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Exploitation and Expropriation, or Why Capitalism Must be Attacked with Equal Force on Every Front

[Author's note: This essay is based upon arguments made in Chapter 2 ("Some Theoretical Considerations") of my book, [Can the Working Class Change the World?](#) Unless otherwise noted, the quotes are from this chapter and are either my words or those of someone I am quoting]

There is much discussion on the left about the connections and relative importance of class, race, gender, and the environment. Some, like political scientist [Adolph Reed](#), take a class-first approach and criticize those who place an emphasis on race and gender as engaging in an identity politics that often shades into support for the neoliberalism that has wreaked havoc on working people for the past several decades. Others, like [Robin D.G. Kelley](#) and [Gerald Horne](#), maintain that capitalism has, from its inception, been racialized, so that we cannot speak of capitalism alone but must add that it has always been a racial capitalism. Scholars such as [Nancy Fraser](#) make similar arguments about gender, pointing out that capitalism has been patriarchal from the beginning. While Reed has been inclined to criticize the positions of those who support the position of Kelley, Horne, and Fraser as emphasizing identity over class, the Northern Irish writer, broadcaster, and activist, [Richard Seymour](#) points out that "To me, it's straightforward. Class is a social relationship that is structured by race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and a whole range of other determinations. Race is the modality in which millions of people inhabit their class experience. Their "identity politics" will often be the precise way in which they fight a class struggle."

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I think that Seymour is correct. Whether or not we are aware of it or not, in a world that has been structured in a racist and patriarchal manner, we live our lives as white or black, men or women, gay or not. But in addition, what the “class first” proponents miss is that, at least to some extent, race and gender are independent of class. For example, numerous studies have been conducted that attempt to isolate race as a factor affecting any number of social outcomes, from wages and income to health and prison admissions. Consider this: “The average of the annual wages of occupations in which black men are overrepresented is \$37,005, compared with \$50,333 in occupations in which they are underrepresented.” Further, “A \$10,000 increase in the average annual wage of an occupation is associated with a seven percentage point decrease in the proportion of black men in that occupation.” Many more similar examples could be given.

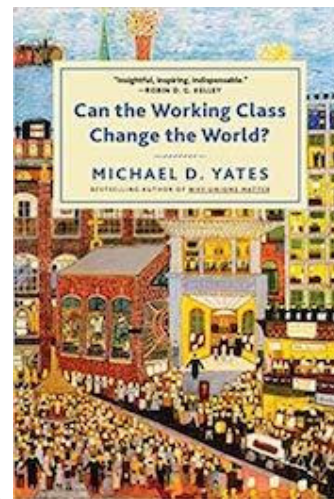
If we add the environment to the mix, we get another set of disagreements. Some who consider themselves on the left believe that the ecological crises we now face are best attacked with modern technology. Others see the necessity of a Green New Deal, with massive public investments in clean energy. Both positions assume that their solution can be achieved within the confines of capitalism, with technological miracles deriving from the genius of private capital and through a state still dominated by this same capital. In neither viewpoint is agriculture or the military, both top polluters and contributors to global warming, much considered. The technophiles argue that modern large-scale farming has greatly benefited humanity and without it there would be mass starvation. The Green New Dealers simply don’t see agriculture as a priority. The military simply isn’t on either group’s radar, perhaps reflecting the national focus and lack of a global perspective of both.

The connections among environmental catastrophes, class, race, and gender are often admitted and sometimes stressed. Global warming impacts poor people most, which means that minorities and women will suffer disproportionately. However, the idea that all four aspects of modern life might have the same root cause is rarely held. In a discussion on social media, a person associated with the technological answer to the question of how best to ameliorate or end global warming was said to have otherwise good views on race and gender. Implying that it is possible to have an acceptably radical take on class, race, and/or gender while embracing a decidedly non-radical analysis of the rampant destruction of the natural world.

There is a way to explore class, race, gender, and the environment in a unified, holistic manner. By doing so, we can not only show the interrelationships among them,

connections that are integral to the nature of capitalist society, but we can also delineate a political strategy that can destroy capital's yoke. What follows is an argument more fully developed in my book, [Can the Working Class Change the World?](#) It draws on the thinking of many persons, and although I hope my presentation is lucid and compelling, the underlying concepts are not original with me.

Capitalism is a system that rests upon two primary foundations: exploitation and expropriation. The first arises in the workplace, whether in a factory, mine, bank, office building, in the home, or online. All capitalist societies are marked by a sharp separation between the few who own and the many who must gain access to what the former have,



namely society's productive property: land, resources, tools, equipment, machinery. Failure to do so means misery and even death. To get such access, people must sell the one thing they do own, their capacity to work. The advantage here obviously lies with the owners, that is, with the capitalists. This fundamental inequality gives capital the power to compel (exploit) workers to labor for an amount of time that is greater than that which would be required to produce the necessities of life. Employees are therefore paid a wage that will buy enough for them to live and to reproduce, to purchase their subsistence. However, their day's work produces far more output than what workers need, and this surplus, when sold, is the enterprise's profits. These are used to buy more means of production, and the process repeats itself indefinitely, allowing for ever greater accumulations of capital. Businesses become larger and more concentrated, and they expand geographically until they encompass the world. Power grows from the points of production to every element within the larger society, from media, schools, and cultural institutions to each level of government. And as capital augments itself, it comes to infiltrate all the nooks and crannies of our lives, including our minds.

The historical trend has been for the working class, those who are exploited, to comprise an increasing fraction of all those who directly produce goods and services. However, there are still very large numbers of peasants, small farmers living mostly at a subsistence level. They face grave hardships, but they are not exploited in the sense described above. Though they are if, to make ends meet, they engage in wage labor.

Capitalism's second foundation is expropriation, which means the taking of something without payment. This occurs prior to and coincident with exploitation. For example, the private ownership of property in the means of production that distinguishes capitalism from earlier economic systems, came into being largely through theft of peasant lands, either by capitalists themselves or in league with governments (the state). Rural farmers, who typically engaged in cooperative labor on lands that were considered common and available to all for grazing animals, gathering firewood and plants, hunting, and fishing, even for cultivation, now found that the common parcels had become private property and what had once been a right to use them was now a crime. The early history of the European incursion in the Americas is one of rampant, relentless, and brutal land robbery. Peasants and native peoples deprived of their means of sustenance often had no choice but to become wage workers, providing a pool of desperate "hands" to be exploited. Profits made from them could then be used to finance the expropriation of more territory in a reciprocal process that enriched capital and impoverished labor. When, as in the Americas, the denial of access to what had been their forests and water, along with the introduction of disease, led to mass death, the new "owners" financed the ravaging of Africa and the expropriation of black bodies, in a slave trade both ruthless and inhuman.

"... slaves, dark-skinned and largely from Africa, were kidnapped and shipped under deplorable conditions across the Atlantic Ocean to spend their lives tormented and tortured on plantations growing tobacco, sugar, and cotton. This was an expropriation of the human body itself, with the labor power of the slaves paid nothing but exploited nonetheless, generating enormous profits for their masters. Slave labor producing cotton made possible the burgeoning growth of capitalism's quintessential infant industry, textiles, the development of which solidified the preeminence of the new mode of production, not only in England and the United States but in the world. The wombs of women slaves were likewise expropriated to satisfy the lusts of slaveowners and to help maintain, through giving birth, a further supply of slaves. There were slaves who were not black, but skin color was an obvious physical marker, and the slave trade brought some eight million black slaves to the "New World." Given that the slave owners and colonizers were

overwhelmingly white, and given that they had already expropriated and partially exterminated indigenous peoples, an ideology of the superiority of whites and the inferiority of blacks, as well as Indians and later Chinese, was inevitable.”

We see with slavery another example of the interplay between exploitation and expropriation. Black bodies are taken and exploited, generating enormous profits, some of which are used to buy more slaves, and the process begins anew. In the United States, expropriation of former slaves continued, through Jim Crow laws that put tens of thousands of men in prison, only to be contracted out to white employers. We see as well that the expropriation of black human beings was central to the development of capitalism, which means that the racism that accompanied and justified slavery was also an inherent aspect of the new economic system. Capitalism, slavery, and racism cannot be separated, just as exploitation and expropriation cannot. They form crucial parts of a whole.

Women too have suffered expropriation from capitalism’s beginning. Any mode of production must find ways to reproduce itself. Capital must be assured of a workforce capable of adequately performing the wide variety of manual and mental tasks necessary for the generation of surplus labor time. Women have been, of course, solely responsible for bearing children, but they have also been required to prepare their young for future wage work. Social scientist, Nancy Fraser, tells us, in describing the changes brought about by capitalism with respect to reproductive labor:

“One is the epistemic shift from production to social reproduction—the forms of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds. Various called “care,” “affective labour,” or “subjectivation,” this activity forms capitalism’s human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their habitus and the socio-ethical substance, or *Sittlichkeit*, in which they move. Central here is the work of socializing the young, building communities, producing and reproducing the shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation. In capitalist societies much, though not all, of this activity goes on outside the market, in households, neighbourhoods and a host of public institutions, including schools and childcare centres; and much of it, though not all, does not take the form of wage labour.”

In pre-capitalist societies, which were predominantly rural, women were usually full participants in direct production of food, clothing, and shelter. Even in early capitalism, cloth and other goods were manufactured in the homes, as a family enterprise. When the factory system was introduced, employers used children, often orphans, and women to

work with the new machinery that centralized production made possible. The labor was so onerous that it threatened the biological reproduction of the labor force. When men began to agitate for limits on the use of women in factory production, capital eventually agreed to legislative restrictions on women's work. However, it also then encouraged a patriarchal confinement of women to the home, where they would have complete responsibility for the kinds of activities Fraser describes in the above quote.

The consequence was

“[a] sharp separation took shape between production and social reproduction, with men the family's main breadwinners and women relegated to overseers of the household. What the women did was essential to the production of wage laborers; without it, capital accumulation was impossible. Yet they became increasingly invisible. In effect, capital had expropriated their labor, obtaining it free of charge, lowering costs of production. Along with this split came an ethos that professed the naturalness of women's subordination to men. Religious ideologues pronounced this the will of God, and laws sanctioned it. Women typically could not own property or vote.”

Women did continue to work for wages but often faced discrimination and sexual violence. Women in the home could be recruited in desperate times, such as war, to return to waged work, only to be discarded when no longer needed. In effect, the expropriation of their reproductive labor made them more exploitable in the labor market and the workplace. And even when they labored for pay, they were still expected to keep the home fires burning and provide free of charge the activities that created the future mass of workers, who themselves would soon enough be exploited. Thus, like racism, patriarchy is an essential feature of capitalism.

The third form of expropriation is that of nature. Capital considers the air, water, and soil to be “free” resources to be used and abused, so long as money can be made. The disharmonies created between society and nature, while existent in previous systems of production, rise to entire new levels with capitalism. The profits accumulated by polluting air, soil, and water allow for great accumulations of capital, always built upon the exploitation of labor, which gives rise to more expropriation of the earth. Nature eventually loses its elasticity, its capacity for regeneration, and this requires an intensification, by chemical and mechanical means, of the expropriation.

“We have, then, a final example of the interplay between expropriation and exploitation. Nature is stolen by capital, so that labor can be further exploited. In addition, land, water, even air, are made into commodities that can be bought and sold, again creating new

arenas for accumulation. The social costs of capital's abuse of nature is typically borne by workers and peasants. They live where air pollution is worst, where the soil has been most degraded. They drink contaminated water. Their workplaces and their hunting and fishing grounds are fouled in multiple ways. When floods, hurricanes, and droughts, caused and exacerbated by capitalist-induced global warming, descend upon humanity, the least of us suffer most."

Before we look at how best to resist exploitation and expropriation, it is important to understand that every aspect of production is determined by them. The way work is organized, the lifespan and safety of the product, the engineering and technological profile, all are determined by the metric of profitability. Given that the only active element that can impede capital's monomaniacal commitment to the bottom line is the workforce, control of labor is of paramount importance. Technology that might encourage employee ingenuity, for example, through using and adjusting machinery or software, will be rejected if there is another technology that give management more control. Production methods that could significantly lower global warming will always be rejected if there are more profitable alternatives.

If we look at the world's dominant economic system in this integrated manner, there are implications for efforts to end its supremacy and replace it with something radically different, one that is its antithesis. The class struggle, combining the organizing of workers and peasants globally, cannot be effectively waged unless racism, patriarchy, and ecological ruin are central to it. This means four things. First, the exploitation and expropriation that are the foundation of capital's rule must be directly confronted, in equal measure by whatever means necessary, from traditional labor union and political agitations to street protests, occupations, and collective self-help measures as with Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, Mississippi. Peasant uprisings in rural India, inspired by Mao Zedong's revolution in China are just as important as mass strikes. Both are assaults on capital. The same is true for the Black Lives Matter demonstrations against racist police brutality, the efforts to end the criminal injustice system, and agitations to win national health insurance. Each must be supported at the same time, again in equal proportion and with reference to one another. And doesn't the full equality of women in all aspects of life demand to be a central and not a peripheral goal of any good society, which, in and of itself, represents an attack on both exploitation and expropriation?

Second, we must admit, from any conscientious examination of history, that working class and peasant organizations are themselves riven with racial, gender, and environmental

divides. Too often, labor unions, social democratic, and communist political parties have downplayed racism and patriarchy, and they have been even worse with respect to the need for radical environmental transformation. Compounding this neglect has been the tendency for both unions and parties to collaborate with employers, ostensibly to obtain labor peace but in fact to stave off internal rank-and-file revolts.

We could use many countries as examples, but the richest nation in the world, the United States, is an excellent case in point. Labor unions, even those that supported civil rights laws, have been hotbeds of racism. A radical black labor group, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, picketed both the auto companies and the United Auto Workers in the late 1960s, chanting at union headquarters, “UAW means UAin’t White.” In the 1970s, black steelworkers had to file charges under the civil rights laws against their union, the United Steelworkers, to force the abandonment of an overtly racist seniority provisions in the national collective bargaining agreement. Even today, race is a contentious issue in many unions, and few of labor’s top leaders are black (or Hispanic, Native American, and Asian). The situation is worse with respect to patriarchy. Few unions are led by women, and these are almost always those in which women comprise the majority of members. Women’s issues are seldom given priority either within the unions or in bargaining with employers. Construction unions, which hold a great deal of power within the major labor federation, the AFL-CIO, are bastions of Caucasian culture and crude sexism. In politics, labor doesn’t even have a party aligned with the labor movement. Yet union brass are dedicated to serving the wishes of the Democratic Party, which has long abandoned whatever commitment to the needs of workers it once had. If we look at the environment, some unions are in league with the fossil fuel industry to promote gas and oil production. Global warming doesn’t seem to be on the radar of most labor organizations.

What can be said about the United States is true for unions and labor political parties in all of the countries of the Global North, although often to a lesser degree. In the world’s poorer nations—the Global South—we see the same. India is a case in point, though on the far left, the Maoists have made progress among peasants in condemning patriarchy and the insidious caste system, as well as in promoting agroecology (environmentally sustaining agriculture, which peasants have utilized for centuries). In the Global North, I might add, it is as if peasants don’t exist, even though there at least two billion small farmers in the world.

If we are to successfully combat exploitation and expropriation, we must counter all forms of inequality within every working class and peasant organization and activity. It is

important that labor unions, working-class and peasant political parties or formations, each direct action group from Occupy Wall Street and the anti-fascists to the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil and the Naxalites in India, have: a statement of principles stressing race, gender, and the environment; a radical education program that, using a critical pedagogy, teaches the principles of Marx's political economy, and that combines study of exploitation and expropriation, with special attention paid to race, gender, and environment; where needed, caucuses of women, discriminated against racial ethnic groups, as well as LGBTQ members; a formal commitment to diverse leaderships, such that the aforementioned categories are, in fact, leaders.

Third, imperial depredation of the poor nations by those in the Global North is implicated in exploitation, expropriation, and the racism, patriarchy, and ecological ruin intimately connected to these two defining features of capitalism. Workers and peasants in the South suffer the greatest exploitation and expropriation. This means that the working classes in the North have a special obligation to bring imperialism to an end through actions in their home countries. And it must be recognized by these classes that it is no doubt going to be the case that workers and peasants in the South will be at the forefront of struggles to end capitalism and build a world without the multiple evils that this rotten system has heaped upon us.

Fourth, if we take the integrated, holistic theoretical approach suggested here, then we see that the class-first approach of Adolph Reed and many others on the left is wrongheaded and bound to fail. Racism, patriarchy, and ecological decay are fundamental to capitalism, and successful class struggle must never marginalize them. Furthermore, it is not possible to have a "good" position on one but not another. If we say that, in the United States, universal health care is our primary objective, then we must also be mindful of the fact that particular consideration will have to be paid to the racial and ethnic groups whose health has been wrecked by discrimination. If we believe that class oppression, racism, and patriarchy are intertwined, then we cannot, at the same time, state that economic growth is a necessary condition for ending these. Growth under current conditions will have a deleterious impact on the environment, which, in turn, will do great harm to workers, especially those who are poor, racially and ethnically oppressed, and women. Trying to end global warming with capitalist technology is likewise doomed to failure and will only increase exploitation and expropriation.

If we want a social system that is not alienating—one in which production is more decentralized, controlled by workers and communities, with meaningful labor, with

smaller-scale agriculture, with human-centered technology, with equality in all spheres of life, with true, substantive democracy, with poisons removed for our soil, air, and water, with as much protection as possible from life's slings and arrows—then we must look at what we have now as a whole, as an interconnected set of processes and institutions that are utterly alienating. They must be rejected root and branch, attacked all at once and all the time.