

Parasites, Pimps, and Capitalists: A Naturalistic Conception of Exploitation

With the possible exception of “class,” there is probably no notion more central to Marxist theory than that of “exploitation.”¹ Marxists are generally committed to the view that, not unlike slaves in a system of slavery and serfs under a feudal regime, wage-laborers under capitalism are economically exploited. The exploitative nature of capitalism is moreover thought to provide a reason, perhaps among others, for preferring a socialist form of social organization to a capitalist one. But despite the critical importance of the notion (and perhaps because of it), Marxists continue to disagree over the precise meaning and function of the concept of exploitation within Marxist theory.

One such disagreement concerns whether the concept is best understood as a moral or nonmoral one.² Marx himself was of course scornful and dismissive of moral critiques of society, even going so far as to

¹There are of course many “Marxisms,” each more or less related to the writings of Karl Marx and (sometimes) Friedrich Engels. I view Marxism not as the codification of and faithful adherence to Marx’s views, but as an ongoing research program that aims to develop the social theory and critique that was pioneered by Marx. Such a project inevitably involves revision and reconstruction, for Marx was obviously not right about everything, and he did not always clearly express or adequately defend the things he was (more or less) right about. In this way, my approach is not unlike such “analytical Marxists” as G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster, John Roemer, and Erik Olin Wright. For a brief introduction to the analytical Marxist approach, see Erik Olin Wright, “What Is Analytical Marxism?” in Terrell Carver and Paul Thomas (eds.), *Rational Choice Marxism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 11-30; and for a longer introduction, see Tom Mayer, *Analytical Marxism* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994).

²For a defense of the view that the Marxist concept of exploitation is (at least in part) a moral notion, see G.A. Cohen, “The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 8 (1979): 338-60; also see his *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 144-64; and Jonathan Wolff, “Marx and Exploitation,” *The Journal of Ethics* 3 (1999): 105-20. Allen W. Wood, in my view, has mounted the most persuasive defense of the nonmoral view of exploitation; see his “Exploitation,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 12 (1995): 136-58; also see Robert J. van der Veen, “Can Socialism Be Non-Exploitative?” in Andrew Reeve (ed.), *Modern Theories of Exploitation* (London: Sage Publications, 1987), pp. 80-110.

claim that morality itself is a form of ideology.³ However, many Marxists have come to think that Marx's antimoralism was unjustified, misguided, or confused. Rather than thinking that moral critiques of class society are just so much ideological nonsense, they believe that a coherent and defensible Marxist theory *requires* a moral dimension, and that the concept of exploitation in particular should be understood as a moral notion if it is to serve any useful "critical" purpose. Against this view, other Marxists, sometimes taking themselves to be following Marx, have claimed that Marxism is best understood as a purely "scientific" social theory, one that does not rely on any moral concepts, values, or principles. Accordingly, they maintain that the Marxist concept of exploitation is a technical notion designed to characterize a type of economic relationship but that the use of this concept does not entail that relationships properly called "exploitative" are necessarily unjust or otherwise immoral.

Here, I side with those who would defend a nonmoralized conception of exploitation.⁴ It is not my aim, however, to answer the question of whether Marxism, taken as a comprehensive (critical) social theory, should include a moral component of some kind. Indeed, I contend that one can accept the conception of exploitation defended below while remaining agnostic about Marxian antimoralism. My suggestion is that we understand the Marxist concept of exploitation as a naturalistic theoretical construct, that is, as a nonmoral concept within an empirically adequate social-scientific theory.⁵

³For useful discussions of this aspect of Marx's thought, see the essays in Kai Nielsen and Steven C. Patten (eds.), *Marx and Morality* (Canadian Journal of Philosophy, supplementary volume, 1981); Allen W. Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 125-56; Richard Miller, *Analyzing Marx* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 15-97; Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); Kai Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989); R.G. Peffer, *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Daniel Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴Wood goes so far as to claim that our *ordinary* concept of exploitation, properly understood, is a nonmoral notion (see his "Exploitation"). The scope of my project is more limited. My primary concern is with the *Marxist* concept of exploitation. For the most part, I leave open the question of whether our ordinary concept of exploitation is morally neutral. Moreover, though Wood and I agree that the Marxist concept of exploitation is a nonmoral one, and the view I defend below owes much to his, my account differs from Wood's both in its basic argumentative strategy and in its criteria for what counts as exploitation.

⁵There are of course naturalistic "realist" theories of morality that maintain that moral propositions are claims about the natural world (which may include social and psychological facts) and that deny that there are any *sui generis* or irreducible moral facts or properties. See, for example, Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163-207; and Richard Boyd, "How To Be a Moral Realist," in Geoffrey Sayre-

Two sets of considerations incline me toward a naturalistic conception of exploitation over a moralized one.⁶ First, the question "What (if anything) is wrong with exploitation?" is perfectly intelligible, and its answer is far from obvious. We can even imagine someone answering "Nothing" to this question without presuming that she misunderstands the meaning of the word "exploitation" or that she fails to recognize some pertinent fact or valid inference. Certainly if the question were "What is wrong with *fornication*?" and someone answered "Nothing," we would have no trouble understanding what she meant. It is not that she thinks there is no such thing as fornication, for she may readily admit that there are such acts; she simply insists that nothing is wrong with fornicating. Though it probably happens less frequently, a person could, perhaps reasonably, take a similar position with respect to exploitation. And if we can understand such a position as a coherent one, then even if we disagree with its proponent about the moral status of exploitative relationships (i.e., on whether they are morally troublesome, and if they are, what makes them so), we and our opponent must share at least an intuitive grasp of when a given relationship is properly called "exploitative" (unless of course we are simply talking past one another). Otherwise, the thesis that exploitation is not morally wrong would make no sense, and meaningful disagreement about its truth would be impossible. Thus, a reasonable way to proceed, it seems to me, would be first to give a morally neutral definition of "exploitation." This would give us a conception of the phenomenon at issue without begging any substantive moral questions. With such an analysis in hand, we can then go on to determine what, if anything, is morally wrong with the phenomenon so described. By using this method, we may even come to think that many

McCord (ed.), *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988). Relying on such a view, one might argue that a naturalistic account of exploitation may turn out to be, in some sense, a "moral" conception after all, provided those natural facts and properties picked out by the term "exploitation" happen to be the morally relevant facts that we apprehend when, say, we call an institutional arrangement "unjust." But I take it that even if naturalistic moral realism is true, when a person describes an action or social arrangement in naturalistic terms, she does not thereby make a moral judgment about it, even if she should happen to describe just those natural properties and facts that are most morally relevant to such a judgment. In order for her naturalistic description to count as a moral one, she would, at a minimum, need to take up the appropriate evaluative standpoint or performative attitude (to use Habermas's terminology) toward the phenomenon in question. Thus, while it may be possible to provide a naturalistic account of exploitation that is also a moral account, a naturalistic conception of exploitation is not necessarily a moral account, even if naturalistic moral realism happens to be correct.

⁶The idea of a *moralized* definition of a concept is adopted from G.A. Cohen, "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom," in John Mepham and David Ruben (eds.), *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol. IV (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), pp. 228-29.

of our moral assumptions and intuitions about exploitation are misleading, distorted, or simply wrong, in much the same way that many of us have come to question or reject many traditional moral ideas about voluntary sexual relations between unmarried persons.

The second reason to favor a naturalistic conception of exploitation, and a more important one for our purposes, is that, although Marxian antimoralism is still controversial, few Marxists would deny that the concept of exploitation has an important role to play in the Marxist explanatory project.⁷ Marxists use the concept of exploitation in their social-scientific explanations of such phenomena as class conflict, the formation of class consciousness, worker alienation, the concentration of wealth, the source of commercial profit, the nature of sociohistorical change, patriarchal domination, racial antagonism, colonialism, war and conquest, and many other things. A naturalistic conception of exploitation would allow us to use the notion for descriptive and explanatory purposes in our empirical studies and social-scientific theorizing without committing us to any moral position on exploitative relationships.⁸ And I take it that although positivism may have been philosophically discredited, one does not have to be a positivist to believe that objectivity in social-scientific inquiry is better achieved through the use of morally neutral analytical concepts.

Accordingly, the account of exploitation that I defend below is designed to satisfy the following conditions:

Condition 1: *The conception of exploitation must be suitable for use within Marxist social-scientific theorizing:* (i) it must satisfy the standards of any fruitful social-scientific concept, such as precision, coherence, generality, and a capacity to facilitate explanation and prediction; and (ii) it must cohere with other important Marxist concepts and theses.

Condition 2: *The defining criteria of the concept of exploitation must not be moralized:* (i) the criteria must be given in nonmoral and natural-

⁷For an exception to this, see John E. Roemer, "Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?" in John E. Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 260-82. For useful discussions of the scientific dimensions of Marxist thought, see G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Miller, *Analyzing Marx*; Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Daniel Little, *The Scientific Marx* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and John Torrance, *Karl Marx's Theory of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸Though I will not explore it here, I think there is a third reason to prefer a naturalistic conception of exploitation to a moralized one, namely, the former makes the best sense of what Marx himself says about exploitation. See Allen W. Wood, "The Marxian Critique of Justice," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 244-82.

istic terms; and (ii) the criteria must allow us to distinguish exploitative from non-exploitative relationships without our having to posit any *sui generis* moral facts or properties and without our having to rely on any moral considerations or intuitions.⁹

Condition 3: *The conception of exploitation must not be (too) idiosyncratic but must accord (at least somewhat) with our commonsense conception of exploitation.*

These three conditions are meant to mutually constrain one another in the following ways. First, commonsense understandings of exploitation are often vague and confused in important respects. So if we are to achieve the level of conceptual clarity about exploitation required by condition 1, we will need to be more precise and consistent than people usually are when they talk about exploitation.¹⁰ Second, the conception of exploitation defended here does not aim to capture every sense of the word "exploitation" in ordinary use but only the sense(s) most relevant to the theoretical concerns of Marxism. The account of exploitation will therefore satisfy condition 3 if it agrees with at least one of the central senses of the ordinary notion.¹¹ Third, the ordinary concept of exploita-

⁹Condition 2 does not rule out the use of all normative concepts and considerations, only moral ones. We may need to rely on epistemic standards, prudential norms, or logic when applying the Marxist concept of exploitation. But this is no more incompatible with a naturalistic conception of exploitation than it would be with a naturalistic conception of biological parasitism. And it should also be clear that moral considerations may figure indirectly in such an analysis, since our moral concerns will often dictate which phenomena we seek to study and which among the innumerable characteristics of a given phenomenon we choose to focus on.

¹⁰This kind of conceptual reconstruction is a necessary preliminary to almost any social-scientific analysis. Durkheim, in his classic sociological study of suicide, says this about the matter: "Since the word 'suicide' recurs constantly in the course of conversation, it might be thought that its sense is universally known and that definition is superfluous. Actually, the words of everyday language, like the concepts they express, are always susceptible of more than one meaning, and the scholar employing them in their accepted use without further definition would risk serious misunderstanding. Not only is their meaning so indefinite as to vary, from case to case, with the needs of argument, but, as the classification from which they derive is not analytic, but merely translates the confused impressions of the crowd, categories of very different sorts of fact are indistinctly combined under the same heading, or similar realities are differently named. So, if we follow common use, we risk distinguishing what should be combined, or combining what should be distinguished, thus mistaking the real affinities of things, and accordingly misapprehending their nature." Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1951), p. 41.

¹¹There are at least two familiar senses of exploitation that I will not attempt to capture here, since they do not serve our other theoretical purposes as outlined in conditions 1 and 2. In the first sense, "to exploit something" is simply to use it for some purpose or to put it to some productive end. This is the sense of exploitation that is at work when we

tion is often used to condemn certain social relations and practices; thus, in order to satisfy condition 2, we will need to separate the quasi-theoretical function of the ordinary concept in *categorizing* social relationships from its practical function in *evaluating* them. Some might deny that this type of disentangling project can succeed when we are dealing with so-called "thick concepts," that is, to use Williams's characterization, concepts whose application is simultaneously "world-guided and action-guiding."¹² Though I agree that the disentangling project might fail with some thick concepts, such as "cruelty," "coward," and "murder," I see no reason why it cannot succeed with others, for example, "adultery," "fatso," and "shack up." We know, at least roughly, what these terms denote regardless of whether we accept or reject the evaluative connotation that is typically intended with their use. To show that "exploitation" falls into this latter category is one burden of this essay.

Some might think that conditions 2 and 3 are incompatible. How, they may ask, is it possible to produce a morally neutral account that accords with the commonsense conception of exploitation when the latter is so clearly morally loaded? However, the compatibility of conditions 2 and 3 becomes clear once we take proper account of condition 1. As an analogy, consider the case of racism. Most ordinary people do not call a doctrine or practice "racism" unless they morally disapprove of it. There are social scientists, though, who regularly investigate and attempt to explain the familiar phenomenon of racism, and these scientists may, and indeed often do, operate with suitably refined naturalistic conceptions of racism. But if the phenomenon they were investigating, guided by their theoretical conception, did not seem to us, at least upon reflection, to bear a family resemblance to what most ordinary people would call "racism," we would suspect that something had gone awry. Such an idiosyncratic usage of the term "racism" would be even more worrisome if the relevant social-scientific research was aimed at influencing public debate and, through that, public policy, which is of course typical of much social science. The thing to recognize here is that many of the things that social scientists study from a naturalistic perspective are things that are of moral or political concern to us. In ordinary discourse,

say, for example, that a community exploits the natural resources at its disposal. However, this sense of the term is not the relevant one for getting at what Marxists mean by saying that one social class exploits another, which is our concern here. In the second sense, "X exploits Y" means something like "X *unfairly* takes advantage of Y." However, this sense is ruled out by condition 2, since it relies on a moral concept.

¹²Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 141.

we often refer to such things using so-called thick concepts, such as “racism” and “exploitation.” But when social scientists investigate morally significant social phenomena, they will sometimes need to discard or ignore many of the ordinary assumptions associated with these thick concepts, including many of the moral ones. The analytical value of social-scientific concepts is determined by their usefulness for describing and explaining social structures and processes. This is not, of course, to say that the social-scientific enterprise has no implications for morality. Indeed, a careful scientific inquiry into the nature of a phenomenon may give us insights that aid us in its moral evaluation, perhaps even leading us to reconsider a long-standing and widely held moral stance toward it.¹³

Marx was engaged in just this sort of project. He took for granted that his readers already believed that slavery and serfdom are systems of exploitation. His aim was to use scientific reasoning to convince them of a thesis that would likely surprise them, namely: the capitalist mode of production, despite its appearance to the contrary, is yet another system of exploitation, though one whose exploitative nature is concealed by the processes of capitalist commodity production and exchange and by the mystifying illusions of ideology. However, this argumentative strategy—showing that capitalism is like slavery and serfdom in being economically exploitative—presupposes that there is a pre-theoretic conception of exploitation that has broad social currency. Marxist theory appropriates this ordinary concept of exploitation, reconstructs and clarifies it, and then puts it to use in its analysis and critique of capitalism. This will be our procedure here.

To summarize: in accordance with the three conditions outlined above, my aim is to offer a nonmoralized definition of exploitation that at once accords (at least roughly) with our pre-theoretic understanding of exploitation and is sufficiently refined and robust to be useful for social-scientific purposes within a Marxist theoretical framework.

1. Parasite-Host Relationships

I want to begin developing such an account by means of an analogy between exploitative relationships among humans and parasite-host relationships among non-human animals. The rationale behind this strategy is twofold. First, in ordinary discourse we often refer to exploiters as “parasites,” suggesting that the relationship between exploiter and ex-

¹³For further considerations in favor of a naturalistic conception of racism, see my “Is Racism in the ‘Heart’?” *Journal of Social Philosophy* (forthcoming).

ploited is somehow analogous to the relationship between a parasite and its host.¹⁴ I want to take the parasite-exploiter metaphor seriously: Exactly what characteristics of the parasite-host relationship are relevantly similar to the exploiter-exploitee relationship such that “parasite” is an appropriate stand-in for “exploiter”? By answering this question I think we can gain insight into our commonsense conception of exploitation, for given the long history and wide currency of the parasite metaphor, it is not unreasonable to suppose that many of the core features of this conception will be reflected in our use of the metaphor. Second, the parasite-host relationship, as it occurs among living organisms, is a phenomenon that biologists systematically study from a naturalistic point of view. So if the parasite metaphor is truly apt, as I think it is, we might be able to construct a social-scientific, nonmoral, and intuitively appealing conception of exploitation by modeling it after the scientific conception of parasitism. Thus, if I am right, an examination of the parasite-host relationship may provide some of the conceptual resources required to develop a naturalistic account of exploitation that satisfies the three conditions outlined above.

I begin with some general remarks about parasitism. In all parasitic interactions, one organism, the parasite, obtains some needed resource from another, the host. Parasitic interactions typically occur between two organisms that live in (more or less) constant physical contact (e.g., where the parasite lives within or on the surface of the host), but they can also occur among “free-living” organisms, where physical contact is less regular. Biologists study parasitic interactions from a variety of theoretical perspectives—biochemical, immunological, evolutionary—and in their investigations of parasitism, scientists make use of various conceptual models, where each model emphasizes different features of the parasite-host relationship. These models are alternative ways of conceptualizing parasitism, and there is no presumption that there is only one way to accurately represent the phenomenon. What this means for our purposes is that there may be more than one plausible interpretation of the parasite-exploiter metaphor, for the meaning we attach to the metaphor will vary with the model of parasitism that we (implicitly) assume. I want briefly to describe two models of parasitism that seem to me to be plausible as bases for unpacking the parasite-exploiter meta-

¹⁴Marx also uses the parasite metaphor when discussing exploiters, though he seems to restrict his usage to merchants and moneylenders. I will not, however, limit my use of the metaphor to these social roles but will extend it to a variety of exploitative relationships, as we do in our ordinary use of it. See, e.g., *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pp. 591 and 645; and *Capital*, Vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 731 and 734.

phor. Interestingly, these two theoretical models also seem to correspond, at least roughly, to two of the dominant approaches to understanding exploitation within the Marxist tradition. I claim that once we make these models explicit, we will find reasons, given our other desiderata, for preferring one of the two approaches to exploitation over the other.

The *outcome* model of parasitism focuses on the differential effects of a parasitic interaction on the biological functioning and reproductive success of the parasite and host. For the parasite, the host is an essential source of energy, nutrients, and other requirements necessary for survival, normal maturation, and reproduction. However, the activity of the parasite, within or on the surface of the host, tends to negatively affect the host. Such interactions may cause disease, or it may so drain the host of its resources that its maturation and reproductive capacities are seriously impaired. Accordingly, many parasitologists conceive of "parasitism" as an interspecific relationship in which the parasite benefits from the relationship and the host is harmed—as an example, think of a tapeworm that develops and reproduces within a rat while releasing carcinogens in the rat's liver. Now if we view exploitation as analogous to parasitism in accordance with the outcome model, then our conception of exploitation will focus on the distribution of *benefits* and *harms* in a given social relationship.

The *process* model, on the other hand, focuses less on the biological consequences of parasitism and more on the nature of the interaction between the parasite and host.¹⁵ To see how this model works, we need the concepts of *foraging* and *scrounging*. Foraging is the investment of time and energy in an effort to acquire some needed resource (e.g., food, shelter, mating opportunities, or care and protection of offspring). On this model, a host is a forager that acquires a needed resource at the cost of time, energy, or risk of safety. Scrounging is the activity whereby an organism takes advantage of the foraging investment of another organism in a way that reduces the scrounger's own cost of obtaining needed resources. A parasite, then, is a scrounger that removes a resource from a forager's control and, in so doing, minimizes its time and energy investment in meeting its own needs. Parasitologists identify three principal means by which a scrounger accomplishes this—usurpation, deception, and stealth.¹⁶ The parasite uses these "scrounger strategies,"¹⁷ often in

¹⁵This model is described in C.J. Barnard (ed.), *Producers and Scroungers: Strategies of Exploitation and Parasitism* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

¹⁶In cases of "usurpation," the scrounger *forcibly* removes the resource from the forager. For example, hookworms invade their hosts by burrowing through their skin; they then migrate to the intestinal tract and feed on the blood of the host. In cases of "decep-

combination, in order to acquire some resource from a host who is disposed to resist the parasite's efforts to do so. The host also needs the resource, for survival or reproduction, and has invested time and energy in acquiring it. If the parasite is to wrestle the resource away, it will have to do so by using one or more scrounger strategies.¹⁸ Now if we rely on the process model of parasitism, we get quite a different picture of the parallel case of exploitation from the one we get on an outcome model. In particular, we arrive at a conception of exploitation that focuses, not so much on the distribution of benefits and harms to exploiter and exploited, but on *how* the exploiter obtains whatever benefits he does from the exploitee and on *why* the exploitee ends up parting with something that costs so much to acquire.

Now, admittedly, the outcome model does have a kind of attractive simplicity and intuitive appeal. But of the two models of parasitism just described, I think the process model provides the more promising basis for developing a conception of exploitation that serves the needs of Marxist theory. Given their theoretical objectives, Marxists want (or should want) a scientifically respectable, nonmoralized, and intuitive notion of exploitation. Ultimately, however, their concern is *practical*; they want to carefully investigate (putative) exploitative relationships (especially economic ones, though not just these) in order to determine (i) whether we should seek to prevent or end these relationships (or cer-

tion," the scrounger acquires the resource by means of *mimicry* or *disguise*. Some micro-parasites are able to survive within the host, despite the host's biochemical defenses, because the parasite's surface, or the capsule surrounding it, has a molecular structure similar to that of the host. This allows the parasite to avoid stimulating an immunological response in the host. In cases of "stealth," the scrounger obtains the resource because its activity is *hidden* from or *undetected* by the forager. In the life cycle of some tapeworms, for example, reproduction takes place because rodents eat insects that are hosts to tapeworm embryos, and the embryos find their way into the insects because insects eat the feces of rodents.

¹⁷Or if "strategy" sounds too akin to human deliberation and will-formation, and thus objectionably anthropomorphic, substitute "patterns of scrounging behavior," which would include genetically predetermined behavior.

¹⁸I have drawn my examples from the world of organisms living in interspecific relationships, where parasite and host are in more or less constant physical contact. But parasitic behavior also occurs among free-living animals, even sometimes within the same species. Consider the following rather vivid example: "Blackheaded gulls nest in large colonies, the nests being only a few feet apart. When the chicks first hatch out they are small and defenseless and easy to swallow. It is quite common for a gull to wait until a neighbour's back is turned, perhaps while it is away fishing, and then pounce on one of the neighbour's chicks and swallow it whole. It thereby obtains a good nutritious meal, without having to go to the trouble of catching a fish, and without having to leave its own nest unprotected." Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 5.

tain forms of them), and (ii) if so, how we should go about doing so. If, following the outcome approach, all we know is who gains and who loses in a given relationship, and perhaps the comparative amounts of the gains and losses, then we know very little about whether we should oppose it and virtually nothing about how we might eliminate or ameliorate it. However, by fashioning our account of exploitation after the process model, we focus on the structure and internal dynamics of exploitative social interactions. This is desirable, since it directs our attention to the causes and mechanisms of exploitation, rather than to just its effects. What is more, we can actually subsume the core features of the outcome model under the process model, since, though it does not emphasize these, the process model also takes account of the differential effects of a parasitic association on the parasite and host. By contrast, the outcome conception abstracts away from both the processes through which the host comes to acquire the resources that the parasite subsequently obtains and the processes through which the parasite extracts these resources from the host, facts that would seem to be relevant to the practical questions just mentioned. Hence, while the outcome model may have its uses, the process model would seem to be the more robust analytical framework, or at least, this is what I hope to show. Accordingly, as a second step toward satisfying our three conditions of adequacy, I will next defend a general conception of exploitation that is analogous to the process model of parasitism.

2. Pimps, Prostitutes, and the Structure of Exploitation

Like parasitism, the idea of *pimping* is also widely employed as metaphor for exploitation, but in addition—and surely this explains the usefulness of the metaphor—the pimp-prostitute relationship is itself an obvious and uncontroversial instance of exploitation.¹⁹ In this section, I

¹⁹Some might think that the pimp-prostitute relationship actually presents a challenge to my claim that it is possible to construct a nonmoral conception of exploitation. For it might be thought that the pimp-prostitute relationship is exploitative because prostitution, with or without a pimp, is inherently immoral. The pimp simply contributes to or encourages this immorality and, to make matters worse, gains financial benefits from it. But while I think few would deny that pimping is exploitative (with the possible exception of pimps and some self-deceived prostitutes), it is much less clear that there is anything morally wrong with prostitution as such. See, for example, Lars O. Ericsson, "Charges against Prostitution: An Attempt at a Philosophical Assessment," *Ethics* 90 (1980): 335-66; and Igor Primoratz, "What's Wrong with Prostitution?" *Philosophy* 68 (1993): 159-82. But compare Carole Pateman, "Defending Prostitution: Charges against Ericsson," *Ethics* 93 (1983): 561-65; Karen Green, "Prostitution, Exploitation and Taboo," *Philosophy* 64 (1989): 525-34; Laurie Shrage, "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?" *Ethics*

will use the pimp-prostitute relationship as an example to illustrate important features of the account to be developed and as a test case against which to evaluate that account's plausibility, as well as that of its competitors. I presuppose no theory of prostitution. The facts that I assume are not contentious and are supported by sociological, historical, and cross-cultural studies of prostitution and by published, firsthand accounts from participants in the trade.²⁰

Speaking generally, we might say a "prostitute" is anyone who regularly provides sexual services for material gain. But since prostitution in this broad sense can take a variety of forms, not all of which are relevant for our purposes, let us focus our attention on the professional street prostitute or "streetwalker." This is a prostitute who makes a living by regularly walking the downtown streets of a large city, usually at night, in an effort to solicit (or be solicited by) customers for brief sexual encounters with the expectation of financial reward. Let us also imagine that in our example the street prostitute is female. Male prostitutes are rarely pimped, and it is the pimp-prostitute relationship that is of interest here. A "pimp" is someone who recruits, sometimes manages, and derives all or part of his livelihood from the earnings of prostitutes. Of course, a "madam" who owns and runs a brothel acts as a pimp, given our definition. Let us assume, however, that the pimp in our example is male, which of course the overwhelming majority of pimps are, especially those that exploit street prostitutes. And finally, let us assume the pimp and prostitute in our discussion are operating in a social context where prostitution is illegal, dangerous, and stigmatized.

99 (1989): 347-61; Elizabeth Anderson, "The Ethical Limitations of the Market," *Economics and Philosophy* 6 (1990): 179-205; and Debra Satz, "Markets in Women's Sexual Labor," *Ethics* 106 (1995): 63-85. My main reply to this objection, however, is that were it a necessary condition for exploitation that the exploitee's activity be immoral (which the objection would seem to imply), this would rule out many clear cases of exploitation. For consider: If a young boy is forced to do the household chores of his sister because of her threats and physical intimidation, then clearly this is exploitation. But no one thinks it is immoral for one to make the bed of one's sibling, even if one does it out of fear.

²⁰See, for example, the essays in Nanette J. Davis (ed.), *Prostitution: An International Handbook on Trends, Problems, and Policies* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993). Also see Iceberg Slim (Robert Beck), *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing, 1969); Charles Winick and Paul M. Kinsie, *The Lively Commerce: Prostitution in the United States* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971); Kate Millet, *The Prostitution Papers* (New York: Avon Books, 1973); Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979); Biswanath Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspectives* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1984); and Roberta Perkins, *Working Girls: Prostitutes, Their Life and Social Control* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, 1991).

With this much as background, I begin by outlining what I take to be the *basic structure of exploitation* (BSE):

X exploits Y only if:

(a) Y is forced to make a sacrifice which results in a benefit for X; and

(b) X obtains this benefit by means of an advantage in power that X has over Y.

Notice that BSE conceptualizes exploitation as a relation between persons (or groups of persons). I will not be concerned with what it means to exploit "a situation" (e.g., to exploit the low property value in a poor neighborhood) or to exploit some trait of a person (e.g., to exploit a friend's generosity). Rather, my interest is in what it means for one person (or group of persons) to exploit another—what Marx calls "*exploitation de l'homme par l'homme*."²¹ No doubt these different senses of "exploitation" are related in some interesting ways, but I will not be concerned to investigate these interrelations here.²²

By a *benefit* I mean anything that, once acquired, improves the general well-being or welfare of the one who acquires it.²³ In accordance with condition (a), the exploiter benefits from the sacrificing activity of the exploitee, where the baseline is the point prior to the sacrificing activity of the exploitee. The relevant benefits typically include such things as money, material goods and resources, social status, useful information, and control over the labor of others. A pimp is often a "super-exploiter," and as such he may not only gain financial benefits from his relationship with a prostitute but also sex, deference, status, leisure, and a competitive advantage over other pimps.

Virtually everyone agrees that exploiters gain benefits through the relationships they have with those they exploit.²⁴ The more difficult

²¹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology: Part I* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 110.

²²For illuminating discussions of these different senses of exploitation and their interrelations, see Robert E. Goodin, "Exploiting a Situation and Exploiting a Person," in Reeve (ed.), *Modern Theories of Exploitation*, pp. 166-200; also see Joel Feinberg, *Harmless Wrongdoing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), chap. 31.

²³Of course, we can give "well-being" or "welfare" either a subjective interpretation (e.g., preference-satisfaction) or an objective one (e.g., "real" interests). The account of the basic structure of exploitation is designed to be neutral with respect to these two interpretations. Particular critical theories of exploitation will opt for one or the other, giving rise to perhaps quite different normative results.

²⁴Lawrence Crocker, in his discussion of economic class exploitation, denies that exploiters *necessarily* benefit from their exploitative activities. See Crocker, "Marx's Concept of Exploitation," *Social Theory and Practice* 2 (1972): 201-15, pp. 205-6. But

problem is to understand the *exploitee's* relation to this benefit. We usually say here that the exploiter benefits "at the expense of" the one he exploits. However, theorists of exploitation disagree over what it means to say this. In a manner that is analogous to the outcome model of parasitism, some maintain that it means that the exploiter "harms" the *exploitee* in some way.²⁵ But if by "harm" we have in mind such things as physical injury, psychological damage, or material loss, then it is not at all clear that exploiters always harm those they exploit. Of course, pimps typically do harm prostitutes in all these ways. But now let us suppose that we have a "nice" pimp—that is, someone who is nice for a pimp, not a nice person who happens to be a pimp. He does not use violence against his prostitutes, he does not verbally abuse or humiliate them, and he does not deprive them of the material goods and physical security that they have come to depend on him to provide. Instead, he protects them, makes an effort to sympathize with their troubles, and works to bolster their self-esteem. But despite the fact that he does not harm his prostitutes—at least not in any ordinary, nonmoral sense of "harm"—it seems clear that our nice pimp may nevertheless exploit them by inducing them to give him the money from the sale of their sexual services.²⁶ For this reason, I think we should not assume that exploiters always harm those they exploit, at least not in any straightforward sense. But even if we want to insist that the *exploitee* must be, in some recognizable sense, "harmed" by being exploited, I would urge that we seek a more analytically precise characterization of the "expense" of being exploited, since once we move away from physical damage, psychological trauma, and material deprivation, "harm" is a notoriously vague and slippery concept with which to work.²⁷

this, I think, is because he confuses exploitation with *domination*. (See my discussion of this issue below.) I do, however, agree that an agent can engage in exploitative behavior without succeeding in acquiring some benefit through it. The thing to say here is that the agent *attempted* to exploit another, but failed.

²⁵Allan E. Buchanan, *Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld, 1982), p. 42.

²⁶Arguing from the premise that pimping, including "nice" pimping, is exploitative makes my case vulnerable to attack from those who are prepared to deny this claim; for I have no independent argument for it and am basically treating it as self-evident. But for those who would try to undermine the premise, it will not be sufficient to show that prostitution under a pimp is not all that different from working for an employer, renting from a landlord, paying back a loan at interest, or buying basic necessities from a merchant, as these relations are precisely those at issue in a Marxist analysis of exploitation. And, it is worth pointing out that such comparisons of pimping to ordinary capitalist activity are often made by pimps themselves, as they seek to defend the legitimacy of their vocation.

²⁷Consider John Stuart Mill's attempt in *On Liberty* to defend his nebulous anti-paternalism "harm principle." Or consider the difficulty within tort law of determining

Some theorists attempt to explain what it means for an exploiter to benefit at the expense of the exploited in *distributive* terms.²⁸ They claim, for example, that a relationship is exploitative only if the benefits of the relationship are such that the exploiter has (much) more to gain from the relationship than the exploitee, or such that the exploitee stands only to lose from it. However, this is a mistake, since an exploitative relationship need not be zero-sum in character and may even be a pareto-optimal improvement for the two parties.²⁹ This might seem counterintuitive; however, the exploitee often has a lot to gain from her relationship with her exploiter, sometimes even more than the exploiter himself. Indeed, the benefits of being exploited often explain (at least partially) why the exploitee gets involved in the relationship. For example, prior to their relationships with their pimps, some prostitutes will have been desperate, poor, and alone. Their pimps may provide them with money, (better) housing accommodations, and companionship. With regard to the actual practice of prostitution, their pimps may sometimes provide clients, deal with abusive or non-paying customers, bribe the police, and, when necessary, provide money for bail and lawyers. For some prostitutes, such an arrangement will be a significant improvement over their prior situations. The pimps, on the other hand, may gain much less from these relationships (assuming we can make sense of these kinds of interpersonal comparisons), for their situations may have been pretty good before the relationships formed, and perhaps not much worse without them. But for all that, I take it that such a relationship would still be

when and to what extent a plaintiff has suffered some definite "harm."

²⁸See, e.g., George E. Panichas, "Vampires, Werewolves, and Economic Exploitation," *Social Theory and Practice* 7 (1981): 223-42; Richard J. Arneson, "What's Wrong with Exploitation," *Ethics* 91 (1981): 202-27; John E. Roemer, *Free to Lose: An Introduction to Marxist Economic Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); and Paul Warren, "Self-Ownership, Reciprocity, and Exploitation, or Why Marxists Shouldn't Be Afraid of Robert Nozick," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24 (1994): 33-56.

²⁹Others have rightly emphasized this important point. See, for example, Wood, "Exploitation," pp. 147-48; see also Alan Wertheimer, *Exploitation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 14-19. For a thorough and trenchant critique of the distributive approach to exploitation, see Julius Sensat, "Exploitation," *Noûs* 17 (1984): 21-38; also see Crocker, "Marx's Concept of Exploitation"; Nancy Holmstrom, "Exploitation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1977): 353-69; Jeffrey Reiman, "Exploitation, Force, and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism: Thoughts on Roemer and Cohen," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16 (1987): 3-41; Jeffrey Reiman, "An Alternative to 'Distributive' Marxism: Further Thoughts on Roemer, Cohen, and Exploitation," in Robert Ware and Kai Nielsen (eds.), *Analyzing Marxism: New Essays on Analytical Marxism* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1989); and Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), chaps. 1-3.

clearly exploitative.³⁰

As against the outcome approach to exploitation, and parallel to the process model of parasitism, the best way to understand the thought that the exploiter benefits at the expense of the exploitee seems to be this: The benefits that the exploiter gains through the activities of the exploitee are made possible by some *sacrifice* on the part of the exploitee. Like the foraging of the host, the activities of the exploitee that produce benefits for the exploiter are costly for the exploitee. Such sacrifices generally involve relinquishing or destroying something of significant and often intrinsic value in order to avoid some unwanted fate; these sacrifices need not be of external objects, such as money or goods, but may include less tangible, though no less real, costs to the exploitee.³¹ For example, engaging in prostitution may require sacrifices of health, freedom, physical comfort, security, self-respect, and relationships with family and friends. These sacrifices of the exploitee produce, whether directly or indirectly, something of value for the exploiter, though, as was pointed out above, they may benefit the exploitee as well.

We should be careful, however, not to assume that an exploiter never makes any sacrifices in order to extract benefits from the exploitee—he or she may give up or risk a lot to be an exploiter. I see no reason, for instance, why pimping should have to be easy or relatively cost-free in order to be exploitative. But of course being the scrounger that he is, a “good” pimp—that is, one who is adept at his vocation—will manage to pimp his prostitutes in such a way that the costs of meeting his present needs and desires are significantly reduced from the level they would be at were he not pimping them.

There is something else we need to recognize about the exploitee’s

³⁰Here, the parasite metaphor may mislead us into thinking otherwise (thus admittedly revealing a limitation of the parasite-exploiter analogy), for the typical parasite makes no contribution to the well-being of its host but simply drains the host of its resources. The pimp-prostitute case shows, however, that a no-contribution condition is not necessary for the existence of exploitation. This should be all that much clearer once one considers the fact that the plantation slaveholder would often provide lodging, food, and means of production for his slaves, so that the latter would be physically able and properly equipped to cultivate crops.

³¹It might be thought that the loss of something (tangible or intangible) counts as a “sacrifice” only if the subject in question was entitled to possess that thing (or proceeds from it) in the first place, which suggests that there are moral assumptions built into the analysis being offered here. This would be mistaken, however. Suppose a rogue cop were to threaten a pimp with repeated arrests and harassment unless the pimp agreed to give him twenty percent of the money the pimp’s prostitutes take in. Regardless of whether we think the pimp is morally entitled to his prostitutes’ earnings or whether we think prostitutes are morally entitled to the payment they receive for their services, we can agree, I would think, that the cop here exploits the pimp and the prostitutes who work for him.

relation to the benefit she yields to her exploiter, namely, that she is *forced* to provide this benefit.³² We are often in relationships that involve making sacrifices for others, such as in friendships and familial relationships. However, when we are not compelled to make such sacrifices but instead make them freely, the beneficiaries are not exploiters. Exploitation occurs only if one party benefits from the forced sacrifice of another.

The force that operates in exploitative relationships can be either *physical* or *non-physical*. Physical force involves physically restraining the subject; this suppresses completely the will of the forced individual, making him physically incapable of acting in ways that he might want. Non-physical force, on the other hand, *constrains* the will of the subject but does not completely eliminate her capacity to act against the compelling force. Thus, where non-physical force is at work, there is still room for choice, even if one's options are reduced to risking one's health or life. Physical force would be operating if, say, a group of recent prison escapees were to break into your home and lock you in a closet, while they ate your food, enjoyed your cable television service, and pawned your valuables. Non-physical force would be at work if they were to use threats of violence to make you cook their meals, entertain them by dancing and singing, and write blank checks out to them. In the latter case, you *could* of course refuse to do these things, but to do so would involve allowing some vital need to go unfulfilled—in this case, the need to secure one's physical and perhaps psychological well-being.

Now, the *cause* of a particular token of forced (in)activity, whether physical or non-physical, need not be another agent. Focusing for the moment on non-physical force, consider the two illustrative cases that Aristotle offers in his discussion of "mixed action." In the first, "a tyrant tells you to do something shameful, when he has control over your parents and children, and if you do it, they will live, but if not, they will die."³³ In the second, an agent throws valuable cargo overboard in a

³²Some might think that the inclusion of "force" in our definition of exploitation vitiates the account, since the concept of force is itself a moral notion and thus violates condition 2. For this view of force, see, e.g., Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), pp. 262-65; and Alan Wertheimer, *Coercion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). However, I believe this moralized conception of force has been ably and decisively refuted by G.A. Cohen. See his "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom"; "Freedom, Justice, and Capitalism," *New Left Review* 125 (1981): 3-16; and "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12 (1983): 3-33. For further considerations against the moralized view of force, see Michael J. Gorr, *Coercion, Freedom, and Exploitation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).

³³Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 1110a5-8.

storm in order to save himself and others from drowning.³⁴ These examples suggest an important distinction. Sometimes when an individual is forced to do something, some particular agent(s) intentionally forces him. We call such cases of force *coercion*, and the familiar mugger example is the paradigm here. The mugger seeks to reduce my alternatives to those that I would find more repugnant or costly than giving him my wallet, such as risking serious physical injury or death. Pimps also, at least sometimes, use coercion with their prostitutes. For example, a pimp may force his prostitutes into performing various acts for his benefit by using (or threatening to use) violence against them or by taking away (or threatening to take away) something they need (e.g., affection, money, protection, or shelter). Sometimes, however, there is force where there is no coercion. In such cases, though no agent intentionally forces her, it is still appropriate to say she was *compelled by her circumstances*, sometimes citing some particular aspect of her overall situation as *the* compelling circumstance. Aristotle's second example illustrates this type of force.³⁵ Women who engage in prostitution under a pimp are often compelled to do so by their circumstances. Sometimes the alternatives are worse—for example, extreme poverty, returning to an abusive home, more risky forms of criminal activity, or street prostitution without a pimp with all the insecurity that this entails.

The distinction between coercion and compulsion by circumstances is important for a proper understanding of the nature of exploitation. Exploiters sometimes coerce those they exploit into providing them (exploiters) with something they value—slavery is perhaps the clearest example of this—but sometimes they do not. Someone else may do the coercing, or the exploitee may simply be compelled by his or her circumstances. In such cases, the exploiter finds some means of parlaying the exploitee's forced activity into a gain for himself without his having to engage in any coercive action. We might call this latter type of exploiter an *opportunistic* exploiter. In the pimp-prostitute relationship, the pimp may act either coercively or opportunistically. Sometimes he may do both, for what may start out as opportunistic exploitation—for example, taking advantage of the desperation and naiveté of a young woman—may later become coercive as the pimp comes to use violence and threats to maintain the exploitative relationship. In one way or another, then, the exploitee is forced to make a sacrifice that results in a benefit for the

³⁴Ibid., 1110a10-12.

³⁵Here is an example of agent-neutral physical force: during an earthquake, a heavy bookcase falls on you, making you incapable of getting to a phone to call for help. *Coercive* physical force is involved, for example, in many cases of rape. The discussion that follows focuses mainly on non-physical force.

exploiter (condition (a) of BSE).³⁶

Some deny that force is necessary for exploitation on the ground that exploitees sometimes “voluntarily” enter into or remain in exploitative relationships.³⁷ There is something important in this observation, but I don’t think it shows that exploitation can be free of force. Unfortunately, we cannot properly resolve this disagreement in the absence of a general theory of force and its associated notions (e.g., coercion, compulsion, duress, threat, etc.), and we cannot develop such a theory here.³⁸ So, for now, let me briefly suggest a way we might (at least partially) accommodate this observation. When someone claims that a particular exploitative relationship does not involve force, this is often (at best) only a half-truth. For non-physically forced actions have both a voluntary and an involuntary aspect—which is why Aristotle called them a form of “mixed” action. Such actions are voluntary insofar as the agent “chooses” to perform them rather than suffer the consequences of not doing so. But they are involuntary insofar as the agent performs them because were she to fail to do so, she would be forgoing the satisfaction of some vital need. So what might appear to be an unforced action when viewed under its voluntary aspect may in fact be a forced one when seen under its involuntary aspect. The pimp often trades on this duality of non-physically forced actions when he disingenuously denies that he is an exploiter. He argues that he does not exploit the prostitutes who work for him, since they are not “forced” to work for him but rather “choose” to. But this common pimp apology is misleading, since these prostitutes’ “choosing”

³⁶Now if we include “force” among the necessary conditions for exploitation, the analogy between parasitism and exploitation will be somewhat weakened. Our ordinary notion of non-physical force has its natural home in the context of freely chosen intentional (rational) actions: non-physical force is a type of constraint on our freedom to choose between alternative courses of action. But in our descriptions and explanations of parasite-host relationships, we do not treat non-human hosts as if they deliberate about and then choose how they will respond to the scrounging behavior of parasites. Of course, we acknowledge that they, like us, have built-in immunological and other genetic responses to the presence of parasites, but we do not think of them as *deciding* how to respond to parasitic encroachments. Thus, the concept of non-physical force, insofar as it is necessarily tied to the concept of rational agency or of deliberation, is not relevant to the typical analysis of animal parasitism. However, it is obviously relevant to the analysis of human exploitation. Indeed, we would fail to capture a feature of exploitation that has moral and political significance were we to ignore how exploitation affects the freedom of the exploitee.

³⁷See, e.g., Wood, “Exploitation,” pp. 148-49.

³⁸Unfortunately, nor do I know of an account that is fully adequate. But for some interesting and suggestive accounts of force, see Cohen, “The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom”; Reiman, “Exploitation, Force, and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism”; and Gorr, *Coercion, Freedom, and Exploitation*.

to work for him may be the only way they can ensure the satisfaction of their material and other needs—or their alternatives may in fact be worse. If we accept the pimp's logic here, we might as well say that the person who throws valuable cargo overboard in a dangerous storm is not forced to do so, since he, too, "chooses" to make this sacrifice rather than risk drowning.

Even if we accept force as a necessary criterion for exploitation, as I think we should, along with the distinctions between physical and non-physical force and between coercion and compulsion by circumstances, our account of the structure of exploitation would still be incomplete. For clearly exploitative relationships also involve some kind of *asymmetry* between the exploiter and exploitee.³⁹ Now it might be thought that this asymmetry lies in the fact that while the exploitee is forced into the exploitative relationship, the exploiter is not. But common though this case may be, this type of asymmetry need not obtain in order for exploitation to exist. Suppose two people, Able and Infirm, are shipwrecked on a desert island. Able is physically capable of doing what is necessary to meet his subsistence needs without the aid of Infirm. Infirm is not so capable, but he happens to possess a weapon that can cause Able intense and lasting pain, should Infirm choose to use it for this purpose. If Infirm uses his weapon to coerce Able into doing enough work to provide for both of them, clearly this would be exploitation.⁴⁰ It is also clear that Infirm would be *forced*, because compelled by his circumstances, to exploit Able in this way, should Able refuse to do the work otherwise. Thus, force, though necessary for exploitation, is not what accounts for the essential asymmetry of exploitation. Earlier I argued that if we want to understand the nature of exploitation, we should not look to the relative benefits that accrue to the exploiter and exploitee. The trouble was that these benefits might not be unequally distributed—

³⁹Indeed, this asymmetry seems to be built into our use of the term. When we say that *A* exploits *B*, this does not normally imply that *B* exploits *A*, but rather suggests that *B* does not. To be sure, this asymmetry does not rule out the possibility that two people can exploit each other. In its most basic form, however, the exploitation relation goes in one direction. We can understand "mutual exploitation" in terms of the basic form.

⁴⁰I probably shouldn't say "clearly" here, since some, like G.A. Cohen, might deny that this is a case of "exploitation." Cohen, working within the framework of a moralized conception of exploitation, may insist that Infirm is entitled to Able's assistance in this instance and thus it would not be wrong for Infirm to force Able to provide it. (See, for example, Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, pp. 149-51.) I cannot adequately discuss here Cohen's complex arguments in favor of what seems to me a rather counterintuitive conclusion. But I will say that within the naturalistic framework favored here, it is an open question whether a particular case of exploitation is unjust or otherwise morally problematic. So it is possible to assert, without linguistic impropriety, conceptual confusion, or moral perversity, that Infirm exploits Able *and* that he does so justly.

or at least not unequally distributed in the exploiter's favor, as one might assume. I think it would also be a mistake to locate the relevant asymmetry in the relative sacrifices of the two parties, since exploiting, after all, can be a risky and costly business. And if, as I have just argued, it is not the force that is involved in exploitation that accounts for the relevant asymmetry, then what does?

As should be clear from condition (b) of BSE, I think this asymmetry is accounted for by the fact that the exploiter has a *power advantage* over the exploitee, and that this advantage is used to extract benefits from the sacrifices of the latter.⁴¹ I suggest that we think of the relevant type of power advantage as analogous to an effective parasite scrounger strategy. Recall that these are strategies—usurpation, deception, and stealth—that a parasite uses to secure a resource from a host that is disposed to resist being used in this way. Similarly, exploiters make use of their power advantages in order to obtain things from people who, in the absence of such pressure, would not be inclined to relinquish them.⁴² This does not mean that the exercise of a power advantage will always meet with active opposition. Often it will not, for the advantage may be so great that the exploitee simply acquiesces, believing that resistance would be futile. Note, moreover, that this conception of power advantage does not entail that a person is an exploiter only if he is more powerful *overall* than the one he exploits. The power advantage may be a limited one, as long as it would allow him to obtain some benefit from the rela-

⁴¹The conception of power advantage relied on here is derived from Max Weber, who defines "power" as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 53.

⁴²Both Allen Wood and Jonathan Wolff conceptualize the asymmetry characteristic of exploitation in terms of the "vulnerability" of the exploitee. See Wood, "Exploitation," pp. 142-47; and Wolff, "Marx and Exploitation," p. 111. Though I take it that we are each trying to get at the same thing, I think it better to understand the relevant asymmetry in terms of the exploiter's "power advantage." Though it is notoriously difficult to provide a general characterization of "power," it seems to me to be even more challenging to offer an account of "vulnerability" that would be useful for understanding exploitation. Indeed, by Wolff's own admission, "it is easier to give a list of causes of vulnerability than to explain its nature." I believe the relevant *cause* of the exploitee's vulnerability is either the coercive power of some other agent or some feature of the exploitee's circumstances (e.g., deprivation of material resources) that the opportunistic exploiter takes advantage of. This leads me to think that "power advantage" is the primary notion here and "vulnerability" the derivative one. Indeed, talk of the exploitee's "vulnerability" seems to be elliptical. One feels compelled to ask, "vulnerability to what?," to which one wants to answer "exploitation." Of course one could say, as Wood does, that the relevant vulnerability is vulnerability to being "used." But since "being used" is just another (and more vague) way of saying "being exploited," this would not be very illuminating either.

tionship despite resistance from the one who provides it.⁴³

Returning to our example, consider the strategies of the pimp. He may use violence or intimidation to coerce a woman into prostitution. He may use the fact that he has something the prostitute desperately needs (e.g., money, shelter, or security) to get her to prostitute herself for him. He may use deception and false promises to charm or trick her into it. He may make her dependent on him by moving her to an unfamiliar city or by getting her addicted to drugs or alcohol. Or he may employ these devices in combination. Whatever his methods, he uses his advantages to break down her resistance to being pimped and thus to being exploited.

It should also be clear that the exploiter must derive a benefit from the forced sacrifice of another *because of* some power advantage that he possesses. That is, he must not only have such an advantage, but the benefits he receives must flow to him through it. If the prostitute has a child who depends on her to meet his material needs, the child is not an exploiter as a result of his enjoying the fruits of the sale of her sexual labor, provided the child does not receive these benefits because of any power advantage he may have over his mother—for example, because of a threat to inform Children's Services about his mother's occupation.

Notice also that gaining benefits from others through the use of power advantages is not a sufficient condition for exploitation; force is also required.⁴⁴ Shaquille O'Neal, the great NBA basketball player, uses his advantages in height, speed, strength, and skill to score points against his smaller, slower, weaker, and less skilled opponents, despite their intense resistance. No doubt O'Neal's fame and glory are, in a straightforward sense, gained at their expense. But surely it would be inaccurate

⁴³For a wonderful discussion of the uses and sources of interpersonal power, see John R.S. Wilson, "In One Another's Power," *Ethics* 88 (1978): 299-315.

⁴⁴A clever critic (like one of the reviewers of this article) might argue that, given the criteria laid down above, prostitutes actually exploit their pimps and, thus, the account must be flawed. It is important to see why such an objection fails. A street prostitute is typically *forced* to make the sacrifices involved in plying her trade, for she will generally be desperately lacking in marketable skills and in material resources. And as her work is socially degrading, legally prohibited, and very dangerous, she most certainly would not resort to doing it, or to submitting to the will of a pimp, unless her circumstances were dire. No pimp in comparable economic circumstances will be able to recruit prostitutes, for he needs resources, financial and otherwise, to be able to attract such women and to convert them into prostitutes. While pimps may certainly make sacrifices to ply their trade, it must be the rare pimp who is forced to do so. It should also be clear that it must be the rare prostitute who will need to extract pimping services through the use of some *power advantage*, for pimps (and probably quite a few non-pimps) are only too eager to assist such women in their work, and not because resistance would be futile. This is not to rule out the possibility of mutual exploitation between a pimp and a prostitute but only to point out that such an arrangement must necessarily be atypical.

and misleading to say that he *exploits* his opponents.

Before leaving this discussion of the role of power in exploitation, we should note that the kinds of power advantages that make exploitation possible do not always entail one agent having control over another in a relationship of *domination*.⁴⁵ Domination involves the exercise of power in an effort to compel obedience and, thus, always involves the use of coercion. But when a person (or group) dominates another, the dominant's coercive power is not limited to compelling the subordinate to perform some specific act on a single occasion (e.g., giving up one's wallet in a robbery). Rather, the dominant has the power to force the subordinate to do a wide range of things of the dominant's choosing, and the dominant has this power over her for some significant period of time. This is admittedly vague, but the basic underlying idea is, I hope, clear enough: domination is not an isolated or very limited use of a power advantage over another but rather the systematic, continuous, and wide-ranging use of coercive power over another within an ongoing social relationship. Given even this rough characterization of domination, it should be clear that exploitation and domination sometimes come apart. To be sure, they both involve power inequalities. But, as we have said, the exploiter's power advantage over the exploitee may be limited (in scope, duration, or both). The exploiter may not have the power to force the exploitee to do much of anything; that is, he may not be a coercive exploiter at all but merely an opportunistic one. Where exploitation does involve coercion, it need not amount to domination. Perhaps the exploiter can obtain money from the exploitee but is not in a position to force the exploitee to do much else. Or perhaps the exploitee is forced to yield some benefit to her exploiter on one or two occasions, but there is no regular pattern of coercion. Moreover, there may also be domination without exploitation, for the dominant may not receive any benefit from the subordinate, either because the former will not accept it, or because the latter is unable to provide it. Indeed, it may be the subordinate alone who benefits from the relationship of domination, as seems to be the case in at least some cases of parental and paternalistic dominion.⁴⁶

⁴⁵According to Weber, domination is "the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons. It thus does not include every mode of exercising 'power' or 'influence' over other persons." Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 212.

⁴⁶The distinction between exploitation and domination in the pimp-prostitute relationship is easy to miss, since such relationships usually involve a heavy dose of both. As we pointed out earlier, the pimp is often a super-exploiter, the recipient of many benefits from his relationship with the prostitute. This super-exploiter status is often a consequence of his standing in a relation of domination to the prostitute. However, he need not have such dominion. Sometimes the pimp may have only very limited coercive power

3. Self-Reproducing Exploitative Relationships

Thus far, I have been concerned to outline the basic structure of the exploitation relation between two agents, whether these actors be individuals or groups. But as I stated at the beginning, ultimately my aim is to defend a conception of exploitation that will be useful for Marxist social theory. To that end, I want to focus on a form of exploitation that is of particular interest to Marxists—though I suspect it will be of interest to others as well—namely, exploitation as a self-sustaining social relation.

This type of exploitation does not take the form of an isolated transaction or ad hoc social interaction, such as a one-time exchange of money for goods or a robbery at gunpoint. Instead, the relevant type of social relation is an ongoing relationship, or a regularly recurring interaction, between two or more agents. Moreover, this social relationship is maintained through regular, predictable, and often norm-governed patterns of behavior. We might call such patterned interactions “regularized social relationships” to distinguish them from more episodic or irregular social interactions. No doubt, it is meaningful to speak of “exploitative acts” that are one-time-only affairs. However, I want to leave such cases aside in order to draw our attention to a particularly important, though often misunderstood, form of exploitation.

If the concept of exploitation is to serve the purposes of Marxist theory, it must allow us to accurately characterize an institutionalized and regulated inter-class relationship that persists over some significant period of time, even generations—for example, the relationship between the slaveholders and black slaves on antebellum Southern plantations. For this we need the concept of a *regularized exploitative social relationship*. Marxist theory also requires an account that shows exploitation to be essential to the social and material reproduction of class societies. In an effort to satisfy these two desiderata, I want to suggest that we view a regularized social relationship as exploitative, in the theoretically required sense, just in case that relationship is maintained or perpetuated (at least in part) through the basic exploitation relation as defined by BSE. We can call these instances of exploitation *self-reproducing exploitative relationships* (SER) and define such a relationship as follows:

X and *Y* are in a self-reproducing exploitative social relationship if and only if:

(a) *Y* is regularly forced to make sacrifices that result in benefits for *X*;

(b) *X* obtains these benefits by means of an advantage in power that *X* has over *Y*; and

(c) As a result of (a) and (b), perhaps in combination with other factors, *X*'s power advantage over *Y* is maintained (or is increased) and *Y* remains in the condition of being forced to make sacrifices for *X*'s benefit.

Thus, in a self-reproducing exploitative social relationship, a social relation that has the basic structure outlined in (a) and (b) has as one of its causal consequences that the conditions for the continuation of a relationship that preserves that structure are thereby reproduced. What SER does, then, is help us to see why some exploitative relationships tend to persist: the very structure of these relationships tends to secure their continuance.

Returning to the case of biological parasitism, we can see this type of systematic, self-reproducing pattern of interaction operating even there. Some parasite-host associations are interspecific relationships where the parasite species is physiologically dependent on the host species for such things as feeding, digestion, respiration, transportation, maturation, and biological reproduction. The host, through its foraging activities, invests time and energy to acquire needed resources, while the parasite, through its scrounger strategies, reduces the cost of obtaining its needed resources by taking advantage of the foraging efforts of the host. There is a systematic flow of essential energy, nutrients, and other resources from host to parasite, which tends to have a deleterious effect on the host's ability to defend itself against further parasitic drains on its resources, but which enables the parasite species to biologically reproduce and, thus, to perpetuate the parasitic relationship itself.

Pimp-prostitute relationships, too, are often self-reproducing. Of course, such relationships can be reproduced in a variety of ways; however, for purposes of illustration, let us take the following somewhat simplistic representative case. Consider a late adolescent girl who flees an abusive home environment for the city. Lacking work experience, skills, and the necessary educational credentials, she may find it difficult to locate a job that pays a living wage. At the same time, if she cannot support herself, she faces a return to an abusive home, now perhaps an even more hostile environment.

Pimps looking to procure prostitutes seek out women in vulnerable situations of this type. When an experienced, street-savvy pimp meets such a woman, he may at first conceal his intentions while he gains her confidence and trust through material and emotional support. Before long, our young woman may find herself financially and emotionally

dependent on the pimp. With this dependence established, the pimp is in a position to get her to, as they say in the trade, "turn a trick," whether through physical intimidation, threats, manipulation, deception, cunning, or persistent reminders of her indebtedness.

It is not uncommon for persons to feel cheapened, dirty, guilty, or depressed after selling sex on the street. In an attempt to relieve the stresses and anxiety of her work, a prostitute may turn to alcohol or drugs. Should the alcohol or drug use become a habit, she will be even more vulnerable to being pimped, since now she will be forced to engage in prostitution not only in order to secure her material needs and to please her pimp, but to support her substance addiction. At this point, moreover, her self-esteem is likely to have been severely damaged, and she may fear that no one could truly love or care about her, with the possible exception of her pimp. With this, her resistance to being pimped will be all but broken. But her situation may get worse still. The criminal justice system tends to contribute to this cycle of prostitution, dependence, and pimping. For example, it is well known that some police officers harass and/or extort money and sex from prostitutes.⁴⁷ Moreover, in those cities where prostitution is a criminal offense, a prostitute has little legal recourse against violent clients or clients who have been serviced but then refuse to pay. And were she to be arrested for solicitation, she may have no one to turn to for help. In steps the pimp. He promises to pay off the police, protect her from "bad tricks," and cover any legal expenses she might incur. Of course he can do all these things for her because he has the resources and leisure that come from living off the earnings of his stable of prostitutes, of which she has now become a part. The more money these women make for him, the more power he has to exploit them, and the more these prostitutes are forced to contribute to their own exploitation.

4. Exploitative Economic Systems

The discussion thus far has been primarily focused on defending an account of exploitation that is nonmoralized and fits with our ordinary sense of the notion (conditions 2 and 3). I now want to show that the account given in SER is also suitable for social-scientific use within Marxist theory (condition 1). I will do so by using SER to clarify the meaning of a well-known but often contested Marxian thesis, namely,

⁴⁷Perkins, *Working Girls*, pp. 299-303; Davis, *Prostitution*, p. 320; Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 213-14, 221.

that all class-structured societies are exploitative (call this the “exploitation thesis”).⁴⁸ When Marxists maintain that class societies are exploitative, they are referring, at least primarily, to *economic* exploitation.⁴⁹ My suggestion, then, is that we understand economic exploitation within class systems of material reproduction through the analytical framework of SER.

Suppose we have a set of persons who are materially interdependent, that is, each member of the economic unit relies on (some subset of) the others to produce at least some of the material goods he or she needs.⁵⁰ A social system of material reproduction exists, then, whenever such an economic unit maintains itself over time through the regularly recurring processes of production, distribution (which sometimes occurs through market exchanges), and consumption. It is through these often very complex social processes that the members of an economic unit systematically and continuously satisfy their material needs.⁵¹ Now the production of material goods requires *productive resources*, where these include

⁴⁸Marx and Engels claim that “the history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., *the exploitation of one part of society by the other.*” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978), p. 489; emphasis added.

⁴⁹Marxists acknowledge that there are exploitative relationships that are not, strictly speaking, forms of *economic* exploitation, for example, some male-female and some parent-child relationships. They do, however, take economic exploitation to be the “fundamental” form of exploitation, though the exact nature of this primacy is disputed. Nothing I say below, however, assumes the primacy of economic exploitation over other forms of exploitation. The account that I will offer does not rule out the existence of non-economic forms of exploitation; nor does it attempt to subsume them under the economic form. Moreover, it denies neither the theoretical nor the practical significance of non-economic forms of exploitation. However, unlike the general account given in SER, the account to follow has a more limited purpose: to provide an analysis of the kind of exploitation that is a constitutive feature of the process of material reproduction within class-structured societies.

⁵⁰I speak here of economic units instead of “societies” because economic exploitation is a relationship that often extends across societies (in any ordinary sense of “society”), given the material dependence of the members of some societies on the members of others. The membership of societies is usually defined in terms of geographical location, formal citizenship, nationality, ethnicity, culture, ideology, or some combination of these. Of course in the modern era, relations of material interdependence have outstripped all of these boundaries. See David Held, Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt, and Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

⁵¹For further discussion of the idea of a system of material reproduction, see Robert Paul Wolff, *Understanding Marx: A Reconstruction and Critique of Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 8-16.

alienable productive assets (means of production) and the productive capacities of workers (labor-power). In any system of material reproduction, the nature of the productive process will be shaped by, *inter alia*, the way in which power over the available productive resources is distributed among the members of the economic unit. Marxists maintain that in *class* systems of material reproduction, there will be some who, because they lack sufficient control over available productive resources (perhaps including their own productive capacities, as in slavery), are forced to produce not only what is necessary to meet their own material needs, but also enough to satisfy the needs and desires of those who possess greater control over productive resources. When a system of material reproduction has this type of economic structure, so Marxism maintains, it is exploitative. Abstracting away from the distinguishing features of particular systems of material reproduction (e.g., slavery, serfdom, capitalism, or socialism), we can represent the Marxist conception of economic exploitation (EE), in a form parallel to that of SER, as follows:

A system of material reproduction is economically exploitative if and only if its economic unit contains (non-identical though perhaps overlapping) groups *X* and *Y* such that:

(a) The members of *Y* are forced to perform surplus labor, and the members of *X* benefit from their appropriation of the product of *Y*'s surplus labor;

(b) The members of *X* come to appropriate this surplus product because of their greater control over existing productive resources; and

(c) As a result of (a) and (b), *ceteris paribus*, the control over productive resources that members of *X* possess is maintained (or tends to increase) and members of *Y* continue to be forced to perform surplus labor, the product of which is subsequently appropriated by members of *X*.⁵²

⁵²I have deliberately developed the account of economic exploitation without relying on the so-called "labor theory of value" (i.e., that the exchange-value of any commodity is determined solely by the average labor-time necessary to produce it), since, as I interpret it, the exploitation thesis applies to both commodity-producing and non-commodity-producing class societies. Perhaps determining the *rate of exploitation* within *capitalism* requires something like a labor theory of value. However, I think we can safely leave this issue aside, for I take it that nothing I say in this essay depends on its resolution. For a defense of the claim that "the relationship between the labor theory of value and the concept of exploitation is one of mutual irrelevance," see Cohen, "The Labor Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation." Also see G.A. Cohen, "More on Exploitation and the Labor Theory of Value," *Inquiry* 26 (1983): 309-32; Buchanan, *Marx and Justice*, chap. 3; and Panichas, "Vampires, Werewolves, and Economic Exploitation." For

Let me highlight a few features of this account. First, EE treats economic exploitation as a relationship between *groups* of individuals, where the relevant groups are defined in terms of the functions they perform within a system of material reproduction. Sometimes the relevant group acts only as a *collection of individuals*, each seeing to his or her own interests without a view to achieving some collective goal. At other times it acts *collectively* in order to consciously promote some shared interest or common objective. For example, capitalists compete with each other for shares of the surplus product, but they sometimes act collectively to keep the minimum wage down, support political candidates who promote their common interests, and reduce the power or prevent the formation of labor organizations. In a similar way, workers normally act as a collection of individuals when they compete with each other for the chance to sell their labor-power for a wage. But of course they sometimes act collectively to secure common goals, such as shorter working hours, higher wages, safe working environments, job security, and retirement and health care benefits. EE represents economic exploitation as occurring between two types of group: (i) a group who, through its labor (whether acting as a collection of individuals or as a collective agent) contributes to the production of the material goods consumed by the members of an economic unit, and (ii) a group who (again, whether acting as a collection of individuals or collectively) acquires a portion of the surplus product by virtue of its greater control over productive resources.

EE characterizes exploitation as a relation between groups but not because economic exploitation between individuals is impossible—Cruoe can certainly exploit Friday's surplus labor. Rather, the Marxian exploitation thesis concerns those relations of production that have their basis in a complex social division of labor. Within such a division of labor, the varied tasks of production are divided among a group of producers whose laboring activities together create a collective product (not collectively owned but collectively produced). Although, strictly speaking, it is the *individuals* who do the laboring, it is the *group* that produces the collective product. This product must then be distributed to the members of the economic unit for purposes of further production (means of production) and personal consumption (means of subsistence). Likewise, surplus appropriation occurs because of the actions of many individuals, each individual having some measure of power over the pro-

the opposing view, see Nancy Holmstrom, "Marx and Cohen on Exploitation and the Labor Theory of Value," *Inquiry* 26 (1983): 287-308; and Ian Hunt, "A Critique of Roemer, Hodgson, and Cohen on Marxian Exploitation," *Social Theory and Practice* 12 (1986): 121-71.

ductive resources used in production, which consequently nets him or her some portion of the surplus. However, this group extracts this surplus because of the economic power they possess collectively, no one of them alone being sufficiently powerful to secure control over enough productive resources to compel others to perform surplus production.

Marxists generally refer to the exploiting and exploited groups within an economically exploitative social system as "classes," where an individual's class position is a function of the kind and amount of power he or she has over available productive resources.⁵³ Although the idea of economic class is vital for Marxist theory, and inter-class dynamics obviously have a crucial role to play in explaining economic exploitation, the concept of class is not here relied upon in characterizing economic exploitation. As John Roemer has correctly argued, the thesis that capitalists exploit workers should be a conclusion of exploitation theory rather than one of its assumptions, especially given that a two-class model of capitalism is no longer viable.⁵⁴ So instead of using the concept of class to define "exploiter" and "exploitee," I speak simply of groups who perform surplus labor and groups who appropriate (a portion of) the collective product of surplus labor. Economic exploitation is possible so long as there are members of the surplus-producing group who do not also belong to the surplus-appropriating group.⁵⁵ Given this view of things, we may not always be able to determine whether a particular individual is (or has been) a member of the exploiter group, exploited group, neither, or both. However, this lack of precision should not trouble us very much, since Marxism seeks to reveal that the economic structure of class systems of production always leads to exploitation, not

⁵³On the traditional Marxian account, there are two major classes within capitalism, the *proletariat* and the *bourgeoisie*, and one minor one, the *petite bourgeoisie*. However, Erik Olin Wright makes a compelling case for complicating the traditional Marxist account of capitalist class structure. He would have us add the "new middle class" to the list of classes within advanced capitalism. The members of this new middle class, like the proletariat, but unlike the petite bourgeoisie, own no (or very little) means of production. However, their own individual labor-powers are more highly developed, due to advanced training and technical education, than that of the traditional proletariat. Members of the new middle class have organizational (managerial) skills or technical knowledge that give them a competitive advantage over proletarians in the labor market and that allow them to appropriate a greater portion of the surplus. Wright maintains that members of the new middle class are simultaneously *exploited* by the bourgeoisie and *exploiters* of the proletariat. See Erik Olin Wright, "What Is Middle about the Middle Class?" in Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism*; also see his *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985).

⁵⁴John E. Roemer, "New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Exploitation and Class," in Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism*, pp. 89-90. See also Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 323; and van der Veen, "Can Socialism be Non-exploitative?" p. 85.

⁵⁵Crocker, "Marx's Concept of Exploitation," p. 205.

to determine individual culpability for, or personal injury due to, the exploitation that occurs because of that structure.⁵⁶

Marx defines *surplus labor* in terms of *socially necessary labor*. Socially necessary labor is the average amount of labor—usually measured in (average) time spent laboring—needed (i) to produce the material goods that would satisfy the needs of producers and their non-producing dependents and (ii) to replace the means of production that are used up in the production of these goods. Here, the *needs* of producers are not the bare physical requirements of human survival but the socially and historically variable needs of the unit's producers (including training) that must be met if the cycle of material reproduction is to continue at the level of material comfort to which the class(es) of producers have become accustomed.⁵⁷ Although the amount of socially necessary labor will vary with sociohistorical context, this labor, whatever its quantity, is what is required for any given economic unit to reproduce its producers. *Surplus labor*, on the other hand, is all labor performed beyond socially necessary labor.⁵⁸ *Labor*, that human activity aimed at the production of useful goods and services, will likely always be a feature of human life—barring the occurrence of complete automation, including the automation of the reproduction of automata. Natural resources cannot satisfy even our most basic needs without our altering their naturally given form; and labor is necessary for transforming the things of nature into the things we need. Economic exploitation occurs, however, only if some group of individuals is forced to perform *surplus labor*.

The total goods produced through surplus labor in a given cycle of production constitute the *surplus product*. A subgroup of an economic unit *appropriates* the surplus product when its members (whether acting as a collection of individuals or a collective agent) have effective control over its use. The members of the appropriating group need not consume or directly use the surplus product; it is enough if they have the power to decide what will be done with it. An *exploiting* group of surplus appropriators, however, does benefit from its control over the surplus product. These benefits include such things as access to a variety of services and

⁵⁶See *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 92.

⁵⁷See *ibid.*, p. 275.

⁵⁸"Capital did not invent surplus labour. Wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the worker, free or unfree, must add to the labour-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra quantity of labour-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production, whether this proprietor be an Athenian [aristocrat], an Etruscan theocrat, a *civis romanus*, a Norman Baron, an American slave-owner, a Wallachian boyar, a modern landlord or a capitalist." *Ibid.*, p. 344.

goods, wealth, security, freedom from burdensome toil, social status, political influence, and an increased capacity for further surplus appropriation.

Note that surplus appropriation can be non-exploitative, even when surplus appropriators benefit from their control over the surplus. For example, if by unforced agreement the members of an economic unit use a portion of their surplus product to invest in future production, to provide for the needs of those who perform administrative functions, or to make provisions for those unable to contribute to material production, these would not be cases of economic exploitation, since the beneficiaries of this surplus labor would not have acquired their portion of the surplus product through their greater control over productive resources. Likewise, if a group were to control the distribution of a surplus product because the producers of that surplus have chosen them for this task through a suitably democratic process, this would not be exploitation either, because again their control over the surplus product would not be the result of greater control over productive resources through which they extract labor from others. Of course, force and power can be at work in collective decision-making, and thus economic exploitation may still be possible even if the use of available productive resources and the distribution of the surplus product is subject to democratic (or worker) control. Marxists maintain that under appropriate democratic conditions this threat can be removed, or at least mitigated. However, it is not my aim to pursue these complex issues of democratic theory here.⁵⁹

I earlier distinguished between coercion and compulsion by circumstances. Relying on this distinction, we can more fully understand the meaning of condition (a) in EE, which requires that the members of the exploited group be forced to perform surplus labor. This condition is a shorthand explanation for *why* exploited producers perform surplus labor.⁶⁰ (The full explanation would be given by a suitably elaborated and

⁵⁹But for an important recent discussion, see David Schweickart, *Against Capitalism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); also see his "A Democratic Theory of Economic Exploitation Dialectically Developed," in Kai Nielsen and Robert Ware (eds.), *Exploitation* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1997), pp. 49-68.

⁶⁰For defenses of the force-inclusive conception of economic exploitation, see Holmstrom, "Exploitation"; Buchanan, *Marx and Justice*, chap. 3; Arneson, "What's Wrong with Exploitation"; Hunt, "A Critique of Roemer, Hodgson and Cohen on Marxian Exploitation"; Reiman, "Exploitation, Force, and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism"; Peffer, *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*, pp. 135-65; and Justin Schwartz, "What's Wrong with Exploitation?" *Noûs* 29 (1995): 158-88. For defenses of the view that force is not necessary for economic exploitation, see, e.g., John Roemer, "What is Exploitation?: Reply to Reiman," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 18 (1989): 90-97; Wood, "Exploitation"; and Wolff, "Marx and Exploitation."

adequate theory of force.) There are three explanations that we might give: Exploited producers are forced to perform surplus labor (i) because some agent(s) coerces them into it, (ii) because they are compelled by their circumstances to do so, or (iii) because they are coerced *and* compelled. All three types of explanation are needed to account for the forms of economic exploitation that are characteristic of different systems of material reproduction

Not all economic exploiters coerce those they exploit into performing surplus labor. Sometimes the compelling circumstances in an exploitative economic system are to be explained (at least in part) by the unintended structural consequences of the actions of individual agents, each acting under property relations that have conventional legitimacy and the backing of state power.⁶¹ We might call individuals who extract surplus labor from others under such circumstances *opportunistic economic exploiters*. Sometimes, however, exploiters do force those they exploit to perform surplus labor. Here, *coercive economic exploiters* have direct control over the productive capacities of exploited producers within a relationship of domination.

Perhaps the most important power advantage economic exploiters have over those they exploit is their substantial, sometimes monopolistic, control over existing material resources, an advantage that is often maintained through overwhelming military power.⁶² Without productive resources, workers cannot meet their own material needs and are thus at the mercy of those who control these assets.⁶³ Moreover, since a portion

⁶¹Reiman, "Exploitation, Force, and the Moral Assessment of Capitalism."

⁶²My concern here is with exploitation within the process of *production*. But for an interesting discussion of the types of power asymmetries that operate within *market-based* exploitation, see David Miller, "Exploitation in the Market," in Reeve (ed.), *Modern Theories of Exploitation*, pp. 157-61. Also see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Power and Wealth in a Competitive Capitalist Economy," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 21 (1992): 324-53. For a "liberal" account of market-based exploitation, see Hillel Steiner, "A Liberal Theory of Exploitation," *Ethics* 94 (1984): 225-41.

⁶³There may seem to be an important disanalogy between economic exploitation as defined by EE and the exploitation that exists between a pimp and prostitute. Workers are compelled to sell their labor-power under capitalism because material resources are concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of capitalists. But while pimps do take advantage of their (somewhat unique) ability to provide physical security, economic stability, and psychological comfort for the prostitutes they exploit, the needs and circumstances that compel some to engage in prostitution under a pimp are not created by the control pimps have over, say, means of subsistence and sources of mental consolation. Rather, the prostitute is herself in the position of a worker looking to sell her services for a "wage" (material and psychological) to some "capitalistic" pimp, who without the structural conditions of the economic system and the illegality and stigmatization of prostitution would be unable to effectively ply his trade. I don't think this "disanalogy" is a problem for the account defended here, for the pimp-prostitute relationship, as an ad-

of what surplus producers produce constitutes new (and sometimes more efficient) means of production, by producing these productive assets, surplus producers are thereby contributing to the maintenance of their exploiters' power advantage over them. There is, consequently, a perpetual and systematic extraction of surplus labor from workers, and the basic structure of the exploitative relationship is continuously maintained. Marx sums up the self-reproductive character of capitalistic exploitation in this way:

[Capitalist production] reproduces and perpetuates the conditions under which the worker is exploited. It incessantly forces him to sell his labour-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labour-power in order that he may enrich himself. It is no longer a mere accident that capitalist and worker confront each other in the market as buyer and seller. It is the alternating rhythm of the process itself which throws the worker back onto the market again and again as a seller of his labour-power and continually transforms his own product into a means by which another man can purchase him.⁶⁴

5. Concluding Remarks: The Normative Significance of Exploitation

G.A. Cohen, a proponent of the moralized conception of exploitation, would presumably object to the naturalistic pretensions of this account of economic exploitation. He might argue that such accounts are not morally neutral because they implicitly rely on the claim that each person has a moral right to sovereign control over his or her capacities and energies (the so-called "self-ownership thesis"), and/or they assume that (some) private property rights in (some) external resources are not morally legitimate. Without such normative assumptions, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to explain: (a) why forcing people to labor for the benefit of others, including needy and disadvantaged others, is always "exploitative"; and (b) why if some people have acquired certain resources justly, they should not be allowed to profit from their property advantage by inducing propertyless others to work for them. So, contrary to the naturalistic aims of the above account, we cannot judge whether a particular relationship is exploitative without resolving the

mittedly provocative but hopefully compelling example, is capable of illuminating various aspects of the economic exploiter-exploitee relationship within a system of material reproduction, even as the social phenomenon of pimping is itself explained (at least in part) by being subsumed under the EE model. We simply need to keep in mind that the analogy with pimping is meant to bring greater *analytical clarity* to the concept of economic exploitation, while the account provided in EE, if I'm correct, can help to *causally explain* pimping and many other social phenomena.

⁶⁴*Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 723.

property question, which is an irreducibly moral one.⁶⁵

Cohen's arguments against traditional Marxist conceptions of exploitation deserve a more substantial reply than I can offer here. But let me briefly outline a response in order to clarify my position. First, it should be noted that, provided the notion has some *explanatory* value, not everything that is characterized as "exploitation," from a social-scientific point of view, must be morally troublesome in order for use of the concept to be justified. Second, though Marxists do often (rightly) maintain that the concept has *normative* significance, there are grounds for opposing exploitation other than an endorsement of self-ownership or a rejection of entitlement claims to external resources, as I will suggest below. Third, whether a forced sacrifice for the benefit of another is properly described as exploitation importantly depends on whether the beneficiary obtains his benefit through a power advantage he has over the one who provides it. For this reason, Robin Hood, whatever wrongdoing he may justly be accused of, is not an exploiter, provided he is not benefiting from "robbing" the rich. Nor are the poor who benefit from Hood's "stealing" properly described as exploiters, as they have not acquired these benefits though any power advantage over the rich—that is, assuming they have not hired Hood's services. Finally, the reasoning that Cohen employs does not give sufficient weight to consequentialist objections to exploitation. One could reasonably object to a system of property relations on the grounds that it gives some the power to economically exploit others and that it makes some vulnerable to such exploitation by causing them to be compelled to offer their labor to those with greater productive resources.

Now, if the Marxian exploitation thesis is true, undoubtedly this would have great moral *significance*, that is, it should arouse our moral attention. This is not surprising, since most, if not all, social relationships that necessarily involve the exercise of social power, persistent conflicts of interests, and social constraints on freedom have this kind of significance for us. Such relationships seem to call out for moral scrutiny, perhaps even moral justification. However, though it has this moral significance, the exploitation thesis does not *entail* any moral position on economic exploitation. Marxists can rightly claim, therefore, that a system of material reproduction is exploitative without thereby expressing moral disapproval or condemnation—though of course many do morally disapprove of or condemn economic exploitation. If this is right, then Marxists may use "exploitation" as a naturalistic concept in their social-scientific theorizing. And, as is well known, Marxists claim that exploi-

⁶⁵See, e.g., Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*, pp. 146-51 and 195-208.

tation theory is useful for explaining many features of class-structured societies and indeed of the modern world. But even if exploitation theory cannot do all the explanatory work Marxism claims for it, the concept of exploitation may still be useful for illuminating a familiar and prevalent type of social relationship, and without presupposing that all such relationships are necessarily morally problematic. Some might think it somewhat counterintuitive, maybe even a bit misleading, to use the term “exploitation” in this morally neutral way, but this usage is entirely defensible given the analytical needs of Marxist theory, or at least so I have argued.

However, even if we accept the naturalistic account of exploitation I have offered here, the controversy over the extent to which Marxism offers (or should offer) a moral critique of class societies still remains. And EE, while not specifically endorsing a moral stance on economic exploitation, might be thought to suggest, if only implicitly, such a stance. There is no way to deal adequately with these issues in the space remaining; however, I would like to briefly situate the naturalistic conception of exploitation defended in this essay within the broader debate over the nature of the Marxist “critique” of class society.

We can distinguish roughly three competing ways of understanding the proper place of the exploitation thesis within the critical project of Marxism. First, there is the view that the main problem with exploitative social systems is the *distributive injustice* that exists within them. Those who take this position reject traditional Marxian antimoralism, and by doing so, they can consistently use the concept of exploitation in their critique of the injustice of capitalism and other class societies. Marxists who defend this view disagree, however, about what in the exploitative relationship is unjustly (perhaps because *unequally*) distributed—e.g., material resources, economic (opportunities for) welfare, productive capabilities, burdensome labor, leisure, the products of labor, or the benefits derived from possessing skills or native talent. They also disagree over whether the injustice lies in the *background conditions* that enable surplus appropriators to exploit producers (e.g., the social distribution of productive assets), or in the *resulting distribution* of the benefits and burdens of economic exploitation (e.g., surplus appropriators getting most of the benefits and surplus producers making most of the sacrifices), or in some complex relationship between the two.

Second, there are those who believe, like the group just described, that the exploitation thesis is part of a moral critique of class society; however, they maintain that this critique is not one based on considerations of distributive justice but on some other moral principle or political value—for example, democracy, freedom of choice, self-realization,

community, or human dignity.⁶⁶ Advocates of this approach focus their critique of economic exploitation on such things as the lack of control that workers have over the productive process, the limitations on the worker's freedom of action and choice both within and outside production, the dissatisfaction and lack of fulfillment that workers feel in their work, the social alienation and conflict that exist between workers and their exploiters, and the indignity involved in being used by others merely for material gain.⁶⁷

There is also a third approach to the critical theory of exploitation. On this approach, Marxism does not, nor should it, offer a *moral* critique of class society. Accordingly, those who hold this view treat the exploitation thesis not as part of a moral critique, but as a morally neutral, explanatory thesis about the nature of class systems of material reproduction. By taking this position, they can consistently reject morality as a basis for evaluating systems of material reproduction (perhaps treating such moral claims as ideological), and yet retain "exploitation" as a useful theoretical concept. Insofar as proponents of this view accept that Marxism must offer not only social explanation but social critique, they claim that Marxist theory is "critical" in that it supplies exploited producers (and those who would act in solidarity with them) with a demystified and more accurate understanding of their social and material situation. The source of economic oppression is hidden by the obscuring social processes of commodity production and by deeply entrenched ideological illusions—including *moral* ideologies—that are produced and perpetuated by apologists for the capitalist system. Marxist critical theory lays bare the exploitative nature of capitalist society, but it does not, so they maintain, supply us with, entail, or specifically endorse any moral principles or values. The explanatory account *is* the social critique. This position, though not without its difficulties, is one that I be-

⁶⁶Those who take this position usually make a distinction *within* political morality. Though they admit that there is a moral form of social criticism that is based on principles of distributive justice, they insist that there is also one that is not based on distributive justice but which nevertheless has moral force and real progressive potential. Proponents of this view are divided on the status of principles of distributive justice. On the one hand, there are those who are willing to embrace them for some purposes, but just not for exploitation theory. Then, there are those who reject distributive justice as bourgeois ideology and exclusively embrace a non-distributive moral perspective. This latter group, while not rejecting the moral criticism of economic structures altogether, is nevertheless opposed to a certain type of "bourgeois" moralism about them.

⁶⁷This approach also takes seriously, as I think one should, Marx's remarks about the limitations of a distributive view of the process of material reproduction. See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 83-111; and "The Critique of the Gotha Program," in Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, pp. 528-32.

lieve should be taken seriously, despite the fact that it has fallen into disrepute among some Marxists.⁶⁸

I contend that the conception of economic exploitation advanced above in EE is compatible with each of the three approaches to the Marxist critical theory of exploitation just described. This is not to say that these various "critical" perspectives are all on equal footing from a normative point of view, but only that EE does not rule any of them out on purely analytical grounds. Though I take it that there are indeed good reasons (for at least some people) to be against (at least some forms of) economic exploitation, it has not been my purpose to argue for this here. The primary point I have wanted to make in this concluding section is that a clear conception of the relevant forms of economic exploitation allows us to argue, with a stable target in view, about which of these reasons are the most compelling and which have little or no force, but without prejudging the matter. I think EE provides us with such a conception. In addition, though, EE makes sense of the parasitism and pimping metaphors for capitalistic exploitation that Marx and Marxists invoke in their more rhetorical moments. And, finally, EE gives specificity to the Marxian thesis that all class-structured societies are exploitative. Though the arguments and analyses offered here do not approach a full defense of the exploitation thesis, or even of the thesis that capitalism is exploitative, I do hope that they have the effect of making these claims, if not plausible, at least more readily intelligible.⁶⁹

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⁶⁸For a useful (though not neutral) discussion of the arguments on both sides of the debate over Marxian antimoralism, see Norman Geras, "The Controversy about Marx and Justice," in Alex Callinicos (ed.), *Marxist Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 211-67; also see his "Bringing Marx to Justice: An Addendum and Rejoinder," *New Left Review* 195 (1993): 37-69.

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