**“Exploitation, Solidarity, and Dignity”**

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Abstract:

This paper offers a normative exploration of what exploitation is and of what is wrong with it. The focus is on the critical assessment of the exploitation of workers in capitalist societies. Such exploitation is wrongful when it involves a contra-solidaristic use of power to benefit oneself at the expense of others. Wrongful exploitation consists in using your greater power, and sometimes even in making other less powerful than you, in order to get them to benefit you more than they ought to. This account of exploitation is appealing because it simultaneously captures three morally significant dimensions of exploitation—its material and social background, the relational (interpersonal and systemic) attitudes it enacts, and the final distributive results it generates. Exploitation is indeed a multidimensional social process. The flipside of the proposed critical characterization of this process is a positive ideal of solidaristic empowerment in the allocation and use of economic power, which the paper articulates in terms of the socialist Abilities/Needs Principle (“from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”). The Abilities/Needs Principle is grounded in human dignity.

**1. Introduction**

In January of 2018, the provincial government of Ontario (Canada) raised the minimum wage to $14 an hour. The response by many firms’ owners was not to accept a cut on their profits, but instead to impose the (perceived) costs on their workers. Thus, an owner of franchises of the successful and iconic firm Tim Hortons sent their workers a letter including the following lines:

“I'm sure some of you have wondered that with such a dramatic increase in wages if some or many of you will be laid off or lose your job. I want to assure you we are doing everything we can to eliminate that concern.”

“Unfortunately when wages rise at such a fast pace we cannot raise our prices at the same rate to offset the costs and something has to give.”

“Effective January 1, 2018 we will no longer be able to provide the benefit of paid breaks.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Further responses by franchises’ owners were to reduce benefits and to downgrade the status of their workers from salaried employees to independent contractors. Other businesses planned to increase automation, laying workers off. The bottom line is that when something “has to give,” it will mostly be workers’ interests, not their employers’. This systematic prioritizing of the interests of powerful economic agents at the expense of the interests of the less powerful agents working under them is typical of class societies, and of the phenomenon of exploitation they secrete. It was obviously present in slavery and feudalism, and it is pervasive in contemporary capitalism—from the clothing factory sweatshops of Bangladesh and the “zero hours” contracting of workers in the Global North, to the employment of better paid and more secure and yet asymmetrically vulnerable salaried blue-collar workers—and even white-collar ones—the world over.

This paper offers a new exploration of what exploitation is and of what is wrong with it. The focus will be on the critical assessment of the exploitation of workers in capitalist societies. Such exploitation is wrongful when it involves a contra-solidaristic use (and perhaps even allocation) of power to benefit oneself at the expense of others. Wrongful exploitation consists in using your greater power, and sometimes even in making other less powerful than you, in order to get them to benefit you more than they ought to. This account of exploitation is superior to others because it simultaneously captures three morally significant dimensions of exploitation—its material and social background, the relational (interpersonal and systemic) attitudes it enacts, and the final distributive results it generates. Exploitation is indeed a multidimensional social process. The flipside of the proposed critical characterization of this process is a positive ideal of solidaristic empowerment in the allocation and use of economic power, which the paper articulates in terms of the socialist Abilities/Needs Principle (“from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs”). The Abilities/Needs Principle is grounded in human dignity.

This paper has the following structure. After some preliminary points and caveats, I present in section 2 the contra-solidaristic use of power account of exploitation and a framework to display its application. In section 3, I develop the content and normative force of this account through a conception of solidarity based on the idea of human dignity and articulated in terms of the Abilities/Needs Principle. In section 4, the proposed approach is summarized and contrasted with the main alternatives to show that it avoids their pitfalls, captures their insights, and articulates important points missed by them. I do not pretend that this paper *establishes* its claims about exploitation, solidarity, and dignity. My goal is to say enough to show their originality and initial plausibility, and to reveal the fruitfulness of their relations—thereby motivating future research to develop them further. A unified statement of the emerging research program is provided in section 4.2. The paper concludes by addressing some objections regarding agency and structure.

Exploitation has been characterized in many ways. A first strand is (a) descriptive. In its most general and neutral sense, exploitation is simply the extraction of benefits from some source. In the specific context of human work (which is my focus here), exploitation is a feature of social economic processes in which some people benefit from the work (the productive efforts and activities) of others. Some Marxists have a more specific, technical definition of exploitation as an unequal exchange that features the extraction of workers' surplus labor.[[2]](#endnote-2) A second strand of characterization is (b) normative. Thus, it is common to take exploitation to involve a wrongful, unfair, or unjust taking advantage of others. When combined with (a), (b) yields the category of cases in which exploitation is the wrongful benefitting from the work of others. The aim of this paper is to develop this normative characterization. I will address the following questions: “When incidents of exploitation in the descriptive sense are wrong, what makes them so?”[[3]](#endnote-3) And: “What ideals and principles justify this normative judgment?” My answer to the first question will be that wrongful exploitation of workers involves benefitting from their work through contra-solidaristic use of greater power, and my answer to the second question will be that we have reason to assess economic schemes, and judgments about exploitation, on the basis of the (solidaristic and dignitarian) Abilities/Needs Principle. A wrongfully exploits B when and to the extent that A benefits from B’s work by using greater power in ways that flout the Abilities/Needs Principle.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Before proceeding, let me enter a few caveats. First, when talking about A, the exploiters, and B, the exploited, I will take A and B as variables ranging over individuals, corporate groups, or more diffuse coalitions of agents.[[5]](#endnote-5) Furthermore, exploitation can arise in occasional encounters, but I will largely focus on extended, and regular, social relationships. Within them, we will consider exploitation both from interpersonal and systemic angles. The significance, and difficulties, of these different renderings of the variables and the contexts of their relations are sometimes important, and I will address them when necessary (and prominently in section 5).

Second, my claims about exploitation will be limited in the following two ways. Exploitation will be characterized as a pro tanto consideration in the assessment of an economic system. I do not claim that, all things considered, exploitation may never be engaged in—there could be other considerations that have more weight in some circumstances. An upshot of this is to circumscribe the assessment of Marxist views on exploitation and justice. Thus, I disagree with Roemer when he takes Marxists to hold the view that there is social injustice if and only if there is exploitation.[[6]](#endnote-6) He is right that this view might generate “false positives” (as some instances of exploitation in the Marxian technical sense are not unjust) and “false negatives” (as some social injustices are not instances of exploitation). But only the problem of “false positives” exercises me. The problem of “false negatives” does not worry me because, like many Marxists and socialists, I would criticize capitalism on other grounds as well (such as on account of its tendency to generate domination and alienation).

Third, the normative account I offer states only sufficient conditions for wrongful exploitation. Although I argue (in section 4) that this account fares better than others, I do not claim that no other account could exist that also explains the wrongness of exploitation satisfactorily.

Fourth, I will largely focus on exploitation in capitalist societies, and address the contrast between them and socialist societies (or hybrid forms of capitalism incorporating socialist elements). Furthermore, when characterizing economic systems like capitalism and socialism, I will characterize them not only in terms of their institutions of property or control of economic assets, but also in terms of the social ethoi that orient agents making choices in social environments featuring those institutions (and this includes, inter alia, their tendency to embrace or challenge them, and to select among the possible forms of behavior compatible with them).[[7]](#endnote-7)

Fifth, when comparing the levels of advantage different social arrangements provide to the people entangled in them, I will adopt a relatively broad view that includes not only access to consumption goods and leisure time, but also to self-realization in creative and cooperative activities, social contribution benefitting others, and self-determination in one’s economic life.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Finally, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between three dimensions of a conception of social justice: the proposal of certain core ideals and principles (DI), the identification of the social realization or implementation of those principles through certain institutions and social practices (DII), and the strategies of transformation to move from here to there—from the status quo to the configurations envisaged in DII when these are not already in place. My focus is largely on DI, although I will introduce some remarks about DII and DIII.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**2. Exploitation as contra-solidaristic use of power**

We can say that an agent A has power with respect to a certain outcome or state of affairs O to the extent that A can voluntarily determine whether O occurs. Applied to social contexts, this definition leads (inter alia) to the view that A has power over another agent B to the extent that A can get B to act in ways A desires. A is able to achieve certain outcomes by getting B to do things A wants B to do, which B would not do (or would not do in the same way, for the same reasons) if A did not have the influence they have over B. If A and B disagreed about how to organize their interactions the will of A would likely prevail. [[10]](#endnote-10) Now, when A exploits B, A wields power over B. The wrongful use of power account of exploitation (the *WP account*), builds on this point.According to WP, you exploit others when you use your greater power (i.e. take advantage of their weaker power) to get them to give you more than they should. More formally:

*WP:* A exploits B when A uses A’s greater power to get B to benefit A more than relevant normative considerations would justify.

WP must be developed further to identify the relevant normative considerations that make certain uses of asymmetric power morally problematic. I propose an account of exploitation as contra-solidaristic use of power (the *CP account*)*,* which further specifies WP by stating that the wrongfulness of exploitation consists in its contra-solidaristic nature.

*CP:* A exploits B if A benefits from B through a contra-solidaristic use of A’s greater power.[[11]](#endnote-11)

According to CP, to ascertain the wrongfulness of exploitation we should combine judgments about two issues: (a) the wielding of asymmetric power and (b) the generation of distributive outcomes. In some cases, we may want to add consideration of a third issue: (c) the allocation of power. We may have to scrutinize the very fact that A is more powerful than B, asking how this asymmetry has come about. Exploitation may arise as the culmination of a process that features misallocation of power besides a misuse of it. A’s treatment of B looks in one sense worse if the power A wields over B has a tainted history featuring A taking steps to make it the case that B is vulnerable to A’s exploitation. Think about the history of colonialism—featuring invasions and then imposition of exploitative terms of production and exchange on the people colonized—or predatory lending—in which indebted people or countries are made more vulnerable and readily available for subsequent economic interactions in which the lender preys on them. These historical processes yielding asymmetric power allocation may be problematic even if, although the result was foreseeable and avoidable, the agents producing it did not have the intention to render others more vulnerable (although when those intentions exist the result is even worse). To avoid misunderstandings, I note that judgments on (a) and (b) are necessary in this account, while problems regarding (c) are a significant worsening factor but not a necessary component. Exploitation consists in using your greater power to get others to benefit you more than solidarity would justify. Exploitation is worse when the power asymmetry was generated by those benefiting from it—in this way, it may feature misallocation of power besides misuse of it.

I will explain my understanding of solidarity in section 3, but for now let us say that it involves acting for the sake of other people’s freedom and well-being besides one’s own. In the reminder of this section I introduce a framework to represent practical situations in a way that is relevant to the application of CP to the systematic exploitation of labor. The key elements are the following.

a. Technical feasibility (given state of development of productive forces).

b. Institutions of ownership and control of productive forces (means of production and labor power).

c. Individuals’ beliefs and preferences (prudential and ethical). We include here the strands in a society’s moral and political culture, or social ethos.

d. Social power configurations (resulting from a-c and prospects for their dynamic change).

e. More or less socially feasible economic scenarios regarding who does what and who gets what (given a-d).

f. Strategies (interpersonal and societal; short-term and long-term).

*Regarding (a)-(d): Modes of production, social formations, and classes.*[[12]](#endnote-12)To understand people’s choices regarding exploitation, we should understand the circumstances in which they act. To describe such circumstances, we need first to note what is technically feasible—i.e. how much of what is valuable to people can be produced. Next, we should identify the mode of production that is typical in the context under discussion. In broadly Marxist terms, a mode of production has two important components. The first concern relations of production, which are certain social frameworks stating terms of ownership and effective control over productive forces—in particular the labor power deployed by workers to produce and the means of production they use to do so, such as land, raw materials, and tools. Different modes of production display different types of relations of production as dominant. Thus, in slave societies, slaves own neither the means of production nor their labor power, while masters own both; in feudal societies, serfs have some control over the means of production and some control of their labor power, with the remainder being in the hands of the lords; in capitalism, wage workers own fully their labor power but the means of production are owned by capitalists. In socialism, workers control both their labor power and the means of production. The second component of a mode of production concerns the typical orientation and motivation of agents engaged in production. In capitalism, for example, capitalists typically seek to maximize their profit, workers seek an optimal combination of wages and leisure time, and both tend to give some weight to the intrinsic satisfaction they get in their economic activities and accept values affirming individual negative liberty and meritocracy. This characterization is of course highly stylized. Actual social formations involve the stated features to different degrees, and often in hybrid configurations. Thus, some contemporary capitalist societies include significant governmental and social economy sectors in which capitalist ownership is not dominant and production has a solidaristic orientation.

It is significant for our purposes that most important systematic cases of exploitation arise in modes of production in which relations of production include class division between workers and other agents who direct their work and extract a surplus benefit from it. Slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and state “socialism” under an authoritarian bureaucracy or one-party rule all involve class division of this kind.[[13]](#endnote-13) These class divisions typically come with class tensions and struggle, which precisely center on sustaining or challenging exploitation. It is important, however, that this conflict proceeds against a background of power asymmetries. To summarize, the following background conditions typically hold where there is systematic exploitation of workers: (i) means of production are relatively scarce; (ii) they are unequally controlled; and (iii) those who control them (or have more control) are more powerful and able to extract surplus benefits from direct producers who do not control them (or have less control). Presumably, a socialist mode of production would eliminate, or minimize, exploitation, by altering (i)-(iii). We can add that (iv) inequalities in talents (labor power) can also contribute to extraction of surplus benefits (even in the absence of (ii)), and that socialism would also address the handling of this asymmetry.

*Regarding (e): Scenarios, baselines of comparison.* Let us consider now some technically feasible (but more or less socially feasible) economic scenarios and the payoffs agents would get in them. In our description of the payoffs of the four scenarios we will consider, we focus only on self-regarding preferences—a restriction we later drop.

S1: B works to A’s greater benefit.

S2: What would happen (independently of A’s actions) if B did not take up S1.

S3: What A would make happen if B did not take up S1.

S4: What A could (together with B) make happen but chooses not to.

We assume: For B: S1>S2, S1>S3, S4>S1. For A: S1>S2, S1>S3, S1>S4. And S2 and S3 are significantly worse for B than they are for A.

Illustrative payoffs A, B: S1 (7, 3). S2 (3, 2). S3 (2.5, 1). S4 (6, 4), or even (5, 5).

In S1 (the exploitative scenario), A offers and B accepts a deal in which B works to A’s greater benefit. Now, S1 is better for B than scenarios S2 and S3. That’s why B accepts to be exploited. There is, however, a fourth feasible scenario, S4, in which A and B cooperate on terms that are less unequal than in S1. That scenario would be best for B, but not for A. Even if A were to fare better in S4 than in S2 or S3, A would prefer to extract surplus benefits from B. Missing the exploitative schedule S1 by allowing B to proceed as B would without engaging A, and even more, perhaps, having to impose penalties on B for not acceding to S1, would be costly for A, but it would be significantly more so for B. This is why, although there is room for bargaining between A and B, A has superior bargaining power. The bargaining would be constrained differently depending on the absolute and relative payoffs. If S2 and S3 are below a certain threshold of subsistence, or (less minimalistically) of decent living, for B, then A has an extremely strong hand to play. If S2 and S3 are above those thresholds, it would be harder for A to get B to settle for S1 rather than hold out expecting A to go for S4 in the next move. The bargaining would then be focused on how inegalitarian S4 (or a new version of S1) would end up being. But even then, A is in a stronger position, as waiting it out is less hard for A than for B.

*Regarding (f): Strategies.* The foregoing scenarios inform the strategies that A and B might choose. In the case of A, there are two exploitative strategies:

I. *Forced and coercive cooperation*: A offers S1 to B, threatening S3 if B declines.

II. *Under-supportive cooperation*: A offers S1 to B, and B faces S2 as the alternative—even though A could offer S4 instead.

The foregoing strategies differ from a non-exploitative, solidaristic strategy:

III. *Solidaristic cooperation*: A proposes S4 to B.

In strategy I, A makes it the case that B has no acceptable alternative to the scheme put forward by A.[[14]](#endnote-14) A can do this by eliminating alternatives altogether—brute force—or by threats that make them unacceptable to choose—coercion. An example is the relationship between slave-owners and slaves. Slave-traders remove people from the territory in which alternative forms of life were available, and slave-owners threaten physical torment if slaves do not work as they demand. Another example is the power capitalist employers have over their workers to get them to exert more effort (increasing profits) through threats of dismissal or non-renewal of contracts.[[15]](#endnote-15) There are more indirect forms of strategy I. A might contribute to a complex causal process that eventually makes it the case that B has no acceptable alternative to S1.[[16]](#endnote-16) The difference here is that A does not directly threaten B with unacceptable scenarios, but is instead involved in a process that has the result that B does not have acceptable alternatives. A historical example is the “enclosures”—the concerted efforts to deprive people of access to their (commonly accessible) land, and as a result become available for exploitative employment as wage laborers. Another example is when capitalists push governments to eliminate unemployment benefits or other income security programs, or undersell or otherwise undermine the prospects of worker managed cooperatives.

Turn now to the contrast between strategies II and III. A could, at reasonable cost, adopt strategy III and pursue S4 with B, but in strategy II A chooses instead to take advantage of the relative weakness of B to drive a hard bargain leading to a division of the fruits of cooperation that is more beneficial to A. The difference between strategy II and strategy I is parallel to the distinction between allowing and doing. In strategy II, A is directly or indirectly responsible for the fact that B does not have acceptable alternatives through omission rather than through (actual or threatened) commission. A does not *deprive* B of an otherwise available option, but fails to *provide* them with an otherwise non-availableoption. A could adopt strategy III and help generate the more beneficial S4 for B. A could do so directly or indirectly, for example by offering B a better deal within the current economic relationship, or by helping change background circumstances that make the bargaining power of B so weak. So, strategies II and III, like strategy I, can have more or less direct versions. The direct versions of II and III are illustrated when we compare capitalist employers who choose to offer low salaries or other benefits to their workers (as is common in sweatshops or in precarious jobs) and others who choose to offer better deals. An example of the indirect versions of II and III arises when we compare capitalists using some of their profits to support reforms that strengthen the bargaining power of workers (for example, by funding leftist parties) and others refraining from doing so.

Marxist scholars sometimes say that exploitation occurs when workers are coerced by their employers or compelled by the circumstances to take up employment under, and provide surplus benefits to, the latter.[[17]](#endnote-17) These cases are covered by the categorization of strategies just mentioned. Thus, the direct version of strategy I covers the case of the relation between slave-owners and slaves (which is directly coercive). The case of capitalist exploitation is covered by a combination of I and by II: capitalists may not violently coerce workers to work, but they can get them to work harder through threats of dismissal and shape the circumstances faced by workers so that they have no good alternative to working under capitalists, and they can fail to offer better terms at the points of hire, a better treatment at work, or support the creation of a better social environment in which workers’ power increases over time.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Of course, there are strategies open to B as well. In particular, B could engage in collective action making it the case that S2 and S3 are less bad for B, or worse for A, than before. Think about unions and strikes, the formation of influential socialist parties, changes in labor law and, at the limit, the transformation of economic structures. After all, historical changes within modes of production, and radical transformation generating new ones, are familiar. These changes alter the prevalence of the three strategies mentioned above. In sequences of change away from slavery or serfdom, and into capitalism (with the end of total or partial property rights in other people’s labor power, and the extension of markets and firms), some cases of A being entitled or able to dish out S3 become blocked. A tends to use milder forms of strategy I and deploy strategy II. Sequences of socialist change within and beyond capitalism could include, over time, or suddenly, the generation of hybrid social formations featuring social provision for unemployment, public health care, a universal basic income, worker-owned and managed firms, and the socialization of the means of production in large sectors of the economy. Here S2 improves for B and becomes less unequal between A and B. As a consequence, versions of strategy III are increasingly engaged.[[19]](#endnote-19)

To understand these changes, we should factor in social and normative preferences besides self-interested ones. Even within capitalism, some exploitative deals may be undesirable (even for some A) if they flout meritocracy (if, for example, they feature bosses wielding their inherited fortunes and imposing low salaries on poor but very hard-working employees), or if they are sustained only at the cost of violating civil and political liberties (if, for example, deeply unequal distributions of wealth and income are defended against protest by the poor through intense surveillance and repression of their political action). And pushing beyond capitalism, a new social ethos might emerge in which a solidaristic concern for the self-determination and well-being of all makes versions of S4 more appealing than S1 for increasing numbers of people.

The asymmetric social power of A over B (the greater ability of A to get B to do what A wants) is based on their different abilities to access valuable objects for themselves, and to make inaccessible or accessible those objects for the other. Often, these differences are the result of institutional structures, such as the relations of production discussed above. When A has greater control than B over certain desirable resources, A can bargain from a position of greater strength and get B to work to benefit A more than A benefits B. The injustices involved here, if there are any, would concern at least these power relations. The injustices might either concern the morally objectionable use of this asymmetry in social power and sometimes the very existence of it. Specifically, CP condemns extractions of surplus benefits like those envisioned in strategies I and II, which, by contrast with strategy III, are at odds with solidarity. We can call for the reduction of power differentials, and for a use of whatever differentials remain in which those involved enact proper concern and respect for others. This is the solidaristic perspective, to which I now turn.

**3. Human dignity, solidarity, and the Abilities/Needs Principle**

The CP account says that there is wrongful exploitation in cases in which A goes for S1 rather than for S4. But we still need to understand when S1 is wrong and S4 right. To do that we need to clarify when S1 is contra-solidaristic and S4 solidaristic, and the significance of solidarity itself.

**3.1. Human dignity and solidaristic empowerment**

To explain why exploitation is wrong, we need to make explicit what guides our critique of it as presented in the CP account. There are three levels of discussion here: (L1) the CP account itself; (L2) economic principles shaping it; and (L3) moral grounds justifying the principles. I first focus on L3, turning to L2 and L1 in section 3.2. An overall statement of the proposed approach is given in 4.2.

The solidaristic perspective urges us to allocate and use power in a solidaristic way. An articulation of this perspective can include the following three moments. First, we can draw on the appealing idea of human dignity to state the following normative view:

*Dignitarian Approach*: We have reason to organize social life in such a way that we respond appropriately to the valuable features of individual human beings that give rise to their dignity.[[20]](#endnote-20)

People have what we may call *status-dignity*. This is a moral status such that certain forms of respect and concern are owed to them. To the extent that people get this treatment, they enjoy *condition-dignity*. The distinction between status-dignity and condition-dignity is important (and often overlooked). Workers toiling in a sweatshop—getting minimal pay, working very long hours, being routinely humiliated by managers, and threatened with loss of job if they try to organize to defend their interests—enjoy little condition-dignity. But they retain status-dignity, a non-conventional deontic standing which ought to be recognized even if it is not in fact recognized, and on account of which condition-dignity must be aimed at. The kinds of respect and concern owed to people in accordance to their dignity is specified through *dignitarian norms*. Such norms state what the appropriate responses to people’s status-dignity in various relevant contexts are. To develop an account of the content of these norms, we need to consider what lies in the *basis of dignity*, i.e., the valuable features of people in virtue of which they have the deontic standing that status-dignity marks. Dignitarian norms will identify the appropriate response to those features in the relevant social arenas. I will say more about these norms and features in a moment. Let me conclude this summary of the dignitarian approach by saying that such norms range over institutions and more diffuse social practices. They state guidelines for designing property regimes, labor laws, and market regulations, as well as ways of addressing and communicating with others, for example. Relatedly, we can add the idea of *dignitarian virtue*. Agents have this virtue to the extent that they shape their sensibility, practical reasoning, and behavior on the basis of dignitarian norms. A dignitarian ethos is important to render dignitarian institutions and practices accessible and stable—or to make their accessibility and stability more robust. Agents with virtuous dispositions are more likely to create these institutions and practices, and to sustain them over time.

The requirements of the dignitarian approach—the dignitarian norms—can be articulated as specifications of the following ideal (which constitutes the second moment of the present development of L3):

*Solidaristic Empowerment*: We should support people in their pursuit of a flourishing life by fulfilling both negative duties not to destroy or block their valuable human capacities and positive duties to protect and facilitate their development and exercise.

If we recognize that people have status-dignity in virtue of having certain capacities, then we should also see that we have reason to shape our social life with them in ways that enact appropriate respect and concern for the development and exercise of these capacities. If people have the valuable capacities for self-determination based on their prudential and moral reflection and judgment, for example, we should organize our common political institutions and practices with them in such a way that they have effective opportunities to participate as decision-makers besides as decision-takers. People who work have these features, as well as others such as capacities for creative and cooperative production, and for meaningful personal and social activities outside of work, which should be given appropriate recognition and support when figuring out how economic systems should be organized. I turn to some details in section 3.2.

The idea of solidarity used here is a substantive proposal, not an analysis of the term “solidarity.” There are in fact many uses of this term, not all of them compatible. As I characterize it here, solidarity includes at least three important components. The first is the avoidance of harmful deprivation. I fail to be solidaristic towards you if I destroy, or block the development and exercise of your valuable capacities—unless I have strong reasons to do that (the burden of proof is on me). Second, solidarity links up with cooperative mutual provision. When you and I cooperate in the production of some goods, we are ready to support each other’s flourishing. But this readiness is not unconditional. I fail to be solidaristic if I benefit from your efforts without putting forward my own when I can do so. If I can but do not reciprocate, I fail to take seriously the significance of your own flourishing, and focus only on my own. This reciprocation need not be one of strict equivalence of output exchanged. What is important is fair reciprocity, that we exert similar levels of effort given what we can achieve. There is an element of altruism in this form of reciprocation. Consider the *Construction Site* situation.[[21]](#endnote-21) You and I are building a house, and we need to carry stones to the construction site. I am stronger than you, and thus it is easy for me to carry bigger stones. It would be obnoxious of me to say that we should schedule the carrying of stones so that we carry the same kind of stones when that would involve great hardship for you. We should give and take, but there is no problem in giving more than one takes if everybody is making appropriate efforts given their abilities.

There is a third component of solidarity (as I see it), which includes basic positive duties to help others facing grave deprivation, even if there is no exchange involved (and thus no expected reciprocation of any kind—even at a lower level of output). Consider the *Sleepwalking Anna* case. Anna is sleepwalking. She is heading down the corridor to an open window. If she is not stopped by someone else, she will fall and die. She will not wake up even if screamed at, she can only be stopped by blocking her path. You are too far away to stop her in time. But I could do it. Do I have a duty to do so? Is this duty justifiably enforceable—say, may you push me against my will to make me fall in a way that blocks Anna’s path even if that would injure my arm? Or, may you threaten me with breaking my arm unless I save Anna? It seems pretty clear that in this scenario I have a positive duty to help Anna. It would not do for me to tell you that I have a negative duty not to kill her—by, say, throwing her through the window—but not a positive duty to save her life—by blocking her path. It also seems true that if I do not save Anna in the available and not unreasonably costly way available to me, you are permitted to force me to save her, even if you impose some costs on me. Again, it would not do to say that costs may only be imposed to enforce negative duties. Imagine that I said that even if I do have a positive duty to save Anna, I also have a liberty right to oppose the enforcement of such a duty by some external agent like you. I should surely be a decent person and help Anna, but I retain the right to resist your commandeering of my assistance if I choose to not give it. This kind of move is sometimes invoked to qualify rights stemming from necessity—if you are starving you have a moral right to try to take some of my abundant bread to eat, but I may legitimately resist. But it seems implausible at least in some cases. In Sleepwalking Anna, I do not have a liberty right to resist your incursion on me when I fail to help her.

The foregoing are simply statements of my intuitions. However, my experience is that others agree. How can we explain these intuitions? The dignitarian framework provides useful resources. The basic general idea is this. If some features of an entity give rise to that entity’s dignity, then any agent who can affect that entity must do so in appropriate ways that involve respect and concern for it. These appropriate ways of treating the entity include negative duties not to destroy or block what is valuable in the entity, such as the features forming the basis of its dignity. One cannot plausibly say that those features are so valuable as to give rise to dignity and yet generate no reason to not be harmful towards them. But if these features are valuable enough to generate negative duties, they are also likely to be valuable enough to generate some positive duties. This is the key claim. What is valuable enough to give rise to dignity must be treated in helpful ways, not only in non-harmful ones. It is callous to believe that one has no positive duty to protect, or foster the development of, the valuable features that give rise to the dignity of people even when we are prepared to recognize that those features can be referred to in order to justify negative duties.

To avoid misunderstanding, notice that I am not saying that the positive duties mentioned are as weighty as the negative ones. What I say is compatible with saying that sometimes causing a harm is worse than not preventing it. The key point is to recognize that there are positive duties. Their weight and role within our overall reasons for action is a further—and no doubt important—issue. Notice, also, that I distinguish the third category of duties of solidarity from the second. These basic positive duties involving no element of expected reciprocation are focused on situations which are extremely grievous. Finally, I do not say that solidarity prohibits every path of action that is not maximally beneficial to others (or to everyone considered from an impersonal point of view). I acknowledge that we have a personal prerogative to give some priority to ourselves. I will state cases of these points at the economic level in section 3.2.

A third moment of the discussion of L3 is to note that the suggested dignitarian and solidaristic account supports a radical version of egalitarianism. Its metric of advantage ranges deep to support people’s abilities to flourish by developing and exercising their various valuable capacities. Furthermore, it simultaneously includes a relational attitude in which we regard and address others as beings with equal dignity, and a distributive aim to generate and sustain social arrangements in which each has equal and effective opportunities to flourish—the power to develop and exercise their valuable capacities in ways they choose. This is more than what some relational egalitarians call for because there is a directly distributive concern regarding people’s opportunities to (freely) pursue well-being. It is also different from luck-egalitarianism, as basic positive duties are acknowledged which require supporting others to overcome certain hardships even when those hardships arise through their choices rather than their circumstances. Thus, unless we would have to face unreasonably severe costs, we should help other people escape grievous situations in which they cannot secure for themselves subsistence, or exercise their political rights as equal citizens.

To further clarify my account of the solidaristic perspective, let me contrast it with the recent account offered by Roemer.[[22]](#endnote-22) Roemer acknowledges that a socialist perspective must include not only a radical, socialist requirement of equality of opportunity (according to which nobody should have less access to productive assets than others through no choice or fault of their own), but also a solidaristic and cooperative ethos that urges people to shape their behavior by the slogan “We all stand together or we each hang separately.” Roemer says, however, that such an ethos does not need to include an altruistic element, which in any case would be, he thinks, supererogatory. In contrast, I think that an altruistic component is important, and not supererogatory.[[23]](#endnote-23) First, its residual aspect regarding basic positive duties helps capture what we owe to others when they are in dire straits even as a result of their choices. Second, it may explain why we should not bargain as hard as we can with them when they become vulnerable as a result of their choices (a point to which I will return in section 4).

Third, an altruistic element seems relevant to support Roemer’s own favored principle of socialist equality of opportunity. The currently more naturally or socially endowed might not accept surrendering benefits to the less endowed—to compensate for initial inequality of opportunity—if they did not directly care about their human flourishing. A similar remark applies to Roemer’s preferred view of the cooperative ethos. Roemer says that such an ethos would be shaped by a protocol of “Kantian optimization” that requires that “each takes the action he would like all to take.” This protocol is contrasted with a purely self-centered one that allows each to take care only of themselves—so that each takes the action that, given what others are doing, is the best action for him. Now, Roemer says that to prefer the Kantian optimization protocol, I do not need to rely on altruistic reasons; it is enough to notice that it would be good for *me* if I and the others followed it. But it is not always best for me to do what I would like everyone to do. When I am more powerful, I may succeed at getting others to benefit me more than I benefit them, by pressing others to make choices I do not myself make. The gains of free-riding may be greater for me than the gains of cooperation. I might have to care about them to not pursue terms of interaction that are exploitative. As it turns out, even the Kantian protocol, as stated by Roemer, is open to egotistic abuse. If I am more powerful, I may want everyone to act on a rule that permits exploitation. I will be the one doing the exploiting. To avoid this abuse, I would need to adopt a partly altruistic perspective that takes others as ends in themselves.

The Kantian protocol can be reformulated to prevent the abuse and make clearer that each agent’s perspective is central to it. I propose a revision that requires that *each takes the action everyone concerned would like (or better: rationally prefer) all to take*. This formulation asks each to take up the perspective of others besides their own when determining what patterns of action to accept (after all, some of the actions A might like everyone to engage in—such as capitalist interactions—may not be the same as the ones a less powerful agent B might like everyone to engage in—as the former might feature B as a discarded destitute, or in the role of an exploited subordinate).[[24]](#endnote-24) Socialist solidarity, as I see it, does indeed involve expanding the first-person singular perspective (the I-perspective) to assume an enlarged first person plural perspective (the We-perspective). It is also a matter of exploring, in a respectful and concernful way, the second and the third person perspectives—singular and plural. It involves also the I – you, and the I- she or he or them perspectives. These additional standpoints improve the We-perspective, making it more fully responsive to the dignity of the people in it.

**3.2. The Abilities/Needs Principle and exploitation**

Turning to L2 and L1, what is the upshot of the solidaristic perspective regarding economic principles? And how do these principles help us make judgments about exploitation? Let us start with the first question, and ask, more precisely, what are the relevant duties and rights regarding work, income, leisure, and the provision and consumption of other goods?

The socialist Abilities/Needs Principle (ANP) (*from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs*) provides a fruitful account of the economic requirements of solidarity and dignity. Although this is contentious, I have argued elsewhere that we should see ANP as a principle of justice.[[25]](#endnote-25) In general, this principle requires that the organization of an economy (its relations of production and its social ethos, among other features) be such that each participant benefits *and* contributes solidaristically. Assuming that economic resources are scarce, the distribution of access to advantages should in principle be equally sensitive to the needs of all and be attuned to their diversity, but nobody should make claims on the social product without contributing to it if they can, and as they can given their diverse abilities. As with solidarity, and given technological feasibility constraints, I do not take ANP to require maximal contribution and complete need satisfaction. ANP has a dignitarian justification. It can be defended by appealing to the dignitarian principle of Solidaristic Empowerment, according to which we ought to shape our social relations so that we do not block or destroy, and so that we enable and further, the development and exercise of people’s valuable capacities (the ones that are the basis of their dignity). We should cater for others’ needs at least when, and because, those needs are interests in developing and exercising their valuable capacities (or are causally relevant to that development and exercise). We should engage in productive contribution also because doing so would involve developing and exercising our various valuable capacities for cooperation, creativity, etc., as well as our moral capacities to act on the basis of respect and concern for others besides ourselves.

We can identify at least six core demands (providing further specification of the ideal of Solidaristic Empowerment):

(a) Opportunities for self-realization at work: There should be effective opportunities for productive activity that involves self-realization. People have valuable capacities to engage in complex, cooperative, creative, and socially useful work. They should have real chances to engage in this kind of work. Arguably, having this option would serve an important human need.

(b) Positive duties: There should be institutions, and a social ethos, which enable and encourage people to produce to meet other people’s needs—thereby supporting the human flourishing of all. Each should envisage a reasonable level of development and exercise of their powers to produce in this way.

(c) Securing basic needs: Some instantiations of the positive duties mentioned in (b) are particularly urgent and stringent. They concern the satisfaction of basic needs for subsistence and for being able to function as a political equal.

(d) Fair reciprocity: There should be an ethos and a scheme of distribution of access to consumption goods that recognizes a responsibility to cooperate in production on terms of fair reciprocity. It is wrong to take advantage of the productive efforts of others without making our own, similar effort if we can. Similar effort is not strict equivalence in output (which might depend on morally arbitrary differences in productive abilities), but a matter of the proportion of contribution given one’s abilities. Above the threshold marked by (c), those (but only those) who make an equal effort (when they can) should have equal access to consumption goods.

(e) Sensitivity to individual differences: Individual differences in abilities and needs are normatively important, and should be factored in when appraising appropriate levels of contribution and access to consumption. Each should be allowed, and enabled, to pursue their well-being in ways that are appropriate given their own characteristics.

(f) Self-determination in economic life: Respect and concern for individual variation should also be supportive of each person’s self-determination. Absent conflict with very strong competing considerations (such as basic positive duties to respond to emergencies), everyone should be entitled to choose whether, and how, to work, and each should be entitled to choose whether, and how, to consume. For example, each should be allowed to form their own schedules of trade-offs between self-realization at work, leisure time, and consumption.[[26]](#endnote-26) Furthermore, the contours of the social structure within which people produce and consume should be subject to authorization, contestation, and change by all the members of society through democratic mechanisms of opinion- and will-formation.

An economy that honors ANP would instantiate these demands. Since they fairly cater for general interests shared by all, they could be rationally chosen (using the revised Kantian protocol) as guidelines for economic life. Now, as it turns out, an exploitative economy would flout some or all of these demands. Here are the links. A exploits B if A uses A’s greater power to benefit from B in ways that fail to appropriately respond to B’s dignity. If A fails to appropriately respond to B’s dignity, then A fails to solidaristically support B’s human flourishing. If B fails to solidaristically support B’s human flourishing, A fails to appropriately respect B’s self-determination, appreciate B’s efforts, or further other needs of B (such as access to consumption goods). Thus, the failures of solidaristic support in exploitation involve a benefitting from others which flouts at least some of (a)-(f).[[27]](#endnote-27)

I have articulated ANP at a fairly abstract level. We could formulate various implementations of it (thus moving from dimension DI to DII in a conception of justice—see section 1). An example would be a modified version of Joseph Carens’s proposal of market socialism.[[28]](#endnote-28) Carens seeks to combine equality with freedom and efficiency, proposing a radically restructured market system. His scheme retains the information function of markets (which often are better than central planning at identifying matches between supply and demand) without some of their typical distributive upshots (which often involve problematic inequalities) and motivational configurations (which are often quite egotistic). In this scheme, pre-tax income varies widely signaling demand. But post-tax incomes are equal, so people choose jobs on the basis of a social duty to contribute to the needs of others (as well as some personal, self-regarding preferences). A second sector of the economy would feature direct public provision for individually differentiated needs (such as in health care). This scheme does quite well regarding the demands (b)-(f) of ANP. I have argued elsewhere for a modified version that makes it better in catering for these, and other demands.[[29]](#endnote-29) Two of the modifications are the following. First, to cater for demand (a) and to better cater for (f), some workplaces would be generated in which opportunities for self-realization and self-management are available. Second, to better cater for demands (c), (e), and (f), a flexible system of different tiers of equal income schedules could be introduced, in which a standard full-time workday is identified, but in which people are also allowed to work more (and earn more) if they especially value consumption and work less (and earn less) if they especially value leisure. This would allow people to strike their own judgment about the relative significance of various goods for them, without exploiting others in their pursuit.

**4. Exploitation as a multidimensional social process**

**4.1. Contrast with other accounts**

We can further clarify the account of the exploitation of workers shaped by ANP through a comparison with other accounts. These views have already been discussed by others. I thus survey them only briefly (although I spend more time with the last one because, being more recent, it has received less critical discussion, and because it is close to the view I propose). The main objectives are to tease out desiderata for an intuitively satisfactory account, and to show that the contra-solidaristic use of power account (CP), if shaped by ANP, satisfies them.

*Unequal exchange account.* On this account, A exploits B if and only if in their exchange A gets more than B does. This account leads to seeing the normative idea of the exploitation of labor as extensionally equivalent with the technical notion. Thus, in a common Marxist formulation, A exploits B, when B works for A, if and only if the amount of labor embodied in the goods A can consume thanks to the economic transaction with B is greater than the amount A contributes, with the opposite being the case for B (i.e. the goods accessible to B embody less labor than the labor B contributes in B’s economic transaction with A). The insight of this account is that it captures the significance of reciprocity. The CP account can do so too by drawing on demand (d) of ANP regarding fair reciprocity. Now, an important difficulty of the unequal exchange account is that it focuses on exchange of goods with equivalent value (measured in terms of socially necessary labor or market price). Thus, it unduly accepts the results of morally arbitrary differences in economic agents’ natural endowments. B, through no choice or fault of their own, may produce less than C despite exerting the same amount of effort or spending the same actual time at work, thus being entitled to less.[[30]](#endnote-30) The account would imply that redistributing from C to B would be exploitative. This result would be avoided by CP if based on ANP, as the demand of fair reciprocity focuses on ratios of effort to abilities, not to average labor or market value.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Furthermore, the unequal exchange account is insufficient because it would imply that redistribution from workers to people who cannot engage in production (because of certain handicaps, for example) would involve wrongful exploitation.[[32]](#endnote-32). If based in ANP, CP would not yield this counterintuitive result because ANP affirms positive duties (demand b), and, especially, basic positive duties which are not contingent on contribution (demand c). And, in any case, someone flouts the norm of fair reciprocity only if they *can* give more than they are actually giving.

*The labor entitlement account*. On this account, A exploits B if and only if A benefits from B in a way that is forced.[[33]](#endnote-33) Workers are entitled to the product of their labor. They are exploited when they are forced by socially created circumstances to surrender it. Thus, in a common Marxist formulation, B is forced to surrender surplus labor when B has no acceptable alternative to doing so. The forcing is social when the fact that B faces unacceptable alternatives to the exploitative scheme is the result of social institutions and practices. A’s forcing of B could be more or less direct—it can operate through threats to B if B does not accept the exploitative deal or through the creation and maintenance of certain institutional frameworks, such as property rights in means of production, which render propertyless people like B unable to fend for themselves. In the framework discussed in section 2, A exploits B when A offers S1 while threatening S3 or generating a S2 that is intolerable for B.

The insights of this account are the recognition of workers’ contribution and the critical examination of force and coercion. But if based in ANP, CP can capture these points. The demand (d) of fair reciprocity gives workers standing to reject some forms of surplus extraction, and the demand (f) regarding self-determination warns against economic frameworks which cast workers as mere puppets of the will of others.

CP/ANP can also avoid the problems of this account. The first problem is that it does not provide sufficient conditions for exploitation. As a response to morally arbitrary inequalities resulting from disparities in natural endowments, it would not be wrong to transfer surplus benefits from able-bodied workers to the handicapped people who cannot work. So, either there would be no exploitation here or there would be exploitation in the technical sense but not in the normatively loaded one (the extraction of surplus benefits would not be wrongful). Again, positive requirements (b) and (c) of ANP help avoid the problematic results.

This account also fails to provide necessary conditions. Exploitation can occur without forcing. For example, A may have sophisticated means of production which were legitimately acquired, hire B to work on them, and get a rent out of it, which B voluntarily accepts despite having acceptable—although less advantageous—alternatives.[[34]](#endnote-34) This problem is also avoided by CP when it draws on ANP’s demand (d), which challenges surplus extraction facilitated by inequalities in assets even in the absence of force or coercion.

*The unfair distribution of productive endowments account*. On this account, workers are entitled to a fair share in means of production (and other productive endowments). It is unjust when they are disadvantaged as a result of having less access to them than others. They are exploited when they have smaller shares than others, benefit the latter with their labor, but end up less well off (with less access to leisure time or income, for example). In capitalism, workers have little or no control of means of production while capitalists enjoy effective control of them. Workers are hired by capitalists, and transfer to them more benefits than they would if the distribution of means of production were less unequal. One way of formulating this account is by saying that A is an exploiter, and B is exploited, if and only if A gains from B’s labor and A would be worse off, and B better off, in a hypothetical economic environment in which the initial distribution of resources was equal (with everything else remaining constant).[[35]](#endnote-35)

This account carries two important insights. First, it addressees the significance of background inequality of opportunity in access to productive assets. Second, it recognizes the significance of the responsibility of agents for the choices they make regarding the use of what they control. Both points can be captured in ANP thanks to its egalitarian profile regarding access to economic preconditions of human flourishing, and through the demands (f) and (d) which call for an economic system that empowers workers to shape its terms, and which, to some extent, allows some agents to refrain from benefiting others who do not reciprocate in appropriate ways.

However, although CP/ANP recognizes the significance of fairness and responsibility, it does so in a way that avoids an important problem of the unfair distribution account. As pointed out by Vrousalis, this account generates counterintuitive results which make it unfit for the identification of necessary conditions for wrongful exploitation. In his *Pit* case, A encounters B in a pit from which B cannot get out. B is in that pit through (bad) option luck—say, after choosing to go skiing in a mountain with known risks posed by pits in it. It is not the result of brute luck such as an unfair initial division of economic advantages. Now, A could easily rescue B by throwing a rope, but chooses to drive a hard bargain offering the rope only if B signs a contract to work for A in a sweatshop for life.[[36]](#endnote-36) This is wrongful exploitation, but it involves no unfair background distribution. This result would not arise with CP if it relies on ANP, given that, in addition to concerns about fairness and responsibility, ANP includes basic positive duties to rescue others in dire straits (demand c). ANP also calls for appreciating the specific circumstances of individuals and the importance of a self-determination in economic affairs that is real rather than merely formal (demands e and f), which in cases like Pit should call for solidarity rather than opportunistic profiteering. Pit also displays a violation of demand (a), as in it A boxes B indefinitely into a situation in which self-realization in work is unavailable.

Another problem of this account is that it seems explanatorily deficient. It tells us what enables A to exploit B, but not what exploitation consists in. (Alternatively: it makes exploitation a wholly derivative issue, holding the distribution of productive assets as the only really significant issue). Even if all and only the cases of exploitation could be identified by using the device of hypothetical comparison with counterfactual situations of equality of endowments, we would get extensional equivalence but not sufficient understanding. The relational dimension of inappropriate instrumentalization or contra-solidaristic treatment when wielding power is not captured.[[37]](#endnote-37)

*The domination for self-enrichment account.* The relational dimension is addressed by accounts of exploitation as taking advantage of the vulnerabilities of others. This paper’s view of exploitation as a misuse of power to get others to benefit you more than they should is indeed a variant of this perspective, although developed in a specific way. As Vrousalis notes, in its initial versions the instrumentalization of vulnerability account is insufficiently discriminative. Surgeons benefit from the sorry health of their patients but getting paid for their services need not involve exploitation.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Vrousalis has a proposal to fill in the details. According to his “domination for self-enrichment” account, “A exploits B if A benefits from a transaction in which A dominates B”.[[39]](#endnote-39) The added point here is that A subordinates B, getting B to act on reasons that are not independent from A’s power over B. Exploited workers transfer surplus benefits to their exploiters not because they are generous or to fulfill the exploiters’ needs, but because they are at their mercy.

This account captures the importance of power differentials, and the relational odiousness of using them egotistically. (CP also obviously covers these points by, respectively, drawing upon ANP’s demands (f) and (b)-(e).) But the domination account is itself insufficiently discriminative. Some exchanges involving domination might not involve exploitation, and some may be more exploitative than others.[[40]](#endnote-40) The account cannot explain these variations without drawing on additional considerations about appropriate distributive outcomes—something the CP account does and is for that reason better. To notice and measure the exploitative abusiveness of power use we need a distributive principle. Just saying that freedom is set back by domination while surplus benefits are extracted is not enough. Solidaristic Empowerment includes additional vital considerations.

To clarify this challenge, consider Vrousalis’s discussion of Roemer’s critique of exploitation as only a matter of unjust inequality in initial distribution of assets. Vrousalis deftly shows that the latter is not necessary for exploitation, as exploitation can arise even when the current inequality has a clean pedigree—one that reflects choices by agents initially situated in fair conditions. His *Ant and Grasshopper* case is telling. In it, Ant and Grasshopper start with equal endowments, but while Ant works hard before the winter, Grasshopper lazes about. When the winter comes, Grasshopper lacks enough resources to survive, while Ant has plenty. Ant can now choose to (i) ignore Grasshopper, (ii) give Grasshopper shelter on condition that Grasshopper signs a sweatshop contract to work for Ant, or (iii) give shelter to Grasshopper at no cost to Ant. If Ant chooses (ii), Ant would be exploiting Grasshopper, and this against a background of inequality in assets that is not unjust. The resulting payoffs in terms of the relevant metric of advantage are:

(Ant, Grasshopper)

(i): Do nothing: (10, 1)

(ii): Sweatshop: (12, 2)

(iii): Shelter: (10, 3).[[41]](#endnote-41)

Vrousalis is right that there is wrongful exploitation in (ii), and that unfairness understood on the luck-egalitarian way is unnecessary for it.[[42]](#endnote-42) But it would be helpful to explore further scenarios of wage labor that proceed not only in (ii) sweatshop conditions but also in (iv) non-sweatshop conditions (with payoffs of 11.5, 2.5 for example), and where case (iii) is not available (i.e., when (iii)\* Ant would bear costs when sheltering Grasshopper—yielding payoffs of 9, 3 for example). There could be many versions of (iv), and to ascertain their acceptability we need considerations of distributive justice or fairness which Vrousalis’s account does not provide. Here reciprocity and individual responsibility would be relevant, I think. Some cases of (iv) may not be wrong if A worked hard to reach the current state while B chose to enjoy more leisure time.[[43]](#endnote-43) Without considerations like these, we cannot know when the terms Ant offers to Grasshopper really involve an affront to Grasshopper’s status or dignity, or how serious that affront is. We need some substantive distributive principle regarding either initial positions or outcomes (or both) to know when domination or misuse of power features exploitation (to know when there is too much that is being taken by the exploiter), and how bad that exploitation is.

Vrousalis says that “exploitation constitutes procedural injury to *status*, and status-injury is not reducible to distributive injury”.[[44]](#endnote-44) If I am right, however, we need a combination of procedural and distributive considerations. It seems to me that this combination is already assumed in Vrousalis’s formulation of exploitation as “domination for self-enrichment.” Here the procedural notion (domination) is coupled with a distributive one (self-enrichment). After all, since exploitation is an agential process, its teleological dimension must be addressed squarely. One possibility going forward is to constrain power differentials in economic power. This can be done by prohibiting unequal control of productive assets, or by allowing some which have a “clean pedigree” while blocking ex ante, or redressing ex post, some uses of them that would generate unacceptable distributive results. ANP supports this through the considerations of self-determination (f), fair reciprocity (d), and basic positive duties (c), for example. The CP/ANP account promises a more textured discussion of exploitation because the Dignitarian Approach it is built with precisely takes off with a fuller understanding of what it is to appropriately respond to the status of persons.[[45]](#endnote-45)

**4.2. A multidimensional process**

Each one of the alternative views of exploitation discussed captures important points but misses others. The CP account informed by ANP can avoid the problems of these accounts and capture their insights (and some others—such as the importance of positive duties). In particular, CP/ANP illuminates the fact that the wrongfulness of exploitation is complex. Exploitation involves a combination of features regarding three dimensions, and CP/ANP meets the challenge of illuminating their significance and relation.

(i) *Background material and social circumstances (including initial distributions).* The first dimension concerns the material and social background against which exploitation takes place. A key feature of this background involves an asymmetry of power between the relevant agents, or disparities in the extent to which they are vulnerable to each other. The asymmetry may be due to psycho-physical features of the agents and their circumstances or to social structures that agents have created (such as certain private property institutions).

(ii) *Relational attitudes, treatment.* The second dimension is attitudinal, expressive, or procedural. It concerns how agents treat each other. Exploitation involves a problematically instrumental treatment of the exploited by the exploiters. This has both interpersonal and systemic or structural instances (a point I return to in section 5).

(iii) *Final distributive results.* The third dimension concerns the final results of the exploitative process. The distributive upshot of this process is that the exploited get less, and the exploiters more, than what they could justly claim.

The three dimensions are analytically distinct. (ii) can hold without (i): It is possible for A to form instrumentalizing intentions in their relation with B even if A is not powerful enough to get B to do what A wants. (i) can hold without (ii): A may be more powerful than B but not use that power to instrumentalize B unduly, pursuing instead forms of cooperation that yield fair (or less unfair) distributions. (i) and (ii) can hold without (iii): A may use their power over B to try to get B to yield surplus benefits for A, but due to other factors (such as the intervention of C, or some natural phenomenon) fail to generate the distribution that gives A more than B. (iii) can arise without (i) and (ii) as an unintended consequence of interactions by initially equally endowed agents. And so on. However, the dimensions are typically connected. For example, the power asymmetry in (i) enables A to effectively instrumentalize B in (ii); together, the background in (i) and the treatment in (ii) help explain how the morally problematic distributions in (iii) come about; and the distributive disparities in (iii) reproduce the background power asymmetries in (i), and enable the problematic treatment in (ii), over time.

Now, the solidaristic perspective can be construed as targeting each of these dimensions. Targeting (i), it can call for reducing interpersonal or structural power asymmetries. This would remove enabling conditions for exploitation. Targeting (ii) (and, simultaneously, (iii)), solidarity can call for using whatever asymmetries remain in ways that enhance the personal power of agents (and in particular the weaker ones) to achieve flourishing lives. And targeting (iii) (but not interpersonal cases of (ii)), solidarity can call for the introduction of institutional mechanisms that incentivize people to act in ways that will cause just distributions even if the motivations to act in those ways do not themselves include reference to the prospect of producing those effects (some frameworks of market competition and redistributive taxation might be defended in this way). Arguably, the ideal project would be to target all the dimensions simultaneously. But it could be that in some junctures this ambition is not sufficiently likely to succeed. It could be, for example, that in a particular context a reduction of power asymmetry targeting (i) would produce more rather than less instrumental treatment, or worse rather than better distributive effects. A challenge for future research on CP/ANP is to explore the various possibilities opened up by this analytic framework. What is clear is that those possibilities are firmly on the agenda once we see exploitation as a multiple failure to take the dignity of others seriously.

Pulling together the various strands of the discussion offered in this paper, we get the following picture:

*Level 1*: CP account of exploitation.

*Level 2*: ANP and its demands for dimensions (i)-(iii).

*Level 3*: Dignitarian Approach; Solidaristic Empowerment; and (revised) Kantian protocol.

CP says that A exploits B when A benefits from B’s work through a contra-solidaristic use of A’s greater power. To figure out when wrongful exploitation indeed occurs, we mobilize substantive standards to shape the content and application of CP. That is the task of levels L3 and L2. Deploying the Dignitarian Approach and the Kantian protocol proposed in section 3, we ask: Is the allocation and use of power under examination one which those affected by it would, ex ante, prospectively authorize if they envisioned what terms of social cooperation to establish while treating each other’s dignity seriously?[[46]](#endnote-46) The relevant terms will have to rely on grounds that all can rationally accept as responding to everyone’s dignity. The ideal of Solidaristic Empowerment guides the search for those grounds, by directing people to figure out how to support the development and exercise of the features in virtue of which they have dignity. Those generic considerations are then articulated further into an economic outlook through the Abilities/Needs Principle. ANP has implications for each of the three dimensions stated in this section. By working out the details of this approach, we can explain why some interactions, or even some social structures, contribute to wrongful exploitation. Future research should illuminate these details for relevant contexts—to operationalize the application of ANP to assess cases of transfer of surplus benefits from workers to others. This paper has certainly not provided such details. Its task has been the more foundational and philosophical one of outlining the core normative structure of the approach.[[47]](#endnote-47)

**5. Agency and structure**

I conclude by briefly discussing some possible objections. They all target complexities regarding the agency of A and B as individual or collective agents variously affected by other agents and social structures. The objections can in principle be answered, but they also point to the need to develop the CP/ANP approach in future work.

It could first be objected that it is not really problematic that there is interpersonal exploitation if at the aggregate level the upshot is desirable. A system allowing for exploitation might be more efficient than a system without (or with less of) it. Witness the dramatic increase in productivity that capitalism has generated. In response, consider three points. First, from a principled perspective, it is important to keep the intrinsic odiousness of exploitation in view. The intense instrumentalization of other human beings which exploitation involves is in itself an awful way of shaping human relationships, even if all things considered people end up better off as a result. We should keep asking: could we imagine ways of getting equivalent levels of advantage without having to treat each other in this way? Second, it is not clear that increases in productivity require contra-solidaristic treatment. In fact, in its current phase capitalism has been incorporating reliance on personal initiative and solidarity among workers forming teams and pursuing projects within firms (especially those involved in knowledge-intensive and innovative tasks). These workers are still exploited, but their new experiences may be pointing towards future possibilities in which their practices of autonomy and cooperation shatter the exploitative mold within which they have been unleashed. Third, assuming (contrary to the second response) that a tradeoff is unavoidable, we should rethink how important it is to insist on greater material output when it comes at the expense of serious relational deficits (as well as environmental risks, of course). Efficiency is parasitic on the utility variables being maximized. Once high levels of production are already achieved, improving human relationships may be more important than getting even more stuff to consume.[[48]](#endnote-48)

A second objection is that it might not be so problematic that there are power asymmetries and domination at the workplace or in the labor market if there is self-determination at the political level. A might be using power contra-solidaristically in day to day economic life, but A and B, together, might be political equals in a democratic system. If as equal citizens they choose an economic framework involving exploitation, then it is not clear that anyone is wronged, as that framework is self-imposed. I agree that self-determination at the macro-societal level is important. Demand (f) of ANP requires it. But it also affirms the importance of the self-determination of individuals in their daily economic life. A collective, societal permission of economic exploitation would depress individual self-determination. The democratically selected regime might be legitimate, but it would still be unjust. It would make sense for citizens to keep campaigning within the democratic process to reach better decisions. An additional, familiar, but very important answer is that the inequality of wealth that results from exploitation infects the political process so that those with greater economic power have disproportional influence on the political process (through lobbying on lawmakers, campaign finance of politicians, the offering of corporate jobs before and after they are in office, and through the threat of disinvesting and capital flight if policies lower their profit margin). Democratic complacency towards exploitative schemes is self-destructive—it depresses the prospect for effective political equality, which is at the heart of the dignity of persons as citizens, and of the value of democracy. For this reason, it also weakens the indirect authorization of exploitation that democracy is said to provide.

A third worry concerns the relation between individual agency and social structure. It might seem inappropriate, on reflection, to focus on the moral condemnation of the relation of exploitation between A and B, if A and B are individuals. First, it is not evident that B is at the mercy of A. B could choose another job, and eventually even exit the working class by starting a small firm. Second, it is not clear that A is capable of treating B differently. Facing stiff competition, A might go out of business if A does not maximize profit through exploitation.

Although familiar, this worry is not convincing. Regarding the first point, we can note that even if some workers can, in a tight labor market, get better deals because of their rare skills, their normal condition is one of having to accept subordination and exploitation by some capitalist or other. Furthermore, changing jobs often imposes significant personal and financial costs. Employers benefit from this general condition and use it in their dealing with any worker they hire. As for exiting the working class altogether, this is a prospect that is very unlikely indeed for individuals who are not extraordinarily endowed or motivated,[[49]](#endnote-49) and in any case is not possible—within capitalism—for all or most of them simultaneously.[[50]](#endnote-50) For most individual workers, their predicament remains as discussed in section 2. Only collective action, deep reform, or structural change offer them a significantly better prospect in which they reject S1 by falling back on a solid S2 from which they can confidently pursue S4.

Regarding the second point, I concede that individual capitalists are affected by competitive pressures. In particular, the owners of small business, such as the Tim Hortons franchise in the example opening this paper, have less power than other capitalists with controlling shares in massive corporations like Amazon. The point, however, should not be exaggerated. Unlike most workers, who must take up wage employment to make a living, most capitalists do not need to hire and exploit other people to do so (they could be wage workers themselves). Additionally, each capitalist may choose to amass less personal wealth to reduce the exploitation of their workers.[[51]](#endnote-51) Furthermore, capitalists routinely engage in collective action—for example, through business associations—to shape economic, political, legal, and cultural conditions. They indeed have significant causal responsibility regarding their generation. And, given their greater power to affect them over time, they have sharper normative responsibilities than the workers they exploit.

An important issue, however, emerges from this discussion. It concerns the significance of avoiding an exclusive focus on interpersonal rapports, and the need for illuminating the relational stance as it concerns the larger systemic or structural dimension (as well as for linking both aspects of the second, relational dimension in the framework identified in section 4.2 with the other dimensions concerning initial and final distributions). Besides exhortations for occasional acts of individual decency and abnegation, it is especially important to focus on generating societal structures in which power is allocated in more egalitarian ways that express and facilitate solidaristic treatment as a regular feature of economic life. Agents act within structures, but they can also change them over time. This is precisely what the CP/ANP perspective proposed in this paper encourages us to do. Imagining and pursuing alternative, solidaristic social structures is, I think, what dignitarian virtue would mostly consist in.

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1. Saltzman (2018b). A worker told a reporter, “I feel that we are getting the raw end of the stick,” and asked to remain anonymous for fear of being fired. The owners of this franchise, heirs to the founders of the firm, were safe from the cold Canadian weather in their winter home in Florida. Saltzman (2018a). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. One definition of surplus labor in the technical account is that it is that part of workers’ labor which goes beyond the amount of labor embodied in the consumption goods they can access with their salary or as some other form of remuneration for their work. I will not rely on this characterization to avoid being saddled with the problems of the labor theory of value, but I will try to capture the point that the exchange between exploiter and exploited is unequal (with the former obtaining surplus benefits). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Exploitation in sense (a) does not logically imply exploitation in sense (b). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In the reminder of this paper, when I use “exploitation” I mean it in the normative sense. When disambiguation is needed, I use “wrongful exploitation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The exploitation relation is often articulated by reference to classes. Marx (1978a, 205) said workers “belong not to this or that capitalist but to *the capitalist class*” (they must sell their labor power to *some* member of the capitalist class). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Roemer (2017, 263). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. On the importance of social ethos, see Cohen (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On the metric issue, see Cohen (2011, chs. 1-3). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On the differences and relations between these dimensions see Gilabert (2017a). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For this account of power see Gilabert (2018b). On this account, the power of A over B may proceed through various mechanisms (e.g. threats, promises of rewards, moral persuasion, etc.). It is useful to start with a broad definition of power, and identify relevant variants depending on our specific normative and explanatory purposes. For a survey, see Lukes (2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. WP and CP are stated here quite generally. To apply them to the case of the exploitation of workers, we should add that the surplus benefit A gets from B comes from B’s work. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. To state the historically typical background conditions of systematic exploitation of labor I rely on Cohen (2001); Elster (1985)*,* and Roemer (1996)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. There are exceptions, such as exploitative trade between differently endowed independent producers in a simple commodity production society, and the “socialist exploitation” by the talented in early stages of socialist organization. On “socialist exploitation” regarding the handling of (iv), see Roemer (1996,107-8). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. In this and the next two paragraphs I draw on, and develop, the discussion in Gilabert (2018c). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Since, normally, in a capitalist economy, even in competitive equilibrium, labor markets don’t clear (i.e. there is involuntary unemployment), and labor contracts are incomplete, this form of power is effective. Bowles and Gintis (1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Notice that in this case the distinction between S2 and S3 is blurred as, historically, B’s status quo is the result of A’s coercive agency. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Elster (1986, 82-3). Marx (1990, 899) talks about workers in capitalism as voluntarily taking up employment under capitalists while also being subject to the “silent compulsion of economic relations.”. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Given the point about thresholds mentioned above, it might be a mistake to say that when B face fallback options above the thresholds of subsistence or decency they are coerced or compelled to work for A. And yet, if the options are significantly worse for B than the deal offered by A, and significantly worse for B than for A, then A may still manage to impose an exploitative schedule. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. On paths of socialist change, see Wright (2010) and Corneo (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. For systematic development of the Dignitarian Approach see Pablo Gilabert (2018a). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. I develop this case from an example in Carens (2003, 155). For empirical research on cooperation and altruism, see Bowles and Gintis (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Roemer (2017, 307-10). Roemer discusses the important views on community provided in Cohen (2009). I examine them in Gilabert (2011, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. I do not deny that some forms of altruism are supererogatory. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Those who will need (partially or fully) unreciprocated help will not rationally choose schemes of social life devoid of altruism. My reformulation of the Kantian protocol is akin to the proposal of Kantian Contractualism as elaborated in Parfit (2011, sects. 49, 52).

    We can say that this formula also better captures the spirit of Kant’s Formula of Humanity demanding that we treat persons as ends in themselves, not merely as means. I argue elsewhere that this core Kantian idea includes positive duties. See Gilabert, (2010, 2017b). Now, exploitation can be seen as flouting an appropriate interpretation and application of the formula as framing economic behavior and structures. Exploitation is a paradigmatic case of failure to respond appropriately to the human dignity of workers. It involves treating them merely (or excessively) as means, as mostly a bundle of resources, or not treating them sufficiently as ends. Capitalism may do better in some respects than, say slavery, by recognizing some negative liberties—workers may not be made to work without their consent. But it is insufficient, as workers are not granted much in terms of real opportunities to access work that is not exploitative. Capitalism may even twist the idea of freedom insidiously, by casting the exploited as responsible for their own exploitation.

    Parfit helpfully notes that we should refine our understanding of the Formula of Humanity to avoid making it unduly lenient—it would be easy not to treat others *merely* as means by taking them as ends just a little bit while neglecting them in every other respect. (See 2011, ch. 9.)One way to do this is indeed to deploy the Kantian idea of a Realm of Ends, in which people identify norms that everybody concerned would, simultaneously, rationally accept. This is the Kantian Contractualist protocol mentioned above. Of course, we need to also explore what substantive principles could rationally be chosen, and the generic reasons for choosing them. The Abilities/Needs Principle I propose is one such principle, and the interests in developing and exercising the capacities at the basis of dignity provide relevant generic reasons. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. I provide a detailed discussion of ANP in Gilabert (2015). The demands (a)-(e) mentioned below also draw on this discussion, although here their statement is revised, their dignitarian basis is developed, and a new demand (f) is added (combining elements of demands (f) and (g) in the previous statement). The ANP is briefly stated in Marx (1978b, 531). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. To avoid misunderstandings, I note that self-determination is not the same as self-ownership, if self-ownership is incompatible with recognizing positive duties of justice. It is also different from independence, if independence is understood as self-reliance. Self-reliance is infeasible and undesirable. Everyone depends on others for the pursuit of their own flourishing, and nobody should feel shame if they are helped, or guilt if they help others, to flourish. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Notice that the dignitarian and solidaristic perspective captures concerns about both freedom and self-realization or well-being—given their connection with important human capacities. Thus, it links up to the critiques of domination and of alienation in the articulation of the critique of exploitation (even though the former critiques also range beyond the latter). Exploitation involves insufficient regard for the freedom and well-being of the people exploited. Exploitation arguably involves domination because the extraction of benefits from the exploited is accomplished by the use of asymmetric power by the exploiter, who imposes their will on the exploited. Exploitation also involves alienation because the exploited are less able to develop and exercise their valuable human capacities (i.e. achieve human flourishing) than they would if people pulled their powers together with the aim of fostering each other’s human flourishing rather than with the aim of extracting from each other asymmetric benefits.

    So the solidaristic and dignitarian perspective illuminates the fact that for socialists the critique of exploitation is connected to, and forms a package with, the critiques of domination and alienation. We should also think about what unifies these three critiques. I think that the Abilities/Needs Principle, and the dignitarian ideal of Solidaristic Empowerment helps illuminate the common basis. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Carens (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Gilabert (2015, 212-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. It could be said that a modified version of the unequal exchange account that requires perfect competition would avoid this objection. But it is not clear that perfect markets would eliminate unfairness resulting from unequal natural endowments (such as talents and bodily abilities). The salaries and other rewards which low skilled workers fetch in a perfect market may still be too low from a moral point of view. See Arneson (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. This holds at the level of principle. However, it is difficult to operationalize fair reciprocity to measure levels of effort and abilities, and this is a shared concern for the CP/ANP account and for the unequal exchange account. Furthermore, B and C may work for the same hours and with the same effort, but one experiences more drudgery than the other. This does not make the account break down, however (as Elster suggests in 1985, 202). The proportionality of income to time or effort at work can be held as a pro tanto consideration, with special considerations about relative disutility of work being added when desirable and feasible.The modification of the Carensian scheme suggested in section 3 provides resources to address these issues but is far from perfect. More work in this area is needed. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Arnsperger and Van Parijs (2003, ch. III); Vrousalis, (2018, sect. 4.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Holmstrom (1977); Reiman (1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Roemer (1996, ch. 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. I base this formulation on Roemer (1996, 110). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. This is a simplified version of the case in Vrousalis (2013, 148-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. For a survey of Roemer’s various formulations of his exploitation theory which discusses this problem (which has also been addressed by others), as well as an argument that Roemer’s distributive account is insufficient because it does not properly illuminate the centrality of power asymmetries in relations of exploitation, see Veneziani (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Vrousalis (2018, sect. 6.1). For a seminal discussion of exploitation as abuse of power over the vulnerable, see Goodin (1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Vrousalis (2018 sect. 6.2). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Some economic arrangements might involve subordination and some extraction of surplus benefits without exploitation as their rationale. The ruling agents in Orwell’s *1984* seem to be in the game for the perverse joy of lording over others, not to extract material advantages from their subjects. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Vrousalis (2013, 150). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. It is not helpful, however, to reduce (as Vrousalis does) the use of “fairness” to what a luck-egalitarian would characterize as unjust. The notion is often used more widely. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. This case of (iv) could still involve domination, but not wrongful exploitation. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Vrousalis (2013, 151). [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Vrousalis construes his account of respect for the status of persons along the lines of the ideal of democratic equality proposed by Elizabeth Anderson, which downplays distributive considerations. My dignitarian account of respect and concern is different. Solidaristic Empowerment has distributive elements. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Recall the contrast between (ii) and (iv) in the Ant/Grasshopper case. Using the Kantian protocol, both Ant and Grasshopper could rationally authorize, ex ante, the prospect of asymmetry of power and its use in (iv), but not in (ii). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Although I present Solidaristic Empowerment as a specification of the Dignitarian Approach, I do not say that the former could not be defended differently. A similar caveat applies to the relation between the items in Level 3 and ANP, and between ANP and CP. The relations stated in the paper are strong enough for my purposes, but readers could accept some items falling downstream without having to embrace grounds they do not find appealing. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. These points engage the significant issue of the subjective schemas sustaining practices of exploitation. Often A are cast as leaders and inciters, and B as contributors and consumers. Now, when B become involved in the design of production and engage in horizontal cooperation, A appear rather parasitic and manipulating, and their exploitation becomes more evident and appalling. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Elster (1985, 208-16). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Cohen (1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Must the owners of the Tim Hortons franchise have a winter home in Florida while their workers are struggling to pay their rent back in Ontario? Contrast this with the owner of Gravity Rainbow choosing to dramatically increase workers’ salaries and reduce his profits. Chen (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-51)