

**Title: “Essential & Necessary”: Political Economy, State Classification, and the Making of a Crisis Class**

**Abstract**

During moments of crisis, state elites and allied economic actors may use selective language to construct new categories of people to manage the crisis conditions. This paper explores these processes of social construction under crisis by comparing the classification of workers deemed essential during COVID (2021-2024) to those classified as vital to national interest during WW1 (1914-1918). It examines how these socially constructed classifications become durable social classes. 1.) I argue that modern states construct durable social classes by creating classifications that are political and normative; these classifications are not innate or neutral, but rather are socially constructed to satisfy political interests. This occurs through the use of “rhetorical political devices” by state actors such as the language of “essential” and “necessary” in these two cases to make up social classifications during social crises. Using these devices, the state identifies certain groups as indispensable to American society to create and manage boundaries between them and other groups. 2.) I propose a general analytical model to describe how the state facilitates class formation based on the empirical data from these two cases. This is fundamentally a historical process; one where the state through processes of classification shapes the characteristics for a social class. 3.) I suggest that the process of classification was the source of class construction, as state actors served as autonomous actors in forming a new class. Synthesizing these cases, I propose a theory of the “crisis class”: a group of workers whose exposure to harm during national emergencies is managed by the state and capital interests. Although differing in status, members of this class share common racial, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics, and their labor is crucial for sustaining economic productivity and societal functioning. The crisis class emerges from historical occupational roles, parallel production positions, shared ideological frameworks, and the persistent structuring effects of race and gender, with the state acting as the principal adjudicator of their role in a given historical moment. In my empirical analysis, I demonstrate how the interests of those who create classifications, along with the surrounding social context, play a crucial role in determining how durable those classifications become in the process of making up people.

Contemporary state theorists have examined how modern states utilize classificatory processes to order populations, whereby the categories produced possess both material and symbolic consequences (Hacking 1986; Scott 1988; Anderson 1991; Lee 1993; Jung and Almaguer 2004; Loveman 2007, 2014; Lee 2008; Morning 2008). Classifications are not static, rather they are susceptible to historical contingency, and negotiated by various intra and extra-governmental actors (Nobles 2000, Snipp 2003, Haney-López 2006; Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017). This is evidenced in the production of racial classifications which are often contested by social movement actors and extra governmental institutions (Espiritu 1992; Perlmann and Waters 2002; Prewitt 2013; Mora 2014; Magboughleh 2017).

In this way, the state functions as a boundary-making and stratifying apparatus. Democratic struggles between classes characterize the modern welfare state (Esping-Anderson 1990, Korpi and Palme 1998). These sorts of social boundaries become durable through organizationally generated and categorically reinforced inequality. This occurs through classificatory distinctions being associated with differential access and moral deservingness (Tilly 1998, Goldberg 2008). More explicit reference has been made to the role of symbolic boundaries in affecting social hierarchy, demonstrating how symbolic classification processes underlie the reproduction of social hierarchies (Lamont and Fournier 1992). As well as how civil societies maintain cohesion through symbolic binaries, operating as moral codes that structure public discourse, defining who embodies civic virtue and who threatens collective order (Alexander 1991).

For Bourdieu, “the operation of classification” was a primary sociological focus. More specifically, his theoretical inquiry into what it means to classify, as well as what the process of classification indicates about social life was a cornerstone of his interest in classification struggles. (Bourdieu 1981-1982, 2-7). In the Bourdieusian sense, classification struggles connotes a symbolic struggle for power and legibility, by which an authoritative entity seeks “to establish the existence of the group, and even people’s social identities, in so far as the identity assigned to particular individuals depends on the group to which they are allocated and the identity assigned to this group” (Bourdieu 1981-1982, 84). These classificatory struggles inherently consist of power relations, and relational dynamics involved between the classified and the classifier as well as and how it relates to claims of objective classification (Bourdieu 1981-1982 23, 31-33). Thus, one may consider the nominal social classification itself as an object of conflict (Bourdieu 1981-1982 53). This struggle involves both symbolic capital and violence, which in the state “says of its subjects, through agents or institutions embodying it, speaks of its claims to universal recognition” and “characterizes the very definition of symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 1981-1982, 33, 125). Thus from Bourdieu, what we receive is a theory of the construction of social classification (Bourdieu 1981-1982, 63).

However, the relationship between how these socially constructed classifications become durable social classes remains underexplored. This tension motivates my question “How do modern states construct durable social classes”? 1.) I argue that modern states construct durable social classes by creating classifications that are political and normative; these classifications are not innate or neutral, but rather are socially constructed to satisfy political interests. This occurs through the use of “rhetorical political devices” by state actors such as the language of “essential” and “necessary” in these two cases to make up social classifications during social crises. Using these devices, the state identifies certain groups as indispensable to American society to create and manage boundaries between them and other groups. 2.) I propose a general analytical model to describe how the state facilitates class formation based on the empirical data from these two cases. This is fundamentally a historical process; one where the state through processes of classification shapes the characteristics for a social class. 3.) I suggest that the process of classification was the source of class construction, as state actors served as autonomous actors in forming a new class. In my empirical analysis, I examine how the state used the terms “necessary” and “essential” to socially construct labor categories during moments of crisis, drawing from selected primary sources from COVID-19 policy reports and World War I congressional records. The state assigned workers to these categories, passed laws, coordinated public and private interests, and provided financial support to sustain productivity. It simultaneously established boundaries around essential and necessary labor, using class, social status, immigration status, gender, and age to legitimize classifications while

defining what sort of work was non-essential. The ambiguities within these classifications required interpretation across different layers of government, reflecting shifting state priorities and ongoing efforts to clarify boundaries. Using secondary sources, I show how these classifications were consistently aligned with particular material outcomes for workers, shaped by broader economic changes, geographic and occupational variation, and structural inequalities such as racialization and gendered labor hierarchies. Black and Hispanic workers were disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid agricultural jobs, while women organized around their marginalized labor positions. Synthesizing these cases, I propose a theory of the “crisis class”: a group of workers whose exposure to harm during national emergencies is managed by the state and capital interests. Although differing in status, members of this class share common racial, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics, and their labor is crucial for sustaining economic productivity and societal functioning. The crisis class emerges from historical occupational roles, parallel production positions, shared ideological frameworks, and the persistent structuring effects of race and gender, with the state acting as the principal adjudicator of their role in a given historical moment.

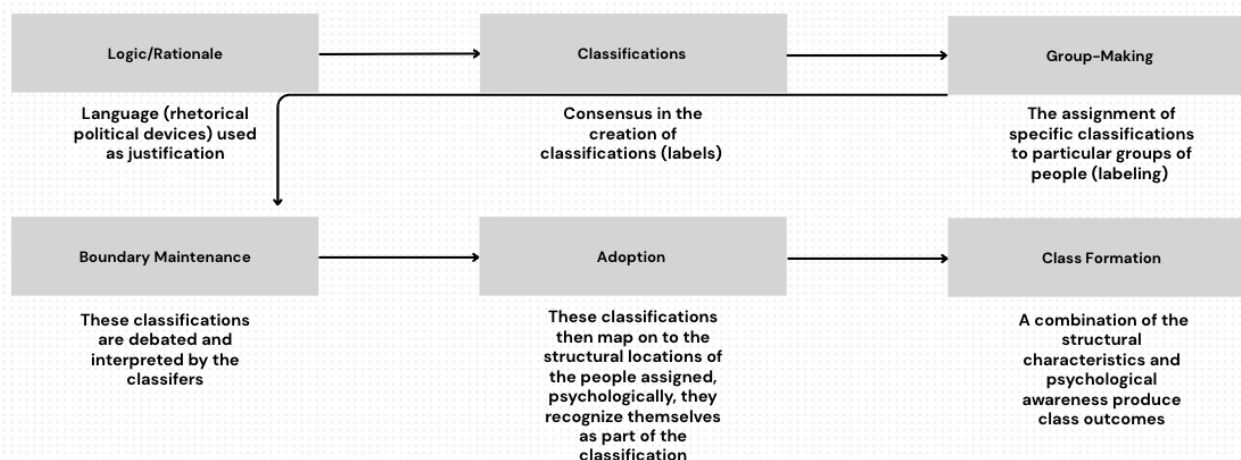


Fig. 1 - The state’s facilitation of class formation (crisis-class making process)

Hacking provides us a pathway for considering how social constructions function, as it pertains to classification specifically, and ideas more broadly. Theories of social construction highlight the extent to which products of the social world are not essentialized nor naturalized. In other words, the aspects of reality which are not understood as inevitable. To study an item's social construction, is to understand a social phenomena within its given sociohistorical and material context or its “matrix”, the characteristics which constitute its ontological being. However, Hacking’s “Looping Effect” posits a sort of fundamental cyclical relationship between the classifier and the classified which underconsiders the extent to which the interests of the classifier and the social context influence the durability of the adopted classifications (Hacking 1986). In my empirical analysis, I demonstrate how the interests of those who create classifications, along with the surrounding social context, play a crucial role in determining how durable those classifications become in the process of making up people.

A reasonable alternative theoretical explanation for the complimentary emergence of “essential” and “necessary” workers as classes is the growth of the “new middle classes” thesis: a culmination of occupations who have emerged at the ardent of late-stage finance capitalism such as white collar workers, non-manual workers, intellectuals, service workers etc... to explain the formation of occupational groups which do not as easily fit into either the classical bourgeoisie or proletariat categorization (Wright 1980). However, the “new middle classes” thesis I argue does not fully capture the formation of these two occupational groups on account of an overwhelming amount of essential and necessary workers occupying service based and lower income occupations, as opposed to the middle manager occupations the thesis explains. Furthermore, the vast amount of essential workers who were frontline workers, functioned similarly to an industrial reserve army (Decoteau 2024). The essential worker category’s complexity and internal duality, reflected in its occupational breadth and stratified exposure to risk, make its classification analytically and theoretically generative beyond its framing as merely a “new middle class. In these cases, their different historical contexts and distance make them instructive for understanding the underlying consistency in how social classification is constructed through selective language during moments of social disruption despite difference in the substantive framing of the crisis itself. Furthermore, through these cases we are able to gain insight into how the political economy during social disruption influences the relationship between social classification, class formation and boundary making.

This project draws on two sets of congressional primary materials, one from the COVID-19 pandemic and one from World War I, to comparatively analyze how the U.S. state conceptualized labor it deemed vital and justified forms of selective governance across crises. This approach aligns with established historical methodology rather than establishing a singular causal argument for the development of the terms, I describe the similar patterns within each case which may lead to identifying multiple causal pathways to the same basic outcome pattern. This paper focuses on the events and processes that produced the construction of “essential” and “necessary” classifications which describe similarly selected occupations between COVID-19 and WWI (Mahoney and Rodriguez-Carces, 2024). Furthermore, Kennedy (2004) also relies on congressional records in interpreting wartime labor governance. In developing my analytical model, I draw from Skocpol and Somers’ triangle of comparative history, particularly their dimension of parallel comparative history to describe the similar ideas and themes that emerge amongst the individual cases within the historical data (Skocpol and Somers 1980). As a result of this scope, I do not assess cases outside of these historical moments. These similarities within the differing contexts are important because they help us understand how state classifications are used in the process of boundary creation. In terms of social reproduction, studying how these classifications are produced show how state actors invent new kinds of preexisting boundaries. In analyzing both cases, two differing yet structurally similar moments of social crisis, I demonstrate the meaning-making processes which occurred during these major historical junctures, revealing processes we may underanalyze otherwise or take for granted.

For the COVID-19 case, I conducted an advanced search in ProQuest Congressional using the filters “essential workers” AND “COVID-19” for materials published before May 15, 2020, which produced 42 results and four relevant miscellaneous reports. I selected the following documents because they capture congressional considerations leading up to the formulation of the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act (H.R. 6800): *Family Care for Essential Workers in the HEROES Act*; *Worker Support and Safety Provisions*; *Immigrants, the Economy, and the COVID-19 Outbreak*; and the *Title-by-Title Summary of the HEROES Act*. I pair these with the act’s final statutory definition (May 15, 2020) and the *Advisory Memorandum on Ensuring Essential Critical Infrastructure* (August 10, 2021). For the World War I case, I performed a ProQuest Congressional search using the terms “necessary” AND “draft” across 1917–1918, producing roughly 91 congressional records, which I then narrowed to January 1–May 18, 1917, yielding 12 results. From these I selected four congressional records (CR-1917-0428; CR-1917-0502; CR-1917-0512; CR-1917-0516) that contain substantive floor debate on “necessary industries” and conscription prior to the passage of the Selective Service Act (May 18, 1917) which formally defined what constituted “necessary” industries. While the Selective Service

Act of 1917 became law, the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800) passed only the House of Representatives and did not advance to enactment. My interest is not in the legal durability of these statutes, but in the discursive and classificatory work they perform. The HEROES Act and its related staff reports circulated widely in congressional discourse, shaped public understandings of “essential work,” and informed later legislative compromises such as the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021. In other words, these materials represent the state’s attempt to codify boundaries of value and necessity, regardless of their ultimate passage into law.

While existing literature on essential workers has theorized them as a unique segment of the working class, it has not yet explored how its characteristics and historical emergence may be representative of an entirely new type of social class formation (McCallum 2022, Lakoff 2017, Decoteau 2024). The social construction of the categories which were so vital to the functioning of the economy during two moments of social disorder remains underexplored. Through comparatively studying the similar discursive and rhetorical strategies used by legislators when deciding how and why both “essential workers” and “necessary workers” were to be classified, I am interested in how occupational categories and group boundaries are socially constructed during moments of social disorder. The structural conditions which historically parallel the cases of COVID-19 and WW1 is that essential workers mirror necessary workers in the longstanding tension between their critical importance and their continual undervaluation. From their origins in World War I, “essential industries” were organized through racialized and gendered structures, a pattern that intensified over the 20th century as service work became more stigmatized and disproportionately staffed by women and people of color. Between the 1930s and 1970s, labor protections around wages and hours largely advantaged white male industrial workers, granting them benefits such as pensions and health care, while institutionalized health systems grew alongside a racialized and gendered “public household” that relegated marginalized groups to low-paid service roles. The rise of the “municipal housekeeping movement,” which emerged in the South before spreading northward, further reinforced these dynamics by framing civic and welfare labor through the domestic responsibilities traditionally assigned to women (Jones 2023).

However, during these two moments, it is taken for granted that the classifications of “essential” and “necessary” workers are uniquely emergent and independent, in other words, that they are historically “new” conceptions. However, my data suggests that rhetorical strategies used by state actors in both these different moments are consistent, demonstrating an underlying process of classification construction on the basis of selective characteristics and judgements about groups of workers which informs the characteristics of class formation during crisis moments more generally, despite the specificities of the crisis itself. However, a central argument of this paper is that these terms were never neutral; from their inception in both cases, they were politically motivated, illustrating how the state produces categories that appear neutral yet function normatively in practice.

### **Logic/Rationale**

The significance of language as power for state actors’ interests has been well studied. Bourdieu states “legal discourse is a creative speech which brings into existence that which it utters” (Bourdieu 1991, 42). Thus, it functions as a mechanism of symbolic power, which is embedded in it possessing social processes of production, circulation and objectification. It is the medium through which social groups become actualized (Bourdieu 1991, 37). Yet language, particularly, political language is often ambiguous. Ambiguity within the state’s language of classification varies from being formed and produced by unintentionality in legal construction, a consequence of modernization, to intentional structured types of ambiguity for state interest (Bendix 1962 461, 494; Bauman 1991; Quisumbing King 2022;) This ambiguous state classificatory language can provide social power to certain groups over others and institute fragmented rules and political norms (Piven and Cloward 1971; Dobbin and Sutton 1988; Weir et. al 1988; Wilson 2011). At the national level, organizational tensions, differing interests and contradictions give rise to ambiguous state practices (Mann 1986; Sewell 1992, pp. 16–19; Mahoney and Thelen 2010, p. 8). Thus, language, and the classifications which are both formed and produced from them, emerge through processes of social construction which have both material and symbolic

implications for ordering social reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). However, language may not only function as a mechanism, but also as an instrumental precondition which creates the reason or rationale for carrying out classificatory schemas in the first instance.

The “Logic/Rationale” stage of my model describes the use of language (rhetorical political devices) as primordial justification. In this section, I draw on primary materials from COVID-19 policy documents and World War I congressional records to show how the state mobilized the labels “necessary” and “essential” to legitimate the social construction of labor categories. I trace this process through the formal deployment of these terms, the classification of specific workers within them, legislative action, coordination between public and private actors, and the provision of financial support designed to sustain productivity during periods of crisis.

### **Classification, Group-Making and Boundary Maintenance**

The state is a sovereign entity possessing the authority to kill or let live, with categories as a functioning element of the state, and classification as part of governmentality and biopower (Foucault [1975] 1995, Bourdieu 1994). The power of the state occurs through “the culmination of a process of concentration of different species of capital” which as it relates to the construction of classification, involves its exertion of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994). This is empirically relevant for studying the construction of classification as such because these forms of symbolic power are transmutable, thus “cultural capital, which is convertible on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized...social capital, made up of social obligations (“connections”) which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital, and may be institutionalized...”. Thus, the construction of social classification is always potentially the creation of institutionalization, which has been observed in the legal classifications of religious groups (Saeed 2020), and thus, has implications for understanding class struggles as struggles against classifications themselves (Tyler 2015). However, the role of ideological consensus among state actors as a necessary stage in the institutionalization of classifications has been underexplored.

Thus, the literature on stratification and boundary-making suggest that grouping is not a passive reflection of social difference but an active social process through which populations are rendered legible, governable, and morally interpretable. Groups are produced through classificatory practices that draw boundaries between people, sorting them into collective categories that carry shared meanings, expectations, and consequences. These groupings are institutionalized through state organizations and policy regimes, where they become durable by being tied to material access, rights, and differential treatment. Importantly, grouping operates simultaneously on symbolic and organizational levels: it assigns individuals to categories while also embedding those categories within administrative systems that regulate inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy. What we know, then, is that grouping stabilizes social inequality by transforming political and social struggles into seemingly neutral classifications. Once established, groups acquire moral valence: some are framed as deserving, responsible, or civic-minded, while others are marked as risky, dependent, or threatening to social order. These symbolic distinctions do not merely describe groups; they structure public discourse and shape how collective life is imagined. Grouping thus works by collapsing complex social realities into bounded social types, making hierarchy appear natural, orderly, and legitimate. In this way, grouping is central to how modern states and civil societies reproduce stratification while maintaining an appearance of neutrality and cohesion. However, this grouping process is not politically neutral, and rather is imbued with political interests from the onset which state actors must continually negotiate, through boundary work, in order to sustain difference and legitimate the classifications and subsequent classes formed.

The “Classifications” stage of my model describes the role of consensus in the creation of these classifications (labels). The “Group-Making” stage of my model focuses on how classifiers assign particular classifications to specific groups of people. In my data, the state drew on class position, social status, immigration status, gender, and age to establish boundaries that formalized and legitimized the categories of “essential” and “necessary” labor. In the process, it simultaneously defined which forms of work were rendered nonessential to domestic economic productivity during periods of crisis. These

distinctions were produced and stabilized through bureaucratic institutions that served as the primary organizational mechanism for classification. The “Boundary Maintenance” stage of my model shows how these classifications are debated and interpreted by classifiers. While each of these three processes are related, they are distinct in terms of the work they do in socially constructing the classifications themselves. Across both crises, state actors produced indeterminate boundaries that required interpretation and contestation by other officials as state priorities shifted. This interpretive labor was dispersed across multiple levels of government, with ambiguity emerging both within and between classificatory boundaries. Despite this indeterminacy, state actors repeatedly sought clarification in order to enhance the categories’ practical functionality.

### **Adoption**

The social construction of classification has been studied in reference to the category of “essential workers” during COVID-19. Existing literature has traced the rapid creation and adoption of this classification as stemming from media portrayals and historical dynamics within the U.S. labor force (Fousek 2021; Jones 2023). However, this literature has provided frameworks and comparative schemes for understanding the factors leading to the emergence of the classification, and has not yet empirically observed the discursive and rhetorical strategies used to form the classification itself. As well as what social dynamics informed their construction at particular historical moments. Ultimately, this area of literature has not yet connected the social construction of classification to theories of classification struggles.

In each period, these workers were reshaped by large-scale transformations in the American political economy, with life chances varying by occupation and geography and socioeconomic outcomes consistently structured through occupational and professional boundaries. Racialized labor processes concentrated Black and Hispanic workers in agricultural and other precarious sectors, reflecting the enduring legacies of slavery and discrimination, while gender further structured these dynamics as women organized collectively in response to their disadvantaged labor market position (Rho, Brown and Fremstad 2020, Barry 2004, 141 and McCartin 1997, 114–116). I suggest that the construction of a crisis class is marked by societal recognition of the indispensability of certain forms of labor during moments of state-defined crisis. During both World War I and the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government publicly acknowledged disruptions to normative social order, helping to frame essential and necessary workers as patriotic figures with a shared identity and purpose. During COVID-19, hero narratives accompanying nationwide stay-at-home orders positioned essential workers between elites and the general public framing the group as simultaneously indispensable and exposed to heightened risk and casting their labor as foundational to public safety even as they faced dangerous conditions, low pay, and limited material support (McCallum 2022, 63). Similarly, during World War I, hero narratives surrounding necessary workers, particularly nurses, were mobilized to encourage participation in organizations such as the Red Cross’s Volunteer Medical Service, recruiting women and disabled individuals into low-paid “patriotic” service (Barry 2004 318–331). In both cases, workers were deemed heroic in relation to their perceived sacrifices, illustrating that the crisis class is defined not only by public recognition of proximity to risk but by the state’s formal designation of the historical moment as a social crisis, through which broader processes of class formation are shaped.

The “Adoption” stage of my model describes how these classifications are historically and presently consistent with the structural positions of those to whom they are assigned, and over time individuals come to psychologically internalize the imposed categories. I draw on secondary sources from both cases to show that workers classified as essential or necessary shared key structural and demographic characteristics, illustrating how state-produced boundaries translated into material outcomes. In each period, these workers were reshaped by broader transformations in the American political economy, with life chances varying by occupation and geographic location. Across both cases, socioeconomic outcomes were patterned by occupational and professional divisions, while processes of racialization stratified labor by concentrating Black and Hispanic workers in agricultural work through enduring legacies of slavery

and discrimination. Gender further structured these dynamics, as women organized in response to their disadvantaged positions within the labor market.

### **Class Formation**

Beyond producing state classifications, the state is an instrument for managing the dialectical contradictions between social classes (Engels 1884). Research on social class formation is located in historical work on the relationship between historical change and collective action. Class scholars have different epistemological approaches for studying the formation of different classes, yet they have commonly privileged historical contingency and the use of historical data to study emergence and function (Roy 1984 483, 486). Marx's theory of class conflict remains a primary source for studying class formation, although there have been subsequent developments in the area (Marx 1852, 1867; Roy 1984, 484). His work provided a foundational framework for analyzing social class formation by distinguishing between a class-in-itself, a group defined by its objective relationship to the means of production, and a class-for-itself, a collective that not only shares this structural position but also develops organization and consciousness through struggle (Roy 1984, 492). His empirical focus was on the English working class of the 1840s. Building on this framework, subsequent scholars have applied and expanded these concepts in studies of French laborers, Black unionized miners, elite and upper-class groups, and the formation of the nineteenth-century middle class (Roy 1984, 494).

Subsequent scholarship has moved beyond purely structural accounts of class formation to foreground the interplay between its objective and subjective dimensions. This body of work situates class not only as a position within the relations of production but as a lived and contested social identity. Scholars have illuminated how individual autonomy and collective agency mediate the formation of class consciousness, emphasizing the significance of shared beliefs, values, and aspirations in constituting collective identities. Others have demonstrated how shifting coalitions and conflicts among social classes shape the trajectories of democratic development and political organization. Still others have traced the dynamics of long-term political transformation and collective action, anticipating the theoretical concerns later formalized in resource mobilization theory (Thompson 1963; Tilly 1964; Moore 1966).

Further literature has made more recent contributions to theories of class. A prevailing conversation concerns the theorization of class structure involving the growth of "new middle classes", a culmination of occupations who have emerged at the ardent of late-stage finance capitalism such as white collar workers, non-manual workers, intellectuals, service workers etc... Classification thus emerges as a central concern because defining social classes may emphasize different elements depending on a primary relationship to economic productivity, conflict, social status, institutional politics and contradictory locations (Weber 1922 [1978]), Wright 1976; Przeworski 1977, Wright 1982). Thus, class formation can be understood beyond its objective and subjective characteristics, by the classificatory frameworks that individuals absorb within society and which constitute their reality (Bourdieu, 1984). However, my theory of the crisis class departs from classical Marxist theory in that, based on my empirical evidence, I argue that the state not only functions within the interest of the ruling class, but necessarily creates classes to manage and order its populations during moments of crisis.

The "Class Formation" stage of my model, consistent with existing class formation literature, puts forth that a combination of the structural characteristics and psychological consciousness of the group produces class outcomes. I synthesize the comparative parallels across both cases to establish the empirical foundation for my theory of the construction of a crisis class, defined as a set of occupations whose exposure to harm and risk during national emergencies is actively managed by the state in coordination with capital. Although these occupations vary in status, they are typically situated within the working class or underclass and share patterned racial, gendered, and socioeconomic characteristics. Despite internal contradictions, what unites this group is the indispensability of its labor to economic productivity and the maintenance of social order during periods of disruption. The formation of a crisis class depends not only on the objective and subjective dimensions of class formation, but also on the state's role as the initial arbiter of crisis in specific historical moments. This class emerges through

recurring occupational roles, analogous positions within production, shared ideological framings, and the enduring structuring effects of race and gender on class outcomes.

## Case Studies

### The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency

In 2020, essential workers made up a broad segment of the labor force, defined by the Department of Homeland Security as those who support critical infrastructure sectors such as healthcare, transportation, agriculture, energy, and education. Based on 2018–2019 American Community Survey data, they accounted for roughly 82% of all U.S. workers and closely resembled the overall workforce in gender balance, wages, and occupational distribution. Within this group, frontline workers, those whose jobs could not be done remotely, constituted about two-thirds of essential workers and just over half of all workers. They included employees in healthcare, education, food processing, maintenance, transportation, and protective services. Compared to the general workforce, frontline workers earned lower average wages, were less likely to hold a college degree, and were more likely to be racial or ethnic minorities, immigrants, and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Educators made up about 12% of frontline workers, healthcare workers 17%, essential sales and related occupations composing of 13% percent. Nearly half (45%) of frontline workers are employed in a range of predominantly male, blue-collar fields. These included transportation and material moving (12%), production (9%), construction and extraction (9%), building and grounds maintenance (5%), installation and repair (5%), and farming, fishing, and forestry (1%). On average, workers in these essential sectors earned significantly less than the overall workforce average. In contrast, protective service roles, such as police officers and emergency medical personnel, made up about 4% of frontline workers and tended to earn wages roughly equivalent to the general average. As the pandemic evolved, the federal definition of essential and frontline workers expanded, most notably to reinclude educators by late 2020 as schools returned to in-person or hybrid instruction. This shift raised the overall education levels and female representation among frontline workers but did not alter the general trend: frontline workers remained disproportionately less educated, lower paid, and more racially diverse than the workforce overall. Finally, while “essential” status indicated importance, it did not necessarily reflect job availability during shutdowns. Industries such as air travel and food service, though deemed essential, experienced significant reductions in operations due to public health restrictions and decreased demand. When these temporarily inactive sectors were excluded, the remaining essential workforce showed slightly higher average wages but otherwise similar demographic and occupational characteristics (Blau, F.D., Koebe, J. & Meyerhofer, P.A. 2021).

Frontline labor in the U.S. is defined by gendered, racialized, and class-based inequalities, with women, workers of color, immigrants, and older adults making up a disproportionate share of low-wage and high-risk essential occupations. Frontline industries employed a workforce that was disproportionately made up of women, people of color, immigrants, and older or low-income workers. While women made up about half of all workers overall, they represent nearly two-thirds of frontline employees, with especially high concentrations in health care (77%) and child care and social services (85%). Women dominated many specific frontline occupations, including cashiers, retail and food service workers, pharmacy technicians, and nearly all major roles in health care and social services apart from physicians. Workers of color made up over 40% of the frontline labor force. Hispanic workers were especially overrepresented in building cleaning services (40%), while Black workers were most concentrated in child care and social services (19%). People of color were also heavily represented among bus drivers, cleaners, warehouse workers, and many healthcare support roles. Immigrants comprised roughly one in six frontline workers (17%), but their presence was particularly high in building cleaning services (38%) and home health care (24%). Immigrant overrepresentation was notable among janitors, maids, packers, and home health aides, as well as some professional roles such as physicians. Age and income disparities are also evident: about one-third of frontline workers are over age 50, and many lived with or were themselves seniors over 65. Nearly a quarter of all frontline workers lived in low-income households, with some sectors, such as grocery, healthcare, and child care, showing

especially high concentrations of low-wage work. Building cleaning services also stood out for its lack of job-based benefits, with nearly 30% of its workforce uninsured (Rho, Brown and Fremstad 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the American working class by exposing the fragility and inequality of labor systems. The “three-dimensional” labor crisis, defined by mass unemployment, the rise of remote work, and the dangers of in-person work, fundamentally challenged prevailing ideas about labor and value. These dynamics also generated a parallel “care crisis,” as the pressures of both paid and unpaid care work intensified. The elevation of “essential workers” as national heroes contrasted sharply with their exploitative and hazardous working conditions, revealing deep contradictions within a “risk-intensive economy.” Ultimately, the pandemic’s treatment of essential workers not only highlighted systemic labor inequities but also carried broad social consequences (McCallum 2022). The framework of global health security has gradually and unevenly taken shape since the early 1990s. Experts in epidemiology, virology, and policy navigated uncertainty while constructing new ways to manage global health threats. This fragile and improvised system of health governance developed over roughly two decades, ultimately forming a “new assemblage” for responding to emerging diseases (Lakoff 2017).

Essential workers have been theorized as both a social class and classificatory category, and in either framework, their structural location is characterized by the contradiction between their indispensable utility and their consistent devaluation. Since the historical roots of “essential industries” in WWI, they were racialized and gendered through structural forces. Across the twentieth century, service-sector jobs became increasingly marked by racial, gendered, and status-based hierarchies. From the 1930s through the 1970s, labor regulations governing wages and working hours largely advantaged white male industrial workers, securing for them benefits such as health insurance and pensions. At the same time, the expansion of institutional health care and the growth of what scholars describe as the racialized and gendered “public household” concentrated women and people of color in lower-paid service positions. This dynamic was reinforced by the “municipal housekeeping movement,” which originated in Southern cities and later moved northward, framing civic and welfare-oriented labor through the idiom of domestic work traditionally assigned to women (Jones 2023).

The pandemic impacted American labor politics and their role as representative of America’s risk based economy. Essential workers have been conceptualized as a class in themselves, with objective characteristics such as shared economic position, social statuses, demographic composition and shared subjective characteristics, like a collective class consciousness and pride for their work. Throughout the height of the pandemic, the state, media and public perception coalesced to form contradictory narratives shaping the essential worker class such as the notion of healthcare workers as “heroes”s. The COVID-19 pandemic and its long-standing consequences not only disproportionately impacted women and Black and Brown essential workers, but was systematic and compulsory, due to their structural position in America’s risk-intensive economy. Longstanding 20th century historical and political processes like the New Deal, the decline of the welfare state, attacks on unions and the role of neoliberalism serve as the antecedents for its development (Lakoff 2022).

Throughout the United States, city level mitigation policies were unsuccessful for serving its most at risk citizens during COVID-19. For example, despite Chicago’s stated commitment to racial equity and the federal government’s expansion of welfare programs during the pandemic, the city’s most vulnerable residents remained unprotected from overlapping crises. This failure stemmed from a deliberate separation of the pandemic response, framed as an urgent and spectacularized emergency, from the structural causes of its unequal racial and class impacts. While officials publicly recognized racism as a public health issue, their interventions largely ignored its systemic roots. Both federal and local governments governed “through emergency,” implementing short-term measures that presumed scarcity, triaged care, and naturalized inequality. This approach expanded welfare on one hand but simultaneously sacrificed frontline workers and neglected the ongoing “slow emergencies” of poverty and racialized precarity. Together, these intersecting crises revealed how emergency governance deepened structural inequities rather than addressing them (Decoteau 2024). Furthermore, areas like Prince George’s County Maryland, the U.S. county with the largest concentration of middle-class Black Americans, preexisting

fiscal fragility made it more vulnerable to the pandemic's effects than neighboring, less-Black counties (Simms 2021).

Throughout congressional records, staff reports, and federal legislative documents during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly between 2020 and 2021, the term “essential” was repeatedly used to legitimize and classify labor under emergency governance during a moment of social crisis. This language becomes codified in bills like the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800), which formally designates “essential workers” as a category of laborers required to continue in-person work due to their presumed necessity to the functioning of society. The phrase appears across numerous federal and state publications to refer to healthcare personnel, sanitation workers, grocery clerks, public safety officers, and others deemed critical to national resilience during the pandemic. In 2020, multiple congressional committees and agencies codified and expanded the federal definition of “essential workers” through the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800) and related legislation. The House Committee on Ways & Means (2020) described essential workers as those in healthcare, emergency response, sanitation, grocery, public safety, and supply chain sectors, authorizing funding for dependent care services through state-administered programs (“Family Care for Essential Workers in the HEROES Act”). The House Committee on Education & Labor (2020) further outlined provisions mandating OSHA to issue infectious disease control standards, establishing hazard pay funds, expanding paid leave, and supporting workforce development and contact tracing (“Heroes Act: Worker Support and Safety Provisions,”). Similarly, the House Committee on Appropriations (2020) detailed essential worker protections in the HEROES Act, including emergency assistance (Division J), the COVID-19 Heroes Fund for hazard pay (Division Q), and workplace safety mandates (Division L) (“H.R. 6800: Title-by-Title Summary”). The Joint Economic Committee, led by Congressman Don Beyer (2020), highlighted immigrants’ overrepresentation in essential and frontline sectors, particularly healthcare, underscoring how immigrant labor shaped the pandemic economy (“Immigrants, The Economy, and The COVID-19 Outbreak”).

Throughout 2020, legislators introduced numerous bills addressing essential workers’ economic and health vulnerabilities. Representative Danny K. Davis proposed H.R. 6460 to fund dependent care for essential workers (March 26), Representative Haley M. Stevens introduced the Essential Worker Protection Act (H.R. 6631) (April 28), Representative Ann M. Kuster proposed the Opportunities for Heroes Act (H.R. 6699) (May 5), and Representative Linda T. Sánchez introduced the Providing Essentials for Frontline Workers Act (H.R. 6787) (May 8). Senator Roger F. Wicker’s Critical Infrastructure Employee Protection Act (S. 3728) (May 13) mandated prioritizing COVID-19 testing for critical infrastructure workers. Other resolutions, such as H.Res. 913 (Carbajal, March 27) and H.Res. 927 (Budd, April 17), symbolically honored essential workers’ sacrifices, reinforcing their cultural and moral significance amid disproportionate health risks. The Congressional Research Service (May 13, 2020) published *“Hazard Pay and the COVID-19 Pandemic”*, which examined frameworks for compensating essential workers and clarified classification criteria across federal agencies like DHS, CISA, and the Standard Occupational Classification System (Sherlock and Bradley, 2020). The passage of the HEROES Act (H.R. 6800) in the House on May 15, 2020, though it failed in the Senate, formally codified “essential work” as labor conducted between January 27, 2020, and 60 days after the federal public health emergency, using criteria such as social interaction, time, and industry type.

By August 2021, the Department of Homeland Security, under Jen Easterly, issued *“Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce: Version 4.1”*, refining classifications by activity, industry, and occupation and offering implementation guidelines for public and private employers (Easterly 2021). These definitions, developed in coordination with the CDC and other agencies, were then adapted by states, producing overlapping yet distinct jurisdictional interpretations (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). Taken together, these legislative and administrative efforts demonstrate how the federal government not only operationalized the term “essential worker” for emergency management but also symbolically enshrined it as a social category marked by sacrifice, risk, and structural inequality.

### World War One

In 1917, new wartime labor institutions such as the U.S. Employment Service, the Division of Women in Industry, and the Division of Negro Economics institutionalized government intervention in labor relations, establishing frameworks for negotiation between employers, workers, and the state. Agencies like the National War Labor Board (NWLB) began mediating disputes over job classification and workplace equity, limiting employer dominance and advancing the principle of fairness in industrial relations. These developments, while incomplete, signaled an emerging vision of “workplace democracy,” particularly as women, immigrants, and Black workers challenged exclusionary practices under wartime conditions (McCartin 1997, 108–111). Women, empowered by their wartime participation, used the precedents set by these agencies to advance demands for equality and workplace representation. Through shop committees and positions in the NWLB, “industrial feminists” promoted women’s rights across unions and reform movements, achieving localized but meaningful progress toward industrial democracy (McCartin 1997, 112–114). Black workers faced steeper barriers. Many wartime agencies and unions excluded them entirely, and federal programs often sanctioned discriminatory practices, particularly in the South. The Division of Negro Economics, led by Dr. George E. Haynes of the National Urban League, stood as a rare federal effort to improve Black employment and combat workplace racism. Despite limited inclusion, Black workers appropriated the rhetoric of industrial democracy to advance their own claims to equality and recognition as patriotic citizens (McCartin 1997, 114–116). Nonetheless, racial inequality persisted. The NWLB often failed to uphold equal standards for Black laborers, as illustrated by the 1918 New Orleans case where white unionists successfully pushed to lower the minimum wage for Black streetcar workers. While wartime labor institutions introduced a new structure for negotiating workplace rights, marginalized groups, particularly Black Americans, remained excluded from the full benefits of industrial democracy (McCartin 1997, 117).

The debate over conscription leading-up to America’s entry into World War I was an ideological struggle over national identity, citizenship, class, and the nature of state authority. Since at least 1914, universal military training (UMT) had been hotly debated in Congress, revealing anxieties about what mandatory service would mean for American values. This was a battle over meaning, not just manpower. In this way, conscription became a powerful site of social construction: not just a method for staffing the military, but a mechanism through which the state created boundaries that were rhetorically legitimized through the repeated invocation of what was deemed “necessary” (Kennedy 2004; 144-190).

In 1918, the onset of the Influenza pandemic exacerbated many of the socio-political and economic conditions that were already inflamed by the war. The influenza pandemic marked the first major confrontation between a natural force and a modern society determined not to submit passively or depend solely on divine salvation, but to fight back through reason and technology. American medical leaders had anticipated an epidemic during World War I and prepared as best they could, awaiting its inevitable arrival. Yet before medicine could confront the virus effectively, it had to become scientific, requiring a profound transformation in medical thought and practice. That transformation began in the late nineteenth century, amid a nation divided by race and expansion, as Native resistance to white land seizure continued (Barry 2004, 12). When the pandemic struck, existing social inequalities magnified its impact. In industrial cities such as Philadelphia, where Black families lived in overcrowded, impoverished conditions with few public services, the virus spread rapidly (Barry 2004, 197–198). Despite public health advice to avoid crowds, infection rates surged, forcing hospitals to their limits as scientists struggled to identify the virus’s cause (Barry 2004 208–209). By 1918, the war had restructured the American economy around “essential” industries. On May 23, Provost Marshal Enoch Crowder issued the “work or fight” order, expanding the draft to men aged eighteen to forty-five and requiring those not in essential jobs to enlist. This intervention deeply extended federal authority into everyday life and even shortened Major League Baseball’s season, as players sought “essential” employment (Barry 2004, 301).

The war’s demands strained domestic medical resources. Most physicians served the military, leaving the civilian population undersupplied. To fill this gap, Red Cross director James Jackson coordinated with the Council of National Defense and the Public Health Service to establish the Volunteer Medical Service in 1918, recruiting women and the disabled for low-wage “patriotic” service (Barry 2004 318–319). Nurses, however, were in critically short supply, largely because many had been recruited by

the military while nursing schools failed to produce new graduates. Red Cross officials warned that “there will be no nurses left in civil life if we keep at this rate” (Barry 2004 319–320). Despite these shortages, medical professionals, physicians, nurses, and students alike, were hailed as heroes for their self-sacrifice and courage (Barry 2004 331). Shipbuilding, deemed essential to the war effort, was celebrated as patriotic labor, though even these industries faced mass absences due to illness (Barry 2004 348–349). In the pandemic’s aftermath, it became clear that social inequality shaped both vulnerability and mortality. Urban elites sometimes blamed marginalized groups for the devastation, reflecting a broader historical pattern in epidemic scapegoating. Mortality rates were closely tied to class and density, those living in crowded, impoverished neighborhoods bore the greatest burden (Barry 2004 394–395).

The Selective Service System was formalized through The Selective Service Act of 1917, a federal legislative act passed by Congress so that the President could use his authority to declare and then amend the rules and regulations for the draft, the term “necessary” appears consistently to refer to the creation of boards, agencies and provisions specifically relating to the draft, which advances the U.S. military’s wartime efforts (Selective Service Act 1917). It was introduced as a way to manage labor and leadership, aiming to maintain key professional and industrial sectors and future leadership classes. Crucially, this turn to conscription was framed not as a betrayal of democratic values but as their preservation. Supporters argued that relying on volunteers would require dangerous levels of nationalist propaganda and emotional manipulation. Public intellectuals and economic elites feared that stirring mass patriotic fervor would destabilize morale and the economy. In their view, the draft offered a “quiet, orderly” alternative: technical, rational, and scientific. Yet, paradoxically, the actual rollout of the Selective Service System was anything but emotionally neutral. The Wilson administration actively harnessed spectacle, performance, and public pressure. Registration Day became a choreographed display of patriotic zeal, and the state openly encouraged communities to shame, surveil, and report so-called “slackers”, men who failed to register. Vigilante practices and social policing were not deviations from the system’s logic; they were central to it (Kennedy 2004; 144-190). White male and female upper classes who owned or controlled the nation’s economic resources were responsible for determining draft eligibility, basing their selections primarily on physical fitness, contribution to material production, and alignment with the ideal of a respectable white family and its overall enforcement. This reflects how, within the Selective Service System, white masculinity became inseparable from dominance over the material world. The state’s central role, Shenk argues, was to uphold a social order in which white manhood was defined through mastery, both over nature and over those whose race, gender, sexuality, or other traits rendered them unfit for such authority (Shenk 2008 6, 23).

During World War I, the language of “necessity” became a central rhetorical and legislative tool through which the U.S. government justified the expansion of executive power and the reorganization of labor under wartime conditions. Across congressional debates, committee reports, and legislative texts between 1917 and 1918, the term “necessary” was repeatedly invoked to legitimize political decisions, define industrial priorities, and delineate who and what counted as essential to the war effort. This logic was formalized in the Selective Service Act of 1917, whose key clause, “persons engaged in industries, including agriculture, found to be necessary to the maintenance of the military establishment or the effective operation of the military forces, or the maintenance of national interest during the emergency”, both symbolically and legally encoded “necessity” as a category of inclusion and exemption (Selective Service Act of 1917). Congressional records reveal how lawmakers debated the moral and practical implications of this framing. In April 28, 1917, representatives contested how “necessary to the maintenance of the military establishment” should be defined within the Selective Service Bill, as they weighed which workers or industries merited draft exemptions (CR-1917-0428). Letters from civic organizations, such as the National Security League, reinforced this logic by elevating certain industrial workers, especially those in production and agriculture, to a patriotic status equal to that of soldiers (CR-1917-0502). Through these debates, “necessity” came to structure not only military recruitment but also broader hierarchies of labor, loyalty, and citizenship.

The National Defense Act of 1916 provided an important precedent for this language, as it had already granted the President expanded powers to mobilize the National Guard and direct private industry

in the name of national defense. There, too, “necessity” justified state intervention and delineated the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate activity in wartime production (The National Defense Act of 1916). By 1917, this framework allowed Congress to authorize the President to determine which sectors and occupations were “necessary” to the national interest, effectively centralizing economic and political authority under the wartime state (CR-1917-0512; CR-1917-0516). Beyond its bureaucratic usage, “necessity” also served as a moral rationale for conscription. Supporters of the draft argued that it embodied democratic fairness and administrative rationality, an efficient alternative to the emotional appeals of voluntary enlistment. Yet, as historians note, the draft system was far from neutral: it relied on public spectacle, patriotic pageantry, and social coercion. Registration Day and community surveillance practices transformed “necessity” into a moral category through which loyalty was policed and dissent punished (Kennedy 2004, 144–190). Subsequent bills introduced in 1917–1918 further demonstrate how the term continued to shape legislative reasoning. Proposed amendments sought to define “necessary skilled labor” in agriculture, transportation, and munitions, specifying who could defer service and under what conditions (65 S.3586; 65 H.R. 10165; 65 H.R. 10431; 65 H.J.Res. 125). Although many of these bills failed to pass, they illustrate the extent to which “necessity” structured both wartime governance and classed hierarchies of exemption. The term thus operated as a key instrument of political ordering, authorizing state power, legitimizing economic control, and establishing a moral economy of labor that defined who was essential, and who was expendable, in the modern wartime nation.

## **Empirical Analysis**

### 1. Logic/Rationale of “Essential” and “Necessary” Workers

In the following section, I use primary source evidence from my selected COVID-19 policy reports and WWI congressional records to demonstrate how the state used the terms “necessary” and “essential” to justify the social construction of the labor categories. This occurred through the explicit use of the terms themselves, the assignment of particular types of workers to these groups, the passing of laws, coordination between public and private interests as well as moves made to financially support productivity for these newly created groups in their moments of crisis.

During both COVID-19 and WWI, state actors used the terms “necessary” and “essential” to construct labor categories which they deemed as vital to domestic productivity during the crisis. The terminology used to construct these labor categories created the logic for state classification of essential and necessary industries. In 2020, Congress’s U.S. Heroes Act Bill, Division Q “COVID-19 Heroes Fund” defined “essential work” as “any work that is performed during the period that begins on January 27th, 2020 and ends 60 days after the last day of the COVID-19 Public Health emergency”. The types of work included first responder work, healthcare work, public health work among several others (H.R. 6800). Federal legislative policy began articulating how it was thinking of essential work during contentious points in the coronavirus pandemic. This logic was enshrined in the use of “essential” as a classificatory term to conceptualize the role of several occupations and industries. In a parallel instance during 1917, Senator Shafroth laid out his argument in favor of the selective system, he argued that “...it is an economic waste to permit farmers, chemists, miners, munition makers, ship builders and factory hands for Army supplies to abandon their work so necessary for the success of our cause to volunteer into a service less needed” (Shafroth, 1917, 48). Wartime congressional legislators developed a rationale for necessary work. Throughout both moments, variations of “essential” and “necessary” are used as classificatory language to motivate and justify the identification of various occupations within the American political economy. The classifications which were constructed in these government documents demonstrate the logic for federal and state demarcations of necessary and essential work, as well as whose labor would count as this type of work. The logic of construction works to classify various occupations as essential and necessary.

Once Congress constructed these types of work, they used them to confer certain types of individuals to the classification. The identification of particular kinds of workers as “essential” and “necessary” served to legitimate their state classifications. In the Congressional Research Service Report

“Hazard Pay and the COVID-19 Pandemic Issues and Options” published May 13th 2020, the section titled “Who is an “essential worker” reads as follows: “A broad approach would be to include all workers except those operating in an environment with low risk of COVID-19 exposure (e.g. teleworkers). More targeted approaches include identifying specific groups of workers and sectors of the economy as essential, including possible consideration of risk to workers in different parts of the country” (Sherlock and Bradley 2020). After federal policy elaborated on what made up essential work, it detailed which types of workers would count in this invented category. This grouped various workers, formerly separated in their various sectors, under the label of “essential worker”. In 1917, a similar process occurred where Senators debated the meaning of “partial military service” when discussing conscription. Senator Smith says “the partial military service, I think, is defined in the following language in that section. It describes certain classes of work. I suppose it means for anything that was considered necessary in preparation for the war, other than active military service...”<sup>1</sup> (Smith, 1917, 60). As federal legislators clarified the meaning of necessary work in relation to labor in preparation for the war, they enumerated which kinds of work are included in this category. Thus, various sectors of the economy which were previously separated were exempt from this new idea of an “essential worker”. In both instances, the state used the terms “essential” and “necessary” to justify their classification of labor as the notion of essential work was extended to justify what type of individual constitutes this type of worker and the idea of necessary work is legitimized through its relation to military service.

During both social crises, the classifications of the state became legislatively formalized. Through inclusion in federal legislation, state classificatory logic moved from a socially constructed idea, to a legally sanctioned doctrine. The HEROES Act bill defines the term “essential worker” as “an individual whose work and duties include essential work, and who is an employee of an employer, or an individual performing any services or labor for remuneration for an employer, regardless of whether the individual is classified as an independent contractor by the employer”<sup>2</sup> (H.R. 6800).

Federal legislative policy creates its definition of an essential worker, thus they set a federal standard for how an essential worker is to be interpreted throughout the U.S. economy. This pattern also appeared during WW1, as Congress explicated its idea of necessary industries when creating their war boards to manage claims for exemptions to the Selective Service Act. Under section 4 of the act it lists “Persons engaged in industries, including agriculture, found to be necessary to the maintenance of the Military Establishment, or the executive operation of the military forces, or the maintenance of national interest during the emergency (Selective Service Act 1917, 352)”<sup>3</sup>. Federal law then defined which industries necessary workers composed of, with such specificity it was expanded to include occupations and employments which may have not been initially conceptualized in the aforementioned industries. This produced a formal definition of what constituted a necessary worker during WW1. In both cases, the state formalized its ideas of essential and necessary work, yet this was continuously influx and subsequent to change at the needs of the state during the crisis moments. The formalization of state classificatory logic within legislation demonstrated its durability and mobility.

The classification logic of the state was also informed by national industry. Through public and private coordination, the state produced classifications which met the material needs of the economy. In 2021, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency published the “Advisory Memorandum on Ensuring Essential Critical Infrastructure Worker’s Ability To

<sup>1</sup> Senator Chamberlain builds on this by explaining it includes “non-combatant service” “hospital work” and “work of that kind”.

<sup>2</sup> They explicitly delineate in status by differentiating between these types of essential workers and a “highly compensated essential worker”. As well as listing further classifications such as “essential work employer”, “large essential work employer” and “self-directed care worker”

<sup>3</sup> This would be enacted into law, and the next year, subsequent amendments to that very phrase were made Such that the right of the state to conscript “service persons classed as skilled experts in industry or agriculture, however classified or wherever residing” should not be abridged and later that year to explicitly include “occupations or employments” in that phrase (Selective Service Act, 352-357).

Work During The COVID-19 Response” which collaborated with all levels of government and the private sector to identify workers who could be deemed essential to critical infrastructure functions. The memorandum included specific considerations for government and businesses to support essential workers' continued productivity throughout the crisis. The memorandum identifies “public works and infrastructure support services” “transportation and logistics” “defense industrial base” “critical manufacturing” “law enforcement, public safety, and other first responders” among others (Easterly 2021). State policy reports articulated particular sectors of the economy which were essential to society's continued infrastructure. These sectors, as well as the strategies to maintain them, were intentionally developed in line with industry interests in organizing essential industries. This precedent also appears roughly a century prior, when Congress granted the President the power to determine which type of industries are necessary, to which they may be exempt from the draft such as “...persons of the following classes: county and municipal officials; customhouse clerks, persons employed by the United States in the transmission of the mails, artificers and work men employed in the armories, arsenals, and navy yards of the United States, and such other persons employed in the service of the United States as the President may designate;...” (Selective Service Act 1917, 352). These industries were not selected in isolation, rather they were chosen amidst ongoing congressional discourse informed by economic data and the interests of both industry and public representatives as to the state of domestic productivity throughout the United States during the war. Their selection represents an informed understanding of the sectors most critical to society's continued functioning during the military crisis. In both historical moments, the state identified several industries as essential and necessary, in accordance to the sustained productivity of the American economy.

The state's classifications are further legitimated through moves to financially support the groups. Once the state's classifications gain mobility, considerable consideration is taken toward financially supporting their ongoing work throughout the crises. In the Heroes Act, the federal government sought funding for specific occupations during the crisis. This included millions in demarcated funding for farmers through the “Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network Program”, for fisherman through the “National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration”, railroad workers through the ‘Railroad Retirement Board’, and assistance to agricultural producers and small businesses<sup>4</sup>. (The Heroes Act Title-By-Title Summary 1-36). House representatives identified particular occupations and industries aimed toward providing them additional financial support during the pandemic. In doing so, they legitimized particular kinds of essential workers, demonstrating their existence through various industries need for support. In the same vein, when discussing the validity of Congress to execute particular war time legislation, Senator Lodge states “ The most important thing for carrying on the war is to keep the industries of the country in the field and farm and factory in the highest state of productivity possible... You must have the spirit of confidence, you must make your farmers, your workingmen, and your business men understand that there is a reasonable certainty in the future that they are not going to be interfered needlessly and recklessly” (Lodge 1917, 7). Congressional legislators understood the importance of financially supporting essential industries throughout the war. Their financial backing of particular occupations symbolized them as necessary for domestic productivity, and thus success in the war. In both these moments, Congress grapples with their role in financially supporting these occupational groups they deemed vital during the crisis.

Taken together, the state's use of the terms “necessary” and “essential” to justify the social construction of the labor categories illustrate what Bourdieu describes as the creative power of legal discourse: the capacity of the state to bring social realities into being through classificatory speech. In these cases, language serves as a constitutive condition that enables and justifies the initial deployment of classificatory frameworks. The repeated deployment of “essential” and “necessary” in legislative texts did not merely describe preexisting labor distinctions, but actively produced them by authoritatively naming certain forms of work, workers, and industries as vital to the nation's survival. Through legislation, policy memoranda, and administrative coordination these terms acquired juridical force, transforming contingent judgments about productivity into durable social facts that organized exemption, obligation, and entitlement. In this sense, the state's classifications functioned as acts of symbolic power that reorganized the

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<sup>4</sup> The bill also mapped out tax credits for preventing business interruption and relief for employer pension plans.

field of labor during crisis, aligning economic necessity with moral and political legitimacy. By conferring recognition, protection, and financial support on select occupations, legal discourse converted abstract crisis management into concrete hierarchies of value, risk, and worth. Consistent with Bourdieu's claim that law "brings into existence that which it utters," (Bourdieu 1991, 42) the categories of essential and necessary work emerged not as neutral descriptors but as state-sanctioned realities that structured material outcomes, exposure to harm, and the social meaning of labor under conditions of national emergency.

## 2. Classifying and Grouping "Essential" and "Necessary" Workers

In the following section, I use primary source evidence from my selected COVID-19 policy reports and WWI congressional records to demonstrate how the state constructed boundaries around "essential" and "necessary" labor. The state relied on class, social status, immigration status, gender and age to create boundaries which legitimated and formalized their classifications of "essential" and "necessary" work. In doing so, they simultaneously articulated what types of labor was non-essential or unnecessary to the domestic productivity of the American economy during moments of crisis. The bureaucratic apparatus was the organizational mechanism through which these boundaries were constructed.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the first world war, the state made boundaries on the basis of class which demarcated the boundaries between essential and necessary workers. These boundaries aided the legitimization of the state's classification of essential and necessary work. In 2020, Congress drafted articles providing for increased funding in "Division J- Support for Essential Workers, At-Risk Individuals, Families and Communities" as well as extension of federal funding during the crisis through "Division E- Continued Assistance to Unemployed Workers" (The Heroes Act Title-By-Title Summary, 36-46). Federal legislators's explicit interest in evoking class distinctions was to identify and financially support those essential workers most in need throughout the crisis. These demarcations constructed the image and legitimated essential workers as at risk and economically vulnerable. WWI offers a historical precedent, as when Congress debated conscription Senator Husting said "I desire to sound this word of warning: that if this is going to be a fight for money as well as a fight for glory on the part of some men, if men are to be sent overseas to fight and die for their country so that others may stay here and get rich in their absence, you will have dissatisfaction with the war." (Husting 1917, 15). Congressional legislators also drew boundaries with class to identify potential reasons why necessary workers may be disinterested in the draft. This supported the idea of necessary workers as members of the working class whose interests conflict with the wealthy who also didn't want to serve.

The state also drew boundaries on the basis of social status to demarcate workers. These boundaries were predicated on the classificatory logic which initially constructed "essential" and "necessary" work. In 2020, Congress proposed pandemic premium pay for workers such that "Essential workers are eligible for up to \$10,000 ("highly compensated" essential workers earning above \$200,000, up to \$5,000) for work performed from January 27, 2020 until 60 days after the last day of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency." (The Heroes Act Title-By-Title Summary, 76). The difference between highly compensated essential workers and those who are not is made real with a monetary cap, with consideration for the role of employers kept close. Social status emerges as a demarcating mechanism through particular distinction made for "highly-compensated" essential workers, thus implying that not all essential workers are compensated the same and possess the same lifestyle. The world war one case underscores this further as the debate regarding mandatory conscription raged on, Senator Borah stated "But if you suppose that you are going to draft men from this walk of life and that walk of life and send them out upon these farms to raise food products and to help raise live stock, and so forth, without relieving the situation as to the speculator, as to the monopoly which controls the situation...you are doomed to disappointment." (Borah 1917, 22). Social distinctions were predicated not only on employment, but lifestyle, to which the employer was also a relevant factor of consideration. As the state drew these boundaries on the basis of social status, they evoked the classificatory logic of who constitutes an essential and necessary worker, and thus aided the classification's legitimation. Status served as a convenient metric to classify workers as essential and necessary.

In constructing labor categories, the state made boundaries between different types of workers on the basis of immigration status. "Essential" and "necessary" work is defined by classifying certain workers into these categories along lines of immigration status. During the COVID-19 public health crisis, Congress's Joint Economic Committee

released a report entitled “Immigrants, the Economy and the COVID-19 Outbreak”, the report included a section constructing immigrants as essential workers. The section entitled “Front-Line and Essential Workers” included subsections titled “Immigrants are overrepresented in front-line health care occupations” “Immigrants are more likely to be “essential” and “Immigrant workers play a critical role in the food supply chain” (Immigrants, the Economy and the COVID-19 Outbreak, 3). Congressional policy reporters distinguished immigrants as a particular population amongst essential workers due to their predominance in frontline occupations. In doing so, they constructed an image of an essential worker as often immigrant, vulnerable yet foundational to the maintenance of critical infrastructures. In a different instance the Selective Service Act during the first world war also produced boundaries constructed around immigration status “such draft as herein provided shall be based upon liability to military service of all male citizens and male persons residing in the United States, not alien enemies, who have declared their intentions to become citizens...” (Selective Service Act, 357). The state codified exemptions for “alien enemies” within law, sanctioning them from the draft and thus militaristic violence, keeping them out of the drafted military. This too positioned immigrants as a viable representation of the necessary worker during the war. While their contexts and functions differed, the state’s boundary construction regarding migrants remained consistent. It simultaneously legitimates the formalization of the categories “essential” and “necessary” work through designating particular types of workers to these categories based on immigration status.

In both cases, the state made boundaries on the basis of gender. Women’s gender status served as a lens for identifying who counts as essential or necessary workers, the social positions they hold, and the resources they required to maintain their domestic labor during crises. In 2020, Congress’s financial support and proposal for the “Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children” sought to “provide an additional \$1.1 billion to provide access to nutritious foods to low income pregnant women or mothers who with young children who lose their jobs or are laid off due to the COVID-19 emergency” (The Heroes Act Title-By-Title Summary, 1). Federal legislators explicitly demarcated groups on the basis of gender in order to financially support WIC programs catered toward the enduring crisis. These demarcations further made visible who essential workers were, as women represented a considerable proportion of essential workers experiencing job insecurity. Comparably, during the war as the discussions regarding who should rightfully be exempt from the draft carried on, House Representative Thomas stated “Women who need the work could be employed to fill their places and would fill them as well or better than the men... Women are usually more industrious, more faithful, more competent, more truthful, and more dependable than men, and should at least be given an equal opportunity in all examinations. Let the men enlist and fight and the women stay at home and work, and weep, and pray [Applause]” (Thomas 1917, 17). Congressional legislators distinguished women as a particular class, and debated on their place for exemption as well as their overall utility for domestic productivity toward the war. The distinguishing of women necessary workers, and the rationale that they represent a better kind of necessary worker, positions them as a specific representation for who necessary workers ought to be. In both these different historical contexts, the state’s boundary construction on the basis of gender is situated in material and political implications for the economy. The gender status of women functions as a mechanism to clarify who essential and necessary workers are, and the social position they occupy as well as their needs in order to continue their domestic productivity throughout the crises. In focusing on gender as a mode of social demarcation the state’s capacity for boundary construction becomes further visible.

Furthermore, the state made boundaries on the basis of age. Age operated as a social marker to further distinguish whose labor qualified as “essential” and “necessary” for sustaining the economy’s domestic productivity during periods of crisis. During COVID, federal legislators sought ought increased financial funding for “Child Nutrition Programs” including “\$3 billion in additional funding to provide emergency financial relief to school meal providers and USDA’s Child and Adult Care Food Program” (The Heroes Act Title-By-Title Summary, 1)<sup>5</sup>. These demarcation’s explicit intent is for identifying and supporting vulnerable populations during the pandemic. However, they also reproduce age as a viable demographic measure for delineating various segments of the population during a crisis. This pattern also appears during the war, as age was utilized to determine populations for mandatory

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<sup>5</sup> Moreover, this is exemplified in “Division R- Child Nutrition and Related Programs” prepared by the House Committee on Education and Labor including “Emergency costs for Child Nutrition Programs during COVID-19 Pandemic” and “Calculation of Payments and Reimbursements for Certain Child Nutrition Programs” (The Heroes Act Title-By-Title Summary, 1)

conscription. “Such draft, as herein provided shall be based upon liability to military service of all male citizens, or male persons not alien enemies who have declared their intention to become citizen between the age of twenty-one and thirty years, both inclusive,...” (Selective Service Act, 351) <sup>6</sup>. The explicit intent of the age demarcation is to bolster the growth of the military establishment for national defense. Although, its shifting parameters suggests it serves a function beyond its stated intent, such as to codify boundary creation on the basis of age itself. Thus inadvertently normalizing durable boundaries during social crises. Age was used as social demarcator to further clarify whose labor may be classified as “essential” and “necessary” to the domestic productivity of the economy during crisis time.

Bureaucratic agencies at different levels of the state coordinated to legitimize the boundaries created constituting essential and necessary work. Throughout both the COVID-19 pandemic and World War One, federal, state and local levels of governments were jointly involved in the legitimation of the boundaries made around these labor categories. During COVID, advisory reports were used to communicate joint efforts in determining roles and response strategies for essential workers in various industries. “State, local, tribal, and territorial governments are responsible for designing, implementing and executing response activities in their communities, while the federal government remains in a supporting role. Officials should use their own judgment in making decisions regarding resource allocation and other public health measures.” (Easterly 2021). Congressional policy writers described the importance of bureaucratic coordination for determining how essential workers would maintain their productivity during the crisis. Thus multiorganizational cooperation serves as foundational to the legitimization and formalization of essential work, rather than just a feature. Earlier wartime politics reflect this same process as during the debate amongst legislators in the House regarding mandatory conscription, the role of federal, state and local jurisdiction was being determined as well. Representative Almon states “The conference report changes this without an expression from either the House or the Senate, and has made provision for the question of exemptions of those engaged in industries, including farming, shall be passed upon by additional boards established by the President in each Federal judicial district of the United States” (Almon 1917, 17). Congressional legislators supported the ability of county boards to determine exemptions for necessary workers during the draft based on federal and executive policy. The bureaucratic apparatus played a crucial part in the legitimation and formalization of the boundaries which constituted necessary work during the war. While the legislative branch constructed the legal and economic rationale for these state classifications of labor, state, local and territorial courts executed these decisions. In both cases, the role of government bureaucracy was articulated, in order to support their legitimization of the boundaries created around essential and necessary work.

Thus, when considering state power and symbolic domination, the empirical construction of “essential” and “necessary” labor during these two moments demonstrates how classification operates as a central technique of governmentality rather than a neutral administrative response to crisis. Ideological consensus among state actors seems to be an important stage in the institutionalization of classifications. As Foucault ([1975] 1995) argues, the state exercises sovereign power through the capacity to regulate life and death, a process that increasingly operates through classificatory regimes embedded in biopower. These classifications are made possible by what Bourdieu (1994) identifies as the state’s concentration of symbolic power, whereby cultural and symbolic capital are mobilized to impose authoritative distinctions that organize social reality. The state’s reliance on class, social status, immigration status, gender, and age to delineate essential and necessary labor illustrates how symbolic boundaries are transmuted into material hierarchies through bureaucratic institutionalization, a process consistent with Bourdieu’s account of the convertibility of cultural, social, and economic capital. Once formalized through legislation, administrative coordination, and fiscal policy, these classifications moved from contingent judgments to durable institutional facts, structuring entitlement, exemption, and exposure to risk. As observed in other domains of legal classification (Saeed 2020), such processes of institutionalization demonstrate that struggles over labor in moments of crisis are simultaneously struggles over classification itself (Tyler 2015), in which the state exercises its power to define whose work counts, whose vulnerability warrants protection, and whose lives are rendered governable within the political economy.

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<sup>6</sup> In subsequent amendments to the act, the age boundary shifts in May 1918 to include those who’ve just “attained the age of twenty-one years, shall be subject to registration” and in August later that year further expanded to include “...all male persons between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, both inclusive, shall be subject to registration” (Selective Service Act, 356-357).

### 3. Boundary Maintenance of “Essential” and “Necessary” Workers

In the following section, I use primary source evidence from my selected COVID-19 policy reports and WWI congressional records to show the ambiguity within the state’s classifications. Throughout the two crises, state actors generated ambiguous boundaries that had to be interpreted and debated by other state officials to accommodate changing state priorities. They delegated this interpretive work across different layers of government. Ambiguity emerged both between and within the boundaries they produced. Despite their opacity, state actors continue to seek clarification of these categories to improve their practical effectiveness.

State actors produced ambiguous boundaries which themselves must be interpreted and debated by other state actors to address its changing interests. Ambiguous boundaries required ongoing interpretation and negotiation by these actors to serve shifting state interests during periods of social crisis. During the early period of the pandemic, The CRS Report on Hazard Pay includes a section entitled “What should the rate of hazard pay be?” it states “Because there is no general federal regulation of hazard pay, there is not an existing standard that can be applied. There are several options for setting a hazard pay benchmark”<sup>7</sup> (Sherlock and Bradley 2020, 2). While hazard pay was being developed as a desired tool to support essential workers during the pandemic, the technicalities of how it’d function and be defined remained undetermined. Thus requiring other state actors to further define and clarify the parameters of hazard pay for essential workers. The ambiguity is likewise evident during the early period of the war, when Congress debated the specific meaning of the term “necessary” itself as it appeared in section four of a draft for the selective service act bill. Representative Moore states “How is that to be determined? It may be that a man working upon the farm in a broad sense is engaged in perpetuating the military establishment, and therefore would be exempt according to the opinion of the selecting power. A man working in a shipyard building a ship for naval purposes undoubtedly would be exempt under this provision, but it is not quite clear, except that the President is given power to establish throughout the United States tribunals for the purpose of enforcing and carrying into effect the terms and provisions of this act, just how the selection is to be made” (Moore 1917, 71). The term “necessary” as employed by congressional legislators was inherently unclear. It functioned as a rhetorical political tool to construct and legitimate state activities, was ambiguous, and required further debate on its interpretation for its implications relating to occupational exemptions. This informed the construction of ambiguous boundaries, which themselves must be further interpreted and debated by state actors for the function of varied and fluctuating state interests during moments of social crisis. In both historical moments ambiguous terminology is related to broad and vague language within policy.

State actors delegated the responsibility of interpreting ambiguous boundaries to different levels of government. By distributing authority, the government maintained its system of checks and balances and presented a fairer route for agencies to determine which workers were deemed essential and necessary. During the pandemic, the federal government provided suggestions for lower level governments on how to develop institutional strategies for the crisis response. “State, local, tribal, and territorial governments are responsible for designing, implementing and executing response activities in their communities, while the Federal government remains in a supporting role. Officials should use their own judgement in making decisions regarding resource allocation and other public health measures” (Easterly 2021). The power to define the meaning of ambiguity is proposed to be allocated toward legislative levels of lower government throughout the country. The state is distributing the power of interpretation toward multiple levels of government bureaucracy. During the war, legislators discussed exemptions to specific classifications and occupations in the selective service act bill draft. Representative Wise says “If you will read this section carefully, and will see the authority and the power you are giving to the President, he can either exempt these men or discharge them when they are drawn, and it is their duty to go to the front unless they are exempted or discharged (Wise 1917, 93). The state’s power to determine ambiguity was assumed to be vested in the executive level of government. This determination was utilized toward maintaining a governmental processes of checks and balances which signaled greater fairness in the process of which agencies specifically would conclusively decide which workers were classified

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<sup>7</sup> In the subsequent section “How long should hazard pay be available?” it says “Some hazard pay proposals related to COVID-19 would make hazard pay available through December 31, 2020...The availability of hazard pay could also be tied to the declaration of an emergency or shelter-in-place order.” (Sherlock and Bradley 2020, 2).

as essential and necessary. In both cases, the state's ambiguous boundaries involve power delegation.

Ambiguity existed not only between state boundaries, but within the very ones they formally constructed. Throughout the crises, these classifications were consistently ambiguous. In COVID-19 policy reports, ambiguity existed regarding interpretation and delegation for the "essential worker" classification. In the subheading of its Frequently Asked Questions section, one question asked what types of workers would be able to receive family care assistance through the Heroes Act fund. The state goes on to cite examples of those who may qualify including sanitation workers, public safety workers and grocery store staff yet ultimately they say "We expect that the biggest group would be healthcare workers of all kinds, but states can use the funding to support childcare and adult care for any group of workers they deem to be essential... Depending on the state's public health orders, eligibility may vary by state." (Family Care For Essential Workers in the Heroes Act, 1). The state attempted to provide clarification toward who specifically may qualify for the HEROES ACT funding benefits. Their allocating to individual states for the primary interpretative role suggests ambiguity in the meaning of the "essential" classification itself, even after formal use. This pattern also occurred during WWI, legislators discussed the ambiguity that pertained to the interpretation of the "necessary worker" classification. In discussing the President's capability to grant exemptions for necessary work in the selective service act Wise says "He can draft engineers, every man working in a railroad yard, every man working in a navy yard, every man working in any kind of industry that is declared to be partially military and which goes to support the Army in the field... Now, do we want to give authority to the War Department to draft every man in the United States...? (Wise 1917, 93). State actors attempted to clarify which types of workers count as necessary, and on what grounds these designations would be made. The continued line of questioning exemplified the ambiguity within the state's notion of "necessary work" during the moment of the selective service draft. In these two differing contexts, the state's persistence to clarify ambiguity within its formally constructed boundaries were consistent. Ambiguity was a feature of state classifications.

While these boundaries were opaque, states actors still sought to clarify the ambiguity which they constructed for greater efficiency and clarity in use. They continued refining these boundaries for greater political strategy. During COVID-19, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's memorandum establishes the severity of not only identifying essential workers, but making sure their role is understood for the enduring crisis. "As the Nation continues to respond to COVID-19, it remains vital that essential critical infrastructure workers can perform their jobs safely, securely, and without interruption from COVID-19 and the new variants of the virus. Doing so is not only fundamentally good for our individual essential workers and communities, it is also critical to the resilience of our National Critical Functions" the report goes on to specifically identify workers who "support critical chains and enable cyber and physical security functions for critical infrastructure" (Easterly 2021). The state was seeking to identify essential workers for legibility in work toward critical infrastructure during the pandemic. This demonstrated the state's attempt to clarify its own ambiguous boundaries regarding what it means to be an essential worker during the crisis. The WWI context offers another example, as state legislators saw the clarification of necessary workers just as importantly, Representative Austin in discussing section three of the developing selective service draft bill, states: "It is absolutely essential that the men who are engaged in the coal-mining industry shall not be taken from their work. Their labor could not be substituted in any way by women, boys, or girls. The same argument applies to the copper-mining industry, which is essential to the manufacturing of ammunition." In response, Representative Caldwell asks: "The word 'industry' used four times. Mining is an industry. The bill itself says 'engaged in industry' Why does not that cover it?" Representative Austin responds: "I want this made specific, definite, and final so that there will be no mistake." (Austin and Caldwell 1917, 98). In this example, the legislators demonstrated the importance of identifying necessary workers for legibility toward domestic productivity and the maintenance of the national economy. The exchange showcased state actors attempting to clarify what constituted necessary work during the war. While the contexts differ, both evidence mutual instances of the state realizing the severity of clarifying their own constructed classifications, amidst their ambiguity. Even as these boundaries remain opaque, state actors still attempt to clarify them to enhance their administrative usefulness and efficiency.

Taken together, the empirical centrality of ambiguity in the construction of "essential" and "necessary" labor clarifies how state classification operates as a technique of governmentality rather than a failure of administrative precision. This process of grouping is inherently political, shaped from the outset by competing interests that state actors must continually negotiate through boundary work in order to maintain distinctions and legitimize classifications. As Foucault ([1975] 1995) argues, modern state power increasingly governs populations not only

through sovereign decisions over life and death, but through biopolitical mechanisms that render life administratively legible, manageable, and productive. The persistent ambiguity surrounding classificatory boundaries reveals that such categories are not fixed determinations but flexible instruments through which the state adapts to shifting priorities during moments of crisis. In Bourdieusian terms, this ambiguity reflects the state's exercise of symbolic power, rooted in its accumulated cultural and symbolic capital, to impose authoritative classifications while delegating their interpretation across bureaucratic fields (Bourdieu 1994). The transmutability of symbolic power where cultural and social capital can be converted into economic effects through institutionalization helps explain why these ambiguous categories nonetheless produce durable material consequences. Ambiguity does not undermine classificatory power; rather, it enables the state to maintain control by dispersing interpretive authority while preserving the legitimacy of the classification itself. In this sense, the empirical cases show that ambiguity is a constitutive feature of state classification, consistent with existing claims (Quisumbing King 2022), allowing the state to reconcile competing interests, manage uncertainty, and sustain biopolitical governance through flexible yet authoritative boundaries.

Thus, read through Hacking's account of social construction, the empirical construction of "essential" and "necessary" labor during COVID-19 and World War I reveals how classifications acquire durability through the interests of their makers and the social conditions in which they are produced. While Hacking's notion of the "looping effect" emphasizes the recursive relationship between classifiers and the classified, the cases examined here demonstrate that this feedback process is neither symmetrical nor context-neutral (Hacking 1986). Instead, the durability of classificatory categories is shaped by the political, economic, and institutional interests of state actors operating within specific crisis conditions. Through legislative language, bureaucratic boundary-making, coordination with private industry, and the allocation of material supports, the state actively stabilized the categories of "essential" and "necessary" work, embedding them within legal, economic, and administrative structures. These classifications were not only imposed upon workers but made durable through their alignment with prevailing class relations, racialized labor markets, gendered divisions of work, and age-based hierarchies. In this way, the empirical analysis shows that the making up of people is contingent on the social context and interests that sustain classificatory schemes over time, extending Hacking's framework by foregrounding how power, crisis, and institutional investment condition which classifications persist and with what consequences.

#### 4. Adoption By "Essential" and "Necessary" Workers

In the next section, I use secondary source material from both cases to describe the how essential and necessary workers shared structural features and demographic characteristics to demonstrate how the boundaries developed by the state map on to the material outcomes of the workers. In each period, these workers were reshaped by large-scale economic changes in the American political economy. Life chances varied by geography and occupation, and in both cases socioeconomic outcomes were patterned by occupational and professional boundaries. Racialization produced labor stratification, concentrating Black and Hispanic workers in agricultural jobs through the historical legacy of slavery and discrimination. Gender also structured these dynamics with women organizing around their disadvantaged labor market position.

In both historical cases, essential and necessary workers experienced wide-scale economic changes which drastically affected the American political economy. Their job choices in the labor market were shaped by these drastic economic shifts. Essential workers were impacted by the the late 2000's economic crisis which triggered a national political response that ultimately affected the types of jobs they had access to. The recovery featured persistently high unemployment and replaced it with lower-paying jobs. (McCallum 2022, 24-25) Essential workers experienced the visible economic effects of the financial crisis as they were pushed out of the middle class and settling for lower paid jobs. Economic inequality was a resulting structural condition of the labor market that characterized the enduring public health crisis. Roughly a century earlier working class laborers were being affected by the preceding structural factors of the Great Depression influenced the kinds of jobs they had access to throughout the war. From 1869 to 1929, manufacturing value grew faster in former Confederate states than nationally. Although concentrated in low-wage, labor-intensive industries, it still raised living standards compared to the rural poverty most workers left behind (Wright, 2013 57). During the latter portion of the 19th century and early quarter of the 20th, the American labor force was shifting as the abolition of slavery saw a growth in manufacturing work particularly in the South, leading to booms in low wage industrial work. This resulted in a southern political economy controlled by a landed aristocracy which maintained inequality in the nation (Wright, 2013 56). An analysis of these low-wage economies together illustrate that both

essential and necessary workers were under precarious structural constraints which characterized the contexts of their crisis, and ultimately how they became classified. Both essential and necessary workers were deeply affected by broad economic shifts that transformed the American political economy.

In both cases, essential and necessary workers' life outcomes were affected by their geographic location and occupational status. Life chances varied by geography and occupation. During COVID-19, race, place and space were deeply interrelated as Black communities were burdened not only by the cumulative effects of long-term crises, but also by state inaction, experiencing delayed responses and being forced to wait for essential services. Slow emergencies refers to the visible converging endemics of systemic racism and ecological catastrophe which compound historically to produce higher rates of mortality and morbidity for marginalized populations, they are often difficult to attribute blame to and may garner less public attention (Decoteau 2024, 39). Black communities suffered the impact of socially reproduced exploitation, and racialized biocapitalism throughout the pandemic. Their overrepresentation as essential workers characterized the limits of their agency and vulnerability to make and let die by the state (Decoteau 2024, 39, 53). A similar phenomenon can be observed during WWI as labor was also shaped the racial dynamics, geography and spatial distribution. Power in wartime Georgia was shaped by multiple factors: rural location strengthened white planters' control over Black and white sharecroppers, but their distance from Atlanta and Washington limited their influence over policy (Shenk 2005, 12). The Jim Crow South was deeply characterized by a racial caste system, that systematically relied on the dialectical exploitation between white planters of both Black and white sharecroppers. In this relationship, Black sharecroppers were tethered to space due to historical constraints in mobility carried over from slavery. Necessary and essential workers were controlled populations by the state, in tandem with capital, whose productivity was managed in relation to physical and social space within the economy. Thus, essential and necessary workers' geographic context and occupational status influenced their overall life chances.

In both cases, essential and necessary workers' differential socioeconomic outcomes were organized around occupational and professional boundaries. These outcomes were structured through occupational and professional hierarchies. During COVID-19, essential workers were separated from non-essential workers by their proximity to risk in the pandemic economy. Early on, exposure to risk defined frontline status and excluded those without it. Remote workers faced far less COVID risk and were typically white-collar, reinforcing their separation from frontline labor (McCallum 60). In the pandemic's earliest stages several occupations were labeled essential due to their exposure to the virus during work. The distinction between essential and non-essential was not only grounded in typical demarcators like capital and status, but emergent factors such as risk and distance. A historical precedent occurs during WWI as necessary workers were separated from non-necessary workers through their relationship to productivity in farming and manufacturing. These men were middle class intermediaries in the cotton economy: professionals, merchants, and politicians. The draft helped elites secure the loyalty and cooperation of ambitious, lesser-status white middle-class men. The administrators of the selective service draft were middle class-white men, who themselves often did not actually farm. The distinction between necessary and non-necessary labor was thus predicated on not only whether or not they did the labor being considered necessary, but the extent to which they possessed ownership of the materials of production itself (Shenk 2005, 21). In both cases, the boundaries that defined essential and necessary workers resulted in socioeconomic discrepancies for these groups on the basis of capital, status, health and well-being. Socioeconomic inequality for these workers was organized through occupational and professional divides.

In both these historical moments, essential and necessary workers were characterized by racialized labor stratification, as Hispanic and Black workers were structurally concentrated in agriculture due to historical legacies from slavery and legal discrimination. These workers were structured and organized along racial lines. During COVID-19, Hispanic workers were concentrated in agricultural work. U.S. agriculture has long been racialized and depends on low-income immigrants of color. Of roughly 2.4 million farmworkers, 75% are Latinx, and about 57% are immigrants from Mexico (Goldstein and Felix-Romero 2016). The concentration of hispanic workers in agricultural work during COVID-19 is connected to the racial groups' longstanding positioning in the labor market. Federal initiatives like the Bracero program which brought Mexican guest workers to labor on farms in the U.S. Southwest during the mid-1900s influenced this racializing of the agricultural industry (Goldstein and Felix-Romero 2016). Before the concentration of Hispanic workers in agriculture, Black workers were incentivized to work these jobs during WWI. The farm labor force was not exclusively Black, but disfranchisement deepened

racial divisions. Although sharecropping initially emerged from postwar economic instability, it persisted even after conditions improved, as alternatives remained limited. Restricted education and few nonagricultural jobs were the main barriers to Black advancement (Wright 2013, 33-37). The Jim Crow South developed a racial economy based on tenancy and sharecropping which many Black workers were structurally constrained to participate in as a result of the legacy of slavery on those very lands. White workers claimed many of the newly available urban and industrial jobs, forcing Black workers to do what they can to make marginal gains in farming (Wright 2013, 33-37). Thus in both cases, historical legacies of racialization and structural exclusion influenced the positioning of the groups who would then become essential and necessary workers during these social crises. The racialized organization of labor in each case funneled Black and Hispanic workers into agricultural roles, a distribution traceable to the persistent structural consequences of slavery and discriminatory policy.

Women essential and necessary workers were characterized by gendered labor stratification and organized in response to their structural position in the labor market. They mobilized in response to these enduring inequality within the labor hierarchy. During COVID-19, women essential workers were overrepresented and disadvantaged in essential worker roles. Although high earners work the longest hours, low-income workers, disproportionately women and people of color, have seen the greatest increases and face the most unstable schedules, with hours fluctuating unpredictably at employers' discretion" (McCallum 2022, 230). "Workers of color faced higher rates of layoffs, infection as essential workers, and COVID-19 deaths, which helped position them as leading voices in pandemic-era labor movements. Women were disproportionately concentrated in low wage essential worker occupations and thus organized on the basis of their particular class positioning during the crisis. As labor scholar Jame McCallum put it "the coronavirus altered the relationship between labor, race, gender and capital" (McCallum 2022 8-9). A similar phenomenon occurred amongst women necessary workers during the Great War. Nursing shortages reflected broader transformations as the field became scientific and one of the few professions that granted women status, power, and control" (Barry 2004, 141). Women staffers in war labor agencies sought to make industrial citizenship real for women workers and were part of a working-class-oriented feminist network known as "industrial feminists". Then too, they organized within the industrial labor democracy for greater representation in the workplace (McCartin 1997, 112-114). Women necessary and essential workers faced the brunt of the gendered structure of the political economy and its material conditions for which they responded to with organization and advocacy. They were not only conditioned by the constraints of the labor market, they responded to it.

Taken together, the empirical patterns traced across COVID-19 and World War I extend existing scholarship on the social construction of "essential workers" by moving beyond explanations of emergence toward an analysis of classificatory formation itself. While prior research has shown how the essential worker category crystallized rapidly during the pandemic through media narratives and long-standing labor dynamics (Fousek 2021; Jones 2023), the cases analyzed here demonstrate that classification is actively produced through discursive and rhetorical strategies embedded in state practice. Across both historical moments, the state did not merely respond to preexisting labor conditions but articulated categories through language that drew on contemporaneous political-economic pressures, racialized labor markets, and gendered divisions of work. These classificatory moves were informed by structural transformations in the American political economy such as post-recession labor precarity during COVID-19 and the reorganization of low-wage manufacturing and agriculture during World War I which shaped who could plausibly be named "essential" or "necessary" at particular moments. The boundaries that emerged were further structured by geography, occupational hierarchy, racialization, and gendered labor stratification, mapping symbolic distinctions onto material life chances. In this way, the empirical analysis demonstrates that classifications are not simply labels applied after the fact, but products of historically specific struggles over productivity, risk, and value revealing classification itself as a social process shaped by power relations, institutional contexts, and enduring inequalities rather than a neutral response to crisis.

### 5. Class Formation: A Crisis Class

In the following section, I synthesize many of the comparative parallels between both cases which serve as the empirical basis for my theory of the construction of a crisis class: a group of occupations whose exposure to harm and violence during a national emergency is managed by the state and capital interests. They may differ in terms of status, but they are often of the working or underclass and share typical racial, gender and socioeconomic characteristics. Despite its internal contradictions, their

commonality is the necessity of their labor to the productivity of the American economy and the ongoing functioning of society during a moment of ordinary social disruption. The construction of a crisis class is dependent on not only objective and subjective characteristics of class formation, but the state as an adjudicator of a crisis in the first instance during a given historical moment. The formation of a crisis class occurs from historically consistent occupational roles, parallel positions within production, shared ideological frameworks, and the persistent structuring effects of race and gender on shaping class outcomes.

The construction of a crisis class is predicated on the historical consistency of occupational status. Occupation served as an important metric to organize labor. Throughout both COVID-19 and WW1 several overlapping industries coincided to produce both the essential and necessary worker groups, such as healthcare, transportation, manufacturing and agriculture. In both cases, many of the jobs in these industries like nurses, material movers, and farmers were also prominent during WW1. (Easterly 2021, Blau, F.D., Koebe, J. & Meyerhofer, P.A. 2021, Shafroth 1917, 48 Selective Service Act, 352-357 and Barry 2004 ). The occupations used to group these workers are consistent across the two historical cases. Thus, through analyzing the historical similarity between occupations in both cases, this dimension becomes visible as an objective measure of social class within the cases. Occupational status remains a fundamental metric through which social classes are analyzed.

The construction of a crisis class is developed through congruency in relationship to production. A worker's relationship to production, in the Marxist sense, emerges as an aligning factor between the two cases. During both COVID-19 and WW1 both essential and necessary groups consisted of primarily working class jobs, to which the workers themselves sold their labor to the companies or businesses they upheld rather than being wide-scale capitalist owners. In both these cases, workers are involved in various activities for maintaining critical infrastructure, key supply chains, cyber and physical security systems manufacturing and agriculture (Easterly 2021 and Shafroth 1917, 48). The state and capital interests position certain forms of labor as vital to national productivity. Beyond historical similarity in occupation and industry, this is also a specific material relationship to production, whereby the workers in these industries do not own the materials of production and thus reap the benefits of doing so, but are still necessitated for the industry's continuity, particularly in moments of crisis. This demonstrates the historical reality of relationship to production as an objective dimension of social class formation, particularly in the construction of a crisis class.

The construction of a crisis class emerges from shared ideologies. The subjective worldview of the workers is important for their sustained understanding of themselves as part of a larger entity. In both cases, essential and necessary workers were imbued with a kind of collective consciousness, during COVID, essential workers were identified with one another through a combination of pride, resentment and structural relatedness to the pandemic while necessary workers were similarly identified through a combination of patriotism abroad, political divergency on the war and belief in the emergent ideal of industrial democracy at home (McCallum 51-63 and Kennedy 45-93 McCartin 12-14). These varying beliefs regarding not only their position within the labor hierarchy, but how the greater political economy and state interests abroad would affect work at home collectively organized various factions of these groups. These ideological factors shaped the shared identities which bonded different factions of necessary and essential workers. They demonstrate the existence of subjective characteristics within the crisis class.

Race and gender are intimately linked to the construction of a crisis class. Throughout both COVID-19 and WW1, racial minorities and women were overrepresented as essential and necessary workers. Women constituted about half of all workers but nearly two-thirds of frontline employees, including 77% of health care workers and large shares in child care and social services, while Hispanic workers make up 40% of building cleaning services, Black workers account for 19% of child care and social service roles, thus people of color are heavily represented among bus drivers, cleaners, warehouse workers, and health care support staff, and immigrants who are 17% of all frontline workers, specially concentrated in building cleaning services (38%), home health care (24%), and various other high and low status positions (Rho, Brown and Fremstad 2020). In a similar dynamic, during WW1, women were

overrepresented as necessary workers in nursing and Black workers faced exclusion, and federal initiatives often upheld discriminatory practices, especially in the South (Barry 2004, 141 and McCartin 1997, 114–116). Race and gender have been empirically observed relevant to the demographic composition of labor and differential outcomes during these two historical moments. In crisis moments, classes are formed in the wake of and ongoing persistence of structural racial and gender inequalities.

The construction of the crisis class is characterized by society's recognition of the necessity of their labor during a moment of state recognized crisis. Throughout both the COVID-19 pandemic and WW1, the federal government issued public decrees acknowledging the disruption to normative social order that these moments may cause, thus helping position essential and necessary workers as vital patriotic heroes with a collective identity and purpose during a time of need. During COVID, the hero narrative throughout the nationwide stay-at-home orders served to position essential workers between elites and ordinary people, cast as essential yet endangered heroes. Their work was treated as the backbone of public safety, even as they faced life-threatening conditions for low pay and little tangible support (McCallum 2022, 63). Similarly during WW1, the hero narrative was used for necessary workers like nurses throughout the war to motivate their participation in organizations like the Red Cross's Volunteer Medical Service in 1918, recruiting women and the disabled for low-wage "patriotic" service (Barry 2004 318–331). In both cases, these workers are deemed heroic relative to their observed sacrifices during crisis time. The crisis class is defined by not only public recognition of their proximity to risk, but the federal government's labeling of the given historical moment as a social crisis in itself. How the state and wider society conceptualize the moment affects this process of class formation.

The crisis class possesses many historical internal contradictions which may serve as barriers toward developing class unity. While more classical theories of class formation may posit a uniform crisis class unity on account of their shared characteristics, white supremacy's longstanding persistence in American political economy complicates class solidarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, workers of color notably experienced higher rates of mortality and morbidity as well as racist discrimination at their job sites (McCallum 8-9). During WW1, several selective service officials were white and sought to privilege whiteness through the enforcement of separate quotas for "white" and "colored" men with exemptions from the draft being based on white patriarchal standards of marital status, fatherhood and occupation. White middle-class women also participated in enforcement on these selective boards and in the cultural production of white masculinist, exclusionary propaganda. A romanticized image of womanhood came to stand in for the nation, something men were expected to fight and die for. In contrast, Black people were portrayed as embodying everything the southern white man considered unmanly (Shenk 2008 5-17). In both cases, the structural persistence of white supremacy and male chauvinism allowed for differential outcomes and experiences of essential and necessary workers throughout the crises. Furthermore, women dominating in healthcare and domestic work due to them being historically denied access to other diverse industries across the two cases demonstrates the persistence of sexism. Within the Jim Crow South, white middle class men were often xenophobic toward Germans (Shenk 2008). Thus, the crisis class faces internal contradictions as it pertains to structural racism, misogyny and ethnic conflict, which has historically sustained divisions within the American working class. To understand this process of class formation divorced from these enduring realities is to obscure the mechanisms that have organized and reproduced inequality within the crisis class.

While the "new middle classes" thesis offers a plausible alternative explanation for the emergence of essential and necessary workers as occupational groupings, the empirical evidence presented here demonstrates its analytical limits. Wright's (1980) framework accounts for the expansion of white-collar, non-manual, and intermediary occupations under late-stage capitalism, yet the workers classified as essential and necessary across COVID-19 and World War I overwhelmingly occupied working-class and underclass positions, concentrated in low-wage service, agricultural, manufacturing, transportation, and care work rather than the managerial or credentialed roles central to the new middle classes. Moreover, the empirical cases show that these workers were defined not by their location between capital and labor, but by their state-managed exposure to risk, harm, and violence during periods of crisis—functioning in ways more analogous to an industrial reserve army mobilized under emergency conditions (Decoteau

2024). The durability and coherence of these classifications cannot be explained by occupational differentiation alone, but instead emerge from historically consistent roles within production, shared relationships to non-ownership of the means of production, and the state's active role in adjudicating crisis and organizing labor accordingly. Crucially, the crisis class is structured through racialized and gendered inequalities that predate and exceed the occupational logics emphasized by Wright (1980), shaping who is rendered indispensable yet disposable in moments of social disruption. In contrast to the new middle classes thesis, which centers structural ambiguity within capitalist stratification, the theory of the crisis class foregrounds how state power, capital interests, and historically sedimented inequalities converge to produce a distinct class formation defined by necessity, vulnerability, and differential exposure, an outcome that the empirical record across both cases consistently supports.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the COVID-19 and World War I cases reveal that, despite their vastly different historical contexts, the state relies on strikingly consistent classificatory strategies when confronting social disruption. Even as each crisis is framed through its own political, economic, and cultural vocabulary, the underlying process through which legislators construct and assign social categories remains remarkably stable. Examining these moments side by side highlights how political-economic conditions during crises shape the relationship between classification, boundary-making, and class formation, illuminating dynamics that remain underdeveloped in existing scholarship on essential work (McCallum 2022; Lakoff 2017; Decoteau 2024).

By comparing the rhetorical and discursive tools used to justify both “essential” and “necessary” labor, this study shows how occupational categories are actively produced, rather than naturally emerging, during periods of disorder. These parallels across eras indicate that the state's classificatory power is not incidental, but part of a durable sociological process through which group boundaries are drawn and particular forms of work are designated as indispensable. State definitions, far from neutral descriptors, materialize within preexisting power struggles and serve to stabilize political and economic priorities under conditions of uncertainty.

The analysis demonstrates that the state uses classificatory language to make up social classes in moments of crisis, identifying certain groups as vital to national functioning and distinguishing them from others through legal and rhetorical means. This historically recurring process produces what I term the crisis class: a heterogeneous set of workers whose labor is essential to maintaining economic productivity and social order, and whose exposure to harm is managed through state intervention. Although these workers differ internally by status, occupation, and contradiction, they share patterned racialized and gendered characteristics and occupy roles structurally positioned as necessary for the continuation of society. The state's actions, assigning workers to categories, coordinating public and private interests, allocating financial support, and delineating non-essential labor set the boundaries within which crisis-era class identities are forged. These boundaries, in turn, map onto material inequalities shaped by race, gender, geography, and broader economic shifts.

Across both cases, the consistency of these mechanisms suggests that crisis classification is not only a tool of governance but also a constitutive force in class formation. The evidence presented here points to the emergence of a new type and process of class formation visible in the data: one produced through state-led crisis categorization rather than solely through market position or labor relations. Ultimately, the study shows that crisis classification itself is instructive for understanding how modern class-making occurs, revealing the state's central role in shaping who becomes indispensable, and under what conditions, when society is under strain.

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