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POST-MARXISM AND CLASS STRUGGLE

Abstract:

This is an exploratory article about class struggle, an unfashionable term since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the global ascendancy of market society. I look at class struggle not as a unitary experience but as clusters of struggles between those who contest inequality and demand dignity and those largely unconcerned by their persistence. I examine four approaches to class: as a structural position; as infrapolitics operating outside the formal public sphere; as the becoming-class of the underdogs; and as unilateral warfare waged by elites without necessarily leading to direct resistance. I then assess a conceptualization of class beyond the mode of production.

Keywords: Class, Class Struggle, Dignity, Inequality, Post-Marxism

> The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context. Moreover, we cannot have two distinct classes, each with an independent being, and then bring them into relationship with each other. We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. And class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.
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> (E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 1966, p. 9)

Though Marx died in 1883, he died again symbolically with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991. In the aftermath, engaging with Marx's work – whether reading, discussing, or drawing from his theories – suddenly appeared anachronistic. Francis Fukuyama's thesis – claiming that the Cold War's end signaled the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism – was widely received as a definitive statement marking the advent of a post-communist, and unmistakably un-Marxist, era.

The thesis proclaiming the end of history proved to be short-lived. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism revealed that the West continued to face powerful ideological challengers. The consolidation of illiberal regimes in Russia and Hungary, alongside a global rise of the far right, delivered further blows to the liberal triumphalism of the early 1990s. The prediction was further demolished by Donald Trump's authoritarian power grab during his second presidency – a textbook case of contempt for the liberal foundations of contemporary democracy within the Cold War's victorious superpower. Jacques Derrida contributed to the intellectual unravelling of the end-of-history narrative with the publication of *Specters of Marx* (1994), a philosophical intervention at a time when Marx was widely dismissed as a political and theoretical relic. Drawing on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Derrida spoke of Marx's spectral return – not as a validation of the letter of his work, but as a haunting presence, a ghost that refuses to go away.

I want to raise the specter of Marx, specifically in relation to class struggle. While it may be tempting to describe this specter as a *return* of class struggle, such a formulation fails to capture its enduring presence for two key reasons. First, class struggle never disappeared. It was demonized or dismissed as obsolete by conservative and neoliberal

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ideologues, and downplayed by post-Marxist critics who, in rejecting class reductionism, shifted attention toward conflicts over gender, race, and other axes of identity. Second, if something like a return is underway, what reemerges is not the same form of class warfare theorized by Marx – an antagonism that once animated nineteenth-century mass politics. In Marx's framework, classes were defined by their position within the relations of production, either as owners or non-owners of those means, and class struggle was inseparable from his emancipatory project to abolish private property. In this sense, class struggle and socialist politics were fundamentally aligned with anti-capitalism.

From a psychoanalytical perspective, the spectral presence of class conflict might be understood as the return of the repressed – it never vanished but remained tucked away in the collective unconscious, reemerging intermittently. Yet I prefer to approach it through the lens of repetition, which offers a more elastic and generative way of thinking about class struggle today. The prefix *re-* does not imply mere recurrence, but rather the act of petitioning again. Repetition is not about nostalgic recurrence but about a dynamic interplay of sameness and difference, of continuity and change. This is repetition-as-transformation, not repetition-as-sameness – a process shaped by memory, contingency, new configurations of power, and a constantly evolving terrain of conflict. Heraclitus's aphorism – «You cannot step into the same river twice» – aptly captures this dynamic. Each invocation of class struggle carries the imprint of past struggles while departing from them in historically specific and politically novel ways. Rather than simply reapplying Marx's nineteenth-century analysis, we must remain attentive to how class struggle rearticulates itself through difference – haunted by its past, yet irreducibly new.

What follows is a repetition of Marx's theorization of class in the sense outlined above: a *repetition-as-transformation*. I do not aim to reinvent class analysis or to offer readers a comprehensive survey of the extensive literature on the subject. My objectives are more modest. I seek to discuss class in a way that resonates with post-Marxists who have focused more on identity and the ontological coordinates of post-foundationalism than on inequality or redistribution. The aim is to think with Marx – but also with a post-Marxist Marx – in order to formulate a concept of social division and antagonism that speaks to the present.

Such an approach calls for expanding the conceptual and political boundaries of class beyond a narrowly anti-capitalist frame. The point is not to dilute radicalism – assuming we can still agree on what the term means today – but to recognize that contemporary struggles for equality unfold across multiple axes of power, many of which cannot be fully understood through the lens of capital alone. Anti-capitalism remains a vital horizon of contestation, but not the only one. This renewed engagement with Marx's class analysis involves a normative claim, consistent with Marx's own: that greater equality is preferable to the continued reproduction of entrenched hierarchies and exclusions. In this spirit, I reframe the question of class by examining four conceptions of class struggle, drawing primarily on thinkers not typically associated with class theory.

1. The Formalism of Structural Positions

Let's start unpacking the multiple variants of class struggle. The traditional Marxist approach defines class using private property as a fundamental criterion. The proletariat consists of those who don't own the means of production and must sell their labor force on the market to make a living, whereas the capitalists are those who own the means of production. This ownership enables them to appropriate the surplus labor of workers as profit, which is why Marx argues that their prosperity stems from the exploitation of others. Here, property functions as a structural criterion that determines class based on one's position within the relations of production. It offers a static definition of class: the proletarians become the working class, and the capitalists form the bourgeoisie. Louis Althusser is among the more prominent advocates of this perspective, particularly in his contribution to *Reading Capital* (1970).

We've known for a long time that structural criteria fall short in defining class. Consider assembly-line workers at an aerospace company who feel satisfied with their jobs because they earn enough to live comfortably. Their managers may earn significantly more – often exceeding the income of small business owners. Does this automatically make the assembly workers part of the working class? And if managers receive only salaries, not equity, should they be classified the same way? The lack of a direct correlation between structural position and class identity complicates definitions based solely on ownership. The identitarian paradox is clear: high-earning managers may not own capital, yet their worldview and aspirations often align more closely with those of shareholders. Conversely, figures like Friedrich Engels – whose family owned textile factories – remind us that capitalists, too, can become committed advocates of working-class emancipation. Engels identified politically with the proletariat despite his bourgeois origins. These apparent contradictions expose the inadequacy of defining class solely in terms of structural position – whether based on profit-taking or wage-earning.

Nicos Poulantzas (1975) acknowledged the difficulty of distinguishing the working class from the broader category of wage earners. To address this, he returned to Marx's foundational distinction between productive and unproductive labor. «The class exploited within this dominant relation (the basic exploited class: the working class in the capitalist mode of production)», he wrote, «is that which performs the productive labor of that mode of production. Therefore, in the capitalist mode of production, all non-owners are not thereby workers»[1]. By productive labor, he meant «labour that directly produces surplus-value»[2]. This criterion enabled a more precise delineation of class boundaries. Poulantzas's position is unambiguous: service-sector employees such as «wage-earners in commerce, advertising, marketing, accounting, banking and insurance, do not produce surplus-value and do not form part of the working class»[3]. According to this logic, an assembly-line worker qualifies as working class, whereas an IT technician does not – even if she earns less. What matters is not income level but whether one produces surplus value.

In addition to classifying workers based on their role in producing surplus value, Poulantzas introduced a second criterion: whether or not the wage earner is exploited. According to him, service workers aren't. As he explains, «The wage form no more coincides with productive labour than it does with exploitation, i.e. the extortion of surplus labour: a well-known lawyer who is the salaried employee of an enterprise that uses his services does not have surplus labour extorted from him»[4]. This distinction allows Poulantzas to further delimit the working class. Academics, sculptors, plumbers, and those in the performing arts may receive wages, but neither produce surplus value nor experience exploitation in the Marxist sense. As a result, they cannot be considered members of the working class.

Poulantzas's reading of Marx constitutes a careful hermeneutic exercise, yet his conclusions are far from unproblematic. It is true that he revised his position on class by the time he published his final book, *State, Power, Socialism* (2014), just five years after his seminal *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. In this later work, he shifts the focus from structural positions to agency and struggle, redefining class struggle as a relational and dynamic process. Nonetheless, my interest lies in his earlier structural perspective, which exemplifies the Althusserian approach – one that often relies on a quasi-scholastic interpretation of Marx, treating his categories as timeless truths rather than as historically contingent concepts in need of adaptation to contemporary realities.

Poulantzas's definition of productive labor is especially restrictive, excluding large segments of today's wage earners. It leaves public-sector workers and those employed in entertainment, travel, hospitality, healthcare, and education in a kind of class limbo.

[1] Poulantzas (1975), p. 20.
[2] Ivi, p. 94.
[3] Ivi, p. 211.
[4] Ivi, p. 216.

Moreover, his framework fails to incorporate unwaged forms of labor – such as housework and childcare – which are indispensable for the reproduction of capitalist social relations yet are omitted from his class schema. The requirement that wage earners must also be exploited introduces further complications. Poulantzas insists on a rigid distinction between exploitation and non-exploitation – categorizing industrial workers as exploited, while excluding salaried professionals such as lawyers. Yet he provides no clear threshold for determining when a contractual relation has become exploitative. Unless he proposes a rigid binary – people are either exploited, or they are not – this absence of gradation introduces an implicit telos of intensity into his concept of class: the magnitude of surplus value extracted becomes the measure of how authentically working-class a form of labor is. This telos flattens the complexity of labor relations and obscures the nuances of political subjectivity.

Such a framework raises a series of challenging questions. Unionized workers and others protected by labor law may be both productive and, by Poulantzas's criteria, exploited – thus qualifying as members of the working class. But what about sweatshop laborers who operate outside formal protections and may generate even greater surplus value for their employers? Does this render them more authentically working class? Or must we extend the analysis further still – to include undocumented migrant laborers – if we are to identify the most extreme forms of exploitation in the contemporary economy? Poulantzas's framework offers little guidance for such cases, exposing its conceptual limits when applied beyond the structured – and increasingly marginal – core of the industrial workforce.

The main issue with Poulantzas's framework is that it introduces so many theoretical qualifications to delineate the real working class from other wage earners that it drains class analysis of its political vitality. What remains is a distilled abstraction of the proletariat – meticulously curated to fit the canonical claim that this class must necessarily lead the anti-capitalist struggle. The result is a formalist construction, reminiscent of Althusser's own tendency to privilege structural relations over lived realities. In both cases, context and conjuncture are relegated to supporting roles in a structuralist drama where the mode of production remains the protagonist.

2. Infrapolitical Class Struggle: Class Beyond the Mode of Production

While Poulantzas emphasizes the structural positions of classes within modes of production, a very different perspective emerges in the work of James Scott, who shifts the focus from objective positions to the everyday practices of resistance enacted by subordinate groups that operate outside formal politics. Drawing on E.P. Thompson, he argues that «neither peasants nor proletarians deduce their identities directly or solely from the mode of production, and the sooner we attend to the concrete experience of class as it is lived, the sooner we will appreciate both the obstacles to, and the possibilities for, class formation»[5]. Scott is not dismissing the relevance of structural positions; rather, he rejects the notion that class identity can be derived «directly or solely» from those positions. Such an approach, he contends, overlooks the lived experience through which people are formed – or fail to be formed – into a class.

From this point, Scott develops a view of political class struggle that departs from conventional models – particularly if one accepts Marx and Engels's assertion in the *Manifesto* that «every class struggle is a political struggle»[6]. He calls this mode of resistance *infrapolitics*: a type of political activity that unfolds beneath the surface of formal public life, deliberately avoiding what is typically recognized as political engagement – such as articulated demands or overt mobilization. Infrapolitics constitutes the predominant mode of resistance among the weak: those living under repressive regimes who must carefully

[5] Scott (1985), p. 43.
[6] Marx, Engels (2002), p. 230.

calibrate their actions to avoid or minimize repercussions, including imprisonment, torture, eviction, loss of livelihood, or even death.

Infrapolitics encompasses everyday forms of resistance – such as poaching or stealing – that are not typically recognized as part of class struggle. Yet Marx himself acknowledged such practices as politically significant. As Scott writes, «The theft of wood in mid nineteenth-century Germany was, as Marx noted in some early articles in the *Rheinische Zeitung*, a form of class struggle»[7]. Scott mentions other forms of resistance by the weak – tacit, dispersed, and often covert – that similarly fall outside conventional understanding of class struggle:

> They include such acts as foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on. These techniques, for the most part quite prosaic, are the ordinary means of class struggle [...] No adequate account of class relations is possible without assessing their importance[8].

Sabotage, arson, false compliance and other non-economic forms of resistance are part of what Scott calls the hidden transcripts of the weak – practices that unfold in a different register than the more visible public transcript of institutional politics. As he put it, these covert acts are part of «the ordinary means of class struggle», thereby expanding our understanding of class conflict beyond the domain of property relations. In Scott's view, class struggle encompasses not only economic exploitation but also the everyday resistances to domination. More on this in the final section.

It is tempting to dismiss these practices as irrelevant to class struggle due to their seemingly unorganized and non-revolutionary nature. These actions are often viewed as too opportunistic and episodic to qualify as political. Yet Scott is quick to dismiss this kind of critique and challenges it directly, writing: «An argument along these lines necessarily implies that "real resistance" is organized, principled, and has revolutionary implications»[9]. His point is well taken: why must resistance conform to a revolutionary standard to be taken seriously? The answer lies in the Jacobin-Leninist conception of resistance – anchored in the model of the vanguard party and the Marxist script for proletarian emancipation as a refoundation of society – which long served as the dominant framework for understanding class struggle. Within this narrative, only organized collective action oriented toward the abolition of private property and the construction of socialism was recognized as legitimate resistance.

Scott offers a compelling alternative to conventional models of resistance by emphasizing the everyday tactics employed by those without access to formal mechanisms of power. He argues that such acts are rational weapons of the weak – used by those who lack the material or institutional resources to openly defy policies, laws, or decisions imposed by authoritarian or dictatorial regimes. In such contexts, practices like poaching and foot dragging serve as practical tools of dissent, adjusted to minimize exposure to retaliation while still registering opposition. Although Scott situates these tactical infrapolitical resistances within exclusionary or repressive regimes, his framework is equally applicable to liberal democracies, where formal protection for free speech and unionization often coexist with mechanisms of suppression. As demonstrated during the Trump administration, authorities openly monitored social media for dissenting views and often refused entry into the U.S. if any was found, while employers routinely suppress collective organizing by disciplining or firing those involved. In both authoritarian and liberal-democratic settings, subaltern actors turn to informal and often covert forms of resistance as a means to contest domination without bearing its full costs.

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[7] Scott (1990), pp. 194-195.
[8] Scott (1989), p. 34.
[9] Ivi, p. 51.

This line of thinking is further developed by Michel de Certeau (1988), whose work closely parallels Scott's in its emphasis on everyday forms of resistance. De Certeau draws a distinction between strategy – the practices of those who possess their own space and can organize it to generate initiatives – and tactics, the mode of operation available to those who lack a space of their own and must maneuver within the terrain imposed by others. Among the many examples he discusses is *la perruque* (literally "the wig"), a practice in which workers use company time to perform personal tasks. As de Certeau explains:

> *La perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job [...] the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit[10].

Like Scott's "weapons of the weak", *la perruque* exemplifies how subaltern actors reclaim autonomy and dignity through subtle, often invisible acts that subvert dominant structures from within.

Also, why should we assume that coordination always requires formal organizations – with their hierarchies, division of labor, and public visibility? While Scott acknowledges that coordination is essential to political resistance, he contests the idea that it must take institutional form. The fact that many everyday acts of resistance are carried out individually doesn't mean they are uncoordinated. Instead, they rely on tacit forms of cooperation sustained through communal social networks and shared understandings[11]. As Scott puts it:

> One of the striking things about peasant society is the extent to which a whole range of complex activities from labor-exchange to wedding preparations, to rituals are coordinated by networks of understanding and practice. It is the same with boycotts, with techniques for evading taxes and forced crop deliveries, with the conspiracy of silence surrounding thefts from landlords. No formal organizations are created because none are required; and yet a form of coordination is achieved which alerts us that what is happening is by no means merely random individual action[12].

In short, the forms of action described by Scott's concept of infrapolitics constitute an alternative stage for class struggle – one that operates alongside the more visible initiatives recorded in the public transcript. These two terrains represent distinct modalities of political engagement. Scott doesn't attribute inherent superiority to either; instead, he treats them as valid and interrelated expressions of class struggle, each shaped by its own set of constraints, risks, and possibilities depending on the context in which that struggle unfolds.

3. Struggles About Class Before They Become Struggles Among Classes

Like Scott, Adam Przeworski (1985) resists rigid structural definitions of class. Yet while Scott emphasizes infrapolitical forms of resistance, Przeworski is primarily concerned with how heterogeneous subjects – included those excluded from direct participation in production – can be constituted as a class through political struggle. The epigraph from E. P. Thompson – particularly his assertion that «We cannot have two distinct classes, each with an independent being, and then bring them into relationship with each other» – serves as a reminder that this path has been traversed before. Thompson's formulation underscores the relational and historical nature of class formation: classes are not pre-given entities but are constituted through shared experiences, struggles, and oppositional

[10] Certeau (1988), p. 25
[11] Scott (1989), pp. 36, 51.
[12] Ivi, p. 52.

identification. Przeworski extends this insight by emphasizing the contingent and strategic processes through which classes are formed as political subjects. Let us now turn to examining his contributions.

In discussing Poulantzas's approach to classes as structural positions, I noted that Marx and Engels themselves conceive of class, at least in part, as defined by one's positions within the relations of production. Yet they also offer a more dynamic and politically charged perspective: class emerges through struggle and collective action. In this view, a class is not simply a group defined by its structural location; it becomes a class by transforming shared positions into political unity through organized action.

Also, in the preface to the 1883 German edition of *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels paraphrases a familiar claim: «All history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development»[13]. This line is typically read to suggest that class struggle is a constant of human history, and that the movement of history depends on it – without that struggle, there is no history, only stasis. Yet this reading is only partly accurate. There have also been periods when the exploited did not resist their exploiters. These were moments without overt class struggle, but not without history[14]. This complicates the Marxist proposition that class struggle is the motor of history, revealing a paradox: history may proceed even in the absence of active class antagonism.

The *Manifesto*, then, reinforces a conception of class that moves decisively beyond Poulantzas's structural formalism. Marx and Engels write: «The immediate aim of the Communists is the same as that of all the other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class»[15], and famously conclude with the injunction, «Working men of all countries, unite!»[16]. These lines imply that although proletarians occupy a defined structural position within the capitalist mode of production, their identity as a class is not a natural or automatic consequence of that position.

This distinction is crucial. If being a wage earner were equivalent to being part of the working class, why bother to call for unity or charge communists with the task of organizing proletarians into a class? Marx and Engels recognize a constitutive gap between occupying a place in the relations of production and becoming a political subject. Class, in their view, is not simply a structural location – it is a process of formation: A historical and strategic project, not a categorical given derived from property relations alone.

Moreover, Marx and Engels's conception of class formation suggests not a singular moment of emergence but a continuous, historically situated process. Classes are shaped and reshaped through changing conditions and political conjunctures – victories and defeats, economic and electoral cycles, crises, union strength, the balance of forces among political parties and movements, movements, and the vicissitudes of public opinion. Class formation is less a stable outcome than an evolving process, akin to the fluctuating work of securing voter loyalty from one election to the next. The organization of people into classes produces provisional configurations rather than fixed endpoints. This recalls the classical philosophical distinction between being and becoming: classes rarely appear as clearly defined or measurable entities. Instead, they emerge through a process of becoming – a trajectory defined less by destination than by movement itself.

Przeworski makes a significant contribution to class theory by challenging structuralist conceptions of class. He contends, not unlike Marx and Engels, that «Classes are not given uniquely by any objective positions because they constitute effects of struggles, and these struggles are not determined uniquely by the relations of production»[17]. The operative term here is *struggle* – not as a mechanical outcome of economic structures, but as a historically

[13] Marx, Engels (2002), p. 197.
[14] Przeworski (1985), p. 80.
[15] Marx, Engels (2002), p. 234.
[16] Ivi, p. 258
[17] Przeworski (1985), p. 66.

contingent and dynamic practice. Przeworski's argument centers on the idea of becoming a class: a fluid and open-ended process of organization, disorganization, and reorganization within the terrain of political struggle.

From this point, Przeworski advances a deceptively simple yet conceptually radical thesis – one that echoes E.P. Thompson's own: «Political class struggle is a struggle about class before it is a struggle among classes»[18], or, alternatively, «classes-in-struggle are an effect of struggles about class»[19]. This formulation recalls the task Marx and Engels assigned to communists – the «formation of the proletariat into a class» – but adds a temporal inflection: first, a struggle about class, and only then a struggle among classes. This two-step formulation is primarily rhetorical, as no clear threshold reliably separates the two phases; in practice, struggles about and among classes often unfold simultaneously. The key insight here is that Przeworski invites us to conceive of class struggle as a constitutive force – one that does not simply mobilize pre-existing identities but actively produces political subjects. «Classes», he writes, «are not a datum prior to the history of concrete struggles»[20].

This reconceptualization renders class formation a recursive process in a double sense: first, because the very conditions in which class struggle unfolds are themselves transformed by the struggle; and second, because those changed conditions, in turn, determine how classes – or any other political subject – can be constituted. As Przeworski notes, «The very right to organize is an effect of struggles that in turn shape the form of class organization»[21]. Class struggle, in this view, is not a linear confrontation between predefined actors, but a feedback loop that continually reshapes the social and institutional conditions in which political actors emerge. In this way, class is not a stable sociological category but an evolving product of conflict itself.

Stating that class struggle is a struggle about class is a disconcerting proposition, particularly given our ingrained tendency to imagine political conflict as occurring between well-defined parties – much like a game of chess or checkers. Yet Przeworski's view of class formation is not all that uncommon. Jacques Rancière articulates a similar position in his account of political subjectivation. For Rancière, every social order wrongs equality by treating some groups as less worthy than others. The latter – be they proletarians, women, immigrants, or religious minorities – are what he calls parts with no part: those who are present within society but denied a proper place in its symbolic ordering. There can be no meaningful dialogue between those who are counted and those who are not. Political struggle, then, begins not as a debate among equals, but as an interruption of that unequal distribution that seeks a place for those who have been excluded from the conversation.

Rancière captures this dynamic with remarkable precision when he writes:

> The political dispute is distinct from all conflicts of interest between constituted parties of the population, for it is a conflict over the very count of those parties. It is not a discussion between partners but an interlocution that undermines the very situation of interlocution[22].

Political conflict is not «a discussion between partners» because it erupts when one group is denied recognition as a speaking subject and nonetheless insists on speaking. It is precisely this refusal to remain silent – this insistence on being heard despite institutionalized silencing – that marks the beginning of politics. For Rancière, politics arises not as an extension of governance, but as a rupture within it: The assertion of equality where none is recognized, the disruption of a social order that has normalized

[18] Ivi, p. 71
[19] Ivi, p. 79.
[20] Ivi, p. 69.
[21] Ivi, p. 71.
[22] Rancière (1998), p. 100.

inequality. Politics, then, is not the management of competing interests, but the moment when those without a part force themselves into visibility.

This is the moment when those previously deemed unworthy of speech or visibility intervene to reconfigure the given. In doing so, they create what Rancière calls a «polemical space of a demonstration that holds equality and its absence together»[23]. Political dissensus is the act through which the part with no part asserts itself as an interlocutor. As Rancière explains, «Parties do not exist prior to the conflict they name and in which they are counted as parties», which is why the dynamics of dissensus involve «addressing an interlocutor who does not acknowledge the interlocutory situation»[24]. Politics thus begins not with the recognition of pre-constituted identities, but with a confrontation that brings those identities – and their exclusions – into being.

Like Przeworski, Rancière shifts our attention away from conflicts among pre-constituted identities and toward the very moment of their emergence. In both accounts, political action is not derivative of structure; it is the generative process by which political subjects come into being. Designated groups – students, electricians, Mormons, civil servants, and so on – don't cease to be what they are but are transformed into political subjects through their practice of dissensus. Politics is not what happens after classes or other subjects form – it is the field in which their very formation becomes possible.

4. Oligarchs and Unilateral Class Warfare from Above

While Scott and Przeworski emphasize class struggle from the standpoint of subaltern agency – focusing on how people become a class through lived experience and political articulation – a fourth perspective shifts the lens upward. Class struggle from above challenges the assumption of reciprocity in class conflict, revealing how conflict can unfold as a unilateral offensive by elites seeking to entrench their privileges and deter organized resistance. This approach highlights how dominant groups proactively shape and sustain class warfare – often without provoking overt opposition – by orchestrating culture wars and using their influence over legislation and public policy.

Before turning to unilateral class struggle, it is important to clarify what I mean by the term *culture wars*. While the phrase is typically associated with political correctness and identity politics – portrayed by the right as a precursor to "wokeness" – I use the term differently. My focus is on a less recognized but equally significant dimension: the systematic effort to assert ideological dominance over the principles that govern economic rationality within state and corporate institutions. This includes the promotion of narratives claiming that markets thrive under minimal regulatory oversight, that capping minimum wage growth is essential to contain inflation, and that unions hinder business competitiveness and increase consumer costs. Or that austerity in social spending – though painful for workers – is justified as a long-term benefit through the presumed trickle-down effects. This cultural dimension is further reinforced by what Rancière calls the management of competing interests, a mode of governance he distinguishes from politics and defines as *policy*. Policy refers to the formal and informal channels through which special interest groups make their voices heard in the legislative process and exert influence over fiscal and monetary decision-making.

Class struggle from above is as disconcerting as the perspectives advanced by Scott and Przeworski. It refers to the strategies employed by oligarchic elites to consolidate power and advance their interests at the expense of the broader population. As Scott observes, these strategies – much like the infrapolitical resistances of the weak – are often woven into the fabric of everyday life, proceeding without fanfare or overt confrontation. Przeworski offers a striking example that reveals how such stealthy forms of class domination can operate decisively through the seemingly mundane mechanisms of routine governance and economic management.

[23] Ivi, p. 89.
[24] *Ibidem*.

In an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* of July 22, 1853, Marx cited *The Times* to the effect that «if the parliament prohibited the capitalist to keep workers at work for 12,16, or some other number of hours, "England", says *The Times*, "would no longer be a country of free people"»[25].

The Times offers a remarkable definition of freedom by and for the elites – one that anchors it to the employers' prerogative to determine the number of working hours expected from their employees each day. Some might argue that while class domination was a routine feature of life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its force has since been tempered by the legalization of trade unions, the expansion of universal franchise, and the rise of workers' political parties. However, such a conclusion is misleading. These developments may have altered the form of domination, but they have not eliminated it. Class domination persists as an enduring feature of contemporary society – although in transformed, and often more insidious, guises.

Warren Buffett, the former CEO of the multinational holding company Berkshire Hathaway, is a prominent figure in the global wealth hierarchy and knows capitalism better than most. In a widely read interview, he voiced his discontent about rich people like himself paying a lower percentage of taxes than his employees, directly questioning the fairness and rightness of this situation. When the interviewer warned that his stance could be seen as inciting class warfare, he boldly declared, «There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning»[26].

Buffett doesn't blame the underclass for class warfare; he blames it squarely on people like him. His is a dissonant voice among the superrich, who generally see it as a bottom-up process instigated by the casualties of market society. Conservatives say that the class struggle sows hatred and division among nationals. It is destructive. They blame communists for this, even if they struggle to explain what they mean by communism other than it is something terrible. They even sound the alarm of class struggle when the only communists to be found are a few academics and scattered and ineffective groups of activists who have little public presence.

But conservatives don't think they need to explain much because they use communism as shorthand for things like asking for a fairer distribution of the tax burden, not being affiliated with a church, being neutral about immigration, or sympathizing with those who seek racial, gender, and sexual equality. For them, class struggle – and, of course, communism – often extends to the legal activities of labor unions, progressives, and liberals in the specific sense that word has in the U.S. Those who have done some reading or learned by hearsay are more sophisticated and trace class struggle back to Marx and his life project of anti-capitalist resistance and proletarian emancipation.

In all cases, the conservative hypothesis focuses on the centrifugal effects of class struggle and denies its egalitarian potential. Class struggle refers to the doings of those at the bottom of the social pyramid, who embark on class warfare to challenge the rich and powerful, sometimes out of conviction but mostly because they are being manipulated, or so they say. People sympathetic to Marx or any of the many communist, socialist, anarchist, progressive, or liberal families will agree with conservatives, except for the part about manipulation: people fight because it is a way to lessen or even eliminate exploitation and the experience of being dissed by the better off.

Buffett's claim turns the conservative argument about class warfare on its head, or, to paraphrase what Marx said about the Hegelian dialectic, the conservative view of class warfare had been standing on its head, and Buffett put it back on its materialist feet. He describes it as a one-sided aggression of the rich against the non-rich. This unilateral form of class warfare seems counterintuitive because it minimizes the relational aspect by bracketing subaltern resistance, whether active or passive, to the extent that such a thing is possible. More precisely, there may be resistance, but most of the time, legislation

[25] Przeworski (1985), p. 86, footnote 34.
[26] Stein (2006).

lowering the taxes on wealth or arguments against increasing the minimum wage go unchallenged. This lack of resistance happens because people presumably think this will help those below but also due to the shrinking role of labor unions since the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Physicists might argue that the absence of resistance violates Newton's third law, which holds that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Critics of Buffett's claim could make a similar point: politics is not physics, and class warfare, by definition, involves at least two active contenders. This is true, so strictly speaking, Buffett mischaracterizes class struggle by framing it as a one-sided aggression. Yet there are indeed two sides: the wealthy, who actively wage class warfare, and those on the receiving end, who endure its effects without necessarily mounting visible resistance. What makes this dynamic so unsettling is its asymmetry: a largely imperceptible yet relentless and thus far effective campaign by rich and powerful oligarchs, along with their enablers, to secure benefits at the direct expense of everyone else.

There are several ways to support the claim that action can occur without eliciting reaction. I'll highlight two. The first is conceptual and draws on the work of Rancière, who contends that domination is the norm, whereas politics is a rare and disruptive event. This recalls a point raised earlier: the possibility of history in the absence of active class struggle. Rancière's reasoning proceeds as follows. Every social order organizes individuals into roles, places, and hierarchies. Although society proclaims equality – whether through the shared possession of logos, which sets humans apart from other animals, or through constitutional guarantees that define all as citizens and subjects of law – it simultaneously wrongs that equality by treating the speech of some as less worthy or less meaningful than the speech of others. In Rancière's account, politics is the practice of dissensus: a disruptive intervention by a paradoxical part with no part – those whose voices don't truly count within the existing order. As he puts it, «Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part»[27]. Yet such interruptions are rare: «politics doesn't always happen – it actually happens very little or rarely»[28].

Rancière makes it very clear that domination is the default condition of social life. What his account doesn't fully thematize, however, is that domination is not self-sustaining – it requires an ongoing effort to uphold the hierarchy of worth that distinguishes those deemed fit to rule from those relegated to subordination. This continuous reinforcement of inequality is evident in what I have described as class struggle from above: the systematic deployment of resources, policies, and discourses to keep the «parts with no part» in their place, while simultaneously consolidating and elevating the power and legitimacy of oligarchic elites.

The second response to one-sided wars – those with little or no reaction from below – is more practical. Such asymmetrical wars can arise for a variety of reasons. Among them are disorganized underclasses who may believe that resistance is futile. Entrenched elite networks raise the cost of dissent, while repeated defeats erode the will to fight. Conservative norms, especially in smaller communities, can expose dissenters to abuse or violence. Workers fear retaliation; others prefer to move on rather than face the exhaustion of confrontation. Downward pressure on wages is often framed as economic common sense. Ideologically aligned courts, corporate campaign financing, and media portrayals of protest as divisive all contribute to a landscape where labor laws may defang unions or turn them into instruments of discipline. These and other factors make Buffett's claim – that there is a class war and his class is winning – a thoroughly credible assessment.

It is reasonable to demand empirical evidence before accepting this argument. While ample data exits, a brief example will suffice: the 2017 tax law enacted during Donald Trump's first presidency. This legislation lowered the top corporate tax rate from 35% to

[27] Rancière (1998), p. 11.
[28] Ivi, p. 17.

21%, with the promise that the resulting gains would trickle down through increased investment in infrastructure and job creation. In reality, however, something else happened because the rationale behind the policy rested on what Paul Krugman terms a zombie idea – «a proposition that has been thoroughly refuted by analysis and evidence and should be dead – but won't stay dead because it serves a political purpose, appeals to prejudices, or both»[29].

Indeed, much of the tax savings were redirected toward stock buybacks and executive bonuses. In the first five years following its enactment, the law helped corporations repurchase nearly U.S. $ 4,2 trillion in their own stock – boosting share prices and delivering additional gains to shareholders[30]. Its distributional effects were starkly regressive. Executives earning U.S. $ 989,000 or more annually saw their income rise by an average of U.S. $ 50,000. Those in the 95th percentile (earning 176,000 or more) gained about U.S. $ 1,500. Meanwhile, for the vast majority of workers – those in the 0-90th percentile – disposable income remained unchanged[31]. Lower taxes means lower revenues, which in turn means both an increase in public debt and the reduction of spending in some areas to compensate for the shortfall in revenue – usually by cutting funding for environmental protection and social programs for the poor, like Medicaid and food assistance.

One could certainly expand the analysis with additional data from other national case studies, but the existing examples are already compelling: the rich and the powerful consistently act to obstruct any movement toward a more equitable distribution of wealth. Their actions prove that Warren Buffett was right when he remarked that «There's class warfare, alright, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning». This is the reality of class struggle from above: a sustained, strategic deployment of political and economic power by elites to entrench their dominance at the direct expense of the majority. Far from being a relic of the past, class warfare remains an active and deeply asymmetrical feature of contemporary capitalist societies.

5. A Post-Marxist View of Class and Class Struggle

Taken together, these four models reveal the heterogeneous terrain of contemporary class struggle – where conflict may originate from above or below, take economic or symbolic forms, unfold through organized movements or informal acts, and involve collective mobilization or individualized resistance. These models differ markedly from one another – so much so that they may appear to describe entirely unrelated phenomena. In some respects, both impressions are valid: they reflect distinct modalities, actors, and sites of struggle.

This discussion could easily be extended by engaging a broader range of theoretical frameworks and literature on class. But as noted earlier, my aim is not to produce a comprehensive compendium on class struggle. Rather, I seek to reignite interest in class analysis among post-Marxists by repositioning it beyond the narrow confines of proletarian struggle.

I begin with two commonplace observations. First, we live in deeply unequal societies, where privilege reproduces itself at the expense of the many. Second, the privileged and the many often mingle anonymously in shared physical spaces – on public transportation, in shops, restaurants, cinemas, and holiday destinations – but both remain acutely aware of the hierarchy, and of their respective place within it. Together, these observations underscore that inequality is both material and symbolic.

By *privilege*, I do not mean simply the sinecures derived from the ownership of the means of production. Privilege encompasses access to stable employment, reliable income, and access to healthcare; the ability to draw on informal networks formed in schools or

[29] Krugman (2013).
[30] Americans for Tax Fairness (2023).
[31] Marr *et al.* (2024), p. 9.

neighborhoods; freedom to eat out without financial anxiety; the possibility of regular vacations; a measure of social and political capital; and a sense of entitlement – often reinforced by having the right skin color or gender.

Similarly, *the many* are not only proletarians compelled to sell their labor power or face destitution. They may be manual laborers or highly educated graduates; members of the lower or middle classes; individuals with acceptable – even good – salaries working in environments that are not conducive to personal fulfilment; people who worry about paying mortgages or medical bills but participate in consumer society largely through debt. The many frequently live with a persistent sense of frustration, shaped by lives that did not unfold as they had hoped – whether due to economic hardship, daily humiliations inflicted by bosses or authorities, or the enduring feeling of being invisible in their interactions with institutions.

The point is that inequality between the haves and the have-nots extends beyond the traditional parameters of private property, surplus value, and the binary of productive versus unproductive labor. To avoid misunderstanding, I am not suggesting that class struggle is unrelated to capitalism. Rather, I argue that the framework developed by Marx – centered on ownership versus non-ownership of the means of production, and on exploitation as theorized by the labor theory of value – is too narrow to capture the full spectrum of dispossession. Class struggle is about disempowerment and inequality, but also involves battles over dignity, self-respect, and the meanings attached to social roles and status.

Machiavelli's widely cited observation illustrates this wider sense of class struggle: «The people don't want to be dominated or oppressed by the nobles, and the nobles want to dominate and oppress the people»[32]. This formulation is significant because it shifts the understanding of class conflict away from the classical theory of value toward a more expansive terrain shaped by domination, exclusion, and subordination rooted in disparities of wealth, status, and power. Domination serves as Machiavelli's central variable in the give and take between the nobles and the people, even as differences in symbolic and social capital are implicitly embedded in these categories. The section on class struggle from above examined how the modern analogues of the nobles – such as the oligarchic and political elites in the United States – actively work to preserve their position of dominance. The other side of this dynamic is how the people counter subordination and challenge the extraction of agricultural produce, surplus value, and the lives of those recruited to fight in elite-driven wars.

Two closely related formulations of class prove particularly useful for this analysis. The first, developed by Przeworski, favors the term *working people* over proletarians. He argues that under contemporary conditions, «It is not the proletariat that is being formed into a class: it is a variety of persons some of whom are separated from the system of production»[33]. This perspective avoids defining the working class – or, as he terms it, the class of workers – solely by reference to non-ownership of the means of production or direct involvement in productive labor. Instead, Przeworski broadens the conception of workers to include all those who must sell their labor to survive. In this view, workers include not only traditional proletarians but all wage earners. More precisely, the term refers to the subset of wage earners who come to perceive their subordination and limited access to the socially generated wealth as a structural injustice worth contesting. As Przeworski puts it:

> The strategy can be extended to the formation of the working class defined as "the masses" or "the people", all those exploited and oppressed, poor and miserable. This strategy focuses on prices, taxes, and employment rather than on wages and conditions

[32] Machiavelli (2019), p. 34.
[33] Przeworski (1985), p. 90.

> of work; and it incorporates under the umbrella of "the people" the petite bourgeoisie and the unemployed[34].

This view of workers moves beyond Poulantzas's more restrictive conception of the working class, which is anchored in the condition of being exploited and engaged in productive labor. In contrast, Przeworski's more expansive and inclusive category of *working people* resonates with designations such as the masses or the people. Working people encompasses the unemployed, small proprietors, and others subjected to various forms of structural subordination. As previously noted, while the expression "working people" remains attuned to questions of distribution and inequality, it also captures a wider spectrum of salaried individuals who – despite occupying heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory positions within the economy – may potentially be constituted as a politically cohesive class.

Scott offers a second formulation that closely parallels Przeworski's. Like Przeworski, he shifts the focus from structural positions to the lived experiences of struggle and material extraction – pointing not only to wages, but also to taxes, prices, rents, land, labor, and symbolic hierarchies such as prestige. For both thinkers, class is not a pre-given category, but one that is shaped and reconstituted through the dynamics of struggle itself. As Scott writes:

> At a first approximation, I might claim that class resistance includes any act(s) by member(s) of a subordinate class that is or are intended either to mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes. While this definition [...] is not without problems, it does have several advantages. It focuses on the material basis of class relations and class struggle. It allows for both individual and collective acts of resistance. It does not exclude those forms of ideological resistance that challenge the dominant definition of the situation and assert different standards of justice and equity. Finally, it focuses on intentions rather than consequences, recognizing that many acts of resistance may fail to achieve their intended result[35].

Scott's schema is relatively straightforward and consists of four key components. First, echoing Marx's view of class struggle, it anchors class in material conditions. He frames the confrontation between subordinate groups and elites – Machiavelli's people and nobles, or Przeworski's working people and dominant classes – as a struggle over access to land, labor, and respect. Second, Scott allows for both individual and collective forms of resistance, thereby diverging from the Marxist emphasis on class as a necessarily organized, collective, endeavor. Third, his account foregrounds alternative standards of justice and equality articulated by subordinate groups, in contrast to those imposed by dominant actors. Fourth, Scott focuses on the intentions behind acts of resistance rather than their outcomes. While this may initially seem voluntarist or idealist, he justifies this choice by rejecting success as a necessary condition for identifying class struggle. Failed attempts, or even outright defeats, are not anomalies but integral to the structure of possibilities of the politics of class.

In bringing together Scott and Przeworski, we glimpse a vision of class struggle that is not merely a reaction to economic dispossession but a contest over recognition, dignity, and the politics of voice – echoing Rancière's insight that domination entails the wronging of equality by rendering some voices less worthy than others. Their work invites us to rethink class as a site of symbolic and material struggle – one that is historically contingent and must be elucidated casuistically – through the polemics, conflicts and claims that emerge in the course of struggle itself. If inequality today is both tangible and symbolic, so

[34] Ivi, p. 91.
[35] Scott (1985), p. 290.

too must our concept of class struggle be: lived, contested, and redefined in the spaces where voices are denied and hierarchies are made visible.

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