

Liberal Class Compromise: A Devil's Bargain

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‘Of course there’s class warfare,’ US billionaire Warren Buffet once quipped in *The New York Times*, ‘but it’s our class that’s making war, and we’re winning.’¹ This truism of respectable middle-class politics reflects the class-consciousness of the Haves just as surely as it (perversely enough) reflects their desire to suppress it in the collective awareness of the Have-Nots. As a project of social control, class warfare must target the minds of the enemy for capture as surely as it targets our bodies and labour-power.

This is achieved through the ideological project of class compromise, by offering opportunities for upward class mobility in lieu of collective mobilisation to answer the class warfare of the billionaire class. In the short term, the opportunity to jump on the bandwagon of upward mobility, to collude with the Warren Buffets of the world, and abandon the challenge of class struggle, might seem the better choice. The reality in the long run, however, is that class collaborationism involves an unannounced Faustian Bargain that absolutely guarantees unintended consequences for trusting the Devil.

Class, the elephant in the room of political respectability

The class divide between Haves and Have-Nots has always been the elephant in the room of western liberal democracies. From the very first moments of the rise of the modern world order after 1492, Western ruling classes have sought to mask the class divide with nation-building mythologies and the identitarianism of the national tribe or clique. Nevertheless, their make-believe is continually belied by the fact that they cannot help themselves but prey on their own economically. Haves appeal for national loyalty to ensure the stability of the class system, but their own loyalty extends no further ultimately than their own self-interest. We wave national flags and then go to work to be paid less in wages or salary than the value of our work by our national bosses, or subsidise their future dividends by raising new generations of workers to adulthood completely for free (as a service to the nation, naturally).

National politics then remains the preserve of national moneyed cliques. Indeed, as syndicalist historian Rudolf Rocker has pointed out,

*Liberalism and Democracy were pre-eminently political concepts, and, since the great majority of the original adherents of both maintained the right of ownership in the ‘old sense, these had to renounce them both when economic development took a course which could not be practically reconciled with the original principles of Democracy, and still less with those of Liberalism. Democracy with its motto of “equality of all citizens before the law,” and Liberalism with its “right of man over his own person,” both shipwrecked on the realities of the capitalist economic form. So long as millions of human beings in every country had to sell their labour-power to a small minority of owners, and to sink into the most wretched misery if they could find no buyers, the so-called “equality before the law” remains merely a pious fraud, since the laws are made by those who find themselves in possession of the social wealth. But in the same way there can also be no talk of a “right over one’s own person,” for that right ends when one is compelled to submit to the economic dictation of another if he does not want to starve.*²

¹ www.nytimes.com

² Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*

This core paradox of class predation within the national community has by no means ever prevented Haves from developing an ideological project to mask and protect their illegitimate monopoly power as a class. Nor has it prevented them from articulating this project in liberal rather than conservative terms—to substitute the carrot for the stick in the broader project of class control, in other words.

While liberalism challenges political autocracy, it retains the economic autocracy of class hierarchy and, in vernacular terms, works to roll class hierarchy turds in egalitarianism glitter, to take the edges off to make class hierarchy less obstructionist to the ambitions of diverse communities to upward mobility. At the same time, middle-class liberalism adopts the pretence that it is qualitatively different to middle-class conservatism on the basis of what it believes, rather than what it does. It uses the same method of defining itself on the basis of who it excludes against its class enemies to the left, trying to position itself as the respectable adults in the room between childish extremes in either direction.

In any event, whether liberally- or conservatively-minded, the point remains: the moneyed aristocracy of the Haves works continually to co-opt the resistance to their despotism as a class any despot knows to expect from those they subjugate (the fact of despotism as such is hardly altered on depending on whether it is exercised by an individual or a class). As a highly class-conscious ruling elite, Haves know that, faced with the reality of social division by class, the rest of us are faced with two choices: class struggle, or class compromise—to fight, or to switch, in other words.

In the face of the challenges of counter-hegemonic class struggle, as they know that we can be tempted to the hamster wheel of work with the carrot of upward class mobility; in lieu of resistance, they allege, we might just as easily switch sides. We are invited to identify with our class overlords, and to pull ourselves up the class ladder by our bootstraps such that, in lieu of defying and resisting their haughty power and their class monopoly over resources, we might collaborate and be complicit in the pursuit of self-interest to the exclusion of all other considerations—up to and including the capacity of the planet to sustain life.

Inviting subalterns to switch rather than fight

Whether class collaboration and switching sides to serve a Haves world is the wise choice the Haves who control popular discourse makes it out to be remains open to question on any number of counts. Nevertheless, the invitation to switch rather than fight remains. We are invited to attach ourselves to the world of class hierarchy and societies of Haves and Have-Nots set perennially against themselves, perennially lying to themselves and each other about their true values and motivations. Confronting and defying the cultish single-mindedness of a collectively-paranoid, ‘neoliberal’ market hegemony, that which sees its own demise in any kind of ideological heterodoxy, involves legitimate challenges.

Indeed, it guarantees reprisals from a violent, vicious knee-jerk reactionary ruling class whose power has always been built on conquest and the will to dominate all life, while self-aggrandising *fait accomplis* of colonial conquest as an alleged benefit to the victims (‘civilising the savages’), and the moral improvement of the conquered—understood to the last to be architects of their

own defeat and subjugation, thanks to the combination of the ‘might makes right’ mentality and the ‘just-world fallacy’ to blame the disenfranchised for existing.³

In contrast to punishment for nonconformity, the invitation to class collaboration offers definite material rewards (as long as Haves can make an endless-growth economy work on a finite planet, at least). There are opportunities and paydays to be had for internalising the ruling-class values of the Haves and calling them our own, just as there are disincentives and punishments for sticking to our guns and asserting ourselves as Have-Nots. The tribal control logic of ‘sympathy for me, punishment for thee’ adds a moral dimension to ideological conformity and class collaboration as complicity with ruling class despotism is rewarded with active demonisation, exclusion and Othering of outsiders whom the national ingroup defines itself against.⁴

As the consumer culture of the Haves world invites us to trade individual and class autonomy as Have-Nots for disposable income and consumption power, so the benevolent paternalism of class rule invites us to submit to overlordship and class monopoly for the moral betterment of humanity through the renewal of the national community via ritual purging of nonconformity and moral deviance. The national clique or tribe operates then on the mentality that the truth of an idea is determined by the number of people who believe it. If, in buying into this kind of groupthink, we have to concede the political legitimacy of billionaire, Have-class monopolies over resources on the grounds of it being assumed by the Have-class as a feature of their born-to-rule status, we can at least be bribed with crumbs from the table of entitlement and privilege by being allowed to be members of the respectable moral elect. We can help to reproduce the state and the ruling class by becoming agents of their pious moralism.⁵

This is no small temptation to class collaboration and collusion with the billionaire Have-class in carrots like material rewards for conformity and moral rewards for the active demonisation and exclusion of outsiders. In the affluent global North, as unaccountable transnational corporate monopoly power eclipses that of national governments, and oceans of corporate dark money reduce the latter to wholly-owned subsidiaries, the nominal opposition is dominated by historically unreconstructed personality cults who choose defeat over evolving ideas beyond whatever serves the marginal status and personal ambition of their cult leaders. That the working class opts for making the best of things under a system that preys on them is, on the face of things, hardly difficult to understand, not least if nominal paths of resistance offer the same (or worse) in the name of transcending predation on principle.

The devil is in the details

Class collaboration, and serving a Haves world as a Have-Not remains, however, a classic devil’s bargain. The irony of property relations is that the ruling class of Haves are slaves of their precious property—properties themselves of their own material attachments even, as the cult-image of the commodity-form and its fetish serves as the foundation for the cult ideology of free-market capitalism. The devil’s bargain of class collaboration is summed up perfectly in the Laborite aphorism, “never let the perfect be the enemy of the good”—‘perfect’ in this usage substituting for ‘principled’ and ‘good’ in this instance substituting for ‘whatever serves the interest

³ Ince, O. U. (2018). *Colonial capitalism and the dilemmas of liberalism*. Oxford University Press.

⁴ Reynolds, J. (2017). *Empire, Emergency and International Law*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Gilles Dauve, classautonomy.info

of the Haves.’ While this creed adopts pretences to not letting ideology blinders get in the way of practical effectiveness, it embraces ideological blinders in fact in unspoken prior assumptions associating whatever serves the Haves-friendly status quo with the good, and whatever does not with its enemy.

Where the construction of systems of meaning and belief are concerned, this is the ontological foundation for the bounded rationality of control cults. The invitation to climb aboard the rat-race bandwagon of upward mobility is also an invitation to accept and internalise the benevolent paternalism of class-based autocracy, to accept the unspoken assumptions underwriting the class power of the Haves, and expediting the class war of billionaires like Warren Buffet. Not least of these is the coercive control logic of Tough Love, that the harms of economic autocracy and monopoly despotism are a net benefit to the victims. It seems a particular irony of liberal feminism that it adopts the coercive control logic of class monopoly for the purposes of expediting upward mobility, and then being disappointed that patriarchal capitalist class hierarchies continue to produce domestic violence at epidemic rate.

This is far from the only unintended consequence of making our peace with class hierarchies, and allowing ourselves to be bribed and bought off for the sake of dodging having to organise and act in defiance of them. It is however symptomatic of the unintended consequences, inherent to Haves-class liberalism, of attempting individual solutions to collective problems and the project of rolling class hierarchy turds in egalitarianism glitter. The pretences of liberalism to qualitative difference with its loyal middle- and upper-class conservative opposition are here belied by its loyalty to class-based autocracy.

This loyalty (in reality, obedience and servile conformity—capital is loyal to none other than self) has positively devastating unintended consequences ecologically in particular in light of the fact that the upward class mobility, as the liberal bribe for class collaboration, requires infinite planet for the endless-growth economy unlimited opportunities for personal social advancement depend on. As the glue of predatory extractivism and its class war on sustainability and the well-being and survival of future generations, in other words, class collaborationism is a sure guarantor of our ecological demise. It is what keeps us in debt trying to approximate the billionaire class, what keeps us serving the machinery of endless growth; while we hide behind our families as a reason to continue serving the man and imagining we serve ourselves, we abandon them in fact to the predatory prerogatives of the Haves-class and their class war.

We likewise spend our lives servicing dividends and the hoarding of trillions in offshore tax havens in places in Panama and the Cayman Islands. Leasing slaves like the car pool to reduce capital costs, rather than purchasing us outright, has long been understood as an obvious nod to sound business fundamentals, just as the extraction of surplus-value by paying less in wages than the value of the labour rented has long been understood as the exploitative and predatory core of the wage-relation. The class collaboration of Haves-liberalism assumes the justice of wage exploitation, just as it assumes the justice of class-based monopolies over resources, just as it assumes the justice of the autocratic hierarchies inherent to market capitalist social relations of production and reproduction—much less positively sacred social and class hierarchies, personal boundaries not so much, as a broader principle.

As left academics like Silvia Federici⁶, Val Plumwood⁷, Ariel Salleh⁸, Jason Moore⁹ and others have noted, however, the wage-relation exists, as Moore puts it, like islands of exploitation in an ocean of primitive accumulation—by which he means the unpaid and unrecognised labour of domestic care workers (i.e. parents) raising future generations of workers to adulthood completely for free. Our reward for jumping on the morality-policing and virtue-hoarding bandwagons of national cliques and respectable middle-class ingroups is subsidising those trillions in offshore tax havens by value-adding to future human capital by housing, clothing, feeding and educating our children as a public service to the national community in a for-profit economy. Welfare payments to support domestic care workers don't keep us above the poverty line, but they do constitute a further subsidy in the project of value-adding to future human capital (i.e. definitely not slaves, very definitely not slaves leased like the car pool).

As perhaps the primary example of the gaslighting and devaluing of subaltern classes, those of us subsidising tax havens in the Cayman Islands need to be made to feel that we are worthless unless we contribute slaves, and that our worth is based on our capacity to provide them. Competitive peer pressure ensures we police each others' value-adding to our common human capital; getting on the rat race bandwagon so that we might keep up with the Joneses ensures we're too busy to reflect on why we bother, or whether any of what we do actually makes us happy or fulfilled.

It is almost as through the opportunity to identify with our Haves-class overlords and collaborate with their class project is an opportunity to address the alienation we experience as disenfranchised subalterns within societies set against themselves by class division by abandoning selfhood and individuality entirely. Hiding from ourselves inside national cliques has, however, about as much chance of long-term success as trying to keep endless opportunities for upward class mobility alive by making an endless-growth economy work in a finite planet.

Class struggle is less punishing than unintended consequences of taking bribes and selling out

The devaluing of vital subsidies from domestic care labour to the production of dividends reflects the crucial importance of coercive control logic to the legitimacy of Have-class economic monopoly. The host must feel that they are worthless and powerless without the moral improvements of the predatory exploiter. They must not understand how deeply the parasite depends on them. Such is the DARVO logic of the domestic abuser and the imperialist alike. Coercive control is as much the basis for class warfare on the minds of the working class as it is for the alleged benevolent paternalism of the ruling class of moneyed aristocrats.

Within this framework, the bounded reality of the market fundamentalism cult necessarily stomps, where possible, class consciousness amongst the great unwashed subalterns and neofeudal peasantry. Like organised religion, the private empire of capital encourages dependency on power structures and the monopolist corporatist despots who lord at their apex. The neoliberal

⁶ Federici, S. (2004). *Caliban and the Witch*. Autonomedia; Federici, S. (2020). *Revolution at point zero: Housework, reproduction, and feminist struggle*. PM press

⁷ Plumwood, V. (2002). *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge.

⁸ Salleh, A. (2024). *DeColonize EcoModernism!*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁹ Moore, J. W. (2025). *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Verso Books.

wing of capitalist empire encourages us to externalise our self-belief and to invest it in the power of the national clique just as surely as the neoconservative and openly fascist. Just as in the case of abusers in private life, however, the token privileges to be gained from class collaborationism can only be had as long as we remain of instrumental use to billionaires, whose loyalty to the nation ends where their desire for dividends and mad power starts, and as long as the finite space of the Earth can sustain an endless-growth economy.

Closing ranks in the face of crisis appears historically to have been the tried-and-true method of survival for human communities writ large. Where human communities are set against ourselves by class divisions the dominant culture dares not name, class divisions respectable intellectuals dare not criticise lest they bite the hand that feeds their own class privileges and ambition, this approach to survival guarantees our demise as surely as tethering our fortunes to an endless-growth economy trying to work on a finite planet. In the face of the unintended consequences of the Devil's Bargain with the class enemy, we need not believe in the myth of benevolent paternalism, but only in our power as individuals thinking and acting for ourselves, as self-aware, class-conscious workers acting in solidarity to defend rights and advance interests. The rich class only wins the class war as long as the rest of us fail to understand how vital we are to them—much less the fact we don't need them at all, and hardly then need to compromise.

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