Class as Moral Injury

Jacob Blumenfeld

Everyone today denies the existence of class, thus proving its enduring power. Class, it is said, has disappeared as a political category, as an economic indicator, as a cultural marker and as a specific identity. Classes have been integrated, recuperated, coopted, in short: *surpassed*. And yet economic inequality is skyrocketing, rents in the world's major cities are unaffordable, social programs are being cut, people are working more hours for less pay, and prices are rising faster than wages. Nevertheless, union membership is declining, political parties rarely support working class policies, and neoliberalism seems more triumphant with every crisis. As some Friends put it, "everywhere proletarianized individuals, nowhere the proletariat" (Friends of the Classless Society 2007). To put it sharply, if class has disappeared, then why is it still being so ruthlessly attacked?

There is a simple answer to this question: it is not class that has disappeared, but consciousness of it. In other words, what has vanished is any political power tied to the category of class. For some, this fact disproves the classical Marxist assumption that capitalism itself organizes the working class into a political power. Since class is no longer a meaningful pole around which people organize their social or political self-understanding, the argument goes, class theory itself must be false. Culture, status, ethnicity and identity are now the most important sources of collective self-understanding and thus the starting point for political change.

But this "farewell to the working class" story was never really accurate (Gorz 2007). On the one hand, capitalism never organized workers along class lines, but always in political and social *processes* that went hand in hand with *proletarianization* (Thompson 1964; Eiden-Offe 2023). On the other hand, class is not just an identity, but a socially determined position based on social wealth and power, whether one is aware of it or not. However, given this objective position, class can be *experienced* (or non-experienced) in very different ways. Un-

derstanding the specific mediation of class requires much more than an objective assessment of income levels.

I thus take class seriously as a meaningful part of our social life, even in times of its supposed eclipse. But I do so in a negative way, because it is not the positive identity of class that needs to be defended and explained, but the negative experience of class as a *moral injury to the status of being human*. This does not mean denying class as an objective-structural position, but understanding and describing class as an experience of suffering. It is thus more about class from the first-person perspective, not from the third person. Class should not be understood *as identity*, as this already presupposes the normative content of class as something positive. Rather, class should be treated as a non-identity, as an experience of lack or a lack of experience.

In what follows, I first discuss my understanding of class as structural vulnerability, i.e. the experience of being subjected to arbitrary power. I then discuss class as a kind of injury, both physical and moral. Using the short story of factory worker and autodidact Paul Mattick, I show how class mutilates human beings in both their bodies and souls (Mattick 1924; Endnotes 2024). I then draw out some conceptual consequences of viewing class as a specifically moral injury. Finally, I deduce what a negative theory of class might mean and what options exist for dealing with class as a moral injury. I argue that recognizing class as a moral injury means acknowledging the immanent demand to overcome it.

1. Class and Misrecognition

What is class? Class can be understood as a passive state or as an active process, as a sociological category based on income, or as a Marxist concept based on one's relation to the means of production (Eiden-Offe 2023: 5–10; Wright 2023). Class can be conceived, for example, through a theory of habitus or a theory of conflict, through statistical measures or through theories of recognition (Bourdieu 1984; Dahrendorf 1959). I argue however that class must be understood as an index of vulnerability to the economic power of others, i.e. to social domination.[1] Where one stands on the class spectrum depends on how

1 See Cicerchia 2021, 616–7: "Class is a condition of collective vulnerability among individuals to both shared constraints and to one another." For more recent debates on

vulnerable one is to being dominated and how much power one has to dominate others. To be dominated, in terms of *class*, is to be subject to the arbitrary power of personal and impersonal sources that determine access to the means of social reproduction. Control and ownership of social wealth form the class structure, mediated by legal property relations. Class relations within this structure become antagonistic through competition both vertically (between capitalists and proletarians) and horizontally (between capitalists and capitalists or between proletarians and proletarians) (Cicerchia 2021: 617; Mau 2023: 123–142; Brenner 2007: 58).

When I speak of class, I am primarily referring to the "class structure" as a specific social structure that determines access to and control over labor and wealth as well as the ability to satisfy one's needs. In other words, class names the real objective structure that restricts one's own sphere of freedom insofar as one must behave in a certain way in order to reproduce oneself. In bourgeois society, this means acting according to market imperatives. This class relation can only be cushioned *by owning property* or *through collective action*.

When I speak of the *moral injury* of class, I refer to the subjective and intersubjective experience of wage-dependent proletarians, whether they work or not. I mean those whose class position renders them systematically vulnerable, insecure, precarious and unfree, as well as subject to disregard, disrespect and injury – both physical and moral. The owning class also operates within this structure, but its ownership of wealth or productive assets shields it from the vulnerability suffered by the wage-dependent, who are forced to adapt their will to heteronomous ends in order to successfully fulfill their tasks.[2]

As mentioned earlier, I take class as a condition of *systematic vulnerability* to the economic power of others who may be owners of land, managers of capital or providers of wage labor. So what is the wrong of class? The usual answers run along the lines of theories of *inequality*, *exploitation* and *injustice* (Cicerchia 2021). These perspectives assume that the harm of class can be mitigated by balancing class relations between those who live off income and those who live off

class theory, see Mattick 2018, 191–218; Mau 2023, Chibber 2022, McCarthy and Desan 2023, Roberts 2023.

2 There is another specific psychological use of the term "moral injury", similar to PTSD, which refers to exposure to harmful events that transgress one's moral boundaries, for instance, in war. The philosophical meaning, although not always clearly defined, is different. I use the term moral injury here specifically to explore the inner damages of class to a person's sense of self.

wealth, reducing exploitative practices in the workplace, providing more benefits for workers, and making access to jobs, income, and wealth more equitable; the strategies that emerge from these theories are therefore concretized through labor law, income tax, equal opportunity policies, and social welfare. In short, they take the existence of classes as a given and, building on this, seek to reduce the harm caused by exclusion, discrimination or exploitation through processes of social recognition and legal protection.

A better world, however, is not a world of better classes, but a world *without* classes. It is not about having a certain class status recognized, but about overcoming classes. What does that say about class? It is not simply an unequal distribution of access to resources but, as I put it, a moral injury to one's sense of self through being subordinated collectively to the arbitrary power of the market. Class is an affront to one's status as a self-determined subject, as one worthy of respect and demanding recognition. It is an injury to the person who wants to contribute to society, but can only do so by destroying their own dignity and eroding their own character (Sennett and Cobb 1972).

Recognition theories and class theories face different challenges. Recognition theories often reduce class to an identity that should be recognized within a framework of progressive rights (Honneth 1995; 2024; Dejours et al. 2018). Class theories, on the other hand, criticize recognition as a superficial affirmation of identity that does not address the material conditions that underlie class structures (Fraser and Honneth 2003; Coulthard 2014). Yet, both theoretical perspectives are needed to understand how class can be experienced as a form of misrecognition, while at the same time demanding more than just recognition in order to improve it (Felski 2021; Scott 2022). In other words, the working class, characterized by vulnerability and dependency, cannot simply strive for recognition within the class structure without reinforcing the conditions of its own subordination. Therefore, the notion of class as moral injury aims at the abolition of class rather than its recognition.

As an existential condition of human life under capitalism, class shapes the self-image of individuals, their relations to others and the possibilities for collective self-determination (Eribon 2019; Louis 2017). Class is therefore not only an expression of inequality or exploitation, but a system of domination that can tear apart the moral fabric of human life. Its paradox consists in being a moral injury and at the same time being constitutive of the relationships that make modern subjects who they take themselves to be. Class both forms and deforms subjects in equal measure. The experience of submitting to the abstract imperatives of an economic structure that determines access to the means of social

reproduction is both liberating and humiliating. It enables the ability to reproduce oneself and at the same time restricts the freedom to determine oneself.

Class is a moral injury insofar as it is fundamentally a form of misrecognition. And yet recognition is not the answer. Why is this so? Because the problem is not *classism*, i.e. some prejudice against workers as a class, but the condition of class itself. It cannot therefore be a question of morally recognizing the working class as dignified, but of abolishing the class structure that reproduces the domination of some over others. Recognition usually means recognizing one's own identity or status as worthy of respect. On the one hand, the struggles of the working class for labor rights are a paradigmatic case of a struggle for recognition. On the other hand, recognizing workers as a class does not remove the cause of the moral injury to human dignity that sparked the struggle for recognition in the first place. In contrast to other demands for status recognition, there is no equal reconciliation between the class of labor and the class of capital. For the aim of class struggle is not to remain a worker, but to escape from being a worker, to escape from subjugation to the personal-impersonal systemic constraints of the economy, to overcome them and finally to abolish them. The secret of proletarian class identity lies in the fact that it tends towards its own abolition and not towards its self-constitution (Eiden-Offe 2023:12). Class is thus both a paradigm for the theory of recognition and a refutation of it.

2. The Physical Injury of Class

Class inflicts both physical and moral injuries, institutionalizing relations of vulnerability and dependency in everyday economic practices. The wage-dependent class is separated from the means of reproduction and therefore vulnerable to systemic injuries by those who control access to their conditions of survival. These include physical injuries – such as accidents at work – and moral injuries resulting from the denial of autonomy. The physical toll of class is vividly illustrated in a 1924 short story by Paul Mattick called *The Conveyor Belt! A True Story from a Factory*, in which the death of a worker is portrayed as the result of the priority of profit over human life (Mattick 1924; Roth 2015; Endnotes 2024). In this short story, a factory worker named Müller is about to take his break from work, "three minutes to twelve", and is looking forward to lunch with his wife and children when the foreman asks him to repair one of the hissing engines. The foreman's decision to delay shutting down the engine for three

minutes encapsulates the moral injury of class. What happens next is tragic: while he is standing on a ladder repairing the engine's flywheel, Müller's wife and children come in to have lunch with him. He smiles, makes a silly move, and falls into the engine's belt—getting brutally crushed in front of his family.

> How sad and infinitely cruel this all was. Why these accidents, why all this, why these three minutes, these three minutes to twelve? Couldn't the engine have been turned off earlier, a wretched three minutes earlier? Three minutes set against a sea of blood and tears. A human being—a man who smiled, who loved, and this woman—how she cared and how she loved, and these children's laughter—these little outstretched arms, calling out: "Daddy, Daddy!" All this outweighs the three minutes, more, outweighs the entire world. But at three minutes to twelve, it had been too early to turn off the engine (Mattick 1924).

To be subjected to the rule of working time means to be injured by class belonging: physically and morally. The body is crushed by three minutes that could not have been shortened, the worker is denied the human dignity that grants him autonomy and time for his family. *Why these accidents, why all this, why these three minutes,* writes Mattick. Because, the story ends, "a law governs here, a harsh law that knows nothing of the real world: profit! It neither hears the whimpering of the wife nor sees the tears of the children. It knows nothing of this Golgotha of labour" (ibid). This is the law of value, the law that subordinates human desires to the whims of an impersonal god of money, whose will is carried out by human beings. Here the worker's life and labor are subjugated to the rhythm of the machine, making his humanity a dispensable by-product of efficiency. The tragedy is not an anomaly, but is part of the structural logic of capital. The experience of class is this: loss of control, loss of dignity, loss of freedom, loss of self.

The role of physical injury is also explored in depth in Nate Holdren's *Injury Impoverished* (2020), which catalogs the unquantifiable costs of industrial accidents: the mutilation of bodies, the grief of families, the despair of communities (Holdren 2020: 19–52). But these injuries are not just physical, they are moral ones too, that is, avoidable, intentional, and done without regard for the dignity of the worker. The worker's body, maimed by machinery, becomes a site of alienation, where the promise of dignity through work turns into the brutal reality of mechanized exploitation. Holdren cites William Hard's 1910 account of class injuries, *Injured in the Course of Duty:*

> We cannot translate into dollars and cents the infinite torture, physical and mental, of America's 500,000 annual industrial accidents. We cannot capitalize the anguished leap of the workman's nerves under boiling metal. We cannot set a price upon the horror in the widow's heart when she carries to burial an oblong block of cold iron (ibid: 54).

What Holdren then documents is the process by which particular human stories of class injuries slowly become quantified into abstract statistics to be used by lawyers and economists seeking social reform. The initial outcry over working class injuries moves from seeking concrete recognition of moral suffering to accepting a form of justice based on monetary compensation.

Statistics from the International Labor Organization (ILO) show that the number of work-related deaths and injuries exceeds the number of deaths from wars and traffic accidents. Every year, an estimated 2.78 million workers worldwide die from work-related accidents and occupational diseases, while another 374 million workers suffer from non-fatal work-related accidents (ILO 2023; 2025). These international figures illustrate the extent of the physical damage that the normal functioning of capitalism causes to those suffering around the world, with the working class bearing the brunt of dangerous conditions. But the moral injury to class goes deeper than the physical injury itself; it lies in the systematic disregard for the life and dignity of the worker.

In an interview from 1916, disability activist Helen Keller explained her conversion to socialism by studying the industrial causes of seemingly natural misfortune:

> I had thought blindness a misfortune. Then I was appointed on a commission to investigate the conditions of the blind. For the first time I, who had thought blindness a misfortune beyond human control, found that too much of it was traceable to wrong industrial conditions, often caused by the selfishness and greed of employers. And the social evil contributed its share. I found that poverty drove women to a life of shame that ended in blindness (Keller 1916).

The fragmented body of the worker becomes a site of physical and moral vulnerability. This vulnerability is not accidental, but systemic and reflects the imperative to extract maximum value from labor. The reduction of the human being to instruments of production represents a profound moral failure that degrades both each individual worker and society as a whole. Yet this degradation

goes hand in hand with a form of resilience: many workers adapt, persevere and are proud of their work. This resilience, however, serves to maintain the system that exploits them. When there is no other way to satisfy one's needs, work becomes both a cause and a cure for suffering. The fact that this experience is not unique, but plays out according to class position, means that it is not individual but structural. Class as a condition means that one has no choice but to return to the source of one's misery, be it in one place or another, for one boss or another, without the possibility of exit.

Our bodies are not immediately given as complete wholes but are products of a social achievement aimed at being treated and recognized as a person (Bernstein 2005: 315). As Helmuth Plessner argues, we both *have* a body and *are* a body, and the specifically *human* form of life is shaped by the struggle to navigate this ambiguity day in and day out (Plessner 2019: 271–2; Plessner 2020: 34–5). Physical injuries fragment our selves, undo us, alienate us, but not all physical injuries are moral injuries. If someone steps on my hand, it can be an accident, or it can be a way to demean my status. So why are class and related physical injuries and accidents moral injuries? Because, at a certain level of analysis, they are not accidents but the result of a systemic vulnerability to physical injury, and thus it is the structure of class dependency that leads to injury. If capitalism is, according to Søren Mau, "the institutionalisation of insecurity", then dealing with class injury means dealing with the fundamental insecurity of one's market-dependent existence (Mau 2023: 130).

3. The Moral Injury of Class

In their ethnographic analysis of working class subjectivity, Sennett and Cobb refer to the wounds that penetrate deeper than the flesh into the soul of the proletarian subject as "the hidden injuries of class" (Sennet and Cobb 1972). They examine how class undermines human dignity and autonomy in deep and existential ways. Working people experience shame, powerlessness and resentment, but paradoxically internalize the validity of the hierarchical system that humiliates them. The erosion of long-term values such as loyalty and commitment further corrodes individual character. For Sennett and Cobb, the question of class raises fundamental issues of freedom and dignity. To belong to the working class means not being able to determine one's own destiny, but to be determined by the arbitrary decisions of others. Only by submitting to the class structure is one free from becoming superfluous. The paradox of class,

for Sennett and Cobb, is that workers may feel ashamed of their status and resentful of those who are more educated and above them in the social hierarchy, while at the same time believing that their own lower status is justified. The resentment towards those who look down on them is offset by the belief that such humiliation is justified by their own class position. If a person's ability is seen as a sign of their individual worth, then their lack of class mobility is proof of their own worthlessness (ibid: 53–109). Through a close analysis of workers' class subjectivity, the possibility of class transition is both desired and feared; for not to be a worker is to lose respect for oneself (ibid: 18–30). In a sense, there is no alternative to feeling injured, since the very levers of class transition such as education and knowledge further degrade workers' own dignity. To protect themselves from vulnerability to misrecognition and disrespect, to moral injury, according to Sennett and Cobb, workers can only cut social ties, retreat into the sphere of the private and sacrifice social life.

The double harm of class lies not only in the constant vulnerability to physical and moral injury, but also in the fact that one finds meaning in the very structures that harm them. Workers' pride in their work and their identification with the product of their labor reflects a form of recognition in which one's humanity is simultaneously affirmed and denied. This duality underscores the central paradox of class: the conditions of recognition are also the conditions of non-recognition (Dejours et al 2018; Jaeggi 2014). The moral injuries of class is not an accidental harm, but a condition of existence under capitalism. Because of their class position, wage-dependents are not only deprived of recognition, but also subjected to a form of misrecognition that reduces them to mere instruments of production. According to Sennett and Cobb, this misrecognition manifests itself in the stigmatization of manual labor, in the devaluation of workers as uneducated or unskilled, and in the pervasive sense of powerlessness that accompanies wage dependency. Yet, this condition is not passively endured, but actively reproduced through the internalization of class norms. Workers strive for the ideals that marginalize them and seek recognition in a system that systematically denies them their dignity. This paradox of recognition – in which the desire for dignity leads to deeper subjugation – is central to understanding the moral injuries of class. The workers' striving for respect and recognition, whether through hard work or social advancement, only reinforces the structures of domination. Class recognition becomes a double-edged sword: it offers dignity while reproducing the conditions of indignity.

In The Corrosion of Character, Sennett continues the examination of the injuries of class by following the lives of the children of the workers from the pre-

vious study (Sennet 1998). This time the analysis takes place in the 1990s, when the neoliberal economy has become dominant and with it the idea of flexibility of place, time, self and activity. The flexibility of proletarian children, as well as their internalized flexible relationship to values, norms and beliefs, further harms them as respectable subjects; it is hard to strive for recognition when one must constantly betray one's worth to meet the needs of the market. According to Sennet, the neoliberal economy prevents individual wage earners from developing a coherent narrative of self and identity, as they must constantly adapt their values and preferences to market pressures. This drive undermines the possibility of fixed values and meaningful experiences. Norms such as loyalty, purpose and commitment are obstacles when flexibility is necessary to remain competitive. The market creates an objective and subjective sense of permanent catastrophe: lives change and are thrown into disarray, not because of nature, but because of society itself. Disaster is internalized, instability normalized. Flexibility enables economic success while weakening one's character beyond repair.

4. What is a Moral Injury?

Sennett and Cobb's account of the hidden injuries of class, alongside other important sources such as the young Hegel, Mead and Marx, forms one of the inspirations for Axel Honneth's account of the struggle for recognition (Honneth 1982). For Honneth, the indignity of working class life, as described in his recent book *The Working Sovereign*, calls for new forms of recognition (Honneth 2024). The struggle for recognition is constitutive for social identity, especially for workers. The difference I want to emphasize in contrast to other critiques, such as Nancy Fraser's, is that the experience of the working class should be theorized not only as a struggle for recognition of class identity, but as a demand for abolition (Fraser and Honneth 2003). This can only be understood if we see class as a *limit* to freedom and not a condition of it.

Moral injuries are harmful because they deny recognition of a person's moral worth (Honneth 1997; Hampton 1999; Bernstein 2005, 2015; Congdon 2016; Renault 2017). These injuries take the form of physical harm, humiliation, or disregard of moral accountability. In the context of class, moral injury is not just an interpersonal wrong, but a systemic condition. For Honneth, moral injuries are interpersonal harms that deny recognition of some salient moral features of another person. Moral injuries are thus wrongs based in

misrecognition, in harming one's normative self-conception through physical or verbal means. According to Honneth, "it is not solely the bodily pain as such, but the accompanying consciousness of not being recognized in one's own self-understanding that constitutes the condition for moral injury here" (Honneth 1997: 23). For something to be considered a moral offense and not just a mere misfortune, it must include "the aspect of recognition being withheld or denied" (ibid). That is to say, "the characteristic feature of moral injuries consists in persons being disregarded in aspects of their positive self-relation—whose intersubjective acknowledgment they are fundamentally dependent upon" (ibid: 24). For Honneth, the three paradigmatic forms of moral injury are physical harm, disregard for the person's moral responsibility and, finally, humiliation and disrespect. Regardless of the specific form, however, "the core of moral injuries is located in the refusal of recognition" (ibid: 25). This denial of recognition is fundamental, a result of the fact that human beings are constitutively intersubjective creatures who are vulnerable to harm because their self-identity is based on recognition from another person.[3]

Honneth argues that moral injuries arise from misrecognition when individuals are denied acknowledgment of their sense of self. For Honneth, recognition is not just a formal affirmation of identity, but a fundamental condition of self-realization. The denial of recognition through the repetition of the class structure thus represents a profound moral injury that corrodes one's normative self-conception. While Honneth's framework helps clarify the form that moral injury takes in regards to class, it fails to recognize the very source of the moral injury in class itself. While recognition is necessary, it cannot resolve the structural contradictions of class. To recognize class means confronting the conditions that make such recognition impossible.

Another account of moral injury comes from J.M. Bernstein, who links moral injury to the failure of recognition that sustains personal independence (Bernstein 2005; 2015). For workers, the class structure means constant vulnerability and dependence, leading to a profound alienation of the self. Bernstein's emphasis on the interdependence of physical and moral integrity underscores the systemic nature of class-related harm. The degradation of the body – through unsafe working conditions, inadequate health care and exploitative labor practices is inextricably linked to the moral degradation of workers. But Bernstein also points to a deeper paradox: the very intersubjective conditions

3 Honneth's argument here develops from a reading of the young Hegel. For a different perspective on the young Hegel and recognition, see Blumenfeld 2024, 170–246.

that degrade the self contain the possibility of solidarity and resistance. For Bernstein, the dignity of the person is precisely that which emerges through forms of recognition, through which the intact, self-moving body comes into being: the dignity of the self is the reflective articulation of the moral integrity of the body. Because we are bodies, injuries to our bodies are injuries to the self. We remain radically dependent on our social environment in order to maintain our personal independence. This dependence signals our constitutive vulnerability. The recognitive constitution of self-consciousness aims to demonstrate the internal, conceptual and empirical connection between bodily vulnerability and social dependence. For Bernstein, moral injuries arise through loss of trust, humiliation, emotional devastation and denial of our dependence on others. They manifest as a violations of another person's dignity through non-recognition, reduction of the self to the body, existential helplessness and loss of trust in the world.[4] "Moral injuries are injuries to one's standing or status that become actual through modes of physically treatment" (Bernstein 2015: 15). This criterion, in my account, can be applied not only to actions, but also to social conditions and relations, with the condition of class belonging being paramount.

The injury of class can also be understood as a form of *epistemic injustice* in which members of a dependent class are not recognized as credible knowers (Hänel 2024). Their knowledge of work, society and politics is disregarded, reinforcing their subjugation and devaluation. The epistemic marginalization of workers, for example, reflects a broader ideological framework that privileges the perspectives of the propertied class and silences or marks as non-intelligible the voices of those who produce social wealth. This marginalization is not complete, however, as workers develop their own insights rooted in lived experience that can challenge dominant narratives. This tension between marginalization and resistance is central to the epistemic dimensions of class.

The moral injury of class cannot be remedied by recognition alone. Unlike identity-based demands which reaffirm group belonging, the wrong of class points to the need for abolishing the source of harm, that is, class belonging itself. Indeed, recognition within the existing framework risks reinforcing the very conditions it seeks to address. The working class is often misunderstood as

4 See Bernstein 2015, 15: "Loss of trust in the world occurs through the recognition that I am absolutely dependent on the other for my standing as a self or person, even for myself, and hence that my existential helplessness is not a mere potentiality, but a present and now ever-present actuality. I am devastated."

pitiable, less intelligent or ideological, and this view reflects middle-class meritocratic ideologies that fail to capture the systemic constraints that drive workers' actions. Rights-based recognition, while valuable, often formalizes mutual indifference and abstracts from the particularity that sustains misrecognition. Yet ideology also contains contradictions: the narratives that justify class domination also reveal its fragility. By exposing these contradictions, dominated classes challenge the normative foundations of their own subjugation.

Class is not only a descriptive but a normative category: it denotes the moral wrong of being collectively subject to vulnerability of domination. Workers in particular are subject to the mute compulsion of economic relations and conform to norms that undermine their dignity and autonomy. Those who are not wage dependent are still forced to bend their own will to abstract economic imperatives in order to succeed. But they have managed to cushion or shield their vulnerability through property and thus act as bearers of class rule rather than its subjects. The wrong of class here lies in its systemic domination, not just in its inequality or exploitation. However, this domination is never complete, but is always contested, both materially and ideologically, and this very contestation points to the possibility of overcoming class, even within the constraints of the present.

5. Conclusion: From adaptation to abolition

Rectifying the moral injury of class demands moving beyond individual adaptation and incremental reform. Strategies such as acquiring property, exercising voice, or demonstrating loyalty may offer temporary relief, but they miss the root cause: the class structure itself. Following Albert Hirschman's framework, individuals can respond to class domination through exit (striving for upward mobility), voice (advocating for change) or loyalty (adapting to existing conditions) (Hirschmann 1970). However, these reactions are restricted by systemic forces that structurally limit the individual's ability to act. Exit through upward mobility, for example, often means complicity with the very system that perpetuates class-based harm; while voice and loyalty are often undermined by capitalist pressures themselves. Nevertheless, these strategies – while limited – demonstrate the potential for collective action. The failure of individual action points to the need for solidarity. A response adequate to the magnitude of the harm would entail collective action of solidarity with the aim of abolishing class society through a form of transformative socialization

(Blumenfeld 2023; 2025). This presupposes strengthening class power in order to end class itself, like a game that would abolish its own rule (Theorie Communiste 2011: 132). Solidarity, both as a principle and as a practice, challenges the atomizing tendencies of capitalist forms of life and reclaims the collective agency necessary for systemic change. Yet solidarity itself is fraught with contradictions, as it must navigate the tensions between individual autonomy and collective responsibility, between immediate demands and long-term goals (DuFord 2022). However, these tensions do not weaken solidarity, but rather enrich its potential as a transformative force. Class as a moral injury is a systemic affront to dignity, autonomy and self-determination. It cannot be eliminated through recognition alone, but requires the abolition of class itself. This paper calls for a paradigm shift from recognition to abolition, emphasizing collective action and social transformation as the path to overcoming the moral injuries of class. This shift is not straightforward, for it requires confronting the paradoxes and contradictions that define class itself. And it forces us to recognize that the struggle for human dignity is inseparable from the struggle to abolish the conditions that block that dignity in the first place.

References

Bernstein, J.M. (2005): Suffering Injustice, in: International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 13.3, 303–324.

Bernstein, J.M. (2015): Torture and Dignity, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Blumenfeld, J. (2023): Expropriation of the expropriators, in: Philosophy and Social Criticism, 49.4, 431–447.

Blumenfeld, J. (2024): The Concept of Property in Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, New York: Routledge.

Blumenfeld, J. (2025): The Socialization Debate, in: Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, 46.1, 93–122.

Bourdieu, P. (1984): Distinction, Cambridge.

Brenner, R. (2007): Property and Progress, in: Wickham, C. (ed.), Marxist History-Writing for the Twenty-First Century, Oxford, 49–111.

Chibber, V. (2022): The Class Matrix, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cicerchia, L. (2021): Why Does Class Matter? In: Social Theory and Practice, 47.4, 603–627.

Congdon, M. (2016): Wronged beyond Words, in: Philosophy & Social Criticism, 42.8, 815–834.
Coulthard, G. (2014): Red Skin, White Masks, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Dahrendorf, R. (1959): Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Dejours, C., et al. (2018): The Return of Work in Critical Theory, New York: Columbia University Press.
DuFord, R. (2022): Solidarity in Conflict, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Eiden-Offe, P. (2023): The Poetry of Class, Leiden: Brill.
Endnotes (2024): The Young Mattick, https://endnotes.org.uk/dossiers/the-young-mattick.
Eribon, D. (2019): Returning to Reims, London: Penguin.
Felski, R. (2021): Recognizing Class, in: New Literary History 52.1, 95–117.
Fraser, N. and Honneth, A. (2003): Redistribution or Recognition? London: Verso.
Friends of the Classless Society (2007): 28 Theses on Class Society, in: Kosmoprolet 1, https://kosmoprolet.org/en/28-theses-class-society
Gorz, A. (1982): Farewell to the Working Class, London: Pluto.
Hänel, H. (2024): Epistemische Ungerechtigkeiten, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Brill.
Hampton, J. (1999): Defining Wrong and Defining Rape, in: Burgess-Jackson, K. (ed.), A Most Detestable Crime, New York: Oxford University Press.
Hard, W. (1910): Injured in the Course of Duty. New York: The Ridgway company.
Hirschman, A. (1970): Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Holdren, N. (2020): Injury Impoverished, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Honneth, A. (1982): Moral Consciousness and Class Domination: Some Problems in the Analysis of Hidden Morality, in: Praxis International, 2.1, 12–25.
Honneth, A. (1995): The Struggle for Recognition, Cambridge: MIT Press.
Honneth, A. (1997): Recognition and Moral Obligation, in: Social Research, 64.1, 16–35.
Honneth, A. (2024): The Working Sovereign, Cambridge: Polity.
International Labour Organization (2023): A call for safer and healthier working environments, https://www.ilo.org/publications/call-safer-and-healthier-working-environments

International Labour Organization (2025): Statistics on safety and health at work, https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/
Jaeggi, R. (2014): Alienation, New York: Columbia University Press.
Keller, H. (1916), Why I Became an IWW, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/keller-helen/works/1910s/16_01_16.htm
Louis, E. (2017): The End of Eddy, London: Harvill Secker.
Mattick, P. (1924): The Conveyor Belt!, https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/paul-mattick-the-conveyor-belt-1924
Mattick, P. (2018): Theory as Critique, Leiden: Brill.
Mau, S. (2023): Mute Compulsion, London: Verso.
McCarthy, M. and Desan, M. H. (2023): The Problem of Class Abstractionism, in: Sociological Theory, 41.1, 3–26.
Plessner, H. (2019): Levels of Organic Life and the Human, New York: Fordham University Press.
Plessner, H. (2020): Laughing and Crying, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
Renault, E. (2017): Social Suffering, London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
Roberts, W.C. (2023): Class in Theory, Class in Practice, in: Crisis & Critique, 10.1, 248–262.
Roth, G. (2015): Marxism in a Lost Century, Chicago: Brill.
Scott, R.L. (2022): The Limits of Recognition, in: Angelaki 27.6, 21–30.
Sennet, R. (1998): The Corrosion of Character, New York: W. W. Norton.
Sennett, R. and Cobb, J. (1972): The Hidden Injuries of Class, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Theorie Communiste (2011): The Present Moment, in: Sic 1, 95–143.
Thompson, E.P. (1964): The Making of English Working Class, New York: Vintage.
Wright, E.O. (2023): Classes, London: Verso.