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Christopher Choong

Khazanah Research Institute

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Authors' email address: **Christopher.Choong@krinstitute.org**

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Summary

- Class analysis has received renewed attention after the Global Financial Crisis in 2007-2008 but many of the underlying class theories are derived from western, developed country contexts. These class theories would need to be critically evaluated, and potentially modified if they are to be relevant for understanding class inequalities in developing countries including Malaysia.

- Three dominant class theories are considered in this paper i.e., the theoretical modes of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu with a focus on their common features, namely, the construction of class with reference to economic capital in its national frame; the central relationship between the objective and subjective class domains; and the peripheral role of social mobility and the question of changing class locations.

- The changing nature of global capitalism suggests that capital, and consequently class, cannot be enclosed within a national frame. Instead, class has to be understood as embedded in mobile, cross-border capital. This is particularly applicable for a small and open economy like Malaysia, with dependence on foreign capital and high foreign ownership of corporate equity; and draws on global culture as a form of elite cultural distinction. Class inequalities need to be understood in terms of how capital operates and interacts across different economic scales in configuring class structures.

- The distinction of postcolonial national repertoire in many developing countries are driven by the impetus to create national unity to address the legacies of fragmented social groupings inherited from colonialism. The state forges national identities to the extent that other identities of class, race and gender have to take a backseat in the imagination of social boundaries and hierarchies. The case of Malaysia shows that the objective and subjective class domains is not as straightforward, and perhaps also not as persuasive, without accommodating competing racial and national repertoires shaped by its history of colonialism.

- The role of social mobility in dominant class theories should be given more weight. The case of Malaysia demonstrates that class positions and orientations depend on the types of social mobility and their interactions with one other, suggesting more complexed ways for social mobility to influence class formation and expressions. Social mobility has also resulted in the burgeoning of the middle class, a terminology that requires more unpacking to better understand class inequalities in Malaysia and the developing world.

Introduction

Class analysis seems to have survived the onslaught of post-industrial dismantling of industrial class structures, and postmodern individualisation of self, with class being back in vogue after the Global Financial Crisis in the late noughties (Atkinson 2015). While there are many competing notions of class, the influence of a particular class theory depends on the degree it adapts and speak to contemporary realities.

In this regard, I consider three theoretical modes of class analysis as "dominant" given their longstanding influence over time and broad applicability in multiple contexts: these are the theoretical modes of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu. Their theoretical paraphernalia are resilient and elastic enough to transcend the original contexts in which these theories were first formulated and have been stretched in different ways in their applications.

In this paper, I take a critical look at whether these theories are adequate for understanding class inequalities in developing country contexts, particularly the case of Malaysia. It should be noted, at the onset, that these theories also differ from each other in some fundamental ways. Nonetheless, these theories share some common, and arguably more foundational, threads that tie them together, and it is these foundational aspects which would be the focus of my analysis.

In narrowing and unpacking "developing country contexts", I look at Malaysia as a case study that exemplifies a country that is located in the Global South, shaped by a history of colonialism and have experienced rapid social mobility in recent decades. Malaysia's political landscape is going through seismic changes, culminating in the first change of government in May 2018[1] since obtaining independence from the British in 1957, with class emerging as an increasingly important factor in understanding voting behaviours (Gethin and Jenmana 2021).

Malaysia is also an open economy driven by export-led growth, and the volume of its international trade has consistently recorded above 150% of its gross domestic product (GDP) since the 1990s (de Micheaux, 2017)—pointing to interesting ways class formation would interact with global capitalism. Furthermore, Malaysia's embrace of global neoliberal capitalism combined with a developmental state model (Gomez 2009) has resulted in broad-based social mobility (Hawati, Jarud, and Jomo 2019), epitomising many other economies in East Asia (Birdsall et al. 1993; Gomez, Walter, and Zhang 2012). All these make Malaysia a pertinent case study of developing country contexts, but where relevant, I also draw lessons from other countries with similar characteristics.

In the next section, I expound on the common and more foundational threads of the dominant theoretical modes of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu, which would serve as the focus of my analysis. Based on this, I offer three critiques on why these theoretical modes are inadequate for understanding class inequalities in developing country contexts, namely the changing nature of global capitalism, the distinction of postcolonial national repertoires and the role of social mobility. These critiques are explained in more detail in the following three sections, articulating

[1] The new Pakatan Harapan government was subsequently replaced by the Perikatan Nasional government in March 2020.

their inadequacies not so much to reject these dominant class theories but to hint at productive ways these theories can be modified and expanded if they are to be used in the developing world. The final section concludes with some discussions on the significance and implications of these arguments.

Common features in the class theories of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu

The first common thread that links the class theories of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu is the construction of class with reference to economic capital in its national frame. This does not mean that these theoretical modes are content with theorising only within national boundaries, nor that they do not have more universal ambitions in extending their theoretical claims beyond a particular national context, but it does suggest that these theories are underpinned by the nation-state as the fundamental unit of analysis in articulating how economic capital operates.

This is clear in the dualistic class structure of Marx i.e., the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which are classes constructed based on how they relate to the national means of production, or more specifically, their ownership of capital in the national economy. These national class entities become the basis for class solidarities across the world, particularly the global proletariat struggle against the global bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels 1967).

Weber differs from Marx in locating class within the realm of market exchange rather than relations of production, explaining class divisions as something shaped by the skills, qualifications and assets one brings to the market economy. However, even these economic resources and market dynamics are conceptualised within a national frame (Wright 2005; Atkinson 2015), and this inclination towards the national is evident in the neo-Weberian Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) occupation-based class scheme used in the United Kingdom (UK) today, a scheme based on a national occupational hierarchy and employment status (Savage 2015).

While it can be argued that the theoretical principles of the EGP class scheme have been used to develop supranational-level classifications such as the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC), a system consistent with and can be operationalised into ILO's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) scheme, these internationally harmonised classification systems are ultimately still based on "national entity" as the basic unit of analysis, designed with the objective of facilitating "cross-nationally comparative research" (Connelly, Gayle, and Lambert 2016; Christoph, Matthes, and Ebner 2020). This means that the national frame remains fundamental, although the occupational units have been harmonised across countries for the purposes of comparative research.

Bourdieu conceptualises the sufficient possession of economic capital as providing distance from everyday urgencies for people to cultivate and transmit cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984, 55), a class theory derived from the French context, centring a national frame in articulating how the different types of capital work. More recently, a body of work has emerged to construct a new social class scheme in the UK based on Bourdieu's notions of economic, social and cultural capital, decentring the occupation-based lens of the EGP scheme (Connelly, Gayle, and Lambert 2016). While it is certainly possible to extend this work beyond the UK and harmonise these categories

across countries, it still faces the same issue as the EGP scheme in that it is based on the nation-state as the basic unit of analysis.

The second common thread is that these theories postulate a rather central relationship between the objective and subjective class domains—in other words, there is an integral connection between class structure, and class practices and experiences.

Marxist theory is permeated with the notion of class consciousness to depict the "subjective awareness people have of their class interests and the conditions for advancing them" (Wright 2005, 21), while those who do not possess such awareness are said to have "false consciousness". Although Marx himself did not use these exact terminologies (Atkinson 2015), the base (material structure) and superstructure (ideological interests) framework is a key theoretical device used to link the objective and subjective domains.

Similarly, Weberian class theory does not reject class consciousness outright, but states that it is not automatic and depends on other conditions as well. These conditions are similarities in status—to bestow life chances and enable social closures, and proximity in social mobility trajectories, or ease of movement between certain type of jobs (Wright 2005; Atkinson 2015).

As for Bourdieu, the social space is configured by the volume and composition of capital, but capital's legitimacy, power and meaning are contested in the symbolic space. The concept of homology is then used to link people's location in the social space and the subjectivities they express in the symbolic space. While Bourdieu's theory does allow for the interplay between structure and agency in different fields, his homology thesis is still paramount, especially when subjectivities are interrogated at the level of modus operandi (Jarness 2015).

The third common thread is that these theories do not foreground the question of changing class locations due to social mobility and how it is experienced. Social mobility is not an essential feature in the theories of Marx, insofar as we understand social mobility as changing class locations of different individuals or households. For Marx, social mobility takes on a qualitatively different meaning because it involves movement of the entire society when the dualistic class structure is demolished (Rutkevich and Filippov 1973). Hence, social mobility of individuals without transforming existing class structure is seen as problematic.

As for Weber, as explained above, similarity in social mobility trajectory is theorised as contributing to class formation (Sørensen 1991) and neo-Weberian have also applied Weberian theory to study social mobility (Wright, 2005), perhaps most notably in the Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations (CASMIN) project (for examples, see Brauns and Steinmann 1999; Wong 2010). However, how the theory has been applied to study social mobility should not be conflated with the theorising of social mobility in class analysis itself. In Weberian theorising, class is conceptualised as a bounded, static category in which individuals move through and across without any rupture to their multi-locational class subjectivities (Friedman 2016).

Bourdieu incorporates social mobility in his theory as the third dimension constituting the social space, alongside the volume and composition of capital (Atkinson 2015). Even so, people's practices and inclinations in these new class locations are often viewed as being pulled back and moderated by their habitus, a durable disposition cultivated from people's original class

locations. Therefore, the force of social mobility on class subjectivities is still limited in Bourdieu's overall theorising, given his stronger emphasis on the habitus rather than social mobility (Friedman 2016).

The changing nature of global capitalism

At the end of World War II, colonial capitalism was gradually phased out, amid many former colonies obtaining independence and embarking on their own development projects. Nonetheless, capital continues to assert itself under various permutations of imperialism, of which the most prominent is the advent and eventual domination of global neoliberal capitalism. The ideology of neoliberal capitalism was actively and consciously promoted by economists such as Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman, establishing the influential Mont Pelerin Society in 1947.

The neoliberal ideology gained further political clout in the global mainstream when the powerful Thatcher-Reagan combination embraced it on the world stage in the 1980s, propelling it to be the prevailing ideological framework governing global capitalist development ever since (Hickel 2017). This ideological framework is premised on a particular rendition of economic growth, one that is underpinned by deregulation, privatisation, liberalisation, limited state, competition and free market. Global institutions built around these neoliberal principles induce and support a form of economic capital that is increasingly global in character, profusely moving capital across national borders to search for new markets, new factors of production and new sources of profits.

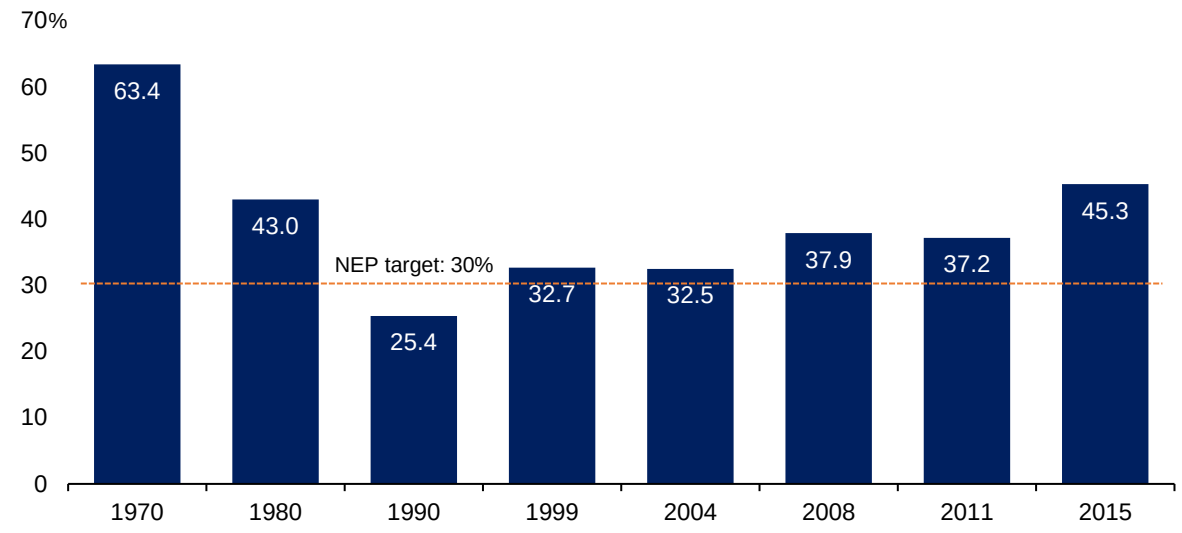
Hence, the changing nature of global capitalism, encapsulated in neoliberal ideology, poses an evident problem for class inequalities in developing country contexts, especially for countries with open economies. The economic capital that constitutes class is likely to have a significant portion of capital invested from abroad, whether through foreign direct investments (FDIs) or foreign portfolio investments. The owners of capital may well be people residing in foreign countries, most likely from the Global North, but maintain control over how economic capital operates in the Global South. In this way, foreign ownership and control of capital in developing country contexts challenges the salience of a national class hierarchy when economic capital is increasingly assuming a global character and being structured into sophisticated joint holdings between foreign and domestic players.

This is clearly seen in the case of Malaysia, where the country has relied heavily on foreign capital via its FDI-led strategy to drive export-oriented growth since the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. The FDIs were initially focused on the electronic industry, but with increasing FDI inflows from China since 2013, foreign capital has also spread to industries such as mining and real estate (de Micheaux 2017). While FDI as a percentage of GDP peaked in the 1990s, it still constitutes a substantial share of Malaysia's gross fixed capital formation (de Micheaux 2017), coupled with many incentives still in place to attract foreign capital despite mixed evidence of FDI's contributions to Malaysia's technological upgrading ambitions (Rasiah 2010; Felker, Jomo, and Rasiah 2013).

At the same time, foreign ownership of corporate equity in Malaysia has been increasing in recent years, recording a significantly high rate of 45.3% in 2015, higher than the 43.0% reported in

1980 and the 30.0% ceiling established in the NEP, as part of the practice of setting corporate equity ownership targets in the country's race-based affirmative action (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2019). See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Foreign ownership of corporate equity in Malaysia, 1970-2015



Source: (Lee 2021)

The thrust of my argument is not that there should be a distinct class theory for Malaysia and developing country contexts, but that we need to go beyond (not against) a national articulation of class to theorising how capital operates and interacts across different economic scales in configuring class. While there are some Marxist theorists who have taken off in this direction e.g., Immanuel Wallerstein's "world systems theory" and Leslie Sklair's "transnational capitalist class" (Atkinson 2015), it still suggests that these dominant theories are inadequate in their classical forms and would require significant updating if class in developing country contexts is to be understood as embedded in mobile, cross-border capital.

Therefore, understanding class beyond the national frame requires conceptualising capital not only as an "asset" but also as a "process"[2], in which class is not a static category but a set of social relations rooted in the logic and structure of capital. It is the transformation of capital into a specific set of global processes that warrants a rethinking of these dominant class theories in Malaysia and developing country contexts.

The changing nature of global capitalism can also be extended to the subjective realm, particularly the "cultural turn" in class analysis (Atkinson 2015). If economic capital enables the cultivation and transmission of cultural capital by virtue of providing distance from everyday urgencies, then the global character of economic capital must certainly be inflected upon the production of cultural capital at the global scale.

Üstüner and Holt (2010) has shown that Turkish elites import from western culture abroad to distinguish themselves from other local classes, but this has the unintended effect of engendering

[2] See Desan (2013) for a discussion on Bourdieu's notion of capital as a "thing" and Marx's notion of capital as a "system".

a more "scripted" form of cultural expression. Hedegard (2015) highlights how Brazilian elites appropriate global western culture by establishing transnational connections with selected local culture. While the appropriation of global culture as a form of elite cultural distinction is also applicable to Malaysia, it is not always centred on the west. Menon (2019)'s study demonstrates how cultural gatekeepers, such as cosmetic surgeons, set beauty standards according to an "authentic" and "natural" Asian aesthetic instead of conforming to western beauty ideals or a more scripted Korean look.

Thus, while it is important to draw from cultural globalisation in understanding social class formation along the traditions of Bourdieu, it is also pivotal to be critical of the western-centric core-periphery model and one-directionality in explaining cultural flows. Instead, global cultural flows can also circulate within developing country contexts, bypassing the Global North, and can be shaped by other identity markers such as race and gender (Lavie and Varriale 2019; Menon 2019). It is also entirely possible for elites in the Global North to nurture a scripted cultural practice from the Global South to present themselves as being cosmopolitan in outlook and orientation, extending the cultural omnivore thesis to the global scale (Friedman 2016; Khan 2012).

All the above reinforce the limitations of enclosing capital, and consequently class, within a national frame without also having a finger on the pulse of how global capitalism is reasserting itself in the 21st century, both in the objective and subjective domains.

The distinction of postcolonial national repertoires

The ways in which these dominant theoretical modes explain the relationship between the objective and subjective class domains, whether through Marx's class consciousness, Weber's social class or Bourdieu's homology, can perhaps be attributed to the shared premise that class is the singularly most rudimental axis in the production of lifestyles and subjectivities. However, this premise can be contested on the grounds that identity markers such as race, gender, religion and sexuality are equally as important.

On race specifically, Marxism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) disagree on whether class or race is the primary contradiction in capitalism (Cole 2009; Mills 2009). While both traditions have theoretical room for race and class to intersect, Marxism views class as the more foundational axis, placing race in the somewhat less definitive realm of the superstructure and ideological. On the other hand, CRT states that "no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity" (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), putting race and class on the same ontological level. Marxism anticipates an end to racial politics, predicated on the notion that racism can be eliminated when class consciousness is attained (Cheng 2013; Cole 2020). CRT, characterising racism as subtle, ordinary and perpetual (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), views the politics of race as something that has to be made explicit and continuously debated (Moreno Figueroa 2010).

The broader debate between the place of identity and class in society suggests that that while class is important, we cannot reduce the social world to class alone. Other identity axes such as race and gender have an important role to play in organising social life (Gilroy 1987; Skeggs 1997; Wallace 2017). To reduce all forms of subjectivity to class is also a neglect of how identities can

assign these experiences differently within a particular class and may offer a misleading one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to the issues of social exclusion, inequality and poverty (Goldberg 2015).

For example, prior to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the 1960s, racial identity was considered more important for Blacks in their struggles for social justice despite the clear existence of class stratification back then (hooks 2000). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, while class plays the important role of assigning whiteness along the continuum of "acceptable" and "non-acceptable" whiteness, Bhopal (2018, 27) qualifies this by saying:

> "While class is clearly important in the narratives of acceptable and non-acceptable forms of whiteness, I argue that the identity of being white – regardless of class – takes precedence over all other forms of identity. Intersectional identities come to the fore after whiteness makes it mark, the identity of whiteness is however, the first determinant of how groups are positioned, followed by other markers such as class, gender, religion, age and sexuality, among others."

The issue of having a narrow and somewhat deterministic focus on class is also taken up within cultural sociology in critiquing Bourdieu's notions of homology and habitus (Lamont 1992). Lamont (1992, 187-188) argues that people do not just draw from their "proximate" environments—that is their immediate socioeconomic structures or class positions—in how they understand and perceive the world.

Instead, people also acquire social and political acumens from more "remote" environments and broader features of society—what Lamont (1992, 87) calls "historically constituted national repertoires". Although Lamont does not reject the possibility of homology in linking the objective and subjective domains, she argues that this should not be generalised but be subject to empirical inquiries, with homology being a specific case among many other competing repertoires.

While all the above critical perspectives on class are derived from developed country contexts, I contend that these national repertoires have distinct manifestations and are constituted differently in the postcolonial history of many developing country contexts. The distinction of postcolonial national repertoire is largely driven by the impetus to create national unity to address the legacies of fragmented social groupings inherited from colonialism.

In this sense, social engineering by the state is a strong feature in many postcolonial developing country contexts, where the state forges national identities to the extent that other identities of class, race and gender have to take a backseat in the imagination of social boundaries and hierarchies. For example, in the case of post-apartheid South Africa, the repertoire of national unity has diluted how historical racial discrimination is taught, discussed and experienced in schools (Teeger 2015a; 2015b).

Similarly, in Malaysia, the repertoire of nation building, tinged with anti-communist sentiments, has shaped preference for race over class politics in the early days of independence (Weiss, 2020). While class formation persists, the stigmatisation of class has suppressed a more robust discourse on class and limited the development of a more intersectional approach to race and class. This has made it easier for racial categories to be essentialised, as convincingly shown in the

anthropological study of the Chinese diaspora by Nonini (2015), and racial myths to be perpetuated, as elegantly articulated in the sociological study of the native Malay by Alatas (1977).

Nonetheless, more recent forms of national unity project have also attempted to transcend race, expressed in the concept of Bangsa Malaysia[3] or slogan such as 1Malaysia (One Malaysia) (Gabriel 2015), bolstering the desire for a raceless social milieu. Hence, the case of Malaysia shows that the relationship between the objective and subjective class domains is not as straightforward, and perhaps also less persuasive without accommodating competing racial and national repertoires shaped by its history of colonialism.

The role of social mobility

As highlighted above, social mobility is not a key theoretical feature of Marx, and for Weber, social mobility is conceptualised as a static category. As for Bourdieu, social mobility is theorised as the "third dimension" in configuring class in the social space (Atkinson 2015), but more prominence is given to the moderating effects of the habitus. Thus, in the case of Marx, social mobility is under-theorised, while in the case of Weber and Bourdieu, the overall force of social mobility on class identity and action is underestimated.

This theoretical slant perhaps explains why social mobility is often conceptualised, perhaps somewhat uncritically, as a seamless and positive experience (Friedman 2016). Instead, Friedman (2016) delineates the concept of a divided habitus, or habitus clivé, to point out the more disruptive and negative experiences of social mobility. A person has to navigate the tensions between two simultaneously held class locations, where the disposition of the original class position would come into conflict with the more scripted habits and tendencies acquired through the new class position. Friedman (2016)'s work introduces the important concepts of "speed", "direction" and "distance" in refining our thinking on social mobility in the theorising of class along the lines of Bourdieu.

The speed, direction and distance of social mobility are especially pertinent when we consider the high growth economies in developing country contexts including Malaysia. Although intergenerational mobility has stalled at the global level, a number of developing countries in East Asia, Latin America, and Middle East and North Africa have seen compelling progress in their average social mobility (Narayan et al. 2018). These social mobilities are attained at a relatively short span of time and often underpinned by rapid economic growth. These countries leapfrogged in the direction of the Global North in terms of living standards, resulting in a sizeable reduction in the material distance between rich and developing countries. This is empirically demonstrated in the global inequality literature where the decreasing trend in global inequality is driven by between-country inequalities, fuelled by the rise of China and other populous developing countries such as India and Indonesia (Lakner and Milanovic 2013; Milanovic 2020).

In the same vein, Malaysia has attained rapid and broad-based inter-generational social mobility since its independence in 1957. Although social mobility is more discernible in the educational

[3] "Bangsa" is widely interpreted as "nation" although the term also carries the connotation "race".

and occupational spheres, they do not translate into mobility in terms of income, that is children do not earn more than their parents despite having more education and taking up higher skilled jobs (Hawati, Jarud, and Jomo 2019). This means that class positions and orientations also depend on the *types* of social mobility and their interactions with each other, suggesting more complexed ways for social mobility to influence class formation and expressions.

Moreover, beyond "actual" social mobility attained, the "prospects" of social mobility also contribute to how people invest in their class identities. Hung (2013) shows that it is the anticipation of social mobility that explains why Chinese Malaysians choose to invest in English and Chinese proficiency in schools. Therefore, it is the desired class position attainable via social mobility—and not just existing class locations, which define how people invest in their cultural construction of self.

The experience of social mobility in Malaysia and other high growth developing economies, pivoting around the speed, direction and distance of distinct trajectories, indicates that the force of social mobility may be stronger than the theoretical visions of Weber and Bourdieu. However, contrary to the notion of habitus clivé, simultaneously held class locations in developing country contexts can be reconciled by cultural repertoires of identity markers such as race and caste, as elucidated in the case of the Dalits in India who rely on the ethos of "paying back" to the community in inscribing themselves into the narrative of social mobility (Naudet 2008).

It is also possible that convergence with the Global North, underscored by state-engineered sentiments of nationalism, fosters collective ownership over social mobility achievements, despite the fact that some people are attaining social mobility faster than others. It suggests the kind of political trade-offs countries need to navigate in weighing between global and national inequalities as collective goals, and how inequalities at the national level can be legitimised (Milanovic and Roemer 2016).

Social mobility has also seen the burgeoning of the middle class in many developing country contexts. Nevertheless, the middle-class concept remains opaque, with definitions differing from one context to the next, and may not sit neatly within the class structures of these dominant theories. Hence, the middle-class label is argued to be a kind of "symbolic container" (Phadi and Ceruti 2011), hosting a broad range of identities substantially different from each other, configured by a range of factors including moral boundaries, gender and social engineering by the state (María Luisa 2008; Leshkowich 2012).

The diversity of middle-class identities challenges the direction of dominant class theorising. Dominant class theorising often starts from class structure as the base which then shapes class identities and compels class actions. However, the broadness of middle-class identities suggest that class actions could be the one refining class identities, and enacting class structures instead (Phadi and Ceruti 2011).

Similarly, social mobility has been accompanied by the growth of the middle class in Malaysia, defined using a combination of neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian traditions (Embong 2002; Aziz 2012). The Malaysian government pursued differentiated policies in creating the new Malay middle class through more direct affirmative action and the new non-Malay middle class through more indirect market-friendly policies (Embong, 2002).

However, Embong (2002) argues that there is heterogeneity within the new Malay middle class, likely to vary by region and state with respect to things like lifestyles, cultural practices and religious beliefs, thus affirming the symbolic container hypothesis. Embong (2002, p. 14) also states that "middle-class politics do not follow a straightforward equation of for or against democracy and civil society", also affirming the criticism on the direction in dominant class theorising, which stems from class structure to political action.

Conclusion

I have offered three arguments on why the dominant theoretical modes of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu are inadequate for understanding class inequalities in developing country contexts: the changing nature of global capitalism, the distinction of postcolonial national repertoires and the force of social mobility. At the core of my first argument is the premise that a theory of class cannot be divorced from a theory of capital. A relational conceptualisation of class, which I find more convincing, also requires a dynamic theory of capital that considers economic forces such as growth imperative and profit motive under different forms of capitalism.

My argument is significant not only in explaining how capital has evolved in reorganising production, markets and institutions at the global scale, but also in the broader implication of how capital would continuously adapt and change amid the pandemic—realignment of global supply chains, acceleration of automation and new working arrangements, among others. This is crucial because addressing class inequalities in developing country contexts would require an appreciation of the terms and conditions in which these different classes are incorporated into the global economy.

While my first argument emphasises the underlying workings of capital in critiquing these dominant class theories, I steer clear of economic reductionism through my second argument. I argue that the economic processes of capital are imbricated with other social processes e.g., race and gender, that are equally as fundamental in the construction of social classes. The significance of my argument lies in the distinction of how these social and economic processes intersect in postcolonial developing country contexts.

These intersections point to the importance of having sufficient granularity in data to construct and analyse intersectional social classes for the purposes of policy making. A more intersectional approach to addressing class inequalities would perhaps help to minimise the emergence of "counter-movements", which tends to happen when one form of inequality is pursued at the expense of another, as we have seen with the rise of populist politics in the west (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017; Mckenzie 2017).

Finally, my third argument draws attention and lends weight to the role of social mobility in dominant class theories. However, the significance lies in the fact that the converse is also true. In other words, the normative framing of class inequalities is consequential for how social mobility is conceptualised and pursued. A focus on equality of opportunity without changing class structure means that social mobility will be aimed at thrusting individuals and households along a certain pre-existing class hierarchy. The policy lesson then is to take heed of the subjective dislocations that could possibly come with changing class locations. However, if the focus is on

equality of outcome, then social mobility will tilt more towards respecting and augmenting distinct class trajectories and destinations in providing recognition to undervalued classes.

Which is the better option for Malaysia and developing countries remains a theoretical and empirical debate, but perhaps the most productive starting point for interrogation lies in the burgeoning and amorphous middle class in many of these contexts.

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