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Structure versus Agency Through a Materialist Lens

The debate on structure versus agency is quite a complex one, asking the question of whether cultural forces like economic systems, systemic racism, and labor segmentation determine people's ability to make choices or if people have the ability through free will to determine their own life path. How much control does a person really have over shaping their life? This essay will explore this debate through multiple theorists, especially those that show how personal agency is challenged by broad-scale cultural forces.

In the structure versus agency debate, one of the most important features to look at is the economy at hand which encapsulates the production and distribution of goods as well as trade and consumption. The United States has a capitalist economy where the means of production and distribution are controlled by private ownership. In this discussion I hope to highlight the ways by which production is controlled by the wealthy who therefore exert control over the agency of the working class. The philosopher Karl Marx analyzed capitalism very closely and constructed the social theory of materialism which studies how people organize societies along the lines of an economic system that drives culture (see Marx et al. 2016/1846, 63). In the nineteenth century, Marx and colleague Friedrich Engels argued that a capitalist economy contains two social classes: the wealthy class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat) where the wealthy class owns and controls the means of production and sets the conditions of the working class who only control the means of their own labor power. The quote that follows comes from their essay "Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook" and discusses the absence of personal agency under a capitalist system through the presence of this class separation:

...the division of labor offers us the first example of how, as long as man remains in natural society, that is, as long as a cleavage exists between the particular and the common interest, as long, therefore, as activity is not voluntary, but naturally, divided, man's own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him, which enslaves him instead of being controlled by him. For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape (Marx et al. 2016/1846, 75-76).

Marx and Engels' concept of alienation emphasizes the idea that the structures of capitalism limit workers' agency. Thinking back to the context of the Industrial Revolution when Marx and Engels would have been writing, it is clear to see how workers were exploited by the wealthy class when large mills and factories built up the manufacturing economy in the United States. Class conflict, reproduction of labor, the reserve army of labor, and alienation are all important concepts for analyzing capitalism that are discussed by Marx and Engels. Marx believed that the wealthy class and working class were in opposition and that this was inevitable under capitalism: those who own the means of production want the cost of labor to remain as low as possible while workers want a fair wage in order to live comfortably. (Marx et al. 2016/1846, 76).

Theorist Leslie White, an anthropologist writing during World War II, comes to mind on this subject as well; he argued that energy and its capture is the prime mover of culture. He understood shifts in energy production within an evolutionary framework. In his essay referenced here, White writes at length about the importance of agriculture in the development of social complexity and hierarchy as well as the steam engine and fossil fuels which enabled the development of industrial capitalism which became global (White 2016/1943). It is important to point out the time between these advancements and why it is significant in understanding the

question of structure versus agency. Although White's theory is materialist, he acknowledges that social conditions may be such that energy systems stop evolving: "A social system may so condition the operation of a technological system as to impose a limit upon the extent to which it can expand and develop. When this occurs, cultural evolution ceases (White 2016/1943, 263-264)." After agriculture is introduced, some 10,000 years ago, (which White understood as a form of energy) no major changes in energy production developed until the invention of the steam engine in the late 17th century. Why did this stagnation occur?

Discussing the relationship between agriculture and inequality is important to understanding this. In his essay, White argues that over time agriculture allowed for a division of labor to develop due to surpluses in food through the domestication of plants and animals. With ample food available, the adoption of a sedentary way of life became possible and alternative roles were able to develop other than those dedicated purely to food production,

"Thus society becomes organized into occupational groups: masons, metal workers, jade carvers, weavers, scribes, priests. This has the effect of accelerating progress in the arts, crafts, and sciences (astronomy, mathematics, etc.), since they are now in the hands of specialists, rather than jacks-of-all-trades. With an increase in manufacturing, added to division of society into occupational groups, comes production for exchange and sale (instead of primarily for use as in tribal society), mediums of exchange, money, merchants, banks, mortgages, debtors, slaves. An accumulation of wealth and competition for favored regions provoke wars of conquest, and produce professional military and ruling classes, slavery and serfdom (White 2016/1943, 259).

Agriculture thus contributed to a system of hierarchy that instills inequality through the control of the wealthy or elite over others. The wealthy or elite individuals in these agricultural systems

benefited from this exploitation and controlled the ability to keep things this way; a long period of stagnation ensued because there was no motivation to create new technologies and the ruling class remained in control of production, distribution, consumption, and trade. According to White, agriculture in the past great civilizations of the world (as a system of energy) did not evolve for thousands of years because of this lack of motivation to change and that if any new energy system were to be developed by the commoners or peasants, the wealthy would appropriate this as well (White 2016/1943). This example shows how inequality has impacted individual agency for thousands of years.

Inequality is fundamental to capitalism as well. Since the development of the steam engine and use of fossil fuels in industrialized parts of the world, technology and the ways in which it captures and emits energy seem to be in a state of constant advancement. It is important to consider this role in the future of technology and energy and what this means for those who control it and those who do not.

Today, globalization connects economies all over the world and allows for the unrestricted movement of capital, production, and consumer goods across national borders. Major commodities like gold, silver, sugar, coffee, chocolate, and cotton certainly impacted the creation of global capitalism through the expansion of merchant capitalism, imperialism, and colonization within the last 500 years. Along with globalization comes the era of neoliberalism that we find ourselves in today where there is an emphasis on free trade - meaning fewer taxes, tariffs and regulations, privatization, and reduced government spending (Harvey 2005). Although all of this may sound positive for the consumer and the owner of the means of production, there are serious repercussions of global capitalism. This can be seen in the video “The Story of Stuff” which explains how an economic system such as that operating in the United States cycles

through the consumption of goods. This cycle begins with “extraction” often involving raw materials from underdeveloped regions of the world. Manufacturing also largely happens outside of the United States where labor is cheaper. Among many other things, free trade and neoliberal policies promote fewer protections and regulations for workers and the environment in exchange for a larger profit. In other words, the profit earned from the production of consumer goods outweighs the health of workers and sustainable practices associated with producing goods in what has been called the “race to the bottom”. These countries can also be called “peripheral countries” where manufacturing is shifted from “core countries” like the United States with a shrinking manufacturing sector. These terms come from the World Systems Theory created by Immanuel Wallerstein which studies the historical development of global capitalism through the distribution of wealth and labor (Wolf 1982).

So how does globalization impact people in the United States or other core countries? Globalization has taken place over the course of hundreds of years, beginning with merchant capitalism and the intention of extracting goods for trade. A new phase of globalization has most significantly impacted the United States more recently in the late 20th century through the transition from a manufacturing based economy to a service based economy. The significance of this shift is twofold: consumers receive lower prices and cheaper goods from elsewhere but because manufacturing jobs have been moved overseas, many people working in this industry have experienced job loss. Retrospectively the impacts of increased labor and work in peripheral countries are not overly positive as workers lives do not necessarily improve alongside their countries’ growing economic standing—as measured, for example, in the GDP-- because of the lack of regulations in place to protect workers’ rights. The same may be said for some living in core countries as well. There, the continuous removal and replacement of the manufacturing

sector with service industries contributes to massive job loss, as former factory workers may not have the skills needed for these new industries.

Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois took on a Neo-Marxian approach in his fieldwork during the late 80s and early 90s in an East Harlem neighborhood in New York City known locally as El Barrio. He writes, “This two-hundred-square-block neighborhood is visibly impoverished yet it is located in the heart of the richest city in the western hemisphere” (Bourgois 2016/1995, 675). His fieldwork focused on a group of 25 crack dealers of Puerto Rican ethnicity, referred to as “Nuyorican” in the essay, and how shifts in global capitalism and rapid restructuring was “destroying their capacity to survive on legal wages” (Bourgois 2016/1995, 686) which pushed them into the informal economy of drug dealing where money can be made under the radar of the government. Bourgois looked at the structural transformation in New York from a regional economy focused on manufacturing to one based on service industries. He found that the breakdown of the manufacturing sector left many people dislocated and with few options for work. He also points to this change generationally through the perspective of Puerto Rican workers and changing modes of production they faced as they migrated from Puerto Rico to New York City (Bourgois 2016/1995, 674).

Larger forces described in this essay include systemic racism and labor segmentation. Racism and capitalism complement each other. Systemic racism operates partly through residential segregation and educational segregation which create gaps in employment opportunities and equal access to resources. The informants in Bourgois’ work came from a working-class culture that had been passed down generationally. His informants were faced with working in jobs within the service sector that had aspects unfamiliar to them such as office culture, female power roles, and “white” management. The informants had “no frame of

reference to guide them through service employment because their social network only has experience with factory work” (Bourgois 2016/1995, 683). Labor segmentation—that is, the slotting of people into certain types of jobs on the basis of their ethnicity and social class—also plays a role in how much agency a given individual has. Within the new service industries, for example, Bourgois’s informants only had access to entry-level jobs, such as working in the mailroom or being an “office boy.” Decades after Bourgois’s fieldwork, we can see that labor segmentation still limits opportunities for many and, in fact, is playing a role in the crisis of COVID-19. A recent article by Gould and Wilson in 2020 titled “Black Workers Face Two of the Most Lethal Preexisting Conditions for Corona Virus – Racism and Economic Inequality” goes into great detail about the impacts of labor segmentation on African Americans today during a global pandemic. This article highlights both historical and ongoing social and economic disparities that have been exacerbated through the public health crisis for people of color, “Persistent racial disparities in health status, access to health care, wealth, employment, wages, housing, income, and poverty all contribute to greater susceptibility to the virus—both economically and physically” (Gould et al. 2020, 1). Facts present in the article like how more African Americans work in front line jobs, experience an inability to work from home, and are more likely to have chronic health issues compared to White non-Hispanic individuals point to a vicious cycle of inequality that exists in the United States today and that the same opportunities do not exist for people of color due to chronic racism deeply embedded in U.S. history.

Bourgois points out in his conclusion that American culture tends to “blame the victim” for the situation they are in. If a person ends up dealing crack for example, it is their own fault for not making better choices. It is fair to say that some people may have the ability to succeed in making meaningful changes, but how and why? It is important to consider what forces are there

that allow a person to make changes and what forces are there that do not allow a person to make changes. For example, a middle-class family more than likely lives in an area where there is access to good public or private schools, cleaner neighborhoods; income is high enough to comfortably live and save money to be used in the future towards a child's higher education. This may provide access to jobs that can be performed remotely which is important currently due to the coronavirus pandemic. Compare this to a family living in poverty in a poor inner-city neighborhood, with a not-so-great public school, little access to clean air or surroundings, and discretionary money that can be saved to spend on seeking higher education in the future. This will likely result in individuals going into front line jobs that cannot be performed remotely during a pandemic. The forces at play are extremely different in these examples and affect not just the current lives of the individuals living them but their children and so on.

The writings of Marx, Engels, White, and Bourgois present similar information about the effects that greater cultural forces have on individuals. From the materialist standpoint, these theories make a clear argument that economic systems and social structures determine the ways that culture moves forward. Through history, starting with the implementation of agriculture to the present-day expansion of global capitalism, themes of a wealthy class and working class – those who control power and those who are controlled by its forces, exploitation, and profit carry through. The harsh reality of globalization and capitalism is that they both have benefits, but the benefits are not distributed equally among those entangled within them.

In American culture, it seems difficult for people to break away from ethnocentric views or to realize they even have them. It appears that our capitalist society has caused people to become very focused on themselves and on being successful, making it seemingly easier to pass judgment onto others who do not appear to be doing the same thing. This creates further

difficulty in understanding why others are unable to have success if they just try harder or do something different without fully considering the level of privilege one can hold or how they come to have it.

Based on the examples cited here, I believe that American culture provides an unrealistic view of agency, as is reflected largely in Bourgois' ethnography. The United States has been known as the place to come to live out the "American dream," the place to become successful, almost as if anything and everything is possible here. This idea exists despite the economic changes that have proven to be challenging for so many, i.e. the loss of manufacturing jobs, but also in the ability to live a positive life within the confines of systemic racism and labor segmentation. Social issues seem to rise drastically, like the crack epidemic in NYC during the time of Bourgois' fieldwork, before the government decides to intervene which in this case took the form of mandatory sentencing which led to mass incarceration of people who were trying to survive in an economy that didn't want them to. This shows the deeply rooted relationship of the United States government and economic systems with the structures of segmentation and inequality. It is also important to consider the impacts the U.S. has through globalization on both peripheral countries and core countries, impacts that largely affect their people and environment negatively, creating a more convenient life here but a more unstable life there. Does agency only matter to Americans if it is about Americans?

In the debate on structure versus agency-- whether cultural forces like economic systems, systemic racism, and labor segmentation determine people's ability to make choices or if people have the ability through free will to determine their own life path--the side one takes probably depends on their class position. I believe through the work of the theorists described here that greater cultural and structural forces ultimately determine a person's ability to make choices in

life. Agency or free will lies with those who have more power and wealth and in that the ability to control those around them. The amount or degree of agency one has is tied to where they are in terms of social class and access to resources.

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