

Working-Class Politics and Identity Politics: An Engagement with Michael Zweig

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It is a pleasure to read Michael Zweig's works¹ written as they are, for the working-class majority in the United States. In his earlier 2012 work, Zweig examined the distribution of American occupations from the vantage point of power, to claim that the U.S. working class was 63% of the labor force. His latest 2023 text uses updated data on occupational categories² to identify 62% of the labor force as working-class; 36% as middle-class; and 2% as the capitalist-class, on the basis of relative power in the occupations. If the working class remains the solid majority, this inescapable social fact remains hidden from most Americans who mistakenly identify themselves as middle class. The progressive political implications of America's "best-kept secret" have yet to be fully realized. Why this is the case stimulates Zweig to offer an incisive analysis of class relations and a novel interpretation of the middle class. These analyses are based consistently on Zweig's understanding of *relative power*, defined as the degree of authority and autonomy (independence) at America's workplaces. Whether or not Zweig's findings are generalizable across the world economy, progressive movements that foreground working class interests have much to gain by politicizing America's best kept secret. Such a politicization however has to navigate the multiple dangers that arise when class identity comes into conflictual relationships with race, ethnic, gender, religious, and national identities attached to workers. These identities can be tremendously divisive. As Zweig notes, "history has shown us time and again how class, race, and gender movements have clashed countless times to the detriment of all"³. What values and strategies may overcome these divisions within the working class? Zweig claims that only a dialectical investigation of the relationships between economy, religion, culture and politics, can help us navigate successfully the depths of class, race, ethnicity, gender and religion.

Among the economic, religious, political and other institutions that mutually intertwine as processes in the U.S. social formation, is it necessary to accord primacy of determination to any one of them? Zweig takes a firm position on this question: "Societies are obviously enormously complex structures that involve far more than the economy. People create cultures, religious beliefs, and political procedures, as well as institutions to organize and perpetuate them. All these deeply influence human experience, far beyond the methods of economic life. But, *whatever the*

¹ The two landmark texts I engage with here are Zweig (2012) *The Working-Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret*, Second Edition; and Zweig (2023) *Class, Race, and Gender: Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of Capitalism*, PM Press. Key themes in the former text reappear in the latter, with a special focus on the dialectics of class, race, and gender.

² Zweig uses U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics for several occupational categories. Compare Table 1 on p.30 with Table 1 on p.95 in his 2012 and 2023 texts.

³ Zweig (2023), p.189.

specifics, economies are at the core of all societies"⁴. The centrality of economic organization in society also means this: "In one way or another, *culture, religion, and politics need to facilitate, or at least not significantly disrupt, the economic arrangements* characteristic of the society"⁵. Where do class relations fit into the organization of the economy? Zweig is equally firm on this question: The "class structure... underpins our economy"⁶. "The heart of class is... about economics"⁷.

These propositions that frame Zweig's analysis, create productive as well as problematic tension when he discusses the intersections of class politics with identity politics. The tension arises because Zweig insists upon the *mutual determination* of class, religion, gender, ethnicity, culture, and politics. This tension deserves close attention. I will return to it in later parts of this essay. If the mutual constitution of class and other identities lies at the nerve center of American society, one way to grapple with these identities is to read Zweig carefully.

Zweig tells us that as an undergraduate student, he was drawn into majoring in economics by the promises offered by Keynesian policy towards unemployment and depression⁸. Much of what Zweig writes is far removed from what I find in any mainstream economics textbook. Most economists do not discuss capitalism when they discuss the economy. If they do write about capitalism, they show poor understanding of its dynamics. As Schumpeter observed, "practically every nonsense that has ever been said about capitalism has been championed by some professed economist"⁹.

Zweig's writings are profoundly different in no small part because his method of analysis is dialectical. His latest work offers an insightful chapter on the dialectical method of inquiry, on contradictions that operate simultaneously, and how one or another of these contradictions may be dominant in driving development at any particular time¹⁰. Zweig uses this concept of the dominant contradiction to try to resolve the tension between contradictions as they appear within progressive movements.

As I read Zweig, it is impossible not to see that his engagements are really with American *society*¹¹, even though Zweig insists that economic activity is the bedrock of all societies. I am fascinated by

⁴ Zweig (2023), pp. 75-76: my italics.

⁵ Zweig (2023), p.76: my italics.

⁶ Zweig (2023), p.90.

⁷ Zweig (2012), p.9.

⁸ Zweig (2023), p. 129.

⁹ Joseph Schumpeter (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, p.144.

¹⁰ See pp. 56-57 in Zweig (2023), Ch.3, titled 'How Do We Know What We Know?'. Zweig applies his understanding of contradictions to his discussions of the capitalist economy in Ch.4. He uncovers 'unities of opposites' in the relations between class and religion (Ch.7); and class, race and gender (in Ch.9 and Ch.10). These are my favorite chapters. Zweig's Ch.9 and Ch.10 have a lot of affinities with two chapters in Michael Hardt's (2023) *The Subversive Seventies*. Both Hardt and Zweig write from the point of view of progressive social movements against structures of oppression. Hardt draws explicitly upon Althusser's (1962) essay on 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'; Zweig seems to do so implicitly when he refers to dominant contradictions.

¹¹ Following Karl Polanyi (1944), I maintain that the economy is always embedded in society. Polanyi argues that all historical attempts to create autonomous or "self-regulating markets" (by dis-embedding the economy from society) produced counter-movements to protect society from the effects of self-regulating markets. This dialectic of self-regulating markets and 'self-protecting society' is central to understanding the emergence of the progressive

the many stories Zweig shares from his personal family experiences and left-leaning progressive activism, his introduction to liberation theology by the Catholic chaplain at SUNY Stony Brook, and his contributions to teaching and research on the livelihood struggles of American workers. I see these writings as lovely elaborations of what C. Wright Mills calls the *sociological imagination*¹², the imaginative ability to connect and relate the biography of the individual to the larger society within which the individual is located, to the institutions that structure society. Zweig tells us about his experiences growing up in Detroit: his political involvement with the United University Professions, the Students for a Democratic Society, the Congress of Racial Equality; and his immersion in the student, antiwar, and civil rights movements. He helped to build the anti-war coalition, US Labor Against the War in 2003, and is involved in the Poor People's Campaign associated with Rev. William J. Barber, Jr., and Rev. Liz Theoharis. These engagements shape his understanding of how power relations work, and his emphasis on *values* as crucial to the building of progressive movements.

Zweig's investigations largely focus on the United States, even though he is clearly aware that the U.S. is a powerful nation whose "global reach" dominates the world system. If the U.S. nation-state is embedded in a larger Interstate System, isn't it necessary to relate class and identity politics in the U.S. with *world* scale processes of class, race and gender formations? How do mutual determinations of class, race, and gender change when we shift our gaze from the U.S. nation-state to the modern world system? Pursuing this bigger question isn't part of Zweig's project. Addressing the intersectionality of class, race, and gender within the U.S. is certainly central to Zweig's project. That still raises two questions. Is it necessary to accord primacy to the economy over society insofar as the economy is an institution within society and insofar as the interrelations between different institutions mutually constitute each other? Zweig makes capitalism into a master frame of reference¹³. Could doing so become problematic in the project of unifying the struggles of progressive social movements across different identities? In what follows, I will engage primarily with Zweig's latest (2023) text; but I will be informed by Zweig's (2012) text throughout this engagement.

I: Productive Forces and Production Relations as Unity of Opposites in constituting the Economy

I begin with Zweig's analysis of the capitalist economy. For Zweig, productive economic activity is the bedrock of all societies, but it is in capitalism that "for the first time in history, production is a process that integrates the entire society"¹⁴. Zweig follows Marx's dialectical method in identifying the technical and the social aspects of the production process whose internal relations comprise "a unity of opposites that are together central in constituting an economy". Production is *technical* because it involves means and methods – the existing productive forces in the form of

New Deal in the U.S; and the reactionary forms of fascism and Nazism in Europe. See Polanyi's *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Paperback edition, Boston, 2001. In my understanding, Zweig uncritically prioritizes 'economic dynamics' over all other dynamics in society.

¹² C. Wright Mills (1967) *The Sociological Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹³ The subtitle of Zweig's (2023) work is "Challenging the Injuries and Divisions of *Capitalism*". Marx seldom mentions 'capitalism' in his three volumes on *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*.

¹⁴ Zweig (2023), p.85.

available technology, tools and equipment – that workers use to make and distribute commodities. Production is *social* in that it involves people working together in forms of cooperative labor in capitalist workplaces. Since these are distinct but intertwined aspects, a dialectical study of the economy must investigate the effects of their “mutual determination”.

Mutual determination of the two aspects of the production process, however, involves class struggles that arise out of the control of ownership of the means of production by small powerful groups in society, and the simultaneous exclusion of the rest of society from ownership of the means of production. Control over the ownership of means of production enables control over decisions regarding what to produce and how to produce – it is an expression of capitalist power in the workplaces owned and directed by them. Class relations express unequal and exploitative power relations in the workplace that spill over into the rest of society. Exploitative power relations are reproduced by producing consent for existing relations of power, by getting the exploited “to accept their own subordination”. When this internalized acceptance breaks down, “military force and repressive policing come into the open”¹⁵. In short, through a combination of consent and coercion, the capitalist class reproduces existing power relations in order to appropriate an enormous *surplus* that results from these exploitative relations. This surplus is disguised when we use categories like “profit” to designate the reward for ‘risk-taking’ by capitalist businesses or “rent” for the reward from ownership of land or “wages” as the reward for the productive activities of the working class. Zweig notes that the great bulk of the wealth of capitalist society takes the form of “economic surplus” that the productivity of the working class creates over and above what it requires for its reproduction according to prevailing consumption norms¹⁶. Who comprises this capitalist class that appropriates the social surplus? What is its relationship with the other classes in the social structure?

II: The Class Structure of American Society

Zweig identifies three basic classes – the capitalist class, the middle class, and the working class¹⁷ – defined in terms of their relative power, the degree of autonomy and authority exercised at the workplace. Working-Class occupations have least power, while Capitalists have the most concentrated forms of power. The middle class that operates “in the economic spaces between capital and labor”, is composed of three broad groups: managers and supervisors who report to the most senior executives in big businesses; small business owners; and professionals.

Zweig defines the capitalist class as all those who own and direct Big Businesses, typically hiring twenty or more employees¹⁸. Owners of Big Businesses do not work directly with the workers.

¹⁵ Zweig (2023), pp.76;78.

¹⁶ Zweig (2023), p.45.

¹⁷ Zweig (2012) focused on these three basic classes, to suggest that “the ruling class” is a subset of the capitalist class. Zweig (2023) claims that the ruling class is “above” these three basic classes, operating at a different level. The ruling class, Zweig (2023: 98-99) notes, comprise people who ‘are typically not capitalists themselves, although many are’.

¹⁸ Zweig notes that there were only 639,000 Big Businesses in the US in 2005, each employing 20 or more employees. The owners and directors of these Big Businesses are the Capitalist Class, around 2% of the US labor force. Zweig also uses the U.S Small Business Administration’s definition, according to which, a Big Business is one that employs 500 or more employees. By this definition, there were only 21,000 Big Businesses in 2005, whose owners

They strategically remove themselves from the production process even though they exercise control over the workforce through at least one layer of middle management. They are a microscopic minority of the workforce.

Zweig makes a welcome distinction between Big Business and Small Business. Only Big Businesses are *capitalist* businesses. Small Business owners are caught “in-the-middle-of” a crossfire: on the one hand they have to struggle to reproduce themselves because Big Businesses monopolize market power; on the other hand, even if they may be sensitive to the concerns of the small number of workers they hire, small business owners are unable to meet the financial and other demands of their workers. They are caught in the middle of a crossfire of powerful interests from above (the capitalists) and from below (the workers), and it is this contradictory location (rather than income or consumption or lifestyle) that makes them middle class. Zweig makes similar arguments with respect to foremen and supervisors; as well as professionals (teachers, doctors, lawyers, and managers) who are situated “in-the-middle-of” conflicting interests from “above” (like the capitalist board of education that undermines the autonomy of teachers and the capitalist healthcare institution and Big Pharmaceutical capital that whittles away the autonomy of doctors) and from “below” (like parents who want their children to receive a quality education from teachers; and patients who want to trust their health to the expertise of doctors).

This insightful conceptualization of the middle class is new, illuminating, and compelling¹⁹. Income does *not* determine class-belonging; but income has a lot to do with class. When Zweig examines data on urban household income distribution data, he finds that the bottom 60% of households make average annual incomes that do not make them “middle-class” in any meaningful sense. In fact, the bottom 60% of households saw sharp falls in their share of national income between 1968 and 2009. This includes the lowest quintile (the bottom 20% of households in the income distribution) that American society refers to as “the Poor” who may be entitled to receive some form of welfare assistance. It is this group of poor households that the mainstream media misleadingly refers to as “the underclass”. Mainstream media claims that all those who are on welfare are poor black households and immigrants. However, the majority of urban households in this lowest quintile labeled as “the Poor” are Hispanic White and non-Hispanic White households. As Zweig observes, “two-thirds (68.5 percent) of all poor people in the United States in 2009 were white (42.5 percent of the poor were non-Hispanic white) while three-quarters of all

and directors were 315,000 individual capitalists, the ‘National Economic Elite’. A subset of this elite includes those who sit on the Board of Directors of ‘national scale corporations’, some 245,000 ‘Captains of Industry’. An even smaller network of directors sits on two or more boards of the most powerful financial, industrial, and agribusinesses. Along with ‘top-level political and cultural leaders, this small network of some 52,000 individuals comprises the U.S. ‘ruling class’. “The entire U.S. ruling class could easily be seated in the Yankee Stadium”. Although the ruling class isn’t monolithic, its members have sufficient similarity and coherence of interest to differentiate them from the rest of society, and to offer strategic guidance to U.S. society. See Zweig (2012: pp.16-17); and Zweig (2023: p.99).

¹⁹ Goran Therborn’s critical appraisal of the ‘global middle classes’ is relevant here. Therborn finds that economists and World Bank professionals distort reality when they use arbitrary income measures to optimistically point to an exploding middle class in the world system. Therborn (2020: 79) writes: “In bankers’ eyes, ‘middle class’ and ‘poverty’ are defined solely by the dollar sign”, draining these terms of any sociological meaning. See “Dreams and Nightmares of the World’s Middle Classes”, *New Left Review*, July/August 2020, pp.63-87.

black people were not poor”²⁰. If we now look at the second lowest quintile which Zweig refers to as “the core” of the U.S. working class, we find here the stereotypical “angry white guy” whose average annual household income disqualifies him from access to welfare payments. This makes households in this second-lowest quintile resentful of the households in the lowest quintile of the income distribution, even though both these quintiles – the lowest 20% and the second-lowest 20% of households – are solidly part of the working class! Insofar as he is influenced by media portraits of the Poor, the “angry white guy” in the second-lowest quintile picks on households in the lowest quintile as the target for his anger, because he mistakenly assumes that all households in the lowest quintile are either Black households or immigrant households living off welfare checks! Immigrant households often fall into the lowest quintile of the income distribution. Still, the majority of households in this lowest quintile are White households! Only 25% of Black households are in the lowest quintile. Zweig shows us how these stereotypes of the poor promote racism and divide the working class. These stereotypes make white households who are *not* “poor” – insofar as they make an annual income above the Federal Poverty Line, itself an arbitrarily constructed line below which some stingy amount of welfare dollars goes to the households in the lowest quintile – resent the bottom 20% of households mistakenly understood to be only blacks or immigrants.

Poverty itself, Zweig remarks with uncommon wisdom, “is something that happens to the working class” (2012, pp. 89-92). We should see the poor as working people who have run into hard times. Zweig also explains how almost every argument that demonizes immigrants is misplaced. There is no evidence that most immigrants are criminally inclined; there is no consensus that immigrants steal jobs from American citizens; there is no data that supports the false claim that the U.S. fiscal crisis is attributable to welfare payments and the presence of immigrants. If anything, it is U.S. foreign policy in South America that creates distress flows of immigrants into the U.S. If the U.S. would stop interfering in the politics of these societies, there wouldn’t be the immigration problem that the media and right-wing Republicans point out as the most urgent social issue! Zweig mentions the complicity of the U.S. State in empowering corrupt right-wing regimes in Central and South America that promote US corporate plunder, and how these policies “go a long way to explain the flow of large numbers of people from those countries to the US in recent decades”²¹.

This isn’t, however, something that happened just in recent decades. The exploitative character of U.S. relations with Latin America goes back at least to the mid-19th century. US-Latin American relations, labor historians point out, undermined not only the future of the labor movement in Latin America; they also undermined the future of the labor movement in the United States by worsening the racism of the American working class²². The American working class buys into simplistic ideas of upward mobility that suggest that anyone who works hard can realize the American Dream of moving up in the class hierarchy and becoming middle class. The poor then become lazy people who deserve their fate. These understandings – recycled in the media – make for bad politics. Zweig reminds us that luck and chance play an important role in upward mobility, as do structural barriers like race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. The structure of the U.S. economy however plays

²⁰ Zweig (2012): p.80 in the insightful chapter ‘Why is Class Important?’, pp. 61-75.

²¹ Zweig (2023), pp. 177-78.

²² See Charles Bergquist (1996) *Labor and the Course of American Democracy: US History in Latin American Perspective*.

a central role: if the movement upward in the class hierarchy from working class to middle class was shared by millions of Euro-males during the Cold War decades, the U-turn in the U.S. economy during and after the mid-1970s is increasingly associated with class polarization and downward mobility affecting also the middle class.

Yet the media and political institutions consistently maintain that America is a [middle class](#) society. As Zweig explains, when the working class disappears into the middle class and the capitalist class disappears into “the rich”, we lose sight of the contours of power. We lose sight of the surplus appropriated by the capitalists, and we remain mystified by the economic category that goes by the name of “wages”. Are wages really the just rewards or compensations offered for the productivity of workers? The sustained trend growth in workers’ productivity since the mid-1960s contrasts sharply with the trend stagnation or decline in real wages of workers. How do we make sense of this paradox?

Zweig argues that there is one important way to understand this paradox of the rising real wage-productivity gap. “*Wages do not correspond to or reflect what workers produce. Wages correspond to what it takes to produce workers.* Surplus arises in the difference between these two: the amount by which what workers produce exceeds what the workers need to go on working and raise children to take their place, at the socially accepted standard of living, provided either by wages from an employer or government programs”²³. Rather than seeing government programs like Medicaid and food stamps as entitlements, it is more accurate to understand them as part of the *social wage*, “a channel for providing compensation to the working class that supplements the private wage paid by the employer”²⁴.

What are the implications that follow from the asymmetrical power relations that determine wages, and the surplus created in the production process? In the first place, the low average wages offered to workers as their “just reward” in relation to their productivity disguises their economic exploitation, their struggles against the degradation of work, and their overwhelming experience of estrangement from the workplace. Yet mainstream approaches render exploitation a meaningless concept. “They hide the relationship between labor and capital that creates surplus in capitalist economies, surplus that is the material foundation of profit”²⁵. Second, struggles over the social wage are a crucial part of the *class struggle* against capitalist politics of austerity that seek to eliminate welfare and public spending on higher education, housing, and healthcare. Third, capitalist’s control over the surplus created by productive workers leads to an enormous waste of this surplus.

Militarism is one form taken by the waste of surplus. The U.S military absorbed 53% of discretionary Federal spending in 2019 and is the greatest single consumer of fossil fuels in the world economy. Reliance on fossil fuels drives resource wars alongside the destruction of nature. Nature and society are another “unity of opposites”, Zweig argues, because “people are elements

²³ Zweig (2023), p.83.

²⁴ Zweig (2023), p.82.

²⁵ Zweig (2023), p.84.

of nature”²⁶. Capitalism disconnects nature from society in its pursuit of short-run profits which often leads to irreversible environmental damage. Capitalists demand an end to all governmental regulation of the environment; they also demand the privatization of government. The privatization of schools, prisons, military operations, and healthcare undermines the livelihood of the working class²⁷. Only a powerful working-class movement can access and repurpose all that wasted surplus²⁸.

III: Class Politics in the Union Movement and the Labor Movement

What does it take to create a powerful working class movement? How may the American working class reconstitute itself such that it is not merely a class “in-itself”, but a class “for-itself”? Zweig notes that Unions are important; they are not, however, automatic instruments of worker power. The Union slogan, “An injury to one is an injury to all”, has become a “quaint abstraction”. Working-Class power “rests only in the active and organized rank and file who make the union their own”²⁹. Unions must also be independent of political parties. By allying itself with the Democratic Party, American unions became top-down bureaucratic organizations without any powerful or independent working class vision to guide their politics. “It weakens us to believe that unions have brought American workers into the middle class, as union leaders typically say in defense of the importance of unions.” Such an approach ‘misses the proper focus of struggle: the capitalist class and its ruling elites’. “If the target of our political campaigns is ‘the rich’, or even ‘the billionaire class’ without further explanation, we reinforce the false understanding of class as a question of degrees of income and wealth only”. Although current political language has come to accept the term “working class”, it is important to popularize the *capitalist class* (not “the rich”) as the antithesis of the working class³⁰.

Zweig links the popular *misperception* that America is a middle-class society to the “ideology and politics of the Cold War”³¹. The ruling class outlawed all “class talk” as unpatriotic, and purged communists and left-wing organizers from U.S. society. One legacy of Cold War anticommunism is that “almost all union leadership have tied themselves to an unyielding defense of capitalism as a system... settling into the role of junior partner to capital inside the Democratic Party”³². American Unions offered uncritical allegiance to the war in Vietnam despite a strong anti-war movement inside the U.S. In fact, as Jeff Schuhrke explains, the leadership of the AFL-CIO unions joined with U.S. foreign policy representatives to systematically undermine progressive labor movements abroad³³. Stripped of all its progressive, left-leaning organizers, Unions became xenophobic, racist, and sexist organizations. The Cold War (1945-1975) nevertheless facilitated

²⁶ This is one of Polanyi’s insights. Labor and land are inextricably intertwined relations. The term ‘culture’ itself, I would argue, is primarily an expression of the relationship of people with land.

²⁷ Zweig (2023), pp. 122-133.

²⁸ Zweig (2023), p.46.

²⁹ Zweig (2012), p.135, and p.140.

³⁰ Zweig (2023), pp.51-52.

³¹ See pp. 52-55 in Zweig (2012).

³² Zweig (2023), p.18.

³³ See Jeff Schuhrke (2024) *Blue Collar Empire: The Untold History of US Labor’s Global Anticommunist Crusade*.

upward mobility for millions of white Euro-males, even as it excluded African Americans as well as women.

Zweig argues that upward mobility is limited by the structure of the U.S. economy. But the structure of the U.S. economy is itself embedded within the structures of the larger capitalist *world system* that the U.S. State played a central part in shaping after 1945. Zweig writes that “the nation and its state have become the overarching identity that has rooted and activated or constrained the individual”³⁴. Doesn’t identifying with the nation-state promote forms of patriotism that undermine international working class solidarity? Zweig’s analysis does not engage with the effects of interstate rivalries and interenterprise competition in which the U.S. nation-state continues to play a leading role. The dialectical relations central to Zweig’s method of understanding the material world unfold within the global political economy, and they shape domestic American politics. U.S. militarism and U.S. capitalism are also dialectically related; they are mutually constitutive. U.S. foreign policy promoted military-industrial complexes as well as the U.S.-led world economic boom. That boom came to an end in the late 1960s and early 1970s in large part because competition from European and East Asian business enterprises squeezed the profitability of big U.S. manufacturing businesses. Corporate manufacturing profits continued to be squeezed by declining rates of return from reinvestments in “hot” wars in East Asia. The genocidal war in Vietnam produced a legitimacy crisis of the U.S. ruling class. As the U.S. deindustrialized in the late 1970s and beyond, the U.S. economy became increasingly deregulated and “financialized”, marked by a long and sustained switch from capitalist investments in productive manufacturing-based industries to investments in stocks and bonds in financial markets. This long switch, and the multiple financial crises that punctuated the decades leading up to the 2007-8 financial meltdown, underlies all those unproductive activities that Zweig denounces, like “the increasingly arcane filigrees of financial derivatives, currency speculation, and commercial activity that undermine the ability of the economy to improve living standards while concentrating wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people”³⁵. The long-term effects of this “financial expansion” during the 1980s and beyond³⁶, were borne by workers across the world, including those in the U.S. in the forms Zweig refers to – “wage cuts, erosion of pension benefits, and government cuts in social safety net programs” – that ‘reflect the power of capital to reduce the expected standard of living’ of workers, and to increase the share of surplus appropriated by capitalists³⁷.

The support of the AFL-CIO for U.S. militarism during the Cold War decades immensely alienated all those struggling for civil rights, women’s rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. U.S. military involvement in the Vietnam War (1964-1976) and union politics allied with that involvement, profoundly divided American workers along the lines of class, race, and gender. U.S. union density dropped to an all-time low at less than 10% of the workforce. Zweig points to a profound “moral failure” in a movement that “focuses only on the injuries of class”, and “ignores injuries of racism

³⁴ Zweig (2023), pp. 154-155.

³⁵ Zweig (2023), p.46.

³⁶ See the pathbreaking text by Giovanni Arrighi (1994) *The Long Twentieth Century*, for an exposition of the dialectics of ‘material expansions’ and ‘financial expansions’ over the longue duree of historical capitalism.

³⁷ Zweig (2023), p.81.

and sexism”. A strategic defeat results from this moral failure. “If working class organizations neglect the insults of racism and sexism, women and minorities who insist upon justice for themselves may build identity movements that disregard the working class standing of most women and minorities. Those movements will then be less effective in winning anything for working women or working class minorities, and less useful as allies to workers’ organizations”³⁸. Looking at the record of such moral failures within the union movement, Zweig insists: “The *labor* movement must be bigger than the *union* movement and organize beyond it”³⁹. A bigger labor movement has to be clear about what *values* should guide it, values that must intersect with values attached to diverse identities of the working class.

IV: Intersections of Class Politics and Identity Politics

Zweig argues that *values* bear a “class stamp”. He writes that “our choice of values carries with it the empowerment of one class or another”. Progressive movements must connect values – like mutual aid, respect for the dignity of each person, individual responsibility toward the public good, and a commitment to minimizing the suffering of working-class people – with the policy platform they advance⁴⁰. Progressive organizers must respect those they seek to organize; and remain answerable to them. These values guided the Poor People’s Campaign initiated by Reverend Martin Luther King in 1968; and they inform the call for “moral revival” that animates his followers today. Zweig demonstrates how religion is dialectically related with larger class struggles in society. Some religious traditions like liberation theology are important carriers of *moral* values like “the preferential option for the poor”. These values often conflict with the values of institutionalized religion. It takes strong class consciousness to assert that salvation is *not* a result of individual piety but requires collective participation in movements against ‘sinful’ social structures. It takes class consciousness to see that poverty *happens* to the working class, and not to some marginal “other” demonized by the media as “the underclass”⁴¹. Practitioners of liberation theology readily recognize this social fact. Those who place an exaggerated emphasis on capitalist individualism ignore the dialectical unity between individual and society. They prefer to see only a collection of separate individuals rather than our social connectedness or the class character of capitalist production. “Only when it comes to class identity have so many people learned to withdraw into the sanctity of individuality.... Class consciousness at the top is accepted.... Class consciousness among workers is a threat to capitalist class rule”⁴².

Do values carry *only* a class stamp? Is it enough in short, to uphold anti-capitalist values? Are there not strong values associated with the anti-racist identity of African Americans that demand our respect? Are there not strong values associated with the anti-patriarchal identity of the feminist movement? Are there not strong values associated with the struggles of the LGBTQ+ movement against oppressive heterosexual norms? Aren’t these values incommensurable? Isn’t it the task of progressive movements to *unite* these *different and incommensurable values* that working people uphold in their diversity of belonging to race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality? Identity-based

³⁸ Zweig (2012), pp. 134-135.

³⁹ Zweig (2012), p.140.

⁴⁰ See Zweig (2023), p. 30; p.149.

⁴¹ Zweig (2023), pp.4; 51; 140. See also Zweig (2012), pp.89-92 in the superb chapter, “Looking at the Underclass”.

⁴² Zweig (2023), p.155.

movements are struggles against multiple structures of oppression in society, struggles that coexist with struggles against the class-based structure of oppression. There isn't a hierarchy among the different structures of oppression. Capitalism draws upon patriarchy: and Patriarchy accommodates itself to capitalist values. Capitalism draws upon Racism: and Racism benefits from Capitalism. There is a symbiotic relationship between these structures of power rather than a hierarchy. This has the strategic implication that progressive movements should reject *any* hierarchy in the identities that intersect and combine to resist structures of power. If there is a hierarchy of identities it can only promote unproductive tension. Zweig is aware of this when he writes: "This tension between class and 'identity politics' is perhaps the most important and difficult dynamic that progressive politics has to navigate"⁴³. Looking back at the powerful intersectional Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020, Zweig wants to *recreate* with understanding, patience, daring, and strength of purpose, such a powerful *intersectional* movement⁴⁴.

How do we do this? Don't we need "a nuanced understanding of the experiences of different constituencies", in order to navigate progressive politics in such a way that issues of class, race, ethnicity and gender reinforce one another rather than being pitted against each other⁴⁵? In his earlier work, Zweig famously claimed that "working class politics cannot be a substitute for identity politics based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. To be most effective, working class politics needs to complement and incorporate these other movements"⁴⁶. How is this to happen? Does making capitalism into a master concept strategically resolve these tensions?

Progressive politics is complicated, Zweig writes, because class and race are "mutually determined, yet at the same time distinct, with ethnic issues drawn into the dynamics as well". Class and gender are also "mutually determined" yet again distinct⁴⁷. To claim that class, race, ethnicity and gender are mutually determined and yet distinct is to admit that each of these structures of oppression are *relatively autonomous* and *intertwined*. There is no hierarchy of oppression! So why do I see some ambiguity in Zweig's analysis of intersecting oppressions?

Race, for instance, Zweig writes, is an instrument of social control directed at all working people, white and black. Zweig calls for a dialectical understanding of race and class by citing Adolph Reed: "Class – as an expression of location within the political economy – is the framework in which race attains meaning"⁴⁸. Zweig does *not* tell whether he agrees or disagrees with Reed's claim. Nor does he elaborate on the implications of Reed's claim. If class is indeed the framework within which race attains its meaning, then race dynamics do *not* operate independently of class; in fact, they are determined by class dynamics, because it is class dynamics that give meaning to our understanding of how race works.

This is surely problematic. Zweig admits that neither race nor class "exists in the U.S without the other entwined in it". But his implicit endorsement of Reed's claim that "class is the framework in

⁴³ Zweig (2023), p.52.

⁴⁴ Zweig (2023), p.9.

⁴⁵ Zweig (2023), p.189.

⁴⁶ Zweig (2012), p.133.

⁴⁷ Zweig (2023), p.189.

⁴⁸ See Zweig (2023), p.167 for the quote from Reed.

which race attains meaning” is as problematic as is Stuart Hall’s claim that “race is the modality in which class is lived”⁴⁹. Zweig writes: “Race and class are separate and different of course, but they constitute a unity of opposites”⁵⁰. If race and class are separate and different structures of oppression, then each has a *relative autonomy* of its own. The concept of “racial capitalism” coined by Cedric Robinson, emphasizes how “the modes of domination of capitalist society are completely enmeshed with those of white supremacy, and that the two axes of power are not only relatively autonomous and equally significant, but also intertwined and mutually constitutive”⁵¹. Racial dynamics are both intertwined with capitalist dynamics and remain relatively autonomous in relation to class dynamics. Zweig himself highlights how the mutual determination of race and class has operated in the U.S at least since the beginnings of settler-colonialism⁵². So, neither race nor class constitute a superior structure of oppression. Yet it is difficult not to get the impression that Zweig implicitly privileges class dynamics over race dynamics when he doesn’t criticize Reed’s claim that race *only* finds its meaning within the framework of class.

Consider also Zweig’s brief, all too brief, remarks on the relationship between class and gender⁵³. Zweig writes that gender experiences shape class dynamics just as class dynamics shape gender relations. He explains how the piecework undertaken by women in households may be seen as the earliest form of relations between wage-labor and capital. He underlines the unpaid value of household labor of women⁵⁴: this includes multiple forms of affective labor. The struggles of women, Zweig reminds us, were central to the evolution of the U.S labor movement. Zweig also draws attention to what Frances Beal calls “triple jeopardy”, the travails associated with being a woman who is also black and poor⁵⁵. Black and lesbian feminists formulated this theory of triple oppression to emphasize the connection among racial, gender, and class oppression. The concept of “racial patriarchy” is one way to articulate this connection. So is the concept of “patriarchal capitalism” or “racial capitalism” along with the claim that the eradication of one form of oppression requires the concurrent dismantlement of all forms of oppression⁵⁶.

These considerations lead me to another question. How do we make sense of Zweig’s insistence that the *common ultimate source* of suffering from injustices of class, race, and gender ‘stems from its *domination by capitalism*’⁵⁷? If this is indeed the case then capitalism, not patriarchy or race or ethnicity lies at the root of all our ills. I find this puzzling when I read Zweig’s admission that “Racism and male supremacy existed *before capitalism*. They do not require capitalism for their perpetuation”⁵⁸. Yet Zweig frames capitalism as a master narrative even as he admits: “The

⁴⁹ Stuart Hall (1977) ‘Pluralism, Race and Class in Caribbean Society’, cited in Hardt (2023:155).

⁵⁰ Zweig (2023), p.167.

⁵¹ Hardt (2023), p.153, refers to Cedric Robinson’s (1983) *Black Marxism*.

⁵² Zweig (2023), p.168.

⁵³ Zweig (2023), pp. 179-186.

⁵⁴ The total value of unpaid household labor in the US amounted to \$1.5 trillion in 2018; for the world economy it amounted to nearly \$11 trillion in 2021 (Zweig 2023: 180).

⁵⁵ Zweig (2023), p.184.

⁵⁶ I am indebted to two chapters written by Michael Hardt for some sharp insights: chapter 11, “Feminist Articulations: A Theory of Intersectionality *Avant la Lettre*”; and chapter 12, “Strategic Racial Multiplicities”, in Hardt (2023), *The Subversive Seventies*, Oxford.

⁵⁷ Zweig (2023), p.189: my italics.

⁵⁸ Zweig (2023), p.197: my italics.

interplay of class, race, and gender does *not* create or involve a hierarchy of interests. We cannot rightly say that one is central, and the others subordinate or peripheral”⁵⁹. These admissions must be read alongside another: “At any one time or place, one or another of these oppressions and resistances will be most central to the long-term growth of movement power. We all have to analyze *the situation* and negotiate relations among the various parts of the movement and the timing and sequence of the movement’s focus to maintain coherence”⁶⁰. I would prefer to replace what Zweig calls “the situation” with the concept of “the conjuncture”. The conjuncture is the present moment in which all the structural contradictions appear in concentrated form.

I would like to recast Zweig’s claims in a sharper manner. In the first place, there is no hierarchy between Capitalism, Racism, and Patriarchy as intertwined *structures* of oppression. These are articulated structures of power, each of which adapts to the other to reproduce oppressive relations in the entirety of society. In the second place, the best strategy for intersectional progressive movements is to prioritize forms of resistance in relation to the form of structural oppression that dominates the *conjuncture*. The anti-capitalist movement, the anti-racist movement, the anti-patriarchal movement are relatively autonomous movements. Despite their relative autonomy, these movements can intersect strategically to articulate an adequate form of resistance against the particular (dominating) form taken by structural oppression during a specific conjuncture. In the current conjuncture dominated by murderous ethnic cleansing of Palestinians and relentless attacks on immigrants, progressive movements must surely make anti-racist politics the primary focus of their collective energies.

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⁵⁹ Zweig (2023), p.197: my italics.

⁶⁰ Zweig (2023), p.198: my italics.

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