

CLASSCRITS MISSION STATEMENT¹

We live in an era of extreme economic inequality not seen since the Gilded Age. In America today, commentators and scholars often portray this inequality as the natural byproduct of the differing interests, talents, and education that individuals bring to something called the “market.” This “market,” a complex system involving millions of participants, driven by the purported imperatives of “supply” and “demand,” as well as the apparent “preferences” of diverse identities, appears as a naturally occurring phenomenon, like water, oil, or trees—capable of existing without any conscious, collective, human action. On this view, economic inequality is the unfortunate and unavoidable costs of a living in a free market society.

A robust tradition of critique insists, to the contrary, that markets and the social classes they produce are political and that collective action can bring about a more equal and just society. However, too often those who argue for class consciousness in the service of progressive social change treat racism, sexism, and other forms of identity-related oppression as secondary to class, and suggest that organizing on the basis of “social” identity is a distraction from the central task of organizing around “economic” interests.

We contest both these views. First, **we hold that class power is inextricably connected to the development of racial and gender hierarchies**, as well as to other systems of unequal power and privilege. The historical debate about the primacy of class, race, or gender has been counterproductive. None of these inequalities can be effectively remedied without confronting all of them. We seek to understand how economic inequality is produced not only directly, through control over the means of economic production, distribution, and exchange, but also indirectly, through control over ideas and information. For example, familiar ideas about black inferiority, the separate spheres of women and men, the global South’s need for “development” to catch up with the North, and the

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distinction between “civilized” and “savage” nations and peoples, have all operated to facilitate and legitimate economic exploitation and marginalization. Moreover, these well-worn tropes reinforce the idea that racialized and gendered divisions between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, are natural—not political.

Second, **we hold that law is central to the creation and maintenance of structural inequalities.** Legal institutions and legal language—including, ironically, the language of equality and liberty—make hierarchies of class, race, and gender seem both natural and fair. It is not only “social” power but legal concepts like “freedom of contract” and “racial identity” that help us imagine market dynamics to function beyond the purview of politics. Legal tools such as the corporate form make possible huge concentrations of wealth and power, and legal institutions, including courts and legislatures, give an appearance of impartiality and democracy to projects of exploitation and upward redistribution. For instance, the corporations that brought on the economic crisis of 2008 were creations of law, and the debt instruments on which they gambled were defined and enforced by law. When it became clear that these corporations had lost their market gamble, their executives, along with most wealthy Americans, promptly forgot about the natural virtues of market competition. Armies of lobbyists descended on Washington seeking conscious government intervention to ensure that ordinary taxpayers, not corporate executives or wealthy investors, would bear the cost. But the economic crisis is only a single example of the law’s constitutive role in the social construction of class. The legal construction of racial and gender inequality is just as real, and just as potent—as are other legally created and enforced hierarchies.

Thankfully, law’s empire is not destined to further structural inequality, and it is neither natural nor necessary for law to serve forever as the handmaiden of hierarchy. Law also provides a powerful moral language of social critique. Law is contested terrain: moral and ethical ideals of justice, fairness, and equality can be implemented through law to generate, sustain, and share wealth more fairly and to alter economic and social relations in progressive directions.

Accordingly, Class Crits seeks to:

- Foster discussion among scholars and activists on issues related to class and the intersection of class with race, gender, sexuality and other forms of structural subordination and inequality, including nationality, disability, and rurality.

- Provide collegial support for research and writing on class and the intersection of class with other forms of systemic subordination and inequality.
- Serve as an organizing center for projects concerning law and class including, for example, casebooks, collaborative research projects, and other innovative, praxis-oriented projects.
- In all of its work, encourage exploration of further questions about the above goals, including the meaning and usefulness of class as a category for addressing economic inequality and injustice; how to analyze and resist the various forms of systemic inequality that intersect with class and economics; and how we might expand or go beyond the concept of “equality” to advance economic justice, human flourishing, and ecological flourishing.