

Race, Capitalism, and Modality

“The dialectic form of presentation is only right when it knows its limits.”

—Marx, *Grundrisse*

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge in Marxist scholarship that has attempted to address the question of whether racism is necessary or contingent to capitalism. Call this the modal question. As some theorists have stressed, our answer to the modal question might depend on what exactly we mean by ‘racism’ and ‘capitalism.’¹ However, little attention has yet been given to what exactly we mean by ‘necessary’ and ‘contingent.’ In my view, this theoretical lacuna has prevented Marxist theorists from giving us a satisfactory answer to the modal question.

William Conroy has similarly noted that “this broad literature . . . remains plagued by a persistent failure to adequately establish what exactly is contingent and what is necessary in capitalist society.”² I agree with Conroy in this regard. Perhaps the clearest example of this is Nancy Fraser’s recent treatment of the modal question, in which she argues against both “proponents of necessity, who insist that nonracial capitalism is impossible” as well as “proponents of contingency, who hold that racism is not necessary to capitalism.”³ Rather, she wishes to claim that “racial oppression persists . . . in forms that are neither strictly necessary nor merely contingent.”⁴ But how could racial oppression be both not necessary and not contingent?⁵

In this paper, I aim to dissolve the existing disagreement in Marxist social theory over whether racism is necessary or contingent to capitalism (i.e. the modal question). To do so, I clarify and reconstruct three distinct but related notions of modality in Marxist social theory: transhistorical, structural, and historical. Using this refined conceptual apparatus, I contend that we can give clear and satisfactory answers to the modal question at a certain level of abstraction.

In Section 1, I will explain why Marxists might want an account of modality in the first place. In Section 2, I will present the possible worlds account of modality. In Section 3, I will use the possible worlds account of modality to reconstruct several modal notions in Marxist social theory. In Section 4, I will reconstruct some possible answers to the question of whether racism is necessary or contingent to

¹ Julian Go, “Three Tensions in the Theory of Racial Capitalism,” *Sociological Theory* 39, no. 1 (2021), 40; William Conroy, “Race, Capitalism, and the Necessity/Contingency Debate,” *Theory, Culture & Society* (2022), 2; Michael Ralph and Maya Singhal, “Racial Capitalism,” *Theory and Society* 48 (2019), 870.

² Conroy, “The Necessity/Contingency Debate,” 2.

³ Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022), 29.

⁴ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 29.

⁵ Perhaps Fraser wants instead to claim that the relation between racism and capitalism is not *just* necessary or contingent. This suggests that (1) there are a multiplicity of relations that hold between racism and capitalism, and that therefore (2) claiming that racism is either necessary or contingent to capitalism does not give a full picture of the true connections between them. Even if we accept these two claims, however, it is still possible to ask the question of whether racism is necessary or contingent to capitalism. Consider wage labour. Claiming that wage labour is either necessary or contingent to capitalism does not give a full picture of the true connections between them, but this does not mean there is no answer to the question of whether wage labour is necessary or contingent to capitalism. So, there is still something to be said about the modal question.

capitalism. In Section 5, I will compare my account with some existing accounts of modality and argue that my account is superior.

1. Motivating the Problem

Let me first address some worries that one might have about the modal question. One possible worry is that the modal question does not bear on political practice, and that if a kind of theorizing does not bear on political practice, then Marxists should not engage in that kind of theorizing. So, we should drop the question of whether racism is necessary to capitalism in favour of politically productive theoretical pursuits.

The problem with this objection is that (1) there are reasons to suggest that the necessity/contingency question does bear on political practice, and (2) we generally do not know whether it does bear on political practice until we understand the claims.

First, consider what necessity and contingency might entail. Michael Walzer, for example, claims that if racism is contingent and not necessary to capitalism, then “[t]hey don’t rise and fall together,” and similarly, if racism is necessary to capitalism, then perhaps racism does fall with capitalism. Second, dovetailing these political implications are also normative implications. Suppose that one is opposed to racism, and that you cannot have racism without capitalism. It seems like this is a *prima facie* case for the anti-racist to also be an anti-capitalist in addition to all the reasons one might already give for someone to be anti-capitalist.

Second, and more importantly, it is only once we have established a clear and informative account of modality that we can properly assess these claims about the political, normative, and theoretical implications of the question. For example, how could you derive any political, normative, and theoretical implications about whether capitalism is exploitative until it is clear what it means for something to be exploitative, and what capitalism is?

That being said, the notion of necessity (and modality in general) is so ubiquitous in the Marxist literature that it is surprising that it has remained so undertheorized. Indeed, one can find instances of the concept repeatedly throughout *Capital*. Let me give just two examples.

In a widely-cited passage of the third volume, Marx distinguishes between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom, writing of the realm of necessity that “[j]ust as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of production.”⁶ That is, there are some productive activities that are necessary to sustain all kinds of human societies. Contrast this with the realm of freedom in a possible post-capitalist society, which “really begins only where labour determined by necessity ... ends,” a realm of human activity which fosters the “development of human powers as an end in itself.”⁷

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 959.

⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 3:958-959.

Another well-known example is the second chapter of the first volume, in which Marx begins his derivation of the money-form: “[m]oney necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange, in which different products of labour are in fact equated with each other, and thus converted into commodities.”⁸ Here again, the notion of necessity is used by Marx, this time to draw a connection between the process of exchange and the money-form.

The state derivation debates in the 1970s brought forth similar questions about necessity — this time about “the necessity of the form of the state,” and what exactly that form consists of.⁹ Around the same time, Marxist feminists debated and continue to debate the necessity of gender oppression in capitalism.¹⁰

Debates within Marxist social theory about the modal status of various phenomena in capitalism have thus been fairly ubiquitous. Why not also racism as well? Further, if modal claims are so widely used in Marxist social theory, it seems apt to want to have a clear account of a concept that we have been using for so long and for so many theoretical purposes.

2 The Possible Worlds Account of Modality

In this section, I summarize a fairly standard possible worlds account of modality in natural language.¹¹ In the next section, I will use this to reconstruct some modal notions used in Marxist social theory.

Necessity, contingency, possibility, and impossibility are *modal* notions. They concern what can or must be the case. These terms are also interdefinable. Some proposition P is necessary when it is impossible that not- P , some proposition P is contingent when it is not necessary that not- P and not necessary that P , and so on. A semantic account of modality tells us what the modal notions of necessity, contingency, etc. *mean*. A fairly standard account of modality in natural language is Angelika Kratzer’s possible worlds account, which I will draw from here.¹²

Consider that the world might have been different. While you ate breakfast this morning (or did not), there is a way that the world could have been where you did not eat breakfast this morning (or did). There is also a way that the world could have been in which you are a famous poet. These ways that the world could have been are called *possible worlds*. Technically, possible worlds are maximally consistent sets of propositions. Suppose you ate breakfast this morning. The proposition that you are eating breakfast was true, along with many other propositions about the state of the world. There is a very large set of propositions, none of which contradict each other, that characterizes the state of the world when you ate breakfast this morning and a very large set of propositions that characterizes the state of the world if you had not eaten breakfast this morning.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 181.

⁹ John Holloway and Sol Picciotto, “Introduction,” in *State and Capital: A Marxist Debate*, eds. John Holloway and Sol Picciotto (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), 19.

¹⁰ See, for example, Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) and Cinzia Arruzza, “Remarks on Gender,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, September 2, 2014, <https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/02/remarks-on-gender/>.

¹¹ Angelika Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality” in *Modals and Conditionals: New and Revised Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹² See Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality,” 2012, although using possible worlds semantics to think about modality in analytic philosophy is much older than Kratzer’s account.

On the possible worlds account of modality, modal notions are quantifications of possible worlds. As a first approximation, we can specify our modal notions as the following:

- That a proposition P is necessary means that it is true in all possible worlds. It is true in all possible worlds that $2+2=4$, so it is necessary that $2+2=4$.
- That a proposition P is impossible means that it is true in no possible worlds. It is true in no possible world that $2+2=5$, so it is impossible that $2+2=5$.
- That a proposition P is contingent means that it is true in some but not all possible worlds. It is true in some but not all possible worlds that Joe Biden is the President of the United States, so it is contingent that Joe Biden is the President of the United States.

Now, consider the following statements:

(1) It is necessary that $2+2=4$.

(2) It is necessary that nothing travels faster than the speed of light.

For each statement, there is a different interpretation on which the statement is true. For (1), given the laws of logic, it is necessary that a proposition is either true or false. For (2), given the laws of logic, it is contingent that nothing travels faster than the speed of light. For (2), given the laws of physics, it is necessary that nothing travels faster than the speed of light. As a first approximation, it seems like we hold some set of facts ‘fixed’ in each case. Holding fixed the laws of logic, it is necessary that a proposition is either true or false, while it is contingent that nothing travels faster than the speed of light.

So far, we have only considered propositions that are necessary, contingent, etc., *in the broadest sense* (i.e. metaphysically necessary) by appealing to truth in possible worlds. But in natural language, we also use restricted kinds of modality, which tell us what is necessary, contingent, and so on, given a set of ‘fixed facts.’ For example, not everything that is physically necessary (that is, necessary given the laws of physics) is metaphysically necessary (that is, necessary in the broadest sense). To account for this, we can introduce the notion of the *modal base*.¹³

Worlds	Propositions
W_1	P Q R S
W_2	P Q R T
W_3	P S T U
W_4	P R T U
W_5	P Q T U

Figure 1. Example set of possible worlds

¹³ Kratzer, “The Notional Category of Modality,” 39.

A modal base is the subset of possible worlds which we are quantifying over when we use our modal notions. Assume, for example, that the set of possible worlds in Figure 1 is the set of all possible worlds. Within this set, there are five possible worlds, each containing four propositions.

In Figure 1, if we take the entire set of all possible worlds as our modal base, then P is necessary because it is true in all possible worlds in that modal base. But say we want to ask what is necessary in a more restricted set of possible worlds. In that case, we might take as our modal base all possible worlds in which, say, proposition U is true and ask what is true in that subset. The propositions which are true in this restricted modal base are P and T , so we can say that P and T are necessary with respect to that modal base.

From this, we can build our more restricted modal notions. A proposition P is ϕ ly necessary if it is true in all possible worlds which meet certain conditions C . The subset of possible worlds which meet C is called the modal base. So, each kind of necessity has its own modal base. For example, take physical necessity. A proposition P is physically necessary if it is true in all possible worlds in which the laws of physics obtain. In this case, the modal base contains all possible worlds in which the laws of physics obtain, and we call a proposition physically necessary when it is true in all of those possible worlds in its modal base.

Similarly, we can define restricted kinds of contingency and possibility with this method. P is ϕ ly possible if it is true in some possible worlds which meet certain conditions C , and P is ϕ ly contingent if it is true in some but not all possible worlds which meet certain conditions C .

To sum up, here are the important features of the account:

- that P is necessary means that P is true in all possible worlds.
- that P is necessary in a restricted sense, or ϕ ly necessary, means that P is true in a subset of all possible worlds, called the ‘modal base.’
- the possible worlds in the modal base are specified by the possible worlds meeting some set of conditions

3. Modality in Marxist Social Theory

In this section, I reconstruct and defend three restricted modal notions in Marxist social theory and explain some implications.

3.1 Three Notions of Modality

There are at least three notions of necessity in the Marxist literature: transhistorical, structural, and historical.

Transhistorical Necessity

P is transhistorically necessary if P is true in all possible worlds in which human societies exist.

Earlier, I mentioned Marx’s ‘realm of necessity’ from the third volume of *Capital*, in which he notes: “[j]ust as the savage must wrestle with nature to satisfy his needs, to maintain and reproduce his life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all forms of society and under all possible modes of

production.”¹⁴ The usage of the term ‘must’ implies necessity, which Marx then qualifies with “in all forms of society,” also implying a modal base of possible worlds containing the existence of human societies.

This transhistorical sort of necessity I am describing also figures implicitly in the first volume of *Capital*, which Søren Mau has recently called attention to: “[c]onsider, for example, the role of the ‘natural’ length of the working day (i.e., the fact that humans need to sleep) or the ‘natural’ basis of surplus value (i.e., the human ability to produce more than what is necessary for the reproduction of the individual). These are ... characteristics of human societies as such, independently of their historical variations.”¹⁵ These are facts necessary to all human societies, and thus they obtain in all possible human societies. But they are not necessary in the broadest sense of the term, these facts are necessary in virtue of a more restricted form of necessity, namely what I have termed transhistorical necessity.

With the next two modal notions, structural and historical necessity, I try to capture a common distinction given by Marxist theorists between capitalism as a type and a token.¹⁶ Capitalism as a *type* concerns the definition or essence of capitalism. Capitalism as a *token* concerns an existing realization or manifestation of capitalism. This distinction discloses two separate but related modal bases to which we might refer when we ask, “is *P* necessary to capitalism?”

In the former case, we are asking whether something exists in all possible worlds in which capitalism exists (given some definition of capitalism). In the latter case, we ask whether something exists in all possible worlds in which capitalism exists *in some historically specific form*, or more precisely, whether something exists in all possible worlds in which capitalism exists and some further historical conditions also obtain.

Structural Necessity

P is structurally necessary if *P* is true in all possible worlds in which human societies and generalized commodity production exist.¹⁷

So what is necessary to capitalism as a type, or what is *structurally necessary*, obtains in all possible worlds in which capitalism exists. This is the sort of restricted necessity we can find in parts of the first volume of *Capital*. Earlier, I mentioned Marx’s introduction of money: “[m]oney necessarily crystallizes out of the process of exchange, in which different products of labour are in fact equated with each other,

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 3:959.

¹⁵ Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023), 14.

¹⁶ This distinction has been made by others. See Erik Olin Wright et al., “Marxism and Methodological Individualism,” in *Reconstruction Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History* (London: Verso, 1992), 116-118; Go, “Three Tensions,” 42; Cinzia Arruzza, “Logic or History? The Political Stakes of Marxist-Feminist Theory,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, June 23, 2015, <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/06/23/logic-or-history-the-political-stakes-of-marxist-feminist-theory/>.

¹⁷ First, here I simply assume that the essence of capitalism is generalized commodity production, following Mau (2023, 13). For a defense of there being any definition that one can give for capitalism, see Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 16. Second, it seems like the latter condition of generalized commodity production implies the former condition that human societies exist. This is true, but I include these somewhat redundant conditions to show that the latter kinds of necessity are restricted versions of the former kinds of necessity.

and thus converted into commodities.¹⁸ This implies that in a system of *generalized* commodity production (and exchange), money is necessary.

Historical Necessity

P is historically necessary if *P* is true in all possible worlds in which human societies and generalized commodity production exist and other historical conditions obtain.¹⁹

What is necessary to capitalism as a specific token we might call *historically necessary*. For example, that the majority of the world transacts in the US Dollar may be historically necessary; that is, in all possible worlds in which human societies exist, generalized commodity production exists, and certain social conditions obtain, the US Dollar is the dominant currency.

3.2 Necessity in Broader Modal Bases Entails Necessity in Narrower Modal Bases

The three notions of necessity I have provided consist of three respective conditions which imply three distinct but related modal bases. Recall that the conditions of a given restricted kind of necessity specify a subset of possible worlds (the modal base). These modal bases may be a smaller subset (narrower) or a larger subset (broader).

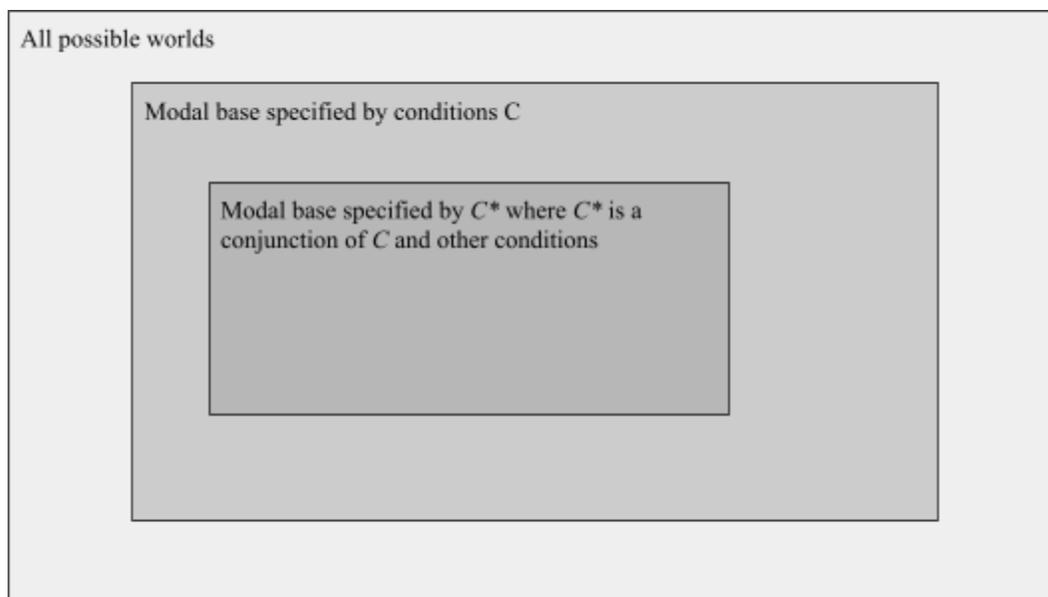


Figure 2. Illustration of broader and narrower modal bases

Two things follow from this: (1) any condition *C* will always specify a broader modal base than any condition *C**, where *C** is the conjunction of *C* and something else, and (2) the modal base specified by *C* contains the modal base specified by *C**.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 1:181.

¹⁹ One might notice that my definition of historical necessity contains a vague condition, that in addition to the existence of generalized commodity production, 'other historical conditions obtain.' This will be important to my argument in section 5.

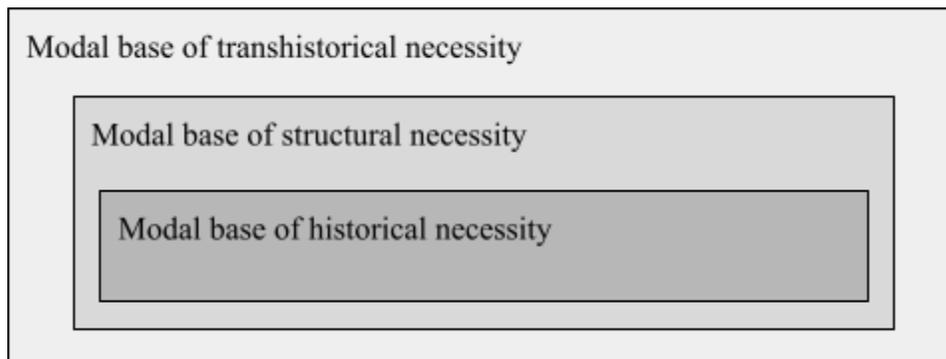


Figure 3. Illustration of the modal bases of transhistorical, structural, and historical necessity as successively narrower modal bases

For example, consider transhistorical necessity and structural necessity. Transhistorical necessity uses a broader modal base than structural necessity because the subset of possible worlds in which human societies exist is larger than the subset of possible worlds in which human societies exist, and generalized commodity production exists. The modal base of transhistorical necessity also *contains* the modal base of structural necessity. Thus, whatever is transhistorically necessary is also structurally necessary. If something is true in all societies, then it is true in capitalist societies.

Similarly, structural necessity uses a broader modal base than historical necessity because the subset of possible worlds in which human societies exist and generalized commodity production exists is larger than the subset of possible worlds in which human societies exist, generalized commodity production exists, and other historical conditions obtain. The modal base of structural necessity also *contains* the modal base of historical necessity. Thus, whatever is structurally necessary is also historically necessary. If something is true in all possible capitalisms, then it is true in any specific capitalism.

3.3 Modality and Levels of Abstraction

Some scholars, such as Søren Mau, have used the concept of levels of abstraction to distinguish between the more abstract and particular claims about capitalism. If what I have been saying so far is right, then levels of abstraction must be thought of as modal bases.

For example, Mau has recently attempted to “construct a theory of the economic power of capital on this level of abstraction,” and *this* level of abstraction he describes as “the essence of the capitalist mode of production.”²⁰ He further clarifies that his “aim ... is not to produce an analysis of a particular historical or geographical variant of the capitalist mode of production.”²¹ Later on, Mau asks of Marx’s descriptions of capitalist firms: “[o]n what level of abstraction are [they] situated? Are they only valid for a historically and geographically specific variant of capitalist production ... or do they tell us something about the core

²⁰ Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 13.

²¹ Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 13.

structure of capitalism?”²² These two uses of the concept of levels of abstraction tell us that Mau thinks that claims at a high level of abstraction are about the essence of capitalism and thus tell us what is the case across all capitalisms. Claims at a lower level of abstraction are about specific variants of capitalism that may not be true about all capitalisms (or the *essence* of capitalism). Thus, Mau’s use of the term ‘level of abstraction’ seems identical to the concept of the modal base which I have been using.

If this is right, then this account of modality also discloses something important about levels of abstraction in Marxist social theory. The everyday usage of the term ‘abstraction’ seems to imply that the more abstract something gets, the less true it is. Consider the common Marxist criticism that neoclassical economics uses ‘abstract’ and ‘idealized’ assumptions. However, if levels of abstraction are understood as broader and narrower modal bases, then abstraction does not mean getting further away from truth, but rather truth extending its hold across broader modal space (the space of possible worlds). That is, the higher the level of abstraction, the more possible worlds that a truth holds in, the more ‘unshakeable’ that truth is, so to speak.

Let me recapitulate the important claims of this section:

- There are at least three restricted kinds of modality in Marxist social theory: transhistorical, structural, and historical. These correspond to three distinct modal bases which are separate but related.
- Necessity in broader modal bases entails necessity in narrower modal bases, as long as possible worlds of the narrower modal base are fully contained within the broader modal base.
- Levels of abstraction in Marxist social theory map can be understood as modal bases, and modal bases explain why abstraction in Marxist social theory is different from abstraction in the everyday sense.

4. Positions in the Necessity/Contingency Debate

		Modal notion	
		Necessity	Contingency
Modal base	<i>GCP</i>	Structural Necessitarianism	Structural Contingentism
	<i>GCP+</i>	Historical Necessitarianism	Historical Contingentism

Figure 4. Typology of positions in the necessity/contingency debate

Now, we are in a position to introduce several answers to the modal question. According to *structural necessitarianism*, racism obtains in all possible worlds in which generalized commodity production

²² Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 228.

obtains.²³ According to *structural contingentism*, racism obtains in some but not all possible worlds in which generalized commodity production obtains.²⁴

According to *historical necessitarianism* about racism and capitalism, racism obtains in all possible worlds in which generalized commodity production obtains, plus some other historical conditions. According to *historical contingentism*, racism obtains in some but not all possible worlds in which generalized commodity production obtains, plus some other historical conditions.

Finally, structural necessitarianism entails historical necessitarianism. Recall how the modal base of historical necessity is contained within the modal base of structural necessity, and, therefore, structurally necessary propositions are also historically necessary. This means that structural necessitarianism entails historical necessitarianism. Our possible worlds semantics explains this well. If it is the case that P is true in all possible worlds in the subset GCP , and $GCP+$ is a proper subset of GCP , then P is true in all possible worlds in the subset $GCP+$.

Other than this entailment relation, the other positions can be coherently taken up. One can be a structural contingentist while being a historical necessitarian or contingentist. But if one is a structural necessitarian, then one must also be a historical necessitarian.

5. Measuring Up

In this section, I will argue that this account of modality is superior to existing accounts in the literature with respect to extensionality, explanatory power, and unity. First, my account of modality allows us to preserve the truth and falsity of necessity claims on varying levels of abstraction. I will show this by applying it to a recent argument by Nancy Fraser. Second, my account may partially explain why there has been clear progress (and much agreement) on the question of whether racism is structurally necessary and also why there seems to be little progress (and so much disagreement) on the question of whether racism is historically necessary. Third, my account of modality unifies the notion of necessity in Marxist social theory with the notion of necessity in natural language.

5.1 Extensionality

First, this account of modality preserves the truth of necessity claims on different levels of abstraction. Recall Fraser's ambivalence on the necessity/contingency question. She argues against both "proponents of necessity, who insist that nonracial capitalism is impossible" as well as "proponents of contingency, who hold that racism is not necessary to capitalism."²⁵ I will recapitulate her argument here and show that a reconstructed version of her claims in terms of the possible worlds account of modality can be understood as structurally contingentist and historically necessitarian.

On Fraser's view, expropriation is structurally necessary to capitalism: "[capitalism] relies on [ongoing] expropriation as a necessary condition for exploitation."²⁶ Expropriation is "the forcible seizure, on a

²³ For the sake of brevity, I have left out the condition of the existence of human societies, since the existence of generalized commodity production implies the existence of human societies.

²⁴ I will later argue that Nancy Fraser (2022) can be read consistently as a structural contingentist and a historical necessitarian.

²⁵ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 29.

²⁶ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 30.

continuing basis, of the wealth of subjugated and minoritized peoples” that is “essential for sustaining accumulation.”²⁷ She then “historicize[s] that structure” by giving a historical account of how historically oppressed races came to be in such a condition.²⁸ As a result, “the distinction between exploited and expropriated increasingly became drawn along racial lines.”²⁹ According to Fraser, democratizing movements in core states in Europe and colonial America secured legal rights and freedoms for exploited white workers, while anti-colonial struggles in the rest of the world were brutally suppressed.³⁰ As a result, non-whites were marked as expropriable while whites were marked as merely exploitable.

However, crucial to her account is the historical fact of the marking of the global population along racial lines into expropriated non-whites and exploited whites. On Fraser’s view, as long as this historical fact is held fixed, racial oppression persists. So, her account endorses historical necessitarianism.

I have thus applied the account of modality to dissolve the initial ambiguity in Fraser’s claim that racism is both not necessary and not contingent to capitalism. The solution is that the claim should be understood as structurally contingent (not necessary) and historically necessary (not contingent). As I have shown in the previous section, this is a coherent position, as the only entailment relation between the various positions is that structural necessitarianism entails historical necessitarianism.

This is where my account distinguishes itself from, for example, William Conroy’s account of necessity. Conroy gives the following definition: “necessary relations are those in which ‘the nature of the relata depends on the relation.’”³¹ So, what it means for racism to be necessary to capitalism is for the nature of capitalism to depend on racism. However, with a more restricted notion of necessity (like historical necessity), we can preserve the truth of Fraser’s necessity claim at a ‘lower level of abstraction,’ so to speak.

Another account from Julian Go attempts to draw a distinction between ‘logical necessity’ and ‘contingent necessity.’ According to Go, something is logically necessary when it “follows directly from a set of logical propositions.”³² Something is contingently necessary when it “follows from specific historical conditions or social circumstances.”³³ On this view, however, contingent necessity collapses into logical necessity. Consider how historical conditions (and possible worlds) can be expressed by sets of propositions from which the contingently necessary follows. If this is right, then anything contingently necessary is also logically necessary.

Go might reply that what is contingently necessary, “with different historical circumstances ... could be different,” while “there is no logical alternative” for what is logically necessary.³⁴ This will not save the view, because with different propositions, what is logically necessary could also be different. Take the following set of propositions:

²⁷ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 36.

²⁸ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 29.

²⁹ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 42.

³⁰ Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism*, 39.

³¹ Conroy, “The Necessity/Contingency Debate,” 2.

³² Go, “Three Tensions,” 45.

³³ Go, “Three Tensions,” 45.

³⁴ Go, “Three Tensions,” 45.

- (1) P
- (2) If P then Q
- (3) Q

Q is logically necessary, on Go's view. But given different propositions in the set, things could be different. So, Go's distinction between logical and historical necessity collapses, while mine can adequately explain what his distinction tries to capture.

5.2 Explanatory Power

One might have noted that my definitions of transhistorical necessity and structural necessity are clear in the conditions which specify their modal bases, while there is some ambiguity to my definition of historical necessity, which was the following:

P is historically necessary if *P* is true in all possible worlds in which human societies and generalized commodity production exist and other historical conditions obtain.

However, I have not specified any particular historical conditions. Therefore, there may be many ways to specify what the historical conditions are. Since the conditions of any restricted definition of necessity specify its modal base, leaving open what the conditions are will lead to seemingly contradictory claims. For example, say theorist A has — implicitly or explicitly — specified in her definition that the historical conditions are capitalisms in which widespread monopoly holds, while theorist B has — implicitly or explicitly — specified in his definition that the historical conditions are capitalisms in which widespread free competition holds. Say that theorist A concludes from her study that some feature *F* is historically necessary, while theorist B concludes from his study that *F* is historically contingent.

The problem here is that they are making modal claims from different modal bases. But they are not making claims on lower or higher levels of abstraction, because neither of the modal bases are subsets of the other. I think that this ambiguity in specifying the modal base is precisely why there seems to be considerable progress in the literature, converging on a structural contingentist position,³⁵ while we have not seen the same convergence in the literature on either of the historical views. While it is quite clear what is held fixed in claims of structural necessity, it is ambiguous what is being held fixed in necessities at lower levels of abstraction. Thus, the account of modality I have been presenting can explain why theorists have only converged on structural contingentism.

5.3 Unity

Finally, my account unifies modality in Marxist social theory with modality in natural language. This is because I have applied an account of modality in natural language to show that it also works for the kinds of modal claims that Marxist social theorists wish to make.

This is also an advantage over Conroy and Go's respective accounts of modality. First, I have argued in section 5.1 that Conroy's account does not capture the meaning of modal claims with varying modal bases. But this feature is central to understanding any kind of restricted modality in natural language.³⁶ Go's account suffers from a similar flaw because it only tries to specify two restricted kinds of modality.

³⁵ See Conroy, "The Necessity/Contingency Debate;" Go, "Three Tensions;" Søren Mau, "Capital and Difference" in *Mute Compulsion* (London: Verso, 2023).

³⁶ Kratzer, "The Notional Category of Modality," 68.

Conclusion

I have thus offered an account of what necessity could mean for Marxist social theory by applying the standard possible worlds account of modality. I have argued that it (1) correctly captures the truth and falsity of necessity claims of varying levels of abstraction, using the concept of the modal base, (2) explains why scholarship on racial capitalism has converged on a structural contingentist position but has not converged on a historical position, and (3) unifies our notion of necessity with the notion of necessity in natural language.

While I have provided a semantic account of modality in Marxist social theory, I have remained neutral to the question of what the right method of investigation is. For example, one might argue that a logical ‘derivation’ is appropriate, while another might argue that we must proceed from particular observations and generalize to stronger laws that hold across modal space. I do not wish to rehash these debates here because my account does not imply any particular method of investigation. This is because it presumably captures our notions of necessity in the regular sciences and in everyday discourse. It is thus still an open question as to what the right method of investigation is for figuring out what is necessary and contingent on different levels of abstraction.

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