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Open Marxism, social class, and social and political movements

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cnc**John Michael Roberts**

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Abstract

Open Marxists argue that capitalist society is mediated through forms of alienated and dispossessed labour from the means of production. For Open Marxists, then, labour is fluid in its constitution because it is constantly struggling to various degrees in and against its alienated and dispossessed capitalist form. Static sociological concepts of social class therefore cannot fully grasp this fluid and antagonistic relationship between labour and capital. In this paper, we agree that the starting point for an analysis of class under capitalism is the dispossession of labour from its means of production. But we further argue that even at this relatively high level of theoretical analysis, it is still possible to isolate a more complex account of social class than many Open Marxists would accept. We then employ this alternative class perspective to highlight some weaknesses in respective Open Marxist accounts of class and social and political movements. Following these critical observations, and with the theoretical assistance of Gramscian analysis, we demonstrate how Open Marxism can develop a more robust account of the class nature of contemporary social and political movements.

Keywords

Gramscian theory, open marxism, social class, social and political movements

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Introduction

While no particular Marxist school of thought is endorsed in *Capital and Class*, Open Marxism has nevertheless attracted attention in its pages and beyond. Its attraction for many lies in one of its beliefs that Marxism is a theory of emancipation and struggle and not just ‘an objective analysis of capitalist domination’ (Dinerstein et al. 2020: 3). Open Marxists follow Marx’s conviction that the generalisation of commodity exchange across society as a whole presupposes that labour appears as free wage labour (Marx 1991; see also Marx 1988: 274). Free wage labour is constituted through its separation from the means of production, which then becomes the precondition and continuous result of generalised commodity production (Marx 1988: 1017). For Open Marxists, circuits of capital are therefore ‘differentiated forms of the social relation between capital and labour’ (Clarke 1994: 140; see also Bonefeld 2004; Clarke 1991a; Holloway 1992: 151).

In this article, we argue that there are problems in *some* Open Marxist accounts of social and political movements, which originate in their respective class analysis. Many Open Marxists reject what they see as rather static and reified ‘sociological’ theories of class classification models in favour of arguing that class is a dynamic process of conflict that cannot be classified (Bonefeld 2014). In making such arguments, however, Open Marxists often fail to fully appreciate the complexity of class relations under capitalism – class relations that can be isolated within the very essence of capitalism. In particular, some Open Marxists tend to reduce different classes to a dualism of a mass of alienated and dispossessed labour versus capital. We claim, however, that even at a relatively high level of abstraction, class relations under capitalism assume more complex forms during specific socio-historical conjunctures than that claimed by some Open Marxists.

While some Gramscians have similarly noted shortcomings in Open Marxism, our critical points are different to their observations. For example, in their critique of Open Marxism, Bieler et al. (2010) unfortunately say very little about how they themselves might conceptualise social class from a Marxist perspective, apart from wishing to reinstate ‘class struggle’ within a conjunctural analysis. We argue, instead, that a more complex class analysis can be derived from the dispossession of labour at the heart of the capital–labour relation – an alienated relation that Open Marxists correctly argue is the constituting moment of capitalism – but that Open Marxists have mostly yet to develop this point themselves. We further claim that without generating a more complex class analysis, Open Marxists are deprived of necessary theoretical categories with which to then analyse the appearance of social and political movements during socio-historical conjunctures and contexts.

Moreover, we claim that a number of Open Marxist explanations of socio-political movements leave a lot to be desired in Marxist terms. In particular, several Open Marxists are extremely ‘open’ in their interpretations in how they assess the potentials of certain leftist and progressive social and political movements and the latter’s ability to overturn conjunctural forms of capitalist economic and political power. In fact, there often seems to be no unity of thought in Open Marxism as to which social and political movements Marxists should support at any point in time. Indeed, some Open Marxists appear to support liberal bourgeois political movements, whereas others are more attuned with lending support for socialist movements. For these reasons, we contend that Open

Marxists would do well to not only incorporate a rigorous Marxist theory of class in their respective accounts, but also draw on other Marxist theoretical strands, such as Gramscianism, in order to strengthen their analyses of social and political movements.

We illustrate these arguments by, among other things, examining movement-parties. Acting as a hybrid between social movements and conventional political parties that compete in local and general elections, movement-parties employ social movement activist tactics – carnivalesque public meetings and elements of horizontal democracy, for example – with winning mainstream political support (della Porta et al. 2017). In our opinion, movement-parties are also important for left-wing and class-based politics because they frequently contain novel class formations and relationships, which, as we argue below, some Open Marxist scholars find difficult to analyse with their rather restrictive view of class. We are not, however, arguing that Marxist theory should simply conduct political surveys about the likes of voting intentions of the electorate, but we do believe that the class composition of social movements, particularly movement-parties, need to be analysed and understood from a Marxist perspective. This further implies we require Marxist theoretical class categories to do so. A Marxism attuned to class relations embedded in the historically specific separation of labour from the means of production constructs the foundations for Marxists to provide such a class-based analysis.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we outline the Open Marxist understanding of capitalist class relations as being based in, and founded upon, alienated and dispossessed labour. However, we argue that even at this relatively high level of theoretical abstraction more complex capitalist class relations can be noted than those normally acknowledged by many Open Marxists. We show that the class relations we flag up are compatible with an Open Marxist perspective, especially since some Open Marxists do discuss social movements by drawing on the sort of class analysis we defend in this article, but they do so without the requisite theoretical concepts at their disposal. The article then shows one way to bolster the Open Marxist approach to class and social and political movements is to draw upon Gramscian theory. Two main arguments are made to justify this theoretical move. First, we say that it makes sense to incorporate Gramscian theory to Open Marxism because there are already residual elements of Gramscianism in some Open Marxist accounts. Second, we also argue that without a class-based and conjunctural analysis, some Open Marxist explanations of social and political movements verge on the liberal and bourgeois – the kind of analysis that Marxists should in fact be critiquing, not celebrating. Still, we note that other strands in Open Marxism do offer up opportunities to elaborate upon class-based explanations of contemporary social and political movements, which we then tentatively develop by exploring so-called movement-parties. We start our article by first sketching out some of the main ideas on social class made by Open Marxists.

Open Marxism and social class analysis

Open Marxists correctly argue that the dispossession and separation of labour from the means of production represent the determining socio-historical form of everyday life under capitalism (Clarke 1994). While commodity production is therefore the fruit of our collective work, commodity production nevertheless appears disconnected and

fragmented. The source of value in capitalism, namely, labour, is thereby mystified. Even so, all workers experience capitalist production as a world of exploitation and oppression. Through these common experiences, workers can therefore make connections between one another in the capitalist chain – ‘between the struggles of coal miners in Britain and the working conditions of car workers in Mexico, and *vice versa*’ (Holloway 1992: 155). Or, in the words of Marx, ‘As the number of the co-operating workers increases, so too does their resistance to the domination of capital. And, necessarily, the pressure put on by capital to overcome this resistance’ (Marx 1988: 449).

Open Marxists are therefore highly critical of class-based approaches founded in classification models of social class. In such models, social class is often said to be constructed through social factors, such as income and status. For those who employ these models, class conflict is thus said to revolve around the likes of the distribution of scarce resources and through ‘a struggle over the spoils of the system of wealth – how much for wages, how much for profits?’ (Bonefeld 2014: 105). According to Open Marxists, however, capitalism is not at its core a machine founded on unfair distribution of wealth. Essential and necessary contradictions instead provide the motor of capitalism, with the separation of labour from the means of production being the generator. If this is the case, then it follows that ‘(c)lass is a living contradiction ... (and so) contradictions cannot be classified’ through ideal-typical models (Bonefeld 2014: 107; see also Moraitis & Copley 2017).

While we agree with these main points in the Open Marxist canon, we wish to add that even at a relatively high level of abstraction in mapping out some of the essential qualities of capitalism, different class relations can be noted. After all, the separation of labour from the means of production is mediated through three further class forms: (1) labour is *free* from *ownership of the means of production*; (2) labour is free from the *control of the labour process*; and (3) labour is free from enjoying the *legal title* to make decisions about the means of production. For capitalists, the opposite is the case. That is to say, (1) capitalists enjoy *ownership* of the means of production; (2) capitalists *control* the labour process; and (3) capitalists enjoy the *legal title* to make decisions about the investment process (Jones 1982: 77; Poulantzas 1978: 18; Woodiwiss 1990: 177; Wright 1978: 73). Implicit in this still relatively abstract definition of class relations is also the class category of managers and supervisors (Carchedi 1991: 35). While they sell their labour to capitalists, managers and supervisors nevertheless they also apply a distinct set of control and surveillance techniques in the capitalist workplace to ensure that surplus value or surplus labour is produced by workers (Schutz 2011: 95; see also Clement & Myles 1994: 14–15; Livingstone 1983: 55; Marx 1988: 1042). Managers and supervisors do not therefore necessarily appropriate surplus labour of workers for themselves, but they can expropriate surplus labour (Carchedi 1991: 35).

We also follow those Marxists who argue that labour should be seen as being productive when it creates an object with exchange value in order to procure surplus value. These labourers are therefore productive workers because they produce commodities with exchange value. In the words of Marx, ‘Labour is productive as long as it objectifies itself in *commodities*, as the unity of exchange-value and use-value’ (Marx 1988: 1039). On this definition, much labour performed in circulation is not productive labour as it does not contribute to creation of surplus value and the valorisation of capital.

Importantly, as Poulantzas notes, other wage earners, for example, those who work in commercial circuits like retail, are certainly oppressed – after all, they too perform unpaid labour – but ‘from the standpoint of the social capital as a whole and its reproduction, their remuneration is an unproductive expense and forms part of the *faux frais* of capitalist production’ (Poulantzas 1978: 212). Unproductive capitalists employ workers who create surplus labour and profits, but not surplus value (for a more detailed discussion of these class relations before and during the covid pandemic, see Roberts 2022).

From the above discussion, we can note that the capitalist dispossession of labour from the means of production gives rise to a complex number of class forms unique to capitalism. We think this is a more discerning account of class than often found in much Open Marxist writing exactly because it captures these class forms at a relatively high level of abstraction. But we also believe that our account is theoretically compatible with Open Marxism for two reasons. First, our approach to Marxist class theory agrees with Open Marxism that we need to reject a Weberian approach to social class in which individuals, based in class groups in a marketplace, use resources like skills as calculated and rational means to achieve certain ends, such as higher than average income (see Bonefeld et al. 1995: 10–11; see also Bonefeld 2014; Clarke 1991b). In a manner reminiscent of Open Marxism, Poulantzas notes that social classes should not be defined by ‘a gradation of incomes’, nor through ‘the hierarchy of wages and salaries’ (Poulantzas 1978: 20). These social factors of classification are merely the effects of deeper class processes rooted in an alienated and objective compulsion in which ‘the possessor of labour-power ... must rather be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power which exists only in his living body’ (Marx 1988: 272). On these critical points about class, then, we find that Open Marxists and Poulantzas appear to share some agreement. Second, the version of social class that we sketch above can also be found in some Open Marxist works, albeit it often remains theoretically underdeveloped in them. It is therefore important to recognise this difficulty in Open Marxist works in order to enhance and improve their particular class-based approach within their overall theoretical oeuvre. We now expand on these points in more detail.

Social class in Open Marxist analysis

Open Marxists employ social class concepts of the sort we have outlined, but they often do so without theoretically developing them. Massimiliano Tomba, for example, argues that social movement protests in Western Europe since the 2008 financial crisis have been in part produced by a section of a ‘terrified middle class’, which seeks to return ‘to pre-euro conditions’ of life. This middle-class group seemingly ‘condemns the excessive power of the banks and their secret committees and longs to go back to the age of small shops, to when human relationships between traders and customers were still possible’ (Tomba 2014: 358). Ultimately, however, it is ‘unable to transcend capitalism’ and so instead seeks transcendent solitude ‘in yoga centres in Oxford Street’ and ‘in the fashions of “new age” movements’ (Tomba 2014: 358). Dinerstein similarly makes use of the term ‘middle-class’, along with other class and social categories, at various points in her study of the politics of autonomy in Latin America. And so, Dinerstein explores urban autonomous organising in Argentina following the global financial turmoil in 2001. She notes

that the global crisis opened up new spaces for the ‘reinvention of concrete practices, ideas, horizons’ in urban Argentinian spaces, which brought together ‘human right activists to workers, the unemployed, citizens, impoverished middle classes, etc’. (Dinerstein 2015: 113–114).

In their own respective ways, both Tomba and Dinerstein therefore demonstrate that social class categories are indeed explicitly utilised by Open Marxists, but often these are employed without theoretically elaborating upon them. Dinerstein, for instance, claims that the 2001 global financial has meant that money as a form of social mediation no longer holds sway in Argentina as it had before the crisis. As a result, ‘(t)he crisis of capital in its money form allowed for an intense moment of de-mediation of the capitalist social relations’ (Dinerstein 2015: 113–114). Problematically, there is a jump here, as is apparent in other Open Marxist writing (see, for example, Pitts 2020: 64), between abstract understandings of capital – money as being an alienated mediation of subjectivity, and so forth – and actual social and political movement organising. What is subsequently missing in this analysis is a conjunctural analysis. When Dinerstein speaks about the ‘middle-class’ attaching itself to other groups, which middle-class groups is she talking about at this particular conjunctural moment in time? Middle-class groups in unproductive commercial circuits, in productive circuits, in the state and public sector, and so on? Similarly, Tomba’s observations on the middle-class lack some analytical and empirical precision. His remarks appear to be based in his own personal observations about middle-class people he might have seen somewhere, but it is certainly not clear who these people are. While Dönmez and Sutton (2016: 695) are subsequently correct to observe ‘the very fact that class struggle rests at the heart of (Open Marxism)’ also implies that capitalist social forms are conceived of by Open Marxists as being ‘fundamentally contradictory: (their) functions cannot be carried out successfully’, there is still nevertheless a relative failure by some Open Marxists to develop both logically and integrally a more complex class theory from the dispossession and separation relation.

But two potential lines of support are accessible for Open Marxists to help them overcome these problems. The first can be found within Open Marxism itself and is hinted at by Simon Clarke’s outstanding analyses of the development of capitalism in the Russian labour market and economy. One of the acknowledged forerunners of Open Marxism, Clarke (1999, 2006) discusses changing class relations within the Soviet and then post-Soviet workplace enterprise. Notably, he documents the changing class forms of management in Russian enterprises during their transition to capitalism after 1991. Clarke observes that different classes of managers emerged in the course of this transition. Many lower level managers had greater pressure imposed on them by senior managers, as well as being excluded from strategic decision-making, as new priorities asserted themselves in Russian enterprises, which then pushed lower level managers to feel an affinity towards workers they were supposed to be managing. Many in the ranks of middle management, however, saw their roles strengthened in the post-Soviet era (Clarke 2006: 218–223). Significantly, Clarke’s insights on management classes are similar to those Marxist theories on class that we briefly outlined in the previous section. The work of Carchedi (1977, 1991), and the application of his class-based theories to workplace organisations by labour process theorists such as Carter (2020, 2021), is a case in point. Both Carchedi and Carter are attuned to how changing class relations in a capitalist

workplace are mediated by shifting value relations and the extraction of surplus labour from employees. To give one illustration, work intensification and greater surveillance of performance through increased organisational targets can be enacted in the workplace by empowering and expanding middle management, thereby moving some working-class members into the non-labour of management. Strands in Open Marxism are thus compatible with strands in the Marxist class approach we also favour. Not only are they compatible, however, but the latter can help the former enhance their theoretical ideas views on class forms.

The second line of support is situated in our belief that Open Marxists would benefit by incorporating a Gramscian state theory into their theoretical arsenal when exploring new social and political movements (see also Cox & Nilsen 2014). As is well known, Gramsci argues that any group aiming to win support and thereby gain hegemony for a political strategy or project has to recognise that it needs to capture state power and gain support in society. As a result, it has to acknowledge the two-fold nature of winning support, or gaining hegemony, insofar that support is gained through ‘civil society’ and ‘political society’ (Gramsci 1986: 12). Gramsci believed therefore that neither political force nor economic relations could explain the dominance of a certain group. Rather, such dominance can only be successful if it wins both state power and ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ with allies in civil society. A political project achieves this by claiming to represent the interests of a selective number of groups in civil society (certain forms of capital, certain classes, certain community groups, certain organisations, and so forth) while subjecting other selective groups to types of coercion (for example, withdrawing state funds from particular organisations). But Open Marxists, unfortunately in our opinion, reject Gramsci’s ideas.

In the next section, we show why Open Marxists make a theoretical mistake in rejecting Gramscian insights. In the section following this, we then argue that the rejection of Gramscian insights leaves some Open Marxists bereft constructing erroneous and bourgeois analysis about political and social movements. Our observations in both sections, though, retain the crucial Open Marxist argument that fetishised class approaches should be rejected in favour of the sort of class analysis tentatively outlined by Clarke, but more explicitly expounded by Marxists like Carchedi, Carter and Poulantzas.

Open Marxist state theory versus Gramscian state theory

Analysts who draw, in part, on Gramsci, have on occasions highlighted the role of regulatory institutions in civil society as acting on behalf of specific state projects, such as Fordist state projects or neoliberal state projects, which are then said to govern the behaviour of groups and organisations in society (see, for example, Jones 2019). For Open Marxists, there are at least two main problems with these approaches.

First, according to Open Marxists, Gramscians underplay how institutions are forms of class relations. Think momentarily about Fordism. For some Gramscians, Fordism was exhausted by the late 1970s as an institutional configuration because many Fordist institutions, such as wage bargaining between national trade unions, governments and

business, which also mapped on to and supported mass production and mass consumption, started to go into crisis. Open Marxists take issue with such accounts because they believe these explanations disregard other class-based issues, such as the increased expenditure on reproducing the postwar labour force in the form of escalating costs on research and development, industry, public services, and so on, coupled with the growing militancy and strength of the postwar labour movement (Gough et al. 2006: 41). These insights follow on from Open Marxist broader points that so-called social and institutional 'structures' are in fact mediations of alienated class relations. For instance, Open Marxists argue that the capitalist state seeks to impose the abstract rule of law, order and money into civil society, these all being forms of alienated class relations in capitalism (Clarke 1988). At a more concrete level of analysis, Open Marxists suggest that labour power is governed through welfare provision, law and order, industrial relations, market labour and so on. Money is managed through a monetary system, which includes national and global monetary policies and standards as well as financial institutions like banks and central banks that regulate monetary supplies in civil society (Bonefeld et al. 1995: 12). Class struggles will affect how different national states develop their respective policies in all these areas (Bonefeld et al. 1995: 26–28).

Second, some Open Marxists claim that Gramscian analysis lapses into Weberian idealism. According to Burnham (2006), this occurs because Gramscian theorists, like Weber, have a habit of viewing capitalism as being comprised of separate social spheres, especially that of the economy, state and civil society. Each social sphere is then thought to enjoy its own 'value orientations' that lead actors to adopt specific goals and means compatible with those values within the social sphere in question. Economic values in the economic sphere will include means-ends actions and calculations about the profit motive, to give one simple illustration. Gramscians therefore overlook how these social spheres are all interconnected forms of the capital–labour relation (Burnham 2006: 31–32). Burnham further argues that Gramscians believe social policies are developed by states through the consciousness of politicians and policy-makers. These government individuals and groups, along with their allies, or 'organic intellectuals', in civil society (the media, think tanks, business interests, and so on), create new cultural, discursive and ideological agendas that go on to win the hearts and minds for a socio-political agenda of selective groups in civil society. For Burnham, this approach is inclined to elevate culture and ideas as explanatory tools over and above material class contradictions (Burnham 2006: 34–35).

Open Marxists clearly set out a very fertile approach to the state and they usefully expose limits to Gramscian theoretical perspectives. But there are some theoretical reservations that need to be considered to their approach. In the first instance, the attack on Gramscian state theory can in fact also be used against Open Marxists. Elsewhere, Burnham (1995: 106–107) discusses the postwar reconstruction across western Europe. He suggests, among other things, that rising wages for the workforce and growth in consumer credit inaugurated steady economic development across Europe. Liberalisation of trade pressures in the late 1950s, however, led a decade later to greater global competition between competing capitals and the eventual overaccumulation of capital. While providing many astute insights, Burnham's narrative nevertheless reads in some places as if it is defined by rather anonymous socio-economic and socio-political processes exerted

themselves (global overaccumulation, for example) at some distance from class relations, class struggles and different socio-political movements and class forces. In other words, it is not always clear in Burnham's analysis where the multitude concrete forms of struggles of alienated labour in and against capitalist and state relations are actually located during specific socio-historical conjunctures (see also Bieler et al. 2010).

In the second instance, there are occasions in which Open Marxists themselves emphasise the ideational moment of hegemonic projects. In their analysis of the politics of UK economic policy during the 1990s, for example, Bonefeld, et al. note that the Conservative government passed the Citizen Charter in 1991 with the aim to empower individuals to claim damages against trade unions for any costs incurred during union strikes. Bonefeld et al. note, 'In other words, the *language* of citizenship and consumer rights was used to disguise the attack on the ability of trade unions to provide collective protection for their members' (Bonefeld et al. 1995: 121; added emphasis). Theoretically, then, Bonefeld seems to suggest that state strategies will employ 'symbolic apparatus with sovereign authority vis-à-vis its own population and other states' (Jessop 2016: 27). Symbolically, state apparatuses endeavour to draw on meaning-making through language and other types of communication (e.g. specific words and policy documents) (Sum & Jessop 2013: 3). This is an important point because it suggests that when considering policy, certain state apparatuses will use semiosis and other discursive representations to frame policy codes and themes for hegemonic projects.

In the third instance, and as we have been at pains to argue throughout this article, we think it is crucial to include a more complex class analysis of the state as well as social and political movements today. We believe, then, that a Gramscian state theory attuned to the class approach we have outlined above provides many fruitful Marxist signposts to analyse social and political movements. From this perspective, the state is not an intrinsic entity as such, but represents a strategic ensemble that encompasses class forces and class practices, their institutions, organisations, ideologies, their alliances, their identities and so on, in a battle between them to win hegemony of state projects and accumulation regimes during particular historical conjunctures in space and time (Poulantzas 1973: 110–112). Struggles between different capitalists (e.g. industrial capitalists vs financial capitalists), different class 'groups', social forces and the strategic dilemmas these elicit are therefore inscribed within the fabric of the state itself. This 'strategic-relational' approach recognises that the state is comprised of such internal divisions and strategic dilemmas, but it also relates these aspects of the state to hegemonic conflicts at points in time concerning political economy, exploitation, uneven development and so forth (Jessop 2002). For Jessop, a Gramscian analysis is subsequently less concerned with the form of the state under capitalism than with its modalities under specific historical moments in class struggle (Jessop 1982: 147).

A Gramscian perspective is thus vital for a Marxist approach to social movement analysis because it helps to analyse and understand how the state will endeavour to strategically appeal to some social classes and social movements in civil society to co-opt these into a hegemonic project while marginalising others, but also how counter-hegemonic movements will endeavour to strategically employ socio-political mechanisms to further their own respective campaigns. We would further suggest that a Gramscian exploration enables Marxists to work at a meso-level of understanding and so

gain critical insights of the class-based nature of social and political movements during specific socio-historical conjunctures. While Open Marxists similarly make some very pertinent observations on the nature of class-based politics, they sometimes lack this vital meso-level of analysis and so deprive themselves of required Marxist theoretical tools with which to judge those concrete politics that might support pose a progressive and left-wing challenge to dominant hegemonic projects. As the next section demonstrates, this in fact leads some Open Marxists to reproduce bourgeois political arguments and bourgeois political commitments.

Open Marxist socio-political analysis

Operating from within the Open Marxist paradigm, Dinerstein and Pitts (2021) argue that any discussion of how we might struggle for a world beyond capitalism must recognise that such struggles are rooted in a variety of ways in which life is socially reproduced and, thus, rooted in a multiplicity of experiences and knowledges across the world. Marxists must therefore reject any Eurocentric and colonial ways of thinking about class struggle. Indigenous people, rural peasants, women, refugees, and so on will develop their class struggles associated with their own reproduction of life, but the same can be said of landless (Dinerstein & Pitts 2021: 144). We cannot prioritise Western workplace struggles over these other struggles. But what we can do in all of these instances is to emphasise ‘moments of *demediation*’ in such struggles in which socio-political activism is created in, against and beyond the mediating real abstractions of capital over everyday life (Dinerstein & Pitts 2021: 168).

Given the clarion call to struggle against capitalist mediations and to avoid Eurocentric thinking, it seems only fitting that we therefore examine some further Open Marxist concrete political proposal to achieve these and other Open Marxist ends. But it is at this point that matters become decidedly murky and strange. When it comes to analysing contemporary politics, a number of Open Marxists produce some esoteric arguments, many of which have little to do with Marxist analysis, let alone the Open Marxist perspective. If anything, some of their political writings articulate a liberal and bourgeois ideology about politics and society more generally. In our opinion, this bourgeois aspect is related, in part, to a predilection among a number of Open Marxists of passing almost directly from abstract Open Marxist categories to empirical (or empiricist) descriptions of actual political activity, processes and practices. They often therefore lack adequate Marxist theoretical tools through which to analyse the socio-political descriptions he makes. Two illustrations will serve to underline this dilemma in Open Marxist political writings: the analysis of Jeremy Corbyn’s time as leader of the UK Labour Party and the analysis of Labour Party foreign policy.

First, then, Bolton and Pitts (2018) situate the rise of Corbyn within the emergence of anti-austerity movements, such as UK Occupy, UK Uncut and the People’s Assembly Against Austerity. According to Bolton and Pitts, these movements drew broadly on a set of ‘productivist tropes’, for example, that the threat to everyday livelihoods emanated from the ‘international banking and financial system’ (Bolton & Pitts 2018: 38). Bolton and Pitts further argue that so-called normative denunciations of neoliberalism of the sort found apparently among Corbyn and his supporters failed ultimately to realise that

neoliberalism is only one expression of capitalist wealth itself. Corbynites who therefore condemned neoliberalism because it strengthens the 'greed' of an 'elite' group of financiers – often called the 1% in the world today – end up articulating pseudo-conspiracy theories instead of condemning the abstract logic of capital itself (Bolton & Pitts 2018: 40–41). Corbyn and his supporters are subsequently guilty of perpetuating these sorts of conspiracy theories, according to Bolton and Pitts.

But while there are ample scholarly debates and studies on Occupy and other 'anti-austerity' movements, which Bolton and Pitts might have drawn upon to make their critical observations about these movements, they prefer not to do so, favouring instead to gather much of their information from mainstream newspapers, blogs or political magazines. This means they miss much of the complexities and subtleties of these movements. To give one quick illustration, they often resort to the clichéd, horary and tired term, 'hard left', to describe a wide variety of left-wing social movements. Bolton and Pitts, for instance, label left-wing opposition to the past Labour leaderships of Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair as 'hard left' (Bolton & Pitts 2018: 31), but they never define what they mean by the 'hard left' in their book. Indeed, later on, matters get even more confusing, when they term UK anti-austerity movements as being 'liberal-left'. But what exactly is the 'liberal-left' and how is it different to the 'hard left'?

In a later co-written paper, Thompson et al. (2021) once again employ the nebulous and vague term, 'hard left', to analyse the contemporary Labour Party. Corbyn apparently gave an 'intellectually moribund' UK 'hard left' an opportunity to display 'political authenticity and purity, teamed with a post-crisis populism of the left' (Thompson et al. 2021: 33). In reality, the authors tell us, the 'hard left' under Corbyn was always

in essence programmatic rather than strategic. Its politics flow from a belief in certain fundamental truths and values which, while tweaked to fit the times, imply a strongly maximalist realisation of every piece of a political and policy programme, with little consideration of electoral or economic feasibility, or of the need for trade-offs and compromises. (Thompson et al. 2021: 33)

Fortunately, continue the authors, since Corbyn stood down as Labour leader, the 'hard left' has rapidly become 'an increasingly irrelevant' force in UK politics (Thompson et al. 2021: 32).

What is immediately apparent from these remarks is how little scholarly engagement there is by the authors on the conceptual meaning about the 'hard left'. No substantive analysis is presented on this tenuous expression. Rather, the authors tend to comment on how irrational and unrealistic the 'hard left' has always been in its ideals and policy prescriptions. But the thinness in this way of thinking about concrete politics is exposed in the article in at least two ways. First, the authors evidently favour the 'soft left' in the Labour Party. During the early 1980s, for instance, we are told that the 'soft left' in Labour was 'redefining its core values' as the 'hard left' sought to impose old-fashioned and defunct 'top-down' policies on Labour. In contrast, the 'soft left' was championing 'pluralism' alongside a mixture of 'market conditions and planning mechanisms' alongside 'citizenship rights granted employees, consumers and tenants' (Thompson et al. 2021: 34). What is required today, the authors tell us, is a new version of this 'soft left'

politics embedded in egalitarianism and pluralism. The authors claim that such policies can be embodied in an updated 'New Deal' programme as was evident in Roosevelt's welfarist policies in 1930s America (Thompson et al. 2021: 36).

Considering, though, that at least one of the authors in Thompson et al., namely Pitts, aligns himself with Open Marxism, he nevertheless, in this article at least, pursues a very peculiar set of 'soft left' policies; policies that the vast majority of Marxists would argue have failed in the past due to their inherent contradictions. After all, Thompson et al. are defending a variety of welfarism, but welfarism has already been tried and tested in the United Kingdom from 1945 up until the 1970s. More worryingly from a Marxist perspective, they appear unaware of the inherent contradictions embedded in welfare capitalism, which have been debated endlessly by Marxists (see Jessop 2002). Marxists are generally sceptical about meeting human needs through welfare goods for the simple reason that they believe capital will eventually want to dominate any 'free' welfare gifts by transforming them into commodity capital for the ceaseless generation of profit (Smith 2012: 175).

Second, the reason why Thompson et al. wish to employ such a thin term as 'hard left' is to then argue it is crucial to rebuild and galvanise a 'soft left' in the Labour Party and in British society. In so doing, however, Thompson et al. fail to give due analysis to the historical conjunctural emergence of the very terms themselves, 'hard left' and 'soft left', within the Labour Party. Going back to 1980, it was in fact Neil Kinnock who helped to coin the term, 'soft left', in order to forge a third way for himself at the time between the deputy leadership contender, Dennis Healy and the 'hard left' deputy leadership contender, Tony Benn. At the heart of Kinnock's thinking, however, was the plan to keep the so-called 'hard left' out of power in Labour, which duly happened once Benn had been defeated by Healy. Soon, the Labour left were ousted from other positions of power in the party, with Kinnock becoming leader in 1983 (Heffernan & Marqusee 1992: 22–25).

Once in power, Kinnock began to accommodate the Labour Party to broadly Thatcherite hegemony. The Policy Review from 1988 to 1991, initiated by Kinnock and his team after Labour lost the 1987 General Election, brought in a range of 'realistic' neoliberal policies into Labour's policy agenda, including supply-side economics, more emphasis on consumer power, cautious welfare spending and a general warming towards market-based innovation in the economy. Furthermore, the Policy Review sought to establish a more 'responsible' relationship with trade unions, which included wage policies that would not lead to high inflation and an acceptance by the Labour leadership that trade unions would not necessarily win back the powers taken away by Thatcher's Conservative governments (Hay 1999: chapter 2). One way of thinking about the rise of the 'soft left' in the Labour Party is to therefore think about it creating post-Thatcherite hegemony within the Labour Party itself. We believe this is a more satisfactory Marxist analysis of New Labour than the 'hard left' rhetoric employed by a self-proclaimed Open Marxists like Pitts.

The questionable nature of this 'soft left' analysis is also apparent in Thompson and Pitts's (2020) pamphlet for the Labour Campaign for International Development. In the pamphlet, Thompson and Pitts spend a significant portion of it is devoted to trashing Corbyn's international development policy stances while he was leader of the Labour

Party. At the same time, Thompson and Pitts claim that Blair's enthusiasm for the utterly disastrous invasion of Iraq marginalised New Labour's 'modest, but undoubted, achievements in the domestic sphere' (Thompson & Pitts 2020: 3). Conveniently, Thompson and Pitts fail to mention that left-wing and progressive critiques of Blairism dealt with a variety of domestic issues as well as foreign policy issues (see, for example, Whitfield 2001). Strangely, though, one of the main messages from their pamphlet is that Joe Biden and Keir Starmer apparently represent a new hope for the world through which to 'reforge the transatlantic partnership around progressive internationalist principles' (Thompson & Pitts 2020: 14). Among other things, this implies that any transatlantic partnership will garner the courage and fortitude to build new 'political spaces within which *liberal values* can be defended' (Thompson & Pitts 2020: 13; added emphasis).

Perhaps unsurprisingly considering their narrative, Thompson and Pitts (2020) give virtually no space to discussing critical examinations of past 'liberal humanitarian' conjunctural interventions across the globe by Western powers in the name of fostering 'human rights', nor do they analyse the changing global conjuncture of imperialism and Empire, or dissect the numerous debates among the left of these terms (for alternative and more detailed Marxist accounts of imperialism and Empire, see Kiely 2010; Panitch & Gindin 2013; Roberts 2010). By arguing that the dominant powers in the West can and indeed should nevertheless construct a new liberal human rights agenda, we believe that as is the case in the recent past this will merely reproduce a Eurocentric global policy regime albeit in a new form.

From the discussion in this section, then, we would suggest that no specific class form analysis of concrete politics emerges from within the Open Marxist tradition. In fact, and as we have readily seen, some Open Marxists even articulate versions of what might be termed as 'soft left' Labourism. In the next section, we therefore combine the Marxist class analysis defended earlier in the article with Gramscian conjunctural analysis and Open Marxism in order to provide an alternative analysis of concrete socio-political movements.

Social class, politics and social movements

Several Open Marxists do develop more abstract Marxist concepts and categories to take account of, understand and explain opportunities for progressive social and political movement to assert their own interests during specific socio-economic and socio-political conjunctures. Gough, for example, locates himself in the Open Marxist paradigm, but does so to make sense of concrete class struggles in the workplace and in civil society more broadly. For example, he makes a distinction between *structure* and *system*. The capital-labour relation is a structure that bestows upon capital- and labour-specific characteristics through certain processes and powers each possesses, but this structural relation is reproduced into distinctive socio-historical capitalist systems at different points in time (Gough 1992: 269).

Given Gough's focus on the structure of the capital-labour contradiction, and the form it assumes during specific socio-historical conjunctures (or 'systems'), he is also attuned to how labour power is reproduced across civil society through other relations

and identities, not least through unpaid labour of gender and age, and through divisions based on factors like ethnicity (Gough 2014). For instance, Gough explores the historical conjuncture of Brexit in the United Kingdom and its impact on class relations and working-class political strategies. He argues that the rise of Thatcherism and neoliberalism from the late 1970s onwards was premised, in part, on the depoliticisation of society and the imposition of the law of value in and against the post-1945 welfare state. Thatcherism was successful in implementing these broad strategies. Neoliberalism has led to a weakening of trade unions, wage cuts for many, cuts of public services, privatisation across society, intensified consumerism and increased debt among ordinary people, greater individualism, and so on. Elements in the Conservative Party and beyond then used Brexit to create a new nationalistic and xenophobic ideology, which was to support the further entrenchment of neoliberalism into society and to free up sections of capital. Under these circumstances, and given that the Labour Party was seen by many of the electorate to be weak on Brexit, *some* sections of the working class supported these neo-liberal socio-political strategies (Gough 2020).

We believe, however, that Gough's observations here are not only compatible with a Gramscian analyses of Brexit, but that a Gramscian analysis can deepen Gough's account. Jessop (2017), for example, likewise suggests that Brexit must be placed in the conjuncture of neoliberal financialised social policies, which grew under the auspices of Thatcherism. Among other things, this conjuncture weakened UK productive capital through de-industrialisation strategies and attacks on trade union power. This also enforced a low skill, low wage economy, a strengthening of unproductive circuits of capital and increasing social divisions across a range of social classes. At the same time, and this is a point missed by Gough, the conjuncture opened up new strategic opportunities for different class forces and left-wing social and political movements to make interventions in civil society and assert their socio-political agendas. Before 2008, global social movements, such as the UK's Globalise Resistance in the early 2000s, were already trying to bring together movement activists with established trade unions (Ibrahim 2015: 93–94). But the 2008 crisis create new opportunities for social and political movements to crystallise around unproductive capitalist circuits like global finance. Bailey (2014) has documented how UK anti-austerity movements followed in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and reinvigorated movements activism in Britain. UK Uncut started as a protest movement in October 2010 with the expressed aim to protest against companies accused of tax avoidance. UK Uncut activists then targeted several well-known high street shops and companies, such as Vodaphone, Top Shop, Boots, and Fortnum and Mason (Bailey 2014). Young people also emerged during this period to join distinct left-ist socio-political movements campaigning for change and they helped to define certain movement-party ideals like those attached to Corbynism in the United Kingdom (Neary 2020: 203).

Further global social movements also emerged out of this conjuncture. Notably, Occupy, which initially appeared on 17 September, 2011 when 2000 people descended on Zuccotti Park near Wall Street, and then spread throughout the globe, was a response to the 2008 global crisis and austerity. Rehmann (2013) argues that many Occupy groups attracted activists from across society, including trade union activists, community activists and global social movement activists. This gave Occupy a more 'inclusive' form

and a fuller sense of democracy and participation. At the same time, there were problems with Occupy strategy, not least the propensity of some Occupy activists to reject organisational socio-political and activist structures (Ibrahim & Roberts 2018). Furthermore, while it is true to say that Brexit led to some working-class groups uniting with other political forces to campaign against a socially constructed 'Other', such as that of migrants to be excluded from welfare entitlements, evidence also suggests that many working-class people living in de-industrialised towns nevertheless saw the Brexit referendum as an opportunity to voice criticisms of the impact of neoliberalism in their regions and the failure of the Labour Party over years to stop these negative effects (see Telford & Wistow 2020).

As we also know, however, a number of Open Marxists simply dismiss these movements as being led by the 'hard left'. We think, however, that our class-based perspective advances a more complex Marxist explanation of such movements. Let us take the rise of movement-parties as an example. According to della Porta et al. (2017), movement-parties are comprised of two broad organisational groups. First, there are social movements, which are often comprised of networks of individuals and groups that share some collective identification and aim to affect social transformation through innovative and alternative socio-political means. Second, there are more conventional political groups, which aim for power through the election mechanisms associated with local government, national parliaments or global bodies like the EU. Movement-parties therefore 'emerge as a sort of hybrid between the two, when organisational and environmental linkages are very close: to different degrees, they have overlapping membership, co-organise various forms of collective action, fund each other, address similar concerns' (della Porta et al. 2017: 7). Of course, there have been in the past links between social movements and political parties, but della Porta et al. argue that since the conjunctural moment of the 2008 financial crisis, some social movements increasingly started to work with more mainstream political actors on anti-austerity politics and policies. In countries, such as Greece, Spain and Italy, these coalitions have coalesced into new party movements like Syriza, Podemos and M5S. Some movement activists have formed organisations like Momentum in the United Kingdom and have joined forces with parliamentary parties like the Labour Party.

Importantly, movement-parties are often comprised of a unique combination of class relations. Indeed, we concur with those Open Marxists who argue that class relations have become more multifaceted since the 1980s because, at least in powerful capitalist countries, unproductive circuits of capital have gained hegemony of sorts. Clarke argues that the post-1945 welfare state integrated the working class into the circuit of productive capital (Clarke 1991c). During the 1970s, however, capital began to produce surplus profits through other channels, particularly through financial means, and this included generating massive debt in society alongside 'the diversion of surplus capital into *unproductive* and increasingly speculative channels' (Clarke 2001: 86; added emphasis). In our view, the prominence of unproductive classes has also given rise to innovative forms of left-wing politics and social movements. Elsewhere, della Porta (2015) notes that one unique element to movement-parties is that they emerged, in part, from protests against austerity like the Occupy movement. But she also claims that a distinctive feature of movement-parties is that while sections of the productive industrial working classes are

drawn to movement-parties, they are not the leading class and, in fact, operate in movement-parties through multiclass alliances. Surveys show that movement-parties also attract young unemployed and other precarious workers, retired people, middle classes working in the public sector and middle classes working in certain unproductive service industries (della Porta 2015: 64–66).

Wilkin (2021: 56) similarly observes that in the specific case of the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France, these ‘yellow vest’ protestors came from a variety of backgrounds – ‘working class, petite bourgeois, retired, unemployed, low-level managers, the disabled’ – and they have made significant connections with other social movements in France, such as groups in the feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) and environmental movements. Wilkin also notes that a large core of *Gilets Jaunes* activists emerged from different strata of the manual (productive) and non-manual (unproductive) working class along with the non-working poor. Such working-class activists can therefore be drawn from so-called white-collar jobs (low-skilled admin occupations, for example, that lack control and possession over the means of production) as well as from skilled artisan occupations. As such, these activists have demanded social and economic justice from the French state. These demands are noticeably different to the moral concerns found among some global movements who have campaigned for universal needs like human rights (Wilkin 2021: 62–63). Arguably, then, *Gilets Jaunes* activists move beyond middle-class identities – identities that might in the past have been attached to global social movements (see Worth 2013: 70). Other studies have shown that a number of movement-parties, such as *Podemos* in Spain, have also been successful in forming intraclass alliances. As MacMillan (2017) observes, *Podemos* has succeeded in gaining the support of a mixed sector of the population, including between 30% and 35% of former Socialist Party voters, a similar proportion of United Left voters and even 10% of those who previously voted for the centre–right People’s Party.

For us, therefore, the Marxist analysis presented above gives rise to a more radical and realistic socialist politics than that offered by some Open Marxists. First, the surge in membership of the Labour Party following Corbyn’s leadership in 2015 is not, as Pitts et al. would have us believe, due to the mass infiltration of the ‘hard left’. According to Whiteley et al. (2019), the membership surge can be explained by a number of factors. Many who joined the Labour Party in 2015 were lapsed members who had left during Tony Blair’s leadership, disgruntled with the ‘centre ground’ that Blair took the Labour Party. But others who joined Labour for the first time during this period were often not as left-wing as returning members, but were those experiencing relative deprivation and held fast to ideals of society treating people with ‘justice and fairness’. Whiteley et al. (2019: 87) note that in respect to new members, as distinct from lapsed members re-joining, 42% of first-time joiners earned less than the average salary of £26,400. But many graduates earning less than the average graduate income also joined Labour during this period. Overall, Whiteley et al. find that discontent with ‘politics as usual’ was been one reason for the surge in Labour membership under Corbyn (see also Gough 2020).

The specific conjunctural moment also opened up strategic opportunities for social and political movements around Corbyn to mobilise new and innovative discursive counter-hegemonic strategies. In his analysis of Labour Party supporters under Corbyn’s leadership, Dean (2019) shows how a number of these adherents adopted social

movement digital protest approaches to attack right-wing forces in UK society. Some of these digital tactics involved creating memes – visual, textual and auditory forms that can be quickly circulated and shared across digital media platforms – and Gifs – which are animated memes. Both memes and Gifs are images that are frequently grounded in emotion, humour and irony. Some also have subversive and political edge to them, such as mocking figures of authority or critiquing what are thought to be reactionary viewpoints. Counter-hegemonic groups in movement-parties, as is the case more broadly in social movements, are thereby attuned to skilfully employing semiotic and visual means in their activism.

Conclusion

In this article, we have indicated that different theoretical and practical themes emerge from Open Marxist writers. In terms of theory, we have argued that one problem with some Open Marxists is that they do not develop their abstract categories at different levels of theoretical abstraction to take account of the empirical material they explore. From an Open Marxist framework, Clarke (2002) makes a similar observation of some of the theoretical work of his fellow Open Marxists. He notes that the fetishistic power of capital lies in its *social form*, namely, that individuals exist in capitalism through a complex division of labour and through a relation of ‘things’, which arise through the division of labour. Relations of things, such as wages, rent and profit, mediate everyday life and develop into further concrete social forms of mediation (Clarke 2002: 62–64).

One of Clarke’s points therefore appears to be an appeal to Open Marxists to take seriously these mediated social forms of capitalist life and not to simply highlight how workers perceive and react in and against capital itself as an abstract dynamic. A recent version of this latter Open Marxist position can be found in a piece written by Pitts (2022). In this piece, Pitts criticises ‘distributionism’ as a left-wing policy proposal – the idea that the fruits of capitalism can be fairly redistributed to the majority in society. Pitts for example singles out movements like Occupy and Corbynism as illustrations of left-wing movements who advocated greater state intervention in order to redistribute capitalist profits for ‘the many’. Problematically, Pitts basis his critique of distributionism on abstract value analysis. Flaws of distributionism are ultimately founded on its disregard of value being a ‘structural imperative to which we are all subject’. Strangely, though, Pitts then supports policies embedded in the ‘recognition of value’, such as Fair Pay Agreements. The reason this is a somewhat ‘strange’ path to support is because Pitts seems to assume that such policies will not be mediated through conjunctural socio-economic accumulation agendas and socio-political agendas, which will still serve to exploit workers.

This leads us to a number of practical problems and dilemmas in some Open Marxist writings. Without adequately developing Marxist categories, the reader is sometimes presented with an empirical Open Marxist discussion of actual socio-political events, which remain at a one-sided level of analysis. More worryingly, this analysis can also occasionally lead to support failed left-liberal social democratic politics. In another co-written piece, Pitts, for instance, argues that the UK Labour Party needs to develop guidelines that will lead to a ‘policy framework for rebalancing power in the

workplace ... to strengthen the hands of workers across industries and professions'. And what sort of concrete policies does Pitts have in mind here. Unfortunately, he is a bit vague in details, but does say the Labour Party should adopt 'a new model of social partnership that redefines a role for worker voice in bargaining with employers around productivity gains, shared prosperity and flexible new working patterns, particularly in the private sector' (Pakes & Pitts 2022: 11). Questionably, though, Pitts adopts the discourse and language – for example, 'social partnerships', 'shared prosperity', and 'flexible working' – that New Labour under Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown also adopted (see also Fairclough 2000). Open Marxism needs to do better than offering up this type of analysis.

More positively, we have also shown that Open Marxism provides crucial concepts and insights for Marxist theory, which are then often developed by Open Marxists for progressive and emancipatory politics during specific conjunctures. Gough, for example, argues that the Labour Party needs to assert and adopt, at different spatial scales, socialist policies against austerity and call for 'decent jobs, public services and housing'. Such struggles around these policies can start to demystify the dominance of neoliberalism in everyday life. Indeed, they can start to question 'the "need" to reduce the fiscal deficit; the "impossibility" of taxing corporations and the rich; the greater efficiency of private firms than the public sector; the imperative of the profit rate and payment of dividends by industrial and commercial firms' (Gough 2017: 371). Some Gramscians would concur with such strategies. Jessop notes, for instance, that the Brexit Referendum should have been used as a strategic opportunity for Labour to galvanise public support for opting out of neoliberalism, and therefore not simply not opting out of the EU (even if the EU embraces neoliberal policies) (Jessop 2018).

Why we have therefore argued that no specific unifying themes in terms of political practice or political programmes flow from an Open Marxist understanding of capitalist society, there are elements within its corpus of work that can be brought productively together with other strands of Marxist thinking to provide a powerful critical analysis of society, past, present and future.

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Author biographies

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