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Field Statement: Marxist Political Economy

Marxist political economy (MPE) is a field of study which develops the original economic ideas of Karl Marx and applies them to contemporary political, cultural, and material problems. MPE, like political economy in general, currently stands opposed to mainstream economics, which has been consciously developed as an apolitical, objective science. Unlike MPE, mainstream economics relies on one-way causality and reduces a wide range of variables to the phrase *ceteris paribus* - "all other things being equal." Cultural and political variables are especially ignored. Unlike mainstream economics, MPE is much more attuned to the complex circumstances around the circulations of objects and the construction of subjectivity.

Sections one through three of this field statement deal with the two major modes of profit-making which Marx describes. The first section, "Primitive accumulation," deals with a process that cannot be properly called capitalistic, but instead is a process which always precedes, and often gives rise to, capitalist accumulation. Primitive accumulation is an undertheorized element of Marxist political economy, but it holds the potential to be a powerful critique of neoliberalism, since focusing on primitive accumulation means focusing simultaneously on history and the global spread of capital. The second section, "Labor theory of value," examines profit from the exploitation of labor and the extraction of surplus value in a regime of private property. This is the mode of accumulation in

capitalism. This mode of accumulation relies upon and constitutes a particular social organization, which is explored in the third section of this field statement, "The Marxist concept of class." Thus, these next three sections are arranged logically by first exploring the *possibility* of the rise of capitalist accumulation, then by looking at *processes* of capitalist accumulation: exploitation of labor (and the ethical elements of this process) and the class process.

As will be shown, this is not just the stuff of economics, but can and should be germane to cultural studies, since both processes involve subjective considerations. Thus, the fourth and fifth sections of this field statement address the relationship between Marxist political economy and cultural studies. The fourth section, "Overdetermination," explores a recent theory in Marxist political economy which indirectly replies to the well-worn criticism that Marxist political economy is reductivist or economistic. Finally, "Cultural studies 'versus' Marxist political economy" specifically addresses the strained relationship between these two disciplines, and concludes with my recommendations for resolving this relationship.

One: Primitive Accumulation

Marx (1965) engaged with the concept of primitive accumulation in the twenty-sixth chapter of Capital, Volume I. In the previous chapters, he had worked his way through his analysis of surplus value, money, the basic elements of capital, and how these elements work to reproduce and expand capitalism. However, these elements all are presupposed: “…The accumulation of capital pre-supposes surplus value; surplus-value pre-supposes capitalist production; capitalist production pre-supposes the pre-existence of

considerable masses of capital and of labor-power in the hands of producers of commodities" (Marx 1965: 713). Instead of treating these conditions as axiomatic, he turned to examine the process by which all of these elements became viable. Since Marx organized materialist history in stages, with capitalism following feudalism, he had to consider the transitional period where both existed simultaneously, where capitalism emerged, and where peasant subjectivity was transformed into proletariat subjectivity. This transition involved the dissolution of the juridical, political, philosophical, and cultural underpinnings of the feudal era. The rigid hierarchies of that period were disassembled in favor of the freedom and equality of the new social democracies, which was, in Marx's view, the freedom of capitalism to flourish. He called this transition "primitive accumulation," loosely following Adam Smith's discussion of "original accumulation."

The most often cited part of Marx's description of this process is the legal and political upheaval. This was a history written "in letters of blood and fire" (Marx 1965: 715) and as such is quite often the focus of subsequent political economists who are most likely drawn in by Marx's outraged tone. Marx describes the enclosure movement in England and Scotland, the legal removal of serfs from their traditional lands, the enslavement of Africans, child-slavery in England, and the general disenfranchisement of the majority of the non-aristocracy. Simply put, this aspect of primitive accumulation involves the divorce of peasants from their main source of self production, their lands and their homes, followed by granting them the freedom to pursue whatever mode of living they please, so long as they respect the newly privatized properties and not engage in

their previous practice of using common lands. This process, backed by both legal imperatives and downright violence, led to a mass of “free” laboring class: “Free labourers, in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, etc., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in the case of peasant-proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own” (Marx 1965: 714). This makes economic sense: as Adam Smith (2003) noted, “Though the wear and tear of a free servant be equally at the expence [sic] of his master, it generally costs him much less than that of a slave” (113). In other words, the maintenance of this new workforce is the sole responsibility of the worker, not the capitalist.

Once there is a mass of freed laborers who must engage in wage-work to survive, and once capitalists are able to gain private access to the basic elements of production, then capitalism can reproduce itself and expand, which is precisely what has happened since Marx’s day. "The historical conditions of [capital's] existence are by no means given with the mere circulation of money and commodities. It can spring into life only when the owner of the means of production and subsistence meets in the market with the free labourer selling his labour-power" (Marx 1965: 170). The two classes of owners and laborers are necessary for the reproduction of capitalism.

This section of <u>Capital Volume I</u> raises an important question: since Marx presents primitive accumulation as the transitional period between feudalism and capitalism, is it possible for Marxist political economists to seek out and interrogate contemporary instances of this transition? Or is it a process consigned to a very particular

history, that of the successful transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe? On the one hand, we can say that the primitive accumulation described by Marx was an event with countless determinations, unlikely to arise again. However, it is more useful to seek out the broader ramifications of this theory and apply it subsequent and current phenomena.

There is a lively group of scholars who do exactly that, and have built compelling cases for subsequent instances of primitive accumulation. The colonial era led many Marxist political economists to argue that primitive accumulation was happening in the colonies. Luxemburg (2004) was the most notable of these. She argued that colonial policy was a far more widespread form of primitive accumulation than even the policies Marx described:

> Yet capital in power performs the same task [of primitive accumulation] even today, and on an even more important scale by modern colonial policy. It is an illusion to hope that capitalism will ever be content with the means of production which it can acquire by way of commodity exchange. In this respect already, capital is faced with difficulties because vast tracts of the globe's surface are in the possession of social organizations that have no desire for commodity exchange… Capital must begin by planning for the systematic destruction and annihilation of all the non-capitalist social units which obstruct its development. With that we have not passed beyond the stage of primitive accumulation; this process is still going on (63 - 64).

This process is not, of course, merely an economic one, but an overtly political and ideological project:

> This end was served above all by the fiction, always popular with European colonisers, that all the land of a colony belongs to the political ruler. In retrospect, the British endowed the Moghul and his governors with private ownership of the whole of India, in order to 'legalise' their succession. Economic experts of the highest repute, such as James Mill, duly supported this fiction with 'scientific' arguments... (65).

Anticipating critiques of scientific discourse and positivism, Luxemburg's skewering of scientific economics is in itself worth the read.

Michael Perelman (1983; 2000) is perhaps the most notable contemporary scholars working in the vein of Luxemburg. His work examines the discourses of classical economists Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and James Steuart, and like Luxemburg, he is highly critical of the claims of the classical economists to scientific truth. He argues that these economists were not only aware that their recommendations and theories were leading to the very violent processes of primitive accumulation in England; they encouraged this transition. While Smith *et al* veiled their recommendations in scientific language, they adhered to a narrow political interest.[1]

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[1] For example, Perelman argues that Smith's concept of the invisible hand was an theoretical attempt to explain the rise of capitalism without having to examine the violent processes which brought it into being. Perelman's argument is that Smith's huge influence stems not from his original insights but in his ability to offer a compelling mythology of capitalism.
Moreover, as Mosco (1996) notes, the narrow political interest of Smith *et al* included consideration only for their respective nations. In this reading, their work is early modern nationalism. In my view, this nationalism is indicative of the whole host of decisions which led to brutal colonization projects throughout the modern era.

As he critiques these economists, he outlines his take on primitive accumulation. Like Luxemburg, he actively expands its scope. He argues that the denial of self-sufficiency occurs daily in myriad ways, particularly in production for private in home consumption: “people provide for themselves in a multitude of ways other than the growing of food. Depriving them of other means of provision forces a dependence on the market in the just the same fashion as restricting access to the means of food production.” This includes washing and entertaining; as space for homes shrinks, people turn to outside, so-called "third spaces" to entertain or to do laundry. Since these spaces require payment in cash, more and more members of the home are compelled to engage in wage work. Thus, Perelman expands Marx's definition of primitive accumulation to include a wide array of productive capabilities. However, he offers no other examples or further elaboration, leaving the examination of this expanded notion of primitive accumulation to other scholars.

Perelman also argues that primitive accumulation has had a direct and quantifiable impact on gender and work. As the reliance on the market grows, there is tremendous pressure to enter into money economies. In some cases, but certainly not universally, women could remain outside wage work and instead produce goods and render care and service in the home. However, by tracing his interpretation of primitive accumulation to its conclusion, Perelman argues that the increasing reduction of the ability for families to provide for themselves drives both women and men to the market in all geographical locales. Empirical works such as Lietchy's (2005) ethnographic work in Kathmandu, Davis's (2007) linking of modern slums to structural adjustment

programs, Raworth's (2004) discussion of women in garment and agriculture, and Blewett's (1990) history of the New England shoe industry bear this out.

The most striking aspect of Perelman's work is the implication that classical political economists such as Smith, Ricardo, and Steuart[2] actively sought the political and forceful removal of peasants from common lands. Perelman's impact, like Luxemburg's, will likely be on those scholars who study the ideology of economists to glean the ways in which they advocate for the privatization of common spaces and the accumulation of the ways in which people have typically provided for themselves.

Davis's work (1983) could be seen as a supplement to Perelman's argument that any socialization of previously private home production is considered primitive accumulation:

> As industrialisation advanced, shifting economic production from the home to the factory, the importance of women's domestic work suffered a systematic erosion. Women were the losers in a double sense: as their traditional jobs were usurped by the burgeoning factories, the entire economy moved away from the home, leaving many women largely bereft of significant economic roles. By the middle of the nineteenth century the factory provided textiles, candles and soap. Even butter, bread and other food products began to be mass-produced (227).

[2] While Smith, Ricardo, and Steuart all advocated for the often violent processes of primitive accumulation, Smith and Ricardo were at least measured and polite in their writings on the subject. In contrast, Perelman finds that Steuart's writings were the most blunt. Here is Steuart's call for "enslavement without slavery": "The statesman must collect the children of the wretched into workhouses, and breed them to this employment, under the best regulations possible for saving every expense" (qtd in Perelman 2000: 154). In short, Steuart is a political economic Iago: fun to read, chilling to consider.

Davis argues that, since house work was associated with women, and that since house work was found to be "unproductive" in the sense that it does not create exchange value, women's status in industrial economies was drastically damaged, devalued to the point of oblivion. Davis offers the example of apartheid South Africa, where black women - both single and married - were segregated into women-only hostels. Davis argues that this was meant to dissolve black families, even as South African capitalists depended on black male laborers. In this context, at least, home production was willfully challenged by capital. Her arguments rest on Ehrenreich and English (1975) and are corroborated by the empirical work of Cowan (1983) and the theoretical work of Hennessy (2000).

Continuing Perelman's and Davis's work, Federici (2004) argues that primitive accumulation is a theory which allows us to see the past in the present. For her, the past processes of primitive accumulation are reflected not only in the modern-day need for wage work but also in the modern structure of gender relations and the reproduction of labor-power. She argues that the present-day violent enclosures and land acquisitions which are destroying traditional ways of life in the Third World, representing a continuation of the processes which Marx describes. She synthesizes this violence with the violent control of women's ability to bear children. In short, her focus is on what could be called the primitive accumulation of women's productive capabilities; their ability to reproduce the species is alienated from them in an analogous fashion to how other productive capacities were alienated from the peasants of Europe.

Paul Smith (2007) deals less with the accumulation of the means of production and more with primitive accumulation as the process by which capitalism opens up new

spaces into which it can flow. Blockages to capital's flow include self-sustaining households, which will not participate in commodity consumption, nor will see the need to engage in wage work. By using this definition of primitive accumulation, institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization become obvious targets of the critical eye. The compulsory restructuring of agricultural and economic organization that was foisted upon developing nations did much to bring them into the flows of finance, trade, and commodity exchange.

Read's (2002, 2003) contribution to this field is more theoretical. He argues that primitive accumulation is a “transitional” phenomenon. As such, it is outside of capitalism proper, but marks the process by which capitalism comes into being or enters into a new space. Therefore, it is not only currently occurring but always possible wherever there are spaces outside capitalism: “Primitive accumulation can be said to take place at every point where something in common is converted into private property (e.g. from land used to gather firewood to the genetic code of indigenous crops) or where the conditions for the production and reproduction of existence are converted into commodities (e.g. the transition from home garden plots to fast food.)” (27). This argument is in line with Perelman's and Davis's.

Read's work moves beyond the others in that he carefully examines subsumption. Subsumption was Marx's term for the de facto and ideological acceptance of capitalism and wage labor. De facto subsumption, or “formal subsumption,” is the basic imposition of the wage relationship. This is obviously a necessary step in imposing capitalist production, but it is not the ultimate step. “Real subsumption” is. This is the acceptance

of capitalism as a natural, reified phenomenon. An clear explanation of how real subsumption operates in the minds of workers is found in Braverman (1975):

> The apparent acclimatization of the worker to the new modes of production *grows out of* the destruction of all other ways of living, the striking of wage bargains that permit a certain enlargement of the customary bounds of subsistence for the working class, the weaving of the net of modern capitalist life that finally makes all other modes of living impossible (98, my emphasis).

Primitive accumulation thus involves not only divorcing the laborer from any alternative forms of production, it also involves socializing these newly freed workers into the system of capitalism. The socialization requires that initial destruction, but capitalism itself requires the socialization. Capitalism then becomes natural. As Read argues, this is a transitional process; it is not quite full-blown capitalism, but neither is it another economic form. It is the birth of capital, a process which happens in fits and starts the world over. And it remains fragile and subject to massive upheaval. Returning to Braverman, we see why:

> But beneath this apparent habituation, the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity. It renews itself in new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism and

> revulsion which large numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social issue demanding solution (98).

Real subsumption, as Read argues, requires micro-political power to maintain it; the day-to-day reinforcements of capitalism as hegemony which we hear in news reporting, see in workplaces, and hear in our friends' and loved ones' voices.

However, to focus on real subsumption's ideological aspects would only privilege the ideal.[3] Following Braverman and the Autonomist school, Dyer-Witheford (1999) argues that real subsumption also involves the very real and material scientific and objective restructuring of the processes of value extraction. Scientific management of the labor process leads to an increase in the extraction of relative surplus value. This is necessary since any drastic increases in absolute surplus value would push workers to the point of rebelling against the system.

Moore (2004) has also contributed to the theoretical development of primitive accumulation, particularly in terms of examining globalization. He argues that "development" and "primitive accumulation" are synonymous processes, and in that case, there has to be an examination of the role of the state in primitive accumulation/ development. He argues that if accumulation is not guided well by the state, there exists a state of permanent primitive accumulation with semi-proletariat only sporadically employed, and itinerant capitalists (92). He calls this situation "stagnant" primitive accumulation, and argues that a strong state is required to break the stagnation and complete the process. This often requires military force or dictatorial statecraft.

[3] The dialectical relationship of mental and material (alternatively called “ideal and real” or “rational and empirical” will be further addressed later on in this field in the section on overdetermination.

This is a direct refutation of neoliberal dogma, which holds that states are far less necessary than markets. Classical political economic (Smith 2003) and neoliberal thinking (Hayek 1989; Friedman 2002; Klein 2005) holds that states merely inhibit capital and market growth, and therefore state power and function should be limited solely to the protection of private property. However, the historical evidence shows that a state bent on legally codifying newly expropriated lands is necessary to primitive accumulation's success. At the core of the state's activities is the modern keeping of documents and enforcing new private property laws; that is, primitive accumulation and capitalism requite a modern state. Additionally, ideological state apparatuses, such as schools, prisons, and hospitals, are required to discipline the newly freed laborers. An emerging example of this is in present-day Iraq, where the provisional government relies on military force as well as "soft power" to restructure the economy into free market capitalism (DiMuzio 2006).

I will visit this further in the section on "Cultural Studies and Marxist Political Economy," but briefly I will say that primitive accumulation is particularly important as a tool to understand the discursive, juridical, military, and political methods for normalizing capitalism among all classes involved. It is precisely these techniques, and in particular the process of real subsumption, which meld the cultural with the material and which should be interrogated by cultural studies scholars. Davis's (1984) work, in which she explores the political economy of the household, is a strong example of this.

One element of primitive accumulation that is mostly overlooked is the use of the word "primitive," which of course is anathema to cultural studies. Smith (2007) has dealt

directly with this sticky phrase. The literal meaning of the translation – the accumulation of the primitive – is something that cultural studies is ready to engage with. "Contemporary primitive accumulation is *primitive* in the sense that it harks back to capital's beginnings, but it is no longer historically *prior*. Rather, it is a crucial component in the dialectic of the primitive and the modern, the barbaric and the civilized, within capitalism today" (56). As Kaplow (1978) argues, "Because [primitive accumulation] means the transfer of resources from pre-capitalist society into the hands of nascent capitalists, it directs our attention to the dynamic inter-relationship between what are often loosely called tradition and modernity" (20). Like Read, Smith sees primitive accumulation as transitional, but in this case the transition is not temporal or structural so much as ideological. "Barbarism" and "civilization" are relative terms, and Marx's concept of primitive accumulation serves to illuminate their interdependence. At the time Marx wrote, many northern nations were actively engaging in precisely what could be called accumulating primitives. Slavery's role in building the new world was economic, but the ideological justification given was that it was a civilizing mission. Moreover, contrasting the "primitive" with the progressive or expansionistic "accumulation" leads to interesting insights into cultural practices.

However, with the exception of Smith's work, there have been few attempts to treat primitive accumulation as a hypothesis and test it in new spaces and periods. Notable exceptions include several researchers who have examined regions and countries in Africa. Kaplow (1978) examined this process in the Gold Coast of Africa; Bryceson (1980), examined the case of Tanzania and drew interesting conclusions about primitive

accumulation's effects on gender relations; and Iyayi (1986) who examined Nigeria. In addition, primitive accumulation in South America is discussed in Nagar (2002). However, the empirical literature on primitive accumulation remains extremely thin.

Instead, it seems as if the trend in Marxist political economy is to treat primitive accumulation as a process which should be consigned to the history books, as opposed to a process which is in play contemporarily. David Harvey (2006) argues that primitive accumulation must be a significant part of any theory of uneven development in neoliberalism, but he fails to specify how this operates, nor does he cite any empirical studies of this transition. Rather, he is concerned with capital flows in globalization, a situation which presumes primitive accumulation has already occured. Michel Aglietta's (1979) terms “extensive accumulation” and “intensive accumulation” are roughly synonomous with formal and real subsumption, but his treatment of these regimes of accumulation are slightly different than Marx's, Read's, Smith's Luxemburg's, or Perelman's, emphasizing their role in capitalism's various "regimes of accumulation," which are different iterations of capitalist accumulation as opposed to the ways in which capitalism opens up new spaces and compels new people into the wage relationship. In other words, Aglietta and the "regulation school" seem to accept that primitive accumulation is, as Marx describes it, the penultimate step in the formation of capital, but their work constrains this process to a discreet past.

Once primitive accumulation has been achieved, capitalism can begin the social and economic processes by which it reproduces itself. The major process by which it

does so is the exploitation of the newly freed labor. To explore this, I will consider the Marxist labor theory of value, and then I will explore the concept of class.

Two: Labor Theory of Value

Marx's labor theory of value (LTOV) is the proposition that the value of a good is equal to the quantity of socially necessary labor power required for its production. Labor power, which is the physical and mental capacity of a human being as applied to altering and recombining objects in his or her environment, is measured in time. The average amount of time and effort a human takes to make, for example, a chair from a tree, is the "socially necessary" time. The value of that chair is then measured as the average amount of time and human energy spent upon its creation. "Socially necessary" time is not fixed but changes historically; since tools and machines, social production in factories, and robotics have decreased the amount of time it takes on average to make a chair from a tree, the socially necessary time it takes to make that chair has changed significantly over time, and thus its value has decreased to the point where chairs are more prevalent than people to sit in them (Mandel 1998; Dillard 1945; Resnick and Wolff 1987.)

Marx's was not the first labor theory. His work was based on the work of political economists Adam Smith and David Ricardo, as well as the "Ricardian Socialists" (Ravenstone 1821; Thompson 1824; Hodgskin 1825; Jones 1831). Adam Smith (2003), who is well known for his clear writing, sums up the LTOV:

> The value of any commodity, therefore, to the person who possesses it, and who means not to use or consume it himself, but to exchange it for other commodities, is equal to the quantity of labour which it enables him

> to purchase or command. Labour, therefore, is the real measure of the exchangeable value of all commodities. The real price of everything, what everything really costs to the man who wants to acquire it, is the toil and trouble of acquiring it. What everything is really worth to the man who has acquired it, and who wants to dispose of it or exchange it for something else, is the toil and trouble which it can save to himself, and which it can impose upon other people (43 – 44).

In all cases, their theories of value were opposed to the "physiocratic" school which argued that value arises from land, since land provides all the necessary elements for humans to survive (Turgot 1744; Quesnay 1758).

Marx's main focus, of course, was not on goods, but those peculiar goods called commodities. The LTOV is particularly important for Marx's criticism of capitalism, his theory of surplus value, and the production of commodities. Commodities are those goods produced in the capitalist system, where the owners of the means of production hire free laborers and take the product produced by those laborers to market for exchange. In comparing the value of each commodity in the market place, the exchangers are also comparing the value of the labor power that produced those commodities. In Capital Volume I (1965), he states:

> Each individual commodity, in this connection, is to be considered as an average sample of its class. Commodities, therefore, in which equal quantities of labour are embodied, or which can be produced in the same time, have the same value. The value of one commodity is to the value of

> any other, as the labour-time necessary for the production of the one is to that necessary for the production of the other. 'As values, all commodities are only definite masses of congealed labour-time.' (39 - 40)

Thus, in a market, exchanges are based on assessing the "toil and trouble" of obtaining a particular good. If I want a chair, I either have to make it myself, or I have to exchange something for it. There is a built-in system of fairness to all of this: I am not willing to exchange something that takes me longer to produce than the time it would takes me to produce a chair. Likewise, the seller of the chair is unwilling to accept something that she could produce quicker than the chair she made. Thus, I exchange a wheel of cheese for the chair, which took me the same amount of time to produce as it would take me to make a chair. She gets the cheese, I get the chair, and we are both happier.

However, if commodities are easily compared by the amount of socially necessary labor in them, then how does profit arise in a system of perfect competition (that is, the market system which I described)? If I know all the factors of the production of a good, then I am not going to get "ripped off" or cheated. And even if I do, presumably it would not be endemic to the market system. There would not be a long line of naive market participants, endlessly getting the wrong end of a lopsided trade. And one of the key trades in this market is between the free laborer and the capitalist. So where does profit arise? Marx's answer is two-fold: one answer is in primitive accumulation, where simple, violent expropriation leads to profits in trading. One can see the potential for profit in the expropriation I have described in the previous section: I take something by force from someone to sell to someone else. Brutal but effective. The other is in his theory of surplus

value in capitalism, which is subtler and has the advantage of being more or less hidden in the production process.

Surplus value is the difference between the value of labor-power (defined as the productive capability of the laborer) when sold as a commodity and the value of its product. The expropriation of this extra product is called "exploitation." In an economic sense, exploitation is the taking advantage of or leveraging of some situation or capacity. This might refer to something as prosaic as exploiting the trees growing near one's home. In the production of commodities and in relation to the LTOV, exploitation is the act of taking advantage of the worker's need to sell his or her labor power in order to receive enough wages to eat, pay bills, and consume goods. The wages that the laborer receives are enough for his or her reproduction. If a laborer works eight hours a day in order to earn the wages to purchase food and clothes and shelter - all of which took *six* hours of socially necessary labor to produce - then that laborer has been exploited. Since the laborer does not receive either the wages equivalent to those two extra hours of labor time, or the goods themselves, then the capitalist has leveraged his position to capture two hours' work from the laborer. The capitalist exploited the laborer's need to work to survive. The surplus work that this laborer performed is now bound up in the commodities he or she produced, which can be sold at a profit by the capitalist.

This exploitation is simply a matter of the market functioning. The profits that the capitalist enjoys are simply compensation for his investment. Subsequent Marxist political economists began to consider this formula in a positive-scientific sense. That is, they asked, How do we determine the amount of exploitation? How do we "see"

exploitation? Can it be quantified? Can we use this theory to predict future profits, prices, exploitation of surplus values, etc? Can it be used as a positive tool for scientific work? Unfortunately, many subsequent Marxist political economists attempted to prove that capitalism is exploitative by proving that Marx's LTOV could be, in fact, a positive theory which could predict *prices* (and therefore the easily quantifiable degree of exploitation). In doing so, they confused Marx's concept of value with the positive concept of price (Ormazabal 2006).

To be fair to those who have attempted to show how the LTOV could be a theory of price, Marx himself worked on this problem. The root of this is the so-called "transformation problem" in the ninth chapter of Capital Vol. III (Marx 1959). There, Marx attempts to mathematically calculate prices based on the LTOV. Of course, Capital, Volume III is an unfinished work, so determining how Marx would have solved the "transformation problem," while an intriguing exercise, is speculative at best.

However, subsequent Marxist political economists have continued this work, particularly those in Vienna at the opening of the 20th century (Dmitriev 1898; Hilferding 1904; Bortkiewicz 1907). The reason they did so is because Marx's entire economic theory - and therefore, much of his theory of social inequality - was challenged on the grounds that he failed in his transformation calculation. Thus, the methods of this group of Austrians were in large part defined by those who opposed the LTOV, either in responding to criticisms of the labor theory, or in Dmitriev's case, attempting a synthesis of the labor theory and marginalism. This focus on positivism and the empirical applicability of the LTOV allowed for categorical dismissal of Marxism by the discipline

of economics. In a sense, mainstream economics has developed itself as a system of empirical inquiry opposed to Marxism. The seminal attack was authored by Austrian Böhm-Bawerk (1898). His attack set the grounds for the debate: it was to be positive, mathematical, and objective. He argued that Marx failed in the "transformation problem." Similarly, Menger (1871), Clark (1894), Robinson (1942), Schumpeter (1987), all have criticized the LTOV on the grounds that it is inapplicable to calculating prices and that it is not true unless it applies to situations without rent or interest. In other words, instead of predicting future outcomes and being testable in a positive way, these economists argue that the LTOV has no bearing on the discipline of economics. Moreover, Marx's LTOV has been challenged because of the impossibility to use it to predict prices in situations with long-term, fixed capital. More recent Marxist political economists Baran (1957), Sweezy (1966 with Baran), Becker (1977) have attempted to refute these accusations, again engaging in positivism.

Instead of the LTOV, mainstream economists have developed the marginal theory of value, which argues that the value of any object lies in what it can command in exchange. The exchange value of an object relies on supply and demand. Each individual consumer, when faced with a choice between, say, a banana at $1 and a coat at $10, chooses that object that will most increase his or her satisfaction, otherwise known as utility (measured in "utils"). This decision can be expressed in supply and demand curves, which show how many bananas will be consumed versus coats at varying price points. Those goods are said to be on the margin of what the consumer desires. The job of the economist is to take each individual supply curve, aggregate them, and then come up

with averages such as price, demand, supply, and so on. Mainstream economists from Menger to Robinson agree that this system is far more capable of predicting prices and demand than the attempts of positive Marxist political economics (Keen 2001).

The positivism of marginalism and mainstream economics have their own critics, not the least of which is Marx.[4] Notable among these are Dobb (1973), Sherman (1987), Keen (2001), and Perelman (2006). However, regardless if one prefers the LTOV or marginalism, the sheer glut of mathematical acrobatics performed on either the task of refuting or proving either theory is staggering, as is the amount of algebra devoted to solving or refuting Marx's "transformation problem" between value and price.[5] I will not belabor anyone with it in this field statement. Instead, I offer Samuelson's (1971) excellent summary and criticism of the whole debate:

> For when you cut through the maze of algebra and come to understand what is going on, you discover that the 'transformation algorithm' is precisely of the following form: 'Contemplate two alternative and discordant systems. Write down one. Now transform by taking an eraser and rubbing it out. Then fill in the other one. Voila! You have completed your transformation algorithm.' By this technique one can 'transform' from phlogiston to entropy; from Ptolemy to Copernicus; from Newton to Einstein; from Genesis to Darwin-and, from entropy to phlogiston . . . . It tells us something about the need for a systematic survey and elucidation

[4] Although Marx was not alive when marginalism became the predominant method of economics, he denied the idea that the market itself (that is, the acts of exchange and their subsequent supply and demand curves) creates value.

[5] And this does not include the other theories of value, such as Sraffa's (1960) concept of “the production of commodities by commodities” or chaos theory-inspired evolutionary economic theories (Keen 2001), both of which rely heavily on mathematical models to explain what is ultimately a human activity.

> of the transformation problem that this uncontroversial and prosaic truth is nowhere underlined in what is now a copious literature stretching over more than three-quarters of a century (400).

Instead, what is germane to cultural studies is that this long and weary bout with positivism drained the life out of 20th century Marxism; while 19th century socialists were organizing labor and contesting capitalism, 20th century Marxists got mired in mathematics. However, this focus on positivism is partially responsible for the advent of the discipline of cultural studies (as well as science and technology studies), which arose in response to rampant positivism in Marxism and other disciplines, such as sociology. For better or for worse, this positivism is a large part of why we study the works of Williams, Hall, Foucault, Gramsci, Althusser, Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, Krakauer, and Davis, among others (Ebert 1995; Hennessy 2000; Peck 2001, 2006). These theorists engage with Marxism at the level of culture, and while the relationship between cultural studies and Marxist political economy is somewhat weak (as I will discuss in the final section of this field statement), cultural studies is better off without positivism.

In addition, the failure of Marxist political economics to solve the transformation problem has strengthened the case of those in MPE that argue that value and price are not one and the same. Largely muted in the value-price mathematical debates are theorists such as Grossmann (1929), Dillard (1945), Dobb (1973), Aglietta (1979), Cleaver (1979), R. Wolff (1981), Gintis and Bowles (1981), Roemer (1998), J. Wolff (1999), Braverman (1975), and Ormazabal (2006), all of whom argue that the labor theory of value was never meant to be a theory of price, but instead is an theoretical orientation towards the

importance of labor as a basic ingredient of the production of objects of value and - and this cannot be emphasized enough - *social relations,* especially property relations.[6] This runs counter to the mainstream concept of value, which is the relationship of prices to prices (Braverman 1975). Rather, as Mandel (1998) states,

> For Marx, labour is value. Value is nothing but that fragment of the total labour potential existing in a given society in a certain period... which is used for the output of a given commodity, at the average social productivity of labour existing then and there, divided by the total number of commodities produced, and expressed in hours...Value is therefore essentially a social, objective, and historically relative category (372).

From this perspective, the labor theory of value is extremely simple to understand. Objects in the material world have value because we must labor to produce or obtain them. The amount of labor is attenuated not only by our technological capacity, but also our social systems which bring labor to bear upon objects. Value, arising from labor, is thus contingent, based entirely upon the overdetermination of factors in any particular time and place. The exchange of objects of value between people is a social exchange - the exchange of congealed labor.

In this simple view, then, it is clear that any social system which is built upon alienating the product from the producer and in turn realizing the surplus labor in that

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[6] Further still from positivist visions of value are those political economists (Marxist or otherwise) who attempt to bring ethics back into economics. Selsam (1942), Kamenka (1972), and Brenkert (1983) have all argued convincingly that we need to consider Marx as an ethical philosopher as well as an economic one. Mosco (1996) argues that the humanist "Young Marx" is foundational to all of Marx's work, rather than being epistemologically distinct from the later economic Marx.

product in order to expand capital is morally corrupt.[7] The property relations of capital are politically, juridically, and forcefully regulated to alienate the laborer from his or her product. This product then belongs to the owner of the means of production (Heilbroner 1985). Given the violent rise of capitalism (outlined in the section on primitive accumulation), any capitalists' claims on the marginal product of capital rests on an historical theft. Perhaps this is the best explanation for mainstream economics' attacks on the labor theory of value, as well as mainstream economics' lack of historical perspective.

Finally, it would be a mistake to ignore the impact of digital communications upon how labor is perceived in capitalism today. As Jameson (Sofronov and Jameson et al 2008) argues, "The most obvious [theoretical problem facing Marxism today] is the labor theory of value and the relationship to technology, the relationship to computer production, and how the labor theory of value can account for the value that's produced by computers" (369). The *avant garde* who are examining labor in digital communications are Terranova (2000), Ross (2000, 2006), Read (2003), Huws (2003), Sotamaa (2003, 2005), and Dyer-Witheford (1999a, 1999b, 2001a, 2001b; de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005). These theorists draw heavily on the Autonomist school of Marxism, particularly their theory of "immaterial labor" (Virno and Hardt 1996; Hardt 1999, 2005; Hardt and Negri 2000; Lazzarato). Immaterial labor is the labor that produces the cultural content of the commodity. This is often the work of advertisers, critics, computer programmers, artists, and writers. These workers tend to produce

[7] My argument here is supported by the ethical Marxists (see note 6) as well as sociologist Wright (1997; 2005), who argues that the LTOV is not necessary when one simply considers that in capitalism, what laborers produce is immediately alienated from them: the fruits of their labor are taken by the owners of capital. This argument, coupled with the historical perspective in the works on primitive accumulation, is a powerful rejoinder to the mechanistic concept of marginal productivity.

symbols, which are arguably not material. Obviously, the LTOV is not affected if the commodity being produced is material or not; however, what is necessary is to continue to apply the LTOV to information and cultural objects, despite the steady stream of arguments that claim that the information economy somehow transcends capitalist relations (for examples, see Bell 1973, 1976; Castells 2000, 2002). Theorists of immaterial labor are not entirely consistent in applying the LTOV to digital work, but they are at least heading in the right direction, a direction that was anticipated by Marx when he considered the ways in which labor becomes materialized in the objects in our world.

Three: The Marxist concept of class

The current state of the concept of class in Marxist political economy is in a state of disarray and chaos. Like the labor theory of value, the concept of class is constantly under attack by mainstream economists, conservative sociologists, and many in the political sphere. However, unlike the labor theory, there seems to be little agreement on how to resolve the messy situation of the concept of class, which has rendered Marxist political economy unable to respond to claims about the "classless society" of the United States, or the need to move beyond class warfare in England, claims whose origins date back at least to Adam Smith.

This is not to say that there is no agreement whatsoever on the concept of class. In all Marxist political economy, capitalism is considered to have produced two classes. In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels argue that "Society as a whole is more and more splitting

up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other — Bourgeoisie and Proletariat" (1948: 9). This statement is considered foundational among Marxists. The bourgeoisie are defined as the owners of the means of production, who gained their dominance by putting

> an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his 'natural superiors,' and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous 'cash payment.' It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single,unconscionable freedom — Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation (1948: 11).

In other words, rather than dominate via "traditional" methods of ideological appeals to divine rights (which are an elision of economic power), the bourgeoisie engage in "naked" domination *vis-a-vis* their control of productive goods such as land and factories; that is, "by subjecting society at large to their conditions of appropriation" (1948: 20). This is a kernel of Marx's examination of primitive accumulation which appears in Capital, Volume One.

Standing opposed to the bourgeois are the proletariat, who own nothing but their own bodies, and are free to sell their labor to the bourgeoisie. They exist in similar fashion to serfs in feudalism and slaves during chattel slavery. They serve a dominant class, which is to say they serve the owners of capital, the bourgeoisie, who are capable of utilizing capital in a way which reproduces domination: "Capital does not consist in the fact that accumulated labor serves living labor as a means for new production. It consists in the fact that living labor serves accumulated labor as the means of preserving and multiplying its exchange value" (Marx 1847, section: "The nature and growth of capital," par. 16).

However, Marxist political economists also agree that ownership - or lack of ownership - of the means of production *does not* necessarily include someone in one class or another. In addition to that objective position, subjectivity in the form of class consciousness is a factor. (As I will show, there is a significant strain of Marxists who consider class consciousness as the most important element in class, almost overwhelming the objective element of class. This strain is so large that it warrants further discussion.) In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels present class as a matter of consciousness; "The proletarian movement is the *self-conscious*, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority. The proletariat, the lowest stratum of our present society, cannot stir, cannot raise itself up, without the whole superincumbent strata of official society being sprung into the air" (1948: 20, my emphasis). This consciousness must be groomed and nurtured by anyone seeking to promote communism: "The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all

other proletarian parties: *formation of the proletariat into a class*, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat" (1948: 22, my emphasis). In sum, class is not simply determined by a relationship to the means of production. If it were, then Marx and Engels would not have argued that one of the tasks of Communists is to form the proletariat into a class; that would have been accomplished simply by the development of capitalism. However, class consciousness is not merely to be groomed from on high, but arises due to recognizing another class as the *other*; that is, as utterly opposed:

> The increasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes [the proletarian] livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon, the workers begin to form combinations (Trades' Unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there, the contest breaks out into riots (1948: 18).

Thus, there is basic agreement on an objective, economic/material element of class, and a subjective, ideological element. In addition, Marxist political economists also agree that, despite Marx's assertion that there are simply two classes, society is divided into quite a few more. However, this is where much of the confusion lies. What are the other classes? How do they relate to the two agreed upon classes? Are they subsumed in

them, as the Manifesto suggests? Or are they distinct and independent of the two major classes of capitalism? Finally, how do we recognize them? Marxist political economists use two main methods to answer these questions.

The first and most obvious is to turn to Marx's writings to find the answers. Unfortunately, "here the manuscript breaks off" (Marx 1959: 863). That is, Marx's most definitive statement on class comes in the final chapter of Capital, Volume III, but this chapter is unfinished. "The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and land-owners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production" (862). This is clear and consistent with the Manifesto and his other writings, but a few paragraphs later, we can see the seeds of confusion, as Marx states:

> What constitutes a class? — and the reply to this follows naturally from the reply to another question, namely: What makes wage-labourers, capitalists and landlords constitute the three great social classes? At first glance — the identity of revenues and sources of revenue. There are three great social groups whose members, the individuals forming them, live on wages, profit and ground-rent respectively, on the realisation of their labour-power, their capital, and their landed property. However, *from this standpoint, physicians and officials, e.g., would also constitute two classes, for they belong to two distinct social groups*, the members of each of these groups receiving their revenue from one and the same source. The

> same would also be true of the infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists and landlords-the latter, e.g., into owners of vineyards, farm owners, owners of forests, mine owners and owners of fisheries (862-863, my emphasis)

Here, Marx troubles his own definition by presenting two new possible classes in physicians and officials. He is acknowledging a counter-argument to his position. However, Marx's style of writing in the three volumes of Capital often involves a strong thesis statement in the introductory paragraph of each chapter, followed by rhetorical questions which hint at counter-arguments to his position, which are then answered with clear answers to those questions which point back to his initial statement. If his style in the 52nd chapter was in the same vein, we can guess that he would eventually reconcile this counter-argument to his statement that there are three main classes. He may have intended to use the special cases of physicians and officials to support his thesis in the Manifesto that "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into [bourgeoisie and proletariat]" (1948: 9). Of course, we can never know.

Several of Marx's followers and scholars of Marxism have attempted close readings of his writings to clarify the concept of class. Among Marx's followers, Lenin's writings are an early example of this approach. He rarely strayed from the classes mentioned in the Manifesto, which in addition to bourgeoisie and proletariat include peasants and lumpenproletariat, either in his exegesis of Marx's work (1914) on his political works and speeches (1917; 1918). In his context, Lenin was eager to include

peasants into the Bolshevik revolution, particularly since that group formed the majority in Russia at the time (1917). Lenin did elaborate on Marx's description of the petty-bourgeois: "Petty-bourgeois democrats are distinguished by an aversion to class struggle, by their dreams of avoiding it, by their efforts to smooth over, to reconcile, to remove sharp corners" (1919, par. 3). However, his use of this term, while loosely based on Marx's description of a reactionary, middle-class portion of the bourgeoisie, is here simply a pejorative directed at his rivals in the Second International.

Ollman's (1963) work is a typical academic reading of Marx. He traces Marx's use of the term class throughout his corpus, and then applies a synthesis of the various connotations of class to the unfinished 52nd chapter of Capital, Volume III. His findings are similar to mine: he assumes that Marx would disassemble the counterargument that physicians and officials would form classes distinct from the proletariat, bourgeoisie, and landowners by arguing that physicians and officials have neither control of the means of production, political organization, nor class consciousness (577). Unlike Lenin, Ollman is not attempting to make an overt political point; but he does attempt to poke holes in the "utility" of Marx's concept of class by presenting it as largely confusing and unfinished.

Hayes's (1993) is notable in that it is an academic exegesis of Marx's writings on France, and that it is typical of academic engagements with the Marxist concept of class after the fall of the Soviet Union. Much like Lenin, he starts with the Manifesto, but quickly notes its shortcomings, arguing that it is unclear whether Marx and Engels saw the various classes on a linear continuum or as groups which constituted one another, a model Hayes calls the circular model of defining classes (101). Hayes argues that the

writings on France, such as The Civil War in France and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte are part of Marx's use of the second method of defining class. With this established, Hayes argues that Marx found two "degenerate" classes who were not interested in the capitalist process: the finance aristocracy and the lumpenproletariat. While each are related to the bourgeoisie and proletariat in certain respects, Hayes uses the circular model of defining class to show how the lumpenproletariat and finance aristocracy are not involved in, nor are they interested in, the capitalist process of appropriating surplus labor. Instead, each attempt to get by on speculation or crime. Based on a close reading, Hayes concludes that Marx's later definitions of class, especially when tested against historical events, was much more flexible and applicable than the Manifesto's simplified linear model.

In addition to close readings of Marx, many Marxist political economists have attempted to clarify the concept of class by using Marx's theories to examine social, cultural, and economic structures and discover class formations. While Marx's writings on class were incomplete or imprecise, his theories do point in certain directions. Judging from the literature, there are three main theories on class derived from Marx: class as property, class as consciousness, and class as process of exploitation.

Class as property

At first glance, one's class seems to tied to one's property or lack of it. After all, the defining feature of the bourgeoisie is their control of the means of production, and the defining feature of the proletariat is that they own nothing but their labor. Lenin and the Bolsheviks are clearly in this camp, as their revolution in Russia centered largely on a

radical restructuring of property relations. In academic literature, Poulantzas (1973) argues that the tendency to break classes into smaller and smaller divisions (as is the tendency in works such as Hayes's) is antithetical to Marx's definition of class as a relationship to the means of production. He argues that there should not be a great distinction between manual laborers and so-called knowledge workers due to the fact that they are each propertyless laborers. Braverman (1975) offers a similar definition of class, arguing that "deskilled" labor and mental laborers relate to capital in the same way. Heilbroner (1985) is also in this vein. Roemer (1982) has developed a highly structuralist view of class as property. He argues that the property one inherits (if any) and how one uses that property in capitalism determines one's class position.

The theory of class as property is relatively simple to apply to various situations and can easily be used to discount sociological theories of the dominance of the so-called middle class (Mills 1956). However, this method of defining class largely lacks the subjective side of class consciousness. Marx and Engels argued that relationship to the means of production is not enough to place people into classes; they have to be conscious of both their interests and the conflicting interests of other classes. Those Marxist political economists who focus on the material dimension of class tend to overlook the political and cultural dimensions of class organization, advocacy, and struggle. The Bolsheviks and the subsequent governments of the Soviet Union are guilty of this oversight (Resnick and Wolff 2002). Braverman specifically avoided consciousness as a potential window into class. Unfortunately, this view of class is much to close to the current, neoliberal definition of class which is largely based on income and ability to

consume as a marker of class (Hennessy 2000; Harvey 2005; Sofronov 2008). One notable example of this mistake is in Abercrombie and Urry (1983), who argue (largely against Poulantzas) that the middle class can be discerned by their consumptive habits. This turns the relationship to property on its head: instead of viewing class from one's relationship to ownership of the means of production, these theorists (who are ostensibly in the Marxist camp) are equating it with the ability to consume. Obviously, the neoliberal view of class as income differs quite a bit from a Marxist perspective, even that of Abercrombie and Urry, but without inclusion of the subjective element of class, the debate remains purely in the realm of the economic, and the political power of class is deflated by those who argue that one can "move up" the class ladder by consuming more conspicuously.

Class as consciousness

There is a major branch in Marxist political economy which defines class as consciousness. As I mentioned, Marx emphasized the political goal of increasing class consciousness among the proletariat. "Consciousness raising" has become shorthand for politicizing groups of people, either in terms of their class position, or other identity-political categories such as sexuality, gender, or race. This is associated with the political movements in the West in the 1960s and 1970s, and the literature reflects this. Olmann's (1968) work, discussed above, largely decried the confusion over the concept of class as preventing working class consciousness from developing. In a similar vein, Reich (1971) discusses the difference between revolutionary class consciousness and trivial consciousness, rising from individual concerns. He argues that revolutionary class

consciousness is associated with radical intelligentsia, whereas the trivial consciousness is associated with the working class. Therefore, the intelligentsia must nurture the working class conscious into a politically potent force; otherwise, indifferent individualism would be the norm. Critical of this, Anderson (1974) argues that Reich's definition of class is too loose. And yet, like Reich, Anderson places heavy emphasis on consciousness as a marker of class, and from this method he identifies the bourgeois, the financial aristocracy, the proletariat, the industrial reserve army, the lumpenproletariat, and the middle class as discrete positions with their own consciousnesses. Soper's (1981) remarkable work relies heavily on consciousness as a marker of class as she discusses a political economy of needs. Her discussion of "false needs" and her attempt to define the Marxist notion of "true needs" relies heavily on the class as consciousness definition. Finally, as a labor organizer, Aronowitz (1992, 2003) is extremely interested in the social and cultural impediments to class consciousness in the United States, and he argues that capitalists have used technological changes such as digital communication to undermine working class unity.

Class as process of exploitation

Class as it relates to property ownership has the downside of not including the subjective element of consciousness; likewise, class as consciousness lacks the material dimension of property and the means of production. Clearly, this is in need of a synthesis, and that synthesis is largely apparent in the work of those who define class as one's position in the process of exploitation. This definition of class is developed in Resnick and Wolff (1987). Their work is largely a response to the base/superstructure metaphor

which is largely (and wrongly) attributed to Marx. This metaphor holds that the economic or material dimension of society is the base, upon which the superstructure of ideology, politics, and culture rests. In its most reductivist form, the base entirely determines the superstructure. In terms of class, this is reflected in the class as property/ class as consciousness dichotomy I have outlined here. Property is material/objective; consciousness is ideal/subjective. In other works on class, class is relegated solely to the economic realm, while state functions and officials are seen as non-class positions.

Instead of this division, Resnick and Wolff see class as determined by the process of exploitation. They define the direct appropriation of surplus labor the "fundamental class process." This process involves the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and it is fundamental because it is the process in capital where surplus value is captured. In addition, a second process, the "subsumed class process," involves all those who enable the realization of surplus value: accountants, managers, state officials (who provide the legal and technical infrastructure for capitalism to flourish), and merchants, among others. In either process, one might be in a dominant position (such as the owner of a factory or the owner of a retail outlet, or a high-level bureaucrat) or in a dominated position (a factory worker, an accountant, a retail clerk). One either produces surplus labor, appropriates it, or takes a cut of the resulting surplus value when that surplus labor is realized as value.

In addition to this definition of class, Resnick and Wolff also view class as a process; that is, one is not a *member* of a class, but one *participates* in the class process. This is based on a reading of Marx (1965) where he argues that "The principal agents of

[the capitalist] mode of production itself, the capitalist and the wage-labourer, are as such *merely embodiments, personifications of capital and wage-labour*; definite social characteristics stamped upon individuals by the process of social production; the products of these definite social production relations" (10, my emphasis). Thus, in Resnick and Wolff's view, one can participate in multiple class processes. This view is extremely useful in understanding how a worker can also be a participant in a stock purchase plan, and what sort of political implications this has. A small amount of stock in a company places that worker in the process of appropriating surplus labor and realizing surplus value; however, the majority of the time, the worker is embodying the proletariat role in the fundamental class process.

This definition of class has been highly influential among Marxist political economists. Lippitt's (1999) encyclopedia entry in the Encyclopedia of Political Economy argues that this view is the future of class analysis, particularly in analyzing globalization. Hennessy (2000) uses Resnick and Wolff's theory of class (as well as their theory of overdetermination, described in the next section of this field statement) to criticize the tendency in cultural studies to view consumption as a marker of class. Her remarkable work focuses on sexuality and gender and to a lesser extent race, thus providing a model exploration of the "holy trinity" of race, class, and sexuality/gender. Finally, the authors contributing to the journal Rethinking Marxism are finding new applications for this definition of class (Lippitt 2005; Diskin 2005; Odekon 2006).

Despite this vibrant batch of scholars, the Resnick and Wolff concept of class as the process of exploitation (and where one stands in relation to that process) has its faults,

particularly for political organization. If class is a process, rather than an identity, the important question of consciousness is deflected from one being conscious of one's *identity* as, for example, a proletariat, and instead is shifted towards one's *participation* in the process of the exploitation of labor. If I, as a factory worker, am conscious of the fact that I am participating in this process, instead of organizing my fellow workers into a union, I might simply look to purchase stock in the company, or engage in some other financialization. This leads to what Martin (2002) calls the "financialization of daily life"; that is, the obsession (at least in the West) with investments, portfolios, and mutual funds as markers of success and prosperity.[8] In other words, de-emphasizing class as identity can have a dulling effect on organizing labor. However, when compared to the other definitions of class (class as property, class as consciousness), Resnick and Wolff's definition and theory holds the most potential - just so long as the political question can be resolved.

Four: Overdetermination

As will be clear from the final section of this field statement, Marxist political economy has had a troubled relationship with cultural studies (Hall 1992; Garnham 1995; Grossberg 1995; DuGay et al 1997; Smith 2001; Peck 2001; Heumann 2003; Peck 2006; Grossberg 2006). At the risk of oversimplifying, the trouble stems mainly from MPE's supposedly inherent economism - the reduction of every social phenomena to something called "the economic." Usually, this means "production." Those who oppose MPE being used in CS, such as Grossberg and Hall, argue that prior to the 1990s, CS focused too

[8] For an early indication of how the concept of the "stockholder society" would be used to diffuse criticism of capitalism, see Braverman (1952).

much on the production of commodities and meanings, and did not acknowledge the agency of consumers. In addition, those critics also argue that a heavy focus on class elides a focus on some other identity category, such as race or gender. In any case, Marxism's presumed obsession with "the economic" was something to be guarded against by cultural studies scholars. The old bromide "The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist" from The Poverty of Philosophy (1847: ch. 2) is often cited by those who want to discount Marx because of his "economic determinism."[9]

This criticism is somewhat ironic, considering that "economism" is a critique first leveled by Marx at anyone who reduced his work to economic determinism. The charge of economism is more appropriately directed at the discipline which deals in it - i.e., "economics." Those who study the economy as an autonomous phenomenon which determines much of social existence have a discipline which relies on this one-way causality. If this sounds like Marxism, it is because of decontextualized quotes like the "steam-mill" line, as well as the much belabored "base/superstructure" metaphor, which I will deal with later.

For now, suffice it to say that MPE and cultural studies can be and should be more than rivals, or even more than just simpatico. Cultural studies is anemic without MPE, and MPE is too rigid without CS. However, in order for the two to coexist, or better yet merge, theoretical and practical space must be created where the two can meet. This requires refuting the charge of economism as leveled against MPE. This is best done

[9] For thoughtful refutations of the economic determinism of Marx, see Mackenzie (1984) and Bimber (1990).

by emphasizing that overdetermination is the key epistemological approach in MPE, and demonstrating that this epistemology is precisely what the best cultural studies brings to bear on whatever object is in question.

"Overdetermination," or the idea that there are never any essential causes for any phenomena, first appears in Freud's (1913) The Interpretation of Dreams. In that context, Freud argues that the meanings of dreams are overdetermined: no one essential cause drawn from conscious life could explain their meaning. In relation to Marxist political economy, overdetermination was first explicitly developed by Althusser (1962), who borrowed the term from Freud. Although he was "not particularly taken" with the term, Althusser stressed that epistemologically, Marx and Engels were superior to Hegel in that they expanded the dialectic, breaking away from Hegel's essentializing notion of the Absolute Idea. In this way, Althusser argues, Marx did more than "turn Hegel on his head," as is commonly said, but offered a more complex theory which allows the researcher to explore the "unexceptional exceptions" of history, such as the Russian revolution. Althusser notes that the revolution occurred, but soured, particularly when Stalin came to power. Was this because the economic situation in Russia was not truly changed to communism? In economistic thinking, that would be the causal reason: because once the mode of production (the base) is changed, the superstructure must surely change, as well. But, Althusser notes that revolutions and their results are overdetermined, not only by the revolutionary but also the reactionary:

> ... ***with the overdetermination of any contradiction and of any constitutive element of a society, which means***: (1) that a revolution in the

> ***structure*** does not *ipso facto* modify the existing superstructures and particularly the ***ideologies*** at one blow (as it would if the economic was the ***sole determinant factor***), for they have sufficient of their own consistency to ***survive beyond their immediate life context***, even to recreate, to 'secrete' substitute conditions of existence temporarily; (2) ... the new society produced by the Revolution may itself ***ensure the survival, that is, the reactivation of older elements*** through both the forms of its new superstructures and specific (national and international) 'circumstances' (all emphases are the author's).

Althusser's work is often cited in cultural studies, particularly his ideas of interpellation and ideology. However, what is often rejected is his idea that "the economic is determinant in the last instance." In his defense, he argues that the last instance never arrives, since it is consigned to "the long run of history." But even this vestige of essentialism is superseded by the next authors, who continue to develop the theory of overdetermination.

Resnick and Wolff (1987) have written the most extensive elaboration of the concept in Knowledge and Class. Their development of overdetermination is drawn from the debates in Western philosophy between rationalism and empiricism, the same terrain Marx (1845) surveyed in the Theses on Feuerbach. Both these epistemological positions are essentialist. Rationalism, they argue, essentializes thoughts and ideals, privileging the subject and judging theory by how well it maps onto the world. Empiricism, on the other hand, essentializes the object, and sees thinking as arising from objective observation of

the world. In either case, one way causality is the epistemological view, whether causality stems from the subject or from the object; either one, depending on the perspective, is the essence. Marxist political economists have been guilty of these essentialisms, particularly in the case of empiricism, which was reformulated by some Marxists as "dialectical materialism" (Engels 1883; Lenin 1908; Kawakami 1928; Sartre 1991).

Against these views, Resnick and Wolff argue that Marxist political economy (what they call "Marxian theory") holds that there is no way to distinguish subject from object, as both are processes which determine one another:

> For Marx, knowledge cannot be conceived in the traditional epistemological terms of independent subjects seeking knowledge of independent objects. Knowledge is not an activity of a subject over against an object. Such subjects and their thinking are rather understood as overdetermined by objects, including those to which the thinking may be directed. The objects conceived in traditional epistemology are impossible for Marx since he conceives all objects as overdetermined by the totality of social processes, including the thinking process of subjects. For Marx, objects of thought are understood at the same time as objects for thought, since the thought process participates in the overdetermination of such objects (56).

In other words, theory should not divide things into discreet subjects and objects, phenomena and epiphenomena, but should endeavor to uncover the processes by which the material and the ideal determine one another. This alone is very different than the

"base/superstructure" metaphor commonly attributed to Marxist political economy, and is quite compatible with common cultural studies theories culled from Freud, Foucault, Hall, De Beauvoir, or queer and colonial theories, to name but a few. For example, a theory of overdetermination which does not privilege any essentialism is highly compatible with Foucauldian ideas about power.

Resnick and Wolff do not stop there, but apply this theory to capitalism, particularly the overdetermined relationship between government, the productive sphere, and non-productive areas such as education, advertising, and sales. They acknowledge that a theory of overdetermination does not privilege any one particular approach to the object, but they insist that class is an appropriate way to examine economic phenomena. They trace class relations through each of these spheres, drawing a distinction between the "fundamental class process" where surplus value is extracted and the "subsumed class process" where surplus value is distributed. Moreover, their epistemological approach to class leads them to refuse to label particular people as belonging to one class or another. Rather, class is a process, and particular subjects are personifications of this process. They do not remain fixed in their class.

Their work is an ambitious rereading of Marx and many of his important followers. Looking over the body of work in Marxist political economy, it is clear that a case can be made that overdetermination is a theory which has its roots in Marxist writings. In particular, they offer interpretations of Marx's (1845) Theses on Feuerbach, Lenin's notebooks, Lukacs, Gramsci, Mezsaros, Jameson, and Hegel. These readings have been highly influential on subsequent Marxist theories. Economic geographers such

as Barnes (1996) have attempted to refine overdetermination vis a vis examining specific local phenomena. While he does not cite Resnick and Wolff, David Harvey's work is simpatico with their theory of overdetermination. Finally, Hennessy (2000; 2006) uses overdetermination in her excellent political economy of sexuality. Her contribution is worth noting: she offers several criticisms of Althusser and Resnick and Wolff, but ultimately demonstrates through her work on sexuality how overdetermination can be used as an analytical tool to discover the relationship between the seemingly distinct areas of queerness and capitalistic exploitation.

Read (2003) has also offered an antiessentialist argument in The Micropolitics of Capital. Like Resnick and Wolff, he draws heavily on Althusser and Marx's Theses. Read argues that the idea of the “ensemble of human [social] relations,” a term used by Marx (1845, Thesis 6), is the direct displacement of the notion of some abstract, universal human nature. “Marx’s statement ‘displaces’ the question of the human essence in that does not argue against essence in general but rather proposes that such an essence does not exist in an idea by rather exists, or effectively exists, in the multiple and active relations that individuals establish with each other” (23). This is what Read calls, after Althusser, "immanent causality":

> Althusser (1970) argued that *Capital* entailed a radical rethinking of causality, what he called structural or immanent causality. Rather than divide between a cause and its effects, a division which always posits effects as merely appearances of an underlying essence, immanent causality posit a cause that exists nowhere outside of its effects…(9).

Most tellingly, at least in terms of the cultural studies versus MPE debate, Read also offers exegesis of Foucault and Deleuze and Guatari on similar grounds, claiming (but unfortunately never demonstrating) the compatibility of their theories with overdetermination.

Since MPE has developed a supple theory of overdetermination, it is clear that the charge of "economism" can be leveled at the discipline which most deserves the critique: mainstream economics. Mainstream economics relies on a one-way model of causality as its epistemological method. As economics defined itself as a discipline in the early 20th century, it modeled itself after physics, using pseudo-physical ideas such as equilibrium and inflation (Mitchell 1998; Perelman 1993; Keen 2001;). If any discipline can be seen as relying on a base/superstructure metaphor, it is this one. Mainstream economists, particularly those who have engaged with political power, have actively carved out the object "the economy" and have scientifically discovered the ways in which its natural, cyclical expansions and contractions determine social behaviors as wildly various as choosing to diet or choosing a sexual/marital partner (Harford 2008). Perelman (1993) notes that economists tend to ignore large trends, complex phenomena, and multiple factors in favor of epiphenomenal, singular causes (27). Keen (2001) concurs, paying particular attention to the severe problems that arise when economists move from the micro scale (at the level of individual, rational choices and cost-benefit analysis) to the macro scale of national economies. Cost-benefit models and strictly dichotomous rational choices do not translate well to the larger sphere of "the economy." Economists Ziliak and McCloskey (2004) argue that economics is merely stories told in charts and graphs,

with dangerously abstract interpretations of positive data. Gibson (2005), an engineer, also notes the gap between mainstream economics' mathematical models and material reality.

Moreover (and often also against mainstream economics), the more radical-liberal strains of economics is highly invested in making the case that government involvement in "the economy" is unwanted and inefficient. Again, this represents a one-way causality: government regulation is an impediment to the inevitable expansion and coordination of liberal subjects possible in free markets (Klein 1997; Kirzner 1998). In the works of Resnick and Wolff, Perelman, Heilbroner (1985) and other Marxist political economists who use overdetermination, a more compelling case is made that government and non-productive areas of social life *make possible* market activity, while capitalism makes possible the existence of modern-day states. Deeper still, overdetermination compels the researcher to look at what might be called cultural studies topics: how does capitalism affect ideology, and vice-versa? How does consumption drive production? How does hegemony work? What is the culture and politics of institutions such as corporations? How does the liberal economic critique of government determine government, and how is that critique determined by government?

In fact, "the economic" is precisely the object which could be examined, troubled, and interrogated by any cultural studies scholar armed with MPE. Mitchell (1998) argues that the "economy" as an object is relatively new, appearing as such in the early to mid 20th century. In its original usage, the term "economy" referred to the actions of households, but as the scientific discipline of economics emerged a the turn of the 20th

century, the term was modified to refer to the aggregate of decisions made in those individual households. Mitchell concludes by calling on cultural studies to analyze "the economy" as a discursive object, just as race and gender have been analyzed. This is a project well within the purview of cultural studies utilizing MPE and a fully developed, antiessentialist epistemological standpoint such as overdetermination.

Five: Cultural Studies "versus" Marxist Political Economy

Given the useful analytical tool of overdetermination, and given the fact that it refutes the "base/superstructure" metaphor associated with Marxist political economy, why has cultural studies rejected Marx in favor of Foucauldian concepts of power, structuralism, or postmodernism? At what point did this occur?

In the early years of cultural studies, Marxism was an important element. However, early cultural studies theorists often engaged with Marxism in order to claim transcendence from it. Williams's (1958) Culture and Society is a seminal work in this field, and although Williams was initially interested in Marxism, he chose to instead engage with modernism as he examined culture. This entailed eschewing class as an entry point into culture. In place of class, Williams substituted discourse, which he felt was more indicative of culture (Shashidhar 1997). His reason for doing so was because Marxism was engaged in the positivism I described in the previous section on the labor theory of value. Williams wanted to avoid the reductivism of comtemporary Marxism.

Unfortunately, however, he ended up operating in the Arnoldian or Leavisite "best of what is said and thought" mode; that is, his engagement was solely at the level of

discourse. He saw that as the locus of the struggle between high and low culture. "The resultant lack of the concept of class struggle in the field of culture forces him to conceptualize writing as the hermeneutic record of 'immediate' living" (Shashidar 1997, 46). This move away from class as an entry point into examining culture has had a major influence on subsequent cultural studies scholars.

Following Williams, major branches of cultural studies have eschewed Marxist political economy in favor of particular readings of Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault, as well as race and gender theories. Adamson (1982) argued that Marx largely ignored the role of culture. In the meantime, a major strain of cultural studies did the opposite and ignored Marxism, leading Grossberg (1992) to confidently assert that cultural studies has "overthrown the Marxist myth that everything is determined by, if not reducible to, economic relations" (325). In other words, the base/superstructure metaphor associated with Marxism was shunned in favor of identity politics (Hall 1992), examinations of resistant consumer habits (Fiske 1987, 1991a, 1991b), and reception studies (Hall 1980).

In the Hall/Grossberg[10] mode of cultural studies, the act of overthrowing the Marxist myth amounts to distinguishing between something called "the cultural" and something called "the economic." This amounts to distinguishing between the ideal and the material (Grossberg 1995; Mitchell 1998; Heuman 2003; Peck 2001, 2006). In their view, if a cultural studies scholar cares to contextualize ideal phenomena, such as discourse, representation, or even interpolation, that scholar must "articulate" that phenomena with the opposing sphere of materiality - i.e., "the economic" (Hall 1980,

[10] To be fair to Hall, his work is far more nuanced than I am indicating here, and my concern with Cultural Studies is largely in the American context. In the context of the United States, Grossberg is the leading discipline of Hall. When I criticize the brand of cultural studies which attempts to separate cultural from the material, I am criticizing the Grossberg model.

1992). This involves connecting these now mutually exclusive spheres. Ironically, this is a tacit acceptance of the very base/superstructure metaphor that Hall and Grossberg were so keen to move beyond.

As is clear from the section on overdetermination, a case could be made that this field statement has also overthrown the myth that "everything is reducible to economic relations." Perhaps Grossberg's work has made this very field statement possible. However, it is more likely that this complex theory of overdetermination, as has been developed from Marx's writings on political economy, philosophy, and subjectivity, offers a far better method for examining cultural phenomena. Rather than presuppose that "the economic" is distinct from "the cultural," and rather than claim that the base determines the superstructure, a theory of overdetermination demands that the scholar pay attention to the blurred edges between culture, economy, and politics, or better still the blurred edges between the mental/rational and the material/empirical. As Peck (2006) argues, synthesizing cultural studies and political economy would

> entail abandoning the idea that the social world is composed of separate 'areas' or 'elements'—some of which are 'material' and some of which are 'symbolic'—and focusing instead on the 'whole and connected social material process' within which we produce and reproduce our means of existence, ourselves, our social relations, and our world (104).

This is beyond anything put forward by Grossberg or Hall, even with a fully developed theory of "articulation," and even with the aid of Richard Johnson's (1986-1987) circuit of cultural productions. "Articulation," after all, asks the scholar to draw connections

between "culture" and "economy" and "politics," but is premised on the idea that these are distinct spheres to begin with. Vigorous application of this theory, such as in Hall's Policing the Crisis (1978), entails making the connections between these spheres. However, by consciously separating these spheres, this theory opens the door for scholars to simply write off entire aspects of the processes of material and cultural production.[11]

With a fully developed theory of overdetermination, I join now with a long list of scholars[12] who have called over the years for greater integration of Marxist political economy and cultural studies. One particular area where cultural studies armed with Marxist political economy can be extremely effective is in examining primitive accumulation. Above, we saw that primitive accumulation is the process of drawing ever larger numbers of people into the wage relationship. A great part of this process is juridical, political, and military; people must be compelled from their previously independent (or at least non-wage) lives into the very specific system of capitalism. However, laws and the threat of violence are not nearly enough to do the job. In addition to the physical and legal coercion, Marx argues that capitalism must be made to appear natural, inevitable, and proper. Clearly, this is the stuff of culture, and therefore of cultural studies.

This process, which Marx called "real subsumption," is a process not only of coercion but also consent. This concept is a forebear to Gramsci's (1971, 1977, 1995) idea of hegemony. True, those in the Hall/Grossberg school are actively engaged with Gramscian theory. However, their reluctance to consider class deflated Gramsci's work

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[11] I'm thinking here of the book on the Sony Walkman (Du Gay et al 1997).

[12] Megan Morris, Nicholas Garnham, Paul Smith, Janice Peck, Rosemary Hennessy, Ann McClintock, and Timothy Mitchell.

into a simple binarism between some force called "dominance" and some oppressed, yet resistant subaltern. To examine resistance without class is to merely catalog the ways in which consumers "decode" messages they receive from on high in ways unintended by those who commissioned the message. Moreover, to describe society in simple superordinant/ subordinant terms tends to elide the subtle and complex Gramscian notions of consent, negotiation, and historical contingency. As Lee Artz (2003) argues, Gramsci's is one of the key areas in which cultural studies and political economy meet *precisely* because Gramsci was continually interested in class and in historical class processes.

In addition to primitive accumulation, subsumption, and hegemony, cultural studies armed with political economy can be quite effective politically. The gaps between culture, politics, and economics only hinder the Left; these gaps tend to prevent someone in cultural studies who is interest in Marx from encountering much of the political economic writing I have outlined here. As Amariglio and Madra argue:

> The deep divide that has opened up between these two tracks within Marxism is such that it is quite possible for a Marxian economist during the past thirty years not to have read a single page that someone like Fredric Jameson may have written, or, indeed, alternatively, for a Marxian literary or cultural critic not to refer, other than cursorily (and anachronistically), to Marxian political-economic analyses written since the 1970s. It is possible to blame this divide on the arbitrary disciplinary divisions that compartmentalize the Western academy and, precisely for

> this reason, it is imperative for Marxists to speak to each other (qtd. in Sofronov and Jameson 2008, 370-371).

There are, of course, many in the academy who have attempted to bridge the gap between culture and economy. Davis (1983) is also an important example of this synthesis. Godelier's (1986) anthropoligical work, while not affiliated with cultural studies, could be a valuable synthesis and resource for cultural studies scholars. More recent and self-consciously cultural studies approaches are those of McClintock (1995), Feinberg (1996), Collins (2000, 2004), and Hennessy (2000).

In addition, cultural studies/political economy focuses the scholar on examining mass culture as a manifestation of both the mental (rational) and the material (empirical). This is the domain of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Kracauer. For example, Kracauer (1995) argues that mass cultural products reveal the shortcomings of rationality in capitalism. A line of chorus girls or a movie palace are epiphenomenal of the incredibly complex processes of capitalist production and consumption; they require coordination, timing, homogeneity, and structure. However, Kracauer argues that this rationalized system *does not serve mankind*. Instead, its sole purpose is the production of value by value, with everyone – from the stars of the show to individual members of the audience – an atomized part incapable of grasping the whole. This argument was elaborated in Horkeheimer and Adorno (1973).

Finally, synthesizing cultural studies and Marxist political economy leads to a critical reassessment of Raymond Williams, with surprising results given how his work was used by the early Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Several scholars have

done just this. Peck (2006) rescues him from those that use his work to separate culture and economy by illustrating the many places where he argues *against* the conception of the semi-autonomous spheres of culture/symbols and economy/material that eventually came to dominate cultural studies: “It is ironic that one of the ‘founders’ of cultural studies devoted much of his career to criticizing the symbolic/material binary that has come to define that field" (104-105). In addition, Williams's conception of class has also been rescued. Cornel West (1992) argues that Williams's concept of class conflict is particularly useful for those "cold" moments where class struggle is elided or "mediated through social, cultural, or educational change" (7). This conception of class is highly influenced by Gramsci. Again, for cultural studies to ignore this part of Williams's work (as well as the corresponding work of Althusser, Gramsci, and Marx himself) is, in my view, untenable.

In fact, Williams returned to Marx later on in his career in his 1977 book, Marxism and Literature. Here, he is highly critical of the very position he is credited for by Hall et al:

> "it is wholly beside the point to isolate 'production' and 'industry' from the comparably material production of 'defense,' 'law and order,' 'welfare,' 'entertainment,' and 'public opinion.' In failing to grasp the material character of the production of a social and political order, this specialized (and bourgeois) materialism failed also . . . to understand the material character of the production of a cultural order" (93).

In contrast to this isolation, "the point" of Marxism and Literature was to find the "lost middle term" (37) between the material/economic and the cultural/ideal. This middle ground does not imply that the material and the ideal are polar opposites or epiphenomenal. They are mutually constitutive; that is, they are overdetermined. Any version of cultural studies which ignores this - either out of convenience or out of desire to "transcend" Marx - is rendered hollow.

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