

A pluralistic framework for the study of economic exploitation

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Nick Drydakis

*Faculty of Business and Law, Centre for Inclusive Societies and Economies,
Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK and
Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK, and*

Michael E. Martell

Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – This study seeks to develop a coherent and ethically engaged research framework for the analysis of exploitation. It responds to the pressing need for a more critical and transformative framework capable of addressing the complex realities of exploitation within contemporary economies. In an era marked by deepening precarity, prevailing economic approaches often fail to interrogate the systemic nature of exploitation or to engage substantively with alternative perspectives. This study presents a structured vision grounded in normative commitments, interdisciplinary research and an epistemically pluralistic understanding of the economics of exploitation.

Design/methodology/approach – The study integrates a wide range of theoretical traditions to conceptualise exploitation as a structural, relational and historically contingent phenomenon. Through an agenda-setting analysis, it identifies priority areas such as digital labour platforms, reproductive labour, global supply chains and postcolonial institutional legacies. It promotes epistemic pluralism, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative approaches and supports participatory and community-engaged forms of research. The proposed framework is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly No Poverty (SDG 1), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16).

Findings – The study argues that exploitation is not merely a market failure but often a core mechanism of accumulation and control within market systems. It is sustained through legal and institutional arrangements that concentrate power while obscuring responsibility. The analysis demonstrates that exploitation is co-constitutive, and that gendered, racialised and colonial dynamics are embedded within economic structures. It further highlights the limitations of the dominant economic framework in addressing these systemic conditions and sets out the case for a research framework grounded in equity, reflexivity and historical awareness.

Research limitations/implications – The Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation provides a foundation for rethinking economic inquiry in ways that centre power, history and social equity. It supports the development of transdisciplinary approaches, encourages mixed-methods research that reveals the hidden and informal dimensions of exploitation and promotes collaborative inquiry that bridges academic research with lived experience. It also invites deeper engagement with Southern, Indigenous and feminist epistemologies.

Social implications – By foregrounding the lived experiences of those most affected by exploitation, the study contributes to the production of knowledge that is inclusive, critically engaged and emancipatory. It advances a vision of research that not only analyses systems of exploitation but also supports efforts to address them. In doing so, it aims to promote research that informs policy, legal reform and grassroots interventions.

Originality/value – This study develops The Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation, which is grounded in six principles: Structural and Relational Ontology; Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge; Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis; Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation; Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry; and Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking.

Keywords Exploitation, Inequality, Interdisciplinary research, Intersectionality, Decolonial theory, Sustainable development goals, Epistemic pluralism

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1. Introduction

Exploitation refers to the processes through which value is unequally extracted under conditions of structural dependency, often generating or reinforcing inequality (Reiff, 2013; Holmstrom, 1997; Hill, 1994). At the same time, inequality refers to observable



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differences in the distribution of resources, opportunities and outcomes. It is important to distinguish between inequality and inequity, with the latter referring to those inequalities that are unjust, avoidable and rooted in structural disadvantage or discrimination (Milanovic, 2016; Bourguignon, 2015; Darity, 2005). Without simultaneous attention to both, there is a risk of obscuring the foundations of exploitation (Tahmaseb, 2021; van Doorn, 2017; Veneziani, 2013; Albee and Perry, 1998; Roemer, 1982). Inequalities are often the outcomes of historically and institutionally embedded power relations, including legal, financial, cultural, epistemic and ideological structures, which consistently privilege some while disadvantaging others (Fraser, 2016; Piketty, 2014). These structures place disproportionate burdens on racialised groups, women, individuals with disabilities, migrants, sexual and gender identity minoritised groups, vulnerable children and youth and the working poor, across both the Global North and South (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Drydakis, 2023, 2022a; Sidiropoulou *et al.*, 2020; Darity *et al.*, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2017). Exploitation, inequality and inequity are thus not discrete phenomena but intersecting and mutually reinforcing conditions, reproduced through everyday economic relations and institutional structures that harm certain populations and regions [1].

Since 2020, according to the International Labour Organization, approximately 27.6 million people have been subjected to exploitative working conditions associated with forced labour and modern slavery (International Labour Organization, 2022). These include physical and psychological threats, withheld wages and debt bondage (Pinnington *et al.*, 2023). This figure comprises 17.3 million individuals exploited in the private sector, 6.3 million in forced commercial sexual exploitation and 3.9 million under state-imposed forced labour. Women and girls represent 39.4% of those affected, with 4.9 million exploited in the sex trade and 6 million in other sectors. Alarming, children account for 3.3 million of all victims, more than half of whom are involved in commercial sexual exploitation. Migrant employees are particularly vulnerable, facing a threefold higher risk of severe exploitation compared to non-migrant adults. Regionally, the highest numbers are recorded in Asia and the Pacific (15.1 million). The economic scale of this exploitation is staggering, with forced labour generating an estimated \$236 billion in illegal profits annually. This figure reflects the wages or earnings effectively stolen from the pockets of employees by the perpetrators of forced labour through their coercive practices. The International Labour Organization underscores that addressing widespread decent work deficits, particularly in the informal economy, is essential for tackling exploitation. This call has gained urgency given the continuing rise in the number of people working in conditions of severe exploitation (Ishaya *et al.*, 2024).

Trafficking represents a critical manifestation of both forced labour and modern slavery. The number of detected trafficking victims increased by 25% in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024). Child trafficking rose by 31%, including a 38% increase among girls. Trafficking for forced criminality expanded from 1% in 2016 to 8% in 2022. Women and girls accounted for 61% of all victims, with 60% of girls trafficked for sexual exploitation. Africa features prominently, with 31% of cross-border victims originating from African countries, alongside a marked increase in child trafficking across Sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2024).

Simultaneously, structural shifts in labour markets have contributed to heightened precarity: over 58% of the global workforce, approximately 2 billion people, are employed informally, without adequate labour protections (International Labour Organization, 2023). The gig economy now accounts for up to 12% of global employment, offering flexibility while frequently circumventing traditional employment rights (World Bank, 2023). Environmental crises further compound these inequalities. By the end of 2023, at least 7.7 million people had been internally displaced due to climate-related disasters, contributing to a global total of 117.3 million forcibly displaced individuals (International Organization for Migration, 2024; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024). These patterns reinforce the critical relevance of Sustainable Development Goal 8, which promotes decent work and economic

growth. They also underscore the importance of coordinated, proactive responses by governments, international organisations and businesses to eliminate forced labour and ensure fair, dignified employment for all (United Nations, 2025).

The widening gulf between the wealthy and the impoverished is no longer confined to individual nations; it has become a defining feature of the global economy (Smith, 2016; Söllner, 2014). While globalisation has narrowed income inequality between countries, it has simultaneously deepened inequality within them, resulting in a complex and multidimensional landscape of global inequality, much of which is underpinned by enduring forms of exploitation and inequity (Aissaoui and Fabian, 2021; Smith, 2016; Milanovic, 2016; Bourguignon, 2015; Piketty, 2014; Söllner, 2014). From precarious work and forced labour to algorithmic control and environmental dispossession, exploitation functions both as a cause and a consequence of intersecting inequalities, requiring an integrated analytical approach grounded in history, ethics and lived experience (Hamann and Bertels, 2018; Veneziani, 2013; Finch, 2002).

Changes in global labour markets have amplified these concerns. The rise of precarious employment, evident in zero-hours contracts, temporary agency work and the rapid expansion of gig economy platforms, has led to heightened insecurity, suppressed wages and the erosion of hard-won labour rights (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2024; Yin, 2024; Kalleberg, 2018; Strauss, 2012; Standing, 2011; Anderson, 2010). These forms of precarious work not only generate insecurity and depressed wages but are also reinforced by the lack of secure, well-paid alternatives, the weakening of trade unions and broader patterns of labour market deregulation. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of vulnerability and diminished employee agency.

The gig economy, in particular, has entrenched racialised and gendered exploitative conditions, with women and migrant employees often disproportionately disadvantaged (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2024; Yin, 2024; Lata *et al.*, 2023; van Doorn, 2017; Lewis *et al.*, 2015; Federici, 2020). One example of such exploitation is when gig platforms pay employees per task without benefits or job security. Women and migrants are particularly affected, often earning less and lacking mechanisms for redress, which reinforces existing inequalities while enabling firms to externalise costs and maximise profit (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2024; Baglioni *et al.*, 2022; Dobos, 2019; Anitha, 2019). These developments affirm the relevance of social reproduction theory in explaining how systems of oppression are sustained through labour and care regimes (Yin, 2024; Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020; Standing, 2011).

Moreover, the expansion of the gig economy has been facilitated by the growth of algorithmic management on digital platforms, which has fundamentally altered employment relationships and often circumvented conventional labour protections (Lata *et al.*, 2023; Cini, 2023; Pignot, 2023; Wood *et al.*, 2019; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). The increasing use of workplace surveillance and algorithmic control has introduced new mechanisms of discipline and value extraction, whereby opaque systems allocate tasks, determine pay and enforce behavioural norms with little transparency or recourse (Zuboff, 2023; Lata *et al.*, 2023; Cini, 2023; Moore *et al.*, 2018). This creates a stark asymmetry of power and information between employers and employees, eroding bargaining power and leaving employees in a continuous state of availability and uncertainty (Lata *et al.*, 2023; Cini, 2023; Pignot, 2023; van Doorn, 2017; Graham *et al.*, 2017). These practices signal not just a shift in employment models, but a potential reconfiguration of exploitation, one that is becoming automated, data-driven and globally scalable. They are further reinforced by gendered institutional dynamics, as women continue to carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities, even within platform-based labour arrangements (Degani, 2022; Anitha, 2019).

Environmental crises have compounded these patterns of exploitation. Resource extraction frequently results in displacement, ecosystem degradation and the marginalisation of Indigenous and rural communities (Urzedo and Chatterjee, 2022; Buscher and Fletcher, 2020; Dunlap, 2020; Gilberthorpe and Rajak, 2016). These activities drive environmental collapse while embedding a global division of labour and risk in which the social and ecological costs of economic growth are disproportionately externalised onto

vulnerable populations (Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Urzedo and Chatterjee, 2022; Dunlap, 2020). For instance, mining operations supplying global technology and energy industries have been linked to severe environmental degradation, unsafe labour conditions and the displacement of communities (Sovacool *et al.*, 2019). These cases demonstrate how resource extraction embeds global inequalities by shifting environmental and social harms onto populations with limited political and economic power. Such dynamics are not anomalies; they are constitutive of a global economic system in which exploitation is embedded within supply chains, financial instruments, regulatory frameworks and digital infrastructures (Zajontz, 2022; Baglioni *et al.*, 2022; LeBaron, 2021; LeBaron and Lister, 2021; Economides and Lianos, 2021).

Exploitation, therefore, is often foundational to the way contemporary economic systems are organised, legitimised and sustained (Zuboff, 2023; Selwyn, 2018). From platform labour and global supply chains to surveillance capitalism and racialised wealth extraction, the mechanics of value extraction typically operate through multiple axes of subordination and dependence (Wood *et al.*, 2019; van Doorn, 2017; Mezzadri, 2016). Given the evidence presented, and in a context marked by rising inequality, systemic harms and overlapping economic crises, the case for sustained, critical and interdisciplinary as well as transdisciplinary engagement with the structures and manifestations of exploitation has become increasingly urgent. From undervalued and insecure labour to extractive trade regimes, discriminatory institutions and colonial legacies, exploitation remains a central yet often underexamined dimension of global development. Addressing this calls for an approach that is analytically rigorous, ethically grounded and responsive to both systemic dynamics and lived realities. Such inquiry is best positioned to illuminate the conditions that enable exploitation while supporting pathways towards equity, redistribution and collective empowerment.

The study makes several original and timely contributions to the analysis of exploitation, grounded in structural factors. It integrates diverse theoretical traditions across disciplinary boundaries. Drawing on alternative schools of economic thought, as well as insights from other disciplines, the study demonstrates the importance of epistemic pluralism and an intersectional theoretical approach for understanding unequal value extraction. It illustrates how exploitative processes are maintained not only through markets but also via cultural and institutional arrangements. This interdisciplinary synthesis enriches the conceptual foundations of the field and offers a more comprehensive understanding of how power operates within economic systems. In addition, the study affirms the value of combining quantitative methods, such as econometrics and experimental designs, with qualitative approaches, including ethnography, participatory research and community-based inquiry. It emphasises the significance of knowledge that centres lived experience and structural analysis, particularly in contexts where exploitation is obscured, informal or normalised. In this way, the study advances the case for mixed methods that are both scientifically rigorous and ethically accountable.

Building on these foundations, the study develops a coherent research framework entitled “The Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation”, which positions exploitation as structurally embedded and historically constituted. This framework is informed by Drydakis’s (2026a) Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Socioeconomic Phenomena, adapting its six interconnected principles to the analysis of economic exploitation. These interrelated principles are: Structural and Relational Ontology; Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge; Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis; Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation; Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry; and Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking. This framework provides a rigorous and ethically grounded framework for future research. It challenges conventional economic approaches that treat exploitation as a mere by-product of market imperfections or policy failures, instead highlighting systems of exploitation as foundational to contemporary capitalism.

The study also contributes by aligning this framework with broader normative frameworks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It highlights five SDGs: No Poverty (SDG 1), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Reduced Inequalities (SDG 10) and Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16), as key domains where critical research can support transformative action. This alignment affirms the moral and political relevance of the field, suggesting that research can contribute not only to interpretation but also to strategic responses and global efforts towards equity, redistribution and sustainability.

Furthermore, the study articulates a contemporary research agenda that maps emerging sites and mechanisms of exploitation. These include algorithmic labour control in the platform economy; the gendered and racialised dynamics of care and reproductive labour; economic abuse within households; environmental dispossession; and the colonial continuities embedded in global value chains. By identifying these areas as urgent priorities, the study invites empirical, theoretical and methodological innovation that is grounded in historical understanding, attentive to intersectionality and committed to amplifying marginalised perspectives.

The remainder of the study is structured as follows. [Section 2](#) outlines the theoretical foundations underpinning the study of exploitation, drawing on feminist, institutional and decolonial traditions. [Section 3](#) articulates the normative commitments and ethical visions that inform this field of inquiry, with an emphasis on equity, inclusion and accountability. [Section 4](#) situates the study of exploitation within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting key global priorities. [Section 5](#) presents a contemporary research agenda, identifying thematic areas for further development. [Section 6](#) elaborates the six core principles underpinning the proposed Pluralist Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation and offers an application of the framework. [Section 7](#) outlines the limitations of the study and proposes directions for future research. [Section 8](#) concludes by reflecting on the transformative potential of the framework and its contribution to building more just and inclusive economic futures. Finally, [Section 9](#) offers an Afterword explaining how the idea for the *Journal of Economic Exploitation and Inequality* was developed.

2. Theoretical foundations in the study of the economics of exploitation

The economics of exploitation is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to analysing how economic systems enable and perpetuate the unfair advantage of certain groups over others. This field scrutinises the mechanisms through which individuals or entities leverage asymmetries in power and resources to extract disproportionate value, thereby contributing to systemic inequalities. By integrating insights from various economic and social theories, the economics of exploitation seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics and to inform strategies for equitable reform ([Fraser, 2016](#); [Weeks, 2011](#); [Godels, 1997](#); [Roemer, 1982](#); [von Weizsäcker, 1973](#)).

Before turning specifically to economic theory, it is important to outline alternative definitions of exploitation that have emerged across sociology, political science, psychology and legal theory, doing so allows for the identification of their core conceptual elements and introduces an epistemic pluralist perspective. Such a perspective recognises that complex social phenomena cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical or methodological framework, as no single system of knowledge can meet all epistemic and practical demands ([Potochnik, 2017](#); [Ruphy, 2016](#)). This study reflects a commitment to the core principles of epistemic pluralism, including epistemic diversity, theoretical openness, methodological flexibility, context sensitivity, ethical reflexivity, dialogical engagement and inclusivity ([Gräbner and Strunk, 2020](#); [Decker et al., 2019](#); [Drydak, 2018](#); [Dow, 2009](#)). Within this framework, the analysis seeks to articulate exploitation as a structural, relational and historically embedded phenomenon, while establishing a set of normative, theoretical and methodological principles to guide

future inquiry. In parallel, it advances a critical and interdisciplinary research agenda that supports the adoption of just, inclusive and decolonial approaches. Contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasises that scientific models and explanations are necessarily partial, selective and purpose-bound, reflecting the complexity of the realities they aim to represent. From this standpoint, the coexistence of multiple approaches is not a weakness but a productive feature of rigorous inquiry. Epistemic pluralism therefore encourages the active cultivation of diverse explanatory frameworks, methods and forms of evidence, enabling different dimensions of a phenomenon to be examined in relation to distinct analytical and normative questions. In the study of exploitation, where economic processes intersect with legal institutions, social hierarchies, historical legacies and moral evaluation, reliance on a single framework risks reductionism and analytical blind spots. A pluralist orientation strengthens conceptual clarity, enhances explanatory robustness and supports more context-sensitive and reflexive forms of analysis. In doing so, it improves the capacity of research to address both the causes and consequences of exploitative relations.

One influential interpretation, grounded in legal and ethical philosophy, defines exploitation as the harmful, merely instrumental use of a person or their capacities for another's advantage (Munzer, 1990). From the perspective of Marxist theory, exploitation is characterised by the capitalist's appropriation of surplus value, which refers to income derived from unpaid labour, produced by employees who do not control the product of their work (Elster, 1986). A related formulation within Marxism proposes that exploitation occurs when the amount of labour employees perform to produce goods for others exceeds the amount required to produce the goods they themselves consume (Elster, 1986). In legal and political theory, exploitation is also described as occurring when one party benefits by using another as a means in ways that cause serious harm (Hill, 1994). Finally, psychological and moral philosophy accounts argue that an offer may be exploitative if it takes advantage of a recognised psychological vulnerability, thereby impairing the individual's capacity to reason effectively and to make autonomous decisions (Holmstrom, 1997; Buchanan, 1985). These contributions are cited for their conceptual precision and enduring analytical influence, as many subsequent formulations build directly on the distinctions they establish. Engaging with such accounts allows key conceptual elements that remain central across disciplines to be identified, providing a robust analytical foundation for examining how later scholarship extends, revises or contests these definitions.

From the perspective of the Neoclassical School, widely regarded as the dominant modern or mainstream school of economics, economic analysis is rooted in assumptions of rational choice and utility maximisation, with a focus on the efficient allocation of resources through voluntary exchange in competitive markets. However, the Neoclassical tradition does not treat exploitation as a central analytical category. Instead, it assumes and justifies market exchanges as voluntary interactions, in which income distribution is understood to reflect individuals' marginal productivity. Accordingly, employees and capital owners are considered to be fairly compensated based on their contributions to output (Mas-Colell *et al.*, 1995; Varian and Varian, 1992). When exploitative outcomes are acknowledged within this framework, such as an employee receiving a salary below their value of marginal product, they are typically interpreted as market imperfections, for example, monopsony power, information asymmetries or regulatory failures rather than as systemic or structural features of the economic system (Manning, 2003; Robinson, 1933; Pigou, 1920). Critics of this approach argue that it obscures the coercive realities experienced by many employees by overlooking power imbalances and historical conditions such as colonialism and systemic discrimination (Sen, 1999; Bowles and Gintis, 1988). Furthermore, by abstracting from social and institutional contexts, neoclassical models tend to ignore the ways in which exploitation may persist even within formally competitive markets (Chang, 2014). Despite its abstraction from structural power and historical context, the formal modelling it provides remains useful for identifying disparities in labour and income outcomes.

Alternative approaches, such as those rooted in Marxian and Institutional economics, provide a structural and relational ontological perspective on exploitation (Prey, 2012; Murphy, 2001; Hausman, 1999; Smith, 1984). These traditions do not treat exploitation as a market failure; they contend that it is an inherent mechanism of capitalism (Federici, 2020; Roemer, 1982). Marxian economics centres on class relations and the structural dynamics of capital accumulation, helping to reveal exploitation as a systemic feature of capitalist economies (Marx, 1867; Wolff, 1999). As already mentioned, Marxism argues that capitalists generate profit by paying employees less than the value their labour creates, thereby producing inherent class conflict within capitalist societies (Marx, 1867; Wolff, 1999). This approach foregrounds the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour, locating exploitation within systems of accumulation, commodification and dispossession. It provides a powerful framework for analysing persistent precarity, profit concentration and the global structures underpinning supply chains and financial expansion.

Institutional economics offers a complementary contribution by emphasising the role of both formal and informal institutions in sustaining structures of economic power (Menard and Shirley, 2024; Hodgson, 1998; North, 1990). From a structural perspective, formal institutions such as property rights, labour laws and financial regulations can be designed or manipulated in ways that benefit dominant economic actors. For instance, the historical transfer of property rights from Indigenous peoples to settler populations in the USA illustrates how institutional frameworks have been used to legitimise dispossession and consolidate economic power (Banner, 2005). Legal doctrines portrayed Indigenous lands as unowned or underutilised, thereby justifying their appropriation by colonial and, later, federal authorities. Through treaties, forced removals and allotment policies, land was systematically reallocated in ways that disrupted Indigenous social, cultural and economic systems. These processes not only entrenched settler-colonial dominance but also embedded racialised hierarchies into the fabric of USA property law and capitalist development (Banner, 2005), with long-term consequences for wealth inequality and intergenerational poverty among Indigenous communities.

Relationally, informal institutions, such as cultural norms surrounding gender roles or caste hierarchies, can shape expectations about who is considered suitable for particular forms of work, education or leadership. These norms often influence behaviours and decisions in subtle but powerful ways, affecting hiring practices, wage determination, access to credit and rights to own or inherit property. Over time, such norms become embedded within formal structures, including segmented labour markets, educational systems and legal frameworks, which systematically restrict opportunities for marginalised groups. From this perspective, path-dependent institutional arrangements, such as historically rooted systems of land ownership or occupational segregation, function as mechanisms that reproduce past inequalities in the present. These arrangements limit economic mobility, reinforce status hierarchies and constrain access to productive resources, thereby sustaining structural inequality across generations. This challenges the assumption that economic distribution operates independently of social stratification. Instead, exploitation and inequality are embedded within long-standing social relations, cultural and structural practices and institutional frameworks that have evolved in mutually reinforcing ways (Menard and Shirley, 2024; North, 1990).

Feminist economics expands this critique by highlighting the extent to which economic systems depend on undervalued and often invisible reproductive and care labour, predominantly carried out by women. From this perspective, capitalism is inseparable from the exploitation of unpaid domestic and care labour. Gendered institutions shape both paid and unpaid labour markets, thereby reinforcing inequalities and exploitation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020; Elson, 1999; Folbre, 2001). These dynamics are rooted in historical divisions between the productive and reproductive spheres, which have systematically devalued social reproduction while treating it as external to economic analysis. Feminist scholars argue that the unpaid labour performed within households, such as childcare, elder care, cooking and cleaning, constitutes a foundational component of the economy, enabling the daily and

generational reproduction of the labour force without recognition or remuneration. Moreover, gendered expectations surrounding care responsibilities often limit women's access to full participation in the formal labour market, entrench occupational segregation and perpetuate wage disparities. Mainstream economic models, by failing to account for these dynamics, not only obscure the full scope of economic activity but also legitimise policy frameworks that overlook or underfund public care infrastructure. In response, feminist economics calls for a revaluation of care labour, the redistribution of responsibilities between genders and institutions and a restructuring of macroeconomic priorities to centre human well-being and interdependence. This involves recognising care work as both an economic and ethical imperative, central to any just and sustainable economic system (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020; Elson, 1999; Folbre, 2001).

In parallel, stratification economics directly addresses the reproduction of persistent inequalities along lines of race, class and ethnicity arguing that group-based disparities are not aberrations but deliberate outcomes of systemic design (Skeggs, 2015; Darity, 2005). This is particularly evident in analyses of the racial wealth gap, where historical injustices such as slavery, segregation and discriminatory housing policies have been compounded by ongoing policy inaction and institutional inertia (Darity *et al.*, 2018). Categories such as race, gender, caste, class and sexuality are not only axes along which value is extracted but also socially constructed mechanisms of control. These categories are often imposed in ways that naturalise inequality, legitimise exclusion and justify unequal distributions of resources, rights and recognition (Darity, 2005, 2022). They are not neutral descriptors but are historically situated and structurally embedded, serving to produce and reproduce durable group-based hierarchies. These hierarchies support extractive economic functions such as wage suppression, labour market segmentation and the allocation of precarious, informal or unpaid work to particular populations (Darity, 2005, 2022; Darity *et al.*, 2018; Skeggs, 2015).

Similarly, Queer economics (Nguyen, 2021) builds on these insights by revealing how sexual and gender identity minorities are systematically marginalised through norms that underpin legal, institutional and market arrangements. This field draws attention to the economic implications of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, which shape policy assumptions about the household, employment benefits and access to healthcare, social security and tax systems (Drydakis, 2009, 2015, 2025). For instance, the privileging of heterosexual nuclear family models in welfare and tax regimes often excludes queer individuals and non-normative family formations from full social and economic participation (Hansen *et al.*, 2020; Martell and Roncolato, 2022). Labour market discrimination, uneven access to housing and barriers to gender-affirming healthcare further limit economic security for sexual orientation and gender identity minorities (Martell and Roncolato, 2023). By highlighting these dynamics, queer economics challenges the assumption that markets are neutral arenas and, in fact, often operate in ways that privilege the rights and opportunities of cisgender and heterosexual individuals. The inequitable provisioning of privilege contributes to opportunities and choices that vary by sexual orientation, gender and other marginalized identities (Hansen *et al.*, 2022). The systematic differences in opportunities and privilege results in a suite of characteristics (such as educational and occupational attainment, family status or even risk taking-behaviours) often attributed to stereotypes of individuals with marginalised sexual orientation or gender identities. These characteristics, however, are endogenous to the markets in which queer individuals live (Burn and Martell, 2020, 2022; Martell, 2018). Recognizing the inherent bias of markets calls for a rethinking of economic institutions to recognise the full diversity of human lives, needs and relationships. It thereby aligns with broader movements in feminist and stratification economics that seek to expose and transform the deep entanglement of economic structures with systems of social domination.

These approaches uncover how identity categories are constructed and operationalised in ways that sustain economic subordination, while also recognising the political potential of marginalised identities to contest exploitation and reshape economic discourse. Indeed, these

identities are not static or unidirectional. They can serve as sites of resistance, cultural renewal and political agency. For instance, terms such as Black, queer or working-class have been reclaimed as rallying points for mobilisation, fostering solidarity among oppressed groups and challenging dominant power structures that seek to pathologise or depoliticise difference (Gore, 2022; Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Thomas, 2019; Garrett-Walker *et al.*, 2019). Movements grounded in feminist, queer and anti-colonial inequalities have demonstrated that identity can serve as a strategic tool for exposing and resisting exploitation and systemic inequality (Gore, 2022; Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Thomas, 2019; Garrett-Walker *et al.*, 2019). Understanding identity as both a tool of domination and a platform for liberation is vital to grasping how economic inequality is structured, reproduced and contested. It reveals how economic systems exploit not only labour but also meanings, classifications and difference itself. These political rearticulations of identity enable collective contestation and the reimagining of social and economic relations (Darity, 2005, 2022; Gore, 2022; Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Thomas, 2019; Garrett-Walker *et al.*, 2019; Skeggs, 2015).

Postcolonial and Decolonial critiques extend the analysis to a global scale, exposing how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary global economic inequalities. These perspectives highlight processes of imperial appropriation and unequal exchange, through which wealth has been transferred from the Global South to the Global North via mechanisms such as debt, trade imbalances and resource extraction (Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2017; Grosfoguel, 2007). Beyond material flows, postcolonial scholars draw attention to the hierarchies of knowledge production that position Western economic theories as superior. The literature indicates that the perceived scientific authority and universality of mainstream economics, along with its marginalisation of alternative epistemologies, have enabled the discipline to shape global policy in ways that privilege free market principles (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela, 2004). These principles are often presented as neutral and objective, yet they help reinforce unequal global structures and legitimise the ongoing subordination of postcolonial economies (Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela, 2004). Such critiques emphasise that global exploitation is not merely a historical event but an ongoing systemic feature of the global economy. In response, decolonial approaches advocate for epistemic justice, reparative redistribution and the recognition of diverse economic systems rooted in local knowledge, relational values and ecological interdependence. These interventions challenge the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks and call for the transformation of both material and epistemological foundations of global economic governance (Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2017; Grosfoguel, 2007; Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela, 2004).

These approaches deepen understanding of exploitation as a historically embedded, institutionally sustained and globally reproduced phenomenon. By foregrounding marginalised experiences and systemic structures, the economics of exploitation can offer a critical foundation for rethinking economic relations and advancing research that is attuned to equity and structural transformation.

3. Normative commitments and ethical visions in the study of exploitation

While the economics of exploitation is to an extent grounded in a normative commitment to justice, equity and transformation, this does not place it beyond the bounds of rigour, objectivity or scientific validity (Gilbert, 2019; Steiner, 2018; Cullenberg, 1998). Instead, it reflects a deeper recognition that this field of research is shaped by underlying values, assumptions and worldviews (Harding, 1995). Approaches grounded in equity-oriented economics strive for strong objectivity by explicitly interrogating the positionality of the researcher, the socio-political context of the research and the values that shape both research questions and methodological choices. Far from reducing rigour, this reflexive and situated approach strengthens the robustness, relevance and ethical grounding of knowledge in the study of exploitation. From this perspective, a normative orientation does not compromise scientific standards. It strengthens them by bringing

implicit assumptions into view and revealing dimensions of economic life that might otherwise remain obscured (Harding, 1995).

The economics of exploitation ought to promote equity and uphold the dignity of minoritised and marginalised communities by illuminating structural relations and systemic injustices. It should also foster transformative inquiry that interrogates dominant frameworks while advancing inclusive and reparative alternatives (van Staveren, 2024; Mongin, 2006). This includes investigations into institutional inequality, as well as grounded inquiries rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised populations (Buscher and Fletcher, 2020; Mongin, 2006; Harding, 1995). Economic marginalisation and vulnerability are both a cause and a consequence of racial, gendered and colonial exclusion, rendering the struggle for economic equity inseparable from broader struggles for liberation (Buscher and Fletcher, 2020). Economic analysis should not present itself as neutral or technocratic in the face of structural violence and systemic disadvantage. Claims to objectivity often conceal normative assumptions that reflect dominant social positions (Harding, 1995). Given that complete neutrality may be illusory, scholars may be better placed to make their normative commitments explicit, particularly when engaging with issues of exploitation.

Attention is required to the moral and political dimensions of exploitation, alongside recognition of the agency, resistance and knowledge of those historically excluded from economic decision-making. By centring the perspectives of marginalised communities, the economics of exploitation can serve not only as a tool for critique but also as a framework for working towards post-exploitative futures grounded in democratic participation. In this way, the discipline is positioned to move beyond diagnosis towards praxis, aligning with global movements for social and economic transformation (van Staveren, 2024; Buscher and Fletcher, 2020; Mongin, 2006).

In addition, as already established, exploitation is not a morally neutral term (Zuboff, 2023; LeBaron, 2014; Holmstrom, 1997; Buchanan, 1985). To exploit is to take unfair advantage, whether of labour, vulnerability or positional inequality, often under the formal cover of legality, contract or so-called “market choice” (Zuboff, 2023; Standing, 2011). This understanding carries ethical urgency: asymmetrical value extraction is not merely inefficient or regrettable, but fundamentally opposed to principles of equity, reciprocity and dignity (Zuboff, 2023; LeBaron, 2014). Ethical concerns surrounding dependency, coercion and harm further underscore the inadequacy of frameworks that treat consent and market efficiency as sufficient guarantees of fairness (Zuboff, 2023; Reiff, 2013).

Importantly, in the face of rising inequality, precarious labour and environmental degradation, there is growing recognition that the production of knowledge is not politically neutral (Craig *et al.*, 2019). The economics of exploitation should actively resist the reproduction of epistemic hierarchies that exclude Global South perspectives, undervalue experiential knowledge and marginalise dissenting economic traditions. Such hierarchies undermine an epistemically pluralistic and ethically grounded inquiry into exploitation (Dadze-Arthur and Mangai, 2024; Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Craig *et al.*, 2019).

A political commitment to justice provides an essential foundation for the normative orientation of this field (Gilbert, 2019; Steiner, 2018; Valdman, 2008; Cullenberg, 1998). Justice, in this context, involves more than the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities. It requires the transformation of institutional arrangements, social relations and political ideologies that perpetuate systemic harm. This includes examining how exploitation is sustained through legal regimes, state policy and global economic governance that privilege dominant groups while marginalising others (Reiff, 2013; Valdman, 2008; Cullenberg, 1998; Ryan, 1987). Realising economic justice involves engaging with the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism, racial capitalism, gendered labour divisions and class-based exclusions. This approach gives priority to the knowledge, agency and struggles of those who have been systematically excluded from economic decision-making. Economic research on exploitation can be understood as a critical and politically engaged practice (Van de Ven, 2007). This involves framing research questions that challenge dominant assumptions, interpreting evidence in ways that reflect structural and historical realities and contributing to collective visions of alternative

economic futures. In this way, the field can support democratic participation in economic life, promote institutional accountability and advance the broader goals of social, economic and environmental justice (Reiff, 2013; Valdman, 2008; Cullenberg, 1998; Ryan, 1987).

4. Aligning the economics of exploitation with the United Nations sustainable development goals

In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the economics of exploitation ought to support and disseminate research that meaningfully advances global social equity. This includes addressing at least five critical priorities: the eradication of poverty (SDG 1), the achievement of gender equality (SDG 5), the promotion of decent work and sustainable economic growth (SDG 8), the reduction of inequalities within and among countries (SDG 10) and the fostering of peaceful, just and inclusive institutions (SDG 16).

Exploitation is both a driver and a symptom of poverty (Dobos, 2019; Bronfenbrenner, 1980). Unjust labour practices, wage suppression and exploitative financialisation deepen deprivation even in contexts of rising GDP, demonstrating how the decoupling of productivity from wage growth has entrenched poverty across income groups (Milanovic, 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 1980). Gender-based exploitation persists in the form of wage discrimination, occupational segregation and the systemic undervaluation of reproductive and care work. Feminist and Marxist economists have long highlighted these inequalities (Tahmaseb, 2021; Folbre, 2001; Elson, 1999; Albee and Perry, 1998). Meanwhile, the global expansion of platform-based work has accelerated precarisation. Precarity erodes income security, workplace safety and collective bargaining power, leaving employees exposed to algorithmic control and fragmented legal protections (Wood *et al.*, 2019; Kalleberg, 2018).

Exploitation and inequality also exacerbate disparities across identities and geography. Stratification and Institutional economists have shown how deeply embedded racialised and colonial structures continue to shape economic opportunities (Darity *et al.*, 2018; Deshpande, 2011; Acemoglu *et al.*, 2001). Exploitative and unequal practices often flourish in contexts where legal systems are weak, underfunded or deliberately circumvented (Flynn and Walker, 2021; Chuang, 2014). Research highlights that institutional erosion and regulatory capture are closely associated with corporate abuse, particularly within global production networks (Flynn and Walker, 2021; Barrientos, 2013; North, 1990).

To further engage with SDGs 8, 10 and 16, research in the economics of exploitation should also consider how structural disadvantage inhibits inclusive economic participation and distorts the conditions under which meaningful democratic governance and social cohesion can emerge. As already discussed, feminist and intersectional scholarship has long highlighted how entrenched inequalities, particularly along lines of gender, race, class and migration status, not only expose marginalised groups to disproportionate harm but also limit their capacity to contribute fully to economic development and social progress, as envisaged in SDG 8 (Browne *et al.*, 2023; Shahjahan *et al.*, 2022; Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Singh *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Federici, 2020; Mendoza, 2020; Harding, 1995). At the same time, SDGs 10 and 16 refer to the broader institutional and systemic contexts, such as unequal power relations, weakened legal protections and exclusionary political structures, which both give rise to and are reinforced by exploitative dynamics (Menard and Shirley, 2024; Hodgson, 1998; North, 1990). Research that examines these interdependencies can offer vital insights, even if traditional economic methods find it difficult to establish causal relationships. An epistemically pluralistic and equity-oriented economics is therefore essential for addressing these challenges and guiding systemic transformation.

5. Priority areas in the economics of exploitation

Given the patterns outlined thus far, the economics of exploitation in the contemporary era should prioritise original research and critical analyses that deepen understanding of

exploitation in its multifaceted and evolving forms. Particular attention should be given to work that interrogates the reconfiguration of labour, capital and power in a context marked by global precarity and persistent inequalities. Researchers are encouraged to examine the transformation of labour markets brought about by the rise of the gig economy, informal employment, algorithmic control and platformisation. These developments have introduced new dimensions of exploitation, disrupting traditional employment relationships and eroding established labour protections (Wood *et al.*, 2019; Graham *et al.*, 2017).

The gig economy, in particular, has redefined employment by classifying workers as independent contractors instead of employees, thereby limiting their access to job security, collective bargaining and social benefits. Research has shown that gig employees frequently experience long hours, income volatility and exclusion from social protection systems, often under the illusion of entrepreneurial freedom (Drydakakis, 2022b; Roy-Mukherjee and Harrison, 2020). In practice, this mirrors, and in many cases exacerbates, the vulnerabilities long associated with informal economies (Drydakakis, 2022b; Roy-Mukherjee and Harrison, 2020).

A key area for further investigation is the role of multinational enterprises within complex global production networks, where subcontracting and price pressures push labour violations deep into supply chains. The fast fashion and agribusiness sectors offer clear examples of exploitation masked as cost efficiency or legitimised through “ethical” certification (Shilling *et al.*, 2021; Stringer and Michailova, 2018). Corporate social responsibility frameworks have largely failed to address the root causes of exploitation, which require regulatory accountability and structural reform (Mehra and Shay, 2016; Barrientos, 2013).

Understanding contemporary economic inequalities also requires engagement with their colonial legacies. Historical institutionalist research has demonstrated that extractive institutions established during colonial rule continue to shape current patterns of underdevelopment and exclusion (Banerjee, 2021; Acemoglu *et al.*, 2001). Postcolonial theorists argue that these legacies persist not only through formal institutions but also through epistemic hierarchies and economic models that privilege Global North logics over the needs and knowledge of historically marginalised communities (Dowlah, 2021; Banerjee, 2021; Bhattacharya, 2017).

As exploitation intersects with social stratification, across race, gender, caste and class, there is a need for more nuanced evaluation of these intersections. Labour markets reflect and reinforce such stratifications, embedding discrimination into pay scales, hiring practices and algorithmic biases (Arun and Olsen, 2023). Understanding the interplay between class and social identities is therefore essential for advancing an intersectional inquiry. Certain identities may intensify experiences of economic and social disadvantage (Crenshaw, 2013). For example, the intersecting effects of being both Black and a woman often result in specific forms of exclusion and marginalisation. In contrast, other identity combinations may lead to different or context-dependent outcomes. The experiences of working-class Black men, for instance, may differ significantly from those of Black women or migrant women, highlighting the need to disaggregate categories and analyse specific configurations of power and inequality. Giving priority to these relational dynamics allows for a more accurate understanding of how exploitation is structured and maintained and offers clearer pathways for transformative research and policy (Crenshaw, 2013). In addition, women employees, particularly those engaged in digital or platform labour and sex work, frequently encounter compounded disadvantages arising from domestic care responsibilities, algorithmic opacity and digital exclusion (Rodríguez-Modroño *et al.*, 2022; Diab, 2022; Drydakakis, 2022c). Exploitation also operates within households, where economic abuse, including the restriction of financial resources, coercive control over employment and enforced dependency, constitutes a growing area of concern. Feminist scholars have highlighted how intra-household exploitation constrains women’s economic autonomy and safety (Soundararajan, 2022; Federici, 2020).

The migrant labour sector also represents a crucial site for the analysis of exploitation (Drydakakis, 2012, 2022b, 2026b). Migrants are frequently employed under informal or

precarious conditions, with limited access to legal protections, healthcare or fair wages. Immigration regimes often categorise them as self-employed or temporary employees. These legal classifications enable firms to externalise risk while curtailing labour rights (Anderson, 2010). Comparable disparities persist for racialised and caste-oppressed populations globally, where structural discrimination continues to shape access to employment and associated outcomes (Soundararajan, 2022; Tomaskovic-Devey *et al.*, 2015; Deshpande, 2011). Nonetheless, resistance to these exploitative systems persists. Cooperative enterprises and labour unions offer alternative models that challenge dominant modes of extraction and exclusion (Jardine and Muaid, 2022; Webster and Morris, 2015). Continued research into these alternatives can provide valuable insights.

Digitalisation and surveillance capitalism represent additional areas requiring urgent scholarly attention (Cini, 2023; Browne *et al.*, 2023; Zuboff, 2023). As employers increasingly extract behavioural data and deploy algorithmic systems to monitor, rank and discipline employees, the boundaries between labour and surveillance become increasingly blurred (Browne *et al.*, 2023; Cini, 2023). These practices commodify not only labour but life itself, raising significant ethical concerns regarding autonomy, privacy and consent (Zuboff, 2023; Moore *et al.*, 2018).

Furthermore, incorporating Global South and decolonial perspectives into the research agenda is central to advancing a fuller understanding of exploitation (Singh *et al.*, 2021; Mendoza, 2020). Decolonial thinkers have critiqued the Western foundations of mainstream economic theory, calling for frameworks that centre Indigenous knowledge, alternative systems of value and reparative approaches to equity (Singh *et al.*, 2021; Mendoza, 2020). A critical research agenda on exploitation benefits from ongoing engagement with structural, intersectional and global dynamics. By foregrounding lived experiences, alternative epistemologies and transformative practices, the field can contribute to reshaping economic systems that resist extraction, affirm dignity and support inclusive, equity-oriented pathways for global economic futures.

6. Research framework for the study of economic exploitation

6.1 Importance of epistemic pluralism in economics

Exploitation is a complex phenomenon that requires a range of policy actions proposed by different schools of economic thought and disciplines. Epistemic pluralism suggests that no single theoretical framework is sufficient to evaluate and address the multifaceted nature of a given social phenomenon and the diverse factors surrounding it (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Garnett *et al.*, 2010). A synthesis of different diagnoses of the causes is recommended to maximise the relevance of insights, underlying factors, moderators, mediators and policy responses (Garnett *et al.*, 2010). Epistemic pluralism embraces a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” approach (Drydakis, 2018; Dow, 2009; Garnett *et al.*, 2010).

As evaluated in previous sections, the economics of exploitation should foster a normative, intersectional, inclusive, ethical and critical academic dialogue. Achieving this requires engagement with a broad array of theoretical approaches (van Staveren, 2024; Zuboff, 2023; Buscher and Fletcher, 2020; Gilabert, 2019; Steiner, 2018; LeBaron, 2014; Reiff, 2013; Mongin, 2006). The complexity of exploitation, rooted in layered social, historical, political and economic contexts, cannot be adequately understood through a singular analytical lens (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Drydakis, 2018; Johnson, 2016; Dow, 2009). At the ontological level, exploitation is not treated as an incidental or individual-level phenomenon. It is understood as a structurally embedded and historically produced process (Zuboff, 2023; Banerjee, 2021; Hardt and Negri, 2018; Fraser, 2016; Smith, 2016; Prey, 2012; Murphy, 2001; Hausman, 1999). These are real and systemic features of contemporary economies, expressed through labour markets, legal regimes and social institutions (Hardt and Negri, 2018; Smith, 2016). Such structures are inherently relational, producing and

reproducing hierarchies based on race, gender, sexuality, class, migration status and geography (Yin, 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño *et al.*, 2022; Tahmaseb, 2021; Anitha, 2019).

Epistemic pluralism in economics should be both encouraged and valued. This approach is grounded in the recognition that diverse traditions, when brought into meaningful dialogue, can reveal new dimensions of understanding and contribute to more effective responses to entrenched injustices (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Drydakis, 2018; Dow, 2009). Epistemic pluralism includes theoretical and conceptual work that interrogates the epistemologies, categories and moral assumptions underpinning socio-economic reasoning (Menard and Shirley, 2024; Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Darity *et al.*, 2018; Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2016; Federici, 2020; Weeks, 2011; Sen, 1999; Godels, 1997; Holmstrom, 1997; Wolff, 1999; Hill, 1994; Munzer, 1990; Bowles and Gintis, 1988; Elster, 1986; Buchanan, 1985; Roemer, 1982; von Weizsäcker, 1973). In doing so, theoretical contributions can begin to reshape the foundations of socio-economic thought, enabling the integration of frameworks grounded in ethics, inclusivity and sustainability (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Drydakis, 2018; Dow, 2009; Finch, 2002).

The study of exploitation therefore benefits from a deliberate openness to a wide range of intellectual traditions, including Neoclassical, as well as Marxian, Institutional, Feminist and Queer economics. As outlined in Section 2, each theoretical tradition in economics contributes distinct conceptual tools and assumptions that broaden the scope and depth of analysis. Engaging with these traditions collectively allows for a more inclusive and multidimensional evaluation of exploitation. In this context, epistemic pluralism reflects a commitment to recognising that knowledge is shaped by different ontological and normative assumptions, as well as by diverse histories, experiences and positionalities. This includes not only academic theories but also knowledge grounded in lived experience, community organising and non-Western intellectual traditions. Such an approach challenges dominant assumptions, expands analytical possibilities and supports a more reflexive and accountable form of socio-economic inquiry. It enables deeper engagement with the structural, relational and ethical dimensions of exploitation in ways that are both rigorous and inclusive (Garnett *et al.*, 2010; Gilabert, 2019; Steiner, 2018).

A lack of engagement with less dominant theories across different schools of economic thought continues to limit the scope of analysis and policy design. This tendency often leads to monism, a methodological stance that privileges a single theoretical perspective (Garnett *et al.*, 2010; Davis, 2008). Monism avoids synthesis and, by resisting the evaluation of phenomena from multiple viewpoints, effectively undermines the value of epistemic pluralism (Garnett *et al.*, 2010; Dequech, 2018). Economists and social planners are encouraged to cultivate the capacity to engage with a broad range of theoretical insights and policy strategies when addressing complex research questions. The case of exploitation provides a clear example of how epistemic pluralism can enhance understanding and increase the relevance of policy responses.

Epistemically pluralistic approaches involve examining the strengths and limitations of each theory in order to identify a range of plausible explanations for a given phenomenon (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019). This requires rigorous investigation to maintain internal coherence and avoid inconsistency. Policy implications should be grounded in clearly defined assumptions and theoretical principles. A superficial or narrowly focused investigation can result in an inadequate study of exploitation. Researchers are encouraged to clarify the assumptions underpinning each school of economic thought, how a particular phenomenon is defined and measured within each framework, what each theory predicts, the associated policy implications and the theoretical and empirical limitations involved. Clear connections between theoretical explanations, policy actions and empirical patterns should also be established (Drydakis, 2018).

As noted earlier, a commitment to epistemic pluralism involves the integration of diverse theoretical traditions. To strengthen the coherence of such an orientation, researchers are encouraged to engage thoughtfully with the tensions that may arise when combining

frameworks grounded in different ontological and epistemological foundations (Drydak, 2018; Prey, 2012; Murphy, 2001; Hausman, 1999; Smith, 1984). For example, applying both Neoclassical and Marxian approaches requires critical reflection on their divergent assumptions concerning market functioning, individual agency and inequality. Scholars may compare and evaluate these assumptions alongside their respective policy implications and outcomes. They may also draw on mainstream empirical tools for particular analyses while interpreting findings through a structural or critical lens or select frameworks according to the specific dimension of exploitation under investigation. Clarifying when and why particular approaches are adopted, and interpreting results with critical and reflexive awareness, enhances analytical depth while supporting theoretical and methodological coherence. These practices contribute to the intellectual integrity and coherence of epistemically pluralist research.

Engaging in epistemically pluralist research involves more than time and technical skill; it also requires a willingness to engage with less-dominant or less widely known theoretical frameworks (Drydak, 2018; Garnett *et al.*, 2010; Davis, 2008; Dequech, 2018). Without such openness, genuine epistemic pluralism cannot be realised. In this study, exploitation is examined through both dominant (Neoclassical) and less-dominant (Feminist and Marxian) perspectives, yielding more comprehensive policy implications. Had these less-dominant frameworks been excluded, important explanatory factors could have remained unexamined. Aversion to, and ignorance of, particular theories may constrain the ability of economists and social planners to investigate the underlying causes of inequality and may obscure uncomfortable realities (Drydak, 2018).

It is also important to note that epistemic pluralism should not be misinterpreted as the rejection of dominant theories, doing so risks reproducing monistic tendencies (Garnett *et al.*, 2010; Dequech, 2018). Disagreements persist regarding the role and value of dominant versus less-dominant approaches and critics of epistemic pluralism sometimes argue that pluralist scholars disregard mainstream theories altogether. However, epistemic pluralism does not privilege or dismiss any theoretical tradition in advance. It draws on a range of perspectives to develop a more accurate understanding of social phenomena and formulate appropriate and just policy responses (Garnett *et al.*, 2010; Davis, 2008; Dequech, 2018). In doing so, epistemically pluralist research can better account for the structural complexity of exploitation and offer more relevant tools for addressing it.

6.2 Research methods considerations

Building on the commitment to epistemic pluralism in economics discussed in the previous section, it is important to recognise the value of diversity in how research is designed, conducted and interpreted (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Dow, 2007; Blaug, 1992). If schools of thought reflect foundational assumptions about how economies function and what constitutes exploitation, then methodological choices reflect how those assumptions are operationalised and what is accepted as valid knowledge or evidence (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Baškarada and Koronios, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2012; Dow, 2007; Greene, 2006; Blaug, 1992). In this sense, methodology is not neutral; it embodies particular ways of seeing, framing and evaluating the social world.

Theorising itself constitutes a form of methodology, shaping the questions posed, the categories employed and the relationships considered meaningful. Across traditions, there are multiple and sometimes competing approaches to developing theoretical frameworks. These include formal theoretical and empirical modelling, commonly used in Neoclassical economics to identify causal mechanisms or equilibria; critical reflexivity, adopted in Feminist and Decolonial approaches to interrogate power and positionality; grounded research, often employed in qualitative sociology and anthropology to generate theory from lived experience; and historical reconstruction, central to Institutionalist and Marxian traditions, which seeks to

understand continuity, rupture and path dependence over time (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Datta, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2012; Dow, 2007; Greene, 2006; Blaug, 1992).

Recognising this diversity not only enriches empirical inquiry but also strengthens the ethical and epistemological foundations of research. A commitment to epistemic pluralism involves acknowledging that different research questions require different tools and that complex social realities such as exploitation cannot be adequately understood through a single method or perspective. Instead, they require approaches that are attuned to both structure and agency, measurement and meaning, causality and context.

The remainder of this section outlines key methodological approaches that reflect this pluralist ethos and demonstrate how different forms of inquiry contribute to the study of exploitation. Drawing on the strengths of quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods, experimental and comparative research enables a more comprehensive investigation of both the structural conditions and the lived experiences of exploitation. Each method contributes distinct insights into how exploitation is produced, reproduced and resisted across a range of social, economic and institutional contexts.

Quantitative methods, including mathematical modelling, continue to play a vital role in conceptualising dimensions of exploitation, proposing optimal outcomes and assessing policy effectiveness. Mathematical models provide a formalised structure through which assumptions, relationships and trade-offs can be explicitly defined and analytically explored. They enable researchers to simulate scenarios, identify causal mechanisms and forecast the likely impacts of policy interventions under varying conditions (Roemer, 1982). In the context of exploitation, modelling can help to reveal how changes in market structure, wage-setting, labour mobility or institutional constraints influence distributional outcomes. By abstracting complex dynamics into coherent frameworks, mathematical models support rigorous analysis and enhance the clarity and communicability of economic arguments. Multivariate analysis enables the identification of well-informed relationships between institutions and socio-economic outcomes and remains an essential tool in this field (Szablewska and Kubacki, 2023; Datta, 2014; Black, 1999). Empirical research rooted in quantitative design contributes to evidence-based policymaking by illuminating both micro-level and macro-level dynamics, such as labour market segmentation, wage stagnation, constrained social mobility and poverty, which may serve as key drivers of exploitative conditions experienced by vulnerable populations (Szablewska and Kubacki, 2023; Datta, 2014; Black, 1999).

At the same time, the field of exploitation and inequality increasingly recognises the value of qualitative methodologies, including ethnography, participatory action research and case studies embedded within communities (McGuinness and Wellborn, 2024; van Doorn, 2017; MacDonald, 2012). These approaches are particularly effective in revealing how individuals and communities experience, interpret and resist exploitative conditions in everyday life. For example, in the study of exploitation, the limitations of metrics-based approaches, such as their tendency to overlook lived experiences and structural dynamics, can be complemented by qualitative approaches that capture context, voice and the intersecting dimensions of injustice. Qualitative methods provide rich contextual understanding of relational and spatial forms of power, often manifesting at the level of households, informal workspaces or marginalised urban and rural settings (McGuinness and Wellborn, 2024; van Doorn, 2017; MacDonald, 2012). Where official data sets are absent or overly abstracted, such research enables the inclusion of voices that have traditionally been excluded from policy debates and institutional knowledge production (McGuinness and Wellborn, 2024; Lune and Berg, 2017; Lichtman, 2013). It also enables the study of vulnerable populations typically overlooked, such as gender identity minorities in the USA, who become political targets and are consequently purposefully obfuscated in secondary data. In this regard, qualitative inquiry represents not only a methodological tool but an epistemological orientation committed to equity.

There is also growing support for mixed-methods research that combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches to produce multidimensional analyses (Baškarada and

Koronios, 2018; Greene, 2006). This integration allows for both the triangulation of data to enhance reliability and the exploration of how exploitation is experienced and resisted within specific social and institutional contexts. By bringing together numerical indicators, such as income disparities or employment rates, with ethnographic accounts that illustrate the lived realities of power, research can more effectively articulate the processes through which exploitation is sustained. Such approaches support the development of nuanced policy responses that reflect the complexities of identity, geography and institutional design (Nguyen, 2021; Baškarada and Koronios, 2018; Greene, 2006).

Experimental and quasi-experimental designs also contribute significantly to causal identification within this field. Randomised controlled trials, natural experiments and field-based interventions provide means of isolating specific drivers of exploitation, whether related to labour market adversities, regulatory vacuums or financial exclusion (Baldassarri and Abascal, 2017; Gangl, 2010). These methods have been employed to document economic exploitative and discriminatory practices in hiring, housing and access to credit, drawing attention to forms of bias that often remain obscured in aggregate data (Drydakis, 2009, 2015; Drydakis and Vlassis, 2010). The evidence generated through such designs can inform the development of rights-based legal and policy reforms, as well as support the evaluation of redistributive interventions.

Cross-national and comparative research remains central to understanding the diverse manifestations of exploitation. By examining how institutional configurations, cultural norms and policy frameworks vary across contexts, comparative studies challenge universalising claims and reveal the contingency of socio-economic outcomes (Pfeffer and Waitkus, 2021; Kus, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 1990). These analyses offer valuable insights into the efficacy and limitations of differing welfare states, labour market institutions and systems of social protection. In doing so, comparative research facilitates transnational learning while also resisting the dominance of Western-centric narratives. It helps identify more context-sensitive pathways to economic equity and draws attention to global dynamics, such as financialisation, trade regimes and postcolonial arrangements, that continue to shape exploitative structures (Pfeffer and Waitkus, 2021; Kus, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

6.3 Imperative for interdisciplinary research

The complexities of exploitation cannot be fully understood or adequately addressed within the confines of any single academic discipline (Truc *et al.*, 2023; Dolfisma and Kesting, 2009; Horn and Nickols, 1982). These are not solely economic issues; rather, they represent systemic, historically rooted and socially embedded challenges that unfold across political, legal, cultural and institutional dimensions. In response, the study of exploitation benefits from a research ethos that is interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and intersectional (Truc *et al.*, 2023; Dolfisma and Kesting, 2009; Horn and Nickols, 1982).

In line with epistemic pluralism, it is important to encourage ongoing dialogue across disciplinary traditions (Truc *et al.*, 2023; Buyalskaya *et al.*, 2021). Economics provides critical tools for analysing market structures, wage formation and patterns of distribution, thereby revealing how seemingly neutral markets can reproduce exploitation (Manning, 2003; Mas-Colell *et al.*, 1995; Varian and Varian, 1992). Sociology sheds light on the influence of institutions, social hierarchies and collective identities in shaping lived experiences of inequality, as well as on the role of dominant norms and ideologies in reinforcing exploitative structures (Lata *et al.*, 2023; Pfeffer and Waitkus, 2021; Skeggs, 2015). Political science contributes to understanding governance, power and policymaking, highlighting how access to resources and representation is often structured through exclusionary frameworks that perpetuate exploitation (Guglielmi, 2023; Zajontz, 2022; LeBaron and Lister, 2021).

Historical analysis offers long-term insights into the enduring legacies of colonialism, industrialisation and globalisation, revealing how present-day exploitation is frequently embedded in past adversities (Dowlah, 2021; Fraser, 2016). Anthropology contributes

ethnographic perspectives on how communities, particularly in the Global South and other marginalised settings, experience and resist exploitation, often in contexts marked by institutional neglect or regulatory invisibility (Hann and Hart, 2011; Long, 2004). Legal research interrogates the functioning of regulatory systems, demonstrating how employment laws, property regimes and contractual norms may reinforce asymmetrical power relations, especially where informal or unpaid labour remains unrecognised (Chuang, 2014; Hill, 1994). Furthermore, philosophy prompts critical reflection on the ethical foundations of economic life, challenging assumptions that voluntary exchange is inherently fair and raising important questions about exploitative practices (Dobos, 2019; Holmstrom, 1997).

In addition to established academic disciplines, it is essential to recognise the value of Indigenous ways of knowing. These epistemologies often emphasise relationality, interdependence and stewardship, offering holistic understandings of economic life that challenge dominant extractive logics (Simonds and Christopher, 2013; Cochran *et al.*, 2008). Indigenous knowledge systems can illuminate alternative ways of living and organising economies that are grounded in reciprocity, care and sustainability. Such perspectives are particularly valuable in exposing forms of exploitation that operate through the degradation of land, culture and collective autonomy. Including Indigenous knowledge traditions within interdisciplinary research not only broadens conceptual horizons but also affirms the legitimacy of historically marginalised worldviews in shaping pathways towards justice and ecological balance (Urzedo and Chatterjee, 2022; Simonds and Christopher, 2013; Cochran *et al.*, 2008; Banner, 2005).

While disciplinary contributions are highlighted here for clarity, it is important to recognise that many intellectual traditions such as Feminist (Browne *et al.*, 2023; Federici, 2020; Harding, 1995), Queer (Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen, 2021) and Post- and Decolonial approaches (Shahjahan *et al.*, 2022; Singh *et al.*, 2021; Mendoza, 2020) do not fit neatly within conventional disciplinary boundaries. These traditions often draw on economics, sociology, anthropology and political theory and are particularly well suited to analysing the complex and interconnected dimensions of exploitation and inequality. Their strength lies in challenging rigid divisions of knowledge and in offering integrated frameworks that are more responsive to relational, structural and intersectional dynamics.

By drawing on insights from multiple disciplines, contributions can conceptualise exploitation as a relational, historically contingent and morally embedded phenomenon, not simply as an isolated economic occurrence (Buyalskaya *et al.*, 2021; Tolciu, 2010). This approach to knowledge production underscores the importance of moving beyond disciplinary boundaries to engage with conceptual frameworks, empirical findings and normative commitments that emerge from a range of intellectual traditions (Gilbert, 2019; Steiner, 2018). These contributions can enhance scientific rigour through the inclusion of marginalised perspectives (Harding, 1995). Interdisciplinary integration, therefore, constitutes not merely a methodological orientation but also an ethical and political stance. Approaches that are collaborative, critical and inclusive are more likely to generate the theoretical and practical tools needed to interrogate exploitation and to inform more equitable and sustainable trajectories (Truc *et al.*, 2023; Tolciu, 2010; Dolfmsa and Kesting, 2009; Horn and Nickols, 1982). In this context, interdisciplinary research occupies a central role in fostering transformative outcomes. Research that exposes concealed mechanisms of exploitation, documents practices of resistance and articulates ethical economic systems contributes meaningfully to shifting both dominant discourse and institutional arrangements. Academic inquiry can act as a catalyst for greater social and economic equity, particularly when it engages with people experiencing exploitation and helps shape pathways towards more just and inclusive futures (Truc *et al.*, 2023; Tolciu, 2010; Dolfmsa and Kesting, 2009).

Building on this interdisciplinary foundation, the study of exploitation also benefits from a transdisciplinary orientation (Stepanova *et al.*, 2016; Wickson *et al.*, 2006). While interdisciplinary research facilitates dialogue and integration across established fields, transdisciplinary approaches extend this engagement by enabling the synthesis and

reconfiguration of concepts, methods and analytical frameworks in ways that are not confined to existing disciplinary structures (Lawrence *et al.*, 2022; Pohl, 2008). In this context, transdisciplinary research supports problem-centred forms of inquiry that integrate economic, social, legal, historical and ethical perspectives, while also engaging with knowledge produced beyond academia, including that grounded in lived experience, community practice and Indigenous epistemologies. Such an approach is particularly well suited to examining exploitation as a systemic, relational and historically embedded process, where additive disciplinary insights may be insufficient. By fostering the co-production of knowledge and the development of integrative analytical frameworks, transdisciplinary research enhances the capacity of scholarship to generate conceptually innovative, empirically grounded and socially responsive contributions that are aligned with the pursuit of equity, justice and sustainable economic transformation.

6.4 *Reconnecting research with the realities of exploitation*

Grounding the study of exploitation in the lived experiences of those facing disadvantage enhances both its relevance and its analytical depth. Yet academic research frequently remains disconnected from the political, organisational and civic contexts in which such struggles are enacted and decisions are made (Craig *et al.*, 2019; Perry, 2017; van Veenstra and Kotterink, 2017). Too often, research is carried out in isolation from the practical settings where employees, communities and social movements confront exploitation in its various forms (Oliver *et al.*, 2014). This distance limits the relevance of academic work and reduces its capacity to contribute meaningfully to structural transformation (Drydakis, 2022b, 2026b; van Staveren, 2024; Oliver *et al.*, 2014).

Research in this field gains both analytical and normative strength when shaped by the questions, concerns and ethical priorities of those directly affected by exploitative processes (Gilbert, 2019; Steiner, 2018; Harding, 1995). Contributions from practitioners, community organisers and affected populations are not supplementary to scholarly knowledge but form a core element of rigorous and accountable research (Fursova, 2023). The study of exploitation has the potential to function as a tool for systemic change, supporting the work of policymakers, trade unions, NGOs and initiatives focused on corporate accountability (Hickel *et al.*, 2022; LeBaron and Lister, 2021; Oliver *et al.*, 2014). Central to this effort is the recognition that those working on the frontlines of justice and equity possess vital knowledge and insights. These perspectives help to reveal how exploitation operates and how it is resisted in everyday life, often in ways overlooked by formal institutions. Their participation enriches research and provides the foundation for inquiry that is more ethical, relevant and contextually grounded (Keighley *et al.*, 2023; MacDonald, 2012; Finch, 2002).

The relevance of theoretical analysis is heightened when extended into policy evaluation, community practice and institutional critique. Policies informed by robust empirical and theoretical work, alongside lived experience, are more likely to support institutional accountability (Perry, 2017; Oliver *et al.*, 2014). Addressing exploitation requires more than tackling its symptoms; it involves structural interventions shaped by affected populations and critical stakeholders. These may include equitable social protection systems, collective bargaining rights, the provision of living wages, secure employment arrangements and public investment in essential services such as housing, healthcare, education and infrastructure (Drydakis, 2011, 2023; Darity *et al.*, 2018; Mehra and Shay, 2016; Fraser, 2016; Piketty, 2014; Barrientos, 2013). Such measures are particularly relevant in contexts where racialised, gendered and postcolonial inequalities continue to shape access to opportunity and agency (Dadze-Arthur and Mangai, 2024; van Staveren, 2024; LeBaron, 2021; Roy-Mukherjee and Harrison, 2020; Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Grosfoguel, 2007).

The study of exploitation can function as a dynamic space in which theory and practice inform one another. When grounded in interdisciplinary collaboration and guided by ethical reflexivity, research contributes more effectively to public understanding, institutional reform

and collective empowerment (Dadze-Arthur and Mangai, 2024; van Staveren, 2024; Fursova, 2023; Perry, 2017; Oliver *et al.*, 2014).

The broader societal relevance of research on exploitation is further enhanced through evidence-informed policymaking. This approach involves the intentional and context-sensitive application of theoretical, empirical and conceptual insights from academic research to develop practical responses, including policy formulation, advocacy strategies and institutional reform aimed at addressing exploitation in economic systems (Lester *et al.*, 2020; Shearer *et al.*, 2018; Head, 2016). Policymakers frequently operate under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity, where competing values, political pressures and institutional constraints influence decision-making. In such contexts, evidence needs to be interpreted, framed and communicated in ways that align with prevailing narratives and connect with the priorities of decision-makers. Research on exploitation, therefore, gains traction when it is translated into compelling narratives, supported by credible data and embedded within coalitions or networks that advocate for change. By attending to both the content of evidence and the political processes through which it is mobilised, researchers are better positioned to support interventions that are informed by knowledge and responsive to structural inequalities.

This approach enhances the impact of scholarly inquiry by ensuring that research findings contribute meaningfully to real-world strategies for promoting economic justice and addressing systemic harm. When academic work is made accessible and applicable to wider audiences through formats such as policy briefs, toolkits, plain language summaries or partnerships with educators and civil society actors, research becomes a more active participant in processes of change (Perry, 2017; Oliver *et al.*, 2014). In a period marked by converging crises, including labour precarity and environmental instability, the need to connect rigorous analysis with interventions and public policy becomes increasingly pressing (Ishaya *et al.*, 2024; Keighley *et al.*, 2023; Smith, 2016; Standing, 2011).

6.5 Key principles in the study of exploitation

Given the analysis presented, this study supports a research framework anchored in the following core principles. These principles provide the foundation for advancing a critical, inclusive and transformative approach to the study of exploitation.

Principle One: Structural and Relational Ontology. The study of exploitation benefits from an ontological approach that recognises it as systemic, historically produced and structurally embedded within economies. It is not incidental anomaly or the result of individual failings, but constitutive elements of the broader economic system. Exploitation, along with other adverse realities such as inequity and discrimination, consists of intersecting and interrelated processes that reinforce one another across social, economic and political domains. These conditions are reproduced through legal, institutional, cultural and technological mechanisms that generate and sustain unequal power relations. Such mechanisms operate through dynamic interactions between individuals, institutions and communities, indicating that these realities are not simply the outcomes of fixed structures but are actively maintained and reshaped through everyday social and economic relations. This relational dimension draws attention to how power circulates within networks of dependency, authority and resistance. These dynamics require detailed examination in order to enable meaningful analysis and to inform the development of more equitable policy interventions.

Principle Two: Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge. Exploitation should not be analysed solely through the lens of dominant frameworks. While insights from Neoclassical economics may offer one perspective, it is important to engage with alternative traditions such as Marxian, Feminist, Postcolonial, Institutional and Stratification economics in order to uncover the power relations, historical legacies and identity structures that underpin exploitative systems. A commitment to epistemic pluralism also involves drawing on knowledge from other disciplines, including sociology, political science, anthropology and law, to support a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis. Equally important is the

recognition that knowledge is situated. Diverse perspectives, particularly those grounded in lived experience, collective resistance and historically marginalised epistemologies, offer vital insights that are often excluded from mainstream analysis. Participatory and community-based research methods can help centre the voices of those most affected by exploitation, ensuring that research agendas, evaluations and policy responses are shaped by those with direct and embodied knowledge of inequity. This principle recognises the value of disciplinary analysis in providing conceptual depth and methodological rigour, while also emphasising the importance of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary engagement that integrates insights across fields and incorporates knowledge grounded in lived experience and social practice.

Principle Three: Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis. The study of exploitation benefits from sustained engagement with interlocking systems of oppression, including sexism, patriarchy, racism, colonialism, casteism and ableism. These intersecting structures shape access to resources, labour conditions and institutional power and should be taken into account to develop a fuller understanding of how exploitation is produced and maintained across different contexts. While intersectionality is sometimes approached in additive or multiplicative terms, a relational understanding offers deeper insight into how vulnerability, labour and value are co-constructed through historically and socially embedded hierarchies of power and exclusion. Decolonial analysis is similarly important for challenging dominant Western narratives and for affirming the knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples, communities in the Global South and other historically marginalised groups. Together, these approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of how exploitation is structured through both material conditions and forms of epistemic exclusion.

Principle Four: Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation. The study of exploitation benefits from being guided by an ethical and political commitment to justice and equity. While equity concerns the fair distribution of resources and opportunities, justice requires deeper engagement with the structural conditions, institutional arrangements and historical processes that produce and sustain exploitation. Research in this area is not solely diagnostic; it is also emancipatory, concerned with recognising human dignity, redistributing power and addressing the systemic roots of exploitation. Socio-economic inquiry holds the potential to contribute meaningfully to the imagining of economies that are not only more equitable but also structurally just. Normative commitment, in this context, reflects a clear recognition that such inquiry is shaped by underlying values, assumptions and epistemic positions. This awareness can enhance academic standards by promoting reflexivity and accountability. In this sense, rigour is strengthened through the deliberate inclusion of marginalised perspectives and the pursuit of justice as a foundational principle in the production of knowledge.

Principle Five: Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry. Research on exploitation is strengthened by the use of diverse methods, including mathematical modelling, econometric analysis, ethnography, historical research, participatory approaches and mixed strategies. This diversity reflects the complexity of exploitation, which involves both structural conditions and lived experience. Choices about methods should be guided by ethical clarity, inclusivity, openness to different forms of knowledge and sensitivity to the context of study. Grounded and historically informed inquiry is especially important for revealing how systemic forces such as colonial histories, discriminatory institutions and economic dependency shape everyday realities. This approach values knowledge produced through lived experience and community engagement, alongside formal analytic techniques. Using a range of methods allows researchers to examine how broader economic systems interact with social practices and to produce insights that support equity, accountability and informed action.

Principle Six: Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking. Engaged scholarship positions research as an active contributor to processes of social transformation by fostering dialogue between academics, policymakers, civil society actors and affected communities. Within the study of exploitation, this approach encourages forms of inquiry that are attentive to lived experience, historically grounded and responsive to structural inequality.

Engaged scholarship approaches knowledge production as a socially responsible practice with the potential to inform critical reflection and practical action, instead of treating research as a form of detached observation. In this context, evidence-informed policymaking offers a pathway through which academic work can shape legal reform, policy design, advocacy efforts and community organising aimed at addressing exploitation and advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. When conceptually robust and critically situated, evidence-informed research can support collective mobilisation, promote equity and strengthen institutional accountability. Crucially, the pursuit of relevance does not compromise intellectual independence. It strengthens the democratic role of scholarship by ensuring that rigorous analysis contributes meaningfully to the development of more inclusive economic systems.

The six interrelated principles form the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation, which offers a critical, equity-oriented approach to examining exploitation. This framework reflects a fundamental shift in how exploitation is understood across research, methodology, policy and pedagogy. In a world shaped by structural precarity, racialised labour regimes, deepening gender disparities and ecological breakdown, conventional models of economic analysis require greater contextual and ethical grounding. These principles call for a reorientation that foregrounds ethics, inclusivity, historical consciousness and the lived realities of those most affected, reflecting the traditions of political economy (Stilwell, 2019; Phillips, 2017; Pettman, 2012; O’Riordan and Voisey, 1997; Bowles and Gintis, 1988).

In advancing epistemic pluralism, the framework recognises that no single theory, method or tradition can adequately capture the complexity of exploitation. It reflects a commitment to the core principles of epistemic pluralism, which include epistemic diversity, theoretical openness, methodological flexibility, context sensitivity, ethical reflexivity, dialogical engagement and inclusivity (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Drydakis, 2018; Dow, 2009). These are not treated as abstract ideals but are systematically embedded within the framework’s six interrelated principles.

Structural and Relational Ontology affirms context sensitivity by framing exploitation as shaped by historically contingent, institutional and power-laden processes (Prey, 2012; Murphy, 2001; Hausman, 1999; Smith, 1984). This perspective compels researchers to interrogate how economic systems are designed to produce and sustain hierarchies of power and dependency (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Drydakis, 2018). It challenges the assumptions of neutrality embedded in dominant economic frameworks, recasting exploitation not as a deviation but as a constitutive mechanism of modern economies. Through pluralistic, interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches, the framework enhances analytical depth by situating data within broader historical, legal and institutional contexts.

Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge addresses epistemic diversity and theoretical openness by validating a range of knowledge traditions and anchoring inquiry in the standpoints of those historically excluded from economic discourse. Critical engagement highlights the necessity of historical reflexivity, a central tenet of the research framework, in making sense of how adverse realities are justified, enacted and resisted across shifting social, political and economic terrains (Darity, 2005, 2022; Gore, 2022; Mosley *et al.*, 2021; Nguyen, 2021; Thomas, 2019; Garrett-Walker *et al.*, 2019; Simandan, 2019; Fosket, 2016; Skeggs, 2015; Haraway, 2013).

Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis strengthens inclusivity and ethical reflexivity by exposing how exploitation operates through intersecting hierarchies of race, gender, class and coloniality and by foregrounding knowledge generated in marginalised and postcolonial contexts. The principle of Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation reinforces the ethical foundation of the framework. It affirms that research should not be detached or neutral but oriented towards redress, redistribution and structural change. Research guided by these principles is well-positioned to support not only incremental policy reform but also systemic transformation (Fursova, 2023; Gilabert, 2019; Steiner, 2018; Perry, 2017; Oliver *et al.*, 2014). Emphasis is placed on redistribution, legal accountability and

collective empowerment over technocratic adjustment. These concerns are particularly relevant in the Global South, where exploitative dynamics are frequently perpetuated through debt regimes and resource extraction.

Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry addresses the need for methodological flexibility and context sensitivity by supporting a wide range of research strategies, including mathematical modeling, econometrics, ethnography, participatory methods and mixed approaches, depending on the nature of the research question and the communities involved. From a methodological perspective, the framework broadens the scope of legitimate knowledge production. Ethnography, decolonial approaches and participatory action research are accorded equal value alongside mathematical and econometric analysis and formal policy evaluation, particularly when examining concealed or informal forms of exploitation such as unpaid care, algorithmic control or undocumented labour (Baškarada and Koronios, 2018; Greene, 2006). Within this framework, methodological choices are shaped by ethical and epistemic commitments rather than disciplinary convention alone. Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking address the principle of dialogical engagement by fostering reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants. This ensures that research remains accountable to affected communities and supports collective learning, action and evidence-informed policymaking (Lester *et al.*, 2020; Shearer *et al.*, 2018; Head, 2016; Van de Ven, 2007).

These six principles are not intended to function in isolation. They are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, with each principle strengthening the application of the others. Each contributes to a broader framework that challenges narrow or one-dimensional approaches to the study of exploitation. For example, methodological diversity cannot be meaningfully applied without a foundation in epistemic pluralism, just as intersectional and decolonial analysis requires an understanding of structural and relational dynamics. Likewise, a normative commitment to justice and equity strengthens the ethical basis of community-engaged inquiry and evidence-informed policy making. Engaging with these principles involves more than applying them individually. It requires collaborative, reflexive and sustained engagement across disciplines, perspectives and research practices. Considered collectively, they offer a coherent yet flexible framework for generating knowledge that is historically situated, ethically grounded, analytically robust and oriented towards social transformation. Through these six principles, the framework does more than accommodate epistemic pluralism. It institutionalises it as a guiding orientation for research that is inclusive in perspective, historically grounded, ethically engaged and committed to social transformation.

In relation to pedagogy, the framework could support an educational approach that treats the study of exploitation as both an analytical and a reflective endeavour. Teaching in this area could benefit from recognising economic knowledge as socially produced, historically situated and embedded within relations of power, challenging representations of economics as a neutral or purely technical body of facts. This orientation could encourage students to move beyond surface-level explanations of economic outcomes and to examine how institutions, legal arrangements, historical processes and power asymmetries would shape patterns of inequality and exploitation over time (Shahjahan *et al.*, 2022; Subedi, 2013; Denis, 2009; Reardon, 2009). Pedagogical practices informed by epistemic pluralism could encourage engagement with multiple theoretical traditions and forms of knowledge. Educators could support learning environments in which mainstream economic models are examined alongside feminist, decolonial, institutional and political economy perspectives, without privileging a single analytical framework. Such an approach could invite students to interrogate whose knowledge is legitimised within economic discourse, whose experiences are marginalised, and how dominant frameworks would be reproduced through curricula and assessment practices. Recognising knowledge as situated could also create space for lived experience, collective resistance

and historically marginalised epistemologies to inform economic analysis, thereby strengthening both critical awareness and conceptual understanding.

Moreover, an intersectional and historically informed pedagogical orientation could further enable students to understand exploitation as produced through overlapping systems of power, including gender, race, class, coloniality and ability. Teaching strategies that incorporate historical analysis, comparative perspectives and case-based learning could help students identify how exploitative relations would be structured differently across social contexts, while also highlighting patterns of agency and resistance. Encouraging reflexivity could allow learners to consider how their own social positions would shape interpretation and understanding, fostering deeper engagement with economic analysis. Pedagogy in this context could also benefit from explicit engagement with normative questions. Teaching could encourage transparent discussion of justice, equity and ethical responsibility within economic systems, instead of presenting economic inquiry as value-free. Structured debate, reflective writing and critical policy analysis could support students in evaluating the moral assumptions embedded within economic models and policy interventions. Far from undermining analytical rigour, such engagement could strengthen it by promoting reflexivity, accountability and conceptual clarity.

Methodological diversity could be equally important in supporting inclusive and effective learning. Combining quantitative analysis with qualitative inquiry, historical investigation, participatory approaches and reflective assessment could allow students to engage with complexity and to appreciate the strengths and limitations of different forms of evidence. This diversity could also support accessibility by accommodating varied learning styles and epistemic orientations, while reinforcing the multifaceted nature of exploitation as both a structural and lived phenomenon. In addition, pedagogy oriented towards engagement and application could encourage students to connect academic inquiry with real-world contexts. Learning activities that involve policy analysis, applied research or collaboration with community organisations could help students understand how economic knowledge would inform social action and institutional change. Education, in this sense, could be understood not as a neutral transmission of facts but as an active site of inquiry where power, inequality and alternatives would be examined and contested. By fostering critical consciousness alongside analytical skill, such pedagogical approaches could support the development of learners who would be equipped to engage thoughtfully and responsibly with the challenges of exploitation and inequality.

6.6 Applying the pluralistic framework for the study of economic exploitation in practice

[Drydakís \(2022b\)](#) engages closely with the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation by treating adverse working conditions as structurally embedded, relationally produced and consequential for material well-being and human dignity. The study examines immigrants in European countries and evaluates how adverse working conditions, related to the absence of a written employment contract, wages below the national minimum and insults or threats at work, are associated with physical health and depression. The design, conceptual framing and policy discussion collectively align with the framework's six principles, while also illustrating a practical sequence of steps that can guide similar research. In this sense, the study functions not only as an empirical contribution but also as an applied model for how economists can operationalise exploitation within a pluralistic and justice-oriented research design, addressing a key obstacle faced by scholars working beyond dominant analytical conventions.

The first principle, Structural and Relational Ontology, is reflected in how the study frames adverse working conditions as systemic features of labour market precariousness rather than as isolated events or individual failings. The paper situates immigrant employment within a wider institutional and economic setting characterised by informality, weak protections and heightened vulnerability, and it treats the employment relationship as shaped by unequal

power relations. Importantly, the analysis does not approach each adverse condition in isolation. Instead, it tests and documents their co-occurrence, showing that lacking a contract, being underpaid and experiencing verbal abuse or threats are positively correlated and may cluster together. This approach mirrors a structural-relational understanding of exploitation, in which harms are produced through interlocking mechanisms such as legal exclusion, constrained bargaining power, dependency and exposure to humiliating treatment. In applying the framework, new research would begin by defining the phenomenon in these structural-relational terms and then identify how multiple dimensions of vulnerability reinforce one another through institutional arrangements and everyday workplace relations. The relative scarcity of quantitative economic studies that adopt this framing highlights an additional obstacle, namely the limited availability of disciplinary exemplars that legitimise structural-relational approaches within mainstream empirical economics.

The second principle, Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge, is evident in the paper's theoretical architecture and its orientation towards knowledge beyond a single dominant explanatory lens. The analysis integrates multiple theoretical perspectives from heterodox economics, public health and social epidemiology to examine how exploitation is associated with deteriorating well-being, moving beyond reliance on conventional economic approaches alone. These perspectives broaden what counts as relevant evidence and provide mechanisms that connect contracts, wages and workplace abuse to health and depression outcomes. The fieldwork strategy also reflects an awareness of situated access. The study reaches immigrant participants through language-course centres and uses multilingual instruments, thereby acknowledging practical and epistemic barriers to inclusion. When applying the framework, new research would similarly articulate what dominant models illuminate and what they obscure, integrate plural theoretical traditions that foreground power and institutional context and design research practices that respect language, trust and participant safety. The framework encourages deeper co-production with affected communities, yet the study's recruitment and translation practices already signal movement towards more inclusive knowledge production.

The third principle, Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis, is addressed through the paper's attention to heterogeneity and structured disadvantage among immigrants, particularly through differentiation by refugee status and gender. The study finds that refugees and women experience poorer physical health and higher levels of depression, and it discusses these patterns in relation to vulnerability, integration stressors and unequal exposure to harmful working conditions, including exploitation. The analysis also positions immigrants as disproportionately concentrated in low-paid, insecure and demanding work, consistent with broader accounts of labour market segmentation. In applying the framework, researchers would extend this step by treating such differences not as additive "risk factors" but as relational outcomes of interlocking hierarchies that shape labour allocation, institutional protection and exposure to coercion or abuse. The paper gestures towards these dynamics in its contextual discussion, although fuller engagement would more explicitly connect national labour regimes to wider histories of migration governance, racialised labour ordering and the global political economy. The study nonetheless offers a workable model for beginning to operationalise intersectional vulnerability within a quantitative research design. The limited number of economic studies that successfully integrate intersectional analysis into large-scale empirical research further illustrates the difficulty of advancing such approaches within disciplinary environments where heterogeneity is often treated as secondary, despite being constitutive of economic experience.

The fourth principle, Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation, is visible in the way the study translates empirical evidence into a protection-oriented and accountability-oriented policy agenda. The paper does not frame immigrant health harms as unfortunate side effects to be addressed through individual coping strategies. Instead, it directs attention to institutional responsibilities and labour protections. It argues for written employment contracts, effective labour inspections, accessible mechanisms for reporting

violations and strengthened safeguards aligned with broader labour standards. This reflects a normative stance in which research contributes to justice as well as description. When applying the framework, a comparable study would make this orientation explicit from the outset by clarifying that its purpose is both analytical and emancipatory, namely to identify structural conditions that undermine dignity and to support interventions that redistribute protections and reduce exposure to exploitation. While the paper largely focuses on enforce-and-protect instruments, it establishes a clear normative through-line linking empirical patterns to rights, enforcement and institutional accountability. The articulation of normative commitments within economics remains constrained by editorial conventions that often discourage explicit engagement with justice-oriented objectives. This reinforces the importance of institutional spaces that recognise normative transparency as a scholarly strength, not a liability.

The fifth principle, Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry, is addressed through the study's combination of a longitudinal design, recognised health measures and grounded operationalisation of adverse working conditions. The paper constructs a panel dataset and employs random effects models with careful attention to identification tests, while maintaining interpretive caution regarding causality. It uses established instruments to measure physical health and depression and operationalises precariousness and abuse through concrete qualitative and quantitative indicators that reflect how exploitation-related harms are experienced in practice. The analysis acknowledges limitations, including unobserved trauma, legal status and coping strategies, and presents the findings as associations without making definitive causal claims. Under the framework, comparable research would follow a similar logic by selecting qualitative and quantitative methods that align with the complexity of exploitation, prioritising ethically grounded measurement and remaining reflexive about the limits of any single method. The framework also encourages triangulation, suggesting a natural extension through the integration of econometric evidence with participatory approaches capable of capturing hidden coercion, fear and constraints on exit. Crucially, participatory and community-based approaches also create opportunities for those directly affected by exploitation to play an active role in shaping research questions, interpretations and policy recommendations. This form of engagement helps ensure that proposed interventions reflect the priorities, needs and lived realities of the communities concerned, while avoiding reliance on external assumptions about what constitutes improvement. By embedding participation within the research process, the framework supports ethically responsible knowledge production and reduces the risk of advocating interventions that those experiencing exploitation neither seek nor find meaningful for their livelihoods. The practical difficulty of combining econometric analysis with participatory methods within standard economic publication formats further underscores the importance of methodological openness at the editorial level.

The sixth principle, Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking, is reflected in both the research process and the communication of findings as actionable policy implications. The paper demonstrates engagement through collaboration with immigrant-serving organisations, translation procedures and ethical safeguards that reduce risks to participants. It also directs findings towards institutions and policy levers with the potential to reduce harm, including contract enforcement, wage compliance, inspection effectiveness and accessible reporting channels. This approach aligns with evidence-informed policymaking that treats scholarship not as detached observation but as a resource for accountability and improvement in labour protections. When applying the framework, the steps involved include building sustained relationships with community organisations and service providers, designing research that informs implementable interventions and communicating findings in ways that support legal reform and institutional learning. While the framework encourages further movement towards reciprocal knowledge exchange and co-produced outputs, the study already demonstrates how research can be designed with policy relevance while maintaining academic independence.

The application of the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation illustrates how future studies can move from abstract concern with exploitation towards systematic, policy-relevant analysis. The framework offers a practical sequence for research design: begin by defining exploitation in structural and relational terms; identify how multiple forms of disadvantage co-occur through institutional arrangements; draw on plural theoretical perspectives to interpret mechanisms; operationalise harms using grounded and ethically sensitive measures; and communicate findings in ways that support accountability and institutional reform. This approach strengthens analytical coherence, improves empirical validity and enhances the relevance of research for labour governance and social protection. For future studies, the framework provides not only a set of principles but also a replicable pathway for producing evidence that is rigorous, inclusive and responsive to the realities of exploitative labour relations.

6.7 Working definition of exploitation

Given the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation, this study responds to the need for a more expansive and analytically robust definition of exploitation, one that aligns with interdisciplinary and critical traditions that recognise its systemic, relational and historically embedded nature (Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020; Grosfoguel, 2007; Sen, 1999; Holmstrom, 1997; Hill, 1994; Bowles and Gintis, 1988; Munzer, 1990; Elster, 1986; Buchanan, 1985).

An inclusive definition should emphasise enduring asymmetries of power, colonial histories and institutional architectures that produce and normalise exploitation, capturing their persistence across institutional, social and epistemic domains (Menard and Shirley, 2024; Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2017; Skeggs, 2015; Federici, 2020; Grosfoguel, 2007; Darity, 2005; Elson, 1999; Wolff, 1999; Folbre, 2001; North, 1990; Roemer, 1982). Such an inclusive and ethically grounded approach is better equipped to challenge prevailing definitions that reduce exploitation to a transactional irregularity or an unfortunate by-product of market failure. These conceptual developments form the foundation for the definition offered below. The definition is intended to function not only as a terminological intervention but also as a means of supporting the broader research framework developed in this study, which is grounded in structural critique, epistemic pluralism and equity-oriented inquiry.

Definition: Exploitation is a historically contingent, structurally embedded and relational process of unequal value extraction under conditions of systemic power asymmetry, social dependency and institutionalised inequality. It operates across formal and informal domains and is organised through intersecting hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, caste, coloniality and ability. Exploitation is sustained by legal, ideological, cultural and technological mechanisms that concentrate control, obscure accountability and normalise social and economic disparities. It functions as a foundational mechanism of accumulation and subordination within stratified economic systems, reproducing structural disadvantage through both material deprivation and the marginalisation of lived experience, dissent and access to resources.

This definition aligns closely with the six principles of the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation and serves as a conceptual anchor for interdisciplinary, ethically committed and transformative research. It is deeply grounded in a structural and relational ontology. It conceptualises exploitation as a historically situated and structurally embedded process, moving beyond interpretations that treat it as an isolated or individual occurrence (Prey, 2012; Murphy, 2001; Hausman, 1999; Smith, 1984). The emphasis on “systemic power asymmetry,” “social dependency” and “institutionalised inequality” signals a commitment to understanding exploitation as a constitutive feature of economic systems. By highlighting the relational dimensions of value extraction, the definition reinforces the view that economic relations are shaped by ongoing structures of domination, accumulation and exclusion (McKeown, 2016; Zwolinski, 2012).

One of the definition's significant features lies in its explicit incorporation of intersectionality and decolonial critique. It names race, gender, sexuality, class, caste, coloniality and ability as intersecting axes that structure and reinforce exploitation. By doing so, it situates value extraction within overlapping systems of hierarchy and subordination, acknowledging the structural legacies and contemporary expressions of racism, sexism, colonialism and ableism (Guglielmi, 2023; Fursova, 2023; Federici, 2020; Dobos, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017; Perry, 2017; Oliver *et al.*, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2007). The use of the term "coloniality" (rather than merely "colonialism") affirms a decolonial perspective by recognising how colonial power persists in present-day institutions, epistemologies and global inequalities.

The definition reflects a strong normative commitment to justice and equity. It identifies not only the material harms of exploitation, such as deprivation and control but also its discursive and ideological dimensions, including the silencing of dissent and the normalisation of social and economic disparities. This moral framing underscores that exploitation is not merely economically inefficient or legally problematic, but ethically objectionable and socially destructive (Gilabert, 2019; Steiner, 2018; Cullenberg, 1998). The definition thus supports the framework's emphasis on transformation, positioning the study of exploitation as a project oriented toward structural redress and emancipation.

The definition also supports the principle of engaged scholarship and evidence-informed policymaking. Its references to the mechanisms that "obscure accountability" and "legitimise exclusionary paradigms" imply a call to action. The definition critiques the ideologies and institutions that perpetuate harm and conceal responsibility, thereby encouraging research that is not only diagnostic but also strategic, policy relevant and solidaristic (Fursova, 2023; Keighley *et al.*, 2023; Lester *et al.*, 2020; Shearer *et al.*, 2018; Perry, 2017; Head, 2016; Harding, 1995). This makes the definition particularly amenable to research that seeks to inform public discourse, legal reform and community organising.

Although the definition does not prescribe specific methods, it supports an epistemologically inclusive orientation by drawing attention to both formal and informal domains in which exploitation occurs (Gräbner and Strunk, 2020; Decker *et al.*, 2019; Drydak, 2018; Dow, 2009). The reference to the marginalisation of lived experience and the influence of cultural and ideological mechanisms indicates an openness to multiple ways of knowing. It invites the recognition of knowledge shaped by situated, experiential and community-based perspectives, alongside more formal academic traditions. This commitment to methodological diversity supports the development of research that is both analytically rigorous and contextually relevant. It enhances the potential for scholarship to engage with the structural and everyday realities of exploitation and to contribute meaningfully to processes of redress and transformation.

This working definition supports the development of inquiries that are historically informed, ethically grounded and epistemically plural, while also facilitating interdisciplinary engagement with the systemic conditions through which exploitation is reproduced as structural disadvantage.

7. Limitations and future research directions

While this study offers a theoretically grounded and ethically engaged research framework for studying exploitation, a number of limitations merit reflection. Firstly, while the present study is grounded in epistemic pluralism, future research could productively explore alternative or complementary forms of pluralism to further strengthen the coherence and applicability of pluralistic frameworks in economics. One important example is structured pluralism, as developed by Dow (2004), which offers a distinct methodological approach to managing plurality within economic inquiry. Structured pluralism differs from epistemic pluralism in that it places greater emphasis on organising pluralism around shared ontological commitments and internally coherent theoretical traditions. Structured pluralism focuses

primarily on how multiple schools of economic thought can coexist and engage constructively without collapsing into relativism or theoretical inconsistency, while giving less emphasis to the politics of knowledge production and epistemic inclusion. By anchoring pluralism in common ontological assumptions, such as openness, historical time, uncertainty or non-ergodicity, structured pluralism provides a disciplined architecture within which methodological and theoretical diversity can be evaluated and compared. From this perspective, structured pluralism offers several potential advantages for future research on exploitation. Firstly, it provides explicit safeguards against incoherence when combining insights from different economic traditions, particularly where their ontological or epistemological assumptions diverge. Secondly, it facilitates systematic comparison across schools of thought, enabling researchers to assess the explanatory strengths and limitations of competing frameworks in relation to specific dimensions of exploitation. Thirdly, structured pluralism may be particularly valuable where the primary objective is to embed pluralism within economics itself, without necessarily extending inquiry across disciplines or knowledge systems. At the same time, the adoption of structured pluralism would involve trade-offs. Its focus on internal coherence within established traditions may offer less direct engagement with issues of epistemic exclusion, power asymmetries in knowledge production or the marginalisation of non-academic and non-Western epistemologies. For this reason, future research could explore how structured pluralism and epistemic pluralism might be combined or sequenced, for example, by using structured pluralism to organise dialogue among economic theories, while retaining epistemic pluralism to address questions of epistemic justice, lived experience and decolonial critique. Accordingly, future work could examine how different forms of pluralism, including epistemic pluralism, structured pluralism, methodological pluralism and interdisciplinary pluralism, can be mobilised in complementary ways depending on research aims, disciplinary context and normative orientation. Such inquiry would contribute to a more refined understanding of pluralism not as a single methodological stance, but as a family of approaches, each offering distinct tools for building coherent, rigorous and socially relevant frameworks for the study of exploitation.

Secondly, although the framework draws on a wide range of theoretical traditions and epistemologies, it cannot claim to represent the full diversity of global perspectives. While it calls for the inclusion of Indigenous, non-Western and critical knowledge systems, further research is needed to engage more deeply with these perspectives on their own terms. This includes developing decolonial methodologies that are shaped by, and accountable to, the knowledge traditions and political struggles of communities historically excluded from mainstream economic discourse. Thirdly, the framework does not fully resolve the tensions that may arise from integrating divergent theoretical traditions. Further research is needed to explore how epistemic pluralism can be practised in ways that preserve analytical integrity while fostering constructive dialogue across traditions.

Fourthly, the practical implementation of the framework may face institutional and disciplinary barriers. Academic and policy environments often remain structured around disciplinary silos, established hierarchies of knowledge and evaluation systems that privilege specific paradigms, particularly those associated with positivist or neoclassical approaches. Future research could examine how the framework can be applied in such constrained contexts, and what forms of institutional support, curriculum change or collaborative infrastructure are required to enable its wider uptake. Fifthly, while the framework is anchored in a strong normative commitment to justice, equity and transformation, this orientation may present challenges when pursued alongside the principle of epistemic openness. In collaborative or interdisciplinary settings, researchers may hold divergent values, assumptions or goals. Future inquiry should consider how to negotiate these tensions in ways that uphold the framework's normative orientation without closing off engagement with alternative perspectives.

Sixthly, the framework remains predominantly human-centred in its analytical orientation. Although it references environmental degradation and ecological breakdown as part of the

broader context of inequality, future research should work towards a more fully integrated treatment of environmental exploitation. This would involve developing analyses that recognise ecological harm not only as a parallel concern but as structurally interlinked with economic inequality and epistemic injustice. This study seeks to encourage the framework's reflexive and generative development. Future research may test, adapt and contest its principles in diverse empirical, institutional and geopolitical contexts. In doing so, it can further enrich the evolving field of critical economic inquiry and support the production of knowledge that is contextually grounded, socially engaged and oriented towards transformation.

8. Conclusions

The literature utilised in this study highlights that understanding and addressing exploitation is not solely a moral concern; it constitutes a foundational step towards reconstructing economic systems that are more just, equitable, inclusive, sustainable and humane (Fraser, 2016; Milanovic, 2016; Piketty, 2014). The study of exploitation reveals that exploitation is not an episodic failure of governance or policy, but, in certain cases, a structural element of economic systems (Banerjee, 2021; Hardt and Negri, 2018; Smith, 2016). Across historical and geographical contexts, economic accumulation often relies on the systematic extraction of value through dispossession, marginalisation and the devaluation of particular groups and forms of labour. From colonial extraction and land appropriation to wage suppression and indebtedness, the mechanisms of exploitation continue to evolve instead of disappearing (Hickel *et al.*, 2022; Urzedo and Chatterjee, 2022; Dowlah, 2021). These structures remain embedded in present-day economic infrastructures, shaping global distributions of wealth, legitimacy and institutional authority. The analysis indicates that exploitation is institutionalised through legal frameworks, digital infrastructures and global market systems (Cini, 2023; Zuboff, 2023; LeBaron, 2021). These processes are sustained by ideological constructs that portray market outcomes as neutral and frame individual or national poverty as self-inflicted, obscuring the role of systemic design (van Staveren, 2024; Chang, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2007).

In response to these dynamics, this study supports the development of a research framework that is theoretically rigorous, methodologically plural and grounded in ethical responsibility and historical awareness (Federici, 2020; Dobos, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017). The proposed research framework, titled The Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation, is built on six principles: Structural and Relational Ontology; Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge; Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis; Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation; Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry; and Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking.

Through this framework, the study evaluates exploitation as a historically contingent, relational and morally charged process. Meaningful insights emerge through interdisciplinary approaches drawing from economics, political theory, sociology, law, philosophy, history and anthropology (Truc *et al.*, 2023; Buyalskaya *et al.*, 2021; Stilwell, 2019; Dolfma and Kesting, 2009). Such a framework not only aims to identify the conditions under which exploitation occurs but also seeks to address structural and intersectional inequalities by advocating comprehensive social protection, strengthened collective bargaining rights and sustained public investment in labour inspection, healthcare, education, housing and infrastructure (Drydakis, 2023; Stilwell, 2019; Darity *et al.*, 2018; Mehra and Shay, 2016).

The study also affirms that the analysis of exploitation raises essential epistemological and ethical considerations. Knowledge production is understood as inherently political. Researchers are called to interrogate the frameworks through which exploitation is theorised, to centre the experiences of those most affected and to contribute to research that advances socially just and scientifically robust outcomes (Fursova, 2023; Keighley *et al.*,

2023; Perry, 2017; Harding, 1995). Participatory inquiry and evidence-informed policymaking are not supplementary practices; they are essential to ensuring that research remains accountable, relevant and grounded. The study concludes by emphasising that the analysis of exploitation offers more than a critique of existing systems; it provides a conceptual and empirical foundation for organising the structures of economic life around principles of equity, with a view to advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

9. Afterword

9.1 Afterword by Nick Drydak

In 2016, I developed two courses at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge: “The Economics of Inequality, Discrimination, Poverty and Exploitation” and “The Economics of Growth and Development”. These courses were designed around six principles: Structural and Relational Ontology; Epistemic Pluralism and Situated Knowledge; Intersectional and Decolonial Analysis; Normative Commitment to Justice, Equity and Transformation; Methodological Diversity and Grounded Inquiry; and Engaged Scholarship and Evidence-Informed Policymaking. The aim was to offer my students a pluralistic and ethical understanding of critical economic and social phenomena.

In 2024, when Clare Lehane (Commissioning Editor at Emerald Publishing) approached me to discuss a business case for a new journal dedicated to the study of exploitation, drawing on my Cambridge courses, I could not have anticipated that these early teaching foundations would evolve, in 2025, into the Journal of Economic Exploitation and Inequality (JOEEI). Nor could I have imagined that the six principles that shaped my modules would, a decade later, form what is now presented as The Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation. Equally, I could not have imagined that I would have the opportunity to develop and lead such a journal as its Editor-in-Chief.

I extend my deepest thanks and appreciation to Clare Lehane, Michael Burrows (Publishing Development Manager at Emerald Publishing), Molly McGrath (Peer Review Editor at Emerald Publishing) and Becky Lewinton (Peer Review Editor at Emerald Publishing) for their vision, professionalism and tireless work in shaping this new journal through countless hours of discussion and document exchange. I also wish to express my deep thanks to Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, for hosting my modules and providing students with a unique learning environment.

I am profoundly grateful to the inaugural Editors of the journal, who generously accepted my invitation to join the Editorial Board. I am truly inspired by their commitment to advancing the journal’s mission in a spirit of collaboration. The inaugural Editors are Michael E. Martell, Tindara Addabbo, Corrado Andini, Dennis Badeen, Patrick Button, Maryam Dilmaghani, Marlene Kim, Maryam Lotfi, Eugenia Markova, Evangelos Mourelatos, Marina Papalexi, Anna Paraskevopoulou, Swetketu Patnaik, Antonis Ragkousis, Stelios Roupakias, Katerina Sidiropoulou, Augustus Wood and Nick Drydak.

The JOEEI is grounded in the six core principles that underpin the Pluralistic Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation. These principles affirm that research on exploitation benefits from epistemic plurality, epistemological openness and explicit political grounding. The journal provides a forum in which diverse theoretical and disciplinary perspectives can engage in critical dialogue, fostering scholarship oriented towards equity and systemic transformation. The journal seeks to cultivate a rigorous and inclusive scholarly community that values epistemic diversity and methodological breadth. It offers a publishing platform that recognises a wide range of methodologies, knowledge systems and lived experiences. Dominant paradigms within economics and the social sciences have frequently marginalised insights grounded in Indigenous worldviews, feminist and queer theory, postcolonial critique and experiential knowledge. In response, the journal creates space for work that decentres Western canons, interrogates hegemonic narratives and advances critical traditions that challenge prevailing assumptions about evidence and academic rigour. By supporting research

informed by decolonial theory, pluralistic epistemologies and mixed-method approaches, the journal aims not only to advance justice, equity and diversity but also to contribute to transforming how economic knowledge is produced and shared.

Aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the journal prioritises research that examines the structural drivers of poverty and deprivation; investigates the economic marginalisation of women and gender-minoritised groups; analyses precarious work, informal and platform economies and exploitative global value chains; and addresses the compounded effects of class, race and colonial legacies on economic exclusion. It also welcomes contributions that scrutinise institutional erosion, regulatory capture, legal impunity, corporate neglect and the weakening of labour protections, all of which enable exploitative practices to persist. Particular emphasis is placed on amplifying Global South perspectives, feminist scholarship and decolonial approaches that challenge dominant frameworks and open pathways towards more equitable economic systems. The journal encourages work that not only documents exploitation but also explores democratic labour practices and emergent routes towards just and sustainable futures.

A central commitment of the journal is to fostering an inclusive and globally representative academic community. Addressing exploitation requires intellectual engagement that reflects the diversity of experiences, traditions and contexts shaping contemporary inequalities. This commitment extends beyond broadening participation to include rethinking publishing practices and academic norms. The journal therefore actively invites submissions from early-career researchers, scholars based in the Global South and individuals from historically marginalised communities, recognising that these voices are essential to reshaping the scope and direction of the field.

The vision for the JOEEI is to serve as a forum for research that interrogates, exposes and rethinks exploitation in its historical, structural and intersectional forms. It is committed to publishing scholarship that is analytically rigorous, pluralistic in method and grounded in ethical and political responsibility. By drawing on diverse disciplines and perspectives, the journal seeks to challenge exclusionary paradigms and support the production of transformative knowledge. Its purpose is not only to analyse exploitation but also to inform debate, policy and practice in ways that contribute to more just, inclusive and sustainable futures. Looking ahead, the journal aspires to become a vibrant platform for dialogue, collaboration and critical inquiry across disciplines, geographies and traditions and warmly invites researchers, practitioners and policymakers to contribute to this collective endeavour.

This new journal is dedicated to my students at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge (2016–2025), with the hope that my modules and teaching have meaningfully shaped their human and social capital and that this legacy contributes to building more just societies.

9.2 Afterword by Michael E. Martell

As a second-year graduate student, I became interested in using economics to better understand how LGBTQ + individuals experience the economy. The reaction of my faculty advisors was mixed. Advisors were generally supportive but also cautiously so. The topic would be perceived as niche. The tools of mainstream economics might be ill-suited to answer the questions I had and continue to have. The research agenda I envisioned required insights and ways of knowing from other disciplines, methodologies outside those typically utilized by economists and perspectives of those traditionally excluded from the discipline. Though I had neither the vocabulary nor intellectual precision to describe it at the time, my agenda needed The Pluralist Framework for the Study of Economic Exploitation described above. I also needed outlets willing to publish research in this tradition. I quickly realized there are too few of them. The lack of outlets has served as an obstacle to emancipatory scholarship. I am grateful for the team at Emerald for their labors to create and support this journal and the vision

for the liberating research it can support. I am similarly grateful, and deeply humbled, for Nick Drydakís's invitation to join him as Co-Editor of the *Journal of Economic Exploitation and Inequality*.

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Note

1. While the study predominantly uses the term inequality for the sake of consistency and clarity, it does so with the recognition that many forms of inequality are shaped by systemic disadvantage.

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Corresponding author

Nick Drydakakis can be contacted at: nick.drydakakis@aru.ac.uk