norms and practices are embedded, which itself fuels their influence.

Since structures of subordination “irradiate” society from their main sources of power, and because they orient the way socialization is done through a more general process of social reproduction, then their norms and practices will tend to shape transversally all types of organizations. This is how popular organizations such as unions, community organizations and popular political parties will adopt, without even planning it, dominant forms of discrimination.

This being said, what are the criteria to identify a group that would be subjected to a structure of subordination?

Disability, for example, do not require any “ableism” as a separate normative system to exist for it to be a criterion for discrimination under capitalism. Because private corporations will primarily select their workers in relationship with their efficiency for the corporation, they will discriminate those who are not “able” to perform the task at hand. But the fact that discrimination based on efficiency is at the very core of capitalist power accumulation does not imply that it is not *also* ableist. This ableism is a side product of the capitalist dynamic, but it is nevertheless a criterion of subordination.

Therefore, all factors of discrimination, used to separate, select and stratify groups and individuals should be regarded as a potential structure of subordination. This means that,

under some circumstances, structures of subordination could be deemed legitimate. For example, keeping minors in a subordinate position to adults until they reach a certain age makes sense, even in an egalitarian society. It is a form of subordination, since society precisely remove them of certain rights and gives authority over them to their parents and educational system. Therefore, the concept of “structure of subordination”, like the concept of power, is descriptive. It is used to identify and reveal the different norms and practices that stratify, discriminate and select some to the detriment of others. What specific structures should be challenged and politicized is a matter of public debate and struggles.

A consequence of this is that the socio-economic concept of class as professional groups makes sense as a structure of subordination. To avoid confusions with the Marxist conception of class, it would make sense to speak of professional categories or strata. On this, the Bourdieusian analysis of the reproduction of “classes” — understood in the sense of professional strata — illustrate a structure of subordination based on a differentiated education, cultures and norms. This structure is deeply embedded inside capitalism, and profoundly structures the way wage scales are built.

The complete list of structures of subordination is therefore potentially very long at any given moment, and the exact dividing lines that can differentiate one sort of subordination from another can be thin. For example, the same kinds of norms and practices that subordinate women also fuel the subordination of non-heterosexual orientations. Does that make heterosexism and sexism a single structure of subordination because they share a “source” of subordination, or two different ones because the groups in question are different? The same problem arises when one tries to define racism. The subordination of Afro-Americans in the United States doesn’t have the same sources as the subordination of Latinx, Asians or Muslims. Terms like racism and white supremacy describe a general trend, but each group could be understood on the basis of partly common dynamics, and partly specific institutions and practices.

For academic purposes, it would be worthwhile to identify the different processes and groups implied, the main nodes of power that reproduces them, and layout a very detailed map of subordination in a given moment and time. Yet, this level of detail might not be necessary for militant groups and popular education. The exact typology of the structures of subordination should therefore be defined in terms of its usefulness to understand the main problems we seek to address.

Finally, a contentious issue dividing feminists and anti-racists is the question of who “benefits” from their subordination. The socialist answer as usually been to point out the ruling class as the ultimate beneficiary of those divisions.<sup>210</sup> Radical feminists and materialist feminists have rather accused men to be the ones really profiting from women’s subordination.<sup>211</sup> Many anti-racists make the same argument for whites, or western citizens in the case of imperialism. Those questions are important for social movements, because they ultimately define who is the main adversary, who is the target of the struggle, and who are the allies. The concepts of power appropriation, stratification and subordination can help clarify those debates.

To answer these questions, one must ask: what would it change if we would abolish a given structure of subordination? Who would have something to gain and who would have something to lose?

Within the working class, stratum are levels of “privilege” without significant distribution of power. The abled college educated white heterosexual cis American citizen professional men probably lead a comfortable life. Yet, like other workers, he must obey his boss at the job and has no real influence over the state. He has privileges, but little power. The subordination of racialized minorities and women benefited him mainly because it raised his chances of getting a good job—removing competition on the labour market at his level. Yet, it is *because*

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<sup>210</sup> Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* (London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019).

<sup>211</sup> Christine Delphy, *L’ennemi principal : 1. Économie, politique du patriacat*. (Paris: Syllepse, 1998).

*he occupies higher stratum positions* that he receives those privileges, not because he is among the groups against which there is no discrimination. As long as he holds this position, the abolition of sexism and racism would not affect him much.

Or taken from another angle, an abled college educated white heterosexual cis American citizen men that ends up in lowly paid precarious job, crippling under college debts, will not benefit significantly from the structural subordination of blacks and women. The fact that he is not likely to get raped, beaten by the police or insulted by others would not be “removed” if sexism and racism would have been abolished. In other words, acts of violence against women and minorities don’t benefit white men in general. These forms of coercion and violence are part of the reproduction processes of subordination. These processes benefit others only indirectly, by tangentially pushing targeted groups away from positions of privilege and power and reducing competition.

Of course, because subordinating norms and practices penetrate the culture of daily interactions, of spontaneous organizations, of households, of communities, it will also generate some minor inequalities outside power structures. But those inequalities are inherently limited compared to those anchored in structures of power accumulation.

The pyramidal nature of hierarchy, and the limited number of really “privileged” positions means that most ordinary people will be excluded from those, even if they are less discriminated against. Therefore, most whites have little to lose, in terms of material privilege, from the abolition of racist structures of subordination. Most do not benefit significantly from it—only the handful few who got the privileged positions *because* of the reduced competition from people of color. This being said, the fact that some who are not the target of structures of subordination end up with little privilege does not make them automatically allies. Despite their lack of privilege and power, they might behave in racist and sexist ways, and perceive anti-racist and feminist struggles as attacks on their identity. As we will see in chapter 8, changing this kind of culture requires long-term fight for hegemony and trust.

The answer is not the same, however, if we speak of imperialism and colonialism. Because imperialism and colonialism are not structures of subordination, but rather *processes of appropriation*, they benefit directly a group by extracting resources and labour from indigenous peoples and foreign nations. Now, colonialism and imperialism are primarily organized by states, which are themselves centrally controlled by a portion of the ruling class. The main beneficiary of colonial and imperial enterprises are therefore states and their corporate allies. But in order to secure support from their own populations, imperialist and colonial state can distribute privileges in terms of income derived from those processes. This would place those who benefit from those privileges in a situation where the abolition of imperialism and colonialism would make them lose something.

Because the sexist structure of subordination has been historically tied to the patriarchal family as a small-scale structure of power inequality, the abolition of sexism would also imply the abolition of the patriarchal family. In which case, men who could control the body, sexuality and domestic labour of their wife within patriarchal families will also lose those “benefits”.

### **Strategic Implications**

These conceptual clarifications are fundamental for emancipatory politics. First, it reveals that the abolition of a given structure of subordination, such as racism against Afro-American, requires identifying the main sources of power on which its norms and practices are fuelled, diffused and reproduced. This source might not be the same for racism against other communities.

Second, the abolition of a structure of subordination does not change the hierarchical nature of society—it will change the modalities of hierarchy. It will improve the lives of those who were subjected to coercion because of it, and it will raise the chances of the previously subordinated communities for social mobility. But in the end, the pyramidal structure will continue to assign a majority of people to the low ranks of the infrastructure of power.

Therefore, and third, to attain real equality, it is the power structures of accumulation themselves that must be transformed. But even if major social changes might significantly democratize society, it might not completely destroy the structures of appropriation. After a revolutionary process, new ways of organizing, deemed better but still imperfect, will probably perpetuate forms of power inequality. Because of the transversal nature of structures of subordination, it is probable that the ones that existed under the capitalist society infuse the new structures. Therefore, a dedicated attention to fight problematic dynamics of subordination must be organized if one seeks to prevent them from re-emerging.

## Chapter 7: Power in Capitalist Societies

From the insight of social reproduction theory, according to which we must start from the reproduction of society as a whole, we have defined four typical social forms of *contemporary* production: market-mediated, state-organized, personal/domestic and community-based. Each part of this whole is necessary for the rest and are deeply intertwined with each other. The sum of this production is the collective power generated by a given society. Structures of power appropriation harness this collective power, in order to put it under the control of a minority—a ruling class. The typical form in which this social power is accumulated in contemporary capitalist societies is dual: capital and the state. It is on this basis that we define two structures of power appropriation: capitalism and the state system. Those two structures grew together, and their current forms are relatively new in world history. Over the last 250 years, they displaced other forms of power accumulation, restructured production and incorporated “inside” their structure a growing proportion of productive activities. To clarify this process and the usefulness of the present theory of power to understand capitalism and states, it is worthwhile to clarify their respective definition and make a quick overview of this historical process.

### Defining Capitalism

Robert Brenner and Political Marxists define capitalism in terms of *market dependency*. Capitalist social relations exist when, on one side, workers are dispossessed of their means of subsistence and are dependent on market revenue to buy what they need. On the other side, the exploiters must be unable to use direct coercion to extract surpluses. The capitalist class is therefore also market dependent to generate their revenue.<sup>212</sup> This distinguishes the capitalist class from previous ruling classes in history: slave masters, patricians, lords and kings could use direct coercion to force their subalterns to produce what they wanted. Under

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<sup>212</sup> Brenner, “Property and Progress: Where Adam Smith Went Wrong,” 60.

capitalism, the capitalist class must hire employees and compete on the market to realize their profits.

This definition can be problematic if we assume an equivalence between totality and the mode of production when it comes to analyzing if a society is “capitalistic” or not. The criteria of market dependency and the incapacity of the ruling class to use direct coercion is not always clear cut. For example, Brenner attempts to distinguish medieval markets from capitalist markets by arguing that:

Like virtually all other feudal actors, merchants found that their private property and economic reproduction had an irreducibly political aspect. Indeed, the best way for merchants to increase their profits was, very often, to strengthen their companies’ trading privileges.<sup>213</sup>

Brenner’s logic here is that, since medieval merchant’s profits were secured because of political privileges, they were not *market dependent* per se—and therefore these were not capitalistic social relations. Along the same lines, Charles Post<sup>214</sup> argues that planters in antebellum America were not in a capitalistic social relation, since they could use coercion against their slaves to increase their surpluses.<sup>215</sup> Another political Marxist, Gary Blank<sup>216</sup>, argues that contemporary China is not a capitalistic economy, because the many poor Chinese still have access to land and Chinese corporations are not fully market dependent since they are shielded by the state against bankruptcy. Ellen Wood also argues that the commercial success of medieval Venice and Florence was based on military force, on the direct military control of markets. In the same way, the Dutch colonial enterprise of the 17th and 18th centuries was driven by geopolitical state power rather than a dynamic of capital accumulation.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Brenner, 76.

<sup>214</sup> Post, *The American Road to Capitalism*, 104–21.

<sup>215</sup> This position is not consensual among political marxists. See Clegg, “Capitalism and Slavery,” 20–22.

<sup>216</sup> Gary Blank, *Is the East Still Red? Socialism and the Market in China* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 65–70.

<sup>217</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (London: Verso, 2005), 44–72.

This disqualification of medieval commerce, American slavery, contemporary China, and western colonialism from the definition of “capitalism” has, however, a curious side effect: it reveals that capitalism, defined in the way Brenner does, never fully characterized the dominant economic system. If contemporary Chinese corporations were not capitalistic organizations because they are protected from bankruptcy by state intervention, then most of the largest western corporations would also be excluded. The same goes for profits derived from “political privilege”: military contracts excluding foreign corporations for security reasons, state contracts given to local corporations for electoral reasons, selective trade rights and tax exemptions to attract capital investments, as well as direct government subsidies are all routine political privilege used in capitalistic economies. To exclude the military control of markets from capital accumulation is also highly suspect, as the main centres of capital accumulation—such as England, France, Germany, Japan and the United States to name a few—were all deeply involved in colonial and military enterprises aimed at controlling foreign markets during periods that were supposed to be qualified as capitalist countries.

If one assumes that we can capture the dynamic of the “totality” by understanding the mode of production (or the social-property relations), the restrictive definition of capitalism by Political Marxists is problematic. Yet, if we leave aside the obligation to characterize the totality of social relations, and accept that various dynamics of power accumulation can co-exist in a society, then it is possible to use this definition of capitalism without running into the same dead end.

It is therefore possible to argue that, what is *typical of capitalist accumulation* is the accumulation of power through market-dependent exchanges. We can define the “core” of capitalism around the institution of wage labour and market competition. From there, however, the strategies available to capitalists and their corporations to accumulate capital are not strictly oriented on innovations and labour cost-cutting. The most powerful corporations actually instrumentalize the state on a frequent basis to get contracts, sabotage competition, obtain privileges, get access to foreign markets, shield them from failure, or

secure patents derived from public research. None of these behaviours respond to the ideal type of market capitalism, yet all of them are efficient and are frequently used to accumulate capital.

The reason why political Marxists insist so much on defining capitalism on the basis of market dependency is because it is functional to their focus on the origins of capitalism and their contribution to the great divergence debate<sup>218</sup>. Their recurrent argument is that the Industrial Revolution is *explained* by the emergence of capitalism in England and its subsequent diffusion in Europe and the world. The unique feature of capitalism, in contrast to all other modes of exploitation, is that the capitalist class, because it is market dependent and subject to market competition, must systematically reinvest an important part of its surpluses to improve the means of production. Contrary to all other forms of exploitation, it does not directly control the means of coercion, and cannot simply pressurize its workers into working longer hours or count on state protection to monopolize a market and shield themselves from competition. Therefore, it is the first and only mode of exploitation that implies systematic improvement.

While this explanation is globally convincing to understand sources of the Industrial Revolution and the constant revolution in the means of production since, it runs the risk of taking the “ideal” form of capitalism for its reality. Instead of making a clear-cut distinction between capitalism as market dependency against non-capitalism forms of exploitation as coercion, it might be better to understand them on a continuum. In reality, pharmaceutical companies receive guaranteed state-backed monopolies on their patented drugs for years, the Canadian milk industry is protected by state-enforced quotas to guarantee incomes for

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<sup>218</sup> Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence*; Robert Brenner and Christopher Isett, “England’s Divergence from China’s Yangzi Delta: Property Relations, Microeconomics, and Patterns of Development,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 02 (2002): 609–662; Philip C. C. Huang, “Development or Involution in Eighteenth-Century Britain and China? A Review of Kenneth Pomeranz’s ‘The Greater Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy,’” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (May 2002): 501.

its farmers, corporations that are *too big to fail* are heavily subsidized by governments if they were to be obliterated by market forces, and so on.

Of course, capitalism is characterized by a separation between the economical from the political: the power to “monopolize” politically a market or shield from market pressures is not wielded directly by corporations themselves. It must be enacted by the state. Corporations can pressure the state to do so, but they have no direct access to its decision-making processes. This separation is important when it comes to understanding the dynamics of capital accumulation and state power, but it does not change the fact that the coercion linked to the state’s law-making ability is effectively used, on a regular basis and on a global scale, to protect the profits of specific corporations. This does not *negate* the capitalist nature of the system—it is part of its features and recurrent motifs.

This being said, how does capitalism differ from the state-backed commercial ventures of medieval Venice or early modern Dutch? The political Marxist definition has the advantage of outlining how the development of long-distance trade and the development of manufacturing centres for luxury goods before the Industrial Revolution were not *proto-capitalists*, in the sense that they could never develop, from their internal dynamic, into a fully blown market dependent proletariat and capitalist class.<sup>219</sup> Because money surpluses derived from long distance trade was based on the monopolization of trade routes and markets, the incentive was to invest profits into means of coercion to guarantee this monopoly rather than improve the means of production.

If we adopt a more flexible definition of capitalism, keeping the distinction between pre-capitalist trade and capitalist accumulation is nevertheless important. For this purpose, understanding market dependency on a continuum must come with a general understanding that there is a somewhat elusive point on this scale that separates structures in which the *main strategies* leading to profitability are based on innovation and market competition,

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<sup>219</sup> Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, 200–211.

from those which structurally incite commercial enterprise to seek state protections and monopolies. Both strategies can co-exist, but a defining feature of capitalism has been the first one: corporations were sufficiently market dependent to seek an edge on markets as their main profit-making strategy.

## **Defining the State System**

In the same fashion that there is a tendency to transhistoricize the capitalist system by understanding all previous market relations *as capitalist*, there is a tendency to transhistoricize the modern state form by applying its characteristics to all previous forms of collective organization of laws and coercion. In the classical formulations of Marxism, for example, the state is defined across history as the functional requirement to protect a given class structure. This is explicit in Hal Draper's interpretation of Marx:

This primitive type of situation changes drastically when society divides into antagonistic social classes. Then society is no longer a single interest bloc. There are now rival interest [...] These rivals are the social classes. [...] Naturally, force must be available to keep the dispossessed in their place, to keep slaves from overthrowing their bondage [...] The power of forcible coercion has now been separated from the general body of society: this is the basic change from the pattern of the primitive community. The state has come into existence.<sup>220</sup>

Depending on the variations of Marxism, this kind of definition is either understood in terms of a quasi-mechanical relationship between the economic base and the political superstructure, or in a more dialectic manner (to which Draper belongs). But even if one accepts the latter version, this understanding of the state places “political” functions of society as ontologically different from “economical” functions across history. It reifies the separations of economical and political across societies, and tends to apply the modern separation to a premodern world that does not quite follow those lines. On this issue, Benno Teshke offers a strong argument against such tendency. Following the Political Marxist definition of capitalism, he argues that feudal exploitation, and actually all pre-capitalist

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<sup>220</sup> Draper, *State and Bureaucracy*, 1977, 244–45.

forms of exploitation, cannot be understood as an “economic” relationship distinct from the political. Therefore:

if feudal societies were really characterized by a fusion of the political and the economic mediated through social property relations, it would follow that the entire vocabulary of base and superstructure, relations of production and modes of production, itself becomes questionable. Given these unresolved issues, a further conceptual shift from the “relations of production” to the “relations of exploitation” can yield greater analytical precision while avoiding an overly “politicist” reading of Europe’s pre-capitalist history. Class relations in pre-capitalist society are never economic relations (they are economic only in capitalism). They are best defined in terms of property in the means of violence that structure the relations of exploitation. Any attempt to rescue the term “relations of production” for pre-capitalist societies faces severe difficulties in “deriving” the form of the state from existing relations of production, for the precapitalist “state” maintains them.<sup>221</sup>

In other words, the “political” functions tied to coercion, defined as the distinctive feature of the state by Draper, do not arise out of a necessity to protect the private relations of exploitations that would be constitutive of class domination in early societies. They *constitute* the very structure of this class domination. The transfer of surpluses from serfs to lords is not “protected” by a state, it is fuelled by the lord’s control of coercion.

The present theory of power can help conceptualize this shift by clarifying the relationship between the economic and political. Following the Political Marxist tradition, what is considered *economic* is nothing but the privatization of social power and its exchange *as property* through market structures. The generalization of this form of power is relatively recent in human history, and for a long time, the organization of power took the form of what we identify today as *states*.

But to really understand the specific features of the modern state, we must understand what separates it from its premodern ancestors. I believe Tilly’s contribution on the history of the state and Gellner’s work on nationalism offer us a strong starting point for this. In *Capital, Coercion and European State 990-1992*, Tilly argues that an important characteristic of

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<sup>221</sup> Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, 55.

modern states is their capacity for *direct rule*. That is, the capacity of a large central government to enact laws, enforce them directly over citizens through agents under their direct control and tax directly those citizens. Tilly explains that, before 1750, no European power had this kind of “direct” form of rule.<sup>222</sup> In Mann’s typology, we can say that large states had a weak infrastructural power—they could not penetrate deeply into people’s lives. Daily activity was rather structured at a local level: the parish, the village, the town. Locally, small elites composed of the clergy, landlords, urban oligarchies, and independent professional warriors often dominated local life, but various forms of self-management by peasants and urban workers were also widespread. The medieval historian, Chris Wickham, explains that:

By 1300, towns had some type of self-government everywhere, in the wholly autonomous city-states of north-central Italy, the imperial cities with their special status in Germany, the towns of Flanders which could defy their ruling count with regularity [...]

In much of England, even though peasants were often legally unfree into the late fourteenth century, manorial court records show that the villagers themselves policed their community, using local customs which had largely been generated by themselves. Such customs, and policing, were normal throughout Europe. Customs were formally recorded from 1300 onwards (sometimes earlier) in England in customals, in Germany in Weistümer, in France and Spain in the franchise documents themselves, in Italy in village statutes, some of which are very complex texts.<sup>223</sup>

These forms of self-policing not only reveal the weakness of large states in this period, but also the lack of a formal legal authority even at the local level. Local lords, warriors and nobles did not have the capacity to impose unilaterally their will—they had to negotiate and deal with the moral sense and customs of their population. They did not wield a clear monopoly on violence either.

As for large states before 1750, they formed a kind of *layer* that existed over local forms of rule. Because they could not penetrate the local organization of life directly, they left a great

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<sup>222</sup> Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*, 103–4.

<sup>223</sup> Wickham, *Medieval Europe* Chapter 10.

deal of autonomy to local communities and their elites, and ruled through them as intermediaries. This inherently limited the capacity of central states to legislate, to monopolize force, to raise taxes and so on:

Those who ruled, or claimed to rule, in city-states, federations, and other states of fragmented sovereignty often managed to exercise tight control over a single city and its immediate hinterland. Beyond that scale, however, they had no choice but to bargain with the authorities of competing centres. The local control usually depended not only on the city's coercive forces, but also on extensive rural landholding by the urban ruling class.<sup>224</sup>

Tilly's thesis is that those large states essentially rose and fell in relationship to their military power, and the intense geopolitical competition of Europe led to the development of new ruling techniques and state forms. Ultimately, the capacity for direct rule, first fully embedded in Revolutionary France, proved to be far more efficient to raise resources and troops. It gave the defining feature of the modern state—which all other states had to copy if they were to survive.<sup>225</sup>

This account fits very well with Gellner's theory of nationalism. Gellner starts from a general depiction of premodern times in terms that echoes strongly those of Tilly:

Political units of the agrarian age vary enormously in size and kind. Roughly speaking, however, one can divide them into two species, or perhaps poles: local self-governing communities, and large empires. On the one hand, there are the city states, [...] peasant communes and so forth, running their own affairs, with a fairly high political participation ratio (to adapt S. Andreski's useful phrase), and with only moderate inequality; and on the other, large territories controlled by a concentration of force at one point. A very characteristic political form is, of course, one which fuses these two principles: a central dominant authority co-exists with semi- autonomous local units.<sup>226</sup>

Gellner studies the cultural forms of these local communities, and explains how the main characteristics of one's *culture* was defined at this level. This is a crucial insight: norms and

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<sup>224</sup> Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992*, 24.

<sup>225</sup> Tilly, 24–25.

<sup>226</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Repr, New Perspectives on the Past (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 13.

beliefs related to morality, to ways of doing things, to visions of the world were produced and reproduced at very small scales for most of human history, and empire-like structures hardly penetrated those norms. Each locality did not reproduce their own language and religion—they were embedded into large cultural groups related to each other by exchange and various power networks. But these large groupings were fluid—they were “shades” of culture merging and overlapping with each other.<sup>227</sup> There was no central institution responsible for coordinating normative production—it had to be done organically “from below”, through the local institutions of a community.

Some organizations, like the Catholic Church for example, attempted to penetrate local norm production while maintaining a centralized power to validate those norms over a large territory. But as Chris Wickham explains, these attempts had limited successes in reality:

When different polities in the north went Christian, mostly what this meant was the conversion of kings and their entourages — the rest of the population followed after, often long after — and that conversion, however genuine, usually only slowly affected the range of values and practices which each society regarded as normal, meritorious and moral, for these values were now defined as Christian as well, whether or not they resembled those of the New Testament<sup>228</sup>

The cultural homogenization of local communities over vast territories that is characteristic of modern nations only appears with the modern state. This is because cultural homogenization both requires a state with vast capacities to implement and supervise a public schooling system, and because the supervision of cultural norms by the state increase its capacity of direct rule. There is, therefore, a dialectic relationship between the rise of modern states, the rise of nationalism and the creation of national cultures.<sup>229</sup>

This deep relationship between cultural penetration and direct rule can be modelled with the tools developed in chapter 4—the mechanisms of structural stability (coercion, normative adhesion, privilege distribution and organizational supremacy). What Tilly’s and

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<sup>227</sup> Gellner, 49.

<sup>228</sup> Wickham, *Medieval Europe* Chapter 5.

<sup>229</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 63–64, 89.

Gellner's historical accounts reveal is the limited capacity to penetrate daily life that pre-modern rulers could derive from the strength of their military. Controlling vastly superior capacity for coercion did not allow those power to destabilize and take control of local structures. In order to do that and achieve direct rule, central states had to play key roles in the shaping of norms (through schooling) and the distribution of privilege (through taxation and various politics of welfare and redistribution). Until then, those mechanisms were controlled by local communities and provided the backbone of local autonomy.

Of course, this "local autonomy" was not synonymous of equality or democracy. As stated before, it was shaped by local elites and various forms of popular power. The administration of justice and the policing of the community was performed locally—on the scale of a town or village. The point here is that, at this scale, we cannot claim that exploitation occurred *simply* because a lord, for example, controlled means of coercion. For one, in most of medieval history, it was not a realistic option for most peasants to find another land on which to settle. Clearing wood was long and risky, and good free arable land was rare.<sup>230</sup> Furthermore, rents extracted by landlords were not seen as unilateral forced exactions. While the modern mindset might render feudal rents as clear forms of illegitimate theft, it would be a modern projection to imagine that this process of extraction was more "transparent" to medieval peasants than profit making is to modern workers. A good illustration of this is the various forms of "collective bargaining" that existed between peasants and lords:

A grandiloquent example is the agreement of 1207 made by the lord of Tintinnano, a small fortified village in southern Tuscany, to stabilise rents there [...] the peasants of Tintinnano, now Rocca d'Orcia, a couple of miles off the main pilgrim road from France to Rome (whence perhaps also some of Guido Medico's more resonant phrases), were threatening to abandon the village altogether if their lord did not make some concessions to them. It is also very likely that the charter was given out in return for money from the peasants, who would have been prepared to pay a one-off sum to obtain the detailed rules for rent-paying and peasant rights which make up the rest of the text: documents like this do often admit that, even if not in this case. This

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<sup>230</sup> Wickham, *Medieval Europe* Chapter 7.

mixture of struggle and pay-offs was replicated, with different emphases in each case, throughout Europe in the development of village franchises. [...]

And in Italy, Spain and France, one important trend of the twelfth century and early thirteenth was for peasant communities to band together to obtain franchise charters, documents in which the lord agreed to abandon unpredictable demands, and set out levels of exaction which were much more restricted.<sup>231</sup>

What was deemed problematic for peasants was not so much the rent in and of itself, but rather its level and the arbitrary powers of the lord. This reveals that peasant communities did consider, in some ways, paying rent to a local lord as legitimate and normal, as long as it was not considered abusive and arbitrary. This is not so different from the contemporary relationship between tenants and landlords, which rarely questions the legitimacy of the landlord's ownership in the first place. Wickham also notes that peasants rarely employed *violent* rebellions against local lords. When they took arms, it was mostly against taxation of central states, despite the fact that those states were militarily much stronger.

Therefore, even if I agree with the Political Marxist argument according to which feudal exploitation does not make a separation between the economic and political, it seems reductive to depict pre-capitalist relations of exploitation as purely based on force as Teschke does: "Class relations in pre-capitalist society are never economic relations (they are economic only in capitalism). They are best defined in terms of property in the means of violence that structure the relations of exploitation."<sup>232</sup> Local relations of trust and the weight of traditional cultures, embedded in day-to-day local practices, also constituted a basic legitimacy for existing social arrangement. Wickham explains, for example, that peasants "often treated lords as patrons and protectors, and occasionally they did receive some measure of protection"<sup>233</sup>. Even when this legitimacy was threatened, lords could not simply repress collective action. If peasants managed to organize themselves, they could secure new rights. Therefore, feudal exploitation had to also rely on other mechanisms of

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<sup>231</sup> Wickham Chapter 7.

<sup>232</sup> Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, 55.

<sup>233</sup> Chris Wickham, ed., *Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century*, British Academy Occasional Paper 9 (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2007), 40.

structural stability, including forms of normative adhesion, concessions in terms of privileges and maintaining organizational supremacy to prevent the organization of rebellious factions.

Contrasting the modern state with this picture reveals just how deeply its institutions penetrate and shape lives. The disarmament of local communities and their elites, the usurpation of self-policing and its delegation to a specialized police force under the direct authority of a central state, the strict enforcement of territorial frontiers, the uniformization of laws, but also of customs and habits on a vast territory, tied with the organization of a mass and relatively uniformized schooling system, the establishment of direct taxation, the use of those tax to structure state-organized services directly to the population are all relatively recent characteristics that make the modern state a unique institution in history.

Just like capitalism “colonized” social production by progressively incorporating within the sphere of the market a wide range of social activities that used to be done by families and communities, the modern state imposed itself in a similar manner. It took over functions and activities, such as law-making, policing, schooling and welfare redistribution, that used to be organized by local actors. Over time, a growing proportion of social production has therefore passed under the organization of modern forms of states. Historically, the rise of nations and nationalism goes hand to hand with the rise of the modern state, because the capacity to shape customary rights and impose national laws requires a central power to penetrate local customs. The state’s colonization of social production implied, intrinsically, the colonization of local norms and culture.

The resulting structure is not only a new way of organizing collective production. It is also, and mostly, a form of social power. The historical process of state building is essentially a process of centralization of the decision-making process over more and more aspects of social life. The modern state separated schooling, policing and law-making activities from the direct control of local communities, and created special institutions under the direct control of its central decision-making body to preform them. But in order to sustain those

institutions, the state requires power resources, it requires a way to extract and control labour and factors of power directly at the center. This is the purpose of its taxation system: regular, systematic taxes on production, income, wealth and transactions constitute the fundamental fuel of surplus appropriation that sustains the overall structure. Notwithstanding the legitimacy of how those taxes are spent, modern taxes are not fundamentally “less” a process of power resources extraction than the taxation of peasants in Imperial Rome, Byzantium, the Umayyad Caliphate or Absolutist France.

The “democratization” of the modern state hinders its nature as a process of power appropriation, because it became subject to popular struggles which prevented state elites to use state power as personal property. Contrarily to capital, which is still widely accepted as a private form of power, states are considered public, and the use of state power for personal gain is widely viewed as corruption. These are parameters that qualify the “decision-making process” over state power, and the “processes of selection” of state elites, but they don’t change the fact that the state is a form of power appropriation.

The expression *state system* aims to echo the concept of *capitalist system* and stress their parallels as structures of power appropriation. If the corporation is the given form of organization in which capitalist power is accumulated, a single state is the given form in which state power is accumulated. And as the capitalist system represents the force field—the structure in which single corporations evolve—the *state system* represents the network of states which mutually constraint and shape each other. This *is* the system of international relations.

## **Capitalism and States**

Understanding capitalism and the state system as two analytically distinct structures of power appropriation is useful to explain their respective logic, but it must not obfuscate their profound intertwinement in contemporary societies. I believe we can make a good case that, at first, their respective emergence was relatively independent of each other. Revolutionary

France is definitely a modern state by historical standards, but by the end of the eighteenth century, France is far from a capitalist society.<sup>234</sup> The military efficiency of the French state pushed other European powers to emulate its techniques of rule in order to survive the intense geopolitical competition through the nineteenth century. In parallel, the emergence of capitalism in agrarian England is a relatively endogenous process according to the Brennerian historiography. It slowly took form out of contingent historical events (such as the Black Death) and a specific configuration of class power which resulted in the creation of a land market and a large rural proletariat. By the 1700s, agrarian capitalism in England fuelled an unprecedented agricultural revolution, increasing land productivity and providing the base upon which industrialization later became possible.<sup>235</sup>

While the French revolutionary state proved extraordinarily efficient to extract existing resources — especially troops — English capitalism *increased* the nationally available resources upon which the state could draw. When the Industrial Revolution kicked-in, economic development fuelled by capitalism provided a far superior base for English war making. Elites in France and Germany, for example, look anxiously at English production and explicitly attempted to emulate its industrial revolution.<sup>236</sup> This geopolitical competition engendered a series of “revolutions from above”, in which newly consolidated states used their infrastructural power to create and fuel a domestic capitalist economy.<sup>237</sup>

The superposition of the dynamism of capitalism with a modern state provided the dreadful combination that made European colonial domination possible across the world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If the modern state originally emerged in non-capitalistic countries, it quickly became a *capitalist state* in so far as it fostered the development of capitalism and used capitalistic market as its main tax base. In return, capitalist social relations thrived in modern states which could guarantee private property, stable laws and a national space of “mobile,

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<sup>234</sup> George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London ; New York: Verso, 1987); Lafrance, *The Making of Capitalism in France*.

<sup>235</sup> Brenner, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism,” 299.

<sup>236</sup> Shilliam, *German Thought and International Relations*.

<sup>237</sup> Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, 263–64.

literate, culturally standardized, interchangeable population”<sup>238</sup>—in other words, a large reserve of *abstract labor*. The two structures of power appropriation fuelled each other, helping each other to colonize an ever-greater portion of social life—both domestically and internationally.

The two structures are now deeply intertwined—capital relies on state power, just as state power relies on the dynamism of capital accumulation. In classical Marxist frameworks, because the “mode of production” is taken to be the primary “material” infrastructure, then the state is necessarily understood as the “determined” partner in the pair. By reformulating the state and capital with the present theory of power, we can no longer affirm that the state is ontologically secondary to the economic base. Which “partner” is stronger is rather a matter of balance of forces that must be explained historically.

Doing so, at this stage, would require a research that goes beyond the present dissertation. I can formulate some preliminary hypothesis in the meanwhile.

First, if political Marxists are right about the exponential power of capitalism to sustain innovation, then state elites might have realized, through deduction, experience or emulation, that it is more efficient *for the state* to let (and help) capitalist production grow. This hypothesis is echoed in the political theory of most capitalistic state elites, which sacralizes the separation of the political from the economy, leaving the latter to “market forces”. This relationship might have left the state in a position of growing dependence on capital, eventually letting capital outgrow the power of the state.

Second, the history of social movements seems to indicate that state power is more susceptible to popular pressures and democratic control than private capital. From the early days of strong territorial states, popular movements have sought voting rights, forms of representation, control over state leaders. The rapid transformations of states in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also required new forms of legitimacy. To maintain cohesion and make direct rule

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<sup>238</sup> Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 45–46.

acceptable in the face of mass working class organizing and revolt, European states had to make democratic concessions.<sup>239</sup> This made it increasingly difficult for state elites to use state power as a “personal” form of power accumulation. It is possible, therefore, that private capital was privileged as a more secure and long-lasting form of power. Furthermore, the threat that popular movement could democratize the state to the point that state power could be used against the ruling class probably also fuelled the liberal doctrine for the limitation of state power. This is particularly true in anti-communist liberal thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which democratic control of the state is associated with the “tyranny of the masses”, while the market is associated with real freedom. In other words, limiting state power and letting capital accumulation flourish might have been understood (at least tacitly) as the best way to shield ruling class power from popular contestation.

Third, the bourgeois struggles<sup>240</sup> against aristocratic privileges and royal despotic power contributed to the crystallization of a modern state with a limited capacity to accumulate power for personal purposes. The “statist” path to accumulate power being impeded by those limitations, it might have become a better strategy for the ruling class to privilege accumulation in the form of capital.

This being said, while modern states have been historically limited in their powers, constrained structurally to depend on capital accumulation and subject to various processes of democratic control, their elite can still use state power to accomplish goals that are not “functional” to capitalism. A whole range of questions — from morality, religion, education, culture, nationalism immigration, gender, sexuality, and so on — are relatively peripheral to the profitability of capital. On these questions, capitalists are not likely to band together to pressure the state to defend a common interest in the protection of their power base. This does not mean that groups of capitalists won’t take part in the debates and use their wealth to tip the balance in their favour. But wealthy individuals can end up on both sides, and these

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<sup>239</sup> Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

<sup>240</sup> Bourgeois here is used in its precapitalist sense: it refers to the non-aristocratic urban middle classes and elites that played a key role in many European revolutions in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

questions are not likely to mobilize the capitalist class as a whole (unless the capitalist class is contingently relatively homogeneous in terms of culture and composition on some issues). Even on questions that affect directly capital accumulation, such as major wars, foreign trade, workers' rights, or patent laws, the incertitude inherent to social policies and the variety of interests tied to different factors can engender a diversity of positions among capitalists. It is specifically this range of opinions that open a relative autonomy for state power.

One might ask if, given the contemporary interweaving of capitalism and the state system, it would not be better to understand both as a single system with differentiated “sites” of power accumulation that are internally related to each other? Ultimately, I do not disagree with such a characterization. This is what the concept of *capitalist society* seeks to capture—the general infrastructure of power exists as a whole, in which capital and states exist as related components. To designate the whole or its parts as “systems” is ultimately a matter of levels of abstraction. In Ollman’s classification, the contemporary infrastructure of power would be a “level two” abstraction. Capital and the state as a part of this infrastructure is a lower level abstraction that falls between level one and level two. If I insist on the differentiated dynamics that *must* be analyzed between how the state system accumulates power differently and in a partly autonomous fashion, it is because it is useful to understand social dynamics and transformations that are important for organizers. These are located between level one and level two of Ollman’s abstraction, and they are concerned with events occurring at the scale of one or a few countries, spanning a couple of years. Given the relative strength of the state as a site of power accumulation and its specific dynamic, I also believe that the infrastructure of power, as a whole, cannot simply be characterized by the process of power accumulation in its capital form. It is inevitably the result of the combined dynamic.

## State Power

While the question here is not to provide a fully fledged theory of state power, we can offer a broad overview of how the present theory of power can help understand the main dynamics of modern states.

First, we can identify two important processes of resource appropriation that are constitutive of states. The main one is taxation. It is the process through which states appropriate resources and labor, and incorporates those under the organizing authority of its structure. The modern state is not the only kind of organization that historically used taxation as a source of power, but it developed it far beyond any other organizations. The other process could be labelled “colonialism”—the process through which a state appropriate territory and population that was previously not under its authority. While this process is a relatively minor provider of resources in most contemporary state, it played an important role in the history of capitalist societies and is still ongoing in regard to indigenous communities and conflictual zones such as Palestine.

These processes illustrate how state power is “fuelled”, but not how it is maintained and what it is used for. On these issues, we have stressed that states are not primarily coercive apparatus whose extractive capacities would be primarily based on the fear of its military apparatus.<sup>241</sup> The establishment of direct rule by the state was only possible when the state could penetrate local norms and cultures, when it could obtain some legitimacy and organizationally outflank local elites. In order to do this, states had to take over socially useful activities and take them under their organizational authority—they had to “colonize” spheres of life that were previously independent from it. It did so with law making, policing, education and welfare, incorporating the contribution of those functions to the mechanisms of structural stability, and shaping those activities to anchor the state into the daily life of its citizens.

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<sup>241</sup> Bob Jessop, *State Power: A Strategic-Relational Approach*, Reprinted (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 10.

All societies require common rules, acceptable ways to behave, and a process to enforce those rules. As we have seen, for a long time, this law-making activity and the work required to enforce it was not *monopolized* by a given organization in many local communities. Pre-modern empires could not directly implement laws upon their subject and directly supervise their enforcement. They had to delegate this to local communities, in which forms of self-management continued to exist, and which never fully implemented orders from above. Villages, communes, towns generated their own customs and enforced them collectively. Local elites could play a central role in the application of “justice”, but they did not necessarily monopolize its definition and its enforcement. It is only with the rise of the modern state that law making and enforcement was monopolized by a clearly identifiable specialized organization over large territories. By monopolizing the production of common rules and their policing, the state appropriated a key role in the general social reproduction. It gives modern states the unique capacity to shape those rules over an enormous population.

Of course, even as powerful as the modern state is, it cannot implement and enforce laws by the sheer force of coercion. Laws are respected in so far that they fit a general common sense. When state laws correspond to a common sense of justice, the state appears to perform a socially useful function by upholding justice. But when states attempt to implement more contentious rules, they encounter resistance. Individuals disobey, evade laws, protect each other for all sorts of minor infractions that are deemed illegitimate by local communities. Therefore, in practice, the *capacity* of a state to *change* major laws and implement changes is limited to its capacity to legitimate and enforce those changes. In some ways, a state must “spend” resources to transform customs. But its monopoly over rule-making and enforcement make it uniquely efficient in history to do so.

Education is also a productive activity that did not belong to the state before its modern iteration. While precapitalistic societies transmitted those organically within families, communities and religious institutions, the modern state “colonized” part of this process by taking a central place in the education of children. The state gained the capacity to shape

culture and decide which skills would be fostered in new generations. Of course, as we explained in chapter 5, even propagandist forms of teaching can't override agency. Students have a practical experience of the world, and an immediate sense of morality, built through the bonds of trust with their family, friends, and their community, upon which school teaching must fit to be accepted. But within this range, the state can legitimate itself by organizing the teaching of skills that are useful to the population, and in return, can use the school system to uniformize language, teach a common vision of history, and discipline children to abstract forms of subordination.

The organization of welfare is a third key function taken over by the state. Forms of social solidarity, such as free or cheap healthcare, homeless shelters, and soup kitchen used to be mainly organized through kinship, charity organizations, churches, or the labor movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By taking over these activities and running them directly within the state, states can "buy" a certain loyalty over the segments of the population. Doing so legitimate its centrality by providing socially important service. But it is also a form of policing, in so far that access to state redistribution of requires citizens to register with the state and accept its conditions.<sup>242</sup>

We could continue to enumerate the various social services, such as public roads and transit systems that are organized by modern states, serve a social function, but also strengthen the centrality of the state. The point is that by taking over those various sectors of social production, and incorporating them inside its organization, the state achieves two objectives. It legitimates itself by taking over something deemed socially useful, but it gains the power to shape this sector of activity. Because the main "source" of state resources is based on taxation, the extent to which the state can incorporate activities is limited to its tax base.

For each of these sectors of production, the state structures them within its vertical organization, in which the legislative assembly and the government have theoretically the

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<sup>242</sup> Mark Neocleous, *The Fabrication of Social Order: A Critical Theory of Police Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 64.

supreme authority to implement changes. In practice, however, the chain of command is never perfect, and each level of managers and workers within schools, police forces, or civil services can disobey, sabotage or organize collective actions against a policy. This can both be a factor of change (i.e. teachers fighting for increased funding of public schools) or of resistance to change (high-ranking bureaucrats resisting the implementation of new policies). But like any organized structure, the state elite normally has the organizational high ground.

In addition to this, democratic victories limit what state elites can do with the state. Universal suffrage, multiple party systems, limits to electoral spending, popular initiative referendum, accountability and transparency policies, are all examples of concessions made under popular pressure to prevent a state elite to appropriate *too much* state power. But those victories were partial at best. They never resulted in a true democratization of the state—in terms of egalitarian decision-making power over the collective power embedded in the state. It only slightly increased popular control and allowed for some level of alternation between parties, which in itself, depersonalizes state power.

This being said, the key holders of state power can use their position to *project* state power for particular projects. Domestically, this projection of state power is usually performed through the spheres of social life that the state control: new laws, educational reforms, new criteria to access welfare, etc. Because of their organizational supremacy, state elites can achieve unpopular reforms to some degree. But attacking socially useful and previously popular activities of the state can trigger popular movements, which limit how fast and far a state elite can go. The projection of state power can also manifest itself by using its tax resources to launch new projects and enter new spheres of activities. The capacity to do so largely depends on its financial leeway and external support.

Internationally, state power is projected against other states and foreign groups by its military capacity, its position within international alliances, its capacity to channel foreign aid and its leverage within commercial networks. The use of this capacity for foreign

interventions is mainly constrained by its domestic limitations and its chances of success given the international balance of power. Within those parameters, state elites will have flexibility to use state power for their own foreign project—be it a war, a project of international development, the negotiation of free trade treaties, an intervention in a foreign conflict, etc. And just as it is the case for domestic policies, major foreign interventions are not strictly “functional” to capitalist accumulation. The decision to go to war in Afghanistan or Iraq, for example, did not *have* to be explained by the “interest” of the capitalist class (and a posteriori, it is unclear what this interest might have been)—it simply did not need to run *against* the interest of the capitalist class.

The capacity of state elites to bring about projects of their own by using state power, independently of a consensus or explicit pressure from capitalists (unless it explicitly undermines capital accumulation), justifies a conception of the state as an analytically distinct process of power accumulation from capitalism. Since modern states are deeply intertwined with capitalism, we are justified to consider its elite as part of the ruling class of capitalist societies. Yet, this “political” faction of the ruling class has its unique patterns and responds to the distinctive process that characterizes its power base.

### **Value and Capitalist Power**

As we now turn to the analysis of capitalist power, the first and obvious question that arises concerns Marx’s theory of value. Reframed within the present theory of power, the theory of worker exploitation under capitalism is a theory of power appropriation. But for this shift to be valid within the parameters of Marxism, we must examine its consequence on the Marxist explanation for this exploitation: the theory of value and surplus value.

A key strength of Marx’s *Capital* was to reveal and demonstrate the source of exploitation under capitalism. Within the present theory, it is possible to translate Marx’s theory of value with the conceptual language of power. Human activity is a source of power, and when we abstract its qualities (such as skills, labour organization, tools, etc.), it can be quantified in

terms of labour time. If we look at Marx's discussion on average labour time (that is, average productivity of human activity for a specific commodity), we can see that his description is very close to the factors of power identified in chapter 4:

[Average labour time] is determined by a wide range of circumstances; it is determined amongst other things by the workers' average degree of skill, the level of development of science and its technological application, the social organization of the process of production, the extent and effectiveness of the means of production, and the conditions found in the natural environment.<sup>243</sup>

What is implicitly recognized is that these factors can increase or decrease the output per unit of labour time. This is the very root of our definition of "factors of power". Value, as "labour time of average productivity" is a unit measuring the average effect on the world of human activity in a given period of time—a measure of immediate power contained in average human activity. The "value" of a commodity is the crystallization of this power. The object produced is therefore valued at the amount of power required to make it—a power that is counted in average labour time.

Surplus value would be the fundamental unequal exchange mechanism that allows capitalists to "accumulate" value—and therefore power. This would directly and simply reveal the hidden power accumulation of capitalist dynamics.

Technically, a reinterpretation of the labour theory of value is therefore possible on the basis of this theory of power. Yet, without replacing the theory of value, I believe it is also possible to give an alternative explanation of prices and exploitation based on the concept of power that would be simple, closer to the lived experience of capitalism, and hold a similar explanatory strength.

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<sup>243</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, V. 1: Penguin Classics (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981), 130.

## The Incommensurability of Nature with Human Labour

The main problem I see with the Marxist theory of value is tied to the problem of comparing the value of nature with the value of labor. I propose to analyse this problem by an approach based on the social cost of production and distribution. Once I demonstrate the incommensurability of nature with human labor, I will show how a power theory of price can solve it.

The social cost approach seeks to investigate the most basic resources that are needed to produce something. It compares different types of production on that basis. Here, the “social product” is understood as *anything* produced by human labour—not only commodities. It investigates the cost, not for the individual, but for society itself. The question it asks is: what is used through production that can no longer be used for other purposes?

Since we are evaluating *what is required* to transform reality for a certain purpose, we are therefore looking at a phenomenon of power. Therefore, we can always measure the social cost of production in terms of the power resources that it uses: labouring individuals (including their skills, knowledge, information), ways to organize this labour and physical factors (tools, machinery, animals, infrastructure, land, environment).

In a social-cost approach, products cannot be completely reduced to labour. Although all products contain labour time, most also contain physical elements that are present in nature, and cannot be produced purely through labour. The elements in question can be the ones that enter directly in the composition of the product—such as the iron of a sword or the petroleum used to make plastic bags—or it can also be indirect, such as the land required to cultivate vegetables. Natural elements represent a social cost in so far as they are present in limited quantities—whether this is an absolute limit for non-renewable resources or a relative limit for renewable resources.

The use of a natural element always cost a certain amount of labour—that is, the amount of labour required to extract the element from its natural environment. It cannot be *reduced* to

this cost, however, since using this element not only deprives society of the use of the labour that's been expended—it also deprives society of the natural element that is used in this way.

For example, building cars require a large amount of material inputs: steel, rare metals, plastic, energy, textiles, etc. Steel requires the mining of iron, which does take a certain amount of labour time that could have been used for other purposes. Therefore, the use of iron does come with a social cost expressed as labour time. But it also comes with a cost in *iron* itself, since the iron that is extracted from the ground could have been used for other purposes, and it will now be used in the fabrication of a car. The social cost of the use of natural elements does not have to be permanent. For example, using land for crops has a temporary social cost—we cannot use the same land for other purposes as long as it is being used for crops.

It could be argued that most natural elements are actually abundant, and that the main cost for society is the labour required reaching it. For example, it could be said that land is not significantly scarce—that there is always more land that can be used for crops, but it is the marginal labour cost to cultivate more land that rises. With enough resources, we are now able to cultivate food in deserts or on urban rooftops. The social cost of natural resources could therefore be reduced to the marginal cost of labour time to make use of it. Yet, this abundance is illusory, and the historic period in which we are entering—the anthropocene as some name it—indicates that we are reaching the limits of nature once again. Historical examples of “involution” or “Malthusian crisis” reveals past instances where labour was abundant, but land was scarce. In deficit of new agricultural techniques, labour could simply not substitute for the lack of available land. The European crisis of the 14th century, leading to the Black Death is the most spectacular example of this. The very idea that any element of nature could be artificially produced and replaced by labour is reminiscent of the trust in the progress of science and technology. But these conditions never existed and are still out of our reach.

Therefore, in the long term, any product has a cost that can be reduced to (1) an amount of

labour time and (2) a quantity of qualitatively different natural resources. The Marxist theory of value can only explain the first part.

### A Power Theory of Prices

To recognize this does not mean that quantitative equivalences are not possible. Capitalist markets do convert those qualitatively different elements to a single homogeneous unit (in money prices). But there is no universal basis on which this equivalence can be rooted—the value of nature in relationship to labour can only be evaluative. Neoclassical economists are not wrong, therefore, to adopt a theory of value based on preferences. Yet, their model is foremost a theoretical abstraction that acts as a normative model to defend free markets, much more than a description of how real market economies set prices.

What we are looking for is a theory of prices that explains simply and efficiently things like wages, consumption, credit, profits and capital accumulation—as they are really happening in capitalism. The goal of such theory is to account for the accumulation of power in *capital form*—how it occurs, what are its processes. This explanation must refrain from unnecessary abstractions to be accessible to contemporary workers.

The very process of establishing equivalences between qualitatively different social products is therefore fundamentally normative. It is the product of social norms, anchored in the daily practices that are socially structured. Because prices reflect a certain distribution of products between sections of society, the very definition of those is subject to power struggles. The terrain on which this struggle occurs and these norms exist is no less “material” than the reality of labor time. But it cannot be simply measured. It is the result of numerous material factors, of the conditions of production, the organization of distribution, the collective actions of producers, the power of legislators, etc. It is the crystallization of past compromises that settled conflicts. It is not an objective social law, but rather the result of political conflicts—and for a long time it was understood as such. Polanyi’s concept of

embedded economy<sup>244</sup> and Thompson's moral economy<sup>245</sup> both refers to how precapitalistic societies understood the political dimension of price fixation.

The principle behind the free market is to *disjoin* exchanges from social norms and political control. The ideologues of capitalism, from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman, have consistently argued that a free market would set prices at the best possible level to optimize production in order to maximize everyone's *utility* (or happiness, in utilitarian ethics). The complex theoretical/mathematical constructions of neoclassical economists, from Walras to Samuelson, are geared to demonstrate this claim.

But in a market of buyers and sellers seeking to maximize their gains, prices are the result of a market-mediated power struggle. A seller in a position of strength, holding a monopoly on a resource that a buyer harshly needs — medication for example — does not *have* to sell it to the highest possible price. He could decide to sell the medication more cheaply for humanitarian considerations. The laws of supply and demand would therefore not apply, and they don't *unless* both the buyer and the seller are actively seeking to maximize their own interest. If we assume they do, then they are in a power struggle, each seeking to either increase or decrease prices. Under capitalism, we can assume that most of the time, corporations do maximize their own interest because those which will survive and outgrow the others are those which will conform to the logic of maximization.

The principles of the neoclassical free market could therefore be valid if all actors had the same amount of power. This is partly assumed in their models, where everyone is only a "price taker", and adjust the number of things they buy and things they produce in relationship to the "price signal". But the nature of capital accumulation is specifically the accumulation over time of unequal power over market exchanges.

This power-based price-fixing is also implicit in Marx's writing when he discusses the

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<sup>244</sup> Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1944).

<sup>245</sup> Edward Palmer Thompson, *Customs in Common*, Penguin History (London: Penguin books, 1993).

fixation of wages. He claims that value is based on homogeneous labour time, and that surplus value is a product of the difference between the value of labour (paid to the worker) and the value produced by labour (captured by the capitalist), but he does not explain the relative levels of those two variables with the value theory itself. To do this, he turns to socially/culturally constituted levels of consumption and power struggles over the duration of the working day:

The value of labour-power is determined, as in the case of every other commodity, by the labour-time necessary for the production, and consequently also the reproduction, of this specific article. In so far as it has value, it represents no more than a definite quantity of the average social labour objectified in it. [...] His natural needs, such as food, clothing, fuel and housing vary according to the climatic and other physical peculiarities of his country. On the other hand, the number and extent of his so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilization attained by a country; in particular they depend on the conditions in which, and consequently on the habits and expectations with which, the class of free workers has been formed. In contrast, therefore, with the case of other commodities, *the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element.*<sup>246</sup> [Our emphasis]

There is here therefore an antinomy, of right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchange. *Between equal rights, force decides.* Hence, in the history of capitalist production, the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e. the working class.<sup>247</sup> [Our emphasis]

Therefore, *the very element labor value is supposed to explain (the origin of surplus value) is left outside the theory of value.* This is a crucial insight for us: even for Marx, it is class struggle that is the main factor determining the relative level of overall profit in relationship to wages. *Our proposition is to generalize this:* the relative prices of skilled labor, the price of land, the prices of raw resources, the price of access to infrastructure, the price of money are all subject to power struggles.

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<sup>246</sup> Marx, *Capital*, 274–75.

<sup>247</sup> Marx, 344.

A group able to control a barrier to access a resource required by others can leverage this position to profit from this situation. *Supply and demand, in this perspective, are not the direct determinant of prices—they are factors in the power struggle.* Controlling a resource in high demand and short supply gives leverage to raise prices.

The barriers in question can be a legal restriction over a profession (requiring to pass tests to join a professional order), a patent to protect the use of a specific product, copyrights to prevent the diffusion of an art content by others, a circumstantial legal monopoly (the right to sell food in a sports event), the ownership of a natural (a mountain pass) or human-made infrastructure (a bridge) to bypass a natural barrier. Barriers can also be linked to the specific conditions of production for a specific commodity: economic sectors requiring large capital investments circumstantially provide protection against those who do not own enough capital. This later type of barrier is actually the main barrier separating workers from capitalists, as well as small owners operating in low-value added sectors to highly valued sectors. If workers are forced to sell their labour, it is because they come from a social class that does not own the necessary capital overcome this barrier. Profit is the mirror of this phenomenon: if the capitalist class can profit from the ownership of capital, it is because ownership of the means of production creates a barrier against potential competitors. Ultimately, all forms of private property are a barrier that can be potentially used in this way.

The very value of money is explained by the barriers structured by capitalism and the state. National money is limited in supply by a central bank, a monopoly legally enforced by the state, and capitalism forces anyone who wishes to survive to use this money to obtain most of what they need. The barrier preventing the printing of fake money is politically enforced, with high consequences for the criminal. Capitalism fuels the *need* for money and the state enforces its scarcity, therefore providing the basis for its value.

At a given moment, prices of land, labour, information, infrastructure, products, etc. are therefore the crystallization of past struggles, of institutional legacies, of socially and historically constructed expectations and standards. Those who control valued assets can

extract a higher proportion of the social production as a whole than those who don't. Contemporary capitalism has not completely destroyed the "moral economy" either: populations have won and defended successfully the political fixation of prices on a moral basis. State interventions to fix minimum or maximum prices on different commodities deemed essential are examples of this (minimum wage, rent control, etc.).

Since incomes relative to price express the share of the social product one can access during a period of time, then price-fixing is, ultimately, income fixing. One's income derives from what he owns, what he can sell on the market for income. This can be one's own labour (including skills, knowledge and information), tools, machinery, social organizations, infrastructure, land, etc. All of which are *power resources*.

Prices represent a specific distribution of income at a given point. The price of labour time—wages—is the crystallization of the share of the total market-mediated production a worker can obtain from its work. Interests and rent are the prices to access money and land. The price of a specific commodity, such as a car for example, represents a composite of incomes. It assumes that a given price has been paid for the wages. If the company borrowed money and pays a rent for the use of land, it also assumes this cost. But the profit derived from selling the car is the specific income that the carmaker can obtain for its ownership of the car factory, for the ownership of its brand, for the ownership of its specific patents, etc. If the car maker is able to increase its profit, either by decreasing the price of its inputs (wages, rents, interest, materials, etc.) or by increasing the price of its output (cars), he changes the overall balance: he is able to obtain a larger share of the total production for the control of the car-making process.<sup>248</sup>

Processes of price-fixing must be analyzed in the social situation in which actors are

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<sup>248</sup> This might not be obvious in the case of price increases of the output. If the car maker is able to increase its profits by increasing the price of its cars, that is, in fact, a transfer of income away from consumers and other sectors producing consumer goods to the car maker. The consumer will have less money for other goods—this is a decrease of its share of the total production, since he can still buy a car, but he has less money for other things, meaning that its total consumption is reduced. And sectors affected by the drop of consumption will have their profit share reduced.

embedded. For this purpose, it is useful to separate analytically short-term possibilities from long-term changes. In the short-term, the factors on which an agent can act to increase its income are limited by hard boundaries. Workers have socially constructed expectations about the appropriate income for their skill level. Union contracts and labour laws protect workers from sudden changes. New market shares are hard to obtain rapidly and competitors are all working hard to keep their own cost at a minimum. It is hard to change consumer behaviours to discover products that correspond to the new “needs” that they do not have yet. In the long term, however, major changes can occur. New laws can be passed, new game-changing technologies can be introduced, large corporations can merge, other major players can go bankrupt, consumer taste can evolve, etc.

Therefore, in the short-term, relations of power on price-fixing occur in relatively tight boundaries, and mostly occur at a micro-level. This is the site of localized labour conflicts and strikes, the daily price competition between stores, the concurrence between providers, etc. In the long-term, relations of power can reconfigure the landscape. This is where large-scale enduring class conflict occurs: the transformation of labour laws or the changing distribution of income between labour and ownership, for example. But this is also where the reconfiguration of profitable sectors occurs: the consolidation of monopolies and conglomerates, the creation of new sectors (such as the new information technologies), the disappearance of other sectors, etc.

The boundaries in which short-term price-fixing occurs are, therefore, the crystallization of past social conflicts and transformations. It is the reflection of the long-term large-scale changes that have been occurring. It represents the institutionalized capacity of a set of given actors to secure a larger share of the social income, to the detriment of others. The lines on which this struggle occurs is not predetermined. Those whose main source of income is ownership (the capitalist class) have a common interest in increasing their shares of income in opposition to the income derived from wages. But they might not act as a common front on this, and they might prioritize increasing the strength of their sector or their corporation.

To sum up our theory in simple terms: *prices are the expression of a power struggle to capture shares of the social production available on markets*. The capitalist market is characterized by the lack of a centre to this price-fixing process: it is as much the product of state regulations than labour activism, corporation competition and class strategies.

This is where Brenner's distinction of horizontal and vertical relationship is useful, and where it can incorporate some interesting reflections from Nitzan and Bitchler.<sup>249</sup> To understand capitalist dynamics, one must analyze the actual behaviour of corporations. What do they do to increase their profits (the income related to their ownership rights)?

Nitzan and Bichler tends to focus overwhelmingly on horizontal relationship between capitalists—their focus on “differential accumulation” is responsible for this bias. Since differential accumulation represents the capacity for accumulation in relation with the average, this means that they focus more on capitalist competition than worker struggles. They are right that any individual corporation can hardly benefit from the general reduction of the workers' wage in terms of *differential* accumulation. But in the long term, this factor is major to understand large-scale reconfigurations in the distribution of income (as it is evident in the neoliberal period).

But if one is to understand the capitalist economy, it must also take into account the horizontal relationships that Nitzan and Bichler emphasize. The capitalist drive to monopolize markets and to buy competitors is based on the power monopolies have to increase prices. Inflationary dynamics are also a large-scale process that allows large corporations to increase their income to the detriment of small ones. The capacity of large corporations (such as Wal-Mart for example) to pressurize their providers into cheapening their inputs is another dynamic—related to “cost-cutting”, but based on inter-capitalist relationships.

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<sup>249</sup> Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *Capital as Power: A Study of Order and Creorder*, RIPE Series in Global Political Economy (New York: Routledge, 2009).

This “power theory of prices” does not assume that rent and interest are parasitic forms of income that are opposed to productive capital. Ownership of land or ownership of money is no less “parasitic” than the ownership of machines and factories. In the same vein, corporations seeking to monopolize markets and states helping them to do so are not only surviving dynamics of the mercantile epoch—these are valid and effective strategies embedded in contemporary capitalism. Patenting, copyrights and corporate secrets are contemporary capitalist forms of monopolization.

To sum up, ownership is defined as a form of power, as the control of the decision-making process over a factor of power (the thing that is owned). Prices are the reflection of large-scale relations of power, which determine the relative income that can be derived from ownership. Owners can therefore use what they own for their own needs, or use it in order to generate income. The income, in the form of money, is a social right to obtain ownership of other things. Capital is therefore *an evaluation of power on markets*, the value of capital is estimated in terms of its propensity to make profits. The value of a “capital asset” is related to its capacity to extract a portion of the social production for its owner.

In this perspective, the capitalist economy fully reveals itself as a privatization and an accumulation of decision-making power over a growing number of power resources transformed into wealth. Money and prices are the results of social processes that abstract the qualitative differences of resources and factors of power—but the quantity they represent reveal the social objectification of power. The substance of value is power, and its determinant is power struggle.

#### The Concrete Power of Capitalists

If *capital* is the abstracted form of capitalist power, it is represented, concretely, in terms of control over privately owned segments of social production. The forms of collective power that a capitalist controls are socially useful (they produce commodities with a use value, as Marx would put it). Just like the state built its power by “colonizing” socially necessary

activities, and taking control of them, capital accumulation is possible by monopolizing the production of useful commodities.

The concrete power of capitalists is therefore two-sided: the power given by control of production, and the power accumulated through profits. The first kind of power concerns the capacity to shape production: organizing work in a certain manner, investing in certain technologies, prioritizing certain kinds of products. This is similar to the power of the state to “shape” the activities it controls. But while the state must take its decisions based on its available tax-base and its general legitimacy, the main criteria for capitalists to shape production is the potential for profits. In some sectors, however, this control of production has other determinants than pure profit calculation. Controlling a media corporation, for example, involve decisions over content. Given a more or less equivalent profit rate, the owner can use this control to convey social values, push political agendas and diffuse certain norms to its audience. Even if a given content reduces the profit rate, an owner could decide to “absorb” the cost to maintain its media influence. In a more limited way, owners and managers can project their values to a limited extent within their enterprises. A racist bar owner can refuse service to blacks (although he might get sued), an ecologically minded manager can push for a company policy to reduce the carbon footprint of a production process, a visionary director can push for radical but risky technological innovations, etc. In the end, however, none of this can subsist if it undermines the corporation’s profitability.

The second kind of capitalist power concerns the profits through ownership: the dividends, the gains in capital, the net rent. A capitalist can choose to channel these profits back into capital, but it can also convert this wealth into other sorts of power. They can finance charities, political movements, universities, research centres, think tanks, lobbying organizations, foreign militias, and so on. Once wealth is fuelled into those kinds of organizations, it is no longer “capital”, but capitalist accumulation allows capitalists to systematically derive this free “disposable” income that can be used in this manner.

## Chapter 8: Fuelling Strategies for Change

As a framework built for emancipatory social changes, socialist theory must be useful as a compass to guide day-to-day decisions. It must provide a basis to analyse situations, judge the best strategy, assess potential outcomes, and decide what course of action will favour a transition towards socialism. This section seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of the present theory of power to answer these questions of strategy. For this purpose, I will be in dialogue with the academic literature on social movements, revolutions and contentious politics. I will also draw insights from activists and union organizers whose experience offers examples of efficient strategies.

The fundamental concepts proposed in chapters 4 and 5 do not offer a fully fledged theory of social movements that could compete with the extensive typologies and mechanisms detailed in the works of Tilly, Tarrow or McAdam. The role of concepts like power, trust and practice is rather to be used as simple building blocks that can help ordinary organizers to understand the most common dynamics around them, to equip them with methods of organizing, and connecting their situation and strategy to the big picture. Since the Dynamics of Contention approach is not fundamentally incompatible with the current theory of power, the student of social movements can use both to map movements in finer details.

There is one element, however, that could be a point of divergence: the Dynamics of Contention approach is well rooted in a tradition that explains the emergence and success of social movements through factors external to them. As Tarrow puts it, to know “why movements emerge in some periods and not in others”:

In the political process model sketched above, a key set of mechanisms that help to explain these variations is found in the political opportunities and threats to which movement actors *respond* [...] The concept of political opportunity emphasizes resources *external* to the group.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 32–33 [our emphasis].

To this “structural” approach, the “resource mobilization approach” takes another path, and proposes that “voluntaristic features of campaigns, notably those related to the skills of the resisters, are often better predictors of success than structural determinants”.<sup>251</sup> This second trend include authors such as Jean Elisabeth Wood<sup>252</sup>, Kurt Schock<sup>253</sup>, Ivan Arreguín-Toft<sup>254</sup>, Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan.

To be fair, both traditions actually recognize the importance of both structural constraints and the skills and decisions of participating individuals. They differ on their relative importance and, on this issue, we are not equipped to provide a better answer than the one available in the literature. What we can say, however, is that ordinary people don’t get to choose the structural constraints under which they must fight. And there are definitely better strategies than others, and skill development of organizers does make a difference in a movement’s capacity. That these “voluntaristic” factors can only slightly tip the balance or radically change the tide is ultimately not *that* relevant for those who must organize anyway. Therefore, for political reasons, I believe it is better to avoid the descriptive academic language that emphasizes factors that are outside activists control as the determinants of social movements. One must, of course, be able to identify the structural limits, but the most important role of a socialist theory in regard to strategic planning is to grasp what can be changed and spot opportunities that have a fighting chance at a given stage of organizing.

### **Aristotelian Ethics for the Radical Left**

In addition to understanding how social movements work and how they can win, socialist theory must also provide some basic guidelines to judge if one is doing the right thing to

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<sup>251</sup> Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Paperback ed, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare (New York, NY: Columbia Univ. Press, 2013) Chapter 1: The Success of Nonviolent Resistance Campaigns.

<sup>252</sup> Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>253</sup> Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*, Social Movements, Protest, and Contention, v. 22 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

<sup>254</sup> Ivan M. Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 99 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

advance towards an egalitarian world. For this purpose, I agree with Alex Callinicos and Richard W. Miller that we can start from the “non-utilitarian consequentialism”<sup>255</sup> of Marx and Aristotle. Institutions ought to be judged based on the kind of life they promote, and the actions of activists must be measured in relation to the consequences they have on contemporary institutions.

This stance can resolve some common ethical paradoxes facing activists daily. Since actions must be judged on the basis of their consequences and the capacity to affect the world is proportional to one’s power (and therefore, the consequences of one’s choices), then ethical choices are not symmetrical between those who have a lot of power and those who don’t. The issue of free speech, for example, has been a heated debate in past few years with the rise of far-right groups. In general, it opposed the antifascist tactic of shutting down crypto-fascists’ events to liberals condemning such actions in the name of the freedom of speech. From a consequentialist standpoint, what is important is neither the intrinsic legitimacy of shutting down Nazis, nor the universal principle of freedom of speech, but rather the consequence of radical groups disturbing far-right groups in relationship to the goal of a more egalitarian society. It follows that there is no general case to qualify antifascists tactics as “always right” or “always wrong”. The disruption of far-right events by small groups of radical leftists is not an issue of free speech, specifically because these groups are not powerful enough to be able to suppress significantly their opponent’s capacity to diffuse their ideas. Most often, speech-disruption tactics are targeted against high-profile speakers who benefit from large media exposure in order to broadcast an alternative message that is often excluded from the mainstream. The inequality of power is the very basis on which this tactic can be legitimate and the reason why it is not an issue of free speech: disruption is used to amplify the message of the powerless, much more than suppress someone else’s idea. However, this does not mean that speech disruption is an *efficient* tactic. Depending on how

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<sup>255</sup> Callinicos, *Making History*, 29; Richard W. Miller, “Marx and Aristotle : A Kind of Consequentialism,” in *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth-Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity*, ed. George E. McCarthy, Perspectives on Classical, Political, and Social Thought (Savage, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 275.

the disruption is made, the event that is targeted, and the group's capacity to outreach to the broader public, a speech disruption tactic can have the opposite effect: it can legitimize the far right and marginalize the left. Since the political groups don't always know in advance the effect of their tactic, they must adapt themselves to changing conditions and learn from their mistakes by evaluating the consequences of their actions.

This approach also reveals the limits of "lifestyle" strategies. From ethical consumption to isolated anarchist communes, many left-wing individuals judge political action in relationship to one's lifestyle conformity with the principles he preaches. A framework based on power, however, reveals the relatively weak impact of small-scale purely pre-figurative politics. Centuries of experimentation, from Fourier's phalanstères to contemporary ecovillages, have demonstrated that these tactics tend to isolate their participants much more than to "show the way" to outsiders. Attempting to act according to strict egalitarian rules in contemporary society is almost impossible and necessitates a rupture with contemporary culture that isolates one from the common sense. This does not disqualify prefiguration *per se*: any attempt to build alternative organizations to progress towards socialism must embed some level of experimental egalitarian procedures and structures. Yet, the choice to adopt pre-figurative practices must not be judged in relationship to its conformity to the ideal, but rather on its impact in the transformative process. "Preaching by example" is necessary in so far as other members of society might dismiss one's political ideal if he is in obvious contradiction, but as we have seen in chapter 5, isolation from mainstream culture is likely to sabotage the necessary relationship of trust that must be built to convince others.

Because this kind of consequentialist ethics requires judgment calls based on the local conditions of action, acting ethically is a skill that must be developed. In some ways, this is similar to Aristotle's *practical wisdom* (or *phronesis*):

the prudent human being possesses [practical wisdom] (phronesis) that permits him always to choose the correct action in a given circumstance and to perform it well and for the right reason. [Practical wisdom] is inseparable, however, from moral virtue

since, as Aristotle makes clear in book 6, “virtue makes the target correct, prudence the things conducive to that target”.<sup>256</sup>

No socialist theory can therefore provide a complete guide on *how to act*, and no single “little red book” can adequately discriminate abstractly the right kinds of actions from the wrong ones in regard to socialist politics. Theory provides tools and general direction but acting in a concrete situation requires judgment. From the kind of non-utilitarian consequentialist ethics borrowed from Aristotle, we can ask: what kind of practices and institutions can the radical left build on its own to foster a socialist “practical wisdom”? Furthermore, we can decenter the question of judgment from individuals and analyse it from the point of view of popular organizations. Making the right decision is not simply an individual characteristic, especially when we are talking of collective action. Communities can therefore develop something like “collective skills” to make the adequate judgment calls. The propensity of a collectivity to make the right decisions is a factor of both its capacity to foster practical wisdom among its members and to setting up the right kind of decision-making process.

Transitional organizations cannot, therefore, be judged on the same basis as would be the institutions of a socialist society. While the latter must be analyzed on the basis of the kind of life they create for those who live in such society, the former must be judged *according to its propensity to bring our society closer to the socialist horizon*. This can only be judged by experience, and requires the accumulation of practical skills that cannot be prescribed in the abstract.

### **Power from Below**

Theory can, however, provide general strategic guidelines. The socialist perspective emerging from the present theory is turned towards building *power from below*. This gives us a general guide of the kind of actions to prioritize and a way to measure the relative success of a given course of action. *Power from below* means to build the power of the popular

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<sup>256</sup> Aristotle, Robert C. Bartlett, and Susan D. Collins, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 313–14.

classes against the ruling class, to increase its capacity to challenge the elite, and eventually, being able to undertake a major transformation of the infrastructure of power. At any moment, taking into consideration the specific context, the group's level of organization and relative power, the culture, and the conflicts occurring at a given moment, the ethical question for socialists is therefore: *what is the course of action that will empower the most other members of the popular classes and lead them to a long-term will to fight for a more egalitarian society?*

Alan Sear's concept of the *infrastructure of dissent* is good to describe the general power of the popular classes. Instead of focusing only on one dimension—such as the strength of a working-class party—or looking only at formal institutions such as labour unions, the infrastructure of dissent designates all formal and informal resources at the disposal of members of the popular classes to resist, dissent and confront the elite with their own demands. This includes the friendly coffee shop where militants can meet, the culture of student strikes even if they are not recognized legally, the informal networks of solidarity that can conjure mass mobilization when needed, the know-how of activists, the friendly print shop, and, of course, formal institutions such as labour unions, political parties and community groups. All of these elements are factors of power: they are resources that allow individuals and groups to act in the world, that unlocks possibilities or multiply the efficiency of their action. A strong infrastructure of dissent means that popular classes have more resources to challenge and resist the ruling classes. It is the base on which large scale social transformations are possible.

All elements of the infrastructure of dissent are not equal, however, in their contribution to the power of popular classes. This will be analyzed in greater depth later, but it is worth mentioning that some institutions allow short-term empowerment but limit long-term capacities. This is the case of highly regulated labour codes in North America, which gives some resources to unions, but ties those to strict limits in order to prevent any spill over effects of labour conflicts. Some organizations also *look like* vehicles of resistance, but are actually highly centralized structures accumulating resources from popular classes for the

use of rising individuals that can propel themselves in the ruling class by these means. Bureaucratic labour unions and centralized political parties are good examples of this: while they do contribute to improving slightly the lives of those who support them, the bulk of the resources they centralize is at the disposal of their leadership and serves their very own agenda. The general task of socialists is therefore not *only* to build the infrastructure of dissent, but to build it with the *right kind* of institutions, which are likely to generate genuine power from below.

I believe that the concept of power already strongly resonates among radical activists and organizers and is already widely used to recruit and train newcomers. The term *empower*, for example, is commonplace in left-wing circles to designate the process by which an ordinary person realizes his own power and the power of collective action to address the issues he cares about. In *Labor Notes* publications, power is a central concept to teach rank-and-file workers how to fight their boss and win union battles. In the training manual *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, they state:

In any workplace, the underlying issue is power: who has it, who wants it, and how it's used. Power is "the whole ball of wax," says Hetty Rosenstein, who headed a local of public workers in New Jersey for many years. [...] Organizers need to understand what makes it hard for people to push for power. Then you can help them take the first step.<sup>257</sup>

Union organizer Jane McAlevey built her whole practice around "power structure analysis"<sup>258</sup>—a method that consists of analyzing the social power of workers' opponents in all their form and map the sources of workers' power through a collective and participatory inquiry. This practice not only guides workers in their strategic decisions, it also *reveals* to the workers their own power of action. This is a pedagogical and training element to the process that, according to her experience, works well.

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<sup>257</sup> Alexandra Bradbury, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* (Detroit, MI: Labor Notes, 2016), 22.

<sup>258</sup> McAlevey, *Raising Expectations*, 37.

In all those cases, power is not used in the same sense as in the classic debate about how (or if) to “take power”. The expression of “taking power” conjures a static state-centric conception of power: power is concentrated within state institutions and belongs to those who occupy its centre. Instead, and as in the current socialist theory of power, it is understood as something that can be “built” from below through collective action and used to confront forms of power appropriations such as state elites, but also capital “as” power. This kind of analysis recognizes that the masses’ main power resides in their number, and most importantly, in the fact that their participation inside the structure of power accumulation — such as the work they provide inside capitalist enterprise — is the very basis of their opponents’ power. Collective disobedience, insubordination, desertion and strikes are their main tools, because they “remove or restrict adversaries’ sources of power”<sup>259</sup> and, at the same time, frees up their own workforce to act on their own purpose.

The language of power is therefore useful, because it is an intuitive concept that can grasp both what the problem is and what we can do to change it. Power designates what the enemy has, what allows him to decide for ordinary folks and create the problems. And power designate what ordinary folks can build together to confront this enemy. The present theory of power can take root in this intuitiveness, in the methods of organizing power from below that already exist, and connect it to the broader power dynamics of the capitalist society.

## **Trust Networks**

Building power from below is not easy. The main problem of ordinary people is neither fear of repression, nor ideological blindness, but rather *disorganization*. Their opponent is always already better organized than they are, and as long as the powerful can keep outflanking them, they can maintain ordinary people in a state of resignation. Because ordinary people lack the coercive capacities to force the participation of others or the capital to pay for their participation, they cannot conjure mass participation on their own. They must coordinate

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<sup>259</sup> Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* Chapter 1.

with each other on a voluntary basis and accept to undertake simultaneous high-risk actions of disobedience. Yet, without a culture of solidarity, established processes of consultation and physical infrastructure to meet and debate, such coordination is hard to achieve.

To address the problem of how one *begins* the organizing process in a disorganized group of resigned ordinary people, union organizers begin by mapping the networks of trust. A *Labor Notes* guide describes the process in this way:

Your workplace may feel like a disorganized mess. But the truth is, you're not starting from zero. There's organization there already—though it might not have anything to do with the union. Are there carpools, for instance? Family ties? A rumor mill? [...] So your next task is to find and build on the organization that's already there. First you'll need to map out the many existing networks, and then you'll begin to knit them together into your union network. [...] Every workplace has informal leaders who aren't elected or appointed; they just are, and they influence others in their group. If you have a message to communicate, reach the leaders of the informal groups. You can bet the word will get out to everyone<sup>260</sup>

In other words, there is always pre-existing networks in any community. Those networks are organic ties between people to provide for their day-to-day needs, including needs for belonging and entertainment. Over time, these networks form bonds of trust between those who are part of them. Union organizers aim to use those relations of trust to influence quickly large numbers of people to act collectively. They map those networks, the relations of trust, and identify those who are at the centre of them—the natural or “organic leaders”<sup>261</sup>. Since conveying ideas and practices — especially risky ones — *requires* trust, the organizer seeks to convince those local leaders, so that *they* can then use their influence over their peers. Convincing these leaders require the establishment of a relation of trust between him and the organizer, but it is saving the organizer's the trouble of establishing the same relationship with all those that the leader can already “move”.

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<sup>260</sup> Bradbury, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, 66, 67, 76.

<sup>261</sup> McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 35.

Once the already-existing networks of trust have been mapped, the process of organizing consist of linking up the organic leaders together to form a core that can facilitate communications and coordination. Those newly created ties are not based on trust yet—they are weaker forms of bond based on information exchange and contextual alliances.<sup>262</sup> But sustained collaboration, common struggles, and ultimately, the experience of victory strengthen those bonds. Trust and a real sense of solidarity can become embedded in this network.

These methods of “leader ID” and “member-to-member” network is already put in practice by union organizers and has demonstrated its efficiency. The idea of the *centrality of trust* explained in chapter 5 offers a model to explain why this works and enshrine this method into the core concepts of socialist theory. It replaces the rationalist assumption, according to which exposition to good arguments is enough to convince others. It also offers an accessible alternative to advertisement-inspired communication strategies: the interpersonal bonds of trust common people share is actually a more powerful conveyor of ideas and practices than expensive professional-designed ads aimed at appealing to emotions and identities.<sup>263</sup>

### **The Role of the Militant Minority**

When discussing the role of trust networks, we have used the terms “organizer” and “leader”. A small discussion on their respective definition and role is crucial at this point.

In the literature on union organizing, *leader* is used to identify any person who is trusted by others, any person that colleagues hold in their esteem and are likely to accept their suggestions and ideas. The leader is not necessarily pro-union or left wing in general—he can influence their colleague in any direction, for any matter. And it does not mean that the leader shows “initiative” or creativity, or seeks to organize its community. Leaders can give relatively “conservative” advice, and they can be seen as a resource for others without

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<sup>262</sup> Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 132.

<sup>263</sup> Specialists in marketing agree with this, see: Michael Phillips, Salli Rasberry, and Peri Pakroo, *Marketing without Advertising*, 3rd ed (Berkeley, CA: Nolo, 2001).

playing any role in organizing them. And finally, it is crucial to mention that union organizers such as Jane McAlevey observed that most leaders don't even self-identify as such.<sup>264</sup>

In this very restrictive definition, the *leader* is therefore only defined by its capacity to influence others through the bonds of trust they have formed. The term "natural leader" that sometimes appear in union literature is therefore somewhat misleading. Being a leader is not a trait of personality or a specific skill, it's rather a social position that can shift with time. McAlevey uses "organic leader" rather than "natural", and I believe it does a better job to describe this kind of social position.

As for the organizer, we could define it as somebody with the will and the skills to bring a given community to act collectively for common goals (workplace, neighbourhoods, school, etc.). The organizer can come from the community itself or can come from elsewhere. He does not have to be a leader either. The distinction is important in the union organizing literature because part of those who think on these issues are specifically well intended militant union staff who are outsiders to the workplaces in which they intervene. And the same is true for many socialists: they have political organizing skills, extended knowledge on political economy, ideas on how unions should be run, but they lack a point of entry to really influence workers. The organizer brings *know how* and ideas to solve a given problem, but they cannot single-handedly organize collective actions. The "leader ID" and "member-to-member network" method clarifies that role and provide a way for the organizer to prioritize time and resources by rallying the already-existing leaders of a given community. Now, organizers are not always exterior to a community. Even when a community is first organized from the outside, a primary goal for the organizer is to train the organic leaders to also become organizers themselves. And ultimately, *being organized* means that a community can sustain internally its organizing culture, and train periodically new organizers among its own members. The concept of organizer is therefore not very far from

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<sup>264</sup> McAlevey, *Raising Expectations*, 13.

the classical socialist concept of “cadre”: committed, politically motivated, knowledgeable activists with good organizing skills.

But one must understand why not everyone can or will become “organizers” or “cadre”—why the very militant ones will most of the time be a “minority”—to understand its role and the appropriate strategies to adopt. As I have argued earlier, there is no definitive “proof” that socialism is in the best interest of the majority. And even if such claim could be supported by social sciences, the scope of knowledge required to accept it as true is well beyond the available time, resources and skills most people have. Belonging to the radical left is most of all an act of faith. And like any commitment of this sort, there is no particular reason to expect the vast majority to adopt this “faith”. The same goes with less radical perspectives—the very idea of a militant and democratic kind of unionism is met with suspicion by many well-intended workers and union activists. Furthermore, one must not only believe that the goal is worth it, he must also believe that *his particular efforts* will actually bring about positive changes that will contribute to the realization of that goal.

For most people, it therefore does not make much sense to dedicate a significant amount of time and resources towards an unclear goal for which they can barely contribute. They have no concrete proof that there is a viable alternative to the way things are—even if they dislike their current situation. They never learned to organize their community to change things, and it is not clear that investing time into developing those skills would be useful. The logical escape path from their oppression is to rather carve out small realms of freedom where they have control: a house, a family, vacations, retirement, etc.

Who, then, chooses the path of the organizer? In her study of the Salvadoran Civil War, Elisabeth Jean Wood argues that many militants joined the revolutionaries for motivations that were unrelated to their chances of success. One important motivation was the value given to participation in a righteous movement per se:

That participation is valued is not unusual for protest movements. James M. Jasper (1997) observes that “the pleasures of protest” include not only companionship, a

sense of community and identity, the euphoria of crowds (what Emile Durkheim called “collective effervescence”), all of which are also available at soccer matches, but also the pleasure of working toward a moral vision and striving for a meaningful life.<sup>265</sup>

The other motivation that is not result-driven is defiance: the feeling of revolt, of confrontation, of injustice that leads one to fight for dignity even in a losing fight. She argues that defiance “is similar to participation, [but it] is negative, something one does because one must, while participation is pleasurable.”<sup>266</sup>

For those two kinds of motivations to drive someone to “become” a committed agent of change, it requires a sense of justice that is significantly in opposition to the established order. In any stable society, it is unlikely that young people will be socialized on a mass scale with norms and practices that would generate this kind of motivation. Most are likely to be dissatisfied by their subordination, and strive to improve their condition, but they will not participate in a fight for the sake of participation. Only a limited number of people will be “ideologically driven” to participate on the long haul regardless of their chances of success. This is the primary source of organizers, of a constant “militant minority” that persists even in the darkest moments.

This ideologically driven minority is not composed of people who are “better” than others. They are not the elected few who crawled out of the cave, saw the truth and went back to free the masses. Often, especially outside communities with a strong organizing culture, being part of the radical left is contingent on groups one meets and friendships one forges. It is frequent to see young people adopting the beliefs, attitudes, norms and practices of radical left groups in order to be accepted and recognized within the group. As the sense of belonging to the radical left “sinks” within the core of one’s identity, it generates the kind of motivation that pushes someone to become an organizer, to take risks, invest energy, spend resources for the sake of fighting for an ideal, notwithstanding its chances of success. Such

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<sup>265</sup> Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, 232.

<sup>266</sup> Wood, 233.

ideologically driven people are not necessarily “organizers”, in the sense that they don’t necessarily have any organizing skills and knowledge. Therefore, not all self-identified anarchists or socialists are organizers. But their motivation makes them more likely to learn how to organize, and to take the time to organize.

In contrast, for most people, *starting* to organize their community does not make sense. Even if they are discontent, they do not know where to start from. Organizing is too time consuming, risky and uncertain. But the ideologically driven organizers don’t quite care about that. They try, they fail and they keep trying, because they attribute an intrinsic value to the struggle. And when one of their organizing projects encounters some success, they lower the cost of participation for other people to join in. Because people are more likely to join in if they expect many other will also join<sup>267</sup>, then there is a self-reinforcing effect on participation as the ball gets rolling. And as an organizing campaign demonstrates its capacity to *win*, even small things, it fuels the belief that collective action can work.

To formalize the typology, we could briefly say that *ideologically driven activists* are individuals for whom political action is part of their identity, and they attribute an intrinsic value to participation in struggles. *Organizers* are individuals with the will and the skills to organize a community. *Organic leaders* are influent individuals within a community, because they are at the centre of trust networks.

### **From Organizationally Outflanked to Organized Power**

What does it mean, exactly, for ordinary people to be *organized*? I defined earlier the concept of organization as “any pooling of human activity and resources under a common decision-making process to achieve a collective goal”. The organizations in which most people take part in the capitalist society are hierarchical, controlled by a few individuals. To “fit” into those organizations, people must resign to their role of subaltern. They must accept in practice their subordination. This inevitably generates grievances that cannot be addressed

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<sup>267</sup> Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works* Chapter 2.

directly, because they are specifically excluded from the decision-making process of the organization.

Yet, the very power of contemporary organizations, such as a state or a corporation relies on the control of the worker's labour. Disobedience, slowdowns, sabotages and strikes are therefore tremendous weapons to influence or change the decision-making processes. Undertaking this kind of collective action, as we have seen, cannot be done spontaneously—it requires coordination. Therefore, for the subaltern, *being organized* means pooling time and resources in autonomous organizations aimed at coordinating contentious actions to address their grievances (by means of reforms or radical changes).

Those “popular” organizations are not necessarily formal. It can take the form of lunch meetings on a workplace, moderating a Facebook group to discuss with colleagues online, printing flyers on one's personal printer, taking the week end to write a militant newspaper, using a colleague's car to visit another work site and meet other organic leaders, holding meetings in a friendly café, all of this to ultimately push a set of collective action to address a workplace problem. Spare time and money are required to build and maintain such organization, but their real resources are the networks of trust on which they can rely. In terms of power theory, I identified 3 factors of power in earlier chapters: individual factors (including skills, information, knowledge), physical factors and social factors (including the organization of labour and the social conditions). Networks of trust are a fundamental dimension of this third factor: organic leaders have power *because* they are in a social position to influence those who trust them. A popular organization's power is therefore strongly bound to these social factors. And, most importantly, it is when it uses this power to organize disruptions — to convince the community to a simultaneous withdrawal of labour and resources from the hierarchical organization — that its true power is revealed.

Many popular organizations therefore find their power proportional to their capacity to organize mass disobedience that undermines their opponent's power. This capacity is tied to the skills of its organizers, the leadership of its organic leaders, the culture of militancy

and solidarity within the community and the strategic position of the community in relationship to their opponent. This is the case for “social movement” organizations, whose type varies according to the kind of community they organize and the type of structure of power accumulation against which they fight. Labour unions are an obvious example, but it also includes tenant associations, student associations, community groups, right defence groups, and various cause-based political organizations. The power base of those groups and their mode of action depends on the nature of their target (for example, an employer, a landlord, a corporation or state), and it depends on whether their subjection is based on the extraction of their labour, of their wage (by paying for rent or taxes for ex), of their land (in colonial settings for example) or else.

Taken as whole, the infrastructure of dissent includes other types of organizations: workers cooperatives or political parties, for example. Because those organizations are not geared towards organizing *disobedience*, their power base is different. They participate in the general field of power built “from below” in so far as they are instruments of the working class that facilitate contentious action and participate in a more general process of social transformation. Indirectly, they can provide support to actions of mass disobedience, but this is not their primary function, nor their source of power. Cooperatives must operate in the field of market competition and reproduce themselves like any other capitalist corporation. They keep functioning as long as consumers continue to buy from them. Ultimately, they, too, accumulate power in the form of capital. Similarly, electoral worker parties are pressured to operate according to the rules of ruling class parties and compete for votes. But what separates worker cooperatives and working-class parties that participate to the infrastructure of dissent from ruling class enterprises and parties are their ties with the community they emerge from. Those ties are what makes a given cooperative more interesting for the consumer than other businesses—price and quality being equal or probably in favour of the union-busting corporation. It is also the networks of trust that will make a worker party seem more reliable than other parties—especially given the high level

of cynicism against electoral politics. We will discuss the specificities of social economy organizations and electoral politics later.

*Being organized* also means that a given community has the capacity to sustain its practices, its norms, its organizing culture over time. Because of the principle of the primacy of practice, discussed in chapter 5, sustaining an organizational practice of resistance cannot be done in the abstract, through books and discourses. The practical skills and tacit judgments required to organize efficiently in a given community are inexhaustible and unspecifiable. One can have a hint of their nature by reading and attending workshops, but like any skill, real-world experience, trial and error, and a relation of apprenticeship is important to its acquisition. In a disorganized community, it is hard for anyone to develop those skills. Without an experienced organizer and a culture of struggle, it is not clear for the motivated individual how he can practice its skills and from whom he can learn on a day to day basis. In an organized community, there are good organizers that are actively teaching their skills to other, and the recurrence of struggles offers recurring opportunities for new activists to practice their organizing skills. Popular organizations therefore act as practical repositories of “contentious repertoires”<sup>268</sup>. The tactics and strategies available for a given community in a given context do not float around, they exist through those popular organizations. And those organizations must actively teach those skills and put them in practice for its culture to persist over time.

That a legal union or community group exists somewhere does not mean that a community is actually organized in this sense. Most adopt what McAlevey defines as an “advocacy” or a “mobilizing” approach. The advocacy model relies on professionals, such as lawyers, researchers, communication experts, lobbyists, to represent a given community and defend its rights. While the presence of this type of organization is better than nothing, it has little to no capacity to organize collective action. Its power is therefore limited to the workforce

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<sup>268</sup> Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, Second revised edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 14–15.

of its staff, and the community has little control over it. The mobilizing model involves more directly the community, but McAlevey note that in this approach, it is always only the:

dedicated activists who show up over and over at every meeting and rally for all good causes, but without the full mass of their coworkers or community behind them. This is because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; the staffers see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change.<sup>269</sup>

In both cases, advocacy or mobilization is planned and controlled from “outside” the community. The community does not form its own organizers, it does not learn by itself how to struggle. What is reproduced, instead, is a culture of dependence on professional activists, and the relationship with them is one of service provider. This constitutes, at best, a rudimentary safeguard for ordinary people, but it does not count as *being organized*. Of course, a workplace can be both represented by a bureaucratic top-down union *and* be autonomously organized on the shop floor level. This is basically the dual situation that arises when a successful rank-and-file strategy is put in place<sup>270</sup>, and sometimes it arises contingently from the direct experience by workers of larger social mobilizations.

Jane McAlevey also makes an insightful distinction between “self-selecting” militant groups and “structure-based” organizations. The former refers to groups that recruit their members on the basis of a “a preexisting interest in or a serious commitment to the cause”<sup>271</sup>. In other words, the main process through which this kind of group involves members of a community is by waiting for those to self-select themselves as participants if they agree with a given cause. Most single-issue organization, such as ecological, feminist or anti-war groups are of this kind: they will organize conferences, display posters, pass leaflets, and hope that a growing number of people that agree with them will join them. In contrast, “structure-based” organizations are anchored in a specific community and must represent it on all the possible issues that can arise from its members. Because of this, structure-based organizations that

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<sup>269</sup> McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 10.

<sup>270</sup> Kim Moody, *In Solidarity: Essays on Working-Class Organization and Strategy in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

<sup>271</sup> McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 13.

seek to organize collective actions must seek clear majorities and therefore reach out to disengaged workers and try to bring them on board. It is clear for McAlevey that only structure-based groups allow for a real “organizing” model to take place.

When looking at society as a whole, passing from an organizationally outflanked working-class to an organized popular power is a matter of scale rather than a binary state. At any point of history, in any society, there will be at least some “pockets” of organizing and some spaces of autonomy where egalitarian visions are shared and reproduced. An organized workplace will be able to win better-than-average working conditions for its sector, but it won’t be able to challenge larger power structures and win bigger changes without a network of organized communities on a larger scale. As more communities get organized and produce their organizers, the general level of working-class organized power rises. At some point, larger social changes require more than the accumulation of organized local communities. This is when, for example, the revolutionary party comes into play in classical socialist politics—as an organization able to bridge and guide working-class power, and channel it to transform radically the infrastructure of social power.

Another feature to take into consideration when analyzing a given infrastructure of dissent is how and where the socialization of ideologically driven activists occurs. It is no surprise that organized communities will tend to “produce” activists and organizers. But there are spaces, for example Canadian and American campuses outside Quebec, that play a crucial role in the socialization of the radical left while being disorganized. Musical counterculture is another good example of this phenomenon. In both cases, newly socialized radicals from those backgrounds will internalize a critique of society, will identify with a given trend of the radical left, will tend to participate in protests and actions, but will not be likely to develop organizing skills and leadership among ordinary people.

## Popular Identities and the Organizational Embeddedness of Solidarity

From a socialist perspective, the level self-organization is only part of the story. There is no guarantee that members of structure-based organizations using the organizing model will come to the conclusion that the long-term solution for their problem is a socialist revolution. “Being organized” makes it more likely for a community to realize its own power, to learn how to fight, to make the experience of more egalitarian decision-making processes, to win its initial grievances and push for more. But the experience of socialist organizers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is that this “spontaneous consciousness” will be limited to trade unionism (and similar community-centric reformist modes of action).

In the classical socialist literature, *class consciousness* fundamentally describes how much working-class people are convinced by socialist politics. Because socialist politics were seen to be the same as the interests of the working class, and those interests were based in the objective economic structure of capitalism, then the role of the socialist party was to “raise” class consciousness by bringing workers to understand their true interest. I have criticized this notion of interest in chapter 1 and I will therefore use a different starting point to talk of class consciousness here.

First, there is a fundamental difference between working-class identity and adhesion to socialist politics. “Class consciousness” is most useful when it refers to the process of self-definition of workers as a common group who share common interests.<sup>272</sup> Now, to identify as a worker can mean very different things according to how the group of workers is defined. Class consciousness becomes fuzzy when we try to specify conditions, because it implies the very definition of class—something that even socialist scholars have debated for decades. Is the “proletariat” restricted to manual workers? To waged workers? Does it include liberal professions such as doctors, lawyers and professors? Autonomous farmers? Does it include housewives? Are students workers? Furthermore, can we speak of class consciousness if a

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<sup>272</sup> E.P. Thompson’s classic work is a good example of the application of a similar conception. *The Making of the English Working Class*.

group has the “right” definition of class, but it restricts its solidarity to fellow working-class members within its national borders? All these questions can be answered theoretically. In chapters 4, 7 and 8, we have discussed the notion of class, and proposed to define it in terms of power relations rather than work proper. Yet, I do not think it is useful to use my own proposition of class as the yard stick to measure the class consciousness of subalterns in a given context.

Instead, I believe it is tactically and theoretically more useful to speak of *the forms of popular identities*, their corresponding forms of solidarity and the politics they produce. Socialists do not need to format workers’ identities to a strict theoretical mould to achieve mass support for socialism. It would be incredibly difficult to do and potentially lead to a noxious sectarianism that can either isolate socialists or force them to adopt extremely authoritarian measures to impose their conceptions. Instead, we can recognize that various forms of popular identities are compatible with egalitarian politics, and work with those even if they are “imperfect”. I have in mind the different identities that are produced or mobilized within struggles against specific oppressions. These identities can be based on language, skin colour, religion, gender, sexual orientation, capacities, wealth, geographic location, types of work, etc. The fact that some of those identities are very particularistic and mobilized primarily for the benefit of a narrow group does not change their egalitarian drive: they originate from a shared experience of injustice. The fact that a group might stop fighting once it feels it achieved its particular goal does not indicate an intrinsic absolute limit to particularistic identities, but rather than linking struggles together and broadening the transformative frame requires concrete ties of solidarity, alliances and a lot of organizational work.

From the principle of the primacy of practice, we must also remember that *identity* is not primarily a discursive construction. It is lived in practical terms as a sense of belonging, as a feeling of commonalities with others sharing this identity, as a set of practical norms of what it means to perform this identity, as the day-to-day relationship with others that a given identity implies in terms of social position. Discursive strategies that seek to frame identities

for political purposes can influence how one “labels” identities, but it can only scratch the surface of how identities are practically defined.<sup>273</sup> The fundamental reorganization of identities must occur at the practical level—and this is where the organizing model can have long-term impacts that top down communication approaches don’t. *Organizing* a community ultimately *reshapes* a number of practices and changes the relationship members have with each other and with their opponents. Therefore, organizing does not only empower a community, it can generate new forms of identities.

Recognizing the validity of the various identities of resistance does not imply the abandonment of a class-based perspective. A good definition of class is still important to orient socialist politics. But since identities are primarily produced in practice, the formation of a working-class identity does not depend on the efficiency of socialist propaganda, but rather on the organization of workers on a class basis. It is through collective organization and action that workers can come to realize, in practice, their shared interest and develop a sense of belonging. An organized workplace is likely to generate a common identity among the workers, in opposition to the bosses. But these ties of solidarity don’t automatically extend to all other oppressed people. We must tie the organized workplace with organized neighbourhoods, schools and other sectors to extend the organizational ties and develop a practice of collaboration and active solidarity. The common identities that will emerge can vary. It can appear as the 99% against the 1%, as the people against the elite, or in certain contexts it can take anti-colonial or anti-imperialist forms. In any cases, what counts is the extent of solidarity that is embedded in the practice of those liberatory identities. Identities that are more “particular” will not disappear (and it would not be positive to erase them), but will rather be tied in practice to broader identities that can be mobilized on a larger scale to achieve major social transformations. For this reason, class-based identities are really umbrella identities that link particular situations under a common denominator: a situation of relative powerlessness in opposition to a ruling class.

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<sup>273</sup> I have in mind the left populism inspired by Laclau and Mouffe. See *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

Raising “class consciousness” is therefore not a matter of popular education, it is not the product of an adequate discourse, but rather the result of long-term organizing of local communities, of forging alliances between them and confronting the ruling class in broad popular struggles. As the practical sense of common conditions and interests develops, the language of class struggle is more and more likely to match the experience of individuals and be adopted as labels to make sense of how they come to identify themselves.

However, even then, class-based popular identities will not necessarily lead to socialist politics. There is necessarily a gap between recognizing a common problem and agreeing on the solution. Socialism is one option among a large set that pretends to solve the grievances of the majority. What is the missing strategic ingredient that bridges that gap? Like any belief, propagation of socialist ideas and practices will run along networks of trust and will become “embedded” in the practice of organizations. Getting communities organized is therefore not enough. Socialists must also build relations of trust between leaders in communities and socialist organizers, they must be in a situation of *hegemony* in its fundamental sense—that of leadership. Organizing this work is the function of radical left groups: to train organizers to revolutionary politics, to analyse the level of working-class organization, to intervene strategically to increase this level, to develop ties with key communities, and use those ties to expend the networks of solidarity and orient broad struggles towards egalitarian politics.

### **Prefigurative Democracy and Power from Below**

Those conclusions immediately raise more questions about the status of democracy within popular organizations. If democracy, defined as the egalitarian distribution of power, is the core of the socialist project, then how democratic must transitional organizations be? How democratic must the revolutionary process be? And how do we assess the right level and kind of democratization?

First, we must recognize that to distribute power in an egalitarian manner, there must be power to distribute. Procedural equality within a powerless organization does not distribute

power to its participants. On the other hand, any process that builds power from below, that *empowers* ordinary people to act, that enables disruptive collective action, is a step forward in terms of distribution of power from the current state of inequality—regardless of the formal decision-making process inside the organization.

This being said, there is a strong case made by radical union organizers such as Mike Parker, Martha Gruel and Jane McAlevey that democracy is actually more efficient at building union power. This is partly due to the observation that unions controlled by staffers or full-time officers with little participation of members tend to privilege industrial peace rather than building members' capacity to undertake disruptive collective action.<sup>274</sup> But the main reason is that democracy is actually more *efficient* for organizing high risk collective action. Because such action requires involvement and trust, members are more likely to engage in it if they can control the process. A democratic organization also opens more opportunities for rank-and-file members to gain organizing experience and learn the appropriate skills required for an efficient member-to-member mobilizing network.

A formally democratic union will not “automatically” produce high mobilization, however. Ordinary people are not “sleeper” radicals whose militancy is hidden by the repression of evil bureaucratic structures. In most places, if one only rewrites the by-laws of a union to create hyper democratic procedures, it will not produce an extra ounce of mobilization. Building power from below requires the leadership of organizers (those with the will and skills to organize) in combination with democratic features. As demonstrated earlier, ordinary people don't spontaneously have the skills and knowledge to organize themselves even if they would want to. And for most, it is simply too costly to try on their own, or when they tried, they failed and got discouraged.

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<sup>274</sup> Ralph Darlington, “The Marxist Rank-and-File/Bureaucracy Analysis of Trade Unionism: Some Implications for the Study of Social Movement Organisations,” in *Marxism and Social Movements*, ed. Colin Barker, Historical Materialism Book Series, volume 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 187–208; McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 39–41; Mike Parker and Martha Gruelle, *Democracy Is Power: Rebuilding Unions from the Bottom Up* (Detroit, MI: Labor Notes, 1999), 14.

What we mean by “democratic organization” is not a definitive set of institutions. The important element is that it allows members of a community to control collective actions, to take responsibilities, to develop their political aptitudes as much as possible in a given context. Union organizers do provide plenty of examples of how this can be done: open bargaining, open committees, easy ways to take responsibility, mentoring systems, democratic by-laws, procedures to level the field between unequal starting positions between members, frequent newsletter, low material privileges for staff and elected officials, etc.<sup>275</sup>

Prefigurative democracy in transitional organizations is not only important for its relation to the socialist project and its efficiency in mobilizing. It is also a prerequisite for the kind of mass-scale skill building that is necessary to provide the social basis on which a socialist society can exist. As I will argue in chapter 9, democracy, like any type of social organization, requires certain *know how*, certain social aptitudes and attitudes to function properly. Because the capitalist society does not really teach those, it is up to the autonomous popular organizations to develop, perfect and transmit them.

This being said, the organizing method could be seen as creating an informal chain of command incompatible with the principle of democracy: the organizers seek to develop leadership over the community leaders, who then use their own leadership to move the rest of the community. But the whole process of organizing is done on a voluntary basis. Organizers cannot generally coerce or bribe leaders to get them on board because they don’t have the power to do so—and if they do, doing so would undermine the very basis on which the organized community could sustain its organizing after the initial push is done. Since the whole structure relies on trust, organizers and leaders cannot push the movement far from the will of the rank-and-file without breaking their trust and jeopardize the very basis of this collective power. Furthermore, the process of leader identification seeks to uncover the pre-existing networks of trust. Organizing without a focus on leaders does not reduce the

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<sup>275</sup> Parker and Gruelle, *Democracy Is Power*.

centrality of leaders: they will still be at the centre of trust networks and influence their colleagues. Ignoring this reality does not negate it. What can reduce the centrality of organic leaders in a given collective action is the development of political analysis and skills among ordinary members. This is the main way through which individuals will rely less on someone else's judgment, be more proactive in getting information, getting involve and making up their own mind. Starting from the organic leader is therefore not a problem if, in the organizing process, there is space for members to take responsibilities, learn from experience, access important information and get training from the organizers.

Therefore, if democratic procedures don't "generate" by themselves radicals and organizers, an organized community *does* in its struggles and its processes of reproduction. We briefly discussed before that two kinds of motivations that keep activists active are independent of results: valuing participation in itself and the will to defy an oppressor. The third motivation identified by Elisabeth Jean Wood, *pleasure in agency*, comes into play once the movement is making progress. It is the "positive affect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that come from the successful assertion of intention"<sup>276</sup>. The self-perpetuating characteristics of organized communities are tied with this motivation. Once ordinary folks that are usually excluded from any sort of meaningful decision — in other words in a situation of *alienation* — finally taste the feeling of changing things through collective action, they become "empowered". They realize that their subjection is not inevitable, they take pride in their participation into a movement that changes things and they will be more likely to do it again.

The tension between democracy and the organizing model is therefore more or less real. In the end, they tend to be mutually reinforcing. The relationship between establishing a socialist hegemony and building power from below does not go as smoothly, however. The general principle of coordinating socialists through a political organization such as a Party and establishing relations of trust with central leaders and organizers across society is not a

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<sup>276</sup> Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, 235.

problematic starting point in itself. But it will eventually encounter problems: the very effect of organizing is an increasing autonomy of communities and individuals. In addition, socialists won't be the only ones competing for leadership over organized community. Looking at revolutionary tipping points like the French or the Russian revolutions, one can only be overwhelmed by the number of factions, of clubs, of parties claiming leadership over parts of the movement and competing for hegemony. These historical precedents, with all the effervescence and dynamism generated by their massive spreads of power from below, teaches us that no unique clear solution is likely to make consensus among organized communities and that socialists are unlikely to be united neither.

A part of those divisions comes from the aforementioned uncertainty that comes with any radical changes. Nobody can claim to *know* what is best for the majority, especially when it comes to large social experiments involving untested institutions. Even among those committed to equality, conflicting visions will necessarily have to co-exist. A certain revolutionary pluralism is therefore necessary among those committed to equality. But the very definitions of what "commitment to equality" is likely the subject of debate. The problem of "where" to set up the barricade, which line delimits allies of social change from its enemies cannot be solved in the abstract.

If one really believes in the potential of equality, in the capacity of ordinary people to develop the skills required to live in a general democracy, then another leap of faith is necessary at this point: that organized communities will be able to take the best decisions for themselves as their power grows and we approach the revolutionary tipping point. The very fact that organized communities, as they grow in power, will embed democratic principles in their day-to-day basis also provides a practical basis which should tip social preferences towards more equality in general. But how this will occur exactly will not be up to the revolutionary groups to decide on their own. They can provide leadership, take initiatives, produce analysis, influence communities, they cannot substitute themselves for the organized communities without undermining the power from below that was built and is the necessary base of a socialist society.

### Autonomy, Confrontation and Co-optation

Building power from below requires an understanding of the conditions in which popular organizations evolve. A central question is the question of the autonomy of popular organizations: how much are their resources, their decisions controlled by the members of a given community? A classic strategy of ruling classes to suppress popular upsurge is to co-opt them by offering them resources and privileges accompanied by conditions that keep them in check. Apparently powerful and rich unions, NGOs, community organizations, worker cooperatives and political parties can actually be quite harmless to the ruling class because much of their power is dependent upon fragile state privileges, temporary compromises with corporations and private philanthropy.

In chapter 4, we argued that the decision-making process of any organization can be characterized by three dimensions: the internal relations, the external constraints and the relations of dependence. Even a very democratic popular organization can behave in the best interest of its constituents only to the limits of the external constraints and its relations of dependence. *Autonomy* therefore takes a crucial dimension in the process of building power from below and striving for autonomy requires popular organization to rely as much as possible on power resources internal to a community.

The disruptive capacity of an organization is also tied to its social position and its internal culture. Fostering a confrontational culture through organizing makes it easier to legitimize disruptive actions, while a culture of leniency and compromises will make it less likely to confront directly the ruling class.

Popular organizations that operate in social economy, such as workers' cooperatives, are therefore unlikely to take part in the organization of disruptive collective actions. The external limits imposed by their reliance on the market for revenues, their dependence on state subsidies and private loans, forces them to abide by the rules and maintain good relationship with ruling-class controlled institutions. As we will see in the next section, this

is not inevitable, however: *the development of the infrastructure of dissent can create an ecosystem of autonomy* that frees cooperatives from these constraints.

## **An Integral Strategy**

The general strategic perspective of building power from below is therefore a broad project aimed at accumulating power within relatively autonomous member-controlled organizations in all working-class communities<sup>277</sup>. We have mainly focused on social movement organizations, such as labor unions, student associations or community organizations. Yet, power accumulation within the social economy and political parties is also necessary to the consolidation of the infrastructure of dissent and to undertake a revolutionary process. Integrating those three “poles” of power accumulation into a unified strategy is what pushes me to label it an “integral” strategy.

I do not wish to elaborate too much on this subject, as it is largely prospective and it falls outside the scope of a dissertation. The goal, at this point, is to indicate some interesting perspectives that arise from the present theory of power. I will limit myself to some general ideas of the integral strategy.

First, while social economy enterprises and electoral political parties are often criticized from a socialist standpoint for their inherent limitations, it is worth noting that what limits those type of organization is not so different from the limitations of labour unions. The three types of organizations can be integrated as functions of the capitalist system, making them dependent on ruling class-controlled institutions, using them to channel and limit the scope of conflicts, or patch the direst needs. And just as a militant and democratic local union

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<sup>277</sup> Note that I now use “accumulating power” and not “appropriating power”. As noted in chapter 4, power accumulation is the general feature of any organizations that pool power systematically. Appropriation occurs when this power is used by a small minority which dominates the decision-making process. Democratic popular organizations should therefore not “appropriate” power, but it can accumulate it: placing more and more power in the collective hands of the working class. Also, as a reminder, working-class is used as a general term that includes all those that have little or no take in the major decision-making processes of capitalist corporations or states.

cannot win more than what's economically viable for a given corporation, the isolated radical worker coop must survive the market competition and the radical left electoral party must win votes in a hostile environment. In each case, the limits are especially strong *because* of the relatively weak infrastructure of dissent.

In a strong infrastructure of dissent, where a large portion of the population is organized within their communities, social enterprises and political parties are less dependent upon ruling-class controlled resources and have a much greater legitimacy to adopt radical practices. Organized communities can support social enterprises and partially shield them from the competition of large corporations. A network of social enterprises and worker retirement funds can accumulate forms of autonomous capital, reducing coops' dependence on banks and state funding. Social enterprises can provide cheaper services to facilitate community organization: printing, places to meet, web infrastructure, news visibility, food for strikers, etc.

Parties and social enterprises, just as labour unions, as they grow in power, are subject to a takeover by a minority. But as many have argued before me<sup>278</sup>, Michel's "iron law of oligarchy" is not so much an inevitable destiny for all organizations than a tendency when democratic counter-tendencies are disabled. And just as militant action from below, combined with a rigorous organizing model, can transform unions and reverse bureaucratic tendencies<sup>279</sup>, active democratic organizing can keep parties and co-ops from becoming oligarchies.

If one accepts that social enterprises and electoral parties can be valid spaces of popular power accumulation given a strong internal democracy and a gradually strengthening infrastructure of dissent, there is still an interrogation of the why. Why bother building those

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<sup>278</sup> Parker and Gruelle, *Democracy Is Power*, 55–56; Darlington, "The Marxist Rank-and-File/Bureaucracy Analysis of Trade Unionism: Some Implications for the Study of Social Movement Organisations," 188.

<sup>279</sup> A good example of that is the case of the Chicago Teachers Union. See Alexandra Bradbury et al., *How to Jump-Start Your Union: Lessons from the Chicago Teachers* (Detroit: Labor Notes, 2014).

types of organization when the task of organizing workplaces and neighborhoods is already gigantic?

Without giving an exhaustive answer, we can briefly state one good reason for each. The transition towards a democratically managed economy will require a certain *know how* in democratic management. These skills do not readily exist, and the transition will be hard if they are not developed, tested and taught to a sufficient core to begin with. Cooperatives can foster those skills before the revolutionary process occurs.

Parties are points of convergence, where strategies and tactics are discussed for those kinds of large-scale social projects. Contemporary parties win public recognition and show the strength of their support by participating in the electoral process. As the infrastructure of dissent gets stronger, more radical left-wing parties can emerge and gather strength. This can consolidate the feeling, among sections of the population, that change is possible and that certain radical options are now credible. When the power from below is strong enough and reached the revolutionary tipping point, the radical electoral parties can provide a crucial space to debate strategy. Their electoral participation up to this point does not limit them to an electoral mode of “taking power”, but this is among the options it will have.

## Chapter 9: Democracy as the Socialist Project

By reframing Marxism through a theory of power, we saw that we could expand our understanding of what we need to change: it is not only exploitation, but more broadly *inequalities of social power* that should be fundamentally challenged. Capitalist exploitation is an important dimension, but it is only one aspect of unequal social power. By extending the analysis to all forms of social power, the proposed framework can integrate more easily power inequalities embedded in other social structures such as the state, and can reveal the mechanisms sustaining subordination such as racism or sexism. It allows an understanding of each phenomenon in its specificity and linking them back to their commonalities: power inequalities.

The present framework also unlocks a more precise way of defining the social alternative, the project of a free and egalitarian society. The socialist horizon is defined by the idea of an equal distribution of social power. And this definition—the idea that each and every one should have a similar influence on the decision-making process over social resources as a whole—is the very core of radical democracy. The strength of the present theory of power also resides in its capacity to define the project of democracy both at the micro and the macro levels. It can provide tools to analyse inequalities of power in small organization, just as well as the societal scale.

This being said, working with a transhistorical conception of power is a risk—it becomes vulnerable to an infinite source of criticism (basically, all of human history can be used against it, and all future events). Yet, I believe it is necessary to work with concepts of transhistorical scope for the very task of defining the emancipatory project. Because the free and egalitarian industrialized society never existed, and because we will have to *invent it*, we need concepts and theories of society that are not historically specific, so that they could possibly apply to the undefined future. A theory limited to explaining capitalism, for example, would offer tools to criticize the system. It can reveal embryos of equality from within contemporary society. It can uncover contradictions that might weaken capitalism and be

exploited to engender a revolution. But it will not be able to anticipate radical new forms of social organization that could result from a revolutionary transformation, because concepts geared towards understanding capitalism would be unable to grasp radically different societies. Just like projecting capitalist market relations upon pre-capitalist societies obscure our understanding of history, a theory geared towards understanding capitalist exploitation would likely miss new forms of oppressions in the post-revolutionary world. This is why I propose a general theory of power that can make a specific account of capitalism, but that is not limited to this *kind* of society.

Avoiding the creation of new inequalities in the revolutionary process is a core task of socialist theory. To that end, classical materialism failed to anticipate the bureaucratic state that undermined the Russian revolution (and most other socialist experiments). To be fair, early socialists, including Marx, always placed their project as an extension of democracy. When, in *On The Jewish Question*, Marx reveals the limits of bourgeois liberal democracy, he does not reject democracy itself, but rather paves the way for its extension to the world of capital. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century idea of the “Republic of labour” draws from the same roots: extending the republican principle of freedom and equality to the capitalistically dominated world of wage labour. Our contention with classical Marxist concepts is not with its core principles, but rather with the lack of embedded tools to *think* this general democracy, to apply it and warn against yet unseen varieties of power appropriation structures. I believe that a broad, general conception of power will fare better in anticipating the various kinds of inequalities that could emerge after capitalism.

### **Form and Content of Politics**

Before moving on, a small detour to define two broad concepts can help clarify the discussion: the content and the form of politics. The *content of politics* refers to *what is to be done with collective power*. The *form of politics*, on the other hand, refers to the distribution of social power. The form of politics raises the question of “who” has more power, and who has less.

At the level of a single organization, the form of politics is the decision-making process. It designates who can decide what, in regard to the collective power embedded in the organization. The content of politics would be the actual decisions that are taken when they do not affect the decision-making process itself. In a private corporation, this can be related to the organization of work, to choices of investment, to decisions on wages and working hours, to the internal policies of the enterprise, etc.

At the level of a state, the form of politics must include parliamentarians, political parties, large corporations, lobbies, unions, associations, etc. The idea is the same, however: the form of politics represents the configuration of social power that characterizes a decision-making process. The content of politics is the decision itself: a new educational program, a reform of security policies, the decriminalization of a behaviour, etc.

The distinction between form and content of politics is not always clear-cut. Decisions that affect the balance of social power as a primary goal can be classified as questions of “form”, but some decisions might affect balance of power only in an indirect way. For example, an electoral reform is a decision that is clearly a question of “form”. By changing the electoral rules and process, one directly changes the balance of forces (even if the difference is small). On the other hand, a harder criminal policy on drugs might appear to be only a question of “content”: it is a choice to enforce a specific conception of morality on society. Yet, sociological studies show that, in the US, Afro-American are overwhelmingly victims of these policies. This places a disproportionate number of black people in prison, who are deprived of their political rights.<sup>280</sup> In this respect, the policy has an effect that could relate to the electoral reform—and thus, questions of forms, but in an indirect way. If it is sometimes difficult to classify a decision in an absolute category of “form” or “content”, it is nevertheless possible to observe that some decisions are closer to a category than the other.

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<sup>280</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Revised edition (New York: New Press, 2012).

The question of wages is a good example of “limit” case. The distribution of social production and its criteria would normally be a question of content. Should we distribute goods in relation to birth status, to merit or to needs? How to evaluate each of these factors to set the right amount of product to distribute to each? As long as the product that is distributed in this way is used for personal consumption, then this is mostly a question of content. Yet, under capitalism, money can be transformed in social power—it can be accumulated and invested in the form of capital. Over a certain amount needed for one’s need, wages transformed into capital can therefore affect the *form of politics*.

Social conflicts can both occur on questions of form and questions of content. Groups might disagree on a specific issue of morality or religion, in which case the conflict will be mostly one of content (but not necessarily, the political rights of women being a question of form for example). Groups might also enter in conflict to change the distribution of social power. And often, it will be intertwined: a group might enter into conflict to increase its power in order to tip the balance on an issue of content.

This distinction allows for the creation of a normative concept of interest linked with our definition of the emancipatory project. Since, in most societies, the overall distribution of social power has been deeply inegalitarian, the prospect of radical democracy, of an equal distribution of social power, is theoretically beneficial for the vast majority. This is true, notwithstanding the actual content of politics.

### **Socialism as an Egalitarian Form of Politics**

For most people, immediate problems are lived and formulated in terms of content: wanting a wage increase, fighting against the decision to build a pipeline in one’s backyard, asking the husband to do more domestic work, protesting against a ban on practicing one’s religion, etc. In each case, demands are targeted toward a person with power that could revert or change a decision, but it does not change the fundamental distribution of power. The grievance could be satisfied without a significant transfer of power.

Yet, recurrent problems of content can lead one to find more permanent solutions. Behind conflicts of content is often hidden an inequality of power (but this might not necessarily be the case). A cultural minority that struggles to preserve its culture can fight to transform state power by creating their own state, which would embed linguistic rights for themselves. A feminist movement can fight the power inequality between genders that reproduces imbalances in the domestic workload. Workers can unionize to increase their power, transform the enterprise into a cooperative to manage it themselves, or work towards a socialist revolution to abolish the rule of the market over their working conditions. Citizens can push for the creation of mandatory popular referendums before any approval of polluting projects in their area. In each case, this represents a transformation of the balance of power, initially motivated by a question of content.

The core of the socialist project, framed within the present theory of power, is content-light and form-heavy: it is mainly focused on the question of distribution of power. This does not mean that questions of content are secondary, however. Most successful mass movements actually start from questions of content, and evolve through experience towards questions of form. It is therefore often necessary for radical politics to start from immediate demands, from hot issues in terms of content, and try from there to canalize discontent towards the long-term, structuring changes of power distribution.

### **The End of Alienation as Radical Democracy**

The present discussion on power and the form politics can be linked with Marx's concept of alienation and commodity fetishism. I will briefly present two dimensions of alienation present in Marx's texts, and demonstrate how those can be tied to radical democracy.

The first and more intuitive meaning of alienation one encounters while reading the *1844 manuscript* is *alienation as power inequality*. What is alienated in such a definition is power itself, it is the individual's capacity to control his own activity, means of life, and goals. In this perspective, the control over one's human activity is not simply negated, it is transferred to

someone else—to the capitalist. Alienation is here understood as an issue of power distribution: the worker is alienated because he *loses* power. And what he loses, the capitalist captures it. Marx does not clearly frame it that way, but there are sufficient clues in the text to orient contemporary readers in this direction.

In the section on *estranged labour*, the concept of alienation is used to designate the worker's loss of the *product*, the dispossession of the *means* of production, the loss of the *way* he produces and the loss of the *goals* for which he produces. This is clear in passages such as:

The external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.<sup>281</sup>

The combination of these elements creates the conditions under which “the more wealth [the worker] produces, the more his production increases in power and range”, “the more he falls under the dominion of his product, capital”<sup>282</sup>. In other words, the commodities produced by the workers allow the accumulation of capital—the very power on which is based the dispossession of the worker's product and means of labour—, and the more they produce, the stronger becomes this force. Yet capital is not an abstract impersonal power:

If the product of labour does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker. If the worker's activity is a torment to him, to another it must be delight and his life's joy. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man.<sup>283</sup>

This “other man” to which “belongs” the alien power is the capitalist himself—the owner of capital. Wage labour thus alienates the power of the worker to control his own productive activity, to decide what he wants to do, to control the way he does it and what is to be done with the product of his work. It is the capitalist who wields these powers, and can use the labourer as a “tool” for his own purpose: capital accumulation.

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<sup>281</sup> Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 73.

<sup>282</sup> Marx, 71–72.

<sup>283</sup> Marx, 78.

In the *German Ideology*, alienation is also used to designate the process through which “activity is not voluntary, but naturally divided, [thus] man’s own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him”<sup>284</sup>. This division of labor is a form of alienation, not because of the division of labor itself, but because individuals don’t have the freedom to escape it. It is in relation to this that communism is defined as a realm of freedom in the famous passage where he argues that “communist society [...] makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic”<sup>285</sup>. The unfreedom imposed by the division of labour of past and current societies is not universal, however: “personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class, and only insofar as they were individuals of this class”<sup>286</sup>. Here again, it is arguable that alienation is a fact for the exploited class only—it is only those who are subordinated that are unfree to choose their productive activity.

Understanding alienation as a transfer of power from the worker to the capitalist, and a general state of *unfreedom* of the working class fits well with the concept of power appropriation defined in this dissertation. It captures the idea that the form of politics in capitalist societies is *alienated* for the majority. And, by extension, freeing the proletariat from this alienation implies an egalitarian distribution of power.

However, to reduce alienation to the sole question of power inequality would ignore some key passages from Marx. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx argues that :

Estrangement is manifested not only in the fact that my means of life belong to someone else, that my desire is the inaccessible possession of another, but also in the fact that everything is in itself something different from itself—that my activity is

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<sup>284</sup> Marx, 160.

<sup>285</sup> Marx, 160.

<sup>286</sup> Marx, 192.

something else and that, finally (and this applies also to the capitalist), all is under the sway of inhuman power.<sup>287</sup>

If alienation was only an issue of class power, then this formulation would be deeply mysterious: how could the capitalist class be also alienated? In the power distribution model, the social distribution of alienated capacities *must* be accumulated by someone who, by definition, would be master of others as well as of his own life. Furthermore, Marx's formulation concerning an "inhuman power" is mysterious if we take into account his insistence on the fact that mankind makes its own history. In this passage, the concept of alienation is deeper: we must look at the specific dynamics that Marx identifies in the capitalist social formation itself, as the source and root of mystification that *prevents all* of humanity—capitalists included—to master collectively its own history, to become fully conscious and free of its self-production, and thus, realize its essence.

Fetishism of commodities can be reinterpreted, in this light, as the set of real constraints existing under capitalist social relations that force every individual to behave *as if* commodities were the actors. The best example of this is the price signal. The worker shopping at a supermarket makes his choices of consumption by taking in consideration only the use value and the price of things before him. Everything else is absent: the ecological damages, the exploitation of other workers, the dangerous working conditions, these are left out of the equation at the moment of consumer choice. The shopper believes he is only choosing a *product*, but he really validates the whole production process. The mystification occurs because the market compresses all prior social relations to a single price signal, which is the only information outside of the material product itself that is transferred during transactions. The relation of the consumer to the process of production is thus cut short. Shopping is experienced as a confrontation with a wide array of products with different prices—which sometime mystically vary—during which he must choose the appropriate product for the lowest price. But the fact that this consumption validates a whole world of social relation which the consumer is unaware of—especially as we understand this

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<sup>287</sup> Marx, 100.

behaviour as generalized—means that the choices of production and consumption are not made by a fully self-aware humanity. They are made in a pure logic of individual interest maximization and cost reduction.

The process through which capitalists make decisions on how to invest their money is no less marked by commodity fetishism. The variation of prices on markets—from staples to bonds, passing by stocks—has the same mystical attributes for them then for the simple consumer. Of course, they will try to explain the variations to predict them, but in the end, the only factors they will take into account for investment purposes are the prices themselves, as indicators of prospective profitability. This does not mean that a capitalist could not take into account non-monetary factors to include “ethical” considerations, but here enters the dynamic of competition. Under capitalist markets, the capitalist perform his role of capitalists as long as he remains competitive. For this reason, a capitalist can hardly deviate from the pressure to take the lowest prices for its inputs. In other words, the structural pressure that allows him to remain a capitalist also forces him to behave in such a way that reproduces commodity fetishism—only taking the prices into account and taking commodities as exempt of past social relations.

Self-alienation of humanity—of both workers and capitalists—by capitalist social relations could then be defined the set of real constraints that prevents the human collectivity as whole to decide, consciously, of its future, of its production and consumption. It is a self-alienation, not because *individuals* are led to believe falsehoods, but because the social structure produced by humans themselves through history is preventing humanity from taking full conscious control of its destiny. In this perspective, Marx states that:

Communism differs from all previous movements in that it overturns the basis of all earlier relations of production and intercourse, and for the first time consciously treats all natural premises as the creatures of hitherto existing men, strips them of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Marx, 193.

The “natural premises” referred above are precisely those social relations which are fetishized as “natural” (or outside the reach of human intervention), and thus bars the possibility of the real and total self-consciousness of humanity. In capitalism, the naturalization of “trade”, of “markets”, of “money”, or “economic rationality” are such “natural premises”. And as mentioned before, it is not the *belief* in this naturalness that alienates humanity, but the real effect of capitalist social relation which constraint possible choices (and reproduces a belief in its naturalness by its constitutive practices).

Therefore, to end this kind of global self-alienation requires a new kind of decision-making process in which social priorities are not set by the unforeseen consequences of decentralized competition for profits, but rather by a collective process of deliberation. Again, this is compatible with the idea of socialism as a radical, generalized democracy.

Therefore, reading Marx with the lenses of power, we can reveal the centrality radical democracy to the form of politics that socialism would take. An un-alienated form of society and existence for working class people imply that all elements of social life are collectively decided through a process under which no individual as more power than another.

### **The Universal Reach of Socialism**

Because Socialism can be understood primarily in terms of the form of politics, it can provide a universalizing framework for emancipatory politics. To that effect, it aims to be compatible with a large variety of “content”, and provide a general solution to problems arising from these by proposing a solution in terms of “form”.

This content versatility is a requirement because the aim of emancipatory politics is to provide a good life to the masses, regardless of the exact definition of *what is a good life*. That does not mean we do not have an idea of what a good life is, nor that political movements should be devoid of a definition of a good life. However, we must recognize that the condition of humankind is the historical and social self-definition of what the good life means. Therefore, there is a fundamental plurality of what the good life might be.

Intrinsically, this entails that even after the realization of the emancipatory project, after the abolition of classes and the end power appropriation, politics will not disappear. There will still be a wide range of political decisions to take that are not strictly related to the distribution of power, and a legitimate way to arbitrate those disagreements will require a form of collective coercion to make sure the collective decisions are respected.

Framed in this way, socialism does have universal intent and a pretension to prescribe what would be best for most. It could be said that most have an “objective interest” in fighting for such a vision, but this would still be problematic. First, the common benefit of radical democracy is still speculative. No one knows if it is possible to organize contemporary societies in an egalitarian way on a large scale. Believing in this is still largely an act of faith. Second, the risk of undertaking the struggle for socialism is high. Without any clear sign of revolution on the horizon, devoting one’s life for this cause might be an enormous waste of time. And even in pre-revolutionary times, no egalitarian project was ever met peacefully by the ruling classes. Challenging seriously the elite is a deadly business, and one might never see its results, if there are any.

Qualifying the socialist project as being *the* objective interest of the masses is therefore immensely arrogant. It assumes a certainty of strategies and goals that we cannot reasonably defend. At best, we can say that we *believe* this project is in the interest of the majority, and proceed to demonstrate it through action and experiments.

Socialism seeks to maximize *freedom*, in the sense of giving the means for all or at least most to accomplish what they want in order to live a good life. This freedom is intimately linked with access to the resources that constitute the factors of power, which *allows* the realization of those goals. Our proposition is that the best way to maximize freedom for most, to ensure access to a good life, is to distribute power equally. This is a contestable claim, however. It is technically possible for an unequal distribution of power to make choices that are actually favourable for most—the *content* of political decisions could be in accord to what people *want* even if only a small group makes the decisions. This is the traditional conservative

argument to justify concentration of power since Plato. Essentially, the contentious issue between the perspective of equality and the argument for the enlighten rule of a few is the capacity of members of the popular classes to rule themselves adequately. Since Plato and Aristotle, it has been argued that it is best to leave decision-making to the few who *know* what is best for most. Political scientist Francis Dupuis-Déri qualifies this historical distinction has a confrontation between *agoraphobic* and *agoraphilic* perspectives.<sup>289</sup>

Against agoraphobic approaches, the egalitarian perspective is based on two general claims. The first concerns the structural incompatibility between inequalities of power and a favourable content of politics for the majority. Despite the best intentions of a ruling class, historical experiences tend to show that those who control power tends to prioritize the preservation of their power, since they consider themselves legitimate holders of power. Those in power also tend to dehumanize their subjects. Labour becomes a factor of power among others, and the human beings that are embedded in organizations become means of ends, interchangeable labour force. The consideration for their will becomes secondary. This is true for managers of corporations towards their employees, army generals towards their soldiers, planters towards their slaves, leaders of a state-centric bureaucratic socialist republic towards their citizens, etc. Those tendencies would therefore prevent the establishment of an enlighten rule in favour of the majority: it would mean that inegalitarian forms of power would systematically produce, at least over time, content of politics that neglects the *wants* of the popular classes.

The second general claim is that the *expertise to rule* is not an exclusive skill of a minority. It is true that decision-making is a skill for which one can be more or less competent. An egalitarian distribution of power requires a widespread acquisition of this knowledge, since it would increase significantly the role of the masses in decision-making processes. The mainstream agoraphobic claim is that, most people are unable to acquire sufficient skill to

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<sup>289</sup> Francis Dupuis-Déri, *Démocratie: Histoire Politique d'un Mot: Aux États-Unis et En France*, Humanités (Montréal: Lux, 2013).

achieve decisions that are at least as good for them as the decisions that would have been taken by a ruling elite (where elite refers to the excellency of those who compose it). Our claim is that skills are learned, and the large majority have the possibility to acquire them if they are taught well and put in a position to develop them adequately. To that effect, exclusion from decision-making processes specifically under-develop decision-making skills by depriving the individual of the necessary learning experiences. Furthermore, there is no systematic transmission of the skills required for collective decision-making in contemporary public institutions. Modern schools, for example, are teaching obedience, submission to authority and foster an elitist culture of competition rather than empowering children to take in charge society collectively. Therefore, power centralization and modern education foster mass incompetency in regard to collective rule. But this state of affairs could be reversible. For this, however, we need to *produce* the conditions for the massive transmission and learning of those skills.<sup>290</sup>

Our position, the idea of equality of power has a historical name: democracy. If the meaning of this word was changed with its political recuperation by the elite to legitimate liberal republics, its root remains profoundly tied to the idea of radical equality. I draw from this tradition and seek to expand its meaning. Taking the full depth of what *power equality* means, it allows democracy to extend far beyond the formal equality of voting procedures.

This departs from the traditional understanding of democracy that prevails in political science: democracy does not only mean political equality, or equality in relationship to the operation of the state. We teared down the traditional separation between the political and the economical, the public and the private, civil society and the state. A family, an enterprise, a Church, a fiefdom, a modern state, a union are all different types of collectivized power, to

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<sup>290</sup> The question of transition towards an egalitarian society poses the problem of democratic-skill learning while we still live in a situation of mass exclusion from power. It means that we must build transitory institutions that embed mechanisms allowing the development of those skills, in the meanwhile. This is where pre-figurative politics can have a crucial importance: institutions such a labour unions, political parties and worker cooperative can play this role if they are structured democratically, focused on rank-and-file participation and embed regular political education activities. See chapter 8.

achieve different purposes. Depending on the case, they can operate on the basis of a top-down decision-making process or a more egalitarian model. The present theory of power can therefore use the idea of democracy to evaluate any kind of human organization, whether it is formal or not, large or small.

The principle of equality at the societal scale requires one to evaluate the infrastructure of power as a whole. In this perspective, democracy refers to the overall balance of power between organizations, between individuals participating in very different kinds of activity. This balance can be of two general kinds: equality of power inside society-wide decision-making processes and equality of power between relatively autonomous organization. In other words, equality of power can exist inside a large formal structure such as a state, or as an equilibrium between individuals and organizations that are independent of one another. The first case implies the centralization of resources inside a common public organization, controlled by an egalitarian decision-making process. The second case implies that power resources are decentralized and distributed equally between relatively autonomous small-scale organizations. Both cases are potentially democratic, as the overall result will be a relative equality of power. The first case corresponds to a more classic definition of democracy: public resources are controlled by “all” through a formal process. Models of “direct democracy” correspond to this type of equality. The second case is closer to principle of autonomy. Each of those solutions has its potential pitfalls. It has often been noted that the first type of equality can end up in a “tyranny of the majority”, since equality of power on collective resources can mean that a majority of like-minded citizens could take decisions in their favour against the minority. But a completely decentralized system of autonomous communities has no way to keep in check the various sections of society and might not be able to sustain the state of equality on the long term. Those two solutions to equality are not antithetic, however: they could actually be combined. Some resources can be subjected to large-scale common collective decision-making processes while others can be decentralized and organized along the principle of autonomy.

To put freedom, equality, democracy and autonomy at the centre of the emancipatory project is not something new. The originality of this framework is in the tools it provides to analyse power inequalities and to think the emancipatory project. These conceptual tools are designed to be more intuitive for non-scholars, more versatile to understand the variety of oppressions—and therefore less likely to produce new ones—and more easily adaptable to understand power from the micro-level of organizations to the macro-level of humanity.

The overall gamble of the present theory of power is to argue that, in contemporary societies, the concentration of power deprives a large majority of the population of the means to access a good life. And whatever this good life *means*—a definition that is likely to change across societies, across cultures, across states, between strata, families and individuals—most would *benefit* from an egalitarian distribution of power, because it would increase the amount of power they could access to realize what they want. The universal reach of the socialist project lies in this premise.

## CONCLUSION

The main point of this dissertation was to reframe socialist theory through the concept of power in order to solve a number of problems relevant to contemporary radicals: how to make a contemporary critique of capitalism that echoes the common sense of our time? How to integrate adequately forms of oppressions such as patriarchy and racism within a coherent framework? How do we understand the form of the state and what place should it take in our critique? How to link the broad concepts used to understand class societies with the requirements of concrete political analysis and strategy? How can socialist theory guide day to day organizing in a meaningful way? How can we integrate the lessons from the various socialist experiments and prevent future attempts to degenerate into new forms of inequalities?

I do not claim to have answered perfectly all those questions, but I believe that the proposition of *power from below* opens a fruitful path that is both useful for those who seek to transform society and that is plausible given the current knowledge in social sciences. I will summarize the main set of concepts outlined in this dissertation, their implications for the questions stated above and sketch the work that would still be needed on the present framework to really realize its potential.

### From Power in General to Popular Power

We started from the concept of power in general, defined as the capacity to transform the world. This definition is anchored in the notion of labor and human activity in general: all labor is an act of power. The magnitude of all power can be understood as the combination of three kinds factors: individual, physical and social. To achieve collective goals, human creates organizations by collectivizing these power resources. This is the basis of collective power. But as soon as an organization is created, a way to govern the collectivized resources

also appears. Inequalities within this decision-making process is the root of social power, of power of some over others.

Power appropriation occurs in organizations that systematically appropriate social resources and labour under the control of a minority. A structure of power appropriation is the *force field* created by a large number of organizations operating along similar processes, and structuring society along their norms and practices. Structures of power appropriation are the armatures of hierarchy—they create the possibility of positions of power and their subordinate counterpart.

This challenges the distinction between productive and unproductive activity when we try to understand production in its broadest sense: all human activity is ultimately useful. Therefore, instead of looking at the productive sphere as the “base” that would characterize the social whole, we are looking at the processes of power accumulation. The institutions and processes that are central in historical development are those that are tied to the main processes of power accumulation. This is where the ruling class gets its fuel, but also where the working class can disrupt the main mechanism of its subordination and regain control over its life.

The fact that we displace our focus away from production to power accumulation does not mean that production is no longer important. Power is rooted in productive activity, and therefore the parameters of production are also the parameters of power. But because all human activity is ultimately productive, it is not production in itself that defines the character of a class society. To understand the specific processes of power accumulation allows us to understand *which* sphere of production is a central source of power for the elite and which is peripheral.

In chapter 6, we therefore introduced the concept of *spheres of production* as an underlying reality to the processes of power accumulation. Processes of power accumulation do not capture the totality of human production. In contemporary societies, for example, capitalism

and the state system are the two main structures of accumulation. But a vast area of production does occur outside their direct operation. This is where the family/kinship and volunteer/community based organizations provide their members with a productive force of their own. This encompasses an important quantity of labor in absolute terms, but it is generally organized in very small units compared to states of capitalist enterprises.

Structures of accumulation grow by colonizing other spheres of production. The proletarianization of workers, the privatization of common lands, of public assets, and the growth of capitalism in general is a sort of “colonization” of the capitalist power structure over previously “non-capitalist” forms of production. The modern state did the same by taking over functions and activities, such as law-making, policing, schooling and welfare redistribution, that used to be organized by local actors. The state’s colonization of social production implied, intrinsically, the colonization of local norms and culture.

This clarifies the relationship between the economic and political. What is considered *economic* is nothing but the privatization of social power and its exchange *as property* through market structures. Ownership can be understood as the social recognition that something is subjected to the decision-making process of its owner. The modern concept of capitalist property is a specific variant of ownership: it is characterized by an almost absolute control over the owned thing.

Structures of power accumulation are characterized by the processes of accumulation that fuels them. The modern state is mainly fuelled by tax collection, partly by colonial extraction and imperialist interventions. Capitalist accumulation is fuelled by the exploitation of the working class through market exchanges and accumulation by dispossession often backed by the state. The *infrastructure of power* is the resulting combination of those processes and structures that constitute the basis of a ruling class’s power.

The ruling class of any society is therefore defined as the group that accumulate the most social power. Its members control decision-making processes of powerful organizations. In

a given society, the groups composing this ruling class have their defining feature based on the social structures of power accumulation that define the main “type” of organizations in which power is concentrated. The working class, on the other side, is defined as the groups from which the ruling classes extract labour and resources to fuel the organizations they control. Working classes are defined in relationship to the specific social structures of power accumulation that characterize their alienation.

To address the question of the relationship between racism, sexism and capitalism, I proposed the concept of *structures of subordination*, defined as a set of norms and practices that select, stratify and discipline groups within unequal collective organizations. Because all structures of power accumulation are necessarily hierarchical, they must always have an internal process of selection to determine *who* will fill the upper and the lower functions. Structures of subordination are therefore always attached to structures of power and always tied to processes of selection and stratification. Yet, they are not *reducible* to them. They exist with and through them. They are *structures* because they are *force fields*. They are norms, practices and ideas, embedded in a large number of organizations, which shapes and structures the environment. Their influence on society *as structures* depend on the power of the organizations that sustain them, and the proportion of organizations that embed their core norms, practices and ideas.

*All structures of power appropriation embed structures of subordination*—they require them. They don’t necessarily require a *specific form of subordination*, but some form of discrimination *must* exist to fill the spots. Furthermore, maintaining the stability of the structure requires the employment of different mechanisms of stability (coercion, normative adhesion, privilege distribution and disorganization) along the logic of the structure of subordination, to legitimize the principles of subordination and discipline the subordinated. Therefore, if a specific form of power appropriation does not necessarily require a specific form of subordination, once the two structures are linked, they fuel each other.

Structures of subordination are therefore not simply add-ons to power structures. The concept of power appropriation structure aims to specify the organizations in which power is accumulated and the process that fuels this accumulation. This process partly shapes the hierarchical structure of organizations, and allows a minority to amass vast amounts of power. But structures of subordination will have a determining effect on the way stratification occurs within those structures, and will shape the selection processes. They have a recursive effect if they “help” the structure of accumulation to become more efficient: they fuel the accumulating structure in which their norms and practices are embedded, which itself fuels their influence.

Sexism and racism therefore appear as two important structures of subordination in capitalist societies. Their norms and practices structure important categories of stratification and are ingrained in the very core of states and corporations. Only mass sustained struggle has been able to progressively undermine them, but they are still very strong to this day.

Closely related to the main concepts of the present theory of power are the ideas of the primacy of practice and the centrality of trust. Those are important in the general picture, but they are especially important when it comes to understanding how we can build power from below to change society.

The idea of the *primacy of practice* is that no human knowledge, no norms, no social structure lives only or primarily in the discursive world. The main mechanisms of reproduction of social structures are therefore operating primarily through practice rather than discourse. The principle of the primacy of practice therefore offers a basis on which we can build a model of consciousness that is rooted in the material conditions of daily life, that gives to discourse a moderate importance and that does not rely on the liberal fiction of the rational individual.

The second principle is the centrality of trust: that the prevalent social mechanism used to transmit knowledge and norms—either practical or discursive—is *trust*. Here, trust is defined as the propensity to accept someone else’s practice or belief as valid (true or good), before or without self-validation. Trust does not only convey practical and discursive *knowledge*, but also norms and moral judgment. Social *know how* is deeply intertwined with an implicit definition of *what is good*, of *what ought to be done*.

Organizations accumulating power are therefore shaping knowledge and beliefs in ways that generally reproduce the required beliefs for their own reproduction. In order to do this, they need to shape the relations of trust and maintain *hegemony*—both practical and discursive—on those with little power. Those who seek to change the world “from below” must build alternative networks of trust—this is the very idea of the gramscian counter hegemony and this is key to any viable infrastructure of dissent.

An implicit conception of reality and morality — rooted in daily life, immediate experience and self-reflection — is likely to persist and to resist attempts by the ruling class to change it. This poses an important limit to the power of trust-based imposition of the ruling ideology. Among the direct experience lived by popular classes in class societies is the shared experience of exploitation, of inequality, of powerlessness and at times of suffering and death. This experience provides the backbone of dissent in its multiple forms.

The socialist perspective emerging from the present theory is turned towards building *power from below*. This gives us a general guide of the kinds of actions to prioritize and a way to measure the relative success of a given course of action. *Power from below* means to build the power of the popular classes against the ruling class, to increase its capacity to challenge the elite, and eventually, being able to undertake a major transformation of the infrastructure of power. Alan Sear’s concept of the *infrastructure of dissent* is good to describe the general power of the popular classes. A strong infrastructure of dissent means that popular classes have more resources to challenge and resist the ruling classes. It is the base on which large scale social transformations are possible.

The main problem of ordinary people is neither fear of repression, nor ideological blindness, but rather *disorganization*. Their opponent is always already better organized than they are, and as long as the powerful can keep outflanking them, they can maintain ordinary people in a state of resignation. Because ordinary people lack the coercive capacities to force the participation of others or the capital to pay for their participation, they cannot conjure mass participation on their own. They must coordinate with each other on a voluntary basis and accept to undertake simultaneous high-risk actions of disobedience. Yet, without a culture of solidarity, established processes of consultation and physical infrastructure to meet and debate, such coordination is hard to achieve.

For ordinary people *being organized* means pooling time and resources in autonomous organizations aimed at coordinating contentious actions to address their grievances (by means of reforms or radical changes). In order to create and sustain those popular organization, we can learn from union organizers and tie their methods to the centrality of trust. In all communities, in all workplaces, there are already networks of trust centred around organic leaders. By identifying those leaders and providing guidance, one can tap into these relations of trust to *organize* the community and confront the decision makers against which they hold grievances. *Organizing* a community ultimately *reshapes* a number of practices and changes the relationship members have with each other and with their opponents. Therefore, organizing does not only empower a community, it reshapes practical consciousness and creates new forms of identities.

Socialists do not need to format workers' identities to a strict theoretical mould to achieve mass support for socialism. We can recognize that various forms of popular identities are compatible with egalitarian politics, and work with those even if they are "imperfect". The fact that some of those identities are very particularistic and mobilized primarily for the benefit of a narrow group does not change their egalitarian drive: they originate from a shared experience of injustice.

Raising “class consciousness” is therefore not mostly a matter of popular education, it is not the product of an adequate discourse, but rather the result of long-term organizing of local communities, of forging alliances between them and confronting the ruling class in broad popular struggles. As the practical sense of common conditions and interests develops, the language of class struggle is more likely to match the experience of individuals and be adopted as labels to make sense of how they come to identify themselves.

By reframing Marxism through a theory of power, we saw that we could expand our understanding of what we need to change: it is not only exploitation, but more broadly *inequalities of social power* that should be fundamentally challenged. Capitalist exploitation is an important dimension, but it is only one aspect of unequal social power. The socialist horizon is therefore defined by the idea of equal distribution of social power. And this definition—the idea that each and every one should have a similar influence on the decision-making process over social resources as a whole—is the very core of radical democracy.

Because Socialism can be understood primarily in terms of the *form* of politics, it can provide a universalizing framework for emancipatory politics. To that effect, it aims to be compatible with a large variety of “content”, and provide a general solution to problems arising from these by proposing a solution in terms of “form”. The overall gamble of the present theory of power is to argue that, in contemporary societies, the concentration of power deprives a large majority of the population of the means to access a good life. And whatever this good life *means*—a definition that is likely to change across societies, across cultures, across states, between strata, families and individuals—most would *benefit* from an egalitarian distribution of power, because it would increase the amount of power they could access to realize what they want. The universal reach of the socialist project lies in this premise.

#### The Future of Power from Below

Summing up this dissertation in a few pages reveals just how wide this project is, and how much there is still to be done. I am well aware of the fragility of this theoretical construct in

its present state, but I hope I was able to convey adequately its promise and potential. This was a first attempt to flesh out a complete theory and its ramification from intuitions born out of my political activism and academic curiosity.

In order to really move forward with the present theory, two main tasks lie ahead. One will be, of course, to engage with other socialist philosophers. This will reveal the main gaps that will require further inquiry and revision. It will identify the research priorities, the components that will need the first serious work of elaboration. At the present state, it is stretched thin—each component is only developed at its minimum depth to be understandable and to show its potential.

The other important task will be to test its “popular” version within social movements. One important premise of this framework is that it is supposed to be easier to understand and to use by ordinary people. Of course, the version presented here is too academic for this. It will therefore be necessary to write a more accessible version that starts from the ordinary experience of working-class people in order to reach the different concepts presented here instead of starting from the intellectual debates around Marxism. The relative usefulness of this whole project depends on how such work will resonate with organizers and activists.

In the meanwhile, we have to remember that a perfect theory is not actually needed to achieve mass-scale working class organizing and mounting a serious threat to the ruling class. If I believe the present theory could help in providing a unified framework, contemporary radicals can still use efficiently partial theories that already exist to build working-class power. The epochal threats of global warming, the coming geopolitical instabilities associated with the rise of China and the rise of the far right across the globe does not leave us the luxury for endless theoretical debates. Theories are slow to mature and spread. In the meantime, we must organize, for the choice before us is once again between socialism or barbarism.

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