

# Class Rules Everything Around Me

BY

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The socialist emphasis on the centrality of class isn't about ignoring racial inequalities, but about crafting a politics capable of ending them.

Class politics are on the rise. Insurgent teachers have brought the word “strike” back into the political lexicon, and Bernie Sanders is attracting millions with his jeremiads against the “billionaire class.” Some liberals, however, insist that there is nothing new to see here — that “class politics is just another form of identity politics.”

The writer Jill Filipovic recently laid out this stance in a series of tweets, arguing “‘Working class’ is an identity. ‘Worker’ is an identity ... None of these are neutral, universal defaults. Running on them is also identity politics.”

Filipovic’s argument, directed against “red rose twitter,” has obvious roots in the split between Sanders supporters and the rest of the Democratic Party. In the 2016 primary, Hillary Clinton sought to undermine Sanders’s claim to represent the left of the party by attacking him for supposedly ignoring issues of race and gender oppression. As she put it in one infamous sound bite,

If we broke up the big banks tomorrow ... would that end racism?  
Would that end sexism? Would that end discrimination against the  
LGBT community? Would that make people feel more welcoming to  
immigrants overnight?

The argument that class politics is simply another kind of identity politics is, in essence, a continuation of this polemic. More fully articulated, it goes something like this: class is an identity like race or gender, but socialists wrongly think it's the most important identity. So when they claim to be against liberal "identity politics," they aren't actually rejecting it, but simply promoting their favored version of it — while denigrating the fight against racial or gender oppression.

This is a powerful and effective argument, for a few reasons. First, given the continuing salience of racial, gender, and other forms of non-class oppression in the US, any politics that doesn't have a clear strategy for destroying them has no claim to the loyalty of the Left. Second, if one starts from the prevailing understanding of class in American liberalism, encapsulated in the social science term "socioeconomic status," the argument is hard to disagree with.

But socialists mean something quite different when we talk about class: rather than just the education or money someone has, class refers to an entire structure that imposes very specific logics of action on people in society. And because of the power the capitalist class holds in society, any significant redistribution of power requires confronting that class. These arguments have massive implications for thinking about politics in general, and undoing the structures of racial and gender oppression in particular.

Socialists, in other words, have good reasons for insisting that class is more than another identity.

## Class in the Liberal and Socialist Imaginations

The liberal understanding of class as socioeconomic status tracks closely with everyday uses of the word. Here, class is conceptualized as some combination of things like wealth, income, and education, which combine to form a kind of aggregated ranking. Classes, in this sense, are akin to rungs on a ladder — some people are higher, some are lower. In some versions, “cultural capital” is added to the mix, including things like knowing which fork to use for what food.

When class is defined like this, it’s not hard to see why liberals see it as conceptually symmetrical to race or gender. Class locations are essentially gradational, with degrees of advantage or disadvantage. People who have similar levels of advantage or disadvantage could easily be imagined to form some common identity based on their shared situation, whether it’s upper-class people valorizing their lifestyle or working-class people valorizing theirs.

The socialist view of class, going back to Marx, is very different. While the liberal view of class is like a ladder, with a potentially infinite number of rungs depending on how narrowly one wants to define the groups, the socialist view is famously polarized, with overwhelming emphasis on two classes: capitalists and workers. Those structural positions, in turn, impose two things on members of a given class: common logics of action and common interests.

The late Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright summed up the socialist theory of class in two pithy rules: “What you have determines what you get” and “What you have determines what you have to do to get what you get.” “What you have” refers to the kind of property you have at your disposal. Do you own the means of production, either in the form of, say, a factory, or enough equity in productive property that you can live off of the returns? If so, congratulations — you’re a capitalist. If, on the other hand, you don’t own productive property, and in order to make money to buy the necessities of life (food, shelter, etc.), you have to sell your labor to someone who does, too bad for you — like most everyone else, you’re a worker. What you have determines what you get.

It's the second rule, though, that really makes the socialist theory of class distinct. Both capitalists and workers achieve their positions by virtue of the kind and quantity of property they possess. But these positions aren't guaranteed for life. Workers and capitalists risk losing their position if they don't follow the logic of action their position imposes on them, and these logics are quite different.

Capitalists must compete on the market against other capitalists to sell their product most efficiently. While the fable of the invisible hand suggests this process benefits everyone, socialists argue that its more common form is exploitation. Capitalists are driven by competition to maximize output per worker, and this compulsion brings them into direct conflict with the interests of their workers. From agricultural workers in the fields and line-workers in the factory to tech workers at Facebook, the drive to maximize profit is bad news for workers.

Workers confront a very different situation. Forced to compete with other prospective employees to even get a job, workers must convince the capitalist hiring them that they will work at the required level of productivity. Once brought on, they have to maintain a high enough productivity to keep their job. When capitalists, driven by the need for profit, impinge on their interests, workers face a choice: they can pursue individual solutions — keep their head down, be a good worker, hope they can get ahead — or they can organize collectively and push back against the capitalist together.

This is what Wright meant when he wrote “what you have determines what you have to do to get what you get.” Capitalists and workers pursue very different strategies to advance their interests by virtue of their different positions in the class structure, and these strategies inevitably make the two groups lock horns. What's good for capital is bad for labor, and vice versa.

For socialists, then, class is less about common status and more about interests and actions. Workers with very different levels of education and income — for example, a registered nurse and a tomato-picker — occupy a common position in

the class structure because they face similar decisions about how best to improve their working conditions, and because their employers are driven by similar imperatives to attack their well-being.

## Class and Other Forms of Oppression

The socialist theory of class says a lot. What it doesn't say, however, is that other forms of oppression don't matter. Movements fighting race and gender hierarchies have reshaped American society at different points, winning massive redistributions of power. Even when such movements are dormant, these forms of oppression shape the distribution of power in society and the degree of material oppression in ways large and small. These forms of oppression have an existence every bit as brutal and concrete as class exploitation.

What's more, liberals like Filipovic aren't entirely wrong when they say class is an identity. Clearly, class can be a basis for identities every bit as salient as race or gender. In fact, a core component of the socialist project is encouraging working people to identify with their class politically — and take action on that basis.

But what the liberal critique misses are two ways that a class structure is different from other forms of hierarchy. First, class structures are built around a close form of dependency. Second, the basis of capitalist class power — their control over society's productive assets — forces all of society into dependence on them.

Take the first point. It's become common to remark that whiteness, for example, is dependent on blackness for its meaning. But class is different, insofar as it is not just the concept of "worker" that is dependent on the concept of capitalist for meaning. It's that to be a worker means, necessarily, to be dependent on a given capitalist or firm for a job. Similarly, to be a capitalist means to be engaged in the

ongoing exploitation of particular workers in order to maintain that position. A white person's whiteness, by contrast, isn't dependent on any particular relationship with or actions by nonwhite people. An antiracist and a racist are equally white.

Class structures, then, rest on a particularly close form of interdependency. This interdependency means that to be a worker is to always and everywhere be in a position of having your interests at least threatened by the capitalist that employs you. But it also means that workers everywhere have the potential power to force their employers to the table by threatening their ability to remain capitalists. The close interdependency of the class structure at once threatens workers' interests and provides the source of the power by which they can beat back that threat.

The particular form of power capitalists possess reproduces a similar kind of dependence on a societal scale. The kind of property capitalists control — productive property — is what everyone in a society depends on. In this sense, it is not only workers who are dependent on capitalists. Because capitalists can choose not to produce or invest if they don't think profits will be high enough, all of society is compelled to ensure that their profitability stays high enough to keep them producing, no matter the costs to the rest of society.

Socialists, in short, don't deny that class is an identity among others. They just argue that it's much more than that. The socialist view of class points out that capitalists hold a form of power that, more than any other, forces all of society to depend on them. Yet because capitalists also depend on workers, workers have the power to resist capitalist prerogatives.

Liberals overlook this crucial point. Because they see class as a ladder, in which positions are differentiated from one another more quantitatively than qualitatively, they deny that class concerns any particularly special kind of social power. For them, it's an identity like any other, and any special focus on it can only be the result of special pleading or a desire to ignore other forms of oppression.

# Class Politics

As should be clear by now, the socialist conception of class has radical implications for politics. Two in particular are worth considering. First, the fact that everyone else in society exists in a state of dependence on capitalists means that other forms of oppression are intimately bound up with class power — and so confronting them inevitably requires confronting the power of the capitalist class. Second, and relatedly, the socialist view of class tells us something crucial about where the kind of power that is capable of undoing various forms of oppression is located.

The notion that different forms of oppression intersect with one another is, by now, commonplace in liberal thought. But the specific form this intersection takes in a society where a small group of people (capitalists) control access to the resources everyone else needs to survive has received substantially less consideration.

This massive concentration of social power means, for example, that the board of a factory-farming corporation finds it easier to locate their waste lagoon in an area of black-owned farms. Because of both a racist culture in which the complaints of black citizens are taken less seriously than whites, and because black neighborhoods have fewer material resources with which to fight back, capitalists know that neighborhoods of color are softer targets. Capitalists' power, their need for profit, and the lower resources of communities of color thus make environmental racism an inevitability in our society.

The strategic implications should be clear: if we want to stop corporations from dumping their waste in black and brown neighborhoods, we have to restrict the power of capital. Similarly, how could we tackle the racial wealth gap without massively redistributing wealth from the top downwards? How could black students receive an equal educational experience as white students without directing more money to the schools they attend? To put the point in a more

general way, tackling some of the most pressing manifestations of contemporary racism requires taking on the market.

The same is true for gender inequality. As #MeToo has reminded the country, the workplace is a site of gender hierarchies where managers and bosses can use their power to sexually harass and abuse. Addressing these abuses means restricting the authority bosses have over their workers. Likewise, the gender wage gap is rooted in employers penalizing women for having children and caring for them. We need state policy that forces employers to offer parental leave to *both* parents, so that women aren't the default caregivers suffering the consequent career penalties. Capitalists, unsurprisingly, are not interested in being told how they have to treat their employees, which goes a long way towards explaining why paid parental leave policy has gone nowhere in the US, despite massive public support.

In other words, Hillary Clinton's rhetorical question — would breaking up the big banks end racism? — has it exactly backwards. The socialist argument is not that the fight against capitalism would automatically undo other kinds of oppression. Rather, it's that it is impossible to make substantial progress in addressing the crushing burden of non-class-based oppressions in American life without taking on the power of capital. As Martin Luther King, Jr argued toward the end of his life: "We can't solve our problems unless there is a radical redistribution of economic and political power."

At this point, liberals may be somewhat unimpressed with the argument. After all, even self-described capitalists like Elizabeth Warren are currently championing all kinds of measures that would limit the power of capital. Many liberals are happy to accept that the free market and the power of capitalists need to be constrained in any number of ways.

Yet here is where the socialist theory of class becomes absolutely crucial. What socialists emphasize, after all, is not the sheer numeric wealth of the ruling class (though that is surely important), but their control over the vast majority of



society's productive resources and the power that gives them over all other social groups and institutions. Most importantly, because the state is dependent on capitalists continuing to invest, hire, and expand production to keep the economy going, there is a structural bias towards capitalist interests in the policy process.

As a result, efforts to address oppression based on gender or race that require restricting the rights of capital, like mandatory paid parental leave, aren't simply a matter of getting the votes in Congress. Even in situations where explicitly socialist politicians have been elected on a radical platform, they have often found that the structural power of capital is not so easily cast off.

If this were all the socialist theory of class had to offer — the insight that winning structural reforms is much more difficult than liberals often imagine — it would be something of a downer. But as the German socialist theorist Karl Kautsky wrote, “Socialism is no message of woe ... but rather good news, a new gospel.” And the good news is that there is an agent with the capacity to bring capital to heel: the working class.

While workers depend on capitalists for employment, capitalists depend on workers to make profits. Most of the time, this mutual dependency is hideously one-sided. Workers urgently need employment, while capitalists see a long line of workers applying for any given job. However, if workers are collectively organized, they can weaponize capital's dependence on them. This, after all, is exactly what a strike is. A strike works by convincing capitalists they have more to lose from resisting, and risking increased disruption, than giving in and trying to resume business as usual.

More broadly, this is how movements from below compel their oppressors to submit. They use disruptive pressure to force the dominant powers to embrace reform as the lesser of two evils. And while there are many ways disruptive power can be exercised, the working class — black and white, men and women, native-born and immigrant — is uniquely well-positioned to exercise it because of its

structural position in capitalist society. As the Socialist Party and IWW leader Big Bill Haywood put it, if the workers are organized, “all they have to do is to put their hands in their pockets and they have got the capitalist class whipped.”

Of course, that’s a big if. More often than not, workers, like every other group on the wrong side of a hierarchy, have failed in pressing their claims against capital and the state. But the history of the democratization of the United States is, in the main, a history of the disruptive power exercised by subordinate groups.

## Why Class Matters

The way socialists see class operating in modern society — as relations of dependence and exploitation that structure non-class forms of oppression — has three key implications for fighting oppression.

First, it means that most of the most substantive measures for addressing these kinds of oppression, particularly now that formal legal equality has been achieved, will require weakening the power of capital. This is the case for reforms ranging from paid parental leave or government-supported childcare to tackling environmental racism.

Second, it means that securing these reforms will require more than either “a conversation” about, say, race, or winning control of the House, or even the presidency. When the choice is between democratic mandates or the interests of capital, the state will privilege the latter. Winning reforms requires disruption.

Finally, it means that movements to destroy racism, patriarchy, and the like will be most successful when they are joined to a powerful workers movement. The Great Depression was a case in point: the radical section of the labor movement, led by

the Communists in the CIO, took up the struggle against racism in alliance with groups like the National Negro Congress. The result, according to W.E.B. Du Bois, was “an astonishing spread of interracial tolerance and understanding. Probably no movement in the last 30 years has been so successful in softening race prejudice among the masses [as the radical union movement].” The radical union movement won affirmative action for black workers, fought housing discrimination, and joined the campaign against lynching, before McCarthyism ultimately smashed it and set back the civil rights cause by a decade or more.

Despite their sincerely held commitments to racial and gender equality, liberals’ view of class ends up undercutting efforts to root out oppression. By treating class as just another identity — and holding that no identity plays any special role in structuring the distribution of power in society — they render invisible the ways that oppression is reproduced by the market. They may embrace the language of intersectionality, but their view of class makes it impossible to see how racial or gender hierarchies and class exploitation are intertwined.

This is part of the reason why liberal programs for antiracism so easily devolve into things like bias training and corporate diversity initiatives, which do little to attack entrenched inequalities. Their theory separates racial inequality and class power, pointing them towards hopeless strategies that attempt to remedy the former while leaving the latter in place. Liberal institutions and political strategies are, quite simply, incapable of realizing liberal ideals.

To truly eradicate all forms of oppression, we need a clear-eyed view of society and a strategy to attack those who hold the reins. And that is precisely why socialists focus on class as the key structure of power in our society.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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