

# **Class in Theory, Class in Practice**

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**Abstract:** An articulation of class politics that has gained prominence on the post-Bernie Left presumes that a socialist politics should appeal to the common interests of the working class because the working class has a structurally privileged position in capitalism. I argue that this position (“class abstractionism”) conflates work relations with capitalist class relations, and that it is therefore prone to substituting an image of one fraction of the proletariat for the proletariat as a whole.

**Keywords:** class; proletariat; class abstractionism; class structure; class identity; culture

**I. Class Abstractionism**

It is impossible to deny that a new discourse of class has been ascendant since 2016. Some of the figures in this new class discourse have been hoeing this same row for a very long time. Adolph Reed has been making the same arguments consistently for thirty years. That argument is that, while “obvious racial disparities” are a problem, “the way forward is precisely through the kinds of social and economic policies that address black people as workers, students, parents, taxpayers, citizens, people in need of decent jobs, housing, and health care, or concerned with foreign policy—not to homogenize them under a monolithic racial classification.”<sup>1</sup>

Critics have assailed this argument as “class reductionism” – a name Reed reasonably refuses as a “specter” and a “myth”<sup>2</sup> – but the argument, has not only weathered the criticism but has found a new constituency in parts of the Democratic Socialists of America and beyond in the wake of the two Sanders campaigns and the Trump presidency. That constituency is certainly not confined to Marxists. From so-called popularists and centrist policy wonks – who want the Democratic Party to focus on universalistic economic messaging rather than “divisive” cultural and racial issues – to Left populists – who want to revive the “we are the 99%” slogans of Occupy – to the genuinely neo-Strasserite elements that have coalesced around *Compact Magazine*, there is a wide and quite disparate chorus of voices singing the praises of class-based politics, understood as a politics that addresses people as workers.

Despite this wider reach, these arguments for the *political* primacy of class continue to have a special affinity with Marxist accounts of the

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1 Reed 2019.

2 Reed 2019.

*structural* primacy of class.<sup>3</sup> Besides Reed, the most prominent figure here is Vivek Chibber, whose recent book, *The Class Matrix*, attempts to systematize an approach he has been developing for many years now.<sup>4</sup> According to Chibber, class is structural, while all other social groupings and cleavages are rooted in culture. This gives class an explanatory importance that cannot be claimed by race, gender, religion, or nationality. This explanatory priority gives rise to the political priority of class politics. Economic and political power are in the hands of the capitalist class – they are the structurally advantaged class – and only the working class occupies the structural position to challenge them. As Chibber put it in 2016:

The working class has this power [to overcome the resistance of the capitalist class and its political functionaries], for a simple reason – capitalists can only make their profits if workers show up to work every day, and if they refuse to play along, the profits dry up overnight. [...] This ability to crash the entire system, just by refusing to work, gives workers a kind of leverage that no other group in society has, except capitalists themselves. [...] It is this power to extract real concessions from capital that makes the working class so important for political strategy.<sup>5</sup>

This general perspective is widely shared by writers for *Jacobin* and activists within the DSA. It combines the two primacy claims – structural and political – but adds a claim about the derivation of political primacy from structural primacy. In other words, for adherents to this perspective, class *ought* to be the basis of politics *because* it is the load-bearing element in the social structure. This is what sets them apart from the Left populists, the neo-Strasserites, and the centrist “popularists.”<sup>6</sup> The intuition, therefore, is that organizing around racial, gendered, or other identities, and around injustices of status and standing, is a distraction from *what is really going on*, and, for that reason, is also a distraction from *what could actually work*.

The structural primacy of class can be fleshed out as the claim that the fundamental social processes that drive, undergird, and explain conflicts over status and standing and identity are the class processes

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3 On the distinction between political and structural primacy, see McCarthy and Desan 2022.

4 Chibber 2022; I have criticized Chibber’s argument in Roberts 2022.

5 Chibber 2016.

6 McCarthy and Desan call those for whom class is politically primary, even though it lacks any special structural status, “class constructivists” (McCarthy and Desan 2022, pp. 10–11). They point to Left populism as an example of this tendency, but I see it as encompassing a wider range of political tendencies.

of capitalism in its current neoliberal form. The political primacy of class can be fleshed out as the claims that naming and appealing to people's material class interests is both more motivating and more inclusive than naming and appealing to people's status, standing, and identity, which are particularistic and divisive, rather than universalistic and unifying. The position that links these two primacy theses by deriving political primacy from structural primacy I will call, following Michael McCarthy and Mathieu Hikaru Desan, *class abstractionism*.

I understand the appeal of class abstractionism. The individual intuitions out of which the position is constructed are themselves compelling. But the position as whole doesn't make much sense. When we get explicit about how and in what sense each of the elements is true, then it seems impossible to combine them in the way that class abstractionism does, and the whole thing seems to fall apart. I want to look at the two aspects of the position in turn, and to point out where its adherents trip themselves up. My basic argument is that the structural priority of class *cannot*, in capitalist societies, ground a normative preference for a strategy of interpellating political agents as workers, or for organizing around "bread-and-butter" issues rather than around issues of police violence or trans health care or sexual harassment. You cannot derive effective political messaging from the correct analysis of the class structure of capitalism, and there is no reason to think that appealing to universal ideals and material interests is the straight and narrow path to composing a working class political movement.

## II. Structural Primacy

Class is structurally primary, for Marxists, because *production* is primary.<sup>7</sup> Class relations organize production, and, since production is fundamental to the existence of human society, solving the class-relation problem is a limiting constraint on everything else that goes on in society. "The centrality ascribed to relations of production by Marx," as Søren Mau helpfully formulates it, "derives from the simple fact that relations of production are the social relations through which people gain access to the necessary conditions of their life."<sup>8</sup> When these social relations of production are also relations of domination – when, that is, they organize the exclusion of some from direct access to the means of social reproduction, or set the terms of this access, such that some have unaccountable power – then they are class relations.

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7 Production is here understood in a very broad sense, and includes the production of new human beings.

8 Mau 2023, p. 112.

Class relations, so understood, are explanatory of other social phenomena because and to the extent that they place limits on what is possible within a given social formation. Production at a certain level – for a given population, at a certain level of social wealth, with a received stock of materials and means – binds us socially to a significant extent. Hence, production relations are sticky. We cannot produce food and technology for a world of 8 billion people, who are used to and reliant upon modern life, in just any old way. We are, in this sense, locked in – for now – to certain relations of production, and this means – for now – certain class relations.

Class, in this sense, names the relations of domination that are productively necessary for a given society. Obviously, this necessity is only ever relative and conditional. Social needs change, and so do production relations. Nonetheless, the wide variety of ways in which human societies have organized production, mediating their relations with the rest of nature, are not a menu of available options for any society to choose from at any time. The presently existing relations of production establish the carrying capacity of the territorial base of a society. Trying to transform these relations radically or suddenly is likely to result in mass starvation, mass migration, and/or conquest by ones neighbors.

The point of Marx's base-superstructure materialism is to underscore this fact, that class relations are themselves a "social technology" of production. To this claim it adds the further thesis that more *productive* class relations are more *powerful* class relations, which tend to win out in comparison with other, less productive class relations. The mechanism of this winning out can vary. It might be that more productive class relations outspread less productive, which would remain in place but only as an ever more miniscule fragment of production. Instead, they might developmentally outstrip them, making the less productive relations literally impossible by, say, replacing the infrastructure upon which they rely. The more productive relation might also lead to military overmatching, such that the less productive relations are scrapped at gunpoint, as it were.

However, there are a couple wrinkles.

First, a tendency is just a tendency, and will be more notable and stable at a large scale and over a long time than it is locally and at any given moment. Historical materialism is supposed to be explanatory and predictive, but it is not a species of determinism. The United States, with far-and-away the most powerful economy and military in the world, lost its war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Viet Cong, representing a population of peasants living at or barely above subsistence. By 2018, however, the economy of Vietnam could be touted as a "miracle" by the World Economic Forum. Privately-owned firms

account for 43% of GDP and employ 85% of the workforce.<sup>9</sup> The long-term tendency of capitalist relations of production to win out could not determine the outcome of the war. The intransigence of the Vietnamese people could defeat the US on the battlefield, but holding the line against more powerful relations of production would have entailed levels of sacrifice that no people should be expected to bear.

Second, the more productive the economy, the greater the surplus and the greater the inequality in how this surplus is spread around, the greater the “slippage” between socially-necessary class relations at the level of the social totality and the relations of production that obtain locally in any given workplace or jurisdiction or line of production. That is, the more productively developed an economy, the less likely its “competitive edge” is to be critically present in any one site or line of production. A highly productive economy is also a highly *diversified* economy, and that means that the various workplaces in that economy are doing very different things in very different ways. In ancient Rome, the major industries of agriculture, mining, timber, and the military – the extractive industry *par excellence* in the ancient world – were run along similar lines, with similar forms of labor discipline. In the contemporary US, the major sectors of the economy exhibit dramatically different forms of organization and labor processes.

In this situation, *class* relations remain fundamental, but they are progressively distinct from – without being independent from – *work* relations. To put it in simple terms, in contemporary capitalism, *work relations* – relations of domination and exploitation at the site of production – *are labor-management relations, not proletarian-capital relations.*

The distinction between proletarian-capital relations and labor-management relations – derived from Marx’s distinction between abstract and concrete labor – highlights a constitutive obscurity in much of the contemporary writing about class politics. The injunction to focus on class and to build a working class politics is actually misaligned with the injunction to trace political developments back to the structure of capitalism. *Class* is not a concept operating at the same level of generality as *capitalism*. *Class* is not peculiar to capitalism, after all. Rather, it is a constitutive element of almost all human societies to date.

The corollary of tracing the fundamental dynamics of capitalism would be an emphasis not on class in general, or even on the working class, but on *the proletariat*. Naming the proletariat, however, would emphasize what so much of the new class discourse seems intent to obscure, that “the working class” as the makers of things is not equivalent to “the working class” as the class of wage-workers, and neither is equivalent to the proletariat, the class of people dependent upon wages for life, whether they are working or not.

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<sup>9</sup> Vanham 2018; Eglinger 2021.

As soon as you approach *Jacobin*-style class abstractionism with the specificity of capitalist class relations in mind, it is obvious that there is a mismatch here. Class abstractionists cannot decide whether they are talking about the proletariat or the workers, capitalism or the workplace. They take the fundamental importance of class to imply the fundamental importance of work relations, but they simultaneously take the political dynamics of the workplace as a model for the political dynamics of capitalism. In trading off among analyses that pertain to different levels of social reality, they end up tying themselves in knots. Keeping these levels of analysis clear in your head is fundamental if you want to say something about the world we live in rather than the world you have constructed in your imagination.

Proletarian-capital relations obtain in an abstract but determining way at the level of society, which is mediated in its essential productive processes by the labor market. Labor is allocated and reallocated to different branches of production, to different localities, and to different work processes by the market. Whether or not labor is productive of capital depends upon market conditions on a global scale. Whether or not one is a proletarian hinges on one's relationship to the wage, not what one does all day. As Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner have recently put the point, "especially under capitalist conditions, there may be gaping differences in 'life chances', income and lifestyle within the working class [i.e., the proletariat]. Indeed, in the normal course of affairs, we would expect real class relations to be almost invisible as an everyday reality to most social actors, most of the time."<sup>10</sup>

Work relations, on the other hand, obtain in an empirically-perceptible but overdetermined way at the level of everyday life, which is mediated in its contingent productive processes by all sorts of things. You might work in a cubicle and have almost no interactions with one's fellow workers, or you might work in a raucous group, where gossip, chitchat, and singing are constant accompaniments. Your boss might be your cousin, who gave you the job because your sister asked, or you might not even recognize your boss if you saw them on the street. Your manager might have pictures of her kids up in her office, kids who attend the same school as your own, or your manager might live in a gated community across town and think of your neighborhood as a dangerous slum.

The labor market, like any market, brings to the fore fungibility and an indifference to particularity. Capital is impersonal and mobile. It can be invested here today and there tomorrow. But work remains something you do with your body, which can only be where you are, even when your work is talking to customers on the other side of the world or coding remotely from your own home. Hence, social proximity – connections and divisions of race, gender, neighborhood, religion, political affiliation

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<sup>10</sup> Riley and Brenner 2022, p. 8.

– are inextricably interwoven into the experience of work, even though capital and the proletariat have no race, no gender, no religion.

Thus, the confusion of the class abstractionists is patent in the fact that they insist that the working class has “the potential power to ... overturn the system,” while also arguing that “The workplace is the primary, but certainly not exclusive, strategic site of class struggle, because it’s where working people have the most potential power.”<sup>11</sup> The potential power of workers in any workplace has nothing to do with the potential power of the proletariat to overturn the capitalist system. The former hinges on the possibility of extracting concessions from the employer by refusing to work. The latter could only be the possibility of taking over production and producing otherwise. It is absurd for Chibber to maintain that the proletariat has the “ability to crash the entire system, just by refusing to work.”<sup>12</sup> Organized refusal to work has only ever won concessions from or provoked confrontations with bosses and the state, and it will never be able to do more than that. It is impossible for a refusal to work to “crash the system” for the simple reason that workers have to eat in order to be in a position to make a revolution, and food will not produce itself. Marx wrote that, “Every child knows a nation which ceased to work, I will not say for a year, but even for a few weeks, would perish.”<sup>13</sup> Marx had not met *Jacobin* writers, who apparently think that a nation which ceased to work could overthrow capitalism.

### III. Political Primacy

This confusion of class relations and work relations, deadly to any attempt to theoretically understand capitalism and its dynamics, can easily turn reactionary when it seeks to guide political action. Nowhere is this more evident than in recent attacks on “culturalism” and on the supposed displacement of class struggle by culture wars and identity politics. Žižek, to take a notable instance, has been arguing recently that “Western political correctness (‘wokeness’) has displaced class struggle.”<sup>14</sup> He is not alone. *Jacobin* ran the following articles in 2020-21: “The New Class War Isn’t a Culture War”; “We Need a Class War, Not a Culture War”; “We Don’t Need a Culture War. We Need a Class War.”; and “Labour Must Fight a Class War, Not a Culture War.”<sup>15</sup>

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11 Blanc and Gong 2018.

12 Chibber 2016.

13 Marx to Kugelmann, 11 July 1868; Marx and Engels 1988, p. 68.

14 Žižek 2022.

15 Bergfeld 2020; Burgis 2020; Guastella 2020; Savage and Trickett 2021.



The underlying notion that class struggle has been or can be displaced or replaced by culture wars is not so much mistaken as it is confused. It cannot be the case that “culture wars have displaced class struggle as the engine of politics,” because class struggle has only ever been – could only ever be – the engine of politics insofar as it takes the form of a culture war. A basic tenet of Marxism is that we must “distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production” and “the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.”<sup>16</sup> It is puzzling, then, that those who wish to unhold the tradition of hard-headed Marxian class analysis are abandoning this distinction in favor of the self-defeating belief that ideological struggle – for this is what “culture war” amounts to in the older idiom – could displace class struggle, that the lived experience of class struggle could displace the class struggle of which it is the lived experience.

Here we must return to and analyze the other half of the class abstractionist thesis, the political primacy of class. The intuition behind the verbal opposition of class struggle and culture war is that naming and appealing to people’s material class interests is both more politically efficacious and more universalistic than naming and appealing to people’s status, standing, and identity.

Right off the bat we must recognize, however, that “naming and appealing to people’s material class interests” is ambiguous. It does not distinguish between the two strategies identified by Riley and Brenner as, first, encouraging workers to “pursue their interests as owners of the ‘special commodity,’ labour power,” and, second, encouraging workers to “link redistributive demands to a broader attempt to exert political control over the social surplus produced by workers and appropriated by capital.”<sup>17</sup> Riley and Brenner want to reserve the name “working-class ‘class politics’” for the second strategy, but this seems like special pleading.<sup>18</sup> Let us acknowledge that they are two versions of “working-class ‘class politics.’” The first tries to drive up the price of labor-power; the second tries to capture and redistribute the surplus product.

Note, also, that neither of these are *revolutionary* strategies. Both presume that capitalists retain control over production. The first strategy seeks to compel the capitalist to pay more up front in the labor market, to shift investment away from constant capital and towards variable capital. The second strategy seeks to tax production after the fact,

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<sup>16</sup> Marx 1970, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Riley and Brenner 2022, p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> The actual distinction between the two strategies is the distinction Lenin identified one hundred twenty years ago between *economistic* and *political* social democrats.

seizing and redistributing the surplus product.<sup>19</sup> Both are attempts to make things better for proletarians, not attempts by the proletariat to abolish itself as a class.

Regardless of which strategy one prefers – and most class abstractionists seem to want both, sometimes without realizing that they are distinct – there are more or less solidaristic, more or less universalistic, versions of the strategy. Union organizing seeks to drive up the price of labor-power, but so does lobbying for a professional certification requirement for hairstylists or for draconian border enforcement to keep out immigrants who would compete in the labor market. Medicare for All might seize and redistribute surplus product, but so might a highway expansion in a powerful congressperson’s district or hiring half a million new police officers. Taxing profits to fund public infrastructure is no more inherently oriented towards the proletariat as a whole than union organizing is automatically conducive to building one big union of all the workers.

Every form of “working-class ‘class politics’” begins somewhere specific, with the particular complaints and aspirations of a more or less clearly bounded set of working class people. Linking those proletarians, those complaints, and those aspirations to other proletarians, other complaints, and other aspirations is never simple. The fact that “The working class consists of everyone whose survival depends on wage labor, including people of all races, genders, sexual orientations, and immigration statuses,”<sup>20</sup> does not mean that the working class has a broadly unified set of interests, but precisely the opposite, that the working class is profoundly divided by the local concerns of its myriad fractions. Increasing the price of my labor-power may lower the price of yours. Taxing *these* profits to fund *those* public works may make *this* working class community better off and *that* working class community less secure.

This is where the conflation of class relations and work relations steps in to make everything easier for the class abstractionist. Whether it is electoralism or union organizing that is being pursued, work relations provide a convenient synecdoche for class relations. This results in claims like, “Wage exploitation means that the interests of the whole working class and the capitalist class are diametrically opposed.”<sup>21</sup> The soothing fiction at work here is that the diversity of the proletariat is transcended by their opposition to capitalists just as the diversity of

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19 Note that while Riley and Brenner are clearly thinking of this control-and-redistribution as something carried out by the state, riot and looting is a variation on the same strategy (Clover 2016; Osterweil 2020).

20 Blanc and Gong 2018.

21 Blanc and Gong 2018.

employees in any firm might be overcome by an organized opposition to the exploitation of their one employer. This is not true, of course. The interests of fractions of the proletariat align with the interests of fractions of the capitalist class constantly, in part because the capitalist class does not have a *common* interest in exploiting labor-power. The defining characteristic of capitalist society is that the various capitals are related to one another by market competition, not by class collaboration. Capitalist employer A does not have an interest in capitalist employer B extracting more surplus labor from B's workforce. Capitalist employer B extracting more surplus labor may well be a threat to capitalist employer A. An individual firm is hierarchically arranged and organized for the pursuit of a particular interest. Capitalism, however, is not.

This confusion between the structure of the economy and the structure of the firm doesn't only lull the class abstractionist into a false sense of security. It also prepares the way for something more pernicious: the assumption that the interests of the proletariat can be identified by *generalizing* from the interests of some identified fraction of the proletariat. After all, if being exploited entails that "the interests of the whole working class" are coherent, but the whole proletariat cannot be observed all at once, then it is tempting to identify the interests of some specific group of proletarians – who can be observed – and treat them like a scale model of the whole class.

The results of such an operation can be seen in Matt Karp's response to Riley and Brenner. Karp draws a contrast between Hibbing, Minnesota, a mining town in the Iron Range, and North Oaks, a former gated community north of the Twin Cities. Hibbing was once a center of labor militancy and a stronghold of the Democratic Party, but broke for Trump in 2016 and 2020. North Oaks, long home to some of the wealthiest families in Minnesota, was a Republican fortress until 2016, when it voted for Clinton. What are we to make of the transformation of the Democratic Party from the party of Hibbing into the party of North Oaks?

Mincing no words, Karp argues that the Left has largely abandoned the interests of the people of Hibbing in favor of the interests of the people of North Oaks.

Left-wing attacks on supposed nostalgia for the 'historical working class', or celebrations of some 'new' or 'actual' working class—i.e., that portion which already votes against Republicans—offer little more than a chic articulation of the actually-existing politics of the Democratic National Committee. The parallel tracks of liberal and left-wing thought on this subject are not accidental, since the organized electoral left today draws breath exclusively in districts dominated by Democrats. Any way forward for the American left will require a cold reckoning with the forces that have landed so

many of its politicians, activists and intellectuals in opposition to the miners and retail workers of Hibbing, Minnesota—and in a de facto alliance with the current occupants of James J. Hill’s manor estate.<sup>22</sup>

This polemic rests on the same fiction that Blanc and Gong articulated, that the interests of the whole working class are diametrically opposed to the interests of the whole capitalist class. After all, the politicians, activists, and intellectuals who find themselves “in opposition to” the miners and retail workers of Hibbing are, by the same criteria Karp is proposing, in alliance with the textile factory workers and gas station attendants of Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Why should the workers of the Fourth and Fifth Congressional Districts be less indicative than the workers of the Eighth District?<sup>23</sup> The only fair reading of the situation is that the working class is divided against itself, and that these mutually opposed fractions of the proletariat have allied themselves – politically and culturally – with different fractions of the capitalist class.<sup>24</sup>

Karp is correct that “celebrations” of the urban fraction of the working class – the fraction “which already votes against Republicans” – are facile. They certainly do nothing to bridge the electoral divide between urban, service-sector workers and rural, “hard-hats-and-pickup-trucks” workers. At their worst, they replicate the slow-motion Stalinism of Obama-era liberalism, when people convinced themselves that autonomous demographic trends were busy electing a new people, ushering in a permanent Democratic majority of cosmopolitan and upwardly-mobile urbanites. In fact, the truth is nearly the opposite of this optimistic prophesy. Left-leaning parties in first-past-the-post electoral systems face an uphill battle precisely because their base constituencies are concentrated in urban areas. This is inefficient from the perspective of electoral politics, since Left-leaning parties often rack up massive wins in a few urban districts while losing a swath of suburban and rural districts by much smaller margins.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, we should not think that the Democrats’ loss of the miners and retail workers of Hibbing, Minnesota – granting for the moment that this loss is real – as *the* crisis that must be reckoned with if we are to find “any way forward for the American left.” The Democratic

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22 Karp 2023, p. 44.

23 It is also worth noting that Karp produces no evidence that “the miners and retail workers of Hibbing” actually broke for Trump. In 2016, Trump beat Clinton in Hibbing by seven votes; in 2020, turnout was up significantly, and Trump’s margin over Biden grew to about 170 votes out of 8600 cast. I do not know the demographic breakdown of these votes, but Karp presents no evidence that the working class of Hibbing lining up solidly behind Trump as opposed to being deeply divided.

24 As well as, it should be noted, different fractions of the landowning class; see Manning 2022.

25 Rodden 2019.

coalition is running on the fumes of organizational work and institution-building that took place decades ago. In 2016, Democratic vote share was strongly correlated with where manufacturing was strong in 1920, while being negatively correlated with where manufacturing was happening in 2010.<sup>26</sup> Many workers are doing the equivalent of voting for Eisenhower ‘cause Lincoln won the war, but no memory lasts forever. It is the sclerosis and destitution of the old institutions, and the failure to build new organizations in the new economic landscape of service-sector dominance that explains the inability to build a stable electoral coalition of the Left, not the other way around.

The problem with treating any fraction of the proletariat as the image of the working class as a whole is that it oversimplifies the problem of passing from class analysis to class politics. By running together features of the structural class relations basic to capitalism (between capitalist and proletarian) and features of one or another work relation (between the miners of Hibbing and the Oliver Mining Company), class abstractionism makes the political task of socialism seem much easier than it actually is. “Class politics” takes on the palpable immediacy of work relations while retaining the universal scope of class relations. Class politics, like workplace organizing, uses material interests to motivate cooperation, pointing to the concrete gains that can be won from putting our heads together and acting collectively. At the same time, however, class politics is supposed to appeal to a national and even an international constituency, something that workplace organizing can never do.

#### IV. Conclusion

There’s the old saying in labor circles that “the boss is the best organizer.” Class abstractionism wants this to be true, not only at the level of the shop floor, but at the level of society at large. There have been points in time when that actually seemed like a plausible story. In situations of rapid industrialization, it was reasonable to think that capital organized the proletariat at a national or even international scale. The emptying out of the countryside, the massive amalgamation of the industrial working class in factory, mine, city, and district – all of this encouraged Marxists and other socialists to think that capital was itself forging the proletariat into a political subject with common experiences, common spaces, common mores and traditions, and common aspirations.

That belief is not reasonable, however, outside the context of mass industrialization that suggested it in the first place.<sup>27</sup> In a de-

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26 Rodden 2019.

27 Benanav 2020; Smith 2020.

industrializing society, capital does not concentrate proletarians into tightly-packed neighborhoods where work, school, friendship, worship, play, and political organizing all embrace and interlink the same families, forming them into a compact community of interests, desires, and outlooks. Indeed, the belief was never as correct as it was reasonable – even highly concentrated working class districts with high levels of unionization were stratified and divided – but also held together – by racial, ethnic, and gendered social geographies.<sup>28</sup>

Class and culture can and must be analytically distinguished, but this does not mean they can be separated in life. Just as a cone can be exhaustively decomposed into either circles or triangles, so any situation – be it a strike or a riot – can be analyzed in terms of class power or in terms of cultural meaning. However, there is this difference: in societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production, class is a market-mediated social fact which takes place, as it were, behind our backs, while cultural identities and meanings are before our eyes. Stuart Hall's famous line about race being "the modality in which class is 'lived'"<sup>29</sup> needs to be given its true generality: *culture* is the modality in which class is lived, and that means that even the experience of class-identification and class-belonging is a cultural experience.

If class has political priority, therefore, this can never be *the same class* that has explanatory priority. Under capitalism, the class that has explanatory priority is, to seize an old phrase, the class in itself. The only class that could have political priority, however, is the class for itself. But the class for itself is a cultural, not an economic category. The class that produces all value is not and can never be a political agent. To deny this is to make the fundamental error of thinking that the capitalist mode of production is just a reiteration of every previous mode of production, just one group of people dominating and exploiting another group of people out in the open, through superiority of arms and organized violence.

Any "working-class 'class politics'" in a capitalist world, in order to be at all liberatory, will have to be an abstract, theoretical politics. If we want to construct an alternative to the capital-proletarian class relation on a global scale, we are choosing to embark on the the most difficult political undertaking imaginable. In the face of that challenge, we will always face the temptation of believing that some local struggle is a monad of this abstract, global struggle, containing all of its determinations in an condensed and easily-graspable form. We must resist this temptation.

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28 Winant 2021.

29 Hall 1980, p. 341.

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