



# Knowledge, Class, and Economics

Marxism without Guarantees

Edited by Theodore Burczak,  
Robert Garnett, and Richard McIntyre

ROUTLEDGE  


# Knowledge, Class, and Economics

*Knowledge, Class, and Economics: Marxism without Guarantees* surveys the “Amherst School” of non-determinist Marxist political economy, 40 years on: its core concepts, intellectual origins, diverse pathways, and enduring tensions. The volume’s 30 original essays reflect the range of perspectives and projects that comprise the Amherst School—the interdisciplinary community of scholars that has enriched and extended, while never ceasing to interrogate and recast, the anti-economistic Marxism first formulated in the mid-1970s by Stephen Resnick, Richard Wolff, and their economics Ph.D. students at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

The title captures the defining ideas of the Amherst School: an open-system framework that presupposes the complexity and contingency of social-historical events and the parallel “overdetermination” of the relationship between subjects and objects of inquiry, along with a novel conception of class as a process of performing, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. Readers encounter novel discussions of overdetermination and class in the context of economic theory, postcolonial theory, cultural studies, continental philosophy, economic geography, economic anthropology, psychoanalysis, and literary theory/studies.

Though Resnick and Wolff’s writings serve as a focal point for this collection, their works are ultimately decentered—contested, historicized, reformulated. The topics explored will be of interest to proponents and critics of the post-structuralist/postmodern turn in Marxian theory and to students of economics as social theory across the disciplines (economics, geography, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, political theory, philosophy, and literary studies, among others).

**Theodore Burczak** is Professor of Economics at Denison University and author of *Socialism after Hayek*.

**Robert Garnett** is Associate Dean and Honors Professor of the Social Sciences in the John V. Roach Honors College at Texas Christian University, USA.

**Richard McIntyre** is Professor of Economics and Chair of the Economics Department, University of Rhode Island, USA.

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### **Knowledge, Class, and Economics**

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*Edited by Theodore Burczak, Robert Garnett, and Richard McIntyre*

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Marxism without Guarantees

**Edited by  
Theodore Burczak, Robert Garnett,  
and Richard McIntyre**

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**For Steve and Rick,  
our teachers, comrades, and friends**

“A superb achievement! This is the definitive collection dedicated to the work of Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, the influential scholars who, with their “Amherst School” students, changed Marxian economics forever. It includes piercing yet appreciative evaluations of their bedrock concepts: class, Marxian knowledge, and overdetermination. The authors in this compendium are all the right commentators (former students, colleagues, and famed social theorists), and the editors—Theodore Burczak, Robert Garnett, and Richard McIntyre—have turned in the most insightful, lucid, and useful introductory essay to the work of Resnick and Wolff yet written. A must for undergraduates, graduates, scholars, and activists everywhere, for whom Marxism remains a living tradition.”

*Jack Amariglio, Professor of Economics, Merrimack College, USA*

“Through their teaching as much as their writing, Richard Wolff and the late Stephen Resnick advanced Marxian analysis beyond simple materialism to develop a Marxism that recognizes the importance of multiple forms of identity where social life is interwoven with different types of exploitation and resistance. *Knowledge, Class, and Economics* provides a superb introduction to Resnick and Wolff’s thought and offers a set of 30 challenging, fascinating, and stimulating essays that engage with it.”

*Gerald Friedman, Professor of Economics, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, USA*

“History’s ironies never end. The interest in Marxism is now more intense than it has been in decades. This collection showcases the scope and depth of the innovativeness of an approach that has breathed new life into Marxism: one ‘without guarantees,’ one that offers ‘hope without guarantees,’ a Marxism that calls for continuous reflection, for re-thinking Marxism indeed.”

*Serap Ayşe Kayatekin, Professor of Economics and Social Science, American College of Thessaloniki, Greece*

“This incisive and wide-ranging collection does far more than commemorate the moment of the Amherst School and the possibilities of rethinking Marxism these past thirty years. It shows us what radical thinking looks like today. *Knowledge, Class, and Economics* will soon be required reading across the social sciences and humanities.”

*Andrew Parker, Professor of French and Comparative Literature, Rutgers University*

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# Contributors

**Masato Aoki** is Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of Economics at Simmons College where he teaches in the Honors learning community program and the College of Arts and Sciences. His primary research interests include Marxian economic and social theory and the political economy of education.

**Rajesh Bhattacharya** is Assistant Professor in the Public Policy and Management Group at Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta. He has a Ph.D. in economics from University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His research interests include the political economy of development (particularly issues of informality and exclusion), Indian economic history, and Marxian theory.

**Snehashish Bhattacharya** is Assistant Professor of Economics at South Asian University, New Delhi, India.

**Theodore Burczak** is Professor of Economics at Denison University and author of *Socialism after Hayek* (University of Michigan Press, 2006).

**Antonio Callari** is the Sigmund M. and Mary B. Hyman Professor of Economics at Franklin and Marshall College.

**Lorrayne Carroll** is Associate Professor of English, Women and Gender Studies Faculty, University of Southern Maine, Portland. Dr. Carroll teaches and conducts research in early American studies, women and gender studies, and literacy studies. She writes with Joseph Medley on the intersections of economic and cultural formations, specifically on the cultural productions that arise in response to neoliberal economic policies in China and elsewhere.

**Anjan Chakrabarti** is Professor of Economics, University of Calcutta. His research interests include Marxian theory, development economics, Indian economics, postcolonial economics, and political philosophy. He has authored or edited six books and over 50 academic articles. His latest major work, co-authored with Anup Kumar Dhar and Byasdeb Dasgupta, is *The Transition of the Indian Economy: Globalization, Capitalism*

*and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2015). He was awarded the VKRV Rao Prize in Economics in 2008.

**Joseph W. Childers** is Professor of English and Dean of the Graduate Division at the University of California, Riverside. He specializes in Marxist, post-Marxist, and historicist theory and criticism, the English novel, and Victorian studies, with a recent focus on working-class and immigrant literature.

**Stephen Cullenberg** is Professor of Economics at the University of California, Riverside, where he served as Dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences from 2006 to 2014.

**George DeMartino** is Professor of Economics in the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver where he is Co-Director of the MA Degree in Global Finance, Trade and Economic Integration. He has written extensively on economics and ethics, and he is the author of *Global Economy, Global Justice: Theoretical Objections and Policy Alternatives to Neoliberalism* (Routledge, 2000) and *The Economist's Oath: On the Need for and Content of Professional Economic Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2011). He is also co-editor, with Deirdre McCloskey, of the *Oxford Handbook of Professional Economic Ethics* (2016).

**Anup Dhar** is Associate Professor in the School of Human Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi, where he is also Director of the Centre for Development Practice. He is currently a member of the editorial board of the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*. His research interest includes psychoanalysis, philosophy of science, social and political philosophy, and development studies. He is co-author (with Anjan Chakrabarty and Byasdeb Dasgupta) of *The Transition of the Indian Economy: Globalization, Capitalism and Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

**Faruk Eray Düzenli** is Associate Professor of Economics at St. Mary's College of Maryland and a member of the editorial board of *Rethinking Marxism*. His most recent publications include "Surplus-Producing Labour as a Capability: A Marxian Contribution to Amartya Sen's Revival of Classical Political Economy" in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics* and "Did Marx Fetishize Labor?" in *Rethinking Marxism*.

**Kenan Erçel** received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; he is now Associate Director at the Fair Labor Association in Washington, D.C., and a member of the editorial board of *Rethinking Marxism*.

**Harriet Fraad** is a mental health counselor and hypnotherapist in New York City who speaks and writes about the intersection of Marxism and personal life. Some of her latest articles appear in *Imagine Living in a Socialist USA* (Harper, 2014), *Logos* (November 2014), *Truthout* (November

2014), and *The Psychohistory Journal* (Winter 2015). She, Richard Wolff, and Stephen Resnick are primary authors of *Class Struggle on the Home Front* (Palgrave, 2009).

**Robert Garnett** is Associate Dean and Honors Professor of the Social Sciences in the John V. Roach Honors College at Texas Christian University. His research interests include the meaning and value of pluralism in economics and the moral philosophy of Adam Smith, particularly its connections to Hegel and Marx.

**Michael Hillard** is Professor of Economics at the University of Southern Maine. He has published widely in the history of capitalism, labor relations, and labor history in journals such as *Labor History*, *Labor: Studies in the Working Class History of the Americas*, *Review of Radical Political Economics*, and *Rethinking Marxism*. His current project is *The Fall of the Paper Plantation: A History of Capitalism, Work, and Struggle in Maine's Paper Industry* (forthcoming).

**Donald W. Katzner** is Professor of Economics and former Chair of the Economics Department at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His published research has spanned six general areas: microeconomic and general equilibrium theory, the methodology of building models and analyzing phenomena when measures of appropriate variables are neither available nor reasonably constructible, the analysis of uncertain economic phenomena when it is inappropriate to employ notions of probability (as is often the case when considering economic decision making), the relationship between culture and economic behavior, internal organizational issues within the firm, and the history of the UMass Economics Department during the tumultuous period, 1965–1981.

**Vincent Lyon-Callo** is Professor of Anthropology at Western Michigan University. He is the author of *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance: Activist Ethnography in the Homeless Sheltering Industry* (University of Toronto Press) and numerous journal articles drawing on his decades of academic research and social service work on homelessness.

**Yahya M. Madra** received his Ph.D. in economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; he teaches economics at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey. He has been a member of the editorial board of *Rethinking Marxism* since 1998. He has published and co-authored articles on various issues in political economy in *Development & Change*, *Antipode*, *Journal of Economic Issues*, *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, *Subjectivity*, and *European Journal of History of Economic Thought*. Currently he is working on two books: *Late Neoclassical Economics: Restoration of Theoretical Humanism in Contemporary Economic Theory* (Routledge, 2017)

and (with Ceren Özselçuk) *Sexuating Class: A Psychoanalytical Critique of Political Economy*.

**Richard McIntyre** is Professor of Economics and Political Science and Chair of the Economics Department at the University of Rhode Island. He is the author of *Are Worker Rights Human Rights?* (University of Michigan Press) and editor of the Routledge book series *New Political Economy*.

**Joseph Medley** is Associate Professor of Economics in the Department of Economics, Sociology, and Criminology at the University of Southern Maine. He teaches and conducts research primarily in economic development, focusing on the international economic policies and practices of the IMF, World Bank, and WTO as well as on the history of Chinese economic development. He is currently teaching courses in these areas and on the topic of sustainable, local cooperative development.

**Claude Misukiewicz** is a historian and managing editor of *History of Political Economy*.

**Warren Montag** is the Brown Family Professor of Literature at Occidental College. His most recent books include *The Other Adam Smith* (with Mike Hill, Stanford University Press, 2014) and *Althusser and His Contemporaries* (Duke University Press, 2013). Montag is also editor of *Décalages*, a journal on Althusser and his circle, and translator of Etienne Balibar's *Identity and Difference: John Locke and the Invention of Consciousness* (Verso, 2013).

**Fred Moseley** is Professor of Economics at Mount Holyoke College. His most recent work is *Money and Totality: A Macro-Monetary Interpretation of Marx's Logic in Capital and the End of the "Transformation Problem"* (2016, Brill). He is also editor of the recently published English translation of *Marx's Economic Manuscript of 1864–65* (2016, Brill) and was the original organizer of the research group that came to be known as the International Symposium on Marxian Theory, which has published nine collections on Marxian Theory.

**Bruce Norton** is Associate Professor and economics program coordinator at San Antonio College in San Antonio, Texas.

**Erik K. Olsen** is Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Missouri Kansas City and research fellow of the Rutgers School of Management and Labor Relations. His research areas include Marxian political economy, microeconomics (with applications to the economics of cooperation and employee ownership), and urban economics. He has published widely in these areas and is currently co-editing the *Handbook of Marxian Economics*.

**Elizabeth Ramey** is Associate Professor of Economics at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York.

**Jan Rehmann** teaches at Union Theological Seminary in New York and at the Free University in Berlin. His research interests include theories of ideology, philosophy of religion, Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Ernst Bloch. He is co-editor of the journal *Das Argument* and of the *Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism*. His published works include *Max Weber: Modernization as Passive Revolution. A Gramscian Analysis* (Haymarket, 2015), *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection* (Haymarket, 2014), *Pedagogy of the Poor* (2011, with Willie Baptist), “Postmodern Links-Nietzscheanism – Deleuze and Foucault: Eine Dekonstruktion” (*Argument*, 2004), “Die Kirchen im NS-Staat” (*Argument*, 1986).

**Bruce Roberts** has published widely in the areas of value theory and the history of economics. He is currently interested in competing conceptions of money and their implications for a value-theoretic understanding of the financial sector.

**David F. Ruccio** is Professor of Economics at the University of Notre Dame. He was a founding member of the journal *Rethinking Marxism* and served as its editor for 12 years (1997–2009). Ruccio is the author of over 80 journal articles and book chapters. His books include *Development and Globalization: A Marxian Class Analysis* (Routledge), *Economic Representations: Both Academic and Everyday* (Routledge), *Postmodern Moments in Modern Economics* (Princeton University Press), *Postmodernism, Economics, and Knowledge* (Routledge), and *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory* (Wesleyan University Press).

**Ellen Russell** is Assistant Professor in Digital Media and Journalism and Society, Culture and Environment programs at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her recent publications include *New Deal Banking Reform and Keynesian Welfare State Capitalism* (2008) and “Why the Rising Tide Doesn’t Lift all Boats: Wages and Bargaining Power in Neoliberal Canada” (*Studies in Political Economy*, 2016). She was formerly senior economist at the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and is an occasional columnist on economic affairs for *rabble.ca*.

**Maliha Safri** is Assistant Professor of Economics at Drew University. She has published articles in *Signs*, *The Economist’s Voice*, *Rethinking Marxism*, and *Performing Diverse Economies* (2016). She has worked for many years in popular economic literacy with worker cooperatives and immigrant communities in New York and New Jersey.

**Ian J. Seda-Irizarry** is Assistant Professor in the Economics Department at the John Jay College, CUNY, where he teaches courses on Political

Economy and History of Economic Thought. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

**Paul Smith** is Professor of Cultural Studies at George Mason University and a long-time member of the Marxist Literary Group. His latest book, *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, was published by Temple University Press in 2011.

**Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak** is University Professor and a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. A literary theorist, feminist critic, postcolonial theorist, and professor of comparative literature, she is best known for her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and for her 1976 translation of, and introduction to, Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*.

**Andriana Vlachou** is Associate Professor at the Athens University of Economics and Business. She has published articles on the political economy of the environment and natural resources in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics, Capitalism, Nature, Socialism, Review of International Political Economy, Review of Radical and Political Economics, Rethinking Marxism, Science & Society*, and other venues. Her edited volumes include *Contemporary Economic Theory: Radical Critiques of Neoliberalism* (Macmillan 1999), *Economic Crisis and Greece* (with N. Theocarakis and M. Milonakis, 2011). She is an editor-at-large of the journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*.

**Richard D. Wolff** is Professor Emeritus, Economics, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and currently Visiting Professor of Economics at the New School University, New York. He is co-author (with Stephen Resnick) of *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy* (1987), *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR* (2002), *New Departures in Marxian Theory* (2006), and *Contending Economic Theories: Neoclassical, Keynesian and Marxian* (2012). His own recent works include *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (2012) and *Capitalism’s Crisis Deepens: Essays on the Global Economic Downturn, 2010–2014* (2015).

# Introduction

## Marxism without guarantees

*Richard McIntyre, Theodore Burczak,  
and Robert Garnett*

This volume offers a broad, reflective survey of the “Amherst School” of Marxist political economy. The Amherst School developed around the work of Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, two economists who came to the University of Massachusetts-Amherst in 1974 as faculty members in a new radical economics program. Beginning with a reading group on *Capital* and other key texts in what they identified as a dissenting, non-determinist tradition within Western Marxism, Resnick and Wolff worked with their Ph.D. students and colleagues from other UMass departments to develop a post-Althusserian critique of economic determinism and a robust class-analytic method of analyzing societies. These ideas were refined and recast in the late 1970s through an initial wave of dissertations, articles, and book chapters in economic history, economic theory, history of economic thought, economic development, and comparative economic systems. The Amherst School expanded further in the 1980s and '90s, shaped by new dialogues within economics and even more by encounters with scholars and perspectives from anthropology, psychoanalysis, evolutionary biology, feminist theory, geography, post-structuralism, postmodernism, postcolonial theory and other fields beyond economics. Through the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, founded in 1988, and a series of large international conferences and smaller semi-annual retreats held on the UMass campus and elsewhere, the Amherst School became a diverse, transdisciplinary space in which to explore the salience of non-determinist Marxian approaches (in particular, the concepts of overdetermination and class) in the context of broad intellectual and social movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The purpose of this Introduction is to locate the Amherst School with respect to its various antecedents and similar groups in contemporary social theory. In doing so, we identify many concepts and arguments addressed in greater detail by our contributors in the chapters that follow. Marxism at its best is a way of critically analyzing society to support a liberatory vision of a better world. But Marxism also has a lot to account for. The Amherst School seeks to explain the enormous social damage caused by attachments to economic determinism, while at the same time

reclaiming from Marx and the dissenting Marxian tradition a powerful, epistemically self-aware, and ethically reflexive class theory to analyze contemporary capitalist and socialist societies.

### **Marxism without guarantees**

What is a Marxism “without guarantees”? Was it not precisely the guarantees that attracted so many adherents to Marxism in the 20th century—the guarantee of being on the side of history, the guarantee of having the true social theory? And does this determinism not give Marxism some credence in popular politics, where the notion that “it’s the economy, stupid” is taken as common sense?

Most of the authors of this collection abandon those guarantees. Why do they do this? However well-intentioned its proponents might have been, the course of Marxism’s development in the 20th century is probably sufficient to indicate that these would-be guarantees have been tremendously damaging. Yet Marxism is so generally identified as a form of economic determinism that it took a detailed genealogy of a viable dissenting tradition within Marxism by Resnick and Wolff to build a convincing case that there would be something left of the Marxian tradition if it dispensed with that determinism.

What does a non-determinist Marxism look like? The beginning of an answer starts with the new reading of Marx’s *Capital* undertaken in the 1970s by Resnick, Wolff, and a contingent of graduate students at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. They first constituted themselves in the late 1970s as a “journal group” to develop and extend this new reading and eventually founded the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, which began publication in 1988, with Jack Amariglio as its founding editor. In his essay here the second editor, David Ruccio, shows how the Marxian critique of economics and of capitalism developed in the pages of that journal over nearly three decades.

The French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser, deeply influenced the journal group. Althusser and his Paris students (Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Jacques Rancière, and Pierre Macherey) had famously gone back to the text of *Capital* in the early 1960s to produce the landmark *Reading Capital*, published in French in 1965, although only the essays by Althusser and Balibar were printed in the 1968 French edition, which was translated into English in 1970.

As Rick Wolff notes in the interview that follows this chapter, he and Resnick discovered Althusser through the work of Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, two UK-based sociologists who had utilized some of Althusser’s concepts to produce a non-essentialist analysis of modes of production and social formations. At the time, Hindess and Hirst’s approach was exactly what Resnick and Wolff were seeking to counter the determinism of traditional Marxism. They began studying and discussing Althusser’s

work in the early 1970s and later met with him in Paris, as their own thinking evolved in a similar direction once they began teaching in the newly established radical economics department at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.<sup>1</sup>

Althusser and his circle sought to criticize the existing Stalinist readings of Marx while staying within a generally Marxian framework. The “traditional” Marxism of the Second International (1889–1916) and official Marxism (after the Bolshevik revolution) were based on a particular reading of Marx and especially Engels. History was seen as having a subject (class struggle) and an end point (communism). Marxism was understood as the science of society, building upon the parallels that Engels drew between the physical and natural sciences. This Marxism provided an integrated world outlook that was seen as a *reflection* of reality consonant with working class life, past and present.

Each form of society was understood to exist in tension between the technological *forces of production* and the legal and organizational *relations of production*. As the forces developed within a fixed set of production relations, these tensions would build and ultimately “burst asunder” in a moment of revolution and transition. Driven by technological change, society would pass through a series of modes of production: ancient, slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist, and finally communist, marking the end of history. The communist revolution would replace the anarchic and uncontrolled process of value creation and distribution under capitalism with a rationally planned, classless society. The task of the revolutionary socialist was not so much to make the revolution but to take advantage of it when it came. History would proceed dialectically but with “iron necessity towards inevitable results” (Marx [1867] 1976, 90). This sketch of Marxian orthodoxy is a bit of a caricature but serves to situate the debates among radicals in Germany and Russia in the years leading up to World War I and gives a sense of the official Marxism that emerged in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s. There were debates between proponents of political and economic determinisms but no debate about determinism itself.

The Great War provoked a crisis in Marxism, first because the workers’ movement failed to rise above national differences, as each of the working class parties ended up supporting its government. Then with the establishment and securing of the Bolshevik regime by the end of the 1920s, there was now a successful Marxist-inspired revolution that had firmly consolidated state power, putting it in position to impose its own views on Marxist parties and theoreticians working for the overthrow of capitalism elsewhere.

Even so, the Frankfurt School in Germany and Antonio Gramsci in Italy began to move away from the guarantees given by traditional Marxism in the interwar period. Gramsci saw the Russian revolution as “the revolution against *Capital*” (Gramsci 1917). Capitalism had been expected to meet its great moment of crisis in the regions where it was most developed:

Germany, Western Europe more broadly, and the United States, not in “backward” and mostly non-capitalist Russia (Marx and Engels [1848] 1970, 44). Gramsci also rejected the increasingly loud voice of Moscow in proclaiming the Russian revolution as the model for others, though he held on to the official Marxist belief that the working class must be the agent of socialist revolution because it occupied capitalism’s most strategic position.

The Frankfurt School did not retain this belief. Cut off from political practice by the crisis of the workers’ movement during and after World War I, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and others at the Institute for Social Research returned in the 1930s to methodological questions that the Second International and the Bolsheviks had closed off. They sought answers in psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, non-positivist sociology, and other “bourgeois” disciplines. Here was the beginning of a more open Marxism, albeit one that largely neglected politics and the state.

Marxisms proliferated after World War II. First there was a surge of interest in Marxism outside Europe, in China of course but also in parts of Africa, India, Latin America, and the Middle East. Second, and more directly relevant to the development of the Amherst School, there was an explosion of Marxist theory in France and Italy. The prestige of the Communist-dominated resistance during World War II led to a situation in which the Communists were the main political opposition in both countries. Though the French Communist party was Stalinist, there was an unusually open and vibrant scholarly discussion of Marxism in France, especially in philosophy and history.

The Paris and Amherst readings were similar but differently nuanced, partly because Althusser and his circle read *Capital* as philosophers, while the Resnick-Wolff group approached it as economists. Both Resnick and Wolff had been trained at elite economics graduate departments and were steeped in the Marxian political economy of the *Monthly Review* school. They adopted key concepts from Althusser, such as the epistemological break between the early and mature writings of Marx, contradiction and overdetermination as a new way of understanding causality, and the critique of historicism and humanism. They discerned a dissenting tradition in Marxism that emphasized culture and epistemology rather than just economics by reading back from Althusser through the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, and Lucacs. They found links between this dissenting tradition and the proliferation of non-European Marxisms after World War II that developed orthogonally to the official Marxism of the Soviet Union, shaped by the differently positioned societies of the emerging postcolonial world.

Though they borrowed the notion of overdetermination from Althusser, who in turn had appropriated it from Freud, Resnick and Wolff leaned more heavily on the concept and ultimately recast it in a radically non-determinist way. Overdetermination constituted the key element of Resnick

and Wolff's critique of economic determinism. If every social site and level of society (enterprise, family, state, economy, nature, politics, culture, etc.) exists as a bundle of internal relationships and conflicts, and if every site and level affects every other site and level, then our vision of society needs to be decentered. How can we say that any one site determines all others, even in "the last instance"? They replaced the base-superstructure model of traditional Marxism with a model of a decentered totality.

Figure I.1 illustrates what we are calling traditional or official Marxism. The forces and relations of production are affected by culture and politics, but the primary direction of causality runs from base to superstructure. Althusser softened this, saying that the base is determinant only in the last instance.

Resnick and Wolff went further, as illustrated by the series of images in Figure I.2.<sup>2</sup> In a centralized system (A) one aspect of social life is the fundamental cause of everything else, but the other nodes of social life do not interact with each other nor do they significantly influence the fundamental cause. This is similar to the crudest forms of traditional and official Marxism. The distributed model (C) is closer to the Amherst School vision, especially if we presume these dots to be connected to each other in the back of a three-dimensional representation. In other words, there are multiple entry points into social analysis, and every aspect of social life potentially influences every other aspect. Of course it is possible in

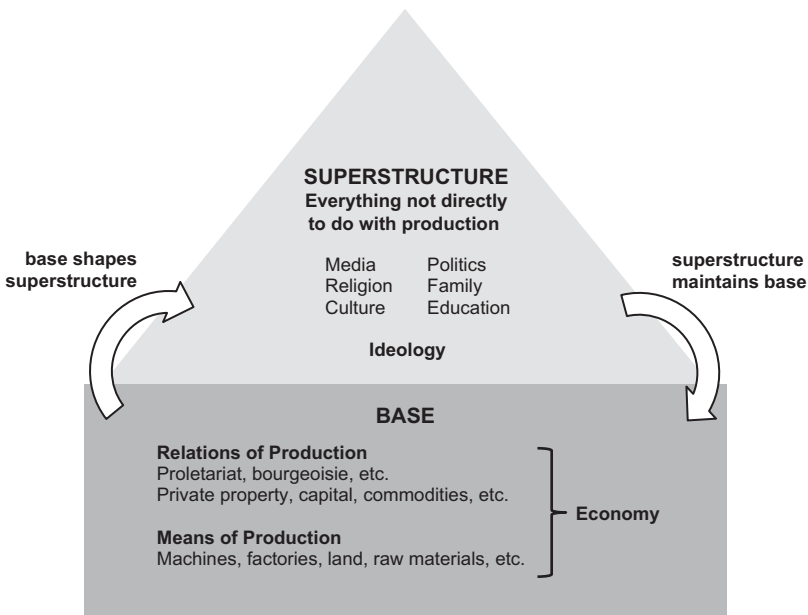


Figure I.1 Traditional Marxist image of society: base and superstructure.

many particular situations to draw a convincing portrait of the economy as determining other parts of society, but this picture is always a creation and not a mere reflection. Image B in Figure I.2 might represent such a conjunctural analysis.

Resnick and Wolff's vision of society (or any nexus of social relations) as a decentered totality opened a space for cultural processes to be analyzed in Marxist terms and for Marxist economic concepts to be understood as cultural forms. Cultural theorists have long made use of dissenting Marxism, especially of the Frankfurt School, but Resnick and Wolff, Jack Amarglio, Antonio Callari, J.K. Gibson-Graham, and David Ruccio created new insights that stimulated discussion between the Amherst School and contemporary cultural theorists, though not without some controversy as shown in the essays below by Montag, Childers, Madra, Rehmann, and Smith.

Overdetermination also has consequences for how we think about theory itself. If we are unable to stand outside of society when we view it, then our starting point must always influence our theories. How we get to that starting point has a lot to do with who we are as people and the great varieties of human culture that each of us always already inhabits. As Resnick and Wolff often said, we care about class processes because ... well, it's a long story having to do with our personal history and our beliefs that class has been repressed as an important concept, particularly in the United States, that class processes are important aspects of contemporary social life, and so on. But this means we can only say our theory is *different* from others, not necessarily more *objective*. Consistent with the history of the dissenting Marxian tradition, Resnick and Wolff invoke the works of Gramsci, Althusser, and other Marxists to make this point, as well as non-Marxist sources such as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's

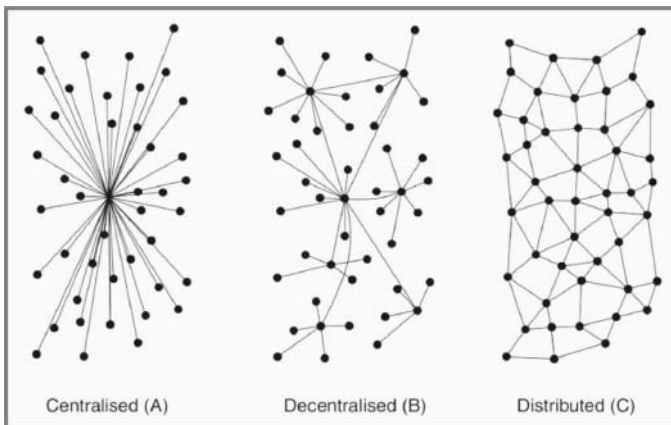


Figure I.2 Centralized, decentralized, and distributed totalities.

*Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1986) and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). This argument is perhaps the most troubling to their radical economist peers who want to show that mainstream economics is ideological whereas the radical alternative is objectively correct. The Resnick-Wolff approach implies that the first part of that sentence is true, but the second is not. In this, their position is consistent with Althusser's famous no-end-of-ideology thesis. Class becomes the *entry point* for Marxian theory but not an ontological or epistemological essence.

### Knowledge, class, and economics

As noted above, the Amherst group differed from the Paris group by reading *Capital* as economists rather than philosophers. One consequence of this difference was that the Amherst group paid closer attention to Marx's theory of value and exploitation. They took the critique of determinism and teleology back to the Marxian economics they had started with and saw that it needed to be transformed. In this, they differed from the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, whose *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) was inspired by Althusser but especially by Gramsci. Laclau and Mouffe dismissed the official Marxist essentialism of class identity and rejected the base-superstructure model. But though Laclau and Mouffe used economic concepts, they had no concept of the economy (Diskin and Sandler 1993). The Amherst group did. Laclau and Mouffe rejected key Marxian economics concepts such as class and labor-power as commodity as essentialist, leading to purely political definitions of capitalism and socialism. As Diskin and Sandler observed:

The effect of this recomposition is not merely to displace essentialist class concepts from their unique and privileged ontological position (the rightful and necessary comeuppance due every essentialism) but to collapse the theoretical structure of the economic space itself...the appearance of untheorized economic concepts in the second half of *HSS* represents a major consequence of the failure to extend the non-essentialist reconceptualization to the categories of political *economy*.  
(1993, 22–23)

In Laclau and Mouffe, the economy became an undertheorized construct to which culture and politics responded. The Amherst group went farther by *rethinking* rather than merely rejecting Marxian economic concepts. Chief among these was the notion of class.

Beginning in the late 1970s, Resnick and Wolff produced a series of articles that eventually comprised the bulk of their 1987 book, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy*.<sup>3</sup> These key essays carefully demonstrated that there was much good work in Marx's *oeuvre* and in the

Marxian tradition that did not adopt economic determinism and that a coherent class theory could be constructed by reading Marx's oeuvre as a theory of exploitation rather than (or in addition to) the laws of motion of capitalism. Resnick and Wolff approached *Capital*, in particular, under the influence of Althusser's concept of symptomatic reading. For Althusser, reading a theoretical text was like the Freudian analyst's interpretation of her/his patient's statements. One first had to construct the "problematic": the questions answered but never posed by the text (or posed hundreds of pages before or after the answers). *Capital*, on this reading, constituted a general theory of class society and not, or not only, a theory of laws of motion of an exclusively capitalist mode of production. The particular notion of class that Resnick and Wolff identified in Marx was defined in terms of relationships of exploitation. They read *Capital* as a long essay explicating the ways in which some people lived off the labor of others. Resnick and Wolff showed that over the course of *Capital's* three volumes, Marx unfolded a compelling theory of the class process, defined in terms of the performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor. Resnick and Wolff elaborated this new reading of Marx's economics in seven other books, and the theory of class they discovered in Marx inspired over seventy doctoral dissertations and many books, articles, and other media by their students and others.<sup>4</sup>

Resnick and Wolff's reading of Marx is innovative in two ways. First they argue strongly for reading all three volumes of *Capital*, placing equal importance on the appropriation and distribution of surplus that Marx discussed in the second and third volumes alongside the more famous analysis of the performance of surplus labor in the first book. They propose a distinction between the fundamental class process of surplus labor extraction (emphasized in Volume 1) and what they call the subsumed class process of distributing that surplus (emphasized in Volumes 2 and 3). They argue that focusing on these class processes, or using them as an entry point into social analysis, is Marxism's *differentia specifica*. Despite the perhaps unfortunate choice of label, the subsumed class process of surplus distribution is not less important than its production, and there are manifold distributions, especially in the form of capital accumulation and luxury consumption by capitalists described in Volume 1, and payments to merchants, bankers, and landlords detailed in Volume 3. Bruce Norton develops this idea most effectively, in this volume and elsewhere, and Norton and others examine different facets of the subsumed class process in the "Capitalism and class analysis" section below. The treatment of these subsumed classes and the move away from the simple two-class model is also relevant for the treatment of crisis, to which we come back briefly at the end.

Second, when using the notion of overdetermination to understand social causality, each site in society is seen to develop differently because of its complex constitution by all other sites. Social development will thus

likely be uneven rather than linear, uniform, and progressive, as in traditional Marxism. Marx developed his theory of capitalism by comparing it with slavery, feudalism, and other “pre-capitalist” production modes. The sense in Marx that these modes of production follow one another historically hardened into dogma in official Marxism. As an outcome of the notions of overdetermination and unevenness, Resnick and Wolff and others in the Amherst School discover multiple forms of class processes in *contemporary* society—not just capitalist, but also feudal, “ancient” (petty commodity production), and communal (McIntyre 1995). No society, even the United States, can be understood as simply capitalist so long as other forms of surplus labor are created in households, family-owned and -operated businesses, and worker cooperatives, and so long as much of economic life happens apart from the various fundamental class processes, as in the state and other organizations that function through receipt of distributed surplus labor. Many examples of this are developed in the two books Resnick and Wolff co-edited with J.K. Gibson-Graham, *Class and Its Others* (2000) and *Re-Presenting Class* (2001).

A symptomatic reading of the three volumes of *Capital* also has implications for how we understand the relationship among different parts of Marx’s text, as explained in Bruce Roberts’s essay. In the traditional reading, Volume 1 is considered foundational for the other volumes. But for the Amherst group, as Marx adds new determinations in Volumes 2 and 3, he literally changes the meaning of the concepts first introduced in Volume 1. For instance “value” means something different in Volumes 1 and 3. Resnick and Wolff sidestep much of the debate over Marxian value theory and the traditional transformation problem by insisting on this reading and the larger point that value-price relationships are not the object of Marx’s *Capital* but merely the theoretical means by which Marx renders visible the class dimensions of—the performance, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor time within—a capitalist economy. Long before the “new solution” to the transformation problem, Wolff, Roberts, and Antonio Callari had shown that the treatment of value-price relationships in Volumes 1 and 3 of *Capital* can be made consistent so long as one allows for the transformation of the concepts of value and value-form at various stages of Marx’s analysis (Wolff, Roberts and Callari 1982). In this volume, Bruce Roberts treats value itself as an overdetermined concept. Fred Moseley’s related chapter highlights the role of money in Marx’s theory of value and surplus value.

In emphasizing the need to read all three volumes of *Capital* with parts of *The Grundrisse* and *Theories of Surplus Value*, Resnick and Wolff draw attention to Marx’s general theory of class exploitation and the related importance of surplus labor distribution. The Neo-Marxism that developed out of the Monthly Review school and the Marxian revival of the 1970s focuses mostly on the labor process, the supposed tendency of the profit rate to fall, and one particular distribution of surplus, that to managers for the

purpose of accumulating capital. Resnick and Wolff's specification of the subsumed class process of surplus distribution opens a richer analysis of contemporary capitalism. The essays by Olsen, Hillard and McIntyre and by Misukiewicz utilize Resnick and Wolff's treatment of the subsumed class process to analyze the theory of the enterprise, contemporary management ideologies and the concept of planning in the work of the important New Dealer Lewis Lorwin.

The Resnick-Wolff approach bears some similarity to the new reading of *Capital* emerging in Germany. We will take Heinrich (2012) as representative of that reading, as his is the best-known treatment in English. Heinrich does not see Marx as primarily concerned with identifying key contradictions shaping capitalism's future, nor is he looking for specific hypotheses about what is behind the overall path that capitalism traverses, the inner nature of crises, etc. Rather, like Resnick and Wolff, the New German reading sees (1) Marx as devoted to developing a general theoretical framework, and (2) Marx's project as the illumination of capitalism's unfairness and the destructive effects it has on working people.

Heinrich reads Marx primarily as a critic of capitalism, not exploitation more generally. This is in contrast to Resnick and Wolff, who develop out of Marx a general theory of class processes, in which the linchpin category is surplus *labor*, which can be performed in a variety of contexts, and not surplus *value*. This difference has consequences for how one thinks about post-capitalist possibilities. For Heinrich, the transition beyond capitalism must still be an all-or-nothing change, and whereas he seems to see communism as a world without commodity production, Resnick and Wolff see it as a world without exploitative appropriation of surplus labor.

Thus, while the new German reading shares with the Amherst School critiques of economic determinism, historical teleology, and traditional (what Heinrich calls "worldview") Marxism, it retains the ideal of consciously regulated production according to the plans of the associated producers. Somehow, someday, it will be possible for the associated producers to see and to plan the whole. Hence, the new German reading rejects market socialism and does not consider the local and enterprise-centered shifts in class relations that are central for the Amherst School. Heinrich seems to have no real interest in value theory as recast by Wolff, Roberts, and Callari, perhaps because value theory is not as important if one thinks of capitalism as a singular, encompassing system that has to be transcended in total, with no real need to identify exploitation on a local level or to worry about non-class revenues, non-capitalist class processes, and the like. By contrast, Burczak's essay here conceives of a post-capitalist future that eliminates exploitation in production and includes considerable financial regulation, even while retaining private property and market exchange.

## Complex class societies and 21st-century socialism

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Stephen Cullenberg (1992) argued that socialism had failed because we asked too much of it. The socialist imaginary in supposedly scientific Marxism was utopian in that any problems in socialist societies were attributed to them being not socialist enough. In other words, when socialism fully arrived it would eradicate poverty, end racism and sexism, stop environmental degradation, entertain your visiting relatives, and so on. In a sense this was the mirror image of neoliberals who attributed any negatives associated with pro-market reforms to policies that were not sufficiently pro-market.

Cullenberg proposed a “thin” definition of socialism as an alternative to these “thick” descriptions. For him, socialism involved the predominance of collective forms of surplus appropriation, which he took to be the necessary but not sufficient condition for a good society. Ideals shared on the left, such as equality, ending alienation, promoting self-realization, community cohesion, and so on, could not be realized without ending the process by which some lived off the labor of others, i.e., exploitation. But it was significant that Cullenberg described this as necessary but not sufficient, as he saw the possibility of benevolent capitalisms and “hideous” communisms, a point made in more detail in the essay by Safri and Ercel. Russell uses these ideas to recast contemporary anti-capitalism, providing “hope without guarantees.”

Cullenberg rethought the concept “socialism” based on Resnick and Wolff’s class-analytic framework. Resnick and Wolff used that framework to analyze the most important example of “actually existing socialism,” the Soviet Union. From their perspective, the USSR had many successes in terms of economic growth, income and wealth equality, health care, cultural development, etc., and it had many failures in terms of personal freedoms, militarization, famines, etc. But it was generally and widely agreed that the Soviet Union was socialist. Not so according to Resnick and Wolff. For them, the Soviet revolution provoked a shift from private to state capitalism, and the collapse in 1991 swung the pendulum back the other way. They faulted Marxists for being overly concerned with power relationships and property ownership and unconcerned with class. As a consequence, many Marxists tended to think that changing who controlled the means of production (the state in the name of the workers) and who exerted power (the party in the name of the workers and peasants) changed society. Of course it did, but if Marxism’s key insight was about exploitative class relations, then these changes were subsidiary. According to Marxian class analysis, the appropriation of surplus labor by non-producers remained the same, even if the identity of the exploiters was altered, as commissars were substituted for capitalists. This leaves a different political legacy than the view that sees the Soviet experience as expressing the “failure of socialism.”

The characteristically postmodern propensity to see all types of class processes as possible simultaneously, rather than existing in a sequence of dominant forms, encourages the Amherst School to avoid interpreting the problems of contemporary capitalism as reducible to a primary contradiction between capital and labor.<sup>5</sup> Capitalist and non-capitalist class processes often coexist in a complex modern economy. Satya Gabriel (1989) used this insight to investigate petty commodity production, or as he preferred to call it, the “ancient” class process of self-exploitation. Dropping Marx’s assumption that the conditions of existence of non-capitalist modes are the antithesis of the conditions for the capitalist mode, he argued that there was no reason to believe that capitalism would overwhelm and erode the ancient class process. Bhattacharya’s essay here picks up this theme and explores the coexistence and reproduction of capitalist and non-capitalist class processes in contemporary India, while Ramey’s essay shows the tensions among feudal, ancient, and capitalist class processes in the recent history of American agriculture.

Understanding a complex economy to embody multiple class processes enables creative and contemporary explorations of non-capitalist, non-exploitative alternatives instead of “waiting for the revolution.” J.K. Gibson-Graham (1996) wonders why she can practice her feminism in everyday life while her Marxian revolutionary practice has to wait for some apocalyptic moment. Recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of contemporary economic life facilitates new political directions like, for instance, the work of the Community Economies Collective, which engages scholars and activists “to open the economy to ethical debate and provide a space within which to explore different economic practices and pathways” (Community Economies Collective 2016). The essays here by Carroll and Medley, Bhattacharya, Bhattacharya and Seda-Irizarry, Chakrabarti et al., and Spivak develop these and related perspectives on the postcolonial global economy, while DeMartino’s contribution explores the ethical implications of overdetermination in *Knowledge and Class* and in the work of the Community Economies collective.

The last section of the book develops a class analysis of everyday life. The essays by Fraad, Lyon-Callo, Ramey, Aoki, and Vlachou examine sex, homelessness, education, and ecology. The Amherst School’s attention to everyday life is not unique within Marxism but does mark the first attempt to use Marx’s class theory rather than alienation or other concepts of the “early Marx” to analyze daily, lived experiences in capitalism and socialism.<sup>6</sup> Harriet Fraad, in her individual work and also in her collaborations with Wolff and Resnick, is at the forefront in applying class analysis to personal and household arrangements. Surplus labor performance exists in the family and intimate relationships—such relations may be feudal, ancient, communist, and even capitalist—opening up the terrain of the family for class theory. That homelessness, education, and ecology are also class issues is “obvious” but little analyzed. These authors change that.

Once it seems possible to imagine the creation of socialism now rather than in some far-off revolutionary future, it makes sense that writers associated with the Amherst School would look at worker cooperatives as a form of non-exploitation that does not involve overthrowing the old or creating a new “system.” Foremost among these is Rick Wolff in his second career as a popularizer of Marxism and master of all media. In the interview with McIntyre, Wolff explains how his position with Resnick shifted over time, from being critics of “economic democracy” in the 1980s to proponents of “democracy at work” in the 21st century. They came to understand that democracy has a very particular and powerful meaning in the American context and that a discourse highlighting democracy can facilitate a discussion about class. That the millions who produce surplus labor have no say over its appropriation and distribution, while the few thousand people who sit on the board of directors do, is an insult to the notion of the United States as a democratic society.

With this entry point, Wolff argues for a “21st century socialism” based on what he calls worker self-directed enterprises. The transition to socialism is now envisioned not as a cataclysmic political event but as something emanating from cooperatively managed enterprises, or as Wolff puts it perhaps too provocatively when he refers to the various spinoffs and garage enterprises in Silicon Valley, as “the achievements of communist enterprises, operated by Republicans in Bermuda shorts in California” (Wolff, in Jhally 2009). This more “microeconomic” approach to creating participatory forms of production at the workplace has great popular appeal but leaves many questions open. How will democratic enterprises relate to the broader community and other social movements? How does the “great relocation” of capital from the old heartlands to the industrializing periphery affect the possibilities for workplace democracy *and* the ability of capitalists to buy off resistance, as they have often done? What about state power? All of these questions are on the table, a sign of a healthy and developing research program and political agenda (Wolff 2012).

We live in what is generally acknowledged to be a time of economic crisis. The difference between the Amherst approach and that of other schools of Marxism is illustrated by the dissimilar ways that crisis is explained. Radical political economists argue over whether a wage squeeze on profits, or disproportionality, or the tendency of the rate of profit to fall is the cause of crisis. Resnick and Wolff bypass this debate with the idea that capitalism *is* crisis and that any particular crisis is most usefully explained by a conjunctural class analysis. In the last decade of their work together, they produced a series of such conjunctural studies on US consumerism, communisms, and the economic crisis of 2008 (Resnick and Wolff 2006, 2010).

Resnick and Wolff saw, before most others did, that this was a serious crisis of *capitalism*, not a banking crisis or a temporary downturn. The kind of capitalism we had from the 1970s to the mid-2000s, fueled by flat

wages, debt, and the increasing working day, week, year, and life, simply cannot go on. Wolff develops these ideas further in his filmed lecture, *Capitalism Hits the Fan* (Jhally 2009). The economic and political systems in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere are broken, and the key question is what comes next? A crucial project for Marxists is to demonstrate how transitions to various possible communal forms of surplus labor appropriation and distribution might resolve the crises endemic to private and state capitalisms *better* than merely oscillating between them. Marx's dramatic vision and ethic remain: The problems and contradictions peculiar to communisms are preferable to those of capitalisms (Resnick and Wolff 1995).

But Marx leaves us with neither a well worked out vision of a just post-capitalist society nor a scientific theory sufficient to explicate the "laws of motion" of capitalism. There is no sense pretending that he did. David Ruccio (2015) argues that Marx and Engels should be viewed instead as "critical utopian socialists." In other words, they criticize many of their socialist brethren for developing schemes that are not rooted in the way society actually works, but they also fill their writings with appreciation for the utopian impulse to build a better society and find the seeds of such a society in some unlikely places, like the utopian communities of Robert Owen and the Russian agricultural commune. Some ideas are *dismissible* as utopian because they flow from a purely moral and ethical position, but others are *dismissed* as utopian because they threaten existing social structures that allow the few to live off the surplus labor of the many. The utopian impulse is problematic without the theory of exploitation and a critical edge. But the impulse itself is necessary for any serious project of social change. To build a 21st-century socialism seems to us to require dropping old certainties and embracing a spirit of openness and experimentation.

## Notes

- 1 The history of the UMass-Amherst department is recounted in Katzner (2011). Katzner's essay in the present volume develops the affinity between some strands of non-Marxian economics and Resnick and Wolff's non-determinist Marxism. For a critical treatment of Katzner's account of UMass radical economics, see McIntyre (2015).
- 2 Thanks to Yahya Madra for pointing us to this diagram. He found it while searching for representations of "rhizome," a concept that Deleuze and Guattari borrowed from botany to indicate their preference for social theories with multiple entry points and hybrid objects as opposed to the "arborist" approach that is more consistent with base superstructure models (the tree and its roots). These particular diagrams were, ironically, developed by Paul Baran of the Rand Corporation (Baran 1964), in the early development of the Internet. This is Paul Baran the engineer, not Paul Baran the influential Marxian economist, though both Paul Barans were born in Eastern Europe, migrated to the United States, and worked at Stanford.

- 3 Another influential text along similar lines, though published a decade earlier, was Cutler, Hindess, Hirst and Hussain's *Marx's 'Capital' and Capitalism Today* (1977).
- 4 In addition to *Knowledge and Class*, some of the key texts are Callari, Cullenberg, and Biewener (1995); Callari and Ruccio (1995); Cassano (2009); Cullenberg (1994); Fraad, Resnick and Wolff (1994); Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006); Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2000, 2001); Resnick and Wolff (2002, 2006); and Ruccio and Amariglio (2003).
- 5 These ideas were developed most effectively in the work of Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (1996, 2006) and their colleagues in the Community Economies network with their notions of deconstructing capitalism and diverse economies.
- 6 Lefebvre ([1947] 1991) is a good example of the alienation approach.

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**Part I**

**Knowledge, class,  
and economics**

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# 1 A conversation with Rick Wolff

*Richard McIntyre*

Conducted over several days in New York City, this extended interview explores Wolff's early years as a product of the *Monthly Review* school of post-World War II U.S. Marxism, the formation and development of his partnership with Steve Resnick, the establishment of and enduring divisions within the radical economics Ph.D. program at UMass-Amherst, the shift in Resnick and Wolff's work after their encounters with Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst's *Pre-capitalist Modes of Production* and the writings of Louis Althusser in the 1970s, and their ongoing collaborative work with current and former Ph.D. students that led to the founding of the journal *Rethinking Marxism* in the late 1980s. The interview also covers tensions between the epistemological and class aspects of Resnick and Wolff's work, Wolff's recent popular advocacy of worker self-directed enterprises, and the relationship between workplace democracy and other social movements.

*You initially came out of the Monthly Review School of Marxism. Can you tell us a little about how this influenced you – and Steve, too, if that's possible?*

For both Steve and me, the *Monthly Review* School of economics was an important influence. I had grown up knowing Harry Magdoff and Paul Sweezy ever since high school. My parents were personal friends of both Magdoff and his wife and Sweezy and his wife. So I moved into being one of their students in almost a family kind of way, because they would socialize together. And in the case of Magdoff, there was an assumption that if anything ever happened to my parents, I would kind of go into that family. It was never put in so many words, but my parents let me know there had been "conversations."

When I graduated from college and decided to go to graduate school rather than to be a lawyer – my father wanted me to be a lawyer but I wanted to learn economics – it was Paul and Harry who said there was only one place I should go, which was Stanford because Paul Baran was a professor there. So I went to Stanford and got in with him. I was his only graduate student. Nobody else wanted to get near this scary Marxist, whereas I was there expressly to do it. Stanford in those days was kind of intimidated by East Coast Ivy League, so it was good for Baran that a

student coming from Harvard wanted him. And it was good for me that he wanted me, since I got a lot of attention that I would never have gotten otherwise. He loved cognac, and I learned to enjoy cognac with him. Unfortunately I arrived in September and the following March he had a massive heart attack and died. So at that point I left Stanford, which was an awful place, and went to Yale, which took me because of all the Ivy League stuff and gave me a ton of money.

The program at Yale was wonderful for me. You could earn two degrees, the Masters and the Ph.D., which you could pursue either way: Ph.D. in history and masters in economics or vice versa. I chose the Ph.D. in economics, but I studied history with C. Vann Woodward. I met Staughton Lynd there. He was teaching labor history then, the job that David Montgomery got after him. I learned from all those people, but meanwhile in the economics Ph.D. program there was really nobody to work with except these junior professors: Resnick, who was unapproachable and scary, and his buddy Stephen Hymer. Hymer ended up being on my dissertation committee but not Steve Resnick.

I was intimidated by him. Steve was a hardass at Yale. As a graduate student I remember going to a couple of seminars to hear visiting people. I think it was the first time I heard Paul Krugman. Sometimes somebody famous would come and we would all go. Steve would often be there, and the guy – there were no women – would give his talk, and Steve would sit in a corner and wait, like a lion crouching to get that gazelle. Steve would go after the guy on theoretical grounds, on the econometric stuff. So graduate students backed away from Steve because it was a nightmare to have a teacher do that to you. Not that he would have done that in class. I never had a class with him, but he was tough. Hymer was much softer, which is why he was on my committee rather than Steve. Also Hymer did work on Africa, my dissertation was on Africa, so it made a certain sense.

I didn't become friendly with Steve until we began teaching at City College. We were both living in New Haven and taking the commuter train. We really became friends because we had so many hours together, basically on the train.

In those days the *Monthly Review* had – I don't remember what they called it – these famous lunches at their offices in New York. Any Marxist or radical economist from around the world who had come to New York for whatever reason would have lunch with Harry and Paul. They would have sandwiches brought in, and you would sit around and talk for an hour or two. And because I was very close to them, they would invite me when I was teaching uptown at City College to visit lower Manhattan where their offices were, and I did that very often. I met Theotonio Dos Santos, Joan Robinson, a whole host of people that I wouldn't have met otherwise. I brought Steve with me, and that's how he began to know Paul and Harry.

Steve and I read Sweezy's work and Magdoff's work – all of it closely – talked about it, wrote based on it, assigned it for our students. There was

always a lot of respect, admiration, and appreciation for what they were doing and not just for what they had written. They were like mentors, very encouraging. We saw them as people who had kept Marxism alive in the United States in the worst years of the McCarthy period and the Cold War, and they were kind of heroes for having stayed with it. Magdoff was a New York City kid, immigrant parents, City College graduate, scrabbling up the ladder trying to make it. Paul Sweezy was a Brahmin, part of the Rockefeller family, lots of money. He didn't go to City College; he went to Harvard, etc. But they worked together well, as far as we could see. We also met Harry Braverman at those lunches.

So the *Monthly Review* was the inspiration. We admired Magdoff and Sweezy, we respected them, we learned from them. But as we thought more about their work, we began to have disagreements. Mostly not explicit – we didn't bring this up to them. But we talked about them between us.

I'm trying to think about how to characterize this. The first thing that bothered us was that Paul and Harry told us there was no need to study economic theory anymore. The theory issues were settled. Bourgeois theory was neoclassical and Keynes. Marxian theory was them, and the definitive work was Sweezy's *The Theory of Capitalist Development*. We were to learn it, master it and then move on. For them, the important thing for us to do was apply it. For instance, the first article I was commissioned to write for *The Monthly Review* was an article about the rise of multinational banking: how big American banks moved abroad. This article was applied Magdoff/Sweezy, applied *Monthly Review*. They liked it, they published it, that's what I was to do. When they got to know Steve, they appreciated that he had been to the Philippines, that he knew all this stuff about third world countries. They wanted us to apply their approach to problems of development. They wanted us to cash in on our pedigrees. Steve had been to Penn and MIT and I had gone to Harvard and Yale. That's when it became very clear that both of them were victims; they had been pushed out of these jobs. Magdoff had never even gotten in; he was a working class kid....

*So they saw you doing what they had not been able to do?*

Yeah, a little bit of that. They pushed hard for us to be big shots as Marxists at a fancy university. And I think that, for instance, they were not particularly thrilled with our move to UMass.

*Because it was a state university, or in the countryside, or ... ?*

They never got that explicit. If I were to guess, it was because it wasn't prestigious enough. Steve had been a young professor at Yale; more of that was what they wanted. My first job offer when I was finishing at Yale was from Johns Hopkins. When I told Sweezy, he urged me to take it. I turned it down, after which James Tobin (at Yale) called me into his office and told me, "You can't do that. No one turns down Johns Hopkins for City College. I can't write a letter for a person who does that." That was a

straight out threat. I never asked him for a letter in any case, because he didn't know me that well.

But what got us upset wasn't that kind of attitude. It was Paul and Harry's notion that the theory was finished that bothered us. By this time we were reading a lot of Marx and were excited by it, as a lot of people were at that time. The idea that the theory was settled when we had so many theoretical questions struck us as very strange. We didn't say much. We were dutiful towards them, they were our masters.

*Was there a particular theoretical problem that bothered you?*

Yes, there were two, but the really important one was economic determinism. Magdoff and Sweezy were perfectly comfortable with economic determinism. They talked like that, they reasoned like that, and for Steve and me, for whatever complicated reason, this was a problem. We didn't read Marx that way, and we didn't like that kind of argument. I don't think we had a good alternative, but we were very uncomfortable with determinism.

The other theoretical issue we had – really an epistemological question but we didn't know that at the time – was their “history proves” argument. Harry especially (but also Paul) was always telling me, “This is a settled matter, the empirical record shows...” Harry, if you remember his writings, loved to take a proposition that was generally agreed to in the profession and then give you 47 facts that contradicted it. And then he'd make the claim that these 47 facts proved something. I don't think we could have articulated why at that time, but this bothered us.

We began to distance ourselves from them, but there was no trouble between us. We did not air things out with them. That waited until we went to UMass.

*Could you say a bit more about your partnership with Steve and why it worked so well and for so long? Initially there was some difference in status. How did you work all that out?*

As I said, I got to know Steve at City College. This was my first real job. I had taught both at undergraduate and graduate levels at Yale, but this was still as a graduate student. I got to City College in 1969 and Steve came along, I think, in 1971. He was told at Yale that it was very unlikely that he would get tenure. He made a strategic error. He signed a petition that was circulated by students. I believe the petition was to get the ROTC off campus, which was going around at many colleges and universities at the time. When he signed it, this irritated someone at the higher level. This person spoke to the chair of the economics department who, as a friend, told Steve that signing the petition was viewed as a grievous error. Steve got the idea that he'd better look for another job.

At that time the chair of economics at City College, who had brought me in, was a man by the name of Alfred Conrad who was married to Adrienne Rich, the poet. He had been a professor at the Harvard Business

School and, together with John Meyer, had written a book on the economics of slavery. I remember thinking "Oh my God" when I met him when I visited City College for the first time, because he had an SDS button on the lapel of his jacket. He turned out to be a radical who had taken the job in New York because he wanted to make a radical department there. He thought that was the most exciting thing he could do, and I was the first person hired in that process. Then he went after Hymer, but I think Hymer already had a job at the New School. And then he went after Resnick. (This was before Steve and I were friends.) And he had plans for many more.

Steve was a professor at Yale, remember, when I had been a graduate student. But when he came to City College, we were both professors. He was an associate professor; I was an assistant. There was never any kind of status thing with Steve. I think he found me interesting, and his friendship with Hymer had changed. Hymer had moved to New York and was having horrible psychological and marital problems, and Steve was a much more straight-laced guy, married to his high school sweetheart, etc. So I replaced Hymer in a way as his friend, and the fact that I was a few years younger never made any difference that I ever felt.

By the time we got to UMass we were already good friends, but the move to UMass really solidified it. The first phone calls that Sam Bowles made in putting the department together were to Steve and me, to be the other half of the radical contingent with his buddies, Herb Gintis and Rick Edwards. He wanted us to come up from City College, they would come from Harvard, and we would meet in Amherst and make this thing happen. This is hard to convey, but we very quickly felt "other" in relation to those three. It's hard to explain. Steve had a line that we used for many years. There are two kinds of people in the world: those that will go into the woods to fight with you, and those that will not; those three, uh-uh. It was his assessment that there was something fundamentally unserious about them. This was not a comment on their economics, or their theoretical knowledge, or their qualities as teachers. None of that. This was a comment on their political commitment to anti-capitalism, for lack of a better term. I didn't have this judgment, but I listened to him – smart guy, Steve Resnick. He made this judgment pretty early on. They were our buddies; we had come together. We would cover for each other; we would work as a solid group. And we did for the first five, six, seven years. We supported them and they supported us. But they were different from us. It is hard to explain. Steve and I talked about it often, trying to explain it to ourselves. The words I would use now – I didn't understand it then – they were more interested in the careers; we were more interested in the political project. They had a fundamental distrust of this project being able to go very far. And they felt vindicated in 1990. I remember Sam writing to me once, saying our efforts to change had failed. I remember thinking, "What is he talking about? History has a reverse; does he think it's going to just follow

a straight line?" In retrospect they were always more interested in the here and now, not in a broader political project, which I think is what Steve was getting at with who would go into the woods to fight with you. Who do you really trust?

And then Steve and I got more interested in the theoretical stuff. Someone gave me Hindess and Hirst's *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*. I don't even know who. I read this book, and I remember calling Steve on the phone and saying, "you've got to get this!" What they had done was written down the theory, the theory of how one class structure is different from another. They really worked it out for you. This is the ancient, this is the capitalist, this is the feudal, and this is the Asiatic (whatever it is). No one had ever done this. And they were answering our theoretical questions.

*So you got to Althusser through Hindess and Hirst?*

Absolutely. Hindess and Hirst weren't economists, though at first we thought they were. But they were really using Marxist theory to ask the questions we were interested in. This was magnificent, and they kept footnoting and citing Althusser, so of course we picked up on that. We really worked through Althusser. Just to be clear, what Althusser's writings said to us was, "I'm a Marxist, you can be a Marxist, and you don't have to have anything to do with economic determinism." Without knowing it, that's what we wanted, because we didn't like this economic determinism. It made us really nervous, and he was showing us, "You don't need to be an economic determinist. Marx wasn't, I'm not."

*What do you think it was for you and Steve that made you so nervous about economic determinism?*

Simple mindedness. The criticisms we had read all our lives, in the '50s and '60s when we were growing up. One of the main tools of anti-Marxism was the criticism of its simplemindedness, the childishness, of thinking that people are motivated only by their economic interests. We knew this criticism was right, but we loved Marxism, just not that. When you think about your mother, your father, your siblings, yourself, can you explain what happened in your crazy family by economics alone? Come on. Should it be part of the story? Sure. Economics is what makes the world go round? No. And as we read Marx we could see how people read him as an economic determinist, but we could also see another way, and Althusser said yeah, yeah, yeah. If you take the two together, the preponderance of evidence is that Marx is a critic of economic determinism, not a proponent. Thank you, Althusser. This is before we had any contact with him. We had just read him, like everybody else, thanks to the *New Left Review*.

*Let's talk about your relationship with students, which always seemed different to me.*

Our teaching was always a part of the rest of our lives, and the rest of our lives always had a great deal in it of building a different society, and

building a movement for that. So for us students were not just sitting in a class to learn some material, or aggrandizing our egos by liking what we were teaching, although I can assure you those students were important to us. But we didn't want just students, we wanted to build a movement, we wanted these students to go out and make this happen on an enormous scale. And that was always important. We wanted them to go into the woods with us! That's what we wanted. I don't know exactly what that meant, but it meant welcoming students into a club, into a society pretty early in the process, where we were all doing something important together. We always talked about this, that what this country needs is lots of people studying Marx, teaching Marx, using Marx, questioning Marx, taking it in new directions, that's fine. But we're building a tradition, that's what we're doing.

*So launching the Rethinking Marxism journal with your Ph.D. students was something you consciously planned?*

Steve and I realized early on how much we needed each other. We even talked about it, and we were not the types to usually talk about these things – which tells you something. But we both understood it, and we said look, this place [UMass] could be impossible if we had to navigate the department alone: its tensions, the politics, the politicking among the students, which got to be difficult sometimes. But there were two of us, two sets of eyes and ears, two people having conversations and bringing back their sense of what's going on. It was invaluable to us, and I think early on we understood that to graduate from UMass – someone like you – and then to go off to another school without someone else to help you: whoa, talk about extra obstacles. That career is going to be very hard. We needed to have an association that could provide support, friendship, a potential colleague you could hire, all of that. We decided early on that there has to be a focus. The journal was a focus. A journal would give us all something we worked on that we could use to communicate our ideas, that we had to write something for or work out a struggle over. Otherwise it would just be either personal friendships or some abstract agreement, which neither of us felt would be sufficient. So the journal, it was natural; you're an academic, make a journal. But that was less important than the group.

And remember we started that journal in the 1980s. Everyone told us we were crazy, that it was a bad time, etc. But we did it anyway because a) the truth of it is, no one knew what was going to happen and b) we had all these other reasons to hold us together as a group. So whether or not it would succeed in some abstract sense, it would succeed if it did that, which it did.

*You guys gave students a lot of freedom in writing dissertations, maybe sometimes enough to hang themselves. But for instance you don't require an econometric chapter, which is unusual. Did you worry at all about the fact that people were going out without the pedigree that you have, and with dissertations that might*

*look odd to the profession? Did that ever come up or were you more interested in helping people do what they wanted to do?*

No we worried about it. We did push students to have some arithmetic somewhere in their dissertation, to have a model of something that they would at least discuss or do some econometric work on. We did some of that in order to help. But we always did it with humor. It's like writing for the censor. How did Gramsci ever write about Marx without saying "Marx?" How do you do what you want to do without running afoul of the rules? So we reached a decision early and never changed our minds about this. The quality of what came out was much more correlated with the passion the student could bring to it, and therefore if you stifle the passion, constrain students by making them do stuff they don't know, don't like, don't want to do, you will hurt the final outcome. We also believed that you can't do Marxian economics very well if you are spending most of your time mastering neoclassical or Keynesian economics. It's just too much. You can't do it. And if you're a young graduate student, for sure you can't do it. There is just no way out of it. The opportunity cost is that if you are going to do the conventional stuff, you are not going to do the Marxian work very well. And for us, grounding you all in Marxian theory, as really good students of Marx, was more important. Had we discovered that students were losing jobs or being denied jobs because there wasn't more conventional economics in their dissertations, we might have pushed for more. But we never got that feedback. If there were students who had that happen, they didn't tell us.

*Was this a point of tension between you and the Harvard group? When I was there in the early '80s, they were pushing people to do fairly standard dissertations with maybe an extra variable for power or race or gender. Or had the parting of the ways already occurred?*

They did what they did, we didn't. Sam and Herb flirted with Marxism when it was chic and cool to do that. That was during the first, I'll be generous, the first ten years we were there, and that flirtation had a lot to do with them being caught up, for awhile, in the left economics sub-culture. Sam loved the camaraderie, the solidarity, and Herb did in his peculiar way also.

But by the mid '80s the fad, the fashion of radical political economy was fading, and they did not want to fade with it. Sam and I once had a difficult conversation where he looked at me – he was frustrated, as I was, we weren't communicating well – and said, "I believe in the life cycle of ideas, and all these ideas we had when we came here, they're over." He thought we had to move on. He didn't say this, but he implied that I was stuck in the mud and he was moving forward. He was adapting to a new reality, whereas what I was doing was some kind of fuddy-duddy, antiquarian obsession with the past, something like that. For me Marxism works in fits and cycles, it has had reverses in the past, it will have reverses in the

future, but you don't give up on your critical framework because there are a few years in which people who used to be interested lose interest. You have to ask why and you have to think about that, but it's not a justification for giving up on a system of ideas.

*I was a Ph.D. student during this period and I think there was a sense in the air that you and Steve were more interested in things that were philosophically rigorous (though you also did the popular economics thing even then) but that Sam especially was interested in popular. So the people who were interested in popular economics would go over here and the people who were interested in philosophical rigor would go over there. Was that your sense?*

Yes, except for the caveat that you just mentioned. Not to toot my own horn, but my wife used to say to me in those years, "You are the only member of that department who is an activist doing what they discuss all the time." I built an organization in New Haven. I ran for mayor. I ran for city council. I was the advisor to the AFL-CIO. I was a major strategist for the union groups at Yale. And I spend thousands of hours doing all that stuff.

I always did both academics and politics, and with whatever self-delusion this involved, I told myself that my personality could never stand doing just one or the other.

*Was that a source of tension between you and Steve?*

Yes. There were times when he resented my activism; it was taking my time and attention away from our intellectual work. On the other hand, he was always supportive of it. It was a tension, even inside of him. He never said to me "You can't do this." Keep in mind the context. How do I say this? I think I'm more of a workaholic than Steve was. But the other way of getting at that, a little dangerous but I'll do it, is that my home life was with a partner who supported, encouraged, and believed in what I was doing, both the activism and the theoretical work.

I'm lucky, I have a wife who believes in the work I do – all of it. I didn't know that when I married her. Luck of the draw. I was 23, what did I know? But whatever it was, I had a person who said, "Write that article. Let's go to the demonstration." Steve had nothing like that.

*Let's talk a little more about students. I remember I took the Marx course with Steve. It had this big long reading list. And then for whatever reason I saw the undergraduate Marx syllabus; it was almost the same thing. I wonder how you thought differently about graduate and undergraduate students. Did you think about this consciously?*

We thought about it and we talked about it. In the end we didn't think it made much difference. Did we make the graduate course a little more rigorous? Yeah. We made assumptions about what we could do. We would be more likely to write equations on the board about value theory. But that was partly just a difference between Steve and me, which was always

there, in every book we wrote together, every article, it was always there. I'll exaggerate a bit here so you get my point. He wanted to write an article that fellow economists would have to acknowledge, however grudgingly, as "pretty good": well argued, proper footnotes, some math if we could get it in there, the right sources that showed we knew what this stuff was. I wanted people to understand what we were saying and worried that if we put too much formal theory in there, they would look at it and go "Argh!" because they don't know what algebra is or how it works, or a differential (d this, d that), and they'd go (Bronx cheer.) We never resolved that. We always compromised.

For example, in our book, *Economics: Marxian vs. Neoclassical*, both the early version and the newer one, *Contending Economic Theories*, all the technical stuff in there is Steve. I mean I reviewed it. I checked for mistakes. I clarified when I thought it looked too murky. But he insisted on that material, whereas I insisted on a metaphor that makes it clear – a story, a way that makes it transparent. It's the same point, but for the economists, they're going to read the equation; they're going to understand it. But they are not going to know what it means. You have to tell them.

And he would compromise. He would understand what I was saying. But he would not write the way I would have written because that would make everyone think we were not serious economists. Look, the man had a point. About the *Contending Economic Theories* book we published with MIT, the last book we wrote together, Steve said, "The students don't buy the book. The teachers buy the book and tell the students to read it. So who do you think the book has to be written for?" And I said, "Yeah, but we want to reach the students. The teachers are a foregone loss anyway." So we would fight, and he would have to acknowledge that I had a point, and I would have to acknowledge that he had a point. The book is a compromise on how to present the material. When we taught together, he would write the equations on the board and I would explain to the students what it meant. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't. I probably did more verbal explanation because of him, and he probably did more math. I mean, we shaped each other a little bit.

*One of our colleagues writing a chapter for this volume told me he is writing it for his graduate students, who hate the epistemology part of Knowledge and Class. They struggle with the class part but are interested in that, but they hate the epistemology. I've had similar experiences, including some who like the epistemology but hate the class stuff. Did you ever think you were asking people to do too much, by having a different notion of class and asking them to think really hard about the theory of knowledge?*

We worried about it. The first press to which we sent the manuscript for *Knowledge and Class* was Princeton University Press. I don't know why; maybe there was an editor we knew there. Princeton sent it out for review, and then got back in touch with us. They said

This is two books. One book is on philosophy and one book is on economics. We don't like and don't want to publish the first book, but we do like and would like to publish the second book, on economics.

That was a shock to Steve and me because in a peculiar way, as we were walking through Marxian theory, we had begun with what you might call class theory. But through our struggles in class theory, we were drawn into philosophical work, which proved absolutely crucial to us when we came back to class theory to make the contribution we think we were able to make.

So for us, these were closely intertwined. We had a long conversation, more than one, and we decided to say to Princeton, "No, you have to take it all or you are not getting any of it." It was polite, it was friendly, but they said no. Then we sent it to the University of Chicago. We didn't have any relationships there but their editor, who was not an economist, wrote us back and said, "This is great. This is fantastic what you've done. I didn't know there were economists who did this sort of work." We didn't know this at the time, but he was into postmodernism and didn't know there were any economists who had even heard about any of this. And that's why we did it with them. It was very successful; we were one of their top five best sellers in the first year.

*I had a good friend, an institutionalist economist, who loved the epistemology. He thought it was great – "exactly what you (Marxist) guys need." But the class stuff, no. It's a lot to ask of people.*

It is. Steve and I would marvel at the reactions, and maybe this goes to what you are saying. There would be years in which graduate students would have enormous difficulties with one and not the other. But it had no pattern. There were people like your friend who would celebrate the one and were either unmoved or horrified by the other. But again, it went both ways.

Since I came to New York, I do much more of the class stuff. It's just easier. I do the philosophic stuff less. Someone brought me to the New School, and I did epistemology. I did it for economists to show that prediction is absurd and policy is absurd, you can't do it, etc. I'm pretty good at this, but there was dead silence in the room. Will Milberg, who had invited me, looked around the room and asked, "Doesn't somebody want to question this, challenge this, disagree?" Nothing. For a good number of them, they didn't like this, they didn't want this, but they had never heard it before. This was so off the wall for them. They had the reaction that anybody does when you hear something that is so different and weird. You don't know what to say. You know this is no good, but you don't know how to respond.

We eventually had some conversation. The students said, "You mean I can't say *this* is the way to solve the problem? Then what do I say when the

people in leadership ask me for advice or for what policy to try?" Well, you can tell them that on the basis of a whole series of assumptions, policy X might work. But you can't tell them policy X is going to solve their problem. And you have to be honest about the 800 times that people have tried this and it hasn't worked. You've got to do something with that.

They (policy economists) don't have a refutation to these arguments because they have never done this work. So I'm ahead of them. I know their arguments for it, but I also know the other side. And their reaction is "you are taking away from me what I'm doing. I won't let you." Ok, that's fair.

*But it's interesting that your popular work now is so extraordinarily successful. ....*  
But that ain't because of me. I wish I could take the credit....

*On the other hand, academia just sails on; nothing changes. I assume from what you said earlier, about the difference between you and Steve, that he would have been bothered more than you are to see that the impact of postmodern critique on university economics is virtually zero.*

Yes and no. I pushed epistemology on Steve. He read it, but I forced it on him. But then he became more committed to it and adept at it than I was. He was a student who surpassed the teacher. He really was. In his head, there were alternative ways of doing economics, and it had nothing to do with right and wrong. It had to do with who you are, where you came from, how your theoretical work was overdetermined in your life as an individual. And there are these incommensurate alternative knowledge constructions.

Steve and I knew a neoclassical economist at Yale, Richard Cooper. I was his student and Steve was his colleague. He was amazing. You would ask him a question, and he would give you the textbook answer. Everything was convertible into supply and demand, or a production function. He was a wonderful teacher. Wow, you could see it; he was just brilliant at that. And that would come up for Steve and me in later years. One of us would say, "Remember Richard Cooper." The man had mastered that paradigm. Anything that came his way, he could stick it into a neoclassical model. He took pleasure in showing you how to do it.

So, I think Steve, on the one hand, would be upset because our perspective has not prevailed. But he would also take it as a kind of epistemological demonstration that there is no necessity that if a particular underlying reality veers off to the right, these people will not go straight on doing what they have been doing. He would be upset but he would also feel vindicated.

*That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that. Your Democracy at Work writings and talks are eliciting their own dualistic reactions, just as Knowledge and Class did. I've seen reviews by self-proclaimed anarchists who say, "This is all fine but he's a Marxist, and you don't need Marxism to do what he's doing." Then*

*at the labor process conference I recently attended in London, the Marxists say, "Well, this is utopianism." How do you react to that?*

I'm familiar with both critiques. I get each from time to time. I would say these people account for 10%, maybe 15%, of my audience. I basically made a strategic decision to just ignore them. This is something that Steve and I talked about a million times. Our most difficult audiences are people who call themselves Marxists.

That has happened to us so much, and for so many years, that it is not even interesting anymore. Marxists, socialists – this is very crude but I'm going to do it anyway – are divided into young and old. I really mean it, chronologically. The older the Marxist or the Socialist, the more likely this utopian critique comes up, and here's how I understand it. For them, for many years, as for us, socialism is public (rather than private) ownership of the means of production, and planning rather than markets. That's it. You can embellish in 27 ways but that's what they want to hear about. They want me to celebrate public vs. private and planning vs. markets. The planning vs. markets is actually less important for them, which is interesting. I try to be gentle, but I lose them when I say 21st century socialism is going in a different direction, that we're not interested in these macro questions, that we're interested in the micro organization of the enterprise. I like planning and I like public ownership, and sure there will have to be coordination among all of these worker self-directed enterprises. But capitalism grew out of feudalism, and eventually the early capitalists figured out how to coordinate themselves. I figure it will happen again that way too with worker self-directed enterprises, where they'll be influenced by the public vs. private and market vs. planning debates. They don't know how to answer me. They live in that old world. They've never been confronted by someone who says, "Socialism, yeah that's what you say. But this is the more important thing for us to be talking about."

So I win, whatever that means. With the anarchists, it depends. If they seem to me to be honest questions, I talk to them about what Marxism has to teach. Anarchism is about control. It's very abstract and very general. It's mostly about citizen-government, and we're not talking about that. We're talking about inside an institution: how does it work, and who's in charge?

*This issue of economic democracy was big at UMass when I was a graduate student. But it was mostly other people, not you and Steve. If I remember correctly, you had a critique of economic democracy at that time. Do you still stand by that critique? Have times changed? Is your current analysis somehow different from those of what we might call Progressive economists?*

You are absolutely right. Steve and I were consistently arguing over a long period of time against a focus on democracy that had functioned on the left as a substitute for and a distraction from issues of class. For us that was very clear. It was clear in our colleagues, Bowles and Gintis, who in

our judgment were obsessed by political issues of democracy, who were really focused on “letting the people decide” and getting everybody to participate, basically taking this from the old SDS idea of participatory democracy. We wanted to say – not that we were against democracy; that would be silly – that an analysis of class is different from an analysis of democracy. Sam and Herb were our counter-points most of the time, since among graduate students those for whom democracy seemed most important tended to end up with them, one way or the other, sooner or later. And it made a certain sense, since neither Sam nor Herb was interested in class. They were really interested in power, and power is closer to this notion of democracy and participation, rather than to exclusion from appropriating and distributing surplus. So we worked very hard to suggest that whatever you think about power, that’s a different matter than the production and distribution of the surplus. We want to focus on that class process, because for us that’s a separate matter. Class interacts with democracy and power, of course. Overdetermination implies that the class process affects power processes, and vice versa. But we wanted to establish their difference, their uniqueness, and their separate importance for what we were doing.

Let me put it one last way. Sam and Herb – we felt, and we didn’t admire this – were tying into an American fetish with democracy. Democracy as a lingo was the issue from day 1. King George III was making a decision without us, and you’re not going to tax us without representation. It’s an endless mantra in which the good people expand the franchise and the bad people try to restrict. So a few people have too much power, too many people don’t have enough, and as leftists we’re all about spreading the power. Resnick and I in our meaner moments would say things like

This is all charming but you are participating in not making a point about one of the things over which we need to discuss democratically: who produces the surplus, who appropriates the surplus and what do they do with it. You leave that out, and yet for us that’s what Marx contributed. That’s where there is a blind spot.

So even the people who talk a lot about democracy have a peculiar tendency in this country, now and in the 1980s, to see it not in relationship to class but to see it in relationship to a whole other set of topics to the exclusion of class, which brings them back into the consensus in this country that ignores this dimension of production. Power is not the repressed discourse that class is. Sam and Herb are dissatisfied with neoclassical economics because it doesn’t include power relationships. In other words – Steve Marglin also does this – the employer is not just trying to find the point where the isoquants cross the price line for efficiency. He’s engaged in a power struggle with his employees over something that is going on in production. Sam would get right to that point. We would say,

"Yeah, that something is class." He didn't want that. He was really much more interested in the power relationship. By power I mean who authorizes who to do what, who gives the order, who takes the order, who's calling the shots, who is the price or order taker, all of that. So, Sam would be happy to say he was introducing power into neoclassical economics, since they make no room for it, treating production as an engineering problem. He is saying no, this is a political issue about who is in charge. When we would try to specify what the struggle was over, that's where we would lose Sam.

*Do you see your current work as pursuing this connection between democracy and class?*

Yes. I would even go further since you are being so polite. This is a conversation that Steve and I had in his last year or so. The approach Steve and I had taken to debates around democracy, saying, "No, we are doing something else," proved to be a hard sell, harder than we would have liked it to be. So when I started running around the country talking in large meetings, I – like any teacher – wanted my audience to stay with me as I laid out my arguments. It was pretty clear to see when moments came that produced in an audience, who were otherwise with me, a certain consternation, a certain discomfort, a certain "Why are you going in that direction?" So I slowly decided to cash in on the need to talk about democracy, because it seemed to me to be a legitimate way, particularly with an American audience, to get into a whole range of topics. But then I'm always very focused on talking about what that democracy is about. In other words, it's not just that I want people to have more power. I want particular people to have a particular power in a realm from which they have been excluded and about which most of my audience has never thought very much.

*You got to a certain moment in the presentation and you lost them?*

It's not that I lost them. It's that I got to a certain point and said, "Now, this is *not* about democracy." Look, mostly when democracy is discussed it is just in terms of *who* participates and *who* doesn't. Democracy is very much less focused on *what* the decision is about, the object of the decision as opposed to the subject of the decision, who is making it. So we would attack that and say, "Class is not understood, class is a powerful phenomenon, class is what we should be talking about, not having more or less participation in decision making *in general*." It is not that people disagreed with me. It is that they didn't understand why I was giving so much importance to something they didn't see as significant.

For me to solve that problem, I put the two of them together. I said that we are in favor of democratizing the class process. That allowed me to hold them, because I'm all about democracy, and at the same time I'm all about democracy *here*, over questions of producing, appropriating, and distributing surplus. I found this allowed me to get done the job I wanted

at the price of giving a bit more emphasis on the democracy shtick than would have been my preference.

*What in your view are the major theoretical issues that need to be explored around the issue of democracy at work?*

There are several. Perhaps one of the most important is an area where I can see already trouble coming. By trouble I mean an understandable concern in my audiences that we haven't worked out.

I no longer get much resistance to talking about democratizing the enterprise. People get it when you or I lay out the grotesquely undemocratic way a typical capitalist corporation works, in the traditional way that decisions are made about what to produce, where to produce, how to produce, and what to do with the profits. Who makes those decisions? Who lives with the consequences? The workers have no participation in those decisions. Everyone shuts up, even in my business audiences. By the way, that's another weird thing. I am increasingly invited by business associations, by groups of medical doctors, groups that you think would go right up the wall when they hear this stuff, but they don't. When I lay out that this is a fundamental affront to democracy, I get nothing. You can tell that for many of them this is new, and you can tell I've got them on that point. They're caught in a contradiction that they don't know, at least yet, how to escape.

But that's not the problem. The problem is that the people affected by corporate decisions are not just the mass of workers there. So if you argue, as we do, that they have a democratic right to participate in the decisions whose consequences affect them, then that applies to the larger community as well, the town where the business is located for instance – and not just the town but the region because it transacts across geographic space. I haven't done the work, and neither has anyone else, to render it practical that there be some co-determination between a presumably democratically organized enterprise on the one hand and a democratically organized and operated residential community on the other. How is that going to be done? What are the mechanisms that can give this concreteness so it can be understood, its importance evaluated, and progress made?

I use a number of examples for this. In Germany in the 1920s, after Kaiser Wilhelm had been overthrown, socialists took over. They were namby-pamby socialists, but they were socialists, and they had no idea what to do. One thing they did do was to set up a bi-cameral legislature of a completely new kind, which was kind of a genius move. One house was people elected in the traditional way, by people clumped into traditional regional areas. But workers elected the second house from their workplaces. If your workplace was a certain size, you got a delegate. So this was the labor house, as opposed to the residential house, and all legislation had to be agreed to by these two houses. Not a house and a senate but a labor chamber and a residential chamber.

That's a place to start. I haven't done the work, but there must be books and articles about this, what they did, what worked, where the problems were, where it screwed up. Having spoken last year to roughly 20,000 people in my various talks, there weren't three who knew about this.

So nobody knows the answer, but this is a way of letting people know that this concern for community is not crazy or something that other people have not thought about. If you really believe that people affected by a decision should have a voice in making it, if that's your commitment, then of course you can't stop by having a corporation or enterprise run collectively and democratically by its employees and simply pretend that people who aren't employees have no say and therefore no role in the decision. The truth of this is already recognized in this country because we mandate that certain kinds of business decisions have to be approved by a residential body. You can't build a road over here, you can't pollute the air, etc. Precisely because they understand the interdependence that has to be worked out, political authorities in the United States bring in businesses formally or informally. It is not done in a democratic way, but there is already political recognition of the interdependence.

*I remember Julie Graham being involved in a similar argument years ago. Anything else you think needs attention?*

Yes, but it is a corollary. Exploitation is defined to mean that there are people in a position to appropriate surplus who did not participate in producing that surplus. If you are going to be strict in your definition, that means people in a subsumed class position inside a corporation, such as the security guards, the secretaries, the clerks, and the managerial functionaries, can't be among the appropriators of the surplus. If they were, you would have an appropriator who is not also a surplus producer. We want to rule that out because this concept of exploitation is what motivates us to be anti-capitalist in the first place. So the way we worked this out, Steve and I, was to say that in a democratic enterprise of the kind we are talking about, the people who appropriate the surplus are indeed limited to those who participate in producing it. Only the people who produce the surplus will appropriate it *and* distribute it.

Bear with me. What then, is the role of the subsumed classes inside the enterprises, the subsumed classes outside the enterprises, and as we just discussed, the residential communities? Answer: their role is to decide *democratically* who gets what share of the surplus that is distributed by the people who produce it. The productive workers produce, appropriate, and distribute it. They do the distribution. But how the distribution is done, the power to determine to whom they distribute shares of the surplus, that is democratically decided by everybody, unproductive and productive workers, people inside and outside the firm: they all do that. This is analogous to what is already happening, but we're going to make it explicit and democratic. It is already the case that to whom the board of