

A critique of Wright's analysis of exploitation

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Abstract

We critically assess Erik O. Wright's recent contributions to the conceptualization of exploitation. We discuss three different exploitation processes that are discernable in his discussion. In applying them to the analysis of capitalist society, Wright maintains the traditional Marxist assumption of the overriding importance of the conflict between capitalists and workers. We argue, however, that Wright's approach is problematic. It is overly constrained by Marxist presuppositions, unclear about the relationship between interest payments and exploitation, and inadequate in defining the value of labor. Due to the latter shortcoming, Wright's definition of exploitation cannot be measured and his claims about what processes generate exploitation cannot be empirically investigated. Wright's analysis of exploitation therefore remains primarily normative and empirically unsubstantiated.

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[Exploitation is] a word that I would myself gladly see disappear from the sociological lexicon. . . Its function in Marxist thought was to allow a fusion of normative and positive claims in a way that I would find unacceptable. . .

Goldthorpe (2000, p. 1574)

Although the field of social stratification has developed an important body of empirical findings and statistical models, "there has been much less concern recently about theoretical issues" (Sorensen, 1996, p. 1334). The neglect of theoretical problems has led Lenski (2001, p. 82) to conclude that "too much of stratification theory still resembles the work of the proverbial blind men

struggling to describe an elephant." We agree that further theoretical development is essential if this field is to become more explanatory rather than remain largely descriptive.

In this paper, we seek to advance the understanding of exploitation as sociological concept. We review Wright's (1997, 2000, 2002) contributions to the conceptualization of exploitation and argue that it is problematic. It is overly constrained by Marxist presuppositions, unclear about the relationship between interest payments and exploitation, and silent on the critical issue of defining the value of labor. Due to the latter shortcoming, Wright's definition of exploitation cannot be operationalized. His claims about what processes generate exploitation cannot be empirically investigated and are consequently not falsifiable. Wright's analysis of exploitation therefore remains primarily normative and empirically unsubstantiated.

The *concept* of exploitation should be clearly distinguished from the *processes* that are hypothesized to

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generate it. We argue that three different exploitation processes that are discernable in Wright's recent work. Underlying each of these processes, however, is the common liability of an inadequately developed concept of exploitation. Although Wright provides a rhetorical critique of capitalism, his discussion does not substantially improve our analytical understanding of exploitation or of the empirical processes that may actually generate it.

1. Wright's neo-marxist approach to the study of exploitation

As discussed by Wright (1997, p. 31), the Marxist tradition is the key example of a theoretical approach in which exploitation is salient. In Marxist social theory, exploitation plays a central role in defining class structure. The latter is said to be the main source of inequality, conflict, and social change.

Wright extends the Marxist tradition, and exploitation is accordingly a key element in his discussion of class structure (Wright, 1997, p. 17):

In capitalist society, the central form of exploitation is based on property rights in the means of production. These property rights generate three basic classes: *capitalists* (exploiters), who own the means of production and hire workers; *workers* (exploited), who do not own the means of production and sell their labor power to capitalists; and *petty bourgeois* (neither exploiter nor exploited), who own and use the means of production without hiring others.

Patterns of exploitation thus play a central organizing role in Wright's (1997) neo-Marxist analysis of class structure in contemporary capitalist society.

Wright (1997, pp. 19–26) next discusses “the problem of the ‘middle class’ among employees” which refers to “class locations” or certain groups of workers who differ in terms of their level of exploitation. Wright (1997, pp. 23–24) identifies four “class locations:” expert managers, non-skilled managers, experts, and workers.² Expert managers and experts have scarce work skills while non-skilled managers and workers do not. Expert managers and non-skilled managers have authority while experts and workers do not. Wright's conclusion seems to be that employees who possess scarce work skills

and/or authority are less exploited than are workers who possess neither. All of these four “class locations” are assumed to be exploited because they are all employees, but some are thought to be more exploited than others.³ The three groups that are less exploited – expert managers, non-skilled managers, and experts – are referred to as “privileged appropriation locations within exploitation relations” (Wright, 1997, p. 23).

The reason why exploitation is lower among these “privileged appropriation locations” is because employees with scarce skills earn a “skill rent” while employees with managerial authority earn a “loyalty rent” (Wright, 1997, pp. 21–22). As explained by Wright (2000, pp. 1568–1569), “the ‘employment rent’ is thus a wage premium workers are able to get because of their ability to resist capitalist attempts at extracting labor effort. Rather than seeing employment rents as a form of exploitation by workers it is thus more appropriate to see them as the outcome of resistance to exploitation by workers.” Presumably, expert managers are the least exploited because they possess both scarce skills as well as authority that enable this group to obtain both a “skill rent” and a “loyalty rent” (while conversely workers are the most exploited as they receive neither).

Due to its significance in defining class structure, Wright (1997, pp. 10–17; 2000, pp. 1562–1565) provides a general definition of exploitation. He identifies three basic criteria that include the inverse interdependent welfare principle, the exclusion principle, and the appropriation principle. According to the inverse interdependent welfare principle, the “material welfare of exploiters causally depends upon the reductions of material welfare of the exploited” (Wright, 2000, p. 1563). According to the exclusion principle, “this inverse interdependence of the welfare of exploiters and the exploited depends upon the exclusion of the exploited from access to certain productive resources” (Wright, 2000, p. 1563).

According to the appropriation principle, “exclusion generates material advantage to exploiters because it enables them to appropriate the labor effort of the exploited” (Wright, 2000, p. 1563). As stated by Wright (2000, p. 1563), “exploitation is thus a diagnosis of the process through which certain inequalities in incomes are generated by inequalities in rights and powers over productive resources: the inequalities occur, in part at least, through the ways in which exploiters, by virtue of

² A terminological inconsistency in Wright's discussion is that “workers” is sometimes used to refer to the broad class of employees as a whole (who are exploited) while elsewhere the same term is used elsewhere to refer to only the particular “class location” of employees who possess neither scarce skills nor authority.

³ As noted by Wright (1997, pp. 19–20) in footnote 25, this approach to understanding the “middle class” differs from his earlier work (i.e., Wright, 1985) in which authority and skill “were the basis for distinctive forms of exploitation.”

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