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## **The Transformational Theory of Class. A Critical Assessment**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The paper deals with the so-called transformational theory of social class put forward by the Dutch sociologist Albert Benschop. The paper offers a thorough, critical, but sympathetic analysis of the aforementioned framework. While its undisputable merit lies in its tackling head on a difficult and-for ideological reasons-often avoided by other theorist subject, Benschop nevertheless cannot but share many misunderstandings present in the conventional literature on class. The author of the paper seeks to provide his own solutions to the problems under consideration, such as that of the dilemma of structure vs. agency.

**Keywords:** social class; exploitation; structure; agency; Erik Olin Wright; ownership; structuralism

### **INTRODUCTION**

The so-called transformational approach to social class has been put forward by Albert Benschop. As class constitutes one of the most central subject areas of not only sociology, it is worthwhile to analyse it in order to assess whether it constitutes an innovative and useful approach. The initial, and very true, premise of the Dutch sociologist is that “there are very few aspects of social li[f]e which are not touched by class differences. The class position of an

individual affects not only the economic life - the labour, income and consumption relations - but also the lifestyle, social consciousness, culture, politics, and even the ultimate and intimate things like life expectancy, sexual relations, marriage, religion, chances on happiness and mental health.

Class positions do not only have a strong influence on power positions in all kind of organisations, but also structure the social interaction chances

- the selection of friends and lovers, neighbours and acquaintances. And last but not least: class positions do not only generate inequalities of social Li[f]e chances, but also strongly determine chances of political action. The class dimensions of all those aspects of our economic, social, cultural and political existence has been demonstrated over and over by many social scientist. Class inequalities are a fundamental structural form of social inequality”.

After that general and rather uncontroversial for all social scientists engaged in class analysis, there comes an assertion which can raise a few eye-brows: “They are generated by the unequal control on social resources which allow some - exploiting - classes to appropriate the surplus labour of other – exploited

- social classes. 1 Then Binschop reverts to some general considerations: ‘Class’ is an essentially contested concept which is fraught with unpleasing associations. Some sociologists have said that class is a largely obsolete or increasingly outmoded concept. In the capitalist metropolies the idea of class has become a kind of forbidden thought, the Dutch thinker writes sarcastically. As a result, when people use the term class they have a fair chance that this will be interpreted as the symptom of a perverted mind and a jaundiced spirit. However, he also hastens to point out, there has and probably will always be other who think that it’s impossible to be silent on class and class struggle as long as the societal structures and social relations of capitalist states are structured by exploiting mechanisms. Benschop argues that when and as long as this is the case, the problem of class and class conflict will remain a crucial theme of scientific and political debate. “In these debates almost every word has an explosive and controversial meaning” 1.

Again, there is no denying that in certain quarters, scholarly or political, the concept of class and in particular class struggle has become a dirty word. However, class structures are present not so much within “states” as within societies. That the two concepts involved are oftentimes conflated, notably at the level of common sense thinking, does not justify our author who ought not to transfer that error into the field of science. The state is, of course, a part of society. In socio-economic structuralism(as the theoretical position of the author of the present paper is termed) the political structure is distinguished by its disposal of the means of public coercion, and on that basis one is able to ascertain what in society does belong, and what does not to that particular societal substructure. But never mind, let’s agree that the above mistake is not necessarily poised to undermine Benschop’s all theoretical undertaking. Again in the way of introductory remarks, he states that “class has soaked up so much meaning that it has become bulky to use. Debates about class often become conversations in which people talk past each other because they are talking about different dimensions of class.

And anyone who has the temerity to write about the theory of social class is immediately plunged into controversy by the very way he or she approaches the subject”<sup>1</sup>

The specific way in which the Dutch sociologist approaches his subject is by referring to his above claim: “The general knowledge object of class theory are the social relations between and in the social classes and their mutual struggle. So class analysis relates both to the class structuration of social positions in specific societal formations as to the ways in which class-based collective actors are generated.

More specifically, it relates to:

- a. the historical conditions of the origin of exploitation and class relations.
- b. the basis and forms of existence of social groups from their place in a specific system of social organisation of labour.
- c. the structural-positional and historical-dynamic relations between and in the social classes and class factions.
- d. the power relations between classes, class factions and social strata within classes.
- e. the conditions and forms of the formation of classes into historical relevant political actors in the process of class struggle (i.e. class-based social movements).
- f. the process of transformation or elimination of antagonistic social class relations”<sup>1</sup>.

What is clear from the preceding is an identification of class mutual relationships with the relations of struggle and exploitation. Below we shall see whether it forms a sustainable foundation for a class theory.

Benschop confirms our interpretation when he states that class theory is “a regional theory of certain aspects of the social structures in antagonistic formation[s] that are characterised by exploitation relations”.

We must still satisfy ourselves with the hope that the sense in which all class relations are antagonistic and exploitative will be clarified lest his theory should not be reduced to the simplistic binary model. Going forward, Benschop elucidates the scope of class analysis as he understands it: it “also tends to be a general theory in the sense that the class structuration of all social relations belongs to its object. Although class theory should not be reduced to a disciplinary theory (it is not an ‘economic theory’), it [is] not a super theory which embraces all forms of social inequality (it is not a general ‘theory of social inequality’)”.

A little more light on the Dutch theorist’s project is shed by his comment that “class analysis is a very broad research program. It is theory guided research of the empirical-historical contradictions between classes and class factions which can serve as a bases for the evaluation or design of political strategies of exploited, dominated working classes against exploiting, dominant classes (including the intermediate or derived classes and social strata which are connected with these fundamental or main classes).

It will be clear the political and normative orientations do play an important role in this scientific program”.

It is evident that Benschop subscribes to the established tradition linking class analysis to class liberation and other normative goals. It is this association, let us note in passing, that is responsible for the condemnation of class theory by those attached to the status quo and opposed to any radical social movements, not to mention revolution. From a theoretical point of view, however, there is no such one-to-one association. The theory of class and class struggle may be taken advantage of by both defenders and adversaries of an established order.

And the, good or ill, intentions of its creator are irrelevant, the social, political and ideological relevance of a given theory goes well beyond his initial purposes. It is this ultimate objective of transformation of capitalist society that Benschop's theory draws its name from. On the one hand, the Dutch author should be praised for the fact that he does not attempt to hide his "own normative and political assumptions. This is the normative principle that directs this study: "all individuals should have equal liberties for optimal development and use of their individual differentiated human potentials and capacities, in such a way that no privileges can arise". This ideal bears resemblance to Marx's vision, but what one can apprehend about it is not its origin but whether it will not conflict with the scholarly aims of the theory. It is generally true that, contrary to Weber, science, at least social science which is value-free is unfeasible if only for its terminology which is inevitably value-loaded due to the simple fact that its concepts refer to social objects and forces not indifferent from the standpoint of human subjects. But this is one thing, and to subject one's scientific study of society to some political aims is quite another, since in the latter case one may fear that not only the direction but also the substantive conclusions of the study could be distorted by that political perspective.

From substantive terms, the foregoing suggest that Benschop does not view society in terms of a two-class model, but still gives little specifics.

Fortunately, his subsequent statements are more to the point.

Benschop claims that "for a systematic analysis of complex class relations we need a clear view of the levels of abstraction and problem axes".

He further contends that "class concepts are differentiated on the basis of four systematic questions.

### **1. First, are classes primarily defined in terms of a specific type of collective action or in terms of social structures (or structural positions in specific social relations)?**

With this question we differentiate between structure and action-oriented approaches"<sup>1</sup>. The above-mentioned division can in fact be observed amongst social theories, which, though, does not prejudge whether it is genuine or based on a misunderstanding.

### **Structure and agency**

Frank Parkin<sup>4</sup> and Anthony Giddens<sup>3</sup> in their critique of Marxism and structuralism in general make two principal arguments. First, they maintain that the framing of Marxist explanations in terms of the logic of the mode of production constitutes a form of functionalism, which they reject on a variety of grounds: Functionalist explanations are teleological; they falsely impute "needs" to the social system, etc. Now, we have neither any right nor honestly will to speak on behalf on the Marxist community whose a few of members might well entertain similar ideas. But the said charge certainly does not apply to socio-economic structuralism. Firstly, this theory does not employ the concept of the mode of production but a broader one of the mode of economic activity. More to the point, within the framework of socio-economic structuralism there is no talk of functional needs, functional imperatives, or whatever, as social change is here explained in terms of structural contradictions. And dialectics is worlds apart from functionalism. This leads us to the second criticism made by the above-mentioned writers who claim that Marxism reduces human actors to the passive "bearers" of social relations, lacking any knowledge or intentionality.

This they contend is especially untenable for a theory, such as Marxism, that also purports to be a guide to political action.

Again, this may be true of certain forms of petrified pseudo-Marxism of Stalinist persuasion as well of the structuralist approach expounded by the Althusser school, but not necessarily of other Marxist and neo-Marxist authors. Most relevantly, however, it in no way applies to socio-economic structuralism. On its basis each societal substructure, be it the economic, political, ideational, or reproductive structure is conceived of as a complex of actions and their interrelationships. The ultimate building blocks of society are thus not simply human individuals but their actions which on their part enter into sometimes very complicated relationships. From that perspective, the much-trumpeted antinomy of agency and structure is non-existent.

With reference to the units of social differentiation, let us reiterate that social classes and social estates (social groups grounded in the non-economic property relations) are obviously no superhuman entities but determinate groups of people, this determinacy resulting from their definite economic or non-economic sets of economic or non-economic property relations. Those relations unambiguously determine their respective class and estate positions, but not concrete actions in specific socio-historical conjunctures. These actions are subject to a variety of external influences whose impact on the activities of class and estate members, be it work, quasi-work (activities which do not bring in the essential means of subsistence), including class and estate struggle is always mediated by their structural situation, i.e. ownership relations. The more numerous the factors affecting concrete actions, the more indeterminacy there is to them. Even, however, when the number of such Exogenous factors is at first glance limited, there is no law which could predict the course and outcome of a given action. This is because the initial situation may be vastly different from the circumstances in which action may find itself in some later period of time, and, even more importantly, any human action cannot be accounted for in terms of any simple mechanism of stimuli and response or reaction, as vulgar behaviourism would have it. Actions are taken by conscious human beings who may be or may be not be aware of such and such elements of their objective situation, and those actions are by no means always rational, as amongst human motives prominent are emotions, social norms and values. If human brain is the most complex structure in the entire universe, what of society which is, amongst other things, the resultant of millions interacting human brains which do not translate themselves into overt acts according to any simple mechanism.

With reference to the specific addressees of the charge in question, it ignores “the variation in the extent and manner in which human agency is incorporated in contemporary Marxist theory. [...] Most substantive Marxist investigations ascribe a significant role to human agency in their explanation of social events. This is particularly true in the area of class analysis.

At the one extreme, Marxists such as Thompson analyse social classes almost exclusively in terms of human agency. Consider, for example, Thompson’s definition of class in his *“The Making of the English Working Class”*: “By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is an *historical* phenomenon. I do not see class as a “structure”, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships. . . . Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition” 6.

One could not ask for a stronger statement of the primacy of agency over structure in the formation of social classes”(Burris 1997).

In fact, the above comment is an understatement; in Thompson’s formulations structure disappears altogether which, needless to say, is utterly incompatible with socio-economic structuralism. Michael Burawoy also lays stress on the one side of the equation only, viewing the relationship between the two concepts involved in a strange manner at that. He, namely, interprets “a transition from the study of the labor process to an engagement with the labor movement” as a “shift of focus from structure to agency, from process to movement”(2008) AS if work was something occurring without an agent – the very word suggests that viewing the work process as a structure does not entail that it cannot be viewed in terms of action.

Much more satisfactory, therefore, are other Marxist approaches which “place a more equal emphasis on objective structures and human agency, viewing the two as reciprocally conditioned by one another. A good example is Przeworski, who analyses classes as the effect of concrete historical struggles that are conditioned by objective structures but also react back upon and transform those structures. In Przeworski’s words (1977, p. 343),

Classes must thus be viewed as effects of struggles structured by objective conditions that are simultaneously economic, political, and ideological. ... Precisely because class formation is an effect of struggles, outcomes of this process are at each moment of history to some extent indeterminate.

Thompson and Przeworski are perhaps exceptional among Marxist theorists in the importance they attribute to human agency, but even when Marxists ascribe a degree of primacy to structural factors this seldom means that human agency is omitted from their analysis. A survey of recent Marxist writings on class reveals a variety of ways in which human agency is incorporated within a broader structural framework. In the first, important aspects of class relations are seen as structurally *underdetermined* in the sense that objective structures merely impose a general directionality upon social development and/or constrain social patterns within certain limits, whereas the pace and concrete form of that development and/or the selection among possible outcomes is determined (through struggle) by human agency. A good example would be my own study of the variation in the size and composition of intermediate classes among advanced capitalist societies (Burris, 1980). There I analyse the structural basis of developmental trends that are common to all advanced capitalist societies (e.g., the growth of the new middle class), but I also emphasize the manner in which those trends vary among societies as a result of distinctive national patterns of class struggle.

A second approach treats certain aspects of class relations as structurally *overdetermined*—that is, as subject to multiple and contradictory determinations and therefore, to some extent, indeterminate. A good example is Wright’s conception of intermediate class positions as “contradictory class locations.” In Wright’s view, such positions as managers and professionals are “objectively torn between class locations” in the sense that they occupy contradictory positions on different dimensions of capitalist class relations. For this reason, Wright argues, their place in the class struggle is objectively indeterminate and therefore especially susceptible to political and ideological forces.

From a theoretical point of view, it is fully possible that in the works of one theorist there can be present more than one distinct theoretical positions. This exactly is, inter alia, the case of the aforementioned Wright; for even when it figures nowhere else in the analysis, human agency almost always assumes an important role in contemporary Marxist accounts of the process by which structurally defined classes are formed (or fail to be formed) into

organised collectivities. Whereas classical Marxism treated this transition as relatively unproblematic, even inevitable, contemporary Marxists have tended to view it as much more indeterminate. Typical in this regard is Wright's statement of the relationship between class structure and what he calls "class formation"—that is, historically specific forms of class organisation.

The class structure itself does not generate a unique pattern of class formation; rather, it determines the underlying probabilities of different types of class formations. Which of these alternatives actually occurs will depend upon a range of factors that are structurally contingent to the class structure itself. Class structure thus remains the structural foundation for class formations, but it is only through the specific historical analysis of given societies that it is possible to explain what kind of actual formation is built upon that foundation"<sup>7</sup>

Overall, it would appear that contemporary Marxists are by no means reluctant to incorporate human agency into their analysis of class, the exact mix between structure and agency to be decided by the nature of the topic under investigation <sup>2</sup>.

From our point of view, what is vital in an account of class formation, class struggle or whatever is not only a correct view of the relationship between structure and agency but also an accurate conception of class structure. Otherwise, one would have to deal with such non-entities as the (old or new, no matter whatsoever) middle class or the professional-managerial class. Such notions are so flawed often because they are based on the false premise that all members of a given population or society must be included in one class or another. Meanwhile, in point of fact there is no such a need. Such panclassism should be rejected because the entire non-economic domain of society is occupied by a diversity of social estates.

It will be interesting to see how in that context Benschop's approach fares. He continues his presentation:

When classes are defined in structural terms, there is a second question: on which level of social integration are analysed? With this question we differentiate between societal, organisational and interactional approaches [...].

**3. When classes are defined in terms of a specific level of social integration, I pose the third question: on which level of structuration of collective action are they defined?**

Classes can be defined on the level of objective positions, of mobility processes, of class habitus & class specific lifestyles, of types & levels of consciousness, or in terms of specific conditions for political class action and class consciousness.

**4. When classes are defined in terms of objective positions, I pose the fourth and final question: which levels of structuration of objective class positions are differentiated?**

Classes can be defined in terms of production and/or distribution relations, of labour and/or market relations. The evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of both production and market based class conceptions will provide some crucial elements for the construction of a transformational class analysis. [...] Class inequalities and structures can be analysed on several levels of social integration. I claim that there are three levels which have to be clearly demarcated: the societal level, the organisational level and the interactional level. Actions and communications in interaction systems occur in direct,

physical co[-]presence of the actors. The actions and communications in organisations can to some extent break away from these direct interactions through the development of organisational positions and structures. The societal level is always the most comprehensive social system of all social actions and action systems which are connected to each other in a communicative and actual way. These most comprehensive social systems can be ‘societies’ in the strict sense (such as the bourgeois society) or societal subsystems (such as the capitalist economic system)’<sup>1</sup>.

The above classification differs from an established one (macro-, meso- and microstructural) in name only, although this fact, of course, does not by itself call into question its validity.

For Benschop “the crucial question is on which level of social integration can the class concept be defined? Some authors have defined the class concept exclusively or mainly on the societal level. They define classes in terms of structural positions in some kind of societal relations which can not be reduced to in equal interaction or organisational chances and which also can not be explained departing from them. Classes have been defined as structural positions in societal labour relations (in the marxist tradition), in societal distribution or market relations (in the neo-weberian tradition) or in societal professional relations (professional classes in the functionalist tradition).

Other authors have defined classes exclusively or mainly in terms of unequal positions in organisations and of the social li[f]e and political power chances which derive from such organisational positions. In the tradition of the elite theory (Pareto, Mosca, Michels, Burnham, Dahrendorf) classes have been defined in terms of inequalities in authority positions. Ralf Dahrendorf has given the most influential modern phrasing for this approach. In the organisational approach classes are interpreted as conflict groups which are determined by their position in authority or power relations of organisations.

The implicit or explicit assumption thereby is that the significance of formal organisations in all social relations is growing and that therefore also the relative structuring force of organisational power is growing.

In the interactional approach classes are exclusively or mainly defined in terms of inequalities in interaction systems which result from dominating role structures (i.e. networks of class-specific social relations). The class concept is concentrated on or reduced to specific sociale interaction systems (like living together, sharing a house) and to the chances which result from these direct personal relations (‘face-to-face relations’). Conceptualizations and empirical research are concentrated on the degree of homogeneity/heterogeneity of personal contacts (circles of friends and acquaintances), marriage ties, neighbourhood relations, intervisiting and clique relations etc. In this approach a class is interpreted as a direct interaction group: ‘associative class’, ‘community class’. The most influential and explicit phrasing of an interactional class concept can be found in the work of the cultural anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner. He defines class as:

“the largest group of people whose member have intimate acces to one another. A class is composed of families and social cliques. The interrelationship between these families and cliques in such informal activities as visiting, dances, reception, teas, and larger informal affairs, constitute the structure of social class” (Warner 1945: 772-3).

Joseph Schumpeter can be seen as the trendsetter of this tradition, which next to the community studies of Warner’s has been stimulated by the symbolic interactionist (Goffman,

Blumer, Laumann, Kimberley, Sennet/Cobb, Vanneman) and the exchange theoretical tradition (Homans, Blau, Ekeh, Berger/Zelditch, Anderson). Recently many of these approaches flow together in network analysis.

The basic weakness of the above statement is its superficial, undertheorised approach to the question of what deserves the name of class theory. It is true that Davis and Moore, Parsons or Warner make use of class terminology, but this fact alone does not transform their perspectives which are in actual fact ones of stratification, not of class in the true sense of the word. The basic differences between these two theoretical approaches to social differentiation are as follows: classes are grounded in the economy, while social strata can be located throughout society. Stratification is universal not only in social space but also time, whereas classes are seen as groups which arose historically and in theory at least are not doomed to the eternal existence. Perhaps the most apparent distinction lies in the fact that stratification is a hierarchical system, whereas social classes, or should we say, socio-economic classes are interrelated in a much complex way.

The Dutch scholar “contends that class relations are structured on all levels of social integration: societal, organisational and interactional. And therefore class relations ought to be analysed on each of these levels. There are however no class theories with such a scope that they encompass all three integration levels and in which these levels are analytically clearly separated. Most theories concentrate only on one integration level. Non-reductionist class theories should in this respect fulfil at least two requirements. First, they should not only be able to make a clear analytical differentiation between the levels of social integration, but also specify the interrelatedness between these levels. Second, they should make clear whether the class concept can be defined exclusively or primarily on one level of social integration, and if so, why?” [...]

The importance of distinguishing the said three levels of, as Benschop puts it, societal integration, seems now grossly overstated. What matters is not so much the level of class definition alone, but whether such a definition, located at whichever level is capable of capturing phenomena belonging to other levels”<sup>1</sup>.

Benschop then presents what he believes is the main thrust of his argument: In general most scientists agree that class relations are a specific structural form of social inequality. [...] From this point of view six general proposition are presented. Together they form the ‘hard core’ of a research program of class analysis.

1. Classes are an aspect of the social structure of a society, therefore they have to be defined in relational and not in gradual terms.
2. Classes are structurally defined in terms of positions in societal labour relations which are characterised by an institutionalised and structural appropriation of surplus labour.
3. Class relations are fundamentally antagonistic because classes can only be defined in terms of a specific relation (positive or negative) to the appropriation of surplus labour. The basic classes of all class societies are the exploited classes of producers of surplus labour and exploiting classes who are able to appropriate and accumulate surplus labour.
4. Class relations are a specific form of asymmetrical power relations. Exploitation is a specific type of asymmetrical power. Therefore classes should be analysed in terms of extractive power and domination relations, and not in terms of professions or aspects of technical/functional divisions of labour.

5. Class relations are dynamic relations. They change continuously in the process of struggle between exploiting classes who try to contain or expand their extractive powers and exploited classes who are using their developmental powers to limit or eliminate their exploitation.
6. Classes are embedded in specific historical forms of exploitative labour relations. Therefore classes are historical phenomena which change their character when the mechanisms and forms of exploitation are modified”.

We have no issue with Benschop’s account of class relations as historical and subject to change. There are some problems with his other claims, however. Let us refrain at this juncture with an ultimate judgment on the relationship between the class structure and exploitation, since, as he has mentioned above, there are also certain intermediate classes.

However, his framing of this basic relation is problematic. His account of Dahrendorf should be, it seems, understood as a disagreement with the ideas of the German sociologist. Meanwhile, not unlike Dahrendorf, Benschop treats exploitation as a form of power or domination. From this point of view Dahrendorf’s view is even superior, as he at least has spoken of property, which term is striking by its absence in the Dutch theorist’s analytical framework. Exploitation, to be sure, is a form of economic ownership, but Benschop whilst underscoring the former, overlooks the latter.

Benschop “outlines the frame of reference of the transformational class approach. It presents a heuristic model to break out of the misleading dichotomy between structuralist and actionist class approaches.

- Structuralist approaches concentrate exclusively on the analysis of the basic structures of class relations and do not - other than by association - allow systematic, substantiated connections with the political class action of social actors: they analyse ‘structures without actors’.
- Actionist approaches on the other hand, concentrate fully on political actions of class actors, but they neglect to analyse the social structuration of these actions: they analyse ‘unstructured actors’.

A transformational class approach starts from a position beyond this controversy between structure and action-oriented approaches. The transformational model is based on the following thesis: class action is structured by class relations and class structures are generated, reproduced and transformed by class action. The object of a transformational approach is neither ‘class structure’ nor ‘class action’, but class specific structuration of action. So the central theme will be the analysis of the ‘structuration of class action’.

My heuristic model emphasizes the multiple character of this structuration of class action. I contend that there are at least five levels on which class action is structured. Class action is primarily structured by the inequalities and differences of (i) objective class positions and of (ii) social classes and class communities. It is also structured by inequalities and differences of (iii) specific habitus and lifestyles, and by (iv) types of action motivation and degrees of class awareness and class consciousness. Finally, class action is structured by (v) a series of specific conditions for the development of class consciousness and political class action, like specific forms of law and state.”

This fragment of the exposition appears to suffer from some logical shortcomings. Class action is said to be structured by both class positions and classes themselves. This disjuncture is rather strange; it implies either an idea of class positions as empty places or social classes without grounding in underlying socio-economic relations. Frankly speaking, both ideas are wrong. Secondly, when speaking of conditioning class action, it is redundant to speak of class consciousness and separately of “a series of specific conditions for the development of class consciousness”.

Benschop points out that “the central thesis of” his theory “is that class relations are primarily anchored in exploitative labour relations on the societal level. To substantiate this claim the basic concept of [...] ‘mode of labour’ (and not ‘mode of production’) is defined. The ‘mode of labor’ will be defined as a specific combination of

- a. a specific distribution of control over three types of direct resources: material conditions, objects and means of labor; individual qualifications; forms of co-operation, combination and leadership.
- b. a specific dominant goal of labor: aimed as use value, exchange value, maximum exchange value, or capital accumulation; and
- c. a specific type of social dominance and subordination relations within and in relation to labor organisations. [...]

We’ll get a pretty good idea why conceptions that define class in terms of labor or production processes (both in marxist as in non-marxist approaches) or in terms of occupations (in occupational sociology tradition) do not work. But we also get a clear sight on the weaknesses of synthetical conceptions in which the concept is stretched to the extreme of a broad mode of production or of the system of social inequalities in general, which criticisms apply, in the Dutch scholar’s view, to Poulantzas’ and Bourdieu’s work, respectively. While sharing Benschop’s critical relation to the two French theorists’ conceptions, we cannot but overlook that his own one leaves much to be desired. We by any means have in mind the replacement of the concept of the mode of production by the term of the mode of labour.

Benschop’s concept follows the traditional notion of the mode of production anyway, the only significant difference at least as compared to some definitions of the latter one being the omission of economic property relations. Instead, the Dutch writer underlines the role of dominance and control. These concepts cannot and do not replace ownership. It is misleading, to say the least, to speak of an appropriator of the product of the means of production and labour power as involved merely in control, as opposed to ownership. At least some of those deficiencies stem from the lack of the concept of labour power which is substituted with the notion of qualifications, as if the latter were not part and parcel of employee labour power.

Another key thesis of Benschop’s theory holds “that classes are structurally defined in terms of positions in both labour relations and distribution relations. This thesis implies a demarcation from ‘productivist’ class concepts (which concentrate exclusively on labour or production relations) and from ‘distributive’ class concepts (which focus on distribution or market relations)”.

If the Dutch sociologist means in that context Marxian and Weberian approaches to class, respectively, he is once again mistaken. Capitalist owners of the means of production, for instance, depend on market for selling their products and thus realising the surplus value

emodied in them, which otherwise will forever remain in potentia only. Similarly, employment in capitalism rests on market exchange relations whereby labour power is leased out in return for the promise of pay.

The Dutch theorist would surely hope that some, if not all, of the ambiguities identified above will become clarified thanks to his key conception of exploitation. This is supposed to be “a general concept of exploitation which holds independently of Marxist labour theory of value. In that connection he explains, apparently in disagreement with his earlier claims tying class to exploitation, that “exploitation positions [...] must not be identified with class positions”.

Then he tries “to show the usefulness of this approach in [...] an analysis of a form of exploitation which has, up to now, been relatively underexposed: credential exploitation. The primary target was to get a sharp conception of credential exploitation. In a brief discussion on the principal differences between qualification and credentials I first specify the basis of credential exploitation. Then the mechanism of credential exploitation is explored as well as the possibilities to reproduce this form of exploitation (how to accumulate ‘credential rents’?).

Finally, I designate the conditions under which credential exploitation can constitute distinct and durable class positions. This conception of credential exploitation is used to analyse the intermediate class positions of professionals and experts in advanced capitalism. I have shown the possibilities (and problems!) of this concept of credential exploitation for an empirical analysis of these class categories.

He then notes that his account of those classes owes much to Erik Olin Wright. Wright’s problems with the concept of ownership, not to mention ownership of labour power, could form the subject of another paper. And it is, amongst other theories, the latter that could cast light on the issue of class position of specialists. The question of credentials also might be dealt with in those terms – as a distinction between real and formal labour power. At the same time, the latter theory does not operate within the framework of socio-economic structuralism, independently of the theory of ownership. Hence, unlike professionals employed in capitalist corporations, a large portion of that category are included in the autocephalous (self-employed) or small capitalist class.

Referring to his earlier claims, the Dutch author states “that the analysis of exploitative class relations cannot be confined to the societal level. Class relations must be analysed on the organisational level as well. The reason is that under certain conditions exploitative class relations are generated on the organizational level of integration. Superior positions within the formal structures of labour organisations are not as such class positions. Under certain conditions however these ‘elite positions’ allow their incumbents to exploit their subordinates to a non-trivial degree and on a durable basis. Whenever this is the case, these superior organisational positions can and should be treated as class positions. To tackle this phenomenon, I elaborate on the different types of asymmetrical power relations, and especially, on the connection between relations of exploitation and domination”.

In particular, Benschop bounds his, controversial, as he concedes, notion of organisational exploitation to how to accumulate ‘loyalty rents’”, and explains that “organisational exploitation can lead to genuine class positions. The general concept of organisational exploitation is used in an illustrative analysis of the intermediate class positions of managers in capitalism.”

It is easy to boast that the labour theory of power is antiquated and should be thrown out. But to find a satisfactory substitute is not so easy. The notion of “loyalty rents” as

supposedly accounting for the class position of corporate managers is rather problematic, to say the least. It assumes what one should only demonstrate: that managers faithfully realise the interest of shareholders due to which they acquire those loyalty rents. But the assumption is far from evident, as the ample evidence on corporate governance shows—in point of fact, the entire agency theory is built upon the possibility of the divergence of interests between the principal/shareholder and her agent/manager who pursues his own private interest not aligned to those of the owners of the corporation.

In addition, turning to the third level of the societal hierarchy as conceived by him, the Dutch social scientist maintains “that under certain conditions exclusive positions in networks of interaction can constitute structural positions of exploitation, and can therefore be treated as potential class positions. Building upon anthropological and sociological network theories two types of exclusive positions in interactional or interpersonal networks are analysed: selective associations and patronage. Patronage is a specific kind of network of social relations between individuals or groups who control substantial unequal resources: the ‘clients’ are more or less forced to render ‘personal services’ and to pay a ‘patronage rent’ (protection premium) to get access to resources which are vital for them, and the patron or boss who controls these resources and will give his clients ‘personal favours’ in return. This is the point of reference for a discussion of the clientele form of exploitation. Lastly he discusses “another form of exploitation which can occur in all societies in which discriminating prestige relations are institutionalized. This form of ‘ascriptive exploitation’ is illustrated by the operation of ‘sexploitation’, that is exploitation of woman by man on the basis of a dominant positive social prestige of man”.

The exposition of our own estate theory goes unfortunately beyond the confines of this paper, so that we must restrict ourselves to the assertion that those alleged forms of exploitation are better analysed in terms of non-economic ownership relations. Socio-economic structuralism effectively avoids twin fallacies of economism and classism, i.e.e. reducing all social relations to economic ones and reducing all social groups to classes. As an example of the theory examined above shows, this list should be supplemented with yet another fallacy of “exploitationism” which over-extends the concept of exploitation. Thanks to concepts of economic and non-economic ownership as well social estates, socio-economic structuralism is immune to such threats.

Benschop’s final deliberations, however, effect in a qualification to the above statement. He contends, namely, that we have to make a clear distinction between exploitation positions (structural positions in exploitative relations) and class positions (structural positions in class relations). The failure to make this distinction is one of the greatest weaknesses of all modern class theories”.

Before turning to what follows, we must comment on the above claim. It is obviously false, if only because by no means all class theories are based on or indeed refer at all to exploitation. Anyway, Benschop goes on to state that “class positions are always embedded in exploitative relations, but not all positions in exploitative relations will generate distinct and stable class positions”<sup>1</sup>. The concept of ‘class position’ is further developed in five steps. I distinguish (i) main and intermediate class positions; (ii) durable and temporary class positions; (iii) primary and derived class positions; (iv) singular and multiple class positions; (v) direct and mediated class positions.

Thus, the qualification turns out to be in name only, as Benschop has confined himself to introduce a more differentiated concept of exploitation. This leads to merely notional

alterations, i.e. that only some forms of exploitation give rise to stable class positions. Because, however, at the same time such notions as “temporary class positions” are put forward, the importance of the former remark is reduced to nil. Attention of the reader may be drawn to the fact that socio-economic structuralism is free of such confusion owing to its concepts of economic ownership (which is, let us keep in mind, much broader than exploitation), para-work (temporary) or lumpenwork (within the underground or informal economy).

Returning to Benschop’s theory, the processes which are responsible for the origin and development of organised political actors and class actions are analysed in several steps, following the sequence of levels of structuration.

### **XI From Class Positions to Social Classes**

The genesis of social classes (‘potential action collectives’) is analysed starting from the structural chances for people to change class positions (‘obstructed mobility chances’). The central thesis is that the durability of the connection of individuals to a class position is crucial for the genesis of social classes and for elementary forms of social organisation (‘the social fabric’) which are expressed in networks of class specific interpersonal relations (‘class communities’).”

It may be conceded that social classes may be analysed on various levels, including static and dynamic. But there doesn’t seem to be any theoretical reason why this title should be accorded exclusively to groups acting as collective subjects as distinct from structural categories. It is not adequate, as Benschop does, to restrict the concept of class only to the former and conceive of the latter in terms of structural positions only.

### **CONCLUSION**

All in all, however, even if Benschop’s performance does not quite match his some rather boastful claims, his theory certainly deserves attention. In point of fact, alike e.g. Sorenson’s approach,<sup>5</sup> it revolves around, but eventually does not pin down the notion of ownership as underlying class relationships. In many ways, though, it comes as close to an ownership approach to class as you can get without using the concept. It is thus a remarkable accomplishment which deserves wider recognition.

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