

# **THE ELUSIVE CONCEPT OF CLASS**

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**By**

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## **LAY ABSTRACT**

The concept of class has always been central in sociological theory and has generated endless debate. The aim of this dissertation is to explore an issue that I maintain has not received sufficient attention in the sociological literature, namely, the competing understandings of class that underpin these debates. In this dissertation I conduct an in-depth analysis of four prominent theorists of class to show that class has been conceptualized in different and often contradictory ways. I focus on four key traditions: classical Marxism, Althusser's structuralism, Laclau's postmodernism, and Bourdieu's constructive or generic structuralism.

## ABSTRACT

The concept of class has always been central in sociological theory and has generated endless debate. The aim of this dissertation is to explore an issue that I maintain has not received sufficient attention in sociological literature, namely, the competing understandings of class that underpin these debates. In this dissertation I conduct an in-depth analysis of four prominent theorists of class to show that class has been conceptualized in different and often contradictory ways. I focus on four key traditions: classical Marxism, Althusser's structuralism, Laclau's postmodernism, and Bourdieu's constructive or generic structuralism.

I raise the question of whether the competing understandings of class in these theoretical traditions indicate a move towards abandoning the notion of class formations in sociological theorizing or whether they signify a movement towards a more complex, sophisticated, and encompassing understanding of class. After a deep dive into understandings of class in the four traditions I have identified, I conclude by arguing that the latter is the case. That is, I argue that the shifts in the understandings of class represented in the work of Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau and Pierre Bourdieu unveil a path towards a notion of class that can usefully guide and provide much needed coherence to future discussions of class in sociology.

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## INTRODUCTION

The discipline of sociology emerged during the nineteenth century with a recognition of the social forces running parallel to individual actions at play in the workings of society. Central to the discipline from the start has been the concept of class, a concept which underwent a radical transformation when considered through a singularly sociological lens. Rather than understanding individuals' social standing in terms of their individual capabilities as in previous epochs, sociology offered a way to think about class as a function of broader social processes.

Looking further at discussions of class as the discipline developed, one finds that the concept of class undergoes repeated re-conceptualizations. It endures as an object of inquiry and debate, and yet, its meaning fluctuates, and the concept remains nebulously defined. I want to suggest that this constitutes a mystery about the concept of class which has not received sufficient attention.

Therefore, my aim in this dissertation is to trace and analyze the successive and contrasting conceptualizations of class as the concept has been addressed in sociological literature. The concept of class was conceptualized through the 19th century and early 20th century as a historical formation, a pivotal force shaping world history; in the 1960s, a shift occurs whereby class is displaced and becomes a secondary concept as a more structural view comes to the fore; another shift in the 1980s eviscerates the concept of class entirely, after which the concept reappears in the late 1980s in an expanded form as a metaphor encompassing all social determinants.

The aim of this intellectual journey is primarily to track these shifts and to ask: Do these shifts signify movement towards a more encompassing understanding of class in sociological theory or do they signal an abandonment of the concept of class formations? This intellectual journey takes us through the work of four authors: Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, Ernesto Laclau and Pierre Bourdieu. Together these four authors reflect just how different conceptions of class can be.

In the first chapter I will argue that the present paradigm of the concept of class as historical formations begins with Marx's materialistic principle which underlines his concepts of class and society as historical formations, and class as the base of his evolutionary pattern. The depiction of unequal social relations in each social formation ended with the main tenets of the idealistic philosophy which

portrayed history as a timeless concept and maintained the existence of freedom and self-determination.

This chapter will describe Marx's empirical analysis of the development of material production, namely, his depiction of specific objective historical formations or socio-economic epochs, his interpretation of the origin, development, and end of each social formation. The main point of this chapter will be to highlight the centrality of the concept of class within such a theoretical framework. Within this framework, the character of each social formation is determined by its corresponding social relations of material production. Classes are understood to be historical formations arising out of material production and struggling over the unequal access and control of the means of production. Classes are tools of historical analysis, and history is the history of classes.

The second chapter will examine the reappearance of the concept of class in the 1960s, which took place through structural Marxism in the work of the philosopher Louis Althusser. The concept of class is displaced from its centrality and becomes a secondary concept hidden behind structures. History is no longer viewed in terms of the history of class struggles but becomes a concatenation of coercive structures. This chapter will unravel Althusser's interpretation of Marx's mature works focusing on his depiction of structures, how structures are determined by their own complexity, and the mechanism by which the concept of class loses its centrality and becomes a secondary element subsumed under structures.

In the third chapter I will argue that the concept of class is eviscerated by postmodernist Ernesto Laclau during the 1980s. This constitutes a new shift. This chapter will examine Laclau's theoretical construction which entails a denial of the concept of class, a denial of any collective identity that is constituted around relations of production, a proposal of a different historical agent, and a denial of the notion of society as a structured and self-defined totality.

In the fourth chapter I will argue that the concept of class re-emerges during the 1980s in the work of anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu in a way that represents a one hundred and eighty degree turn from the previous conceptualization. Here class encompasses all social determinants and is the universal explanatory principle which dictates our image and disposition towards the world and ourselves. Bourdieu integrates theoretical elements from Marx, Durkheim and Weber. More specifically, Bourdieu brings together the primacy of class as a function of material production from Marx, the symbolic element of social life from Durkheim, and the notions of status groups, lifestyles, and power from Weber. This chapter will examine the theoretical construction by which Bourdieu depicts the centrality of the concept of class in modern society, and its endurance.

In the concluding chapter, I summarize the shifts I have covered. I look at the contribution of both structural and non-structural theory, and question whether the shifts constitute the end of a paradigm around class that commenced in the 19th century, or if they signal a move in the direction of a more encompassing understanding of class in sociological theory.

Before I begin, it is important to note that I have tackled the writing of each of these four theorists as neutral observer and not as an adherent of any perspective. I have attempted to capture as accurately as possible the views of the scholars I am examining, an endeavour I hope reveals fairly the intellectual contribution each has made to our understanding of class and to the wealth of possibilities still open to us as we continue, as sociologists, to debate the foundational questions about class in our discipline. To be as transparent as possible and to allow readers to assess for themselves my interpretation of the theorists I discuss, I have included in my endnote's extensive *verbatim* passages from their original works.

I note as well that I have added scant information about the background of each theorist and something of the socio-historical context within which they wrote. There is a historicity to their writing and their conceptualizations of class to be sure. But I stress that establishing the historicity of their ideas and conceptions of class is not a concern of mine in this dissertation. That issue is for another dissertation. My intention was simply to provide context by including some background for each theorist.

### Sociologists On Class

In the remainder of this introduction, I present a brief overview of the contemporary sociological debate on class. Given the vastness of the literature the discussion is necessarily a cursory one. My purpose here is simply to show the confusion that exists and to provide the reader with an idea of some of the main points of contention. The discussion is meant as a backdrop for my more focused analysis of the four theorists I have chosen to examine.

A great deal has been written in sociology about class. The concept of class as it was first presented in classical Marxist writing has been revised and further developed by neo-Marxists and neo-Weberians during the last sixty years. Dahrendorf (1959), in his book *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*, pointed to the persistence of class in a pluralistic society, despite the dissociation between wealth and authority. E. O. Wright (1989), arguably one of the most prominent and important writers on class, demonstrates the complexity of the contemporary class structure in his book *The Debate on Classes* (1989) by

depicting the existence of contradictory class locations and the process by which capitalist relations of production shape the patterns of class conflict.

During the 1990s a debate emerged between post-Durkheimians on the one hand, and neo-Marxist and critical Weberians on the other. The debate centred on the dichotomy “dissolution / continuation” of the existence of classes in advanced industrial societies. Among the post-Durkheimians were Clark and Lipset (1991) who maintained that class analysis has grown inadequate because traditional hierarchies have declined. Similarly, Pakulski and Waters (1996) argue in favour of the dissolution of class due to two factors: a decentering of economic relationships, especially property and production, and a shift in patterns of group formation and lines of sociopolitical cleavages, maintaining the dissolution of the class mechanism in advanced capitalism. On the other side of the debate were such theorists as Wright (1989), Golthorpe (1992) (2002), Hout (1993), who saw the persistence of class in post-industrial societies and the promising future of class analysis.

In making the case for the continuing relevance of class, Wright (1989) argues that in advanced societies class remains a powerful determinant of social life though it might not be the main explanatory principle of all social phenomena; that class boundaries continue to exist; that inequalities in the distribution of material wealth continue to have consequences; that the extraction of labor effort from non-owners persists; and that class differences continue to have an impact on individual subjectivities. Wright unveils the increasing complexity of class relations in advanced societies and maintains that the complexity should not be interpreted as the dissolution of class.

In *Understanding Class*, Wright (2015) surveys different approaches to class analysis represented in sociological writing between 1995 and 2015. Among the sources he examines are Gruski and Weeden’s numerous publications (1998, 2000, 2005, 2012), Picketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), Standing’s *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011) and *The Precariat Chapter: From Denizens to Citizens* (2014), and Sorensen’s paper “Towards a Sounder Basis for Class Analysis” (2000).

Gruski and Weeden (2005) propose a new framework for class analysis as an alternative to conventional class categories. They propose to build a class analysis based on highly disaggregated occupational categories which they call “micro-classes”. Through this lens they explore the same phenomena previously studied by conventional class categories. They question what it is about a person’s location within a system of production that best explains life chances, income, political attitudes, cultural tastes, etc. Their answer is “the homogenization of conditions”. They argue that the homogenization of conditions

has a much more intensive impact at the level of micro-classes than at the level of Marxist and Weberian big class analysis. They also argue that while the homogeneity of big class analysis arises analytically, the homogeneity of micro-classes arises empirically, and therefore has a higher explanatory power than conventional class categories which remain analytical abstractions.

Wright (2015) accepts that for the purpose of explaining variations across individuals in lifestyles, political and social attitudes, even wealth, micro-class analysis is adequate. Yet, if the task is to address the central theoretical agendas in Marxist and Weberian analysis, and if the purpose of the inquiry concerns the potential for social change and emancipatory transformations, micro-class analysis becomes inadequate. Wright (2015) insists on moving beyond this point into an analysis that encompasses different levels of analysis and their interconnections.

Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2013) approaches the study of inequality by building on two dimensions of economic inequality - income and wealth. It is through these dimensions that Piketty explores the ambiguities of class in the 21st century. His central observation is the rise in the share of the national income in the United States from 1913 to 2013. The trend shows a concentration of income and wealth among the richest 10% of the population, a group which received over half of all income generated by the US economy, with the top 1% benefiting the most. This is a trend which will only deepen due to market dynamics.

While acknowledging the importance of the statistics presented, Wright (2015) finds that Piketty's work suffers from an ambiguous class analysis. Regarding the income dimension, the mistake of including CEOs and labour in the same category could have been avoided by taking into consideration their contradictory class locations. Regarding the wealth dimension, the absence of class analysis is reflected in the fact that Piketty includes different kinds of assets in the category "capital". For example, he counts economic return in patterns of home ownership as capital even though this measure diverges drastically among different classes. According to Wright (2015), if we want to transform the power relations that generate these trends, we must go beyond economic categories of inequality into a sociological class analysis.

During the 80's and 90's there was an increase in economic insecurity and precarious employment. In *The Precariat* (2011) and in *The Precariat Chapter* (2014), Standing focuses on the sector of the population affected by this precariousness, identifying this sector as the precariat class. Standing bases his distinction between "working class" and "precariat" in the intersection of economic precarity and political marginality, maintaining that the precariat suffers both,



while the working class does not. In terms of relations of production, Standing claims that the precariat does not enjoy the long-term stable jobs secured by unionization. In terms of relations of distribution, Standing concludes that the precariat lacks access to all the non-money wage sources the working class has (pensions, vacations, support networks). In terms of relations to the state, Standing finds that the precariat lacks any of the rights provided to citizens in the core of the working class.

Wright (2015) questions whether this set of socio-economic characteristics is sufficient to describe a social category as a class and reminds us that the most basic (Marxist and Weberian) criterion of class analysis is “material interests”. So to claim that the working class and the precariat are distinct classes, is to claim that they have distinct material interests, which they have not. However, if we examine these differences through Wright’s (2015) concept of contradictory locations within class relations, we can place the precariat and the working class together, since some locations can be simultaneously dominated and dominating, exploited, and exploiting. Moreover, both locations would be enhanced in an alternative economy.

While the theme of inequality is becoming more and more central in sociology, the theme of exploitation remains in the background as a taken for granted fact. Yet Sorensen (2000) attempts to reconfigure the concept of exploitation as the causal connection between the advantage of one class and the disadvantage of another, and the antagonistic interests this generates. Sorensen (2000) attempts to place the concept of exploitation within a 21st century context by identifying exploitation with the concept of economic rent. Exploitation then becomes inequality generated by ownership or possession of rent-producing assets.

Wright (2015) finds problems and missing elements in such a theoretical proposal. Rents do not provide a full account of the explanatory mechanisms of exploitation, since exploitation requires the appropriation of “labour effort”, rather than simply “advantage”. Wright (2015) maintains that capitalism generates antagonistic class interests even under the imaginary condition of perfect competition. He concludes that to equate “exploitation” and “economic rent” is an unsatisfactory base for class analysis. Wright (2015) concludes that the concept of exploitation cannot be reduced to advantages obtained by asset-owners under conditions of imperfect competition.

My point with this discussion is to show that while class continues to be a prominent focus of attention, the precise definition of class underlying these studies and the variations among those root definitions remains obscure. Clarity and precision around what we mean by class remains elusive. The quest for an apt and adequate understanding of class inequalities continues. It is my

contention that there is much to be gained from revisiting in this regard the work of Marx, Althusser, Laclau and Bourdieu. Such an analysis highlights pivotal changes in conceptions of class and lays the groundwork for considering a more coherent understanding of the concept.



**CHAPTER I**

**THE CONCEPT OF CLASS IN CLASSICAL HISTORIC MATERIALISM.**

## CHAPTER I

### THE CONCEPT OF CLASS IN HISTORIC MATERIALISM

The present paradigm of the concept of class in sociological literature begins with the unraveling of social forces during the 19th century. In the work of its founders, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, class is depicted for the first time as the outcome of social forces. However, it is in classical Marxist theory where the concept of class acquires its most relevance and centrality, so the aim of this chapter is to examine the theoretical construction by which classical Marxism placed the concept of class as the central and pivotal force in historical development.

Marx wrote during the troubled Germany of the nineteenth century. He embraced the legacy of the Enlightenment, namely, the improvement of the human condition, and was immersed in Hegelian philosophy and in the debate between the old and the new Hegelians. The young Marx presents his theory of historic specificity, the principle of material production and historical formations, and the centrality of the concept of class.

In order to examine his theoretical construction this chapter will focus on Marx's elucidation of the principle of material production and its relation to class. I will depict its centrality and the reason why the concept of class becomes the basis of the evolutionary pattern, which allows us to view society as a concatenation of historical formations according to their corresponding social relations of production and therefore, the elaboration of history as the history of class struggles.

The underlying concept that sustains the centrality of the concept of class is the rooting of class in the labour process, namely, material production. The fundamental idea by which Marx roots class in the labour process is that man produces him/herself through labour.

To examine the concept of class as the pivotal force in historical development, this chapter will be divided into four sections. In the first section, "Marx's Departure From Idealistic Philosophy," I will examine Marx's departure from Hegel's idealistic philosophy which led him to the formulation of his historic materialism, his critique of the existing State and civil society, and his formulation of human emancipation as opposed to political emancipation. In the second section, "The Principle of Material Production and Man" I will examine the formulation of Marx's principle of material production, the production of man through labour and the rooting of class in the labour process. In the third section, "Material Production, Social Structure and Class" I will examine the class struggles corresponding to the outperforming modes of production and therefore class as the pivotal force in historical development. In the fourth section, "Material Production and Mental Production" I will examine the production of ideas as a function of material production.

## **THE PRINCIPLE OF MATERIAL PRODUCTION: MARX DEPARTURE FROM IDEALISTIC PHILOSOPHY**

Marx's life unfolded during the reorientation of European thought that took place during the 19th century. The European intellectual climate of the time was dominated by the legacy of the Enlightenment, namely, the idea of progress, perfectibility, totality, and the overcoming of human alienation. How to improve the human condition and how to alter the human environment to allow human capacities to flourish were key themes during Marx's epoch.

The idea of progress was mainly portrayed in Hegel's idealist philosophy, where it crystallized as the gradual unfolding of the spirit, taking place gradually and in historical stages rather than abruptly and through conflict. The final stage was portrayed as the Absolute Spirit, namely, man arriving at true self-consciousness and ending all alienation.

The legacy of the Enlightenment was built upon and modified by Marx's contemporaries, the young Hegelians. The young Hegelians were critical of the German State, which they considered marked by blind reason, spiritual chaos, and an oppressive and unenlightened religiosity. Concerned with the condition of man in contemporary society, some were critical of the oppressive religiosity, others proclaimed models of socialism. Hess (1842) focused on a critique of the then current social and economic arrangements, maintaining that the domination of money and private property symbolized the alienated condition of mankind. Saint Simon (1956) wrote about class struggle and the notion of human history as the history of wars between classes, others portrayed man as torn asunder by a modern division of labour, unable to develop man's potentialities, and lacking harmony with other men.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Germany 1818, Marx lived in a period marked by Germany's regression to an agricultural and semi-feudal state after its defeat to Napoleon's armies. Lagging behind France and England politically, socially and economically, Germany was a place where Marx also endured discrimination due to his Jewish ancestry. Germany's regression was in sharp contrast with England, where the Industrial Revolution was making way for the growth of free capitalism, with the consequent effects on society. Also, Germany stood in sharp contrast with France, now a Republic, which had become the centre of social, political, and artistic thought.

Marx developed his ideas in response to the influence of the old Hegelians who adhered to the idea of history as the development of the spirit as well as the young Hegelians who centred their theories on man instead of spirit. Against this

backdrop Marx presented his theory of historic materialism, the principle of material production and the consequent historic specificity of each social formation. He proclaimed the centrality of the concept of class as the motor force of history, by depicting antithetical forces that generate social change.<sup>1</sup>

Marx's principle of material production stems from his inversion of the central concept in Hegel's idealistic philosophy, namely, the principle of spiritual production. While Hegel attempted to reconcile the mind/matter dichotomy through the development of spiritual production, Marx attempted to reconcile this duality through the development of material production taking place through history.

Hegel's idealistic philosophy portrayed history as the self-realization of the spirit, maintaining that history is spirit in itself objectification as culture, or the succession of world dominant civilizations. For Hegel spirit is a self creative energy imbued with a drive to become conscious of itself, and human beings are spirit in the process of self-alienation and self-realization. Hegel maintained that spirit actualizes its nature as self-conscious by the process of knowing through history. For Hegel, the process culminates at the stage of absolute knowledge, where spirit is finally and fully at home with itself, a stage where freedom, self-determination and self-realization would be achieved.<sup>2</sup>

In Hegel's view of history the modern State had a prominent role as the rule of reason and incarnation of freedom representing the general interest. The State was the political realm where the synthesis of universal and particular interests became possible if human beings, by reason, realized that they have universal interests and that their true freedom consists in the acceptance of general principles. The State was the place of self-realization. Civil society was considered by Hegel as the sphere where man is constituted as a separate individual, his individual or particular interest being civil and economic, not political. These particular interests were opposite to the general interest. Hegel maintained that civil society, although relevant, was subordinate to the State, and therefore, that political interests representing the general interest transcended individual and economic interests.<sup>3</sup>

Marx inverts the Hegelian concept of spiritual production into material production by maintaining that human beings create their world through their "material" productive activities; that human beings are not the personification of spirit, rather, spirit is the thought process of human beings. For Marx, the real social process (man's alienation from himself) takes place in the material world, and therefore presents us with concepts of the State and civil society which are the opposite to those in Hegel's idealistic philosophy.<sup>4</sup>



To Marx, the State, rather than being the incarnation of reason and the guardian of the general interest, was a sphere of human alienation, where human beings projected their social power away from themselves and were alienated by it. The State was the site of political alienation, one which required a re-possession of the social power externalized in the State institutions by a collective act.

According to Marx, the modern State was unable to overcome the egoism of civil society, and therefore unable to create a genuine community. Marx maintained that the modern State emancipated human beings by declaring that their real differences shall not affect their standing as citizens, but in reality, leaving intact the world of domination, subordination, exploitation and competition. For Marx, the political person who is considered in abstract a moral person, is in reality, uneducated, unsocial, alienated in his existence, corrupted. Analyzing the French and American constitutions Marx finds the concept of natural rights distorted. Liberty is translated as non-interference; the right of property is translated as the right of self-interest, leading human beings to stand against each other, not the realization but the limitation of their own liberty.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike Hegel, Marx did not see civil society as an outgrowth of the State, but rather, the State as an outgrowth of civil society. For Marx, civil society was the site where the self-alienation of man as a producer of material goods takes place. Marx portrayed "man as essentially a producer," "material production being the primary form of his producing activity". He maintained that "the fundamental reality was the reality of man's alienation in economic life", economic life taking place in civil society; with industry being the externalized productive power of the species.<sup>6</sup>

This is why, while Hegel conceptualized history as the self-realization of the spirit, Marx conceptualized it as the self-development of human species taking place along material production, culminating in communism. Marx postulated that along this path, man had not been able to express himself freely in productive activity; that his material productive activity had always been involuntary, forced, and therefore, alienated labour. Human beings had not yet been able to realize their nature as conscious free producers.

Marx posited that the escape from alienated labour, namely, the transcendence of human alienation and the achievement of self-realization (the realization of man's human nature as a free conscious producer, the regaining of man's productive power), only becomes possible with the overcoming of surplus value or the socialization of the productive forces. Marx maintains that only at this stage will human beings form a genuine community, a genuine civil society which allows for the potential inherent in mankind. Only at this stage would human beings form a universal community where each human being has recognized and organized

their power as social powers; a community where each human being no longer separates their social power as political power.<sup>7</sup>

This is the theme that underlies all of Marx's writings, from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, where the idealist concept of alienation is transformed and rooted in the labour process, to *Das Kapital* (1990) where, in a scientific manner, and through a critique of the existing political economy, Marx presents his theory of value, depicts class as a social relation of production, and proposes the overcoming of surplus value as the re-possession of social power, and the free development of the potential inherent in man, — individuals acting as members of a universal community.

Having demonstrated how Marx's departure from Hegelian idealistic philosophy is the cornerstone of his principle of material production, the next section focuses on the principle of material production and the production of life species.

## **THE PRINCIPLE OF MATERIAL PRODUCTION AND THE PRODUCTION OF LIFE SPECIES**

Opposing the idealist conception of man, namely, that man develops in accordance with a spiritual essence, Marx unveils, through his principle of material production, a human nature that has "neither an unchanging nature, nor develops in accordance to some spiritual essence". Instead, Marx maintains that man produces himself through material labour, and therefore, that his nature is determined by the material conditions of his life. Marx posits that there is a dialectical relation between man's nature (as determined by the material conditions of his life), and the practical transformations of those conditions through history. Labour, therefore, is the link between man's nature on the one hand, and the practical transformations of the conditions of his life on the other. Such is the foundation of his historic specificity, namely, that at each stage of material production, particular kinds of men facing specific conditions of life and needs, produce specific practical transformations to those problems, and therefore, produce a specific society.<sup>8</sup>

It is in *The German Ideology* (1970) where Marx presents his materialist principle; the interrelated concepts of "man producing himself through labour," and "the rooting of class in the labour process". These fundamental ideas were in incipient form in *The Manuscripts* (1978) and later fully developed in *Das Kapital* (1990).

Marx states his principle of material production by arguing that "the first premise of all human history is the existence of human individuals. Thus, the first act to be

established is the physical organization of those individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature.” Marx goes on to assert that a) the writing of history must set out from these bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men; b) human beings distinguish themselves from animals because they produce their means of subsistence, and “by producing their means of subsistence human beings are indirectly producing their actual material life” c) “the way in which men produce their means of subsistence is their mode of production”; d) this “mode of production is not simply the production of their physical existence, rather it is a definite mode of life, and a form of expressing their life”; e) “what individuals are, coincides with their production in what they produce and how they produce.” Marx concludes, therefore, that “the nature of individuals depends on the material conditions of their production”, and that this production presupposes the intercourse of individuals”.<sup>9</sup>

Marx maintains that as the division of labour develops along the different conditions of production, each stage “determines the relations of individuals to each other with reference to the instrument and to the product of labour,” namely, the forms of ownership.<sup>10</sup>

Marx depicts the first form of ownership as “tribal,” where people live by hunting and fishing. Here the social structure is limited to an extension of the family, chieftains, members of the tribe, and slaves. The second form of ownership is ancient communal and State ownership, which develops from the union of several tribes into a city. Here a group of citizens share communal property and hold power over the labouring slaves. Thus, communal and also private property develops. The third form of ownership is feudal or State property. It is also based on a community in association against a subjected producing class, the small peasantry, while in the city small capital commands the labour of journeymen. At each stage of production, Marx depicts “definite individuals who produce in a definite way, entering into definite social and political relations”, depicting therefore, the connection of the social and political structure with material production.<sup>10</sup>

Further, Marx describes three aspects of social activity as the fundamental conditions of history. First, that “men must be in a position to live in order to be able to make history, meaning, to sustain human life. “This involves before anything, eating, drinking, habitation, clothing” [...] “That the first historical act is the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself”. That “this is the fundamental condition of all history”. The second aspect of social activity is that “the satisfaction of the first need leads to new needs, and this production of new needs is the first historical act”. The third aspect of social activity is that “human beings propagate their kind”.<sup>11</sup>

Marx insists that the production of life is social, namely, that it is formed by the co-operation of several individuals. Therefore, “a certain mode of production is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation or social stage, and this is what determines the nature of each society”.<sup>11</sup>

I have described in this section Marx’s principle of material production and the underlying notion that production presupposes co-operation. The question arises, within this framework, by which process does “class” become the central concept and the pivotal force of history? I address this question in the next section “Material Production Social Structure and Class”.

## **MATERIAL PRODUCTION, SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND CLASS**

Since material production of life is social and generated in co-operation with other, a certain mode of production is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation or social stage. Marx states that each stage of material production determines the relation of individuals to each other with reference to the instruments and products of labour. Therefore, at each stage of material production, individuals enter into clearly defined social and political relations.<sup>12</sup>

What is pivotal in Marx’s depiction of social formations is the unequal forms in which these distributions take place throughout history. “In earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In Ancient Rome we find patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations” [...]” The history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman; in a word, oppressor and oppressed stood in contrast opposition to each other, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight [...]”<sup>13</sup>

Class is, therefore, the social relation of co-operation in material production, or social relations of production, an unequal collaboration of individuals. At each stage of production, the unequal distribution of labour and its products crystallizes into two antagonistic classes: a dominant class against a subjected directly producing class or the domination of some by others, private property being the outcome of this unequal distribution. In other words, a social structure is formed by classes.<sup>14</sup>

This unequal collaboration of individuals or class formation takes different forms along the development of material production. Each form is determined by the ownership of the instruments of production and the product. Along with the development of material production, historic materialism involves definite modes of production or industrial stages, and their corresponding social relations of production or classes. By re-periodizing history into three main modes of production (slave, feudal, and industrial capitalism), Marx describes the outperforming of one mode of production by another, and the contradiction between the already existing classes and the new mode of production. In other words, the relation of production contradicts the new forces of production, and new classes emerge.

A slave mode of production, consisting of a social structure formed by the class of citizens existing against a subjected class of slaves, was outperformed by the feudal mode of production which took place during the Middle Ages. The feudal mode of production was based on land ownership. Here, the social structure was formed by two main classes, the feudal lord or owner of the land standing against the direct producers, the serfs. The serfs owned their simple means of production, their tools. The product of their three-day work each week belonged to the feudal lord, while the product of their four-day work belonged to them and made up their livelihood.

The growing demand for wool turned the use of land into pasture. During this process of enclosure, the serfs were forcibly separated from their means of production. Marx described this process as “primitive accumulation,” where “serfs were divorced from their means of production and forcibly separated from the means of producing their own economic livelihood, as they had done in feudal society”. The process was “primitive’ insofar as it formed the historical basis of capitalism and constituted the historical moment when serfs labourers were transformed into wage-labourers in industrial capitalism.<sup>15</sup>

For Marx, the process of primitive accumulation took place in two stages. The first stage consisted of the expropriation of land during the 17th century, “when large population of agricultural workers were forcibly thrown from the land by evictions and enclosures, leading to the dissolution of a whole way of life”. The second stage was marked by “the legal transfer of feudal lands into private hands by direct seizure and expropriation. By the 19th century, the enclosure movement had created private property, the industrial worker (wage-labour), the factory system and the private ownership of the means of production”.<sup>15</sup>

The separation between town and country took place once feudalism was fully developed. The towns became cities as industry and commerce developed, and the guilds (the small craft industry) declined. The separation between capital and

labour was established. Capital became independent of landed property. This was the beginning of property having its basis in labour and exchange.<sup>15</sup>

As the productive forces developed, the separation of industrial production and commerce takes place. The development of trade and manufacture presupposed machine development, which in turn presupposed a concentration of population, demand for commodities, and modern capital assessed in money. This caused a decline in the guilds' capital consisting of old and hereditary customers.

A new class, the bourgeoisie, begins to surface. Private property, which had begun with the ancients as movable property, and later in the Middle Ages took the form of land property, now takes the form of modern capital owned by the bourgeoisie. Against the bourgeoisie, a new propertyless class also emerges, the proletariat.

In this way, the two antagonistic classes linked with the new mode of production (industrial capitalism) are established, bourgeoisie and proletariat. The form of ownership corresponding to capitalism consists, on the one hand, on the ownership of the means of production and the product by the bourgeoisie, and on the other, on the selling of labour power by the proletariat, a class completely separated from its instrument of production and its product and now converted into wage labourers with nothing to offer but their labour power.<sup>16</sup>

Classical historic materialism states that within this new class formation, labour, the labour process, and the product of labour are transformed. Labour ceases to be an activity by which a human being produces the means of existence and his economic livelihood by his own simple instrument of production. Now, the worker is completely separated from the instrument of production and the product, and his labour becomes a commodity bought and sold in the marketplace. Labour becomes labour power. The worker becomes a commodity, a special commodity that produces more value than the value paid for its purchase.

The labour process ceases to be a relationship between man and nature and becomes a valorization process with two characteristics: the worker works under the control of the capitalist to whom his labour belongs, and the product belongs to the capitalist, not to the worker, the immediate producer.

The product of labour ceases to be a use value (a product that satisfies human needs) and becomes an exchange value, a commodity bought and sold in the market which acquires a social uniform objectivity, since use values are produced by the capitalist only as the material substratum of exchange value.<sup>17</sup>

Classical historic materialism states that in this new mode of production, the unequal social relation of production takes place through the extraction of surplus value, a surplus value that results from a quantitative excess of unpaid labour. More precisely it states that the creation of surplus value takes place in the purchasing of labour power, since the value of labour power, and the value which that labour power produces, are two different magnitudes. It is out of this difference that the capitalist extracts surplus value. The seller of labour power realizes its exchange value and alienates its use value, since the daily sustenance of labour costs half a day labour. But the same labour remains effective for the whole working day. Therefore, the value which labour power creates for the capitalist is double that which the capitalist pays for. Therefore, "labour power is the substance of value", "labour time is the measure of magnitude of value", and "money is the form of appearance of value, a form which hides the social character of labour."<sup>18</sup>

Classical historic materialism states that capitalism is a society dominated by the law of value, namely, a society based on exchange value, which transforms money and commodities into social relations, and inversely, transforms human beings into instruments for capital accumulation, thereby curtailing self-determination. In such a society, social power, this multiplicity which arises out of the co-operation of individuals, appears to men, not as their united power, but as an alien and inevitable force existing outside themselves. It becomes a power they cannot control, a power imposed on them independent of their will.

Classical historic materialism maintains that capitalism, through the development of the productive forces, contains the conditions for the overcoming of surplus value. That only a class completely shut out of self activity is in a position to achieve complete self-activity, which consists in the appropriation of the totality of the productive forces and the development of the totality of capacities, ending with the existence of classes and private property.

Classical historic materialism insists that in the new classless society, human beings will no longer exist to serve the valorization of value; instead, the economic system will serve man's potentialities.<sup>19</sup>

In classical historic materialism the conditions for the overcoming of surplus value are contained in big industry, since it is in big industry where the contradiction between private property and the instrument of production appears for the first time: "on the one hand there are the totality of productive forces which are, for the individuals, no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property, forces which have taken an inhuman form, completely indifferent to the intercourse of individuals as individuals". "On the other hand, and opposite to these productive forces, are the majority of individuals from whom these forces have been

extracted, individuals who, deprived of any self-activity, have become abstract individuals”, who only in this manner can relate to other individuals through the system of exchange. Labour is the only connection which still links them with the productive forces and with their own existence, but “this labour has lost all semblance of self activity and only sustains life by stunning it.”<sup>20</sup>

In classical historic materialism individuals in previous modes of production appropriated a crude instrument of production which became their property and achieved a new stage of limitation, since they continued to be subordinated to the division of labour. On the contrary, in the appropriation by the proletariat, when the force which arises out of the co-operation of individuals emerges, self activity coincides with material life. “Only at this stage individuals develop into complete individuals and cast off all limitations”. “This transformation of labour into self activity corresponds to the transformation of the earlier limited social intercourse into the intercourse of individuals as such.”<sup>21</sup>

Through the principle of material production, then, historic materialism confers centrality to the concept of class. Class becomes a dynamic force, pivotal to historical development and the basis of the evolutionary pattern along historical formations.

To sum up, historical development is the struggle between social classes in relation to access and control of the means of production. “Class” is therefore the motor force of history. An analysis of slave, feudal and capitalist modes of production shows that along with the development of material production, new classes enter into contradiction with the existing social relations of production or classes, and in this materialistic connection of men, new classes emerge.

This movement represents history. History is the history of classes surfacing in dialectical manner along the development of material production. The bourgeoisie is the revolutionary class of capitalism, surfacing from the class antagonism of the Middle Ages. The proletariat is the revolutionary class of the classless society. Historic materialism maintains that individuals form a class when they share the same conditions of existence and must carry a common battle against another class. Every class achieves an independent existence over against individuals who find their conditions of existence predestinated.<sup>22</sup>

In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the link between material and mental production in classical historic materialism.

## **MATERIAL PRODUCTION AND MENTAL PRODUCTION**



I have described Marx's departure from idealistic philosophy and his formulation of the principle of material production and classes arising from it, as the basis of his evolutionary pattern. This section focuses on mental production as an outcome of material production, namely, the emergence of ideas as outcomes of each specific mode of material production or social formation.

Opposing the idealist conception of ideas as eternal and self-subsistent entities, Marx derives all mental production from material production. In other words, Marx sees all mental production as effluxes of the existing social relations of production, as distorted forms in which the unequal social relation of production appears to men. Marx unravels how a certain relation among humans assumes for them, the fantastic relation between things, comparable to a savage who fashions a fetish with his own hands and then falls down and worships it. Marx maintains that these effluxes, these distorted forms in which the unequal social relation of production appears to men, is ideology or false consciousness, which controls activity and maintains relations of inequality.

Once conceived in terms of human activity, in terms of material production and classes, the terms consciousness, history, capital, value, and civil society acquire a different meaning. Consciousness is no longer a self-subsistent entity. It becomes an estranged consciousness of an existence determined by specific social relations of production surfacing through the forms of morality, religion, metaphysics. History is no longer an abstract act of self-consciousness as idealism maintained. Instead, it becomes the history of class struggles along the succession of modes of production carrying class inequality. Capital is unveiled as a social relation of production. Value is no longer a quality inherent in a product but the essence of unpaid labour. Civil society is no longer the subordinate sphere where man is constituted as an individual. It is, instead, a form of social intercourse determined by the existing productive forces. It is a civil society that will transform itself, with the overcoming of surplus value (or the regaining of the social power) from a form of alienation into a form of self-determination.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated the centrality of the concept of class in classical historic materialism. This centrality stems from the principle of material production. In it, the tenet that man produces him/herself through labour, roots class in the labour process.

I described how Marx departs from idealistic philosophy and traces a new path towards the overcoming of human alienation, through the development of material production. I examined the way material production presupposes the social intercourse of individuals. In this social production of life each mode of production is linked to a specific mode of co-operation or social stage. In other words, with each mode individuals enter into defined social and political relations.

I went on to describe how classical historic materialism depicts the unequal forms in which the intercourse of individuals takes place in each historical formation. The unequal forms create classes. At each stage of production there is an unequal distribution of labour and its products, creating two antagonistic classes, a dominant class and a subjugated class.

Then I described how classical historic materialism re-periodizes history into three main modes of production: slave, feudal and capitalism and explained their corresponding class structures. As one mode of production is outperformed by a superior one, the existing relations of production or classes enter into contradiction with the new mode of production and in the materialistic connection of men, and new classes emerge.

This class struggle along the development of material production is what confers centrality to the concept of class. Classes are the dynamic force pivotal to historical development and the base of the evolutionary pattern along historical formations. As material production develops, slave and master give way to lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, and eventually bourgeoisie and proletariat. In a capitalist mode of production, the unequal distribution of labour and its products takes place through the extraction of surplus value.

I discussed the escape from human alienation that Marx envisioned and the process by which human self-realization (or the realization of man's nature as a free producer and the regaining of the externalized productive power of the species) could be achieved. According to Marx, self-realization becomes possible

only with the overcoming of surplus value or the socialization of the productive forces. Only then is social power regained, and civil society transformed into a universal community, where each human being recognizes his/her power as social power.

The centrality of the concept of class, namely, class as a pivotal force along historical formations depicted in classical historical materialism, is displaced later in the work of structural Marxist Louis Althusser. I devote the next chapter to examining this shift.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Coser, Lewis A. 1977. *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Sociological Context*. N. Y. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers Pp. 68, 71, 75-76, 77

Marx [...] his work stands in a direct line of descent from the mainstream of European thought. Among the significant themes in the works of his predecessors that are important for the understanding of Marx, four major ones stand out: the idea of progress, whether peaceful or conflictive: the idea of alienation; the idea of perfectability; and the holistic view of society and of historical epochs. P. 68

[...] the philosophers of the Enlightenment were at one in their common belief in the possibility of alerting the human environment in such a way as to allow for a fuller and more wholesome development of human capacities. P. 71

The young Hegelians in general, and Ludwig Feuerbach in particular, provided Marx with elements of that theoretical equipment which enabled him to "stand Hegel on his head." That is, they led him to anchor his views in an examination of the social system - of the social relationships in which men were enmeshed-rather than the world of disembodied ideas and the Spirit. Pp. 75-76

The eighteen thirties and early forties, the years of Marx's young manhood, were years of profound despair for the German educated classes. A blanket of repression covered all those who attempted to think independently. P. 76

Germany was lagging behind France and England not only in its political development, but socially, and economically as well. P. 77

These concepts are further developed all through chapter II.

- 2 Tucker, Robert C. 1978. *The Marx Engels Reader*. N.Y. W. W. Norton & Company. P. XXI

Hegel represents history as the self-realization of the spirit (Geist) or God [...] Spirit is self-creative energy imbued with a drive to become fully conscious of itself as spirit [...] history is spirit in its self-objectification as culture — the succession of world-dominant civilizations [...] Spirit actualizes its nature as self-conscious being by the process of knowing [...] Through the mind of man [...] the world achieves consciousness of itself as spirit [...] Knowing is recognition, whereby spirit destroys the illusory otherness of the objective world and recognizes it as actually subjective [...] The process terminates at the stage of "absolute knowledge" when spirit is finally and fully "at home with itself in its otherness having recognized the whole creation as spirit.

- 3 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 5, 6

The State played a key role. The State is the rule of reason in society, the incarnation of freedom [...] In Hegel's philosophy civil society [...] as that sphere in which man is constituted as a separate individual. His interests are civil and economic, not political [...] His particular interests appear as distinct from, and opposed to, the general interest represented by the State [...] But if men realize that their true freedom consists in the acceptance of principles, of laws which are thrown, a synthesis of universal and particular interests becomes possible. It can be actualized, however, only and through political institutions whereby the State proper is distinguished from civil society. Civil life remains as an element of the State, but only as a subordinate moment of it.

- 4 Tucker, Robert C. 1978. *The Marx and Engels Reader*. N. Y. W. W. Norton & Company. P. XXIII

For Marx [...] one could discover social reality, the reality of the human predicament in history, by turning Hegel 'right side up'. Man was not the personification of spirit: rather spirit was the thought-process taking place in man [...] The Hegelian picture of spirit alienated from itself was [...] man's alienation from himself in the material world [...] The State, for example, was a sphere of human alienation [...]

- 5 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 7, 9

(Marx) differentiates between "political emancipation" and "human emancipation" [...] shows that civil society is the real basis of the State, and calls for the overcoming of the separation between them. [...] For Marx the free development of the potential inherent in mankind required the individual to think and act as a member of a universal community [...] But, Marx argues further, contrary to Hegel, the modern State is unable to overcome the egoism of civil society and create a genuine community [...] We see therefore that a partial, merely political, emancipation leaves intact the world of private interests, of domination and subordination, exploitation and competition, because the State establishes its universality, and the citizens their communality, only by abstracting away the "real differences and interests" that separate the members of civil society and set them against one another. Hence Marx considers even the most perfect democratic state inadequate because it is based on this fundamental "contradiction between the political state and civil society" [...] (In) political democracy [...] man, not merely one man but every man, is there considered a sovereign being, a supreme being; but it is uneducated, un-social man, man as he is in his fortuitous existence, man as he has been corrupted, lost to himself, alienated, subjected to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements, by the whole organization of our society-in short man who is not yet a real species-being [...] Liberty is defined [...] The right of property is [...] As for security [...] Marx concludes that, in these constitutions, species-life itself-society-appears as a system which is external to the individual and as a limitation of his original independence.

- 6 Tucker, Robert C. 1978. *The Marx and Engels Reader*. N. Y. W. W. Norton & Company. P. XXIV

The primary sphere of man's being was not his life as a citizen of the State but rather his economic life in civil society [...] Man's alienation as a producer of

material goods [...] The fundamental human reality reflected in a mystified way in Hegel's philosophy of history was the reality of man's alienation in economic life. Man is essentially a producer; and material production is the primary form of his productive activity, industry being the externalized productive powers of the specie.

- 7 Tucker, Robert C. 1978. *The Marx and Engels Reader*. N. Y. W. W. Norton & Company. P. XXV

man's nature was to be a "free conscious producer" [...] Since man [...] is estranged from his human labour, labour is alienated labour [...] The socialization of the productive powers [...] Human self-realization will be stained on the scale for all humanity [...] the transcendence of human alienation [...]

- 8 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. P. 21

[...] *man produces himself through labor*. He has neither a fixed unchanging nature, purely biologically determined [...] neither does he develop himself in accordance with some spiritual essence [...] There is rather a dialectically conceived relation between his nature as determined by the conditions of his life, and the practical transformation of those conditions. The link between the two is labor. It follows that one cannot speak of "Man" as such, except at a highly abstract level. History is made by particular kinds of men, with specific needs and problems, and specific conditions of life determining the possibility of a solution to those problems.

- 9 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 4 and 42

The German Ideologist' concept of alienation had been decisively transformed and rooted in the labor process. P. 4  
The first premises of the materialist method [...] are real individuals, their activity, and the material conditions under which they live, both they find already existing, and those produced by their activity [...] The first premise of all human history is [...] the existence of living human individuals [...] the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature [...] The writing of history must [...] be set out from these natural bases, and their modification in the course of history by the action of men. By producing their means of subsistence, men are indirectly producing their actual material life [...] The way in which men produce their means of subsistence [...] this mode of production [...] it is a definite form of activity [...] a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life [...] as individuals express their life, so they are [...] What they are [...] coincides with their production, both, with what they produce, and with how they produce. The nature individuals thus, depends on the material conditions determining their production. P. 42

- 10 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 43-46

[...] the various stages of development in the division of labor are just so many forms of ownership, i. e. the existing stage of the division of labor determines also

the relation of individuals to one another with reference to the material instrument and product of labor [...]

- 11 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 46-51

The fact is therefore, that definite individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations. Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring our empirically, and without any mystification and speculation, the connection of the social and political structure with production [...] we must begin by stating the first premise of all history, the premise, namely that men must be in a position to live in order to “make history”. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act in thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed, this is a historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life. [...] The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of the needs is the first historical act [...] The third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development is that men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind [...] It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation or social stage and this mode of cooperation is in itself a productive force. Further, that the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society [...] that the “history of humanity” must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange [...] The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite mode of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.

- 12 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 43-46 and 54-56

The fact is therefore, that individuals who are productively active in a definite way enter into these definite social and political relations [...] The social power, i. e. the multiplied force which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is determined through the division of labour, appears to these individuals, since their co-operation is not voluntary but has come about naturally, not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them.

- 13 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. “The Communist Manifesto” in Tucker, Robert C. 1978. *The Marx and Engels Reader*. N. Y. W. W. Norton & Company Pp. 473-474

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed [...] contending classes.

- 14 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. P. 43

The various stages of development in the division of labor are just so many forms of ownership, i.e., the existing stage of the division of labor determines also the relations of individuals to one another with reference to the material, instrument and product of labor.

- 15 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 69, 71, 72, 73.

The separation of town and country can also be understood as the separation of capital and landed property, as the beginning of the existence and development of capital independent of landed property — the beginning of property having its basis only in labor and exchange [...] In the towns which, in the Middle Ages, did not derive ready-made from an earlier period but were form anew by the serfs who had become free, each man particular labor was his only property [...] The competition of the serfs constantly escaping into the town [...] The next extension of the division of labor was the separation of production and commerce, the formation of a special class of merchants [...] with this, there was given the possibility of commercial communications transcending the immediate neighbourhood [...] The towns enter into relation with one another, new tools are brought from one town into the other, and the separation between production and commerce soon calls forth a new division of production between the individual towns, each of which is soon exploiting a predominant branch of industry [...] The immediate consequence of the division of labor between the various towns was the rise of manufacturers, branches of production which had outgrown the guild system. Manufacturers first flourished in Italy and then in Flanders under the historical premise of commerce with foreign nations [...]

- Morrison Ken. *Marx Durkheim and Weber: Formations in Modern Social Thought*. Sage. 2006. London. p. 402.

The growing demand for wool turned the use of land into pasture. During this process of enclosure, the serfs were forcibly separated from their means of production. Marx denominated “primitive accumulation” to this process where the serf labour was divorced from their means of production and forcibly separated from the means of producing their own economic livelihood as they once had done in feudal society. Marx denominated this accumulation “primitive” so far as it formed the historical basis of capitalism and the historical moment when serfs labourers were transformed into wage-labourers in industrial capitalism.

For Marx, the process of primitive accumulation took place in two stages. The first stage consisted in the expropriation of the land during the 17th century, when large population of agricultural workers were forcibly thrown from the land by evictions and enclosures, leading to the dissolution of a whole way of life. The second stage was marked by the legal transfer of feudal lands into private hands by direct seizure and



expropriation. By the 19th century, the enclosure movement had created private property, the industrial worker (wage labour), the factory system and the private ownership of the means of production.

Marx Karl. *Capital*. 1990. Penguin Classics. Toronto. Pp. 873 - 895 passim.

16 Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital*. Vol. I. London. Penguin Books. Pp. 873-875

Primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. P. 873  
So called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as "primitive" because it forms the pre-history of capital, and the mode of production corresponding to capital. Pp. 874 - 875

17 Morrison, Ken. 2006. *Marx Durkheim Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought*. 2nd edition. London. Sage. Pp. 391, 400, 401

Commodity. A Key concept in Marx's theory of value which derives its significance from its early use by classical political economists to designate a category of production and a thing bearing value [...] Marx claimed that one of the distinguishing characteristics of commodity production in capitalism is that commodities are subject to buying and selling, and in this sense, enter into the medium of 'exchange, where they are sold for a price. It was this system of exchange which had not been seen before and it had the effect of creating "value in exchange" and reducing all social relations to economic transactions of buying and selling [...] According to Marx, commodities have two distinct properties: I) use value, which is capable of satisfying human needs and II) exchange value, in which quantities of one commodity can be expressed in the value of quantities of another commodity. P. 391

Labor [...] activity by which human beings produce the means of their existence and their economic livelihoods [...] an activity which defines individuals in nature and history [...] human labor was self-actualizing because it was through labor that human beings create use values, maintain their existence and define themselves in society and history [...] Labor power [...] capacity to add value to commodities [...] it is found in the market and purchased as if it were a commodity [...] it produces more value than the price at which it is purchased [...] P. 400, 401

18 Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital*. Vol. I. London. Penguin Books. Pp. 126, 127, 131, 163, 293, 305

The usefulness of a thing makes it a use value. P. 126  
[...] the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values [...] P. 127  
Use-values are produced by capitalists only because and in so far as they form the material substratum of exchange-value [...] P. 293  
In both cases, the surplus-value results only from a quantitative excess of labor, from a lengthening of one and the same labour-process; in the one case, the process of making jewels, in the other, the process of making yarn [...] P. 305

What was really decisive for him was the specific use-value which this commodity possesses of being the source not only of value, but of more value than it has itself. This is the specific service the capitalist expects from labour-power, and in this transaction he acts in accordance with the eternal laws of commodity exchange. In fact, the seller of labor power, like the seller of any other commodity, realizes its exchange-value and alienates its use-value.

Now we know the substance of value. It is labor. We know the measure of its magnitude. It is labor time. The form, which stamps value as exchange-value, remains to be analyzed [...] P. 131

The only difficulty of the concept of the money form is that of grasping the universal equivalent form, and hence, the general form of value as such [...] P. 163

19 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 55

*All round* dependence, this natural form of the *world-historical* co-operation of individuals, will be transformed by this communist revolution into the control and conscious mastery of these powers, which, born of the action of men on one another, have till now overawed and governed man as powers completely alien to them.

20 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 83-92

This subsuming of individuals under definite classes cannot be abolished until a class has taken shape, which has no longer any particular class interest to assert against the ruling class. "The transformation, through the division of labor, of personal powers (relationships) into material powers, cannot be dispelled [...] but can only be abolished by the individuals again subjecting these material powers to themselves and abolishing the division of labor. This is not possible without the community [...] In the previous substitutes for community, in the State, etc., personal freedom has existed only for the individuals who developed within the relationships of the ruling class [...] In a real community the individuals obtain their freedom in and through their association [...] P. 83

[...] in big industry the contradiction between the instruments of production and private property appears for the first time and is the product of big industry. Moreover, big industry must be highly developed to produce this contradiction. And thus only with big industry does the abolition of private property become possible. In big industry and competition the whole mass of conditions of existence, limitations, biases of individuals are fused together into the two simplest forms: private property and labor [...] P. 91

Thus, on the one hand, we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property, and hence of the individuals only in so far as they are owners of private property themselves. Never, in any earlier period, have the productive forces taken a form so indifferent to the intercourse of individuals as individuals, because their intercourse itself was a formerly restricted one [...] On the other hand, standing over against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away. and who, robbed thus of all real-life content, have become abstract individuals [...] The only connection which still links them to the productive forces and with their own existence, labor, has lost all semblance of self-activity and only

sustains their life by stunning it. While in the earlier periods self activity and the production of material life were separated [...] and [...] the production of material life was considered a subordinated mode of self-activity, they now diverge to such an extent, that altogether material life appears as the end, and what produces material life, labor (which is now the only possible but, as we see, negative form of self activity), as the means [...] P. 92

21 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 92, 93

[...] this appropriation must have a universal character corresponding to the productive forces and the intercourse [...] P. 92  
Only at this stage does self-activity coincide with material life, which corresponds to the development of individuals into complete individuals and the casting-off of all natural limitations. The transformation of labor into self-activity corresponds to the transformation of the earlier limited intercourse into the intercourse of individuals as such. With the appropriation of the total productive forces through united individuals, private property comes to an end [...] P. 93

22 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 88-89

Thus all coalitions in history have their origin, according to our view, in the contradiction between productive forces and the forms of intercourse.

23 Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970 *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. P. 18

[...] that is to say, the question with Marx in all his work is how to penetrate beneath the abstract categories of political economy and social life generally, to the human reality underlying them; and in turn to exhibit the meaning of these apparently self-subsistent spheres and categories in terms of human activity.

Marx, Karl. 1990. *Capital*. Vol I. London. Penguin Books. Pp. 165

It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.

Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels. 1970. *The German Ideology*. N. Y. International Publishers. Pp. 47, 51

[...] the phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process [...] P. 47  
The production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour. The same applies to mental production as expressed in the language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc., of a people. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., -real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its further forms. Consciousness can

never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process [...] The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises [...] Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life [...] consciousness a social product. P 51



**CHAPTER II**

**THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS IN STRUCTURAL  
MARXISM**

## CHAPTER II

### THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS IN STRUCTURAL MARXISM

In the previous chapter I examined the centrality of the concept of class in classical historic materialism, where class is the dynamic force pivotal to historical development and the base of the evolutionary pattern along historical formations. This centrality disappears from Marxist literature in structural Marxism. Therefore, the goal of this chapter is to examine this shift in structural Marxism through the work of its main exponent, Louis Althusser.

Althusser wrote as a mature scholar in the 1960s, in a France where social movements against coercive structures were taking place. In his youth Althusser viewed the world through class demarcations, but eventually came to see his early interpretations as dogmatism and rejected them. Confronting an intellectual impasse and recalling a youth marked by wars, set out to restore Marxism as a philosophy and a science.

Althusser's philosophical reading of Marx's work maintains the existence of an epistemological break between Marx's early works and *Das Kapital*. He interprets Marx's early works as Hegelian, in complete contrast to his last work *Das Kapital*, which he interprets as scientific. In Marx's later work, Althusser sees an epistemological mutation and a theoretical revolution. In this interpretation, the concept of class becomes displaced as the idea of structure rises to prominence.

To examine the displacement of the concept of class in Althusser's re-interpretation of classical Marxism, this chapter will begin by describing how Althusser first arrived at the idea of structures, starting with his rejection of Hegelian idealism on the one hand, and the classical political economists' empiricism on the other. This will lead to a discussion of the nature and prevalence of structures in Althusser's theory. The second section describes the

displacement of the concept of class within this structuralist interpretation and the mechanism of its displacement.



## **ALTHUSSER'S CONCEPT OF STRUCTURES**

In the previous chapter I examined the work of Marx during the 19th century, his interpretation of history through historic materialism, and the centrality of class in his theory. A century later, Communist regimes were established in Russia, China, and some Eastern European countries. In the 1960s, the philosopher Louis Althusser erupted onto the intellectual scene with an interpretation of Marx's writings which displaces class, making it a secondary element. How does Althusser's theory displace class?

I begin with a brief biographical note about Althusser. Althusser was born in October 1918 in a suburb of Algiers, then a country controlled by France. His father was a lieutenant in the French military, who worked as a banker on his return to France. Althusser's early childhood seems to have been a happy one, living as he did in the comfort that characterized the life of French citizens living in occupied Algiers and belonging as he did to a petit-bourgeois family. In 1930, due to his father's work, the family moved to Marseille, and in 1936 to Lyon, where Althusser was enrolled in the prestigious Lycée du Park and began to prepare for entrance to France's "grandes écoles". Born into a Catholic family, Althusser worked closely with professors of the Catholic faith. In 1937 he joined the Catholic youth group, Jeunesses Etudiantes Chrétienne. In 1939 he gained entrance to the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris.

However, before the academic year began, Althusser was recruited into the French army, and soon after was captured in Vannes. He remained a prisoner of war in Northern Germany till the end of WWII. His "Journal de Captive," written in captivity, provides evidence of the cycles of depression that plagued him for the rest of his life. They also provide glimpses of the experiences of solidarity, political action and community, which led him to explore the idea of communism.

Following his release at the end of the war in 1945, Althusser (now 27 years old), spent three years working on his Masters' thesis and preparing for the "agregation," the competitive examination that would qualify him to teach philosophy, and the gateway to his doctoral study and university employment. He also associated politically and intellectually with leftist movements of the day and attempted to embrace a synthesis of Christian and Marxist thought based on 19th German Idealist philosophy, mostly on Hegel's and Marx's legacies.

In 1948 Althusser passed his "agregation" and began working at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure as a Director of Studies, a position he would retain for the next 30 years. During these years Althusser began three lasting relationships, one with the French Communist Party, becoming an active member; another with

his companion and eventual wife H el ene Rytman; and the third one with French psychiatry due to his recurrent bouts of depression.

During the 1950s Althusser lived two lives. In one life he was a successful but obscure academic philosopher and pedagogue catering to his students' interests and the demands of their exams. In another life, he was a loyal and active Communist Party Member attending cell meetings, distributing tracks, and forming Marxist groups.

In 1961, Althusser erupted onto the intellectual scene in France and abroad with the publication "On the Young Marx," a text which stirred a heated debate during a time of crisis in the French Communist Party. In that publication, Althusser proposed a scientific alternative to the humanist revisions of Marxism. By 1965, the publications of *Reading Capital* (1970) and *For Marx* (2005) consolidated the impact of Althusser's reinterpretation of Marx and firmly established what eventually became known as structuralism.<sup>1</sup>

Althusser's structuralism was a reaction to a theoretical "detour," as he called it, by French Marxist intellectuals and Marxist political leaders. Althusser accused these groups of confusing science with ideology and slicing the world through the single blade of class. Perhaps the clearest answer is to cite Althusser himself describing the reasons for his theoretical impasse in the introduction of his book *For Marx* (2005)

"History had stolen our youth" writes Althusser, referring to the wars that surrounded him: WWII (1939 - 1945), the Algerian War for Emancipation (1954 - 1962), the Spanish Civil War (1936 - 1939). "It had imprinted on us the terrible education of deeds," "it turned us, students of bourgeois or petty bourgeois origins into men advised of the existence of classes, of their struggles and aims" [...] "from the evidence it forced on us we drew the only possible conclusion, and rallied to the political organization of the working class, the Communist Party" [...] "The war was just over. We were brutally cast into the Party's great political and ideological battles" [...] "In our political memory this time remains the time of huge strikes and demonstrations" [...] "In our philosophical memory it remains the period of intellectuals in arms, hunting out error from its bidding places; of the philosophers we were, without writings of our own, but making politics out of all writing, and slicing up the world with only a single blade [...] with the pitiless demarcation of class" [...] "bourgeois science, proletarian science" [...] "Under the alert Wing formula what then counted as philosophy could only chose between commentary and silence, between conviction [...] and dumb embarrassment" [...] "We had been made to treat science, a status claimed by every page of Marx, as merely the first-corner along ideologies" [...] "We were at the age of enthusiasm and trust [...] but this did not save us from remaining long

confused by this detour into which our leaders [...] had actively led us” [...] “So we spent the best part of our time in agitation , when we would had been better employed in the defence of our right and duty to know, and to study for production as such” [...] “We were not even intimately familiar with Marx’s mature works, as we were only too eager and happy to rediscover our burning passions in the ideological frame of his early works” [...] “In this way we came to realize that under the protection of the reigning dogmatism, a second negative tradition had prevailed [...] the stubborn, profound absence of any real theoretical culture in the history of the French workers’ movement [...] it rarely attracted men of sufficient philosophical formation to realize that Marxism should not be simply a political doctrine [...] but also [...] the theoretical domain of a fundamental investigation, indispensable, not only to the development of the science of society [...] but also to [...] philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

Althusser re-read Marx in his effort to re-install Marxism as a philosophy and a science. He observed an epistemological break between Marx’s early and mature works. Althusser claims that in his mature works, Marx performed a philosophical revolution, leaving behind the Hegelian epistemology of his youth and adopting instead a Spinozean epistemology that consisted in acknowledging the difference between the *concept* of the real object as distinct from the real object. Althusser maintains that it is this new theoretical framework that distanced Marx from Hegelian idealism on the one hand, and the empiricism of the classical political economists on the other.

In connection with Hegelian idealist philosophy, Althusser claimed that Marx distanced himself on three accounts: the idea of totality, the conception of time, and the concept of homo economicus.

Against the Hegelian idea of totality, Althusser argues that the Hegelian totality is reducible to a principle of interiority, namely, to an interior essence (noumena) or a spiritual totality whose elements (phenomena) are no more than expressions of this essence. Althusser claims that the duality noumena / phenomena does not permits us to apprehend the concept of the real thing, since it remits us to a spiritual essence. According to Althusser, Marx maintained that the structure is not an essence but has, instead, an objective and scientific existence with an objective existence formed by its effects. Althusser cites a passage from Marx stating: “In all forms of society, it is a determined production and the relations that this production brings about, the ones that assigned the place and importance to all other productions and their relations” [...] “it is a general illumination where all the colours are submerged, and that midwives the particular tones”. Althusser offers another example of the effect of an objective structure with fetishism, suggesting that it has been interpreted as subjective phenomena, when in reality, it is an effect of the objective structure of the mode of production.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

With regard to the Hegelian conception of time, Althusser claimed that Marx opposed the Hegelian conception of time as an homogenous continuity, as a dialectical unfolding of the spirit, which led the classical economists to think of their categories as eternal. Althusser maintained that instead, Marx presents us a concept of time as discontinuous, as constituted by a complex totality, as a structure with each mode of production having its own time and history. In *Das Kapital*, Althusser points out, Marx shows that the time of economic production is not linear. Time is complex and linked to modes of production. For Althusser, historical time is the specific form of existence of a totality, namely, a mode of production. Althusser maintains the existence of specific structures of historicity.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the Hegelian concept of “homo economicus”, Althusser maintains that Marx opposed this concept because it rests on a naive anthropology that roots the origin and end of all economic phenomena on the needs of economic subjects; that sees a universality of laws and effects of these needs; and that treats economic phenomena as an absolute for all forms of society in all times. Althusser reminds us that Marx opposed this naive anthropology by unraveling the historicity of human needs.<sup>7</sup>

Althusser asserts that it is from this philosophical revolution, from this new rationality, that Marx also opposes the empiricism of the classical political economists and arrives at his scientific discovery. This new rationality led to his modification of the object of political economy and became the foundation of a new problematic: The discovery of structures and structural causality, and the periodization of historical formations according to the global structures or modes of production.

Althusser points out that Marx criticized the classical political economists’ empiricism because it had led them to see economic phenomena as directly observable data, as data that was given and could be subjected to linear causality. Marx criticized the classical political economists for seeing only the “form of existence” of economic phenomena.

Althusser maintains that in *Das Kapital* Marx unravels instead the “concept” of economic phenomena as different from their forms of existence, and that through this distinction, Marx arrives at his scientific discovery: the existence of structural causality, namely, the existence of a structure that consists only of its effects, and the existence of structural overdetermination. Althusser claims that in *Das Kapital* Marx detected the existence of a global structure or mode of production which determines another structure: the regional structure (consisting of the unity of forces of production and relations of production), this regional structure in turn determining economic phenomena.<sup>8</sup>

Althusser contrasts the classical political economists' interpretation of economic phenomena with Marx's interpretation and concludes that while the classical political economists remained prisoners of the established economic categories, Marx critically examined them to grasp the "concepts" behind the given economic data. These concepts then led him to his theory of value which underlines the whole of capitalist production. For example, Althusser points out that Marx studied "labour," and went beyond the simple act of labour conceived by the classical political economists. This led him to see the two dimensions of labor: "concrete" labour which creates use values and "abstract labour" which creates value or exchange value.

Althusser further argues that in studying "commodity", Marx again went beyond the conception that classical political economists had of a commodity as a manufactured object. Instead, Marx discovered two dimensions of the commodity: its use value and its value or exchange value. Althusser suggests that while studying commodities, Marx realized the existence of a mysterious commodity which produces more value than what it is paid for: "human abstract labour". While studying the working day, he discovered that there was a portion of unpaid labour, which was the essence of value. In doing so, he discovered the relation between commodities and money, the buying and selling of commodities, and demonstrated how and why the commodity, by virtue of its inherent quality of exchange value, produces more value. Marx studied the transformation of money into capital and demonstrated the characteristic of value to increase itself constantly, in other words, the valorization of value.

And most of all, Althusser underlines the point that Marx constructed the concept of "surplus value", which provides an understanding of capitalist production, while Smith (1776) and Ricardo (1821), by studying "given data" or just the manifestation of economic phenomena, never distinguished between the concept of surplus value and its forms of existence such as profit, interest, or rent.<sup>9</sup>

Althusser maintains that this new theoretical framework has three consequences. First, to apprehend economic phenomena, economic science must depend on the concepts that are not visible and must be constructed. The objective of economic phenomena is no longer the creation of wealth, but the concept of "structure": a concept that must be constructed for each mode of production taking also into consideration its ideological and political dimension.

Second, economic phenomena are not homogeneous and therefore, not susceptible to comparison and measurement.

Third, since economic phenomena are determined by their same complexity or structure, linear causality can no longer be applied. Linear causality must be replaced by structural causality, such as a group of elements whose common complexity illuminates them by a certain light, which changes their hue.<sup>10</sup>

I have described first, Althusser's claim that Marx experienced a philosophical revolution, and second, how according to Althusser, this philosophical revolution led Marx to his scientific discovery. Marx modified the object of political economy which created a new problematic: the discovery of structures and structural causality; the discovery of a new science of history, namely, the periodization of historical formations according to the global structures or modes of production.

It was a necessary detour. But I now return to my main goal in this discussion which is to track the displacement of the concept of class behind structures. What happens to the concept of class in Althusser's structural Marxism?

## **THE CONCEPT OF CLASS IN STRUCTURAL MARXISM**

It is in Althusser's description of Marx's refutation of the classical political economists' category of production that Althusser illustrates the displacement of the concept of class behind structures. When describing Marx's refutation of the classical political economists' concept of production, Althusser reminds us of the two elements this category comprises: the work process and the social relation of production process.

While describing the work process, Althusser cites Marx's statement in *Das Kapital* that "the labour process as a material mechanism is dominated by the physical laws of nature and technology". Althusser maintains that labour power too is included in this mechanism and that the determination of the labour process by these material conditions is at its own level a denial of every "humanist conception of human labour as pure creativity". Althusser also maintains that in *Das Kapital* Marx breaks with this idealist view of labour by re-thinking the material conditions of every labour process and by providing the concept of the economic forms of existence of these material conditions.<sup>11</sup>

What Althusser is challenging in this passage is Marx's statement in *The German Ideology* that "man produces himself through labour". With this challenge, Althusser dismisses the ramifications of this statement, namely, the concept of class as rooted in the labour process and class struggles as the pivotal force of history. Althusser presents instead an idea of history as a concatenation of objective structures.

Furthermore, regarding the social relations of production, Althusser maintains that they are not reducible to simple relations among men or to intersubjectivity, struggles, domination, and servitude. Rather, the social relations of production consist of a specific combination: “agents” on the one hand, and the “material conditions of the production process” on the other. Althusser cites a passage from Marx stating “[...] distribution appears as distribution of products, but [...] before being distribution of products, is distribution of the elements of production and distribution of the members of society into different types of production (subordination of individuals to determined relations of production [...])<sup>12</sup>”

Althusser maintains that this “distribution” consists in a certain “attribution” of the means of production to the “agents” of production or classes. In emphasizing the concept of “combination,” he states that material production comprises a combination of agents and means of production. It is the specific form of this combination which distinguishes the different economic epochs or different modes of production. It is the combination of several elements, including direct producers, indirect producers, objects of production, and instruments of production, that allows us to arrive at the definition of a specific mode of production.<sup>13</sup>

Althusser argues that the relations of production are a structure that holds together the different groups of agents on the one hand, with the objects and instruments of production on the other. The relations of production regroups the agents (classes) into functional groups which occupy a certain place in the production process. The relations among these “agents,” “occupants”, or “classes”, are the result of the relations they maintain with the means of production. Therefore, the Marxist concept of history rests on the variations of these combinations.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Althusser defines the relations of production as a fixed structure. It is as a regional structure that distributes the means of production and the economic functions determining categories of agents of production. It is a regional structure of the total structure that determines places and functions which are occupied by the agents of production or classes. These agents are just the occupants of these places, the bearers of these functions. Althusser states that the real subjects of history, are not these occupants, nor these concrete individuals. The real subjects are the definition and distribution of these places and these functions, the structures which are irreducible to any anthropological intersubjectivity. Althusser maintains that to reduce this relation of production to human relations, would be to adulterate Marx’s ideas.<sup>15</sup>

When insisting on the combination of agents of production and means of production, Althusser asserts that this connection takes place at the level of relations of property (i. e. relations of possession, and of disposition of the direct and indirect producers). This connection necessitates the existence of a political organization destined to impose and maintain these types of relations by the estate and by ideologies. Certain relations of production impose as the condition of their existence a juridic-political and ideological superstructure that can contain the economic agents in the distribution of their roles, namely, a minority of proprietors of the means of production, extracting surplus value from the population.<sup>16</sup>

Althusser insists that “the economic” is not something visible. We can only apprehend it by constructing it as a concept. To construct the concept of the economic is to construct the concept of the mode of production, and to define, within this global structure, within this totality, the place of the regional structure.<sup>17</sup>

Althusser also insists that to think of the concept of production is to think of the concept of the mode of production, or the unity of the material and social conditions of production. The concept which expresses the economic reality of the capitalist mode of production is the concept of surplus value, which is the concept of a relation of production that exists between the agents of production and the means of production. The concept of economic exploitation is a fact constituted by a relation of combination.<sup>18</sup>

I have described how classes, which were the pivotal force of history in classical Marxism and the subject of history, become in Althusser’s framework a secondary concept, a recipient of functions, merely occupants of functions determined by the regional structure. Althusser conceptualizes objective structures as the subject of history and denies any intersubjectivity to them, making history a concatenation of coercive structures.



## CONCLUSION

To sum up, Althusser gives Marx a philosophical reading and concludes that there is an epistemological break between Marx's early and mature works. According to Althusser, the mature Marx left behind Hegelian philosophy, thereby creating a philosophical revolution. Marx's new rationality involved acquiring knowledge by constructing the "concept" of the object as distinct from the concrete object. Althusser also maintains that as the result of this new rationality Marx made a scientific discovery related to structural causality. Structures consist of the complexity of their elements. This led Marx to the concept of a global structure or mode of production that determines a regional structure, consisting of the unity of productive forces and relations of production. In time, these determine economic phenomena. Marx new rationality also led him to discover the concept of surplus value which characterizes the global structure of the capitalist mode of production.

Althusser maintains that this regional structure consists of a combination of material conditions of production and "agents". A regional structure holds together agents, and objects and instruments. They determine the functions and the places of these "occupants," "agents," or "classes". In this way, "class" loses the centrality it had in classical Marxism and becomes instead, a secondary reality behind structures, a mere occupant of a function, a function determined by a regional structure.

Althusser interprets Marx's production after the epistemological break as scientific and objective, and states that Marx is not an idealist, nor an empirical theorist. The objects of his discovery are structures and structural causality. Denying the existence of any intersubjectivity, class becomes a secondary reality, a mere occupant of certain functions dictated by a structure. Class is no longer the subject of history and therefore no longer the pivotal force of historical development. Objective structures become the subject of history. History is no longer the history of class struggles. History is a concatenation of coercive structures.

I started the dissertation by discussing the centrality of the concept of class in Marx's classical historical materialism. In this chapter I have shown how in Althusser's formulations, the concept of class shifts and loses its centrality, becoming instead a secondary or derivative reality. In the next chapter, which addresses the postmodernism of Laclau, I show how another shift occurs, this time denying class completely.

## ENDNOTES

**1 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive; Spring 2018 Edition; "Althusser"*. Pp. 1-24**

Althusser's biography is based on the above mentioned source.

**2 Althusser, Louis. 2005. *For Marx*. London. Verso. Pp. 21, 22, 23, 26**

History: it had stolen our youth [...] and the war as such it had imprinted on us the terrible education of deeds [...] turned us [...] into men advised of the existence of classes [...] from the evidence it forced on us we [...] rallied to the political organization of the working class, the Communist Party. P. 21

The war was just over. We were brutally cast into the Party's great political and ideological battles [...] To defend Marxism [...] what then counted as philosophy could only choose between commentary and science, between conviction [...] and dumb embarrassment [...] we had been made to treat science, a status claimed by every page of Marx, as the first corner among ideologies. We had to retreat, and, in semi-disarray, return to first principles [...] We were at the age of enthusiasm and trust [...] P. 22 we were not even intimately familiar with Marx's mature works [...] P. 23 [...] Marxism should not be simply a political doctrine, a "method" of analysis and action, but also, over and above the rest, the *theoretical domain of a fundamental investigation*, indispensable not only to the development of the science of society and of the various "human sciences", but also to that of the natural sciences and philosophy. P. 26

**3 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB. Pp. 186-187.**

[...] but if this category-inner essence/outer phenomenon-was to be applicable everywhere and at every moment to each of the phenomena arising in the totality in question, it presupposed that the whole had a certain nature, precisely the nature of a "spiritual" whole in which each element was expressive of the entire totality [...]

**4 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB. P. 187**

In all forms of society it is a determinate production and its relations which assign every other production and its relations their rank and influence. It is a general illumination [...] in which all the other colours are plunged and which modifies their special tonalities. It is a special ether which defines the specific wight of every existence arising in it.

**5 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.**

Pp. 190-191

But there were also consequences in this ambiguity for the interpretation of the phenomena he baptized “fetishism”. We have proved that fetishism is not a subjective phenomenon related either to the illusions or to the perceptions of the agents of the economic process, that it cannot be reduced therefore to the “subjective effects” produced in the economic subjects by their place in the process, their site in the structure [...] And yet, how many other texts of Marx’s assure us that this appearance is not subjective at all, but on the contrary, objective through and through [...]

6 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
P. 198

I now come to the concept of historical time [...] In particular, it is only possible to give a content to the concept of historical time by defining historical time as the specific form of existence of the social totality under consideration [...] just as there is no production in general, there is no history in general, but only specific structures of historicity [...]

7 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
Pp. 165, 166

Marx rejected both the positive conception of a homogeneous field of a given phenomena and the ideological anthropology of the “homo economics” [...] which underlies it. P. 165

Not only does Marx define these “needs” as “historical” and not absolute givens [...] but also and above all recognizes them as “needs” in their economic function, on condition that they are “effective” [...] defined [...] by the level of the income at the disposal of the individuals concerned [...] and by the nature of the products available [...] the result of technical capacities of production. P. 166

8 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
Pp. 182-186

Marx does not present economic phenomena [...] in the infinity of an homogeneous planar space but rather, determined by a regional structure and itself inscribed in a site defined by a global structure; therefore, as a complex and deep space itself inscribed in another complex and deep space [...] everything depends, in fact, on the nature of this depth [...] of this complexity. To define economic phenomena by their concept is to define them by the concept of this complexity, i. e., by the concept of the global “structure” which constitutes as economic objects and determines the phenomena of this defined region, located in a defined site of the structure as a whole. P. 182

In other words, how is it possible to define the concept of structural causality? P. 186

9 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
Pp. 151-152

Now Marx appeared upon the scene [...] and he took a view directly opposite to that of all his predecessors. What they regarded as a solution, he considered but a problem [...] he examined all the economic categories which he found at hand, just as Lavoisier proceeded from oxygen and examined the categories of phlogistic chemistry which he found at hand. In order to understand what surplus-value was, Marx had to find out what value was. He had to criticize above all the Ricardian theory of value. Hence, he analyzed labour's value producing property and was the first to ascertain "what" labour it was that produced value, and why and how, it did so. He found that value was nothing but congealed labour of this kind [...] Marx then investigated the relation of commodities to money, and demonstrated how and why, thanks to the property of value immanent in commodities, commodities and commodity exchange must engender the opposition of commodities and money [...] He analyzed the transformation of money into capital and demonstrated that this transformation is based on the purchase and sale of labour-power. By "substituting" labour power, the value producing property, for labour, he solved with one stroke one of the difficulties which brought about the downfall of the Ricardian school, viz, the impossibility of harmonizing the mutual exchange of capital and labour [...] By establishing the distinction of capital into constant and variable, he was enabled to represent the real course the process of the formation of surplus-value in its minutest details and thus to explain it [...]

10 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB  
Pp. 183-184

Once we have simply put Marx's fundamental theoretical concepts in their places and posed them in the unity of a theoretical discourse, a number of important consequences follow [...] First: the economic cannot have the qualities of a "given" [...] Second: if the "field" of the economic phenomena no longer has the "homogeneity" of an infinite plane [...] This: if the field of economic phenomena is no longer this planner space but a deep and complex one, if economic phenomena are determined by their "complexity" (i. e. "structure), the concept of linear causality can no longer be applied to them [...]

11 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
Pp. 171

He opposes himself to nature as a natural force, he is stating that the transformation of material nature into products, and therefore the labour process as a material mechanism, is dominated by the physical laws of nature and technology. Labour-power, too, is included in this mechanism. This determination of the labour-process by these material conditions is at its own level a denial of every humanist conception of human labour as pure creativity.

12 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
Pp. 174-175

[...] we must now turn to a study of the social conditions of the production process: "the social relations of production". These new conditions involve the specific type of relations "between the agents of production" which exist as a function of the relations between these agents on the one hand "the material means" of production on the other. This adjustment is crucial: "the social relations of

production are on no account reducible to mere relations between men, to relations which only involve men, and therefore to variations in a universal matrix, to inter-subjectivity" (recognition, prestige, struggle, master-slave relationship, etc.). For Marx, the social relation of production do not bring "men alone" onto the stage, but the "agents" of the production process and the "material conditions" of the production process, in specific "combinations" [...] "but the "relations of production" necessarily imply relations between men and things, such as the relations between men and men are defined by the precise relations existing between men and the material elements of the production process. How did Marx think these relations? He thought them as a "distribution" or "combination" [...] (subsumption of the individuals under determinate relations of production [...])

13 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB. P. 175

In its most banal conception, distribution appears as the distribution of products, [...] But before distribution is distribution of the product, it is: (1) the distribution of the instruments of production, and (2) what is a further definition of the same relationship, the distribution of the members of society into the different kinds of production (subsumption of the individuals under determinate relations of production) [...] This distribution thus consists of a certain "attribution" of the means of production to the agents of production, in a certain regular proportion fixed between, on the one hand, the means of production, and on the other, the agents of production.

14 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB. P. 175

Whatever the social form of production, labourers and means of production always remain factors of it. [...] The "specific manner" in which thus combination is accomplished distinguishes the different economic epochs of the structure of society from one another.

15 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB. P. 180

Here once again we find the results of the other papers in this book: i. e., the fact that the structure of the relations of production determines the "places and functions" occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are "supports" (Truger) of these functions. The true "subjects" (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are [...] the definition and distribution of these places and functions. The true 'subjects' are these definers and distributors [...] But since these are "relations" they cannot be thought within the category "subject". And if by chance anyone proposes to reduce these relations of production to relations between men, i. e., "human relations", he is violating Marx's thought [...] Marx shows [...] that the "relations" of production (and political and ideological relations) are irreducible to any anthropological inter-subjectivity since they only combine agents and objects in a specific structure of the distribution of relations, places and functions, occupied and "supported" by objects and agents of production.

- 16 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
P. 177

This shows that certain relations of production presuppose the existence of legal-political and ideological "superstructure" as a condition of their secular existence [...]

- 17 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
P. 179

[...] the economic is "never clearly visible" [...] the only way to the essence of the economic is to construct its concept [...]

- 18 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB.  
P. 180-181

We know which concept in the capitalist mode of production expressed the fact of capitalist relations of production in economic reality itself: 'the concept of surplus value.' [...] The fact that surplus-value is not a measurable reality arises from the fact that it is not a thing, but the concept of a relationship, the concept of an existing social structure of production, of an existence visible and measurable "only in its effects"[...] it is only present there, as a structure [...] It is a relation of production between the agents [...] and the means [...] the very structure that dominates the process in the totality [...] The relations of production are structures.



**CHAPTER III**

**LACLAU AND THE EVISCERATION OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS**



### CHAPTER III

#### LACLAU AND THE EVISCERATION OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS

The aim of this chapter is to examine the place of the concept of class in the theory of Ernesto Laclau. Laclau writes in the 1980s, amid several significant social transformations taking place in the world, including the failure of several communist regimes, and the emergence of manifold social movements such as feminism, ecological awareness and marginalism. Laclau is also submerged in a bi-furcated intellectual context: structuralism vs. postmodernism.

From a postmodernist perspective, Laclau sets out to revisit the categories of Marxist theory in light of the societal transformations mentioned above. The underlying theme in Laclau's intellectual journey is the concept of hegemony. The dominant theoretical concepts which are targets of his critique are "the essentialist philosophies" and "the category of the subject."

In this chapter I will review Laclau's interpretation of Marxist theory as "essentialist," and its effect on class. Regarding "the category of the subject" I will review Laclau's denial of any essentialist perspective in the constitution of collective identities, and also unravel the constitutive principle of the collective identity that he proposes as the subject of history.

The discussion is organized according to the following subtitles: "The Origins of Hegemony"; "The Denial of the Concept of Class as an Outcome of Essentialism"; and "Laclau's Postmodernist Concept of Hegemony." The discussion leads to a focus on Laclau's historical agents: "Plebs vs. Class."

## THE ORIGINS OF HEGEMONY

Ernesto Laclau (1935 - 2014) was an Argentinian political theorist and post-Marxist writer. He was born and lived in Buenos Aires, a society in transition from its tradition form to modernity, and characterized by political upheaval as sectors of the population began their claim for voice and political participation.

In 1954, at age 19, Laclau gained entrance to the Universidad de Buenos Aires to study history. During his university years he participated in diverse political groups, wrote articles for political journals, and in 1958 joined the Socialist Party. He later left the party due to differences over its Marxist-Leninist orientation. Eventually Laclau joined the Argentine Socialist Vanguardist Party and directed the University Action Group. In 1962 he joined the Socialist Party of the National Left, a group with a distinctly Latin America perspective that sought to embody the spirit and aims of the Argentinian plebs/populus (pueblo) through the Peronist movement. Laclau also directed the newspaper *Working Class Struggle* and published articles in the *National Left* journal. In 1964 Laclau graduated as a historian from the University of Buenos Aires and devoted himself to researching, political activism, and lecturing at Universidad Nacional de Tucuman and Instituto di Tella.

In 1969 Laclau moved to England where he received a scholarship to study with Eric Hobsbawm. He obtained his doctoral degree at the University of Essex in 1977. From 1986 onwards, Laclau taught as a Professor of Political Theory at the University of Essex, where he founded and for many years directed the graduate program in "Ideology and Analysis of Discourse", and the "Centre for Humanity and Social Sciences Study", seeking new paths in the analysis of political phenomena and identities.<sup>1</sup>

Two main influences marked Laclau's intellectual life: the intellectual legacy of the sociologist Gino Germani, and his involvement in the Peronist movement. During his university years in Buenos Aires, Laclau served as a teaching assistant for Germani, and co-founded together with him and Jose Luis Romero, the course "Historia Social General" at University of Buenos Aires, a course focused on the history of social movements. Germani's theory on marginalization, the reinterpretation of "pueblo" (plebs/populus) and populism, and the importance of social movements was greatly influential in Laclau's intellectual development. Even many years later, in 2005, in his book *La Razon Populista*, Laclau cites Germani's thoughts on populism.<sup>2</sup>

Together with the intellectual legacy of Germani, the Peronist movement embraced by Laclau also left its mark on his intellectual life. Peronism embodied the concept of a multi-class social movement that did not identify with a left/right

dichotomy but encompassed opposing components all of which sought social justice. The movement began in the 1940s as a challenge to the existing social order and has been playing an important part in Argentinian history to this day.

More specifically, Peronism can be described as a populist and nationalist political and social movement with an appeal to several classes. The movement pressed for social measures beneficial to the country's "growing class of urban workers, and facilitated cooperation between business and labour. Peronism had the strong support of the workers and of their labour unions, but also gained the support of many lower-middle-class-citizens and of (some) the country's industrialists".<sup>3</sup>

Critchley and Marchart (2006) discuss the mutual influence between Laclau's life in politics and his theoretical writing. They quote Laclau's comments about his first lesson on hegemony as stemming from his meetings with trade unions during his initial years in politics. Hegemony is a theme that permeates all his political activism and writings. Critchley and Marchart write: "The experience of Argentinian populism taught Laclau [...] (that) political alliances had to be constructed not along class lines, but beyond class lines, in a constant effort to hegemonize a larger universal task. This led him to abandon all forms of class reductionism." Laclau is also quoted as stating: "All I tried to think theoretically later [...] is something I learnt in those years in the course of practical activism" [...] the dispersal of the subject positions, the hegemonic recomposition of fragmented identities, the reconstruction of social identities [...]"<sup>4</sup> These are the concepts that I will now explore.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) Laclau begins his intellectual journey by observing the contrast between Marxist predictions (theory) on the one hand, and historical events taking place in contemporary society on the other. Revisiting Marxist theorists, Laclau maintains that their reformulations of hegemony were a function of the contrast between theory and actual events or an attempt to fill in the gap left by historical events which were not consistent with Marxist theoretical predictions. Laclau argues that these theoretical reformulations resorted to either a logic of historical necessity (namely, that future events would address specific problems), or a logic of contingency (namely, interpreting an event as not relevant).

According to Laclau, the successive Marxist reformulations of the concept of hegemony were intended to recompose the category of historical necessity when historical events denied its validity. Revising the different reformulations, Laclau maintains that whether hegemony was portrayed as a strictly class alliance, or as a political calculation, or as a moral quality, the identity of the revolutionary

subject was constituted at the relation of production level, or what Laclau calls the economic level.<sup>5</sup>

Laclau insists that all the reformulations of the concept of hegemony in Marxist theory failed. Rejecting any concept of hegemony which has “the economy” at its heart, Laclau proposes instead a reformulation of hegemony and of historical agents constituted within the political realm. He maintains that “economic” space is itself structured within the “political” space. I will focus on Laclau’s reformulation of “hegemony” in the third part of this section, but to start I will describe Laclau’s theoretical opposition to Marxist theory and to class as the historical subject.<sup>5</sup>

Laclau opposes Marxist theory and its concept of class at several levels of abstraction. He begins his book by mentioning concrete historical cases such as the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet system, and the failure of Marxist regimes in Eastern Europe and Asia. At a higher level of abstraction, his theoretical critique stems from his denial of labour as a commodity, which will be described in the next section.

## **LACLAU’S DENIAL OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS**

How does Laclau deny Marxist theory and its historical subject? I argue that he does so by denying the concept of labour power as a commodity, asserting the existence of relations of domination and resistance within the political realm, and by denying the Marxist laws of motion of capitalist development and the creation of a unified class with a historical mission.

For Laclau, to accept the Marxist paradigm as the ultimate constitution of the historical subject or class, three conditions have to be met. The first condition refers to the neutrality of the productive forces. Laclau maintains that in order to confirm such neutrality, the laws of motion of the productive forces must be strictly endogenous and must exclude all determinacy resulting from political or other external interventions.

The second condition refers to the unity and homogeneity of social agents constituted at the economic level and the growing impoverishment of the working class. Laclau argues that accepting this unity and homogeneity must stem from the very laws of motion of this level, not admitting any fragmentation or dispersion of positions requiring recomposition from elements external to the economy.

The third condition refers to the historical interest of the universal class. Here, Laclau insists that the position of these agents in the relations of production must

endow them with “historical interest”, and that their presence at other levels beyond the economist’s level, must also be explained by the economist’s paradigm.<sup>6</sup>

Regarding the first condition, the neutrality of the productive forces, Laclau explains that this condition is not met. The laws of motion of the productive forces are not endogenous. The economist’s paradigm is not independent of human action. In contemporary society, the capitalist realities of production constitute an unsurmountable obstacle to the advance of the productive forces.

As an example, Laclau points to the constant political exchange between labourers and capitalists that results from the capitalists’ need to extract labour from the purchased labour-power. He denies the neutrality of the productive forces and emphasizes the interconnections between productive forces and human action.

Depicting labourers as “capable of social practises,” Laclau also denies the Marxist interpretation of labour power as a “commodity”. Instead, he maintains that labour power is different from other commodities, not because it produces more value than the value it has been bought for, but because the capitalist must do more than just purchase it. “He must also make it produce labour” [...] “if it were merely a commodity like others, its use value could [...] be made automatically effective from the very moment of its purchase”. And Laclau adds: “the designation of labour as the use-value of labour power, obscures the absolutely fundamental distinction between productive inputs embodied in people capable of social practises, and all those remaining inputs for whom ownership of capital is sufficient to secure consumption of their productive services”. Laclau maintains that “a large part of the capitalist organization of labour can be understood only as a result of the necessity to extract labour from the labour-power purchased by the capitalist”. He asserts that “the capitalist organization of labour has to be both: a technique of production and a technique of domination.”<sup>7</sup>

Laclau adds that “the evolution of the productive forces becomes unintelligible if this need of the capitalist to exercise its domination at the very heart of the labour process is not understood.” This “calls into question the whole idea of the development of the productive forces as a natural, spontaneously progressive phenomenon.”<sup>8</sup>

Laclau concludes that “it is not a pure logic of capital which determines the evolution of the labour process; the labour process is not merely a place where capital exerts its domination, it is instead, the ground of a struggle”. Based on studies of worker’s resistance, Laclau postulates the existence of a “politics of production” which challenges the idea that the development of capitalism is the

sole effect of the laws of competition and the exigencies of accumulation.<sup>9</sup> Laclau maintains that the worker is capable of social practices, that he could resist the imposed control mechanisms and force the capitalist to use different production techniques. The labour process cannot exist without a series of relations of domination and struggle.<sup>9 and 10.</sup>

According to Laclau, the presence of two logics: a logic of workers' resistance, and a logic of capital means that both influence the organization of the capitalist labour process and affect the character and rhythm of expansion of the productive forces. From this, Laclau deduces that a) the productive forces are not neutral, b) their development cannot be conceived as natural and unilinear, and c) the economy is not an autonomous and self-regulated universe. This then leads him to deny the neutrality of the productive forces and the role granted to the economic sphere in the constitution of social agents.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the second condition, namely, the unity and homogeneity of social agents constituted around the economic level, Laclau presents the picture of a fragmented working class and examples of "decentralized" positions. Against Braverman's (1974) homogenization argument of labour's degradation resulting from the separation of conception and execution, Laclau cites Edwards', Gordon's and Reich's studies (1982), maintaining that the forms of control in the labour process, plus the existence of racism and sexism, have created a segmentation of the labour market. He also points to studies of labour in Western Europe that show a polarization of the labour market between a well-paid and protected general sector and a peripheral sector of unskilled workers.

Laclau adds divisions among workers due to union practises, and states that divisions are mainly political, not merely economic. He rejects other works maintaining the existence of homogenization in the working class, including Poulantzas' (1975) distinction between productive and unproductive labour and Wright's (1989) distinction between ambiguous and non-ambiguous class positions. Laclau maintains that "the problem with these approaches, [...] is that they are still based on the concept of objective interests, a concept which lacks theoretical basis". He adds that "the process of unification resulting from the proletarian impoverishment due to the development of the productive forces, has not taken place."<sup>12</sup>

Laclau states that "it is necessary to analyze the plurality of diverse and frequently contradictory positions [...] that the search for the true working class and its limits is a false problem"[...] and adds that "this implies, not that the working class and socialism are incompatible, but [...] that fundamental interests in socialism cannot be logically deduced from determinate positions in the

economic process". Laclau insists that "there is no logical connection between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the producers".<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the third condition, namely, that the position of agents in the relation of production must endow them with historical interest and that their presence at other levels beyond the economist level must also be explained by the economist's paradigm, Laclau maintains that the condition is not met. He argues that "the workers resistance to certain forms of domination will depend upon the position they occupy within the ensemble of social relations, and not only those in production."<sup>13</sup>

As I will show in the next chapter, Bourdieu presents a different view on the dichotomy posited by Laclau between class interests and positions in the economic process. But returning to the issue in this chapter, having denied the validity of Marxist theory and the formation of classes and decried the failure of the concept of hegemony as it is used in Marxist literature, we are left with the question of how Laclau actually understands hegemony. Who is the hegemonic subject? Is Laclau's hegemonic subject the historical agent? A discussion of these questions follows.

## **LACLAU'S CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY**

It is through his concept of hegemony that Laclau denies the existence of society as a structured and self-defined totality. Laclau presents a concept of hegemony as a logic of articulation and contingency, a logic that determines the changing identity of the subjects. Un-fixity, openness and indetermination are its main characteristics, as well as the condition of every social identity. Laclau maintains that hegemony is composed of various forms of protests which overflow class boundaries. Hegemony is a political relation constructed through systems of differences, chains of equivalences, and forms of overdetermination. Such is the openness of the social, that no hegemonic logic can apprehend in its totality.<sup>14</sup>

In Laclau's concept of hegemony, the core of the hegemonic subject's identity is not constituted externally as it is in Marxist theory where it is treated as a class constituted from material production. The subject's identity is constituted internally through articulation and discourse. The subject's identity is therefore, purely "relational" and the system of relations is unfixed and unstable. Every social identity is constantly being deferred, never totally acquired, never achieving a final structure.<sup>15</sup>

How does the issue of power fit in with Laclau's concept of hegemony? For Laclau, power is never foundational, and as such, it cannot be a function of "class". Rejecting the concepts of centre, power, and autonomy, Laclau maintains the existence of nodal points and partial concentrations of power, and the existence of contingent social logics, none of them with absolute validity. For Laclau there is no logical and necessary relation between socialist objectives and the position of social agents in the relations of production. Instead, he maintains the existence of "political subjectivity," namely, the existence of a variety of points of rupture such as women's struggles, ecological struggles, anti-racist struggles, etc., which can be articulated on equal footing with workers' demands. For Laclau, there is a collective will constructed upon dissimilar points.<sup>16</sup>

For Laclau, hegemony can only take place in a field which is dominated by articulatory practices. He defines "articulation" as any practice establishing a relation such that their identity is modified because of the articulation. "Discourse" is defined as the totality which results from such articulatory practice. "Moments" is defined as differential positions insofar as they have been articulated within a discourse. And "elements" is defined as any difference which is not discursively articulated yet. Subject and object acquire their identity within a discourse since the production of meaning is structured under the form of discursive totalities. For example, an earthquake can be interpreted either as a natural phenomenon, or as an expression of the wrath of God, depending on the discursive frame.<sup>17</sup>

Given Laclau's interpretation of the social as open, indeterminate and without an underlying principle, what is Laclau's concept of society? Laclau denies the existence of a fully constituted identity of the social, which leads him in turn to abandon the premise of society as a structured totality. Instead, he maintains the existence of partial over-determinations, namely, a field of identities which never manages to be fully fixed. New differences are constantly being constructed through the articulation of social practices and the partial fixations of nodal points. Therefore, society never manages to be identical to itself. Laclau replaces the concept of social formation with that of hegemonic formation. A hegemonic formation is an ensemble of discursive moments, an articulated totality of differences. He maintains that "social formation" is only "an ensemble of empirically given agents", and therefore a meaningless term.<sup>18</sup>

If social agents as references do not constitute any formation, if they do not form around class interests, is there a socio-historical agent in Laclau's theory? And if there is, who is this socio-historical agent? Those questions are taken up in the next section.

## **THE HISTORICAL AGENT: PLEBS VS. CLASS**



For Laclau, the historical agent is plebs, not class. It is plebs aiming to become populous. Plebs is a part aspiring to become a totality. Laclau maintains that class is just a particular and contingent form of articulating demands and that it is therefore necessary to go beyond the concept of class struggles. He proposes to move from classes to collective identities and wills, namely, to his concept of plebs, a notion which does not have any fixed referential unity, a notion that cannot be attributed to any specific phenomenon but to a logic that traverses through a variety of phenomena.

How do these collective identities, these identities which are not the function of material production emerge? Laclau suggests that the emergence of plebs is based on three elements: a) relations of equivalence represented through empty signifiers; b) internal frontiers which change with the production of floating signifiers; and c) and a constitutive heterogeneity which renders centrality to political articulations.<sup>19</sup>

Laclau's explanation begins with an example. He describes a poor neighbourhood where problems of housing, water supply, electricity, health, and education abound. Neighbours request a specific solution from the authorities. In other words, they formulate a "demand". Other neighbourhoods have other demands, also unmet. This establishes among them a "chain of demands" or a "relation of equivalence". When all those demands become articulated through a discourse, (discourse meaning a social relation about a social situation), there emerges a symbolic unification resulting in mobilization and protest. The symbolic unification of these different demands becomes an "empty signifier" which has a role that goes beyond the material content of the demands. The empty signifier takes on the character of a popular identity and expands through heterogeneous groups.<sup>20</sup>

This popular identity — plebs — is the discursive crystallization of a feeling of solidarity implicit in the equivalence chain. The crystallization acquires a life of its own, and reacts iteratively with the demands. Here is where the "plebs" aspire to construct through partial demands, a totality or a universal "populous." This is how Laclau understands "hegemony". For Laclau, there is no hegemony without the construction of a popular identity. The names of Mandela in South Africa and Peron in Argentina are symbols of hegemonic unifications. Each hegemonic relation is characterized by a particularity aspiring to become a universality, a particularity that tends to become a plenitude, but a plenitude that remains always elusive.<sup>21</sup>

Regarding frontiers and floating signifiers, Laclau argues that when these popular demands commence to construct a plebs as a potential historical agent, internal frontiers emerge between the protesters and the authorities as an abyss or chasm that separates the population from the government. In some cases, these frontiers may be stable, as in the case of the Tzarist's regime, where the chain of equivalent demands continued to have as a common denominator the opposition to the Tzar. In this case the demands crystallize into an "empty signifier". In other cases, such as the "New Deal" in United States, or the "Chartism" in England, the frontiers move when some demands are articulated by the two opposing camps. In this case, these demands become "floating signifiers."<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the issue of heterogeneity and political articulations, Laclau maintains the existence of a social heterogeneity which is constitutive of the social fabric, a social heterogeneity that expresses itself in the fact that some demands are not incorporated in the chain of equivalents. Some of them form a chain of difference. The chains of equivalence and difference reinforce each other and hegemony results from the balance of these two logics. Should any of them become overpowering, hegemony dissolves. Heterogeneity precipitates a construction of antagonistic frontiers and a continuous emergence of new subjects aiming for social change with a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands. For Laclau "politics" is the anatomy of the social, the articulation of demands, and therefore the construction of the plebs.<sup>23</sup>

It is through the theme of heterogeneity that Laclau presents once more his contrast with Marxist theory by setting up his constitutive heterogeneity against the Marxist dialectic, and by maintaining that the heterogeneity existing in society cannot be transcended by any dialectic negation since antagonisms can only establish themselves contextually and can never be deduced from any internal logic.<sup>24</sup>

Referring specifically to Marxist theory, Laclau denies that antagonism is "inherent" in relations of production. For him, antagonisms exist "among" the relations of production where there can be myriad points of rupture - ecological, gender-based, imbalances between sectors, massive unemployment, and many other categories of marginals. For Laclau, it is impossible to determine *a priori* which hegemonic sector is going to form a new point of rupture. Laclau believes that Marx constructed history as "the history of production," and isolated within the world of poverty brought about by the transition to industrialism, one differentiated sector, depicting it as destined to be the historical agent in a new stage of productive forces. Against this framework Laclau differentiates among several sectors experiencing poverty and brings forward the many possible points of rupture.<sup>25</sup>

Following his description of the constitution and emergence of plebs or popular identities, Laclau goes on to discuss the functioning of the plebs, and the possibility of failure and disintegration. After maintaining that a certain degree of crisis is necessary for a popular identity to emerge, Laclau reminds us that popular identities are complex constructions resulting from the articulation of the two logics, equivalence and difference. Failures of hegemonies occur when one of these two logics prevails over the other, such as the cases of the Kemalist movement in Turkey, Peronism in Argentina, or populism in the United States.

The Kemalist movement found its limits in its intent to build its diversified plebs into an identical identity instead of allowing a voluntary change through an equivalence chain. The imposition of an identical unity dissolved the equivalence chain. In the case of the populism emerging in the United States, this movement found its limits in the impossibility of expanding the equivalence chain. Asians, Blacks and Latino were not easily accepted by the white poor and had difficulties incorporating themselves and being accepted as part of the populist movement. In the case of Peronism in Argentina, Laclau argues that it was its own success in the construction of an almost unlimited equivalence chain which subverted the principle of equivalence. Failure can also result when the specific social situation of populism is not respected and its popular identity is forced to subordinate their local specificity to an international centre or to a universal task, as was the case of Togliatti in Italy, and Mao in China.<sup>26</sup>

At this point we are left with the following question: What is the relation between democracy and popular identities in Laclau's postmodernism? Some of the hegemonies he mentions (as in Peron's case) have been totalitarian, at least for certain periods of time. Are totalitarianism and democracy not opposites?

Laclau centres his notion of democracy on the subjects, not on the regimes. Against the present liberal concept of democracy, he maintains that its failure is to perceive the subjects as prior to society and as rational bearers of natural rights. Laclau maintains that this interpretation of democracy ignores the subject's social construction and his relations of power. For Laclau, the question of popular subjectivity is an integral part of democracy. Rationality is not the dominant concept. Instead, emotions and a variety of solidarities based on popular demands become the centre. Therefore, Laclau maintains that democratic identity is synonymous with popular identity. For Laclau, the construction of plebs is the condition *sine qua non* of democratic functioning.

Also, Laclau maintains that there is no opposition between "democracy" and "totalitarianism" when the hegemonic moment is the result of popular identity or "plebs". In this case, totalitarianism has emerged from democracy. He maintains

that the spectrum between totalitarianism and democracy is diverse and that there are partial incarnations of both in hegemonic representations.<sup>27</sup>

Laclau concludes by synthesizing a list of theoretical decisions needed to think of plebs as a social category. One must: a) acknowledge the constitutive role of social heterogeneity; b) see “plebs” not as datum, but as a political category creating a new actor; c) think of heterogeneity as an incomplete totality; d) think of social construction as contingent and articulated; e) accept that plebs do not constitute any “structural effect” from any subjacent logic and that they are instead, the terrain where a political subjectivity is constructed (the hegemonic logic consists in the possibility that the partiality becomes an impossible totality); f) acknowledge history as a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations. Popular identities emerge and expand with the multiplication of social demands.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to Marxism, Laclau concludes that history is not an infinite advancement toward a final objective and that we do not live in societies that tend to build social homogeneity through immanent structural mechanisms. Instead, he maintains that history is formed by discontinuous hegemonic formations. We inhabit a historical terrain where there is a proliferation of antagonisms and points of rupture requiring re-grouping.

Laclau maintains that the demand for a salary increase or for a progressive distribution of income cannot be derived from capitalist logic. Instead, it is derived from a discourse relative to justice. “The overdetermined nature of the political identity does not establish itself *a priori* in a transcendental horizon, but is always the result of concrete processes and practices. It is necessary to re-conceptualize the social demands and the nature of collective identities.”<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

For Laclau the collective identity to be studied as the historical agent is “plebs,” not “class”. The cornerstone of his denial of “class” as the historical agent stems from his critique of essentialism, which is where he places Marxist theory. This leads Laclau to reject any universal discourse, any subjacent sense of history such as the law of motion of material production resulting from the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production. He rejects the link between economic, political, and ideological levels. This leads Laclau to reject the idea of “society” as an apprehensible structure formed by class positions, developing according to laws that will lead to a transition into a society free of antagonisms.

This critique of Marxist theory as essentialism also leads Laclau to reject the concepts of a founding subject and a unified struggle. Laclau sees no collective identities forming around the economic level as classes; no collective homogeneous will; no ontologically privileged class being the historical agent acting according to predicted laws; no universal class as the locust of historical development.

Against the notion of class as the universal historical agent, Laclau maintains that it is necessary to re-conceptualize the nature of collective identities. He delves into the theme of hegemony to unravel “plebs” as a discontinuous and ever-changing historical agent. For Laclau, history is not an infinite advancement toward a final objective, but a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations, within which popular identities emerge, expanding by a multiplication of different social demands and sometimes failing. “Plebs” is a collective identity which is not established *a priori*, but in concrete processes and practises.

Contrary to assumptions about universality and the notion of social homogeneity as brought about by immanent structural mechanisms, Laclau believes in a constitutive heterogeneity inherent in the social fabric. Heterogeneity, for Laclau, has a constitutive role in the formation of collective identities, identities which search for a totality that is always incomplete.

In this way Laclau’s postmodernism eviscerates the concept of “class.” But the concept is resurrected in expanded form in the work of Bourdieu. The resurfacing of class as a concept in the work of Bourdieu is the subject of the next chapter.

## ENDNOTES

### 1 [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernesto\\_Laclau](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernesto_Laclau) Pp. 1 and 2

Ernesto Laclau [...] fue un filosofo, teorico politico y escritor argentino postmarxista [...] Ingreso a la carrera de Historia en la universidad de Bs. As en 1954 [...] Laclau participo en diversas agrupaciones politicas [...] y en 1958 ingreso al Partido Socialista Argentino. Posteriormente ingreso al Partido Socialista Argentina de Vanguardia, debido a diferencias con respecto a la orientacion marxista leninista del partido que dejaba fuera del analisis fenomenos latinoamericanos como la Revolucion Cubana. Al interior del PSAV, lidero el frente de Accion Universitaria. Finalmente, en 1962 ingresa al Partido Socialista de Izquierda Nacional [...] el cual [...] busco acercarse al pueblo argentino a traves del peronismo. Dirigio el perodico *Lucha Obrera*, y publico en *Izquierda Nacional*, ambos ligados a dicho partido. Durante su epoca universitaria, Laclau tambien fue ayudante del sociologo Gino Germani, y creador [...] de la materia Historia Social en la facultad de Filosofia y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires. En 1964, Lalcau se titula como historiador. [...] Desde 1969 se establecio en Inglaterra, donde recibio una beca para estudiar con Eric Hobsbawm. Finalmente se doctoro en la universidad de Essex en 1977. Desde 1986 se desempenio como Profesor de Teoria Politica en la Universidad de Essex, donde fundo y dirigio [...] el programa de postgrado en Ideologia y Analisis del Discurso, asi como el Centro de Estudios Teoricos de las Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales [...] un tipo distinto del analisis del discurso, que se basa en la teoria post-structuralista [...] con el fin de articular los analisis innovadores de los fenomenos politicos concretos (identidades, discursos y hegemonias.)

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

Ernesto Laclau [...] was a philosopher, political theorist and post-Marxist Argentine writer [...] He gained entrance at University of Buenos Aires, History Department in 1954 [...] participated in diverse political groups [...] and in 1958 joined the Socialist Argentine Party. Due to differences regarding the Marxist Leninist orientation, which neglected the analysis of Latin America phenomena such as the Cuban Revolution, Laclau left the party and joined the Vanguardist Socialist Argentinian Party, from where he directed the University Action Front. Finally in 1962 Laclau joins the Socialist Party of the National Left [...] from where he searched a dialogue with the Argentinian masses through Peronism. He directed the newspaper *Working Class Struggle* and published articles in *National Left*, both newspapers linked to Peronism. During his university years Laclau was also a teaching assistant to sociologist Gino Germani, and co-founder [...] of the cathedra "Social History" at University of Buenos Aires. in 1964 Laclau graduated as a Historian [...] Since 1969 he established himself in England, where he was granted a scholarship to study with Eric Hobsbawm. He obtained his Doctoral Degree at University of Essex in 1977. From 1986 and on, Laclau taught as a Professor of Political Theory at Essex University, where he founded and directed [...] the Graduate Program in Ideology and Discourse Analysis, and also the Centre of Humanity and Social Sciences' Theoretical studies [...] an innovative type of discourse analysis, based on post-structural theory [...] which articulated the analysis of concrete political phenomena (identities, discourses, hegemonies.)

2 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 15 and 16

El populismo por si mismo tiende a negar cualquier identificación con, o clasificación dentro de, la dicotomía de izquierda/derecha. Es un movimiento multclasista, aunque no todos los movimientos multclasistas pueden considerarse populistas. El populismo probablemente desafía cualquier definición exhaustiva. Dejando de lado este problema por el momento, el populismo generalmente incluye componentes opuestos, como ser el reclamo por igualdad de los derechos políticos y la participación de la gente común, pero unido a cierta forma de autoritarismo a menudo bajo liderazgo carismático. También incluye demandas socialistas (o al menos, la demanda de justicia social), una defensa vigorosa de la pequeña propiedad, fuertes componentes nacionalistas, y la negación de la importancia de clase. Esto va acompañado de la afirmación de los derechos de la gente común, como enfrentados a los grupos de interés privilegiados, generalmente considerados contrarios al pueblo y a la nación. Cualquiera de estos elementos puede acentuarse según las condiciones sociales y culturales, pero están todos presentes en la mayoría de los movimientos populistas.

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

Populism in itself tends to deny any identification with the dichotomy left/right. It is a multi-class movement, although not all the multi-class movements can be considered populist. Populism probably defies any exhaustive definition. Leaving this problem aside by the moment, populism generally includes opposite components, such as claims for equality in political rights, and the masses participation, often under authoritarian leadership. It also includes socialist demands (or at least the demand for social justice), and the denial of the issue of class centrality. Together with the affirmation of the masses' rights, vis a vis privileged groups usually considered opposed to the masses and to the nation. Any of these elements could be accentuated according to the social and cultural conditions, but they are all present in the majority of the populist movements.

3 <https://www.britanica.com/topic/Peronist> Pp. 3 and 4

Peronism's main characteristics could be described as a populist and nationalist political and social movement, with appeal to several classes [...] It enacted social measures beneficial to the country's growing class of urban industrial workers, and ensured the cooperation between business and labour [...] Peronism had the strong support of the workers and their labour unions [...] but also gained the support of many lower-middle-class-citizens and of some of the country's industrialists" [...]Peronism thought to provide an alternative horizon for antiestablishment symbols and to hegemonize more and more social demands [...] The Peronist movement remained the main civilian contender of power in Argentina.

4 Critchley, Simon and Oliver Marchart, eds. 2006. *Laclau: a Critical Reader*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 2

[...] all I tried to think theoretically later [...] is something I learnt in those years in the course of practical activism [...] the dispersal of subject positions, the

hegemonic recomposition of fragmented identities, the reconstruction of social identities through the political imaginary [...] The experience of Argentinian populism taught Laclau [...] (that) political alliances had to be constructed not along class lines, but "beyond class' lines in a constant effort to hegemonize a larger universal task. This led him to abandon all forms of class reductionism.

5 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. Chapters 1 and 2

All through chapters 1 and 2 Laclau and Mouffe revise Marxist theoretical reformulations and maintain that they were attempts to fill in the gap left by historical events and theoretical predictions. They also maintain that the Marxist concept of hegemony was created in order to fill in the gap. Laclau and Mouffe reject the Marxist concept of hegemony and propose a reformulation of hegemony constituted within the political realm.

6 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 76

The economic level, however, must satisfy three very precise conditions in order to play this role of constituting the subjects of hegemonic practices. Firstly, its laws of motion must be strictly endogenous [...] Secondly, the unity and homogeneity of social agents, constituted at the economic level must result from the very laws of motion of this level (any fragmentation [...] of positions requiring an instance of recomposition external to the economy is excluded). Thirdly, the position of these agents in the relations of production must endow them with "historical interests," so that the presence of such agents at other social levels [...] must ultimately be explained on the basis of economic interests.

7 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 77

At the present, the capitalist relation of production constitute an unsurmountable obstacle to the advance of these productive forces.

8 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 78

Labour-power differs from the other necessary elements of production in that the capitalist must do more than simply purchase it: he must also make it produce labour. This essential aspect, however, escapes the conception of labour-power as a commodity whose use value is labour. For if it were merely a commodity like the other, its use-value could obviously be made automatically effective from the very moment of its purchase [...] A large part of the capitalist organization of labour can be understood only as a result of the necessity to extract labour from labour-power purchased by the capitalist. The evolution of the productive forces becomes unintelligible if this need f the capitalist to exercise his domination at the very heart of the labour process is not understood. This, of course, calls into question the whole idea of the development of the productive forces as a natural, spontaneously progressive phenomenon. We can therefore see that both elements of the economist view point (labour power as a commodity and the development of the productive forces as a neutral process) reinforce each other.



- 9 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 79

Thus, it is not a pure logic of capital which determines the evolution of the labour process; the latter is not merely the place where capital exerts its domination, but the ground of a struggle.

- 10 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 79

Since the worker is capable of social practices, he could resist the imposed control mechanisms and force the capitalist to use different techniques.

- 11 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 80

Workers struggles understood in these terms, obviously cannot be explained by an endogenous logic of capitalism, since their very dynamism cannot be subsumed under the "commodity" form of labour-power [...] Thus, the thesis that the productive forces are neutral, and that their development can be conceived as natural and unilinear, is entirely unfounded.

- 12 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 81-82

On the contrary, the general tendency is to insist on the division and fragmentation of the working class [...] racism, sexism have created a fragmentation of the labour market [...] It is impossible to talk today about homogeneity of the working class, and [...] to trace it to a mechanism inscribed in the logic of capitalist accumulation [...] The problem, however, with these approaches [...] is that they are still based on the concept of "objective interests."

- 13 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. Pp. 84-85

[...] it is necessary to analyze the plurality of diverse and frequently contradictory positions, and to discard the idea of a perfectly unified and homogeneous agent, such as the "working class" of classical discourse [...] Evidently this implies not that the working class and socialism are incompatible, but the very different statement that fundamental interests in socialism cannot be logically deduced from determinate positions in the economic process [...] for there is no logical connection whatsoever between positions in the relations of production and the mentality of the producers.

- 14 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. Pp. 85-86

The logic of hegemony, as a logic of articulation and contingency, has come to determine the very identity of the hegemonic subjects. A number of consequences follow from this [...] Un-fixity has become the condition of every social identity. The fixity of every social element in the first theorizations of hegemony preceded, as we saw from the indissoluble link between the hegemonized task and the class that was supposed to be its natural agent [...] But insofar as the task has ceased to have any necessary link with class, its identity is given to it solely by its articulation within a hegemonic formation. Its identity, then, has become purely relational. And as this system of relations has itself ceased to be fixed and stable [...] the sense of every social identity appears constantly deferred.

- 15 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 86

The moment of final suture, never arrives.

- 16 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 142

The important point is that every form of power is constructed in a pragmatic way and internally to the social, through the opposed logics of equivalence and difference; power is never foundational. P. 142

this hinges upon a collective will that is laboriously constructed from a number of dissimilar points. P. 87

- 17 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 105

In the context of this discussion, we will call 'articulation' any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as the result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call "discourse". The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call "moments". By contrasts we will call "element" any difference that is not discursively articulated. P. 105

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists [...] But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God," depends on the structuring of a discursive field. P. 108

- 18 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. P. 112, 113, 127, 143

If the social does not manage to fix itself in the intelligible and instituted forms of a "society". P. 112

Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. P. 113

The limit of the social must be given within the social itself as something subverting it, destroying its ambition to constitute a full presence ... which prevent it from constituting itself as an objective reality. P. 127

In the foregoing argument we spoke of "social formation" as an empirical referent, and of hegemonic formation as an articulated totality of differences. P. 143

19 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. P. 197

La emergencia del pueblo depende de tres variables que hemos aislado: relaciones equivalenciales representadas hegemonicamente a través de significantes vacuos; desplazamientos de las fronteras internas a través de la producción de significantes flotantes; y una heterogeneidad constitutiva que hace imposible las recuperaciones dialécticas y otorga su verdadera centralidad a la articulación política.

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

The plebs/populus' emergency depends on these three variables: equivalence relations represented in an hegemonic form through empty signifiers; flexible limits through floating signifiers; and a constitutive heterogeneity which renders impossible a dialectical suture, and bestows the political action's centrality.

20 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. P. 98

Pensemos en una gran masa de inmigrantes agrarios que se ha establecido en las villas miseria [...] Surgen problemas de vivienda, el grupo de personas afectadas pide a las autoridades locales algún tipo de solución. Aquí tenemos una demanda [...] otras demandas igualmente insatisfechas [...] esto establece entre ellas una relación equivalencia [...]

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

Let's imagine a great mass of agricultural immigrants that has established itself in a very poor neighbourhood [...] there are other demands equally unsatisfied [...] this establishes among them, a relation of equivalence [...]

21 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 122, 123, 124, 148

Lo que debemos explicar ahora es el precipitado en el que consiste la relación equivalencial: la identidad popular como tal [...] Es solo ese momento de cristalización el que constituye al "pueblo" del populismo. Lo que era simplemente una mediación entre demandas adquiere ahora una consistencia propia [...] el lazo estaba originalmente subordinado a las demandas, ahora reacciona sobre ellas [...] comienza a comportarse como su fundamento [...] Sin esta operación de inversión no habría populismo. P. 122

Por lo tanto el "populus" como lo dado (como el conjunto de relaciones sociales tal como ellas factualmente son) se revela a sí mismo como una falsa totalidad, como una parcialidad que es fuente de opresión. Por otro lado, la "plebs", cuyas demandas parciales se inscriben en el horizonte de una totalidad plena (una sociedad justa que solo existe idealmente) puede aspirar a constituir un "populus" [...] verdaderamente universal que es negado por la situación realmente existente. P. 123

Ahora debemos explicar como esta pluralidad de vínculos se torna una singularidad a través de su condensación alrededor de una identidad popular [...] no hay hegemonía sin la construcción de una identidad popular a partir de una pluralidad de demandas [...] P. 124

No existe ninguna plenitud social alcanzable excepto a través de la hegemonía; y la hegemonía no es otra cosa que la investidura, en un objeto parcial, de una plenitud que siempre nos va a evadir [...] P. 148

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

What we need to explain now is the equivalence relation. It consists in what? The popular identity as such [...] It is only that moment of crystallization what constitutes the "actor" of the populism's identity. What was before simply a mediation between demands, acquires now, its own consistency [...] the agglutinating element which was originally subordinated to the demands, now it reacts on them [...] now its behaviour mirrors its fundament [...] Without this inversion it would not be populism. p. 122

Therefore "populus" as data (as the whole of social relations as they are) reveals itself as a false totality, as a partiality which is a source of oppression. On the other hand, the "plebs" whose partial demands appear as a totality (as a just society that only exists ideally), can aspire to constitute a universal "populus" [...] which is negated by its existing situation. p. 123

Now we should explain how this plurality of links turns into a singularity through its condensation around a popular identity [...] there is no hegemony without the construction of a popular identity making a plurality of demands [...] p. 124

There cannot exist any reachable social plenitud except through hegemony; and hegemony is nothing else than the act of bestowing in a partial object, a plenitud that will always evade us [...] P. 148

22 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. P. 165

[...] que ocurre si la frontera dicotomía se desdibuja [...] En ese caso las mismas demandas [...] reciben la presión estructural de proyectos hegemónicos rivales [...] su sentido permanece indeciso entre fronteras equivalenciales alternativas [...] A los significantes cuyo sentido está suspendido de este modo los denominaremos "significantes flotantes."

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

[...] if the dichotomy of the frontier is erased [...] in that case, the same demands [...] receive pressure from rival hegemonic projects [...] its meaning remains undecided [...] such signifiers, whose meaning is suspended are called "floating signifiers."

23 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 174-175

La relación equivalencial no elimina este particularísimo [...] no tiene acceso a un espacio general de representación [...] Este tipo de exterioridad es lo que vamos a denominar "heterogeneidad social"

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

The relation of equivalence [...] does not have access to a general space of representation [...] This type of exteriority is what we denominate "social heterogeneity."

24 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura

## Economica. P. 188

[...] en los antagonismos sociales nos vemos confrontados con una heterogeneidad que no es dialécticamente recuperable.

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

[...] in social antagonisms we are confronted with an heterogeneity which cannot be solved dialectically.

25 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 188, 189

Afirmar que existe un antagonismo inherente al capitalismo porque el capitalista extrae plusvalía del trabajador es claramente insuficiente, porque para que exista un antagonismo es necesario que el trabajador “se resista” a dicha extracción. P. 188

[...] los puntos de resistencia a la fuerza antagonizante siempre vana ser externos a ella. Por lo tanto no hay puntos privilegiados de ruptura y disputa a priori [...] [...] es imposible determinar a priori quienes van a ser los actores hegemónicos de esta lucha. No resulta en absoluto evidente que vayan a ser los trabajadores. Todo lo que sabemos es que van a ser los que están fuera del sistema, los marginales (lo que hemos determinado heterogéneo) [...] P. 189

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

It is insufficient to affirm the existence of an inherent antagonism in capitalism on the basis of the extraction of surplus value, because in order to exist such antagonism it is necessary that the worker “resists” to such extraction [...] the points of resistance against the antagonizing force are always external to that force. Therefore, there are not privileged and a-priori points of rupture and dispute [...] P. 188

[...] it is impossible to determine a-priori who the hegemonic actor will begin this struggle. It is not evident that the workers will be those actors. All we know, is that those actors will be the ones who are out of the system, the marginals, (that which we have denominated “the heterogeneous”) P. 189

26 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Chapter 8

Laclau devotes chapter 8 to give examples of failures of popular identities. Failures which occur when any of the two logics (equivalence, or difference) prevails over the other. Laclau insists on the necessary balance between these two logics.

27 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213

Sin embargo, el totalitarismo, aunque se opone a la democracia, ha surgido dentro del terreno de la revolución democrática. P. 208

El hecho de que algunos movimientos populistas puedan ser totalitarios [...] es sin duda cierto, pero el espectro de articulaciones posibles es mucho más diverso de lo que la simple oposición totalitarismo/democracia parece sugerir. p. 209

?como pasar de este punto a discutir mas minuciosamente la relación entre populismo y democracia P. 210  
 la cuestión de una subjetividad popular se convierte en una parte integral de la cuestión de la democracia [...] P. 211  
 el fracaso de la actual teoría democrática [...] es consecuencia del hecho de operar con una concepción del sujeto que percibe a los individuos como anteriores a la sociedad, portadores de derechos naturales [...] sujetos racionales. En todos los casos son abstraídos de sus relaciones sociales y de poder, de su lenguaje, de su cultura y de todo el conjunto de practicas que hacen posible la actuación social. Lo que se excluye en estos enfoques racionalistas es la cuestión misma de cuales son las condiciones de existencia del sujeto democrático. P. 212  
 la identidad democrática es prácticamente indiferenciable de lo que hemos denominado identidad popular [...] la construcción de un pueblo es la condición sine qua non del funcionamiento democrático. P. 213

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng  
 Nevertheless, totalitarianism, although opposed to democracy, has emerged from within the democratic revolution's realm. P. 208  
 The fact that some populist movements could be totalitarian [...] is true, but the spectrum of possible articulations is far more diverse than that of the simple opposition totalitarian/democracy. P. 209  
 How do we pass from this point to discussing in detail the relation between populism and democracy? P. 210  
 The question of a popular subjectivity becomes an integral part of the democratic question. pP 211  
 The failure of the present democratic theory [...] is the result of operating with a conception of the subject that perceives the individuals as prior to society, bearers of natural rights [...] rational subjects. Subjects who are abstracted from their social and power relations, abstracted from their language, their culture, and abstracted from all the practices that make possible social action. What is excluded in these rational focus is the question of "which are the democratic subjects' conditions of existence" P. 212  
 The "democratic identity" cannot be differentiated from "the popular identity" [...] the construction of plebs/populus is the sine qua non condition of the democratic functioning. P. 213

28 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 277, 282

Pensar al pueblo como categoría social requiere una serie de decisiones teóricas [...] La mas importante de ellas vincula[...] al rol constitutivo que hemos atribuido a la heterogeneidad social [...] concebir al pueblo como una categoría política y no como un dato [...] Es en esta contaminación entre la universalidad del populus y la parcialidad del pueblo donde descansa la peculiaridad del pueblo como un actor histórico [...] P. 277  
 La historia no es un avance continuo infinito, sino una sucesión discontinua de formaciones hegemónicas. P. 282

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng  
 To think of plebs/populus as a social category requires a series of theoretical decisions [...] The most important of them refers [...] to the constitutive rol that we have attributed to social heterogeneity [...] to conceive plebs/populus as a political category and not as a simple data [...] It is in this contamination between the

universality of populus and the partiality of plebs where the plebs peculiarity as a historical actor rests [...] P 277

History is not a continuous and infinite development, but a discontinuous succession of hegemonic formations. P. 282

29 Laclau, Ernesto. 2011. *La Razon Populista*. Buenos Aires. Fondo de Cultura Economica. Pp. 285-286, 207, 309, 310

¿vivimos en sociedades que tienden a incrementar la homogeneidad social mediante mecanismos infraestructurales inmanentes o, por el contrario, habitamos un terreno histórico donde la proliferación de antagonismos y puntos de ruptura requieren formas cada vez mas políticas de reagrupamiento social? [...] ya no podemos entender al capitalismo como una realidad puramente económica sino como un complejo en el cual las determinaciones económicas, políticas, militares, tecnológicas y otras [...] entran en la determinación del movimiento del todo. P. 285-286

[...] representa un estado cualitativamente nuevo en la historia del capitalismo y conduce a la formación de las lógicas de la formación de identidades que hemos descrito [...] Hay una multiplicidad de efectos dislocatorios [...] todo antagonismo es esencialmente político [...] P. 287

[...] la naturaleza sobredeterminada de toda identidad política no se establece apriorísticamente en un horizonte trascendental, sino que es siempre el resultado de procesos y practicas concretos. P. 309

[...] las categorías que entonces sintetizaban la experiencia social se están tornando [...] obsoletas. Es necesario reconceptualizar la autonomía de las demandas sociales, la lógica de su articulación, y la naturaleza de las identidades colectivas que resultan de ellas. P. 310

Translation by Adalgisa Diana Borgia Holteng

Do we live in societies that tend to increment social homogeneity through immanent, infrastructural mechanisms? Or on the contrary, we inhabit a historical terrain where the proliferation of antagonisms and rupture points require more and more, political forms of social re-grouping? [...] we can no longer understand capitalism as a purely economic reality, but as a complex concept in which the economic, political, militar, technological and other determinations [...] form the whole movement. P. 285

[...] it represents a qualitatively new stage in the history of capitalism and conducts to the conceptualization of identity formations that we have described [...] There are a multiplicity of dislocation effects [...] all antagonism is essentially political [...] P. 287

[...] the political identity is not established a-priori in a trascendental horizon, but is always the result of concrete processes and practices. P. 309

[...] the categories that synthesize the social experience are becoming [...] obsolete. it is necessary to re-conceptualize the autonomy of the social demands, the logic of it's articulation, and the nature of the collective identities that result from these articulation logics. P. 310





## **CHAPTER IV**

### **BOURDIEU AND THE EXPANSION OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS**

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### BOURDIEU AND THE EXPANSION OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS

To this point I have described shifts that have occurred in the treatment of class as a concept. I began with Marx's conceptualization of class as a direct function of material production and central to his theoretical formulations. I went on to look at Althusser's structuralism, where class became a secondary concept subsumed by structures. I then examined a third shift in Laclau's postmodernism, where I argued that the concept of class is eviscerated.

This chapter will attempt to describe the place of the concept of class in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. I show that in Bourdieu's work there is a sharp 180 degree turn from the previous conceptualization of class in postmodernism and an expanded reappearance of the concept in structural theory.

Bourdieu published his masterpiece, *Distinction* (1984), around the same time Laclau published *Hegemony* (1985). The authors were contemporaries. However, Laclau adheres to postmodernism and interprets his historical moment through a postmodernist lens, denying the concept of class in the process. Bourdieu, on the other hand, after a lifelong study of different cultures and their class structure, maintains the existence of a class structure and sets out to unravel the relation between the social structure and the cognitive structure of individuals.

I divide my discussion of Bourdieu's work into five sections: 1) the new dimension that Bourdieu opens between the conditions of existence and class formations; 2) the concepts of "habitus" and "taste" which emerge out of this new dimension and become the cornerstones of class reproduction; 3) contemporary classes and class fractions, and the impact of habitus dispositions on class ethos and aesthetics; 4) the different types of capital and their relation to class and class fractions; and 5) Bourdieu's concept of integrative class struggle. In conclusion I will examine Bourdieu's contribution to sociological theory by unveiling the realm of culture. I will delineate what constitutes a class for Marx, and what constitutes a class for Bourdieu

## THE NEW DIMENSION

I begin with a brief biographical background. Bourdieu was born in 1930 into a lower-middle-class family in Deguin, a small town in the Southwestern part of France. He spent his early years in this remote rural region. However, he was a gifted student and rose from marginal social and cultural origins to become a major figure in French intellectual life. He gained entrance to the Lycée de Pau and then to the academically select Parisian Lycée Louis-le-Grand when he was 19 years old. In 1951, at age 21, he entered the famed Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Paris where he prepared for the “agregation” in philosophy. The ENS was the breeding ground for intellectuals like Emile Durkheim, and later Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Henry Bergson, Jean Jaures, Claude Levy-Strauss, Jean Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron and Alain Touraine.<sup>1</sup>

Bourdieu’s experience as a student, and especially his sense of personal alienation, contributed significantly to his reflections about class. Being from the extreme Southwestern province, and with a marginal cultural and social background that made him different from his privileged peers, Bourdieu felt like an outsider. This feeling accompanied him through all the prestigious schools he attended, and was especially strong at ENS. In his book *The Inheritors* (1979), he describes the French university culture as hostile to popular classes and as privileging stylistic distinction over genuine intellectual inquiry.<sup>1</sup>

Bourdieu was frustrated by “the intense institutional loyalty felt by those teachers from humble origin who owe their cultural, social and professional success to the institution that makes it possible”. He writes about “the lofty promulgated ideals of universalism, and the (very different) practices of academic power. He complains about “the French academic mandarins who impose curriculum orthodoxy and ... do little or no empirical research.” He was offended by the thinly veiled prejudice against the lower classes. Yet, ENS was also known for cultivating critical analysis, and here is where Bourdieu excelled.<sup>1</sup>

Considering Bourdieu’s experience of alienation, one might have expected him to join the French Communist Party, especially so since the ENS and France had become highly politicized during the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, Bourdieu did not. Instead, he created a committee for the defense of liberties which pushed the idea that the educational system and the culture it transmitted served the dominant class.<sup>1</sup>

There was another pivotal influence on Bourdieu’s work - his experience of colonial Algiers. At age 26, Bourdieu completed his “agregation” in philosophy

and began lecturing at the secondary level. But his teaching career was interrupted when he was called into military service due to the war in Algiers.

In Algiers Bourdieu became a self-taught ethnologist. He brought an ethnologist's eye to his observations that the French military was trying to impose a social structure on Algerians and failing. This prompted the development of his central underlying preoccupations: the question of "how stratified social systems of hierarchy dominate, persist and reproduce without resistance and without conscious recognition of their members" and how culture transmits systems of dispositions which engender practices. How does culture embody power relations?<sup>1</sup>

Bourdieu opposed the French war in Algiers, and eventually was sent back to France, where in 1961 he became a teaching assistant to philosopher Raymond Aron at the Sorbonne. From 1962 to 1964 he lectured at the University de Lille. In 1964 he assumed responsibilities at the centre that Aron had founded, the European Centre for Historical Sociology. Bourdieu held that position till 1968. In 1981, he was elected to the College of France.<sup>1</sup>

Intellectual life in France during the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by two major themes. The opposition between subjectivism /objectivism, and Marxism. The intellectual climate at the time did not appear to encourage the development of an independent base for social theory and empirical research. Yet, Bourdieu sought to do precisely this.

Although trained in philosophy, Bourdieu built his ideas on the ethnologies he conducted while in Algiers. One main recurrent theme emerges from his research: the problem of relating cognitive structures to social structures.<sup>2</sup>

In developing this theme, Bourdieu draws from different philosophical currents and integrates them. He draws from Marx the primacy of class analysis, the emphasis on the practical activity involved in the production and reproduction of social life, and the notion that social being determines consciousness. Yet he rounds out these themes by integrating conceptual tools derived from Weber, including the study of the symbolic and material conditions of social life, the notion of the social functions of symbolic goods and practices, the notions of lifestyles, status groups and their attributions of honour and dishonour, and notions of charisma and legitimacy.

From Durkheim Bourdieu draws the notion of "the social" together with a genetic sociology of symbolic forms, the explanation of a social genesis of schemes of thought, perception and action, and the internalization of cognitive structures.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing from the intellectual currents of his own time, Bourdieu integrates Bachelard's innovative conception of the social scientific method. Bachelard proposed a reflexive epistemology that acknowledges sociological factors as shaping the process of reason and scientific discovery. His was a science demystifying relations of power.<sup>4</sup>

While Marx revealed the existence of an objective externality, that is, the conditions of existence, and depicted class formation as an immediate function of material production, Bourdieu unveiled a new dimension between the conditions of existence and class formations. He explored the relation of agents to their conditions of existence.

Why is this dimension so relevant? The answer is because Bourdieu maintains that while relating to their condition of existence, agents acquire representations about their own and others' practices, and of the social structure. These representations form an integral part of their social reality. The central concept of his theory, "the habitus", is immersed in this new dimension.<sup>5</sup>

How are these representations formed and incorporated into agent's minds? What is the genesis of these mental structures? To find the answer, we consider Bourdieu's concept of active knowledge and his acknowledgement of subject and object.

Bourdieu elaborates on the active aspect of cognition by describing the structuring mental activity of agents. For Bourdieu, this structuring activity is not a system of inborn universal and eternal categories, but a system of incorporated schemes constructed in the agent's relation to their conditions of existence during the course of their collective history and incorporated during the course of individual history. Between the conditions of existence and the practises, there exists the structuring activity of agents producing cognitive structures and classifying schemes which function in and for the practise. The key point of these cognitive structures is that they are "incorporated structures".<sup>6</sup>

Regarding "subject and object," Bourdieu acknowledges both, but elaborates further by maintaining that agents are subjects who are also, objects to themselves and to the others. These agents do not react automatically to the outside world. Instead, they respond by forming mental schemes. Therefore, this active aspect of cognition has constitutive power. Agents construct their representation of the social world according to their their relation to the conditions of existence and therefore internalize the social structure.<sup>7</sup>

The social genesis of this construction is what Bourdieu sets out to explore and unveil. Since knowledge of the social world is an act of construction, how do

agents construct their representation of the social world? What is the social genesis of this construction? How do these classifying, enclashed and enclashing schemes take place? How are schemes of thought and expression elaborated?

Bourdieu searches for the genesis of these systems and presents us with a new concept, the habitus; this structuring and structured mental activity that we acquire while relating to the conditions of existence. The habitus becomes central to Bourdieu's theory because it is the mechanism that remits us to the most fundamental oppositions of the social order. How the habitus does so, how social divisions become principles of divisions which organize our view of the social world and why knowledge of the social world is an act of lack of knowledge are questions I move on to in the next section.

## **HABITUS AND TASTE**

In answering the question of how social divisions organize our perception of the social world, Bourdieu maintains that the perception which agents have of their social space (and of their place in the social space), depends on the agent's conditions of existence. In their effort to know the social world, agents elaborate cognitive structures.

For Bourdieu the habitus is the key. Bourdieu explains that through this relation, and the needs it generates, agents incorporate dispositions, which in turn generate practises. Through this relation agents also incorporate perceptions which give sense to those practises. The habitus can therefore be defined as the structuring activity, the agent's incorporation of dispositions which generate practises, which in turn are enclashed and enclashing. These classified and classifying schemes function beyond consciousness as common sense and are shared by all the agents in a society.<sup>8</sup>

The habitus arranges our view of the social world. Different habitus express the objective differences inscribed in the conditions of existence. Through the habitus, agents incorporate the structure of class divisions. Therefore, class differences are naturalized since each habitus expresses the needs and liberties inherent in each class.<sup>9</sup>

According to Bourdieu, the social order is progressively inscribed in the agent's minds by means of the conditioning associated with the different conditions of existence and by means of their inherent exclusions, inclusions, divisions and struggles which are at the origin of the social structure. The social order is also transmitted by means of all the hierarchies and classifications that are inscribed

in the cultural objects, the school system, language, and by means of all the verdicts from family and daily life. Thus, social divisions become principles of divisions of the social world. Agents acquire a “sense of one’s place” that makes them exclude themselves from that which excludes them.<sup>10</sup>

This correspondence between the social structure (the real divisions) and the mental structure (the principle of divisions) has as its effect the unquestionable adherence to the social order. Therefore, the divisions of the social world are accepted as “evident”. The sense of limits erases the consciousness of those limits. This is why Bourdieu maintains that knowledge of the social world is actually a lack of knowledge of the social world. Assumed knowledge of the world is the mechanism by which the dominated tend to attribute to themselves what the social order attributes to them.<sup>11</sup>

But how does the habitus, this generator of the agent’s dispositions and perceptions, incline us to certain predilections and choices adjusted to the condition of existence of which it is the product? This brings us to the concept of taste.

## **TASTE**

I have stated that the habitus generates dispositions, which in turn generate practises and perceptions. Perceptions give sense to practises. I have stated that the habitus homologizes the practises of each class. It inclines us towards certain choices. It does so through our tastes.

Bourdieu defines “taste” as the tendency and attitude for the appropriation of certain types of objects and practises, whether material or symbolical. “Taste,” operates through repressions and distinctive sets of preferences. Taste provides a sort of sense of orientation within the social structure.<sup>12</sup>

The centrality of the disposition of “taste” lies in its power to perform the transmutation of things and practises into signs of distinction or vulgarity. This makes “taste,” the symbolic expression of class. It is an enclassing system. “Taste” is at the base of all personal characteristics. All the information persons give (consciously or unconsciously) about themselves through “taste,” is interpreted according to the incorporated class taste scheme. And all the material properties then, function as symbolic properties.<sup>13</sup>

Taste defines some practises as marks of distinction, and other practises as marks of stigma, thus situating us in the social hierarchy. It is the principle of all practises belonging to the same condition of existence. It is the generating

formula of the lifestyle of each class, given that a class is perceived as much by its consumption as for its being.<sup>14</sup>

Bourdieu maintains that nothing is further from an act of knowledge than our social sense of "taste," which is social hierarchy converted into nature. One of the many examples with which Bourdieu demonstrates the social construction of taste is the opposition encountered in the aesthetic disposition between the "legitimate" perception (the perception culturally established to appreciate an art object) and the perception of the popular classes. Bourdieu tells us that the "legitimate" perception requires a competence acquired within the family, in familiarization with fine art objects, or/and good schools. In this "legitimate" perception, a painting is appreciated according to the mode of representation, namely, the "form". It is a competence which allows the viewer to decipher the meaning or to appreciate the technique. It is a distant and cold aesthetic disposition, an elaborate contemplation that only a select public distanced from necessity can perform.<sup>15, 16</sup>

In plain contrast, Bourdieu's description of the popular aesthetic is based on substance instead of form. Instead of a cold, rational, and distant appreciation, the popular taste appreciates a simple painting that evokes emotions with which one can identify, a spontaneous pleasure, or a moral function. The painting of a simple object like a beautiful sunset or a sweet child does not have to be deciphered. In the popular aesthetic there is no mediation between the ordinary disposition and the aesthetic disposition. There is a continuity between life and art.

Bourdieu demonstrates that the aesthetic disposition is not distributed equally among the classes. He describes "legitimate" art appreciation as entitling a "principle of belonging," socially constructed and acquired — belonging that requires the accumulation of a cultural capital that can only be acquired in the absence of economic necessity. For Bourdieu, the aesthetic disposition is a dimension of the global relation with the world and with others, a dimension where the effects of a particular condition of existence is exteriorized in an unrecognizable form. He adds that the link between the "legitimate" aesthetic and its distance from necessity, far from being evident, appears as founded in nature.<sup>17</sup>

Bourdieu concludes that "taste" is a symbolic expression of class differences, the manifestation of the disposition system produced by social conditioning. "Taste," unites whatever is similar and separates whatever is different. Through its symbolism, excluding and including, it is the principle by which we are classified by others and the principle by which we classify ourselves and others. Taste is the practical manifestation of an inevitable difference. The aversion to different



lifestyles is one of the strongest barriers among classes. Taste is the unconscious base of class unity, and the unconscious base of human relations objectified as relations among things.<sup>18</sup>

## **TASTE AND CLASSES**

Bourdieu devotes three chapters of his book ("The Sense of Distinction," "Cultural Goodwill," and "The Choice of the Necessary") to demonstrating the coincidence between the class habitus of ethos and aesthetics on the one hand, and the conditions of existence on the other. In other words, he is concerned with the coincidence between the habitus disposition of taste, and the agents' conditions of existence. Bourdieu maintains that a social class is not defined only by its position in the relations of production, but also by the class habitus normally associated with that position.<sup>19</sup>

Bourdieu maintains the existence of the three main classes in contemporary society, the dominant class or bourgeoisie, the dominated class or the popular class, and the petite bourgeoisie or middle class.

Regarding the dominant class, Bourdieu believes that the class displays an ethos and aesthetic founded on a condition of existence which is distanced from necessity. Accordingly, this class displays an ethos of ease and a confident relation to the world and the self. The self is the materialized coincidence of "is" and "ought", a coincidence that supports and authorizes all the inner or manifest forms of "certitudo Sui", and ethos of casualness, confidence, grace, facility, elegance, freedom, naturalness.<sup>20</sup>

The aesthetic of the dominant class is the legitimate aesthetic, symbolizing distinction, and mark a distance from necessity and from other classes. The common denominator of all the objects and practises is their adherence to form (being perceived) rather than substance (being). Bourdieu describes the homology among the previously described dominant aesthetics in art and other areas. Regarding the presentation of self, Bourdieu suggests that the taste of distinction is attentive to body presentation and care. The body is presented with elegance, assertiveness, ease, discretion, and allure. The language is discrete, assertive, and measured. The legitimate way of dressing, wearing cosmetics or styling one's hair, are social marks that receive their value within the social hierarchies. Women of the dominant class obtain from their body a double security, since the value of their beauty is associated with moral value. Their presentation and manners are read as indicators of a moral physiognomy. Bourdieu points out that body appearance is the most undeniable objectification

of class taste. It is culture converted into nature. The whole manner in which the body is carried, treated, and presented reveals the class habitus disposition and the relation to the social world. There is one taxonomy for the dominant and another for the dominated. Social perception of the body acts to reproduce the social order.

In the dominant taxonomy, the way food is consumed is formal. It is a formalism that denies the primary function of food consumption, converting it instead into a social ceremony, an affirmation of dignity, refinement, and ethics. The seating arrangements adhere to the principles of hierarchy, the dishes are well presented and in a certain order. Food is eaten in moderation and with good manners, which includes selected, light, refined and expensive dishes.

In entertainment, the aesthetic disposition in the dominant taxonomy tends towards "boulevard theatre," and light, jovial productions, or formal galas attended in the appropriate formal dress. In sports, the disposition is towards selected sport environments distant from the masses, such as sailing, skiing, horseback riding, golf, and fencing.<sup>21</sup>

The dominated class, on the other hand, is "virtue made of necessity and solidarity," necessity being the inescapable deprivation of necessary goods. According to Bourdieu, "necessity imposes a taste for necessity," which implies a form of adaptation, an acceptance of necessity, a resignation, a deep-seated disposition. Contrary to the habitus of the dominant class, which cannot be constituted in any other manner than in conditions of existence liberated from necessity and urgency, the habitus of the dominated is acquired in the submission to necessity. It inclines the popular classes towards "substance" instead of "form", towards a pragmatic functionalist taste, away from futility and formalism.<sup>22</sup>

Bourdieu shows the homology between the simple and spontaneous emotions found in the popular classes' appreciation of painting and music, and all the other areas of taste. In the presentation of self, the language is spontaneous, loud and frank, expressing sincerity of sentiments. There is an abandonment of distances in their relation to each other, a feeling of familiarity which is an affirmation of solidarity with others, and the only warranty against adversity. The physical expression is spontaneous, full of gesticulations, not measured. There is no investment in body presentation such as dressing or cosmetics, not only because of necessity, but also because of the image of women among the popular classes. Their bodies are seen as devoid of beauty and moral physiognomy. Women specifically, perceive women of the dominant class as naturally beautiful. A failure from a person of the working class to conform to this taxonomy of the popular classes is condemned, draws attention and a call to class solidarity.

The same adherence to substance appears regarding food consumption, theatre and sports. Food consumption tends toward heavy, rich, fatty and inexpensive foods which have the function of maintaining the body, especially the masculine body which performs physical work. Food consumption is a disposition focused on masculine bodily strength. Therefore, hearty, masculine food, in large quantities, is served at home, the refuge of freedom, where manners are not required.

In their cultural consumption the popular class displays a spontaneous and emotional reaction towards anything that its members can relate to or identify with, such as a theatrical character. Plays usually portray a bleak view of social life. In sports the popular classes tend towards sports which celebrate masculine strength, such as boxing and wrestling.<sup>23</sup>

I have described the contrast between two opposing tastes, the taste of luxury and the taste of necessity. I have also described how the habitus of taste remits us to the most fundamental opposition in the social structure, that of the dominant and the dominated classes. I have shown how the conditions of existence, and the idea that agents have of themselves, and the social structure are the two factors that constitute the class habitus and their taste disposition.

Bourdieu reminds us that “the adaptation to a dominated position” implies a form of acceptance of the domination. The presence of cheap substitutes for unattainable foods is an indicator of dispossession as well as a recognition of dispossession. Bourdieu emphasizes that cultural dispossession provides the best apparent justification for economic dispossession and that the popular class lacks the cultural capital which is the condition for the adequate appropriation. In the factory as much as in school, workers encounter the “legitimate” culture as a “principle of order,” a principle which does not have to justify itself. Reproducing the hierarchies of the social world, the school system transforms with an apparent neutrality, social enclassements into school enclassements in such a manner that both appear as founded in nature. Social value translates into personal value.<sup>24</sup>

Bourdieu also devotes a whole chapter to the description of the petite bourgeoisie. Contrary to the bourgeoisie ethos of ease, confidence, graciousness, elegance and freedom, the ethos of the petite bourgeoisie is an ethos of restriction, insecurity, and good will. The restriction manifests itself through pretension, insecurity, and the voluntaristic rigour of the “called but not yet chosen”. They base their pretension on what they one day hope to embody — the “ought to be” of the legitimate culture, by a permanent invocation of the “ought.”<sup>25</sup>

According to Bourdieu the petite bourgeoisie performs the most profound recognition of the “legitimate culture to which they aspire to belong. Their performance is further proof of the imposition of the legitimate culture. This acceptance is at the base of the good will of the petite bourgeoisie. The petite bourgeoisie tries to mimic in their practises, the practises of the bourgeoisie. Their good will is an unconditional testimony of cultural docility. The petite bourgeoisie exhibits an unconditional and cult-like devotion towards all the aristocratic traditions of the past and tries in vain to integrate into a culture that rejects them and to which they will always be a foreigner. Excluded and anxious to be included, the petite bourgeoisie searches in vain for marks of distinction.

In searching to mimic the legitimate culture, the taste of the petite bourgeoisie insists on imitation: theatre adaptations, popular arrangements of classical music, cinema adaptations of famous theatre plays, and simplified adaptations of scientific magazines. This is a consumption imitation, an unconscious bluff that fools only the ones who perform it. Their insecurity shows in their physical body language, which denotes their relationship with the social world. It shows in their gestures the lack of ease with which they carry their bodies, and in the use of a hyper-correct language.

Lacking the cultural capital of the bourgeoisie as well as their economic and social capital, those in the petite bourgeoisie are the typical autodidacts. They reveal themselves constantly in their anxious performance and lack of knowledge. They cannot maintain the relation of familiarity with the culture, the freedom, the audacity of the bourgeoisie.

Trying to distance itself from the proletariat, and failing to gain full access to the bourgeoisie, the petite bourgeoisie must extract indispensable resources to compensate for its lack of economic, cultural, and social capital. This is achieved through the power of limitation and restriction on themselves. The price of gaining access to the bourgeoisie is sacrifice, deprivation, good will, asceticism, moral warranties, and veneration. Their aim of belonging to the bourgeoisie demands from them a complete inversion of values and attitude. They substitute the large family of the proletarians and its solidarity with one descendent on whom they concentrate all their efforts, hopes and dreams for the future, forming that descendent according to the expectations of the dominant or “superior” class. Bourdieu writes: “The petite bourgeoisie is a proletarian who makes himself small in order to become bourgeoisie” yet, his moral has something of miserliness.”<sup>26</sup>

In the next section I will examine Bourdieu’s unveiling of different types of capital in contemporary society, and relate them to their corresponding class factions, their ethos and aesthetics.

## TYPES OF CAPITAL AND CLASS FACTIONS

As the discussion above suggests, Bourdieu's explorations into the realm of culture presents a more complex concept of capital. His ideas on capital deserve attention. Bourdieu holds that capital does not consist only of economic capital. He identifies different dimensions of capital, namely, economic, cultural, and social capital. He maintains that each type of capital is an instrument used by the powerful in the constant struggle to control processes of hierarchization. In this section I describe the different types of capital identified by Bourdieu and the different class factions formed according to capital composition.

According to Bourdieu, there are three class factions within the bourgeoisie, namely, the patrons, the intellectuals, and the liberal professions. The patrons obtain their privilege mainly from economic capital which takes the form of high incomes. They display wealth in all their practises and in an ethos of luxury and optimism. Their taste is mundane and traditional. Like the patrons, the intellectuals display a distance from the masses, but differ in their practises due to their income levels. Intellectuals, then, display a high cultural capital, but lower economic capital. Their ethos is ascetic. They search for the maximum cultural benefits at the lowest economic cost. The benefits they obtain from their cultural capital are symbolic. They display their high cultural competence in their appreciation of art by deciphering paintings, commenting on vanguardist theatre (which carries a symbolic protest of the social world), and frequenting museum exhibitions.<sup>27</sup>

According to Bourdieu, the two factions have a whole different relation to the art object, which reflects the differing position in the patrimonial structure. While intellectuals appropriate an art object symbolically, the patrons appropriate the art object materially, by purchasing it. Bourdieu emphasizes that the material appropriation of art (and its symbolism) elevates the distinctiveness of the appropriator, reducing the status of a merely symbolic appropriation. To appropriate a material art object is to affirm oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and of the taste for that object, designating the non-possessors as inferior. It is a reified negation of others. People affirm themselves in the capacity of appropriation. Appropriation conveys a superior moral personality trait, a distinctive power, a testimony of the intrinsic quality of the proprietor. Among all the conversion techniques aimed at the accumulation of symbolic capital, the acquisition of an art object is the form which renders the most obvious signs of power and distinction. For Bourdieu the bourgeoisie lives a double life falsely unified; the spiritual vs. the temporal, disinterest vs. interest, art vs. money.<sup>28</sup>

The third faction making up the bourgeoisie, according to Bourdieu, are the liberal professions. This faction has a cultural capital like that of the intellectual faction. Yet their economic capital is superior, allowing them to enjoy a lifestyle like that of the patrons. The symbolism implicit in their prestigious consumption allows them to increase their social capital and accumulate honourability. The ethical disposition between this faction and the intellectuals is different though. While intellectuals tend to impugn a social order which does not recognize their merits, the liberal professions are in solidarity with a social order that conveys respectability on them.<sup>29</sup>

According to Bourdieu, there is one factor which affects the dominant class: time. The more ancient the position in the dominant class, the more power of distinction it conveys. Social origin is the most powerful factor for the bourgeoisie. The display of castles, titles, antiques, old money, connote the most profound recognition of distinction.

Similarly, Bourdieu sees three distinct factions among the petite bourgeoisie, the differences relating to their accumulation of meagre but different types of capital. The three classes are the declining, the executant, and the new petite bourgeoisie.

The declining petite bourgeoisie, formed by small shopkeepers, mechanics, electricians, etc., suffers economic decadence and appears linked to a past which no longer exists. They lack the economic and cultural capital necessary to perform a reconversion, manifest regressive dispositions, adhere to an old status quo and complain about modernism. They distance themselves from labour on the one hand, and from modernism on the other. Their taste preferences are austere and traditional. They display an ethos of seriousness, and a recognition of the value of work and order, complaining about liberalism.<sup>30</sup>

For Bourdieu, the executant petit bourgeoisie is the fullest realization of the petite bourgeoisie. Those within the petit bourgeoisie are situated in a central position with regard to the structure of their capital. The ethos which characterizes this faction transforms itself from a progressive optimism while young and on the rise, to a regressive pessimism and resentment among older individuals. This fraction is made up of teachers and office employees, etc., who aim to prolong the ascension through accumulation of cultural capital, mostly to benefit their descendants, on whom they place the realization of their own ambitions. The older members of the group adhere to conservative ethics.<sup>31</sup>

The third faction, the new petite bourgeoisie, is formed by declassed individuals from the bourgeoisie who possess strong cultural capital poorly converted into social capital and have therefore not obtained the positions typically connected to

their class origins. They sell cultural products and practises which represent the bourgeois taste, such as services related to event planning, public relations, tourism, fashion, decor, etc. In other words, they are dedicated to the selling of symbolic products and services. Their cultural capital allows them to easily convey (and sell) their know-how and the taste of the dominant class to the petite bourgeoisie that aspires to obtain these distinctions. Their ethos is that of “affectation in relaxation.” For Bourdieu, these sellers of symbolic taste perform an imposition of the legitimate taste and culture in a friendly manner. Pitting themselves against the repressive morality of the petite bourgeoisie in decadence, and to the asceticism of the executant petite bourgeoisie, they transform the moral of duty into a moral of pleasure. They offer to their buyers the promise of an ethos conveying distinction.<sup>32, 33</sup>

## **THE INTEGRATIVE CLASS STRUGGLE**

Finally, we come to Bourdieu’s ideas about class struggle. Bourdieu maintains the existence of an integrative class struggle in contemporary society. He holds that the classes are in constant competition as each attempts to enclass itself into a superior category while at the same time impeding access to the class immediately below. This integrative and competitive class struggle takes place through the symbolic power of enclassed and down-classed practises and material objects. As mentioned above, different types of capital act as instruments of power in this constant class struggle.

Bourdieu acknowledges some class movement in the form of enclassing and down-classing, but overall, and contrary to most studies of social mobility and theories of embourgeoisement of the working class, Bourdieu maintains that there is no fundamental transformation of the social structure.

In his discussion of class movement Bourdieu recognizes the ability of each type of capital to convert into a different form. Accordingly, Bourdieu constructs a multidimensional space formed by 1) capital volume, 2) capital structure (the composition of the global capital, whether the capital is mainly economic, cultural, or social), and 3) the evolution in time of these three factors. The modification of the volume of capital taking place in the same type of capital is what Bourdieu designates as a vertical shift. For example, a teacher may become a professor. The shift from one type of capital to another is designated as a horizontal shift. Here, a teacher may become a shopkeeper.<sup>34</sup>

Bourdieu suggests that the strategy by which individuals and families try to conserve or increase their patrimony to maintain and/or improve their position in the social structure, depends on their actual volume and composition of capital, as well as on the state of reproduction instruments (the educational system and the labor market). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital is the best conveyer of access to the superior class, a factor which has caused an intensified competition for academic qualifications, changes in the educational system, and a new relationship between qualifications and employment.<sup>35</sup>

How has the change in the educational system affected the different classes in their integrative and competitive class struggle? According to Bourdieu the dominant class remains essential stationary, with minor changes in how its factions compete to dominate the definition of the legitimate. But there has been some down-classing among mostly labour and peasantry, a considerable portion of the petite bourgeoisie, and a small portion of the bourgeoisie.

Among the dominant class, the factions in morphological expansion are the ones richer in cultural capital (the intellectuals and the liberal professions), who strengthen their place in the dominant class and intensify their already high investments in the educational system. In addition, the liberal professions invest in the possession of cultural and material goods, which symbolize legitimate taste. This solidifies their sense of honourability and social capital.

The faction rich in economic capital (the patrons of industry, land and commerce), tend to suffer some regression and have to increase the use of the educational system in order to ensure their social production. Their investments in the educational system allow them to appropriate part of the company as salary. They have access to the most prestigious schools which confers on them desirable titles and credential that then give them a preferential place in the employment market. A small portion of the patron's faction, the ones who did not achieve an academic title, are down-classed and form "the new petite bourgeoisie", selling their lifestyle (the lifestyle of the dominant class) to the middle classes.<sup>36</sup>

The petite bourgeoisie is down-classed, with the exception of a small segment which may be able to retain its cultural capital.

According to Bourdieu the dominated or popular classes have suffered most as a result of down-classing. They are the most negatively affected by the changes in the educational system. They have experienced a "hysteresis" of the habitus. Their perception of academic titles corresponds to earlier epochs, before the proliferation of titles led to their devaluation in the employment market. They still believe in the previous social and market value of academic titles. Bourdieu adds



that the disparity between the aspirations and opportunities the school system produces affects individuals according to their social origin. The lower the social origin, the fewer opportunities are available. Bourdieu uncovers the paradox of the school systems' democratization. The classes that thought of education as liberating are either relegated to a lower order or eliminated. The result of the structural mismatch between aspirations and possibilities, between the social identity that education promises and the ones it offers is a collective disillusionment. Students from this class are increasingly relegated to technical schools. High school certification prepares them only for a life of labor. Bourdieu argues that the cultural system in the class struggle has served the dominant class and sacrificed the popular classes, whose members either do not possess a title, or possess a title but not the social origin needed to obtain a good position.<sup>37</sup>

Bourdieu concludes that the hierarchical social structure controls the struggles. The actions of one class aiming to improve its lot are countered by the impediments placed in their way by the class above. The two actions cancel themselves out. Thus, there is no change in the social structure, only relatively insignificant displacements. Between the minor shifts forward or enclassements and the minor shifts backwards or down-classments, the fundamental structures are maintained.

For Bourdieu, what the integrative and competitive struggle eternalizes is the difference in the conditions of the existing social order. The dialectic of enclassement and down-classment functions as an ideological mechanism, a conservative discourse aimed at creating the illusion for the dominated that by biding their time rather than challenging the social order, they can obtain what can only be obtained through struggle. Any changes in enclassing and down-classing processes only reinforce the permanence of the social structure. The reproduction of the social structure is perpetuated by its "displacement". It is an integrative struggle because it is imposed by the dominant and accepted by the dominated who accept the "legitimate" goals.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In Bourdieu's studies of contemporary society, we see a return to the concept of class, though reformulated in an expanded form, in sociological theory. Bourdieu's contribution to sociological theory is the unveiling of the realm of culture, through which he demonstrates the representations agents have about their own practises form an integral part of their social reality and perpetuate a hierarchical social structure. Accordingly, Bourdieu maintains that a class is defined as much by perception (representations; consumption) as by its being (the position in the relations of production).

In searching for the genesis of these representations, Bourdieu devises a new dimension located between the conditions of existence and class formations, namely, the relation of agents to their conditions of existence. Bourdieu maintains that it is within this relation that agents form their habitus, this structuring activity through which they incorporate dispositions and perceptions and construct their representations of the social world.

Bourdieu argues that agents' representations of the social world are "recognition without knowledge," and remit us to the most fundamental oppositions of the social world, namely, the hierarchical social structure where differences are naturalized.

Among the dispositions incorporated through the habitus, Bourdieu shows that "taste" is central. Far from being an inborn category, it is socially acquired, and through its power to perform the transmutation of things and practises into signs of distinction or stigma, acts as the symbolic expression of class differences. In this way it perpetuates the hierarchical social structure by naturalizing social differences.

For Bourdieu, taste is social relations objectified in things, social hierarchy converted into nature. Accordingly, Bourdieu describes the contrast between two tastes which appear as founded in nature: the taste of necessity (dominated class) and the taste of luxury (dominant class). It is the taste of luxury that defines the "legitimate" culture. Bourdieu maintains that nothing is further from an act of knowledge than our disposition of taste.

Based on the symbolism of taste and the reconversion of different types of capital, Bourdieu asserts the existence of different classes and class factions. He

further asserts an integrative class struggle as classes jostle to enclass themselves (move up) while at the same time down-class others (keep down). This position sets Bourdieu apart from the authors of most studies of social mobility and from theorists who write about the embourgeoisement of the working class and its opponents.

What is the effect of this “integrative” class struggle on the social structure? The perpetuation of the hierarchical social structure occurs by displacing itself. The social structure does not transform itself. The dialectic of enclassing and down-classing functions as an ideological mechanism. It creates the illusion of change, but does not change the “legitimate” metas. What is the place of the working class in this integrative struggle? For Bourdieu, the working class remains submissive to its own representation and its own place in the social structure.

In these formulations, Bourdieu’s theory of contemporary society goes beyond classical Marxism. In the first place, Bourdieu adds the realm of culture to that of the objective externality (or conditions of existence) by introducing a new dimension in which he places the habitus (the mental structuring activity which incorporates dispositions). Accordingly, Bourdieu suggests that a class is not defined only by its being (the position in the relation of production), but also by its being perceived (its consumption).

Secondly, there is a modification regarding the active aspect of cognition and the role of subject and object. In Marx there is an active aspect of cognition in his formulation of ideology or false consciousness. But Bourdieu takes the notion of cognition further and expands it by identifying the structuring activity of agents producing enclassed and enclassing mental structures. He develops the concepts of habitus and taste. Through them, the hierarchical social structure perpetuates itself.

With regard to subject and object, Marx sought to bridge the gap between idealism and positivism, acknowledging an objective externality (conditions of existence) and a subject which, accordingly, constructs an ideology linked to those conditions. Bourdieu acknowledges an objective externality but expands on the role of the subject and on the agent’s active role in cognition. Further, he elaborates on the agents’ representations and on the knowledge which becomes a lack of knowledge, namely, recognition and acceptance.

While “capital” for Marx is a relation of material production, Bourdieu expands this concept by unpacking the different dimensions of capital (economic, cultural, and social capital), and by unveiling the reconversion ability of capital and its power in the designation of the legitimate principle of hierarchization.

While Marx never defined "class," his central concept emerges clearly as "relations of material production". Bourdieu's definition is more complex. Having added the cultural realm, Bourdieu proposes that a class is defined as much by being perceived (its consumption) as by being (its position in the relation of production). A class is not defined by certain properties, not even by a determinant property such as volume and structure of capital. A class cannot be defined through social origins, income, instruction, or gender. It cannot be defined by a chain of properties (as a linear conceptualization of class assumes).

For Bourdieu, a social class is defined by the structure of the relationship among all the pertinent properties, a structure which confers to each property its value. And Bourdieu adds that we must search for the structural causality in the network of factors. He reminds us that agents are not defined by the properties they possess at a certain moment in time. The transformation through time should be taken into consideration.

While Marx spoke about class struggle, Bourdieu maintains the existence of an "integrative" class struggle in contemporary society generated by cultural domination and characterized by symbolism. This is an integrative struggle by which the social structure does not change, but merely displaces itself.

While Marx visualized the solution as the overcoming of surplus value, for Bourdieu the solution lies in the overcoming of agents' representations of the social structure and their place in it. Bourdieu maintains that agents should "overcome the limits of their minds" acquired in the terrain of culture and education. He asserts that the conscience of their cultural deprivation is inversely proportionate to their deprivation. It is in the "terrain of education and culture where members of the dominated classes have fewer probabilities of discovering their own objective interests and produce a problematic according to their interest." "Social subjects ... are perhaps never less likely to transcend 'the limits of their minds' than in the representations they have and give of their position, which defines those limits."<sup>39</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Swartz, David. 1997. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 6, 11, 18, 19

the question of how, stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce [...] without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members [...] Systems of disposition which engender practices. P.6

[...] equates the practice of reflexivity with the practice of social science itself. P.11  
ENS is known for cultivating an abundance of "esprit critique", and in this, Bourdieu excelled [...] Bourdieu's analysis of French university culture, as hostile to popular classes and as privileging individualized stylistic distinction rather than genuine intellectual inquiry [...] Bourdieu refers to the intense institutional loyalty felt by those teachers of humble origin s who owe their cultural, social and professional success to the institution that makes his success possible [...] He is incensed by the French academic mandarins who impose curriculum orthodoxy, who themselves do little or no empirical research [...] He is frustrated by the gap between the lofty ideals of universal [...] and the actual practices of academic power [...] He is offended by the thin veiled prejudice against the lower classes, he perceives in French academic culture. P.18

This personal experience of alienation with French academe motivates him to submit French schooling to critical examination [...] French intellectual life was sharply divided between adherents to the French Communist Party [...] and existentialist [...] P.19

These concepts are developed further between Pp. 1-51.

- 2 Swartz, David. 1997. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 48-49

This early research experience inaugurates specific motifs and points of method that become recurrent themes in Bourdieu's later work. Four fundamental conceptual issues emerge: the problem of relations between individual dispositions and external structures; the problem of agency in structural analysis; the problem of relating cognitive structures to social structures; the problem of relations between material and symbolic aspects of social life.

- 3 Brubaker, Rogers. 1985. "Rethinking Classical Theory: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu." *Theory and Society*. Vol.14, N. 6. November 1985. Pp. 747, 748

Bourdieu appropriates from Weber the conceptual resources for a theory of the social functions of symbolic goods and symbolic practices [...] from Durkheim Bourdieu appropriates an explicit program: the program of a genetic sociology

of symbolic forms [...] P. 747

Bourdieu's appropriation of themes from Marx [...] seems evident and straight forward: the primacy of class as the unit of analysis [...] P. 748

- 4 Swartz, David. 1997. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 33 and 37

Bourdieu's intellectual vocation [...] is to use science to demystify relations of power. P. 33

Bachelard therefore proposes a reflexive epistemology [...] Conditions that can shape the process of reason and scientific discovery. P. 37

- 5 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 483

[...] the representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practises and properties is an integral part of social reality.

- 6 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 467

[...] the principle of this structuring activity [...] a system of internalized embodied schemes, which having been constituted in the course of collective history, are acquired in the course of individual history and function in their "practical" state "for practise" (and not for the sake of pure knowledge).

- 7 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 468

The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized "embodied" social structures [...] implements classificatory schemes [...]

- 8 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 170

The habitus is both, the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification ("principium divisionis") of these practises. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus [...] that the represented social world i.e., the space of lifestyles, is constituted [...] The habitus is not only a structuring structure, [...] but also a structured structure; the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world [...]

- 9 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 172

The most fundamental oppositions in the structure (high/low, rich/poor, etc), tend to establish themselves as the fundamental structuring principles of practises.

- 10 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 470-471

Thus, through the differentiated and differentiating conditions associated with the different conditions of existence ...the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds...a 'sense of one's place' which ends one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.

- 11 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 471

The "sense" of limits implies "forgetting" the limits. one of the most important effects of the correspondence between real divisions and practical principles of division, between social structures and mental structures, is undoubtedly the fact that the primary experience of the social world is that of doxa, an adherence to relations of order which, because they structure inseparably both, the real world and the thought world, are accepted as self-evident. Primary perception of the social world [...] act of miscognition, implying the most absolute form of recognition of the social order. Dominated agents [...] tend to attribute themselves what the distribution attributes to them, refusing what they are refused.

- 12 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 173

Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practises, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences [...]

- 13 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 174-175

Taste is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs, [...] It transforms objectively classified practises, in which a class condition signifies itself (through taste), into classifying practises that is, into a symbolic expression of class position [...]

- 14 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 483

A class is defined as much by its "being-perceived" as by its "being", by its consumption [...] as much as by its position in the relations of production [...]

- 15 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 474

So nothing is further removed from an act of cognition [...] than this sense of the social structure which, as is so well put by the word "taste" [...] is social necessity made second nature [...]

- 16 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 28, 30

Any legitimate work [...] tacitly defines as the only legitimate mode of perception the one which brings into play a certain disposition and a certain competence. p. 28 [...] asserts the "absolute primacy of form over function" P. 30

- 17 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 54

The aesthetic disposition [...] In other words, it presupposes the distance from the world [...]

- 18 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 77

And finally it is an immediate adherence at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class.

- 19 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 372

Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is normally [...] associated with that position.

- 20 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 339

[...] a bourgeoisie ethos of ease, a confident relation to the world and the self, which are thus experienced necessary, that is, as a materialized coincidence of "is" and "ought", which supports and authorizes all the inner manifest forms of "certitudo sui", casualness, grace, facility, elegance, freedom, in a word, naturalness [...]

- 21 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 260-317

Bourdieu devotes chapter 5 (Pp. 260 - 317) to depict the lifestyle of the sense of distinction as distanced from necessity.

- 22 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 372



The fundamental proposition that the habitus is a virtue made of necessity, is never more clearly illustrated than in the case of the working classes, since necessity includes for them all that is usually meant by the word, that is, an inescapable deprivation of necessary goods. Necessity imposes a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessity, a resignation to the inevitable, a deep-seated disposition [...]

- 23 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 372 - 396

Bourdieu devotes chapter 7 (Pp. 372-396) to depict the lifestyle of the dominated class, lifestyle made by virtue of necessity and solidarity.

- 24 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 386 - 387

Adapting to a dominated position implies a form of acceptance of domination. The effects of political mobilization itself do not counterbalance the effects of the inevitable dependence of self-esteem on occupational status and income [...]. It would be easy to enumerate the features of the life-style of the dominated classes which, through the sense of incompetence, failure or cultural unworthiness, imply a recognition to the dominant values [...]. Dispossession is never more totally misrecognized, and therefore, tacitly recognized, than when [...] economic dispossession is combined with cultural dispossession, which provides the best apparent justification for economic dispossession [...]. In the factory as in the school [...] workers encounter legitimate culture as a principle of order which does not need to demonstrate its practical utility in order to be justified [...]. The educational system [...] reproducing the hierarchies of the social world in a transformed form [...] transforms social classifications into academic classifications with every appearance of neutrality and establishes hierarchies [...] as [...] grounded in nature, so that social value comes to be identified with "personal" value, scholastic dignities with human dignity.

- 25 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 339

[...] a petite bourgeoisie ethos of restriction through pretension, the voluntaristic rigour of the "called" but not yet "chosen" who base their pretension to embody one day what "ought to bemoan a permanent invocation of the "ought."

- 26 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 318 - 371

The petit bourgeois is a proletarian who makes himself small to become bourgeois.  
P. 338

Bourdieu devotes chapter 6 (Pp. 319-371) to describe the lifestyle of the petit bourgeois, and his main aim to upclass into the immediate superior class.

- 27 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of*

*Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 283 - 294

Bourdieu devotes Pp. 283-294 to describing the variants of the dominant taste.

- 28 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 280, 282

[...] two modes of aesthetic appropriation expressing two different asset structures. To appropriate a work of art is to assert oneself as the exclusive possessor of the object and of the authentic taste for that object which is thereby converted into the reified negation of all those who are unworthy of possessing it, for lack of the material or symbolic means of doing so [...] P. 280

Of all the conversion techniques designed to create and accumulate symbolic capital, the purchase of the works of art, objectified evidence of personal taste, is the one which is the closest to the most irreproachable and inimitable form of accumulation, that is, the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power in the form of natural "distinction," personal "authority," or "culture." P. 282

- 29 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 291

By contrast, for those who, like the professionals, [...] the accumulation of economic capital merges with the accumulation of symbolic capital, that is, with the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability that are easily converted into political positions [...]

- 30 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 346-351

Bourdieu devotes pp. 346-351 to describing the declining petit bourgeoisie.

- 31 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 351-354

Bourdieu devotes pp. 351-354 to describing the executant petit bourgeoisie.

- 32 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 354-365

Bourdieu devotes pp. 354-365 to describing the new petit bourgeoisie.

- 33 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 365, 367

[...] sellers of symbolic goods and services [...] Because the new "substitution" industry which sells fine words instead of things to those who cannot afford the things [...] is perfectly adapted to act as a transmission belt and pull into the

race for consumption and competition those from whom it means to distinguish itself. P. 365

[...] the new ethical avant garde urges a morality of pleasure as duty. P. 367

- 34 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 114, 131

Endeavouring to reconstitute the units most homogeneous from the point of view of the conditions of production of habitus, i. e. with respect to the elementary conditions of existence and the resultant conditionings, one can construct a space whose three fundamental dimensions are defined by volume of capital, composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time (manifested by past and potential trajectory in social space). P. 114

[...] vertical movements upwards or downwards in the same vertical sector, that is, in the same field [...] and transverse movements from one field to another [...] P.131

- 35 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 125

Reproduction strategies [...] whereby individuals or families tend [...] to maintain or improve their position in the class structure, constitute a system which, being the product of a single unifying generative principle, tends to function and change in a systematic way [...] these strategies depend, first, on the volume and composition of the capital to be reproduced; and secondly, on the state of the instruments of reproduction [...] labor market, educational system, etc.

- 36 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 135, 137

The categories (relatively) richest in economic capital [...] tend to regress [...] By contrast, the fractions richest in cultural capital, (measured by educational qualifications) have greatly expanded. P. 135

The reconversion of economic capital into educational capital is one of the strategies which enable the business bourgeoisie to maintain the position of [...] its heirs, by enabling them to extract some of the profits [...] in the form of salaries [...] P. 137

- 37 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 143, 144

In a period of "diploma inflation" the disparity between the aspiration that the educational system produces and the opportunities it really offers is a structural reality which affects all the members of a school generation, but to a varying extent depending on the rarity of their qualifications and on their social origins [...] one of the paradoxes of what is classed "the democratization of schooling" is that only when the working classes, who had previously ignored or at best vaguely [...] P. 143 [...] concurred in the [...] ideology of "schooling as liberating force" [...] did they discovered [...] schooling as a conservative force, by being relegated [...] eliminated [...] working class youngsters [...] the most obvious victims of down-

classing [...] whose social identity and self-image have been undermined by a social system and an educational system [...] P. 144

- 38 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 147, 156, 157, 161, 163, 164, 165, 168

The strategies which one group may employ to try to escape down-classing and to return to their class trajectory, and those which another group employs to rebuild the interrupted path of a hoped-for trajectory, are one of the most important factors in the transformation of social structures. P. 147

It can be seen how naive it is to claim to settle the question of "social change" by locating "newness" or "innovation" in a particular 'site' in social space [...] But to characterize a class as "conservative" or "innovating" [...] by tacit recourse to an ethical standard which is necessarily situated socially, produces a discourse with states little more than the site it comes from, because it sweeps aside what is essential, namely, the field of struggles, the system of objective relations within which positions and postures are defined relationally and which governs even those struggles aimed at transforming it. Only by reference to the space in the game which defines them, and which they seek to maintain or redefine, can one understand the strategies, individual or collective, spontaneous or organized, which are aimed at conserving, transforming, or transforming as to conserve. P. 156

Reconversion strategies are nothing other than an aspect of the permanent actions and reactions whereby each group strives to maintain or change its position in the social structure, or, more precisely, [...] conserve only by changing [...] change so as to conserve. Frequently the actions whereby each class [...] works to win new advantages [...] are compensated for [...] by the reactions of the other classes, directed toward the same objective [...] cancel each other out [...] generate an overall displacement of the structure of the distribution between the classes [...] P. 157

[...] initial gaps are maintained P. 161

The dialectic of down-classing and up-classing which underlines a whole set of social processes presupposes and entails that all the groups concerned run in the same direction, towards the same objectives, the same properties, those which are designated by the leading group and which by definition are unavailable to the groups following, since, whatever those properties might be intrinsically, they are modified and qualified by their distinctive rarity and will no longer be what they are, once they are multiplied and made available to groups lower down. Thus, by an apparent paradox, the maintenance of order, that is, of the whole set of gaps [...] and thus of the relations of order which give a social formation its structure, is provided by an unceasing change in substantial (i. e. non-relational) properties. P.163

But the dialectic of down-classing and up-classing is predisposed to function also as an ideological mechanism, whose effects conservative discourse strives to intensify [...] the dominated groups are exposed to the illusion that they have only to wait in order to receive advantages which, in reality, they will obtain only by struggle [...] once this mechanism is understood, one perceives the futility of the abstract debates which arise from the opposition of permanence and change, structure and history [...] the real basis of these debates is the refusal to acknowledge that social contradictions and struggles are not, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order, that [...] permanence can be ensured by change, and the structure perpetuated by movement [...] P. 164

[...] the embourgeoisement of the working class, and those who try to refute them  
 [...] It is an integrative struggle, and by virtue of the initial handicaps, a reproductive struggle, since those who enter this chase, in which they are beaten before they start, as the constancy of the gaps testifies, implicitly recognize the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part. P. 165

[...] Everything suggests that an abrupt slump in the objective chances relative to subjective aspirations is likely to produce a break in the tacit acceptance which the dominated classes [...] previously granted to the dominant goals, and so to make possible a genuine inversion of the table of values. P. 168

- 39 Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. Pp. 387-390, 484

It is no doubt in the area of education and culture that the members of the dominated classes have least chance of discovering their objective interests and of producing and imposing the problematic most consistent with their interests. Awareness of the economic and social determinants of cultural dispossession in fact varies in almost inverse ratio to cultural dispossession [...] P. 387-390

[...] social subjects [...] are perhaps never less likely to transcend "the limits of their minds" than in the representation they have and give of their position, which defines those limits. P. 484



## CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this work has been to track and document key shifts that have taken place in the conceptualization of class. My interest was to raise questions about how class has been conceived in sociological theory, and more specifically in the work of Marx, Althusser, Laclau and Bourdieu. My inquiry has taken us full circle from an understanding of class as a direct function of material production and the central force propelling history (Marx), to class as secondary to the structures that order social relations (Althusser), to class as nonexistent (Laclau), and finally to an expanded concept of class as a metaphor for an inclusive set of social determinants (Bourdieu).

But in the introduction, I suggested an underlying secondary concern has to do with the question of whether the shifts in understandings of class in these works signals the end of the usefulness of class as a concept or a move towards a more encompassing, coherent, and workable definition. I intend to take that question up in this conclusion. I will argue that an analysis of the shifts unveils a path towards a more complex, encompassing reconceptualization taking place at the superstructural level.

It may be useful to begin by briefly summarizing each theorist:

In Chapter One I explained that class first emerged as a concept in the work of Karl Marx. Marx's contributions were made against the backdrop of an intellectual climate in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century dominated by the legacy of the Enlightenment which focused on the idea of improving the human condition, altering the human environment so as to allow for a fuller development of human capacities, and above all the idea of perfectibility or the possibility of overcoming human alienation.

The impact of these ideas is apparent in all of Marx's writing, but nowhere more notably than in Marx's preoccupation with the notion of human alienation and how to overcome such alienation.

Marx's formulations addressed a Hegelian legacy. Both young and old Hegelians Developed theories geared towards improving the human condition. Old Hegelians stressed the idea of history as the development of the spirit; young Hegelians centred their theories on man instead of spirit. In presenting his principle of material production and the consequent historical specificity of each social formation, Marx opposed them both. For Marx, the existence of classes as

a function of material production was the motor-force of history. Marx envisioned a class struggle that would end at the stage where one class is able to overcome its alienation and achieves self-realization for all.

For Marx, the essence of human reality was the reality of man's alienation in economic life. Marx devotes all his writing to resolving the problem of this human reality. From the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, an early contribution, to his *opus magnum*, *Das Kapital*, published in 1867, the underlying master theme in Marx is the overcoming of human alienation.

In the *Manuscripts* (1844), Marx identifies four impediments to men's control of their externalized power: alienation from the product; the act of production; themselves; and others.

*The German Ideology* (1846) is where Marx presents his principle of material production and the consequent historical specificity of each social formation. Marx describes man as essentially a producer, material production being the primary form of his productive activity and industry being his externalized power. Yet humans had yet to reach a point where they could express themselves freely in productive activity. They had no control over their externalized power. Marx visualizes the overcoming of alienation at the stage in which most individuals regain the productive forces that have been extracted from them, and self-activity coincides with material life.

In his *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx argues that the capitalist social formation forces humans to serve the valorization of value, instead of serving the development of man. By going beyond the atemporal economic categories of the classical political economists, and the atemporal categories of old and young Hegelians, Marx depicts the capitalist social formation as a specific historically given economic epoch characterized by the production of exchange value. In Marx's theory of value, "capital" is treated as a social relation of production; "classes" are treated as relations of production; "the value form" is seen as arising directly out of relations of production; the existence of "surplus value" is a specific form of class exploitation; and the overcoming of surplus value is seen as the overcoming of alienation. In other words, for Marx, the overcoming of surplus value, regaining control over productive forces, and regaining control of externalized power would ultimately lead to self-realization.<sup>1</sup>

To recap, the idea of improving the human condition, altering the environment in order to allow for a fuller development of human capacities, progress, and above all, overcoming alienation are the driving forces in Marx's intellectual production.<sup>1</sup>



Over a century later, capitalism had developed and expanded through the world's economies, and communist regimes had established themselves in Russia, China, and parts of Eastern Europe. During this period the concept of class undergoes three shifts away from Marx's formulations.

During the 1960s and amid the proliferation of Marxist thought in sociological literature, the centrality of class as a concept is lost. Althusser erupts onto the international intellectual scene with his publications of *Reading Capital* (1970) and *For Marx* (2005). As I explain in Chapter Two, in Althusser's writing class becomes nothing more than a secondary concept subsumed by structures.

When Althusser writes *For Marx* (2005) as a mature scholar, he explains the reason for the theoretical impasse between himself and Marx. He mentions the impact of wars on young students who were "suffering the terrible education of deeds, seeing only "the existence of classes and their aims," joining the Communist Party, and then "being cast onto the Party's political and ideological battles"; joining huge strikes and demonstrations; becoming "intellectuals in arms"; "making politics out of all writing"; "interpreting science as either bourgeoisie or proletarian"; and most of all, "slicing up the world with the single blade of class".<sup>2, 3</sup>

Althusser was also reacting to the French intellectuals surrounding him, and against the politics of some leaders of Communist regimes who were performing what Althusser describes as "the detour of theory". According to Althusser, this "detour of theory" consisted in a confusion between science and ideology and had the consequence of, again, leading to an interpretation of the world "through the single blade of class." Althusser sets out to re-install Marxism as a science and a philosophy. He maintains that Marxism is not a political doctrine, but "the theoretical domain of a fundamental investigation indispensable to the development of science and philosophy". This is his task in *Reading Capital* (1970).<sup>4</sup>

In *Reading Capital* (1970) Althusser presents his "second reading" of Marx's mature works, maintaining that Marx had left behind Hegelian philosophy and adopted in its place a Spinozean philosophy. Althusser states that Marx achieves in *Das Kapital* a philosophical revolution and makes a scientific discovery. The philosophical revolution consists in the production of new theoretical concepts. Among these were the concept of an economic object as different from its forms of existence, and therefore the concept of surplus value as distinct from its forms of existence. The scientific discovery consisted in Marx's exploration of structural causality and his observation that structures are determined by their own complexity and effects. Marx suggested that the global structure or mode of

production determines the regional structure, which in turn determines economic phenomena.<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Althusser's denial of the centrality of the concept of class comes in his discussion of regional structures. Althusser views the labour process as dominated by the physical laws of nature and technology. He views the regional structure as constituted by forces of production and relations of production or classes. Yet, these classes are not reducible to a simple relation between men, intersubjectivity, struggle, domination, and servitude. Rather, classes are converted into "agents" which are re-grouped according to physical laws and technology.<sup>2, 3,4</sup>

Twenty years later, the concept of class undergoes another shift in the work of political scientist and postmodernist Ernesto Laclau. In Chapter Three, I briefly outlined the two stages in Laclau's life. In his formative years Laclau experienced a country transitioning into modernity with large and diverse sectors of the population demanding social and political justice. In his later years Laclau saw stark changes in the international political panorama with the failure of the existing communist regimes from Budapest to Prague; the Polish political upheaval; Kabul and the aftermath of Communist rule in Vietnam and Cambodia.

In the first stage, Laclau was heavily influenced by the work of his professor, sociologist Gino Germani. More specifically, Laclau drew on Germani's theory of marginalization, his reinterpretation of "Pueblo" (plebs/populus) as the positive and valuable historical agent, and his ideas on populism and the importance of social movements.

Even fifty years later, Laclau leans heavily on Germani's concept of populism as positive, as a multi-class movement not identified with a left/right dichotomy but made up of opposing components drawn together by a desire for justice. Germani, together with Laclau and Romero, co-founded the course "Historia Social General," a study of the history of social movements, for the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires. In addition, Laclau's political involvement with Peronism in Argentina, a movement characterized by dispersed subject positions, a hegemonic recomposition of social identities, and a demand for justice, provided Laclau with the theoretical frame for thinking beyond class boundaries.

As a mature scholar, always seeking deeper paths in the analysis of political phenomena, Laclau began to question the intellectual ideas circulating at the time. He viewed critically Marxism and the proposals about how to get there, Marxist forms of analysis, the nature of the conflict, the meaning of the struggles and objectives, and mainly the ontological privilege of a universal class.

Immersed in a bi-focal intellectual context (structuralism vs. postmodernism), Laclau formulates, from a postmodernist perspective, a critique of the theoretical foundation of Marxist theory, and deconstructs the category of its historical subject. Laclau presents, instead, hegemony as a concept through which contemporary social struggles can be understood. He proposes a new historical agent - "Pueblo" (plebs/populus). Pueblo are Plebs aspiring to become populus.

For Laclau, the new feminism, the social movement of ethnic minorities, the movements organized around ecological and antinuclear struggles, all signify the emergence of popular and collective identities different from class. Laclau posits the existence of a multiplicity of diverse political struggles. These new forms of social conflict make him question the nature and identity of the Marxist historical agent, namely, the ontological centrality of the proletariat as the universal subject immersed in a structured society. Laclau questions a society conceived in terms of a class structure, as a transparent order or an intelligible totality. He questions the immanence of history as the history of classes.<sup>5, 6</sup>

The final shift in understandings of class I examined (Chapter Four) occurs in the 1980s in the work of French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. In that chapter I showed how Bourdieu resurrected the concept of class and restored it to its initial centrality; indeed he expanded its parameters.

The deep sense of alienation that Bourdieu felt as a student with lower class origins among the privileged classes led to reflections that ultimately resulted in the publication of *The Inheritors* (1979). The book presented an analysis of French university culture, depicting the existing hostility towards popular classes. It also depicted the contradiction between the preached ideas of universality and the existing prejudices against lower classes.

Bourdieu's subsequent experience as a recruit in the French army in Algiers and his ethnographic studies there ignited what was to become Bourdieu's central underlying theoretical preoccupation: the questions of "how stratified social systems of hierarchy, dominate, persist, and reproduce, without resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members"; "how culture transmits systems of dispositions which engenders practices", and "how culture embodies power relations".<sup>7</sup>

In exploring these questions, Bourdieu confronted the debate on subjectivism vs. objectivism as well as Marxist ideas circulating at the time. He believed that none of these theoretical traditions encouraged the development of an independent base for social theory and empirical research. Bourdieu set out to fill the gap, transcending the oppositions subjectivism/objectivism and positivism/idealism,

and critically analyzing the existing Marxist currents. One prominent theme emerged in Bourdieu's writings: the problem of relating cognitive structures to social structures.<sup>8</sup>

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu seeks to unravel the basis of the systems of classification which maintain and reproduce the social structure.<sup>9</sup> He achieves this by identifying a new dimension situated between the conditions of existence and classes. The new dimension is the relationship of agents to their conditions of existence. Herein, Bourdieu argues, lies the "habitus," the classification schemes that create class.<sup>9</sup>

Bourdieu argues that while relating to their conditions of existence, agents acquire a representation of their own practices and of the social structure, that is, the class structure. More importantly, these representations form an integral part of their social reality. It is here where the agents' cognitive mental activity produces classifying and classified schemes. It is here where agents incorporate the class structure. The habitus is this structuring (and structured) mental activity of agents which binds them to the oppositions of the social world, and therefore to the prohibitions and liberties inherent in each class condition. For Bourdieu, only a change in the subject and object can generate a rupture or what he describes as a disengagement of the objective opportunities with regard to subject hopes. Only in this way can the habitus be overcome.<sup>9</sup>

I turn now to the secondary question I posited in the introduction, namely, whether these shifts indicate an abandonment of class as a concept or a move towards a more encompassing and inclusive understanding of class. If the latter, what paths are open for a future conceptualization of class?

To answer this question, I will begin by looking at what recent discussions have had to say about sociologists' treatment of class. Then, I connect those discussions to what I have done in my dissertation, focusing particularly on Bourdieu and Laclau.

My introduction covered Wright's (2015) assessment of the latest searches for innovation on the concept of class. Wright focuses on the work of Grusky and Weeden (1998) (2000) (2005) (2012), Piketty (2013), Standing (2011) (2013) and Sorensen (2000).

In introducing the notion of "micro-classes," Grusky and Weeden (1998) (2000) (2005) propose a new framework for class analysis as an alternative to conventional class categories. They suggest that the concept of micro-classes offers a fuller explanation of life chances, income, political attitudes, and the cultural assets of individuals. Wright (2015) concedes that this framework may

explain variations across individuals. But he insists that if the purpose of our inquiry is to address the central theoretical agenda in Marxist analysis and to consider the potential for social change and emancipatory transformations, such micro-class analysis is inadequate.<sup>11</sup>

Piketty's (2013) approaches the study of inequality by building on two dimensions of economic inequality, income, and wealth. His central observation is the increase in the concentration of income and wealth taking place in the wealthiest segments of the population. Piketty's work is an important contribution to the demonstration of the self-valorization of value. Wright acknowledges the importance of the statistics that Piketty presents to support his observations but finds that his writing suffers from an ambiguous class analysis. More specifically, he finds ambiguities in Piketty's income and wealth dimensions. For Wright, those two dimensions include contradictory class locations. In addition, Wright states that if we want to transform power relations, we must go beyond economic categories of inequality into a sociological analysis of class.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Standing (2011, 2014) focuses on the sector of the population most affected by the precariousness generated by the current economy, identifying this sector as the "precariat class". For Standing there is a difference between the "working class" and the "precariat class". Standing claims that the precariat does not enjoy the long-term stable jobs secured by unionization (relations of production). Moreover, the precariat class lacks access to all the non-money wage sources the working class has, such as pensions, vacations, and support networks (relations of distribution). In addition, Standing claims that the precariat lacks any of the rights provided to citizens in the core of the working class (relations to the state). Wright questions whether this set of economic characteristics is sufficient to describe a social category as a class. He reminds us that the most basic criterion of class analysis is "material interests". So, to claim that the precariat and the working class are two distinct classes is to claim that they have distinct material interests, which is not the case. Both positions could be enhanced in an alternative economy.<sup>13</sup>

Sorensen's (2000) goal is to reconfigure the concept of exploitation considering 21st century conditions. He does so by linking the concept of exploitation with the concept of economic rent, defined as the payment of assets that exceed the price sufficient to cover costs. Exploitation then becomes inequality generated by ownership or possession of rent-producing assets. Wright (2015) responds by arguing that rents do not provide a full account of the explanatory mechanism of exploitation, since exploitation requires the expropriation of "labour effort" rather than a simple advantage. Wright (2015) concludes that the concept of exploitation cannot be reduced to advantages obtained by asset-owners under conditions of imperfect competition.<sup>14</sup>

The preceding discussion shows, if nothing else, that the quest for an adequate understanding of class inequalities continues. It is my contention that the problems and issues that arise in current debates can be addressed by going back and looking at the writing of previous theorists, especially Bourdieu and Laclau.

Unlike the theorists that Wright examines, Bourdieu rescues and brings to the fore the essential observation and forgotten metaphorical quest of Marxist class analysis - the existence of a structure and the idea of emancipatory alternatives, the possibility of the transformation of class relations, and most of all, the imperative to understand the nature of class oppression in the context of the present advanced and complex industrial civilization. Bourdieu achieves this task by unveiling the existence of the habitus, the genesis of the system of representations agents have of themselves and of the social structure, and by demonstrating how these systems of representations perpetuate the class structure. Bourdieu resurrects the centrality of the concept of class. He depicts the existence of a definite social structure in complex modern society. He brings forward the Marxist concept of class as the historical agent. He defines class as much for its consumption (its being perceived) as for its position in the relations of production (its being). He maintains the existence of an integrative class struggle and posits emancipation as the overcoming of the habitus.

Laclau, on the other hand, denies the existence of a structured society and presents instead the concept of hegemony as unstructured, as a logic of articulation. Laclau proposes to move beyond the concept of "class" into that of "collective identities". He constructs a different historical agent. For Laclau, the historical agent is not "class" but "plebs/populous," formed by an array of actors.

So, we are left in the work of these theorists with two contrasting views on the concept of class. While the contrast between them seems stark and makes it unlikely that they can be reconciled, I believe that there is common ground between them and that in reflecting on this common ground the debate about class can be advanced.

To develop this argument, I return to Gramsci's theoretical innovation on classical Marxist theory, namely, Gramsci's belief that the possibility of change exists at the superstructural level, and not at the structural level as classical Marxist theory posited.

In both Marx and Gramsci, "civil society" has a prominent place. Civil society represents a positive movement of historical development. Yet there is a

difference. For Marx, “civil society” is the form of intercourse determined by the existing productive forces. Therefore, it exists at the structural level.<sup>15</sup>

For Gramsci, “civil society” belongs to the superstructural moment because it includes not only the whole of material relations (commercial, industrial life) but the whole of ideological-cultural relations, namely, the whole of spiritual and intellectual life and the political and cultural hegemony of a social group. Civil society is the moment when the active historical subject or “collective will” interprets the existing economic structure and its correspondent social relations. Civil society becomes the moment of catharsis, the moment when necessity is resolved allowing the collective will to bring about a new “historical block”, a new historical situation which includes structure and superstructure.<sup>16</sup>

Against the view which claims to resolve the historical problem of class struggles by operating on economic relations, Gramsci maintains that change is always considered as a function of the transformation which must first take place in the ideological-cultural relations of civil society. This is why for Gramsci; ideologies are not a justification of power forms, as in classical Marxism. Rather, they are forces capable of creating a new history.<sup>17</sup>

Gramsci draws a distinction between civil society and political society, and between cultural leadership and political leadership. In Gramsci, cultural leadership or “hegemony” acquires a more prominent meaning than political leadership (collective will). Cultural leadership incorporates political leadership, but also goes beyond it to encompass moral and intellectual reform. By cultural leadership Gramsci means “the transformation of customs and culture”. For Gramsci, the conquest of hegemony (or cultural leadership) precedes the conquest of power, since “hegemony” embraces not only the party but all the other institutions of society. For Gramsci, “hegemony” aims not only at the formation of a collective will capable of creating a new state apparatus, but also at elaborating a new conception of the world.<sup>18</sup>

Gramsci’s acknowledgement of the superstructure, and in it, the cultural dimension, provides the link between Bourdieu and Laclau. It is at the superstructural level where Bourdieu and Laclau meet.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

Bourdieu shares with Gramsci the notion of culture as a pivotal element. Within the cultural realm Bourdieu unravels a new dimension existing between the conditions of existence and class. The existence of the habitus. This structuring and structured activity that agents form while trying to apprehend the reality around them, a structuring activity which crystallizes into the naturalization and assimilation of the hierarchical social structure. Bourdieu cites Gramsci’s description of the self-perception of the worker as someone who “tends to bring

his executant dispositions with him into every area of life." In doing so, Bourdieu is describing the habitus and the worker's naturalized recognition of dispossession.<sup>22</sup> Both Gramsci and Bourdieu coincide also in stressing the importance of culture for the transformation of society. For Gramsci, transformation lies in the cultural element of the superstructure. For Bourdieu, transformation is dependent on overcoming the habitus that exists at the superstructural level.

Laclau acknowledges and adopts from Gramsci the notions of "hegemony," "historical block," "collective will," "articulation," "intellectual and moral leadership". Laclau asserts that in Gramsci's work, the Marxist concept of class as an anthropologically privileged agent, is replaced by the principle of class identity as articulation. He is referring here to the articulation of social agents from diverse structural relations in search of democratic revindications, forming hegemonic identities. Laclau builds on this and presents us with a different historical agent - plebs/populus. According to Laclau, Gramsci comprehended the complexity of advanced industrial civilization and the density of its social, political, and economic relations.<sup>23, 24</sup>

Do these convergences between Bourdieu and Laclau at the superstructural level illuminate a possible path forward for the future of the concept of class? My response here is that at the very least they prompt a whole series of pivotal questions:

Could a future understanding of class acknowledge the present structure of society while at the same time initiating change at the superstructural level? Is the overcoming of the habitus a necessary precursor for the overcoming of surplus value?

Could a future understanding of class blend two historical agents - class / plebs overcoming the habitus?

Are we approaching an understanding of class prompted by a coincidence of diverse sectors demanding emancipation and societal transformation?

Could the agents of change be conceptualized as concrete agents articulated from diverse structural relations, searching for equality?

Are we approaching an understanding of class as formations of complex and collective wills who share ideas and values in search of democratic revindications, and who are overcoming the habitus or the systems of classification and dispositions acquired in their relation to their conditions of existence?



Finally, will history uncover new ways to overcome surplus value?

These are all questions that I believe my analysis raises. They are important questions that warrant further research. In addressing them I believe there is the possibility of moving the sociological discussion of class forward in meaningful ways. I offer my analysis and the stage it sets for pursuing these questions as the main contribution of my dissertation.

### Concluding Thoughts

In the dissertation's introduction I noted that my goal was to try to find an answer to the question of why there was such confusion around the meaning of the concept of class, a concept so central to sociological theorizing since the days when the discipline first emerged. I believed that this task necessitated looking more carefully at key shifts in conceptions of class over time. This led me to an in-depth reading of the works of Marx, Althusser, Laclau and Bourdieu.

My analysis focused on capturing the shifts and points of divergence among these theorists. I asked if these shifts rendered class irrelevant as a concept in the context of current sociological theorizing, or whether they showed a movement towards a fuller, more encompassing, and ultimately more useful understanding of class. I concluded, and attempted to explain why I believe the latter is the case.

In the end, my quest threw up as many questions as it answered, questions that I believe are pivotal to the discipline's ongoing efforts to grapple with social injustice and inequality.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Coser, Lewis A. 1977. *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. 2nd. ed. N. Y. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers. Pp. 68, 73

[...] four major themes stand out; the idea of progress [...] the idea of alienation; the idea of perfectibility; and the holistic view of society and historical epochs. P. 68  
The State of Germany, the Young Hegelians asserted, was marked by blind unreason and spiritual chaos [...] P. 73

The concepts of progress, alienation, perfectibility, and the holistic view of society and historical epochs are expanded in Pp. 43 to 87.

- 2 <https://stanford.library.sydney.edu.au/archives/spr2018/entries/althusser/>  
Part 1

Part 1 describes Althusser's youth. In 1939, after gaining entrance to ENS was mobilized into the army. He was captured in Vannes, and was a prisoner of war. In 1945 Althusser associated with leftist movements. Begun to suffer recurrent bouts of depression. In 1961 Althusser begun with his epistemological break: his debate on what constitutes the core of Marxist philosophy, and searched for a scientific alternative to the humanist revisions of Marxism.

- 3 Althusser, Louis. 2005. "Today" in *For Marx*. London. Verso. Pp. 21,22.

History: it had stolen ... bourgeois science, proletarian science.

- 4 Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. 1970. *Reading Capital*. London. NLB. Pp. 179-180

[...] regional structure [...] [...] the fact that the structure of the relations of production determines the 'places and functions' occupied [...] by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are 'supports' (Truger) of these functions. [...] relations of production [...] are irreducible to any anthropological inter-subjectivity [...]

5 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Peronist> Pp. 3, 4

The peronist movement arose as the personal following of Col. Juan Peron. In 1943, after participating in a successful military coup, Peron became Argentina's minister of labour, a position through which he enacted various social measures to help the country's growing class of urban industrial workers. Gaining the admiration of the masses, Peron called for the state to take a leading role in the economy to ensure cooperation between businesses and labour. In 1946 he was elected to the presidency with the strong support of the workers and their labour unions; he also gained the support of many lower-middle-class citizens and of the country's industrialists. [...] Peronist movement [...] was composed of many divergent elements, from left-wing trade unionists to right-wing authoritarian nationalist. [...] the movement remained the main civilian contender for power in Argentina.

<https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/ernesto.laclau> Pp. 1,2

Laclau participated in several socialist political agroupations and the Peronist Party, always searching dialogue with the masses or "pueblo."

6 Critchley, Simon and Oliver Marchart, eds. 2006. *Laclau: A Critical Reader*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 1

The reciprocal contamination of the political and the theoretical domains can be witnessed in his own intellectual biography.

7 Swartz, David. 1997. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Pp. 1-51 and P. 6

the question of how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce intergenerationally without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members.

8 Swartz, David. 1997. *Culture and Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. P. 49

Four fundamental conceptual issues emerge: the problem of relations between individual dispositions and external structures; the problem of agency in structuralist analysis; the problem of relating cognitive structures to social structures; and more generally the problem of relations between material and symbolic aspects of social life.

9 Brubaker Rogers. 1985. "Rethinking Classical Theory: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu" *Theory and Society*. Vol. 14, n. 6. Pp. 747-748

[...] from Marx [...] the primacy of class as the unity of analysis [...]  
 [...] from Durkheim [...] the program for a genetic sociology of symbolic forms [...]  
 [...] from Weber [...] symbolic goods [...] practices [...] charisma [...] legitimacy [...]

10 Wright, Erik Olin. 2015. *Understanding Class*. London. Verso. Pp. 93, 98, 100, 107, 108

Mann adopts quite a restrictive understanding of the explanatory relevance of class, seeing class almost exclusively in terms of ways in which "organized collective actors" are formed around economic resources. P. 93  
 the structure of society is at its core determined, not by [...] but by power organizations. P. 98  
 Within Mann's general framework [...] classes are not sets of locations-within-social-relations, nor are they [...] rather they are a particular kind of collective actor formed into organizations that deploy economic power resources P. 100  
 My central criticism of Michael Mann's "announced" strategy of class analysis is his dismissal of the relevance of studying what he calls "latent classes." P. 107  
 [...] it is worthwhile to try to understand the general properties of these sets of class relations (class structures) that generate these limits. P. 108

11 Wright, Erik Olin. 2015. *Understanding Class*. London. Verso. Pp. 113, 115, 125

At its core, their proposal is to build class analysis on the basis of highly disaggregated occupational categories. P.113  
 Grusky and Weeden argue that this homogenization of conditions operates much more intensively at the level of detailed occupations. P. 115  
 However, if one's explanatory agenda concerns the potential for progressive social change [...] What we need is class analysis that moves across these levels of analysis and explores their interconnection. P. 125

12, 13 Wright, Erik Olin. 2015. *Understanding Class*. London. Verso. Pp. 129, 130, 135, 136, 158, 160, 161, 162, 164, 173

Piketty's book is built around the detailed analysis of the trajectory of two dimensions of economic inequality and their interconnection: income and wealth. P.129  
 In 2012 the richest 10% of the population receives just over half of all income generated in the US economy. P. 130  
 But the absence of a sustained class analysis of the social processes by which income is generated and appropriated obscures some of the critical social mechanisms at work. This way of treating the earnings of the CEOs becomes less obvious when we think of the position of the CEOs [...] as embedded in class relations. P. 135  
 This means that they cannot [...] be described as simply "labor". They occupy [...] contradictory locations within class relations [...] P.136  
 The patterns of home ownership are completely different [...] P. 138  
 It is really the intersection of economic precarity with political marginality that most sharply creates a boundary dividing the precariat from the working class. p. 158  
 In terms of relations of production, he writes: "The precariat consists of people living through insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment." p. 160  
 The distinctive characteristic of the precariat is that it lacks access to all the nonmoney wage sources of income. P. 161

The precariat [...] “lacks many of the rights provided to citizens in the core of the working class and salariat.” Pp. 161-162

The most criterion, used in both the Marxist and Weberian traditions of class analysis, is “material interests” [...] P. 164

The concepts we use should have precise meanings that illuminate the nature of shared and conflicting interests and potential collective capacities. P. 173

14 Wright, Erik Olin. 2015. *Understanding Class*. London. Verso. Pp. 81, 92

He proposes a simple [...] alternative by identifying exploitation with economic rents. “Owing assets of various sorts gives people a stream of income [...] when those assets are deployed in production or exchanged in a market.” “Rents are payments to assets that exceed the competitive price or the price sufficient to cover costs and therefore exceeding what is sufficient to bring about the employment of the asset”. I propose [...] to restrict exploitation to inequality generated by ownership or possession of “rent-producing assets.” P.81

The concept of economic rent therefore can play a useful role in the theory of class and exploitation by clarifying the range of mechanisms by which exploitation is enhanced or counteracted, but not by reducing the concept of exploitation simply to advantages obtained by asset-owners under conditions of imperfect competition and imperfect information. P. 92

15 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. Pp. 30-31

[...] it would be tempting to say that for Gramsci civil society includes not “the whole of material relationships; but the whole of ideological-cultural relations; not the whole of commercial and industrial life, but the whole of spiritual and intellectual life.”

16 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 32

[...] this includes spontaneous or voluntary forms of organization.

17 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 34

The superstructure is the moment of catharsis, that is, the moment in which necessity is resolved into liberty, [...] as the awareness of necessity.

18 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 34

Both, the historical past and existing social relations constitute the objective conditions which are recognized by the active historical subject which Gramsci identifies in the collective will. It is only when the objective conditions have been recognized that the active subject becomes free and it is able to transform reality [...] Structure ceases to be an external force which crushed man [...] and is

transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethical-political form, and into a source of new initiatives.

- 19 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 39

Gramsci proposes two fundamental themes for studying the modern party; one on the formation of the "collective will" (which is the theme of the political leadership), and the other on "moral and intellectual reform" (which is the theme of cultural leadership) [...] reform [...] it refers to a transformation of customs and culture.

- 20 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 34

[...] the ethical political moment, [...] dominates the economic moment.

- 21 Mouffe, Chantal. eds. 2015. *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*. N. Y. Routledge. P. 40

Gramsci's hegemony includes [...] both the moment of political leadership and the moment of cultural leadership. Therefore, it embraces, as its own bearers, not only the party, but all the other institutions of civil society [...] which have some connection with the elaboration and diffusion of culture. As regards to the function, hegemony not only aims at the formation of a collective will, capable of creating a new state apparatus and of transforming society, but it also aims at elaborating and propagating a new conception of the world.

- 22 Bourdieu Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard University Press. P. 386

It was Antonio Gramsci who said somewhere that the worker tends to bring his executant dispositions with him into every area of life [...] indices of dispossession [...]

- 23 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. Pp. 67- 68, 71

For Gramsci, political subjects are not [...] classes, but complex collective wills [...] the collective will is a result of the politico-ideological articulation of dispersed and fragmented historical forces [...] presupposes the attainment of a "cultural-social" unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, on the basis of an equal and common conception of the world. P. 67-68

[...] articulations whose success was not guaranteed by any law of history. P. 68

The Gramscian theory of hegemony [...] accepts social complexity as the very condition of political struggle and [...] sets the basis for a democratic practice of politics, compatible with a plurality of historical subjects. Gramsci [...] his theory of hegemony as articulation entails the idea of "democratic plurality." P. 71

24 Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London. Verso. Pp. 66-67

It is in this movement from the "political" to the "intellectual and moral" plane, that the decisive transition takes place toward the concept of hegemony beyond "class alliances". [...] moral and intellectual leadership requires that an ensemble of "ideas and values" be shared by a number of sectors [...]

Intellectual and moral leadership constitutes, according to Gramsci, a higher synthesis, a "collective will" which, through ideology, becomes the organic cement unifying a "historical block." p. 66

The analysis conceptually defines a new series of relations among groups which baffles their structural location within the revolutionary and relational schema of economism. At the same time, ideology is signalled as the precise terrain on which these relations are constituted. Ideology is not defined with a "system of ideas" or with "false consciousness" of social agents: it is instead an organic and relational whole, [...] which welds together a historical block around a number of basic articulatory principles. P. 67





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