



## Labor and Globalization

Oksana Balashova, Ismail Doga Karatepe,  
Aishah Namukasa (Eds.)

Where have all the classes  
gone?

A critical perspective on  
struggles and collective action



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Edited by Christoph Scherrer

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## 2. ‘Us’ and ‘them’: Theoretical insights about the class division in contemporary capitalism

*Jorge Enrique Forero*

*“There’s a class warfare, all right. But it’s my class, the rich class that’s making war, and we’re winning” Warren Buffet, US multi-billionaire*

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the problem of class division in contemporary capitalism. Focusing on the recent work of Savage et al. (2013), it addresses two problems: First, it calls into question their concept of “the elite” and particularly their neglect of the role of the capitalist mode of production in the constitution of this group; second, it questions how these authors create class borders between the working class and social groups such as the middle class and the precariat. Regarding the treatment of “the elite”, we suggest it would be useful to bring back the question of the relationship between the capital accumulated by this group and the control/ownership over the means of production. Regarding the working class and the other aforementioned groups, we suggest to instead use the concept of class fractions. In order to develop these proposals, the article explores a way to integrate the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu – used by Savage et al. (2013) – and the Marxian approach to social classes. To this end, it follows a double path, first using Eric Olin Wright’s classification of social class approaches in order to highlight their limits and potential contributions, and, second, suggesting the use of some insights from Alain Badiou in order to build a common ontological framework.

**Key words:** Social classes, Marxism, working class, class divisions, class fractions

### **Introduction**

In 2013, Mike Savage and a group of researchers from different universities published their analysis of the BBC’s Great Britain class survey of 2011, “the largest survey of social class ever conducted in the UK” (Savage et al. 2013). Their research aimed to grasp the class configuration within the country through measuring the differences in the distribution of three kinds of capital among the population: Economic capital, defined as “wealth and income”; social capital, which measures “contacts and connections which allow people to draw on their social networks” and cultural capital, understood as “the ability to appreciate and engage with

cultural goods, and credentials institutionalized through educational success” (Savage et al. 2013, 5). The operationalization approach developed in the study was based on the theoretical work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

The scholars’ aim was not to develop “a deductive class schema” but instead to use what they defined as a “latent class analysis”, which was “based on the idea that some parameters of a statistical model differ across unobserved subgroups, which form the categories of a categorical latent variable” (Savage et al. 2013, 11). This method allowed them to identify seven well defined classes: elite, established middle-class, technical middle-class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emerging service workers and the precariat (2013, 12). In general terms, the results indicated dynamics that moved toward a crescent-shaped “polarization and class fragmentation” (2013, 3).

The study received much attention and a fair amount of criticism. Tai-lok Lui, for example, pointed to the lack of a theoretical framework capable of giving an account of the changes in the social structure that the research seemed to be describing (Tai-lok Lui 2015, 481). In the same way, Hugo Radice (2015) used the work of Savage et al. as a starting point for bringing back the Marxist discussion regarding social classes. He points out that studies like that of Savage and his colleagues may allow us to get a “snapshot” of the “classes-as-clusters”, but does not provide information regarding how they interact with each other, nor does it offer a way to understand the changes on class configuration (2015, 271). This is a limitation relative to broader theories of social classes, such as the Marxist one. Nevertheless, Radice suggests, “the integration of the two approaches to class into a single ontological and epistemological framework allows the weaknesses of each to be addressed” (2015, 286).

This article explores this possibility, suggesting some limitations of Savage et al.’s analysis, and indicating a potential convergence between Bourdieu’s and Marxian theories of social classes. The article is divided in three sections: In section one, we present Olin Wright’s (2009) proposal to create an “integrated analytical model” to the study of social classes. In the second section, we engage with Bourdieu’s theory, and suggest some ways to generate a convergence with Marxian theory, including some contributions from the ontological framework developed by the philosopher Alain Badiou (2003). Finally, we go back to Savage et al.’s findings, analyzing them from the framework suggested, focusing on the two tendencies identified by the authors, namely, polarization and differentiation.

### **Towards an “integrated analytical approach”**

Radice’s suggestion to link empirical works like that of Savage et al. with an approach that has



more explanatory power seems to be a reasonable one. A step in this direction can be found in Olin Wright's (2009) outline of an "integral analytical approach", where he seeks to articulate what he identifies as the three main approaches to class analysis: The first which describes the interaction between relevant attributions of social agents and their conditions of life; the second, which highlights how the privileges and opportunities of some agents relate to the exclusion of others, and the third, which focuses on how social differences imply relations of exploitation and domination. Let us briefly describe these one by one.

Social stratification should always be the starting point for any analysis of class as it allows us to identify the differences between individuals regarding their different living conditions. At the most basic explanatory level this would imply that we must relate those with similar life conditions, based on some common attributions of the individuals gathered there, for example gender, age, social background, behavioral patterns or even religious inclinations (Wright 2009, 103). Many studies of this kind, for example, identify education as the attribution that most influences living conditions. From that point of view, class division is generated as follows: The social and personal background of certain individuals facilitate their acquisition of those socially relevant attributes, giving them access to the jobs and occupations that offer a better economic reward (Wright 2009, 104).

The second approach goes one step further addressing the idea of "opportunity hoarding". This concept sheds light on the way in which the ability of certain individuals or groups to access the attributions that may ensure better living conditions is related to the *exclusion* of other individuals. This approach also indicates the mechanisms used to ensure this dynamic of exclusion; academic credentials and professional certifications, for example, but also citizenship, unionizing, etc. (Wright 2009, 105). Different forms of social power allow some social agents to hoard certain kinds of opportunities, leading to differential locations within the so-called labor 'market' dynamics, impacting on the distribution of economic resources.

A Marxist approach, on the other hand, is characterized by the emphasis it places on one specific kind of opportunity hoarding: The private property and the ownership of the means of production, which is also identified as the main historical cause of class differentiation. The appropriation of the means of production implies the exclusion of certain social agents from these means, thus, forcing those excluded to alienate their physical and intellectual capabilities and exchange them for means of subsistence with the owners of the means of production. This constitutes relations of *domination* and *exploitation*. Domination understood as "[...] the ability to control the activities of others", and exploitation as "[...] the acquisition of economic benefits

from the labor of those who are dominated” (Wright 2009, 107).

From this classification, Wright suggests that there is the possibility for an integrated model, wherein each approach grasps a different mechanism of class configuration and that all of them interact in different ways depending on the social organization under analysis. The Marxist approach, he says, studies the major class division within contemporary societies – the one between workers and capitalists. The “opportunity hoarding” approach, on the other hand, points to the processes of differentiation that secure privileged positions for the middle class with respect to the working class. Finally, the “attributions and conditions” approach describes the way individuals are distributed into different positions within the class structure (2009, 109-110). In the next section, we will suggest that such an integration is possible, through a connection between Bourdieu’s and Marxian theories of social classes.

### **For a Marx-Bourdieu convergence**

The work of Pierre Bourdieu constitutes one of the most important contributions to the analysis of social classes, not only because of his remarkable empirical research, but also because of his theoretical insights. He defined his approach as a “relational perspective”, where “one needs only to take up the relational or structural mode of thinking characteristic of modern mathematics and physics, which identifies the real not with substances but with relationships” (Bourdieu 1987, 3).

The social class configuration is for him a multidimensional space shaped by the “relative distance” created by the “unequal distribution of the sources of power”, which in contemporary societies can be measured by three main types of capital: Economic, social and cultural. Each social agent possesses a determinate *volume* of capital, *composed* by different proportions of each kind, which vary through time, creating the *trajectory* of each agent within the social space.

With the set of common principles which measure the relative distance between individuals, we acquire the means of regrouping individuals into classes in such a way that agents in the same class are as similar as possible in the greatest possible number of respects [...] and in such a way that the classes are as distinct as possible from one another- or, in other words, we secure the possibility of obtaining the largest possible separation between classes of the greatest possible homogeneity (1987, 5).

Bourdieu seeks to go beyond what he calls “the opposition between objectivism and subjectivism”: Between an objectivist approach that believes that social scientists can classify

social agents as objects in a process of knowledge that subverts the lay “common sense”, and a subjectivist approach, for which social agents construct social reality as an aggregation of those inter-subjective constructions (1987, 1-2). Instead, Bourdieu aims to explore how “agents are both classified and classifiers”, and that they “classify according to (or depending upon) their position within classifications” (1987, 2).

The distribution of the social agents along the social space also regulates the acquisition of certain “dispositions”, the sense of one’s own place, from which their daily strategies and behavior are shaped. Social differences are therefore “inscribed in the body” in the form of what Bourdieu calls “habitus”, defined as a “system of practical classification”, and “an embodied manifestation of the class condition, as well as of the conditionings that this condition imposes” over the social agents (Bourdieu 2003, 100):

This sense of one’s place is at the same time a sense of the place of others, and, together with the affinities of *habitus* experienced in the form of personal attraction or revulsion, is at the root of all processes of cooptation, friendship, love, association, etc., and thereby provides the principle of all durable alliances and connections [...] (Bourdieu 1987, 5).

One can find here a resemblance with the way E. P. Thompson understands class, not “[...] as a ‘structure’, nor even as a ‘category’, but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown it happened) in human relationships” (Thompson 1966, 9), and that shapes social relations between classes as well as within classes.

The theoretical construction of social classes is, from that perspective, one particular modality of those class relations, and the more accurately it grasps the social dynamic of classification and the principles behind it, the greater its risk of being confused with the actual social dynamic. Or, in Bourdieu’s words, a mistake “recurrent within the Marxist tradition”, is that of believing that “theoretical classes are real classes, real groups of individuals moved by the consciousness of the identity of their condition and interests, a consciousness which simultaneously unites them and opposes them to other classes” (1987, 7). In order to prevent such a mistake, he proposes that

[...] a theoretical class, or a "class on paper," might be considered as a probable real class, or as the probability of a real class, whose constituents are likely to be brought closer and mobilized (but are not actually mobilized) on the basis of their similarities

(of interest and dispositions) (1987, 7).

Finally, as stated before, through the description of the distribution of the three forms of capital (economic, social and cultural), it is possible to obtain a relative description of the agents' distribution into the social space. Nevertheless, for Bourdieu the *class division* is not self-evident in the distribution.

The boundaries between theoretical classes which scientific investigation allows us to construct on the basis of a plurality of criteria [can] be conceived of as lines or as imaginary planes, such that the density (of the trees or of the water vapor) is higher on the one side and lower on the other, or above a certain value on the one side and below it on the other. Objects in the social world always involve a degree of indeterminacy and fuzziness, and thus present a definite degree of semantic elasticity (1987, 13).

The drawing of class boundaries, and therefore the making of a social class is then, as the constitution of other social groups, a political and symbolic struggle where the resources – including the three types of capital – are unequally distributed. The more founded in reality those boundaries are, however, the more probabilities of success in the construction of the social group.

Now, as we said before, there is no doubt that a work like that of Savage et al., grounded on Bourdieu's approach, can constitute a good starting point for a class analysis. However, it cannot take us very far due to its explicit rejection of the idea that the privileges of certain actors can generate the depriving conditions of others. In their own words,

[...] it is the potential of some assets to augment, store, transmit, and convert advantages which is central to the operation of class. Those without such assets are thereby limited relative to those with them. This formulation hence avoids a zero-sum conception of class exploitation (where one class gains directly at the expense of another) whilst also endorsing a relational contest in which some groups have unusually marked opportunities to accumulate and hence gain increasing advantages over those who do not (Savage et al. 2014, 7).

We agree with Radice that combining Bourdieu's and the Marxist approaches into an integrated framework of class analysis will require a "single ontological and epistemological framework" (2015, 285). Nevertheless, such an enterprise, although possible, is beyond the scope of this paper. For now, let us only mention three points to be taken into consideration as we move in

that direction.

The first relates to the use of the concept of economic capital in Bourdieu and the possibility of integrating it with Marxist value theory. If one wishes to go beyond research on stratification, there needs to be a distinction between money used within the spheres of consumption and reproduction, and that which is invested to obtain any kind of surplus, which – from a Marxian point of view – can only result from direct or indirect forms of exploitation and expropriation.

The other two points are potential contributions from Bourdieu's theoretical work to the Marxian class analysis. One is his emphasis on the "practical character of social classes", which means the way in which they are shaped in daily social relations, inside and beyond the sphere of production, only becoming theoretical as a result of the analytical effort to identify and describe the patterns and the underlying mechanisms of their configuration.

Finally, there is Bourdieu's idea that to study class one should appropriate the way of thinking of "modern mathematics". We suggest that this can be done by using the developments of set theory, in the way suggested by the French philosopher Alain Badiou (2006). We will not develop the full implications of this ontological approach for class analysis here, but simply indicate some basic orientations.

First, social groups can be conceived of as sets, as the bounding of elements<sup>7</sup> and subsets that share one or more properties. Sets and subsets have relations of union, intersection, belonging, inclusion, and so on (Alain Badiou 2006, 64-74). This bounding is the result of an operation: A "forming into one", the constitution of a new "unity" from an initial plurality, with implications that will vary depending of the rules behind the operation, but that never imply the overcoming of the condition of multiplicity, which it is what set theory is based upon (2006, 26-33).

In the constitution of social classes, we can find different dynamics of "forming into one". One of those configurations is that which results from the processes of classification operated in daily life by social agents, in the way suggested by Bourdieu (2003) and Thompson (1966). In contrast, during the process of social research there can be several "formings into one" depending of the operation's criteria: One configuration will result, for example, if the criteria is the relation of the social agents to the means of production, another one if the criteria is the accumulation of the three kinds of capital. It will be revealing if there is a relative overlapping of those different configurations, but slight differences between them do not

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<sup>7</sup>To be more precise, the elements are also subsets, and to the extent that set theory as presented in Badiou's ontology allow just for the presentation of multiplicities (Badiou 2006, 26).

invalidate the knowledge procedures used in order to constitute them.

Now that the possible convergence between these different approaches has been explored, let us return to some of the findings of Savage et al. and look at a few problematic points as well as possible paths of exploration that can rise from an expanded approach.

### **Another glance at contemporary class dynamics**

We cannot discuss here all the findings presented in Savage et al., and this is also not our aim. However, let us just briefly reflect on some of their main points, and especially on the way they address current dynamics of polarization and differentiation.

#### *a. Polarization:*

As we said before, a picture of the social division like that obtained with the methodology used by Savage et al. constitutes a good starting point for a class analysis. And, as they highlight, it allows us to identify what they call a process of polarization. In their own words

[...] one of our most striking findings is the delineation of an ‘elite’. [...] If one has to detect the most important cleavage in Britain today, it is not between ‘middle’ and ‘working’ class, but between a relatively small corporate (or ‘professional-executive’) elite and everybody else. [...] One struggles to read any sustained studies of the social composition of small elites within sociology even though it is clear that their relative income and wealth has increased dramatically (Savage et al. 2014).

Let us just mention that the lack of attention regarding those of the top seems to be not exclusively a failure within sociology. Jose Gabriel Palma, points to a similar omission in the fields of economics and development:

Perhaps the most striking stylized fact of traditional mainstream explanations of high inequality, [...] is that until very recently they have focused almost exclusively on the middle of the distribution. It is only very recently that they are starting to look at the bottom 40 percent — as if there was an absolute taboo against looking at the top (Palma 2014, 25).

However, now that this slippery social group has finally received some attention let’s take a brief look at their main characteristics before they once again fade into the shadows. Savage et al. describe them as “the most advantaged and privileged group [...] characterized by having the highest levels of every form of capital. [...] a relatively small, socially and spatially

exclusive group at the apex of British society, whose economic wealth sets them apart from the great majority of the population. [...]” (Savage et al. 2013).

The most basic question that these results should invite us to ponder on has to do with the concentration of economic capital. As quoted above, Savage et al. recognized “the potential of some assets to augment, store, transmit, and convert advantages” (Savage et al. 2014, 7). They also accept the possibility that “some groups have *unusually marked opportunities to accumulate and hence gain increasing advantages over those who do not*”<sup>8</sup> (2014, 7). In other section, they declare:

[...] we also think that there are mechanisms of accumulation *other than those arising from the labour market alone*. Bourdieu’s concept of economic capital usefully broadens our understanding to incorporate other forms of wealth accumulation, for instance income from savings, investments, housing and the like. *In our view, it is quite conceivable that someone who has never been in paid employment, but who has the capacity to draw upon sources of capital such as these can be seen as highly privileged in class terms*<sup>9</sup> (Savage et al. 2014)

There seems to be no better agenda for further research than to establish the extent to which those “other forms of income” can be a more determinant source of economic, as well as other forms of, power than “paid employment”. In this sense one can see the problematic use of the name of “elite”, referring to the top of the social structure, identified through their share in the distribution of social wealth. Focusing on the outcome of the process of distribution, this specific act of nomination, as Bourdieu would call it (1987, 17) ignores the underlying mechanisms. Their relationship with the means of production, meaning their condition of the *capitalist class*, as an origin of their capacity for capital accumulation certainly does not have to be assumed *a priori*, but it should be considered as a valid hypothesis.

One possible way to address the question is by studying the dynamics of economic differentiation at the top, for example one could compare the internal differences within the top decile. Given the extraordinary level of concentration of wealth, revealing patterns of differentiation can be found within a “big” and perhaps heterogeneous group such as the top 10%, especially at the national level. Recent analysis by Oxfam has shown that the 65 richest individuals in the world possess the same amount of wealth as the poorest 50% – more than 3.7

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<sup>8</sup> Our emphasis

<sup>9</sup> Our emphasis

billion – and that the top 1% already hoards more wealth than the rest of the global population (Oxfam 2016, 11). At the national level for example, the total wealth owned by Carlos Slim in the Mexican stock market exceeds by 38% the wealth owned by the rest of the Mexican population (Caballero 2015). This figure leads us to suspect that there may be substantial differences between Slim and many of the other millions of Mexicans included within the ‘top decile’. In the case of the UK, the threshold for belonging to the richest 10% was a little more than £1 million in 2015 (Office for National Statistics 2015, 15), yet the threshold for belonging to the top thousand individuals was one hundred times this number, while the richest man in the country was worth more than £13 billion (Ward 2015).

Furthermore, the occupational characterization of “the elite”, used by Savage et al. may confuse, to the extent that its members continue to be described as “chief executive officers, IT directors, marketing and sales directors, financial managers and management consultants” (Savage et al., 2013, 16). The role that occupational income plays for some agents in the contemporary levels of inequality cannot be denied as there exists, “[...] a veritable separation of the top managers of large firms from the rest of the population” (Piketty 2014a, 24). But interesting as income variations between occupations may be, there are important differences between the inequality generated by labor income and that which results from capital ownership: They correspond to different social forces, and especially, as Piketty recognizes, *different hierarchies* (2014b, 743). There is no doubt that the extraordinary bonuses, commissions and other forms of payments for CEOs and managers are a source of the wealth for many of the “elite members”, but those should not be considered as wages: the extreme differences of “labor” income between workers and managers should be necessarily an indicator of a qualitative difference.

In 2009, the wealthiest bosses in the UK earned ninety-four times the average worker’s wage: The chief executive of Reckitt Benkiser, a big pharmaceutical and chemical company, for example, earned the equivalent income of 1,374 of their workers put together (Jones 2016, 163). This is not a British aberration: “[t]he average salary (plus bonuses) of a CEO at one of the top 350 US firms in 2014 was \$16.3m” (Oxfam 2016, 14).

Decades ago, when the discussion regarding the emergence of a “managerial class” was extensively addressed, many scholars showed that the members of this group were usually major stockholders, a position that explained their extraordinary wages (Ralph Miliband 1980, 35). Masking capital profits as labor income, has, indeed, been a frequent tax-avoidance strategy used by capital owners and stockholders (Jones 2016, 165).

Yet, even when accepting that managers and CEOs are not necessarily stockholders,



their relationship to the means of production is still an important explanation for their extraordinary share of the wealth produced. When defining the capitalist class, Wright uses Poulantzas' distinction between legal ownership and real control over the means of production (Wright 1979, 67-74) From his point of view, the power over the productive process and of the decision-making over the means of production, that CEO's and top managers possess, give them a stronger sense of fellowship with the capitalist class than that which a small amount of shares would give to a middle-income wage earner. Class experience plays here a major role, and for a long time research has shown that CEOs and managers of big companies share "values, goals and behavior" with the capitalist class (Meiksins 1986, 112).

As Radice points out, one of the main criticisms against Marxist theory of social classes is the false prediction of a simplification of the social structure through the polarization of society into two fundamental classes (Radice 2015, 273). The figures on inequality quoted above, seem to suggest that if we took Bourdieu's methodological suggestion of measuring economic – and probably other kinds of – capital, we would find such a distance between those in the top and *everybody else*, that the class boundary would be, opposed to Bourdieu's supposition, almost self-evident. The next intermediate task would be then, to establish the mechanisms behind this process of differentiation. And the Marxian approach has, as mentioned before, something to say about this.

### *b. Fragmentation*

Savage et al.'s study also points to the crisis of the so-called "traditional working class", finding a substantial reduction of its proportion with respect to the total population, as well as a relative over-representation of aging people: "[...] we might see this class as a residue of earlier historical periods, [...] a 'throwback' to an earlier phase in Britain's social history, as part of an older generational formation" (Savage et al. 2013).

This phenomenon, they say, has evolved in tandem with the emergence of new occupational groups. An important example is the *precariat*, a category used by scholars like Standing to describe "[...] millions of people scattered around the world, living and working in insecure jobs and conditions of life" (Standing 2012, 589). Savage et al. describe the precariat as "[...] clearly the most deprived of the classes that we have identified, on all measures, yet they form a relatively large social class, [...] a significant group characterized by high amounts of insecurity on all of our measures of capital" (Savage et al. 2013, 25).

We mentioned above that authors such as Tai-lok Lui (2015) and Radice (2015) highlighted the lack of a historical dimension as one of the major problems in Savage et al.'s

study. Indeed, if we consider the working class as a historical entity, the changes in the conditions of exploitation, labeled here as precarization, should not be dealt with as the emergence of a new class. What should be recognized here is *the precarization of the labor conditions for increasing sectors of the working class*, probably as part of the broader question of the neoliberal accumulation regime and its implications for the relationship between capital and labor (David Harvey 1990). From that point of view, this can be seen as part of a *differentiation within the working class*, which has been present in many ways throughout its history.

A good way to exemplify this is through the relationship between two categories often used synonymously, the *proletariat* and the *working class*. It can be said that each of these refer to different properties, moments, or dimensions of the *same* social class. The first denotes the lack of a means of production; the second, the alienation of the labor force –waged labor – into which the proletarian is dragged as a result of the first dimension. If the second is the moment of *exploitation*, the first is the one of *exclusion*, and constitutes its historical premise.

The problem is that the two moments are not completely coincident. Subsequently, if we accept that proletarians and working class refer to two different – but related – dimensions or constituting moments of the same class, it can also be said that as social groups they have a relationship in which the second tends to be a ‘subset’ of the first. The priority that the signifier *working class* achieved in socialist discourse was the result of a decision, both political and theoretical. ‘Political’ because the working class seemed to be the most suited fraction for political action: Its members acquired discipline and organization as a result of the industrial regime, and they were the only actors capable of carrying out a strike, seen then as a major instrument of socialist struggle. ‘Theoretical’, because of the role of exploitation as an economic category within Marxist economic thought. Yet, this included a high level of abstraction: As E.P. Thompson has shown, the political ‘working class’ that emerged during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Europe was constituted by several actors besides wage earners (Thompson 1966). The effect was one of *synecdoche*: The part was taken as a representation of the whole. Curiously, in the theoretical discussion regarding the concept of working class, the procedure has been just the opposite<sup>10</sup>. After ‘wage earners’, the category started to be used to refer to manual/industrial-workers, then to productive-formal-workers, and even to productive-formal-unionized-workers, and so on. Certainly, there has been a historical “shrinking” of the working class, but clearly there has been also a theoretical “shrinking” of the

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the discussion of Olin Wright regarding the use of the category by Poulantzas (Olin Wright, 1979: 30-60)

concept.

The hiatus between the moment of exclusion and the one of exploitation represents a central theoretical – and political – problem in a social context where, as a result of the development of the productive forces, the quantity of labor required for the dynamic of capital accumulation, especially in the productive sector, has been globally reduced. Today, more than ever, it can be said that *being exploited is a privilege*. The gap between the proletariat and the working class has been increasing substantially, as well as the political action of those included within. In his article about the *Social classes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Therborn uses the category of *plebeians*, referring to the heterogeneous “workers and the popular classes in all their diversity” (2012, 15), thereby avoiding the use of *proletariat* because of its identification with the working class. Yet, whatever the theoretical strategy to grasp this group, it should be able to address both its historical character and the mechanisms behind its constitution as a social group.

In the same article Therborn mentions how contemporary research about the middle classes in developing countries uses income thresholds of between 2 USD and 13 USD per day. Also, looking at the social representations of that social class in thirteen developing countries, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo found that, “[t]he defining characteristic of its members is that they have a *steady, waged job*”<sup>11</sup> (2012, 16). This is not a third world phenomena: In his compelling book about the “demonization of the working class” in the UK, Owen Jones shows how the self-identification as ‘middle-class’ has begun to mean barely “non-poor” (2016, 142).

It is certainly not so easy to find a Marxist criterion to define a “middle class”. Nevertheless, Marxist theorists have sought to distinguish this relatively privileged layer of the population from the rest of the working class. For example, Poulantzas used the label “new petty bourgeoisie” for gathering the ‘mental’ workers, supervisors, workers of the service sector and many other groups that from his point of view cannot be labeled either as bourgeois or working class (Poulantzas 1975, 287-292).

Certainly, the concept of petty bourgeois can be appropriate for describing, for example, small employers and independent, well-established professionals who enjoy certain levels of independence and prestige. However, it is interesting to notice that the tendency for many of those actors to become simple wage earners as a result of the logics of capital accumulation was already pointed out by Marx and Engels in their Manifesto:

The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked

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<sup>11</sup> Our emphasis

up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage laborer's (Marx and Engels 1998, 34)

For Marx and Engels then, qualification was not a criterion for class differentiation, and professionals can definitely be part of the working class. However, this process may be indefinitely incomplete. And, even recognizing a process of "proletarianization" of those sectors of professionals, the labor market will maintain differences in terms of wage, prestige and labor conditions, such as those present between different levels of qualification.

Bourdieu's tools and concepts seem particularly useful for grasping those differences and the way they affect daily social interaction. From this perspective, qualification is a form of cultural capital, which ensures better access to both social and economic capital. Furthermore, it also implies non-economic rewards: Symbolic privileges and power that mask the way the qualified labor force is also subjected to domination and exploitation. In the struggle for improving their position within the [labor] market, those actors can seek to limit the access of others to cultural capital with strategies of "opportunity hoarding", in order to avoid the devaluation of this kind of capital, an "immediate" interest opposed to that of non-qualified workers.

However, the precarization of their labor conditions can give them a shared experience with respect to the other sectors of the working class, constituting a common ground for political articulation. The way medical doctors are subjected to a Taylorist discipline by big health care providers – let's recall the 2015 labor grievances of the young medical doctors in the National Health Service in the UK – is a good example not just of the accuracy of Marx and Engels insights, but also of the tendency toward a homogenization of the working class experience that capital tends to impose.

Furthermore, academics, professors and researchers have often enjoyed high levels of autonomy regarding their professional activities. But here also, the recent reforms in the system of scientific research and higher education all over the world, and the increase in the supply of highly qualified labor is changing the conditions for 'intellectual' workers, who are beginning to progressively share the fate of other wage earners in terms of competition and precarization.

That should invite us to think about the differences between qualified and not qualified labor more in terms of fractions, divisions within one single class, rather than in terms of boundaries between two different classes. Indeed, the concept of class fractions, used extensively for characterizing the internal division within the capitalist class, has not been yet equally applied to the working class. A curious fact considering the attention that "the boundary

question” occupied the theoretical discussions of the 1970s and 1980s (Meiksins 1986). With social differentiation being one of the major problems for the political organization of the working class, it is striking that none of the major scholars on the topic took a risk in that direction.

In the same way, if qualification is not a criterion for class differentiation, neither should income be, an important challenge to the approach used by Savage et al. The suggestion of Bourdieu has more power here: Any boundary will be a more or less capricious line within a continuous distribution of levels of income.

A good example of how neither income nor qualification are necessarily class boundaries, and how some of those considered as middle class can share with other sectors a working class experience, is the case of the tech workers that have massively supported Bernie Sanders’ 2016 campaign to the Democratic nomination and constituted, along with the workers of the education sector, his major donors. An article in The Guardian suggested a simple explanation:

[...] According to PayScale, the median salary for a software engineer in San Francisco is around \$100,000 – post-tax, this comes out to roughly \$70,000-. With median one-bedroom rents in San Francisco hovering around \$3,500, this means the average software engineer spends 60% of their take-home pay on housing. It would take our average software engineer 40 years of saving every penny of their post-rent income to pay cash for a house in San Francisco in today’s prices. (Tarnoff 2016).

Although highly qualified and considered as high-wage earners, their class experience nevertheless makes them conscious of where real class boundaries are located. It is worth noting that tech workers are also the main supporters of one of the most prominent socialist in the US, the Seattle city council woman Kshama Sawant, who has publicly suggested that Microsoft and Amazon should be worker-run and publicly owned companies (Tarnoff 2016).

## **Conclusions**

Discussing the research of Savage et al. (2013) on the class structure in the United Kingdom, we suggested a way to integrate the theoretical framework they used with the class theory of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and the Marxian approach to social classes. First, we used the contribution by Erik Olin Wright, in order to highlight the limits of their approach, as well as the way in which this can be mutually complemented and reinforced. Secondly, we suggested

the use of set theory – in the way indicated by Alain Badiou – as an ontological strategy to address the question of social classes, its internal differentiation and relations.

Using the framework described above, we problematized the findings of Savage et al., indicating alternative explanatory strategies to deal with their findings and suggesting a further research agenda. In particular, we addressed the dynamics of polarization and fragmentation, identified by those authors.

Regarding the polarization, and highlighting the 2016 report of Oxfam on social inequality, we suggested recovering the Marxian discussion of the control and ownership over the means of production as a major cause of class differentiation. Here, we suggested that internal differentiation within the so-called “elite” should be a matter of research, problematizing also the occupational characterization used by Savage et al.

Finally, regarding the issue of fragmentation, we discussed the problem of establishing class boundary lines separating the working class and sectors such as the proletariat, the ‘middle class’ and more broadly, the qualified labor force. We suggested here the use of the concept of class fraction as an alternative for dealing with those sectors, considering instead potential subsets of a single class.

From that point of view, it can be said that the dynamics of fragmentation do not necessarily exclude those of polarization. And as we can see from the evidence gathered by Savage et al., that means polarization between the elite and the rest of the population, and fragmentation within the later. In the way we deal with these dual phenomena will determine how we uphold the soundness of a Marxian theory of social class, as well as the possibility of revolutionary politics.

We consider that a framework like the one proposed can help us to better deal with the internal contradictions of that huge social group which stands in front of the capitalist class. It should be clear that neither the intellectual, nor the political project requires a rejection of the plurality that constitutes it. Indeed, what categories can compress the diversity of the life conditions and surviving strategies of the billions of people who are not part of the tiny “elite”?

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