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Paul Bowman
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Rethinking Class: From Recomposition to Counterpower

Paul Bowman

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social order. This remains as true today as it was at the beginning of capitalist class society. In answer to the question we posed ourselves at the start of this article — is class still a useful tool for the project of social transformation — we can conclude that it is not only useful but necessary.

Simply put, so long as the majority of people do not perceive their material interests to be in some way fundamentally in conflict with the basic mechanics of capitalism, then so long will the project of ending capitalism with the consent and participation of the vast majority of society remain a pipe dream. To paraphrase Voltaire's quip about the necessity of inventing god, just because class really does exist, does not mean it isn't necessary to continually re-invent it. Today, in the 21st century, the project of the recomposition of an antagonistic class counterpower that can not only resist capital, but work towards its destruction remains as vital as ever.

to be heard — but not in the working class itself; here there is no longer any room for ideology.

Today we need to understand ourselves not from a one-sided perspective, but from a many-sided, all-round perspective. One that starts not from the cycle of capital's reproduction, but from our own cycle of our reproduction as social human beings. In that sense, wherever there is confrontation between people's direct material and social needs and the drive for profit accumulation, there is class struggle in potential. Of course to move from potential to fact, people need to see the common ground between their individual needs and those of others in the same situation of conflict with the system as them. This is not the automatic product of mysterious "historical forces" but the practical task of organising.

Although wage labour is a key part of the class conflict, it is not the whole of the class relation, by any means. The confrontation between capital's drive for expansion and the cycle of human self-reproduction can take the form of confrontations around so-called "primitive accumulation" — the ongoing forcing off the land of traditional peoples engaged in subsistence economies — such as continues today in the Amazon basin and the forests of India and many other places around the globe. It includes the struggles of landless peasants for land, it includes the struggles of slum-dwellers against developers trying to clear them out of their homes for new development. It includes the struggles of unemployed single mothers in Western European council estates for decent childcare and facilities for children that will give them options beyond joyriding and drug dealing.

Conclusion

The class line remains the San Andreas fault-line of capitalist society. It remains the only fault-line with the power to create a rupture strong enough to bring down the whole edifice of the capitalist

In Paul Bowman's article 'Rethinking Class: From Recomposition to Counter-Power', he poses the question "Is class still a useful idea?" or "should we instead just dispense with it and go with the raw econometrics of inequality?" He draws a line between revolutionary class analysis and universalist utopianism and goes on to explore the history of different ideas of class and the elusive revolutionary subject. After exploring the intersecting lines of class and identity, he poses the challenge that we as libertarians face as we strive to create "cultural and organisational forms of class power [that] do not unconsciously recreate the… hierarchies of identity and exclusion" that are the hallmark of the present society.

If we were to strip the anarchist programme of the early 21st century down to its irreducible components, they would have to include at least these four – direct democracy, direct action, recomposition and full communism.

Most readers will have at least have heard of the first two and the last one – even if the latter passes nowadays, albeit undeservedly, more as a humorous internet meme, than a viable goal. However this article is about the less familiar third term, recomposition, and particularly around the category that gives it life – class.

Against universalism, against utopianism

The term class divides people into two camps. One which seems to uphold its validity with an almost cult-like intensity, and a much larger camp that is at best undecided, but mostly turned off entirely by it – and especially so by the apparently religious fervour of the small minority in the first camp.

Given the fact of this starting point, the most obvious question is — Is class still a useful idea? Is there any mileage to be gained from including class in our analysis or should we instead, just dispense with it and go with the raw econometrics of inequality?

Today books like "The Spirit Level"[1], try to recast the old discourses of socialism against poverty and class injustice, as appeals to universal rationality. Inequality, they say, leads to measurably worse social outcomes on a whole number of levels. The graphs and the statistics they muster, should surely convince any putative social engineers, with a scientifically neutral interest in the social policies most proven to maximise social utility, of the sanity, the "rationality" of more egalitarian policies.

Similarly, inspired by the success of Occupy Wall Street in putting the whole 1% versus 99% meme on the social agenda[2], sources as diverse as popular science magazines like New Scientist publish special reports[3] on the scientifically measurable ills of inequality, and locally organisations like TASC[4] regularly publish data on inequality in Ireland.

What useful extra does class add to that? In what way does class step outside the dead end of the "rationalist" programme? Simply put, by rejecting the unspoken, underlying presumption of such a programme – by rejecting universalism — and its bogus moralising.

A class analysis accepts the truth that the status quo is not against everyone's interests. That being the case, any attempt to construct a programme of radical social change in the name of the "general interest" is doomed to failure, because there can be no universal interests so long as the interests of a minority resist change. In fact it is the very ability of a tiny minority to make its own interests rule over those of the vast majority that is one of the most important things that needs to change.

[1] "The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone", Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett, Penguin Books Limited, 2010. As reviewed in IAR 2 by Gavin Gleason.

[2] Although perhaps the WSM should take some credit/blame for this meme, given our involvement in forming the 1% Network in 2010, a year before Occupy Wall Street launched this particular meme into the global mediasphere.

[3] For example see www.newscientist.com

[4] See www.tascnet.ie

A libertarian project of recomposition

Having looked at the intersection between class and identity, we can return to the task of outlining a libertarian perspective on class recomposition.

First the challenge of prefiguration is that in the process of creating the cultural and organisational forms of class power and autonomy, we do not unconsciously recreate and mimic the decompositional hierarchies of identity and exclusion that permeate the society around us. That is to say, we do not aim to include women, people of colour and others within our organisations simply on an instrumental basis that, together, all the people excluded from the "norm" of white, cis, het, male, able-bodied, working age workers, actually make up the majority of our class, but because this reflects the kind of society we aim to create.

When we talk of a project of class recomposition, we need to be careful that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Particularly of those late 19th and early 20th century socialists who constructed a class identity in a one-sidedly economistic way. That is, one that sees the class from the perspective of capital — i.e. as composed of the possessors of labour power, as "factory hands" or simply as "mere workers". Even though the socialist movement of the turn of the 20th century tried to reclaim the identity of "worker" as a positive identity, even a heroic figure — the good worker versus the bad capitalist — far too much was given away by simply trying to invert the capitalist framing of the exploited class as mere workers. As Mario Tronti summed it up so neatly already in the 1960s:

> Workers have no time for the dignity of labor. The "pride of the producer" they leave entirely to the boss. Indeed, only the boss now remains to declaim eulogies in praise of labor. True, in the organized working-class movement this traditional chord is, unfortunately, still

to break the symmetry, break the chain of the endless reproduction of "more of the same". This means that the work of political recomposition, of building organs of counterpower must be prefigurative in struggling to avoid reproducing not only the exclusion of identities constructed as "other", but also the tyranny of experts, the dominance of the "big mouths" and all those who leverage inequality of knowledge or experience to marginalise the rest of the class — they don't call these things "*human capital*" for nothing. But we must be clear that this is not different in either degree or quality from the necessity to work against all the elements of decomposition that keep our class divided and structured by the needs of capital rather than those of our own.

If the "middle class" does not have any of the objective determinations that could make it an actual class, or transform the class struggle into a three-way fight, it does have a significant reality in the sphere of subjectification. One that any attempt to organise prefiguratively and horizontally needs to be aware of and challenge. But we need to remember that at its root class is something people do, rather than something they are. This cuts both ways. On the one hand, a political self-identification with the class, and renunciation of self-identification as "middle class" does not help mitigate the destructive effects of continuing to behave in the domineering ways proper to the most empowered fractions of the class, trained and socialised for roles exerting social direction or control over others. But on the other hand, recourse to the essentialist politics of "privilege" or guilt, have no productive role to play in creating truly horizontal spaces and practices of cooperation. As Foucault put it, power is not some sceptre-like object that can either be seized or possessed (particularly not passively), but is only operative in being exercised.

But more than this, a class perspective is not simply the foundation of a critique of what exists, and an analysis of what needs to change, but also implies a strategy for how that change could be brought about. In the matter of strategy, a class perspective rejects the "rationalist" programme as utopian.

What does it mean to say that a programme for social change is utopian? In the first instance it means that the programme has no obvious strategy for how it is to be brought about, other than a vague notion of if you educate enough people about its desirability then somehow it will be brought about through weight of numbers and the force of public opinion.

On a deeper level, utopian programmes are differentiated from instrumental and prefigurative ones on the basis of the means-ends relationship. To start with the most familiar case, instrumentalism is the position that "the end justifies the means". That is to say, that if the end, or goal, is one that significantly increases social good or the welfare of the masses, then any squeamishness about using deceptive, manipulative or manifestly unjust methods to achieve it, is a case of misplaced scruples, or "bourgeois morality". In other words, for instrumentalists, there is a total disconnect between means and ends.

The prefigurative approach holds, by contrast, that there is an inherent link between means and ends. For example, if kangaroo courts or summary execution are used to rid society of a genuine evil-doer, the use of improper methods lays the foundation for miscarriages of justice in the future. The means used to achieve a goal, necessarily leave its mark in the end result, in the prefigurative view. For example, the famous Sonvilier Circular issued to all sections of the First International by the Jura Federation in 1871, declared that

> The future society must be nothing else than the universalization of the organization that the International has formed for itself. We must therefore strive to make

> this organization as close as possible to our ideal. How could one expect an egalitarian society to emerge out of an authoritarian organization? It is impossible. The International, embryo of the future society, must from now on faithfully reflect our principles of federation and liberty, and must reject any principle tending toward authority and dictatorship.[5]

However, recognising the link between the means employed and the ends achieved, as prefiguration does, must not mean mistaking the one for the other, for confusing means and ends.

This error, of confusing means and ends, is the starting point for utopianism. From the utopian viewpoint the end and the means are simply one. If you want to change social relations all you have to do is for a group of well-meaning people to voluntarily begin to practice the new relations amongst themselves and spread their adoption through the power of example, education and propaganda etc. This perspective erroneously confuses interpersonal relations, which can, with effort and struggle, be changed by the voluntary actions of a few, with social relationships, which cannot.

To take another historical example, Robert Owen, in his 1819 "An Address to the Working Classes" states that because the new (communist) society will be an improvement in the conditions of all members of society, therefore there is no fundamental conflict between classes in the here and now to prevent its achievement. Hence why Owen is generally categorised as a utopian socialist (and not just by Marxists).

Despite the clear difference between prefigurative and utopian approaches, the two continue to be confused today. Partly this is deliberate on the part of instrumentalists like Leninists and other authoritarian Marxists and socialists, who are hostile to prefiguration on principle. But partly it is genuine confusion on behalf

[5] As quoted in James Guillaume, "Michael Bakunin" — www.marxists.org

defenders of capitalism and its class system. So the question arises, which of these two pictures is correct? Despite the occasional reliance by defenders of the coordinator class thesis, on popular usage and understanding of the term "middle class", in fact they are not mutually compatible. The argument here is that it is the popular usage that is closer to the truth. The so-called middle class are less a vision from some new dystopian future, and more of symptom of what's wrong with the here and now.

When we add to the lack of any independent historical role, the lack of any clear-cut autonomous relation to the appropriation of surplus value, in the a way analogous to how the different fractions of the capitalist ruling class extract identifiable portions of total surplus value — the landowning class (rent), the industrial capitalist (profit) or the financial capitalist (interest) — we can conclude, albeit summarily, that the middle class does not in fact have an objective determination in the existing relations of production,

So if the idea of the middle class as a "proper class" in the sense that we have defined so far, doesn't stand up, is the term simply empty of any meaningful reference? If we are really all equally proletarians, are all proletarians then really equal? Clearly not. The class is traversed by stratifications and hierarchies based on inequalities of economic and social power. Capitalist society is as hierarchical and authoritarian in practice, as it is egalitarian and democratic in theory. And for better or worse, capitalist society is the one within which we have been socialised. To some degree then, most of us have, consciously or not, internalised at least some of the forms, culture and ideology of existing society. This has a practical effect on every attempt at self-organisation that consequently always runs, as a primary danger, the risk of recreating the very forms and hierarchies that shape the society that shaped us. The DNA of capitalist alienated relations lies within each and every one of us, and in order to prevent the development of organs of counterpower being simply subverted and recuperated into new adjuncts to the established power, a conscious effort must be made

out of the tendency that decided to see the bureaucratic Communist Party *apparatchiks* then running the USSR as a new class. This solved for them a problem specific to the peculiarly stageist unilinear theory of history then held by orthodox Marxists. Namely that after feudalism, the only possible modes of production were capitalism and then socialism. As the USSR didn't fit easily in either category, this caused major cognitive dissonance for the disorientated Trotskyists. However the "new class" theory still held to the unilinear schema by asserting — against all plausibility — that the new class society was beyond capitalism, on the monorail of history. And hence, that the backwards peasant economy of Russia, shattered by world war and civil war as it was, had somehow managed to leapfrog over the capitalist powers of the West to become a vision of the future, not as shining dream for workers, but as nightmare. The legacy of these past peculiarities still remain within the coordinator class concept today, in that its defendants still maintain that the true danger of the coordinator class is its potential to seize control in a revolutionary situation and create a new class society, as tyrannical as Stalin's USSR or Mao's China, after capitalism. And in a way they are right. That is, that the concept of a third class really only makes sense if it presents an alternative to either the maintenance of existing class society — the historical role of the capitalist class — or the abolition of capitalism and class society itself — the historical potential of the proletariat. Without some third possibility between those two outcomes, then the idea of a third class, as a historical, 'once and future' class, falls.

In fact this is not what people mean, in ordinary conversation, when expressing antagonism or hostility to the "middle class", Generally such hostility is based on the idea of the middle class as reproducing the existing status quo, as being part of the institutional

political movements is more than simple history-geek indulgence. The size of this particular topic can be seen in Marcel Van der Linden's excellent book, "Western Marxism and the Soviet Union". libcom.org

of those, who through naivety or lack of critical ability, read the Sonvilier line about the International being the embryo of the new society growing within the bosom of the old too literally.

So, in the question of class this question has significant meaning. If we aspire to a classless society, it is not enough to start by pretending that class doesn't exist. Such a confusion of means and ends would be hopelessly utopian and would ignore the fact that class is not simply a subjective phenomenon, but has an objective material basis that persists regardless of whether anyone chooses to believe in it or not.

Newer than you think

The line from the opening of Marx & Engels' 1848 "Communist Manifesto" that "all history is the history of class struggle" is fairly well known. But historically, the use of the term "class" to talk of different sections of society really only comes into common use around the time of the rise of capitalism.

It is our status as doubly free citizens that makes class relevant. So long as society was politically constituted by dividing its members into formal ranks or orders, then the particular oppressions and injustices relative to one's caste, estate or rank were the natural focus of peoples struggle for freedom. For slaves the struggle for freedom was the struggle against slavery, for serfs the struggle against serfdom, for untouchables the struggle against the caste system. It is only with the formal constitution of society as one in which all its members are legally equal, formally free, that the question of class comes to the fore.

Class is a result of our paradoxical situation of being legally free, in the political sphere, while being unfree in the economic sphere. So saying, it is peculiar to the historically unique set of social relations that effects a relative separation between the spheres of the political and the economic, based on the separation of pro-

ducer from the means of production, that allows this paradoxical, schizoid, situation to exist.

In the feudal and absolutist societies that pre-dated capitalism it was common to speak of particular sections of society either by name (lord, peasant, clergy) or by reference to the formally defined hierarchy of ranked society – the higher and lower orders. With the progressive dismantling of formal rank, talk of "lower orders" was increasingly replaced by references to the "lower classes". The shift from orders to classes reflected that social position was no longer explicitly dictated by sovereign power, but that persistent inequality continued.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the use of "classes" was universal in regular discourse. The idea then that "class" is somehow an invention of socialism or the left, is a historical nonsense. However the transition from "classes", in the sense of the lower, poorer, "dangerous" or working classes, to the notion of a "working class", singular, was the result of the historical development of working class power as antagonistic to the dominant interests in society.

Neither up nor down

Of course it would be pointless to skip to the conclusion at the start of an article, but it may be useful to have something in mind already, before taking on the rest of the argument. Although it may seem a bit of a dodge, perhaps it is most useful at this stage to concentrate on negative definitions – i.e. focussing on what class is not.

There is no up or down in class. The capitalist class is no nearer god on high, nor the proletariat closer to the devil down below – no matter how hellish our lives may become sometimes. Even if it still haunts our language (and that of sociologists), there is no basis for the vertical metaphor inherited from the feudal social pyramid.

people to identify as middle class, some counter that, in reality, the middle class really does exist, even if not in the nakedly ideological way that Obama and Rouseff would have it, because it has a material foundation that distinguishes it from both the capitalist and working classes. Let us examine this proposition then.

Certainly the class, being the vast majority of the population, is extremely diverse and differentiated. Not only through the hierarchisational effects of identities discussed above, but through differential access to opportunities for employment, education, etc. There are large inequalities in terms of knowledge, articulacy, confidence, self-empowerment and so on. And occupationally, people play a very diverse range of roles within their working lives. That diversity includes big differences between the amount of control over, or amount of autonomy in organising the work we do, the degree to which we can get any fragment of job satisfaction or self-actualisation through work, or whether it is alienating, unpleasant, degrading or an affront to basic dignity. In addition, the tiny proportion of the population that makes up the capitalist class, relative to number of workers means that the job of supervising and organising workers is mostly done, at least at the lower and middle levels, by other workers. It is on the basis of these two broad factors — autonomy over the conditions of ones own work and the role of controlling the work of others — that some theorists build their argument for a material basis for a third class, between workers and capital, grounded in the relations of production. For example the advocates of Parecon propose this as the basis for a so-called "*coordinator class*".[17]

The origins of Parecon's coordinator class actually lies in the debates within the post-WW2 Trotskyist movement over the nature of the USSR. Without getting too drawn into this perennial obsessional debate of the left[18], the idea of the coordinator class comes

[17] See, "Parecon: Life after Capitalism", Michael Albert, 2003.

[18] Which is not to say that it isn't a significant question. Drawing up a proper balance sheet of the failures of 20th century revolutionary left or anti-capitalist

brackets higher than that of their audience average (or, quite often, than their fictional employment would pay for — see for e.g. the US sitcom "Friends" where young-ish people in middling jobs live in millionaire-sized New York apartments). Soap opera plots involve their luckless 'ordinary' stars in every contorted personal, sexual or social entanglement imaginable by a panel of desperate script-writers — except the money problems that continually afflict the real lives of their audiences. Having a realistic average income in TV-land is just hopelessly uncool.

But it's not just about the media, advertising and consumer culture conning people into accepting unrealistically aspirational lifestyle identities or body images. People consume the images and culture they chose to consume, and even though their effects on us may be more than we are often comfortable admitting, even to ourselves, that does not mean that we are helpless victims being "brain-washed". That picture is not only elitist and insulting, but in fact reproduces the very attitudes that are part of the middle-class subjectivity — i.e. its subjective alienation from working class people.

The fact is that no one willingly chooses to lose, or persistently identify as a loser (excepting psychological illnesses involving self-hatred). If being working class is associated with being exploited, being a victim, or otherwise subjected to a humiliating and disempowering but inescapable situation, the natural reaction in the struggle for human dignity, is to seek to escape it. But that very desire to escape class is not a demonstration of the end of class, but its continuing power as an operative force. Only if people accepted their class position with genuine indifference and equanimity could we really say that class, as a relation with the potential power to revolutionise society, was finally dead. Once again we come back to that curiously-worded formation above, that the middle class is class in the mode of being denied.

But even though many people will accept much of the above, as far as it speaks to the subjective drives that push working class

Class is not a stratum or other "geological" feature. Nor is it yet an identity or a cultural grouping. Indeed, it is not a "thing" at all. Neither is it a unity of action or a unity of interests, even if such can potentially be constructed on its basis. It cannot be reduced to either an exclusively objective category or an exclusively subjective one.

Also we are not interested here in class as a trans-historical concept, but one historically specific to capitalism. From that starting point we can say that the objective determination of class relates to the situation of people relative to the process of exploitation, that is the self-valorisation of capital by the accumulation of surplus value. By self-valorisation we mean not only the expansion of capital's value, but also the broader effect of making capital's cultural values that of society as a whole, through the enshrinement of "growth" as the unquestionable social good. Further, that as one of, if not the unique specific characteristic of capitalist social relations is the relative disjunction of power into two distinct spheres — of political and economic power, that is to say, the relative autonomisation of relations of domination and exploitation — that class is specific to the sphere of exploitation, as distinct from that of domination, as we shall see later on. Which is not to say that the class relationship is restricted only to the workplace-based struggle around the wage between employees and employers.

The centre cannot hold

Leading on from that last point, a recent document from the Brazilian Federação Anarquista do Rio de Janeiro (FARJ) has this to say:

> Within our vision of social anarchism, as "a fundamental tool for the support of daily struggles", we also need to clarify our definition of class. While considering the class struggle as central and absolutely relevant in society today we understand that the Marxists, by

> choosing the factory worker as the unique and historic subject of the revolution, despise all other categories of the exploited classes, while also potentially revolutionary subjects. The authoritarians' conception of the working class, which is restricted only to the category of industrial workers, does not cover the reality of the relations of domination and exploitation that have occurred throughout history and even the relationships that occur in this society. Just as it does not cover the identification of revolutionary subjects of the past and present.
>
> [...]
>
> Authoritarians, including some who call themselves anarchists, think of the centre as a means, and orientate their politics towards it. For them, the centre – considering this to be the state, the party, the army, the position of control – is an instrument for the emancipation of society, and "the revolution means in first place the capturing of the centre and its power structure, or the creation of a new centre". The authoritarians' very conception of class is based on the centre, when defining the industrial proletariat as a historical subject [...] and excludes and marginalises other categories of the exploited classes that are in the periphery like, for example, the peasantry.[6]

And they go on to list examples of different sections of those being exploited, dispossessed or otherwise excluded by capital in Brazil, including not only the wage-earning industrial proletariat, but also the precarious informal workers and unemployed of the favelas, as well as the indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon, strug-

[6] FARJ, Social Anarchism and Organisation, ch 2, anarkismo.net

middle class is class in the mode of being denied, to use the odd-sounding, but compact Hegelian formula.

There is a parallel here with the official stamp of approval for the middle class by the leading politicians and mainstream news media. The existence of the middle is asserted, but the existence of other classes is denied — this is class without confrontation, class without struggle, the bourgeois utopia of a universal class — a class that is not an antagonistic relation between classes, but a universal acceptance of the status quo, in relation to which there are only conformists ("the silent majority") or deviants. So the Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff, head of the Brazilian Worker's Party (PT) can announce to the world's media that her vision for Brazil's development is "*to transform Brazil into a middle-class population* [...] *We want this; we want a middle-class Brazil.*"[16]. A clearer statement of the developmental ideology of the new Empire of capital, could not be made. One that has particularly chilling resonances given the Brazilian police's well-documented tendencies to conduct covert wars of extermination against street children and jobless inhabitants of the favelas. Presumably to the Brazilian Right, both Rousseff's PT and the FARJ belong to a Brazilian "Left" commonality, but from the perspective of class, it's hard to see how two political tendencies could be more opposed.

So much for the political-ideological considerations for the popularity of the middle class for bourgeois opinion-formers, but how is its popularity amongst large numbers of the proletariat explained, and does it have any material foundation in the relations of social production?

To take the first question, the simple and glib answer would be that 'proles' get bad press. Not only do news media stories only ever identify the subjects of their stories as "working class" in 'poverty porn' pieces or other tales of victimhood, but virtually all TV and movies portray 'normal' protagonists as several income

[16] FT Interview: Dilma Rousseff, Joe Leahy, October 2, 2012.

The myth of the middle

Much ink has been split and many trees have fallen over the decades to discussions around the "middle class". The partisans of a two class model and those of a three class model have argued back and forth without seemingly shedding much light on the question. Certainly the "middle class" is the one mention of class that makes it regularly into the capitalist media. By contrast the "working class" seldom makes an appearance and, on the rare occasion it does, it is usually in the mode of sociological commentary, characterising a neighbourhood or community as economically and culturally marginalised. The very notion that such a thing as a capitalist class might exist, is of course never allowed to be spoken, except on the even rarer occasion of reporting the statements of socialist agitators. In the media discourse then, the middle class is presented as the centre of society, the main agent of progress and reform and is generally implied to be as large a portion of society as can be got away with. In the extreme case of the USA, thanks to the peculiarities of its subliminally racialised social discourse, the middle class is regularly presented, from the President down, as composing the large majority of society. The middle class here is presented as the universal class, the location not of a relation of struggle, but as an anchor of social peace, the mythical centreground of modern politics. The middle class are then the very opposite of the "dangerous class", they are the officially-sanctioned "safe class" in relation to whom, all others are deviant, dangerous and "on the margins of society", or as the FARJ would say, peripheral.

From the perspective of class composition, of course, it is clear that the middle class is not so much an autonomously composed class, but an aspect of the decomposition of the real underlying class — the proletariat. The one immediately apparent constant of middle class consciousness is subjective alienation from the working class, regardless of the subject's objective social situation. The

gling to avoid dispossession and extinction at the hands of the loggers and the ranchers.

Without passing judgement on the validity of the centre-periphery model the FARJ adopted in this 2008 text, we want to draw attention above all to their critique of the "traditional" or "orthodox" Marxist conceptualisation of the working class. That is, as being viably represented by the central "class figure" of the wage-earning industrial worker, who in his or her (but mostly his) person not only represents the "vanguard" or cutting edge of the proletariat, and its (supposedly) most powerful section, but can in fact substitute for the rest of the class, in that their interests can stand in place of those of less "central" elements of the dispossessed. The clear parallel between this "class substitutionism" and the politics of Leninist style vanguard party substitutionism or the electoral representation of the social-democratic Marxist party are obvious.

Operaismo and Class Composition

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the smaller Socialist Party (PSI), despite having built up considerable power in its partisan units, opted to collaborate with the bourgeois parties in founding the post-Fascist Italian state, becoming part of its "constitutional arch". This policy of rebuilding liberal democracy and modern capitalism, rather than pushing for revolution, became a foundational axiom of Communist politics in post-war Italy.

During this time Italian industry was greatly modernised, particularly in the automobile industry, led by the iconic FIAT. This process was accompanied by a vast internal migration of young Italian workers from the pre-industrial South to the factory towns of Northern Italy. The young Southerners, coming from areas where the Communists had been repressed by a combina-

tion of the Mafia, the Christian Democrats (DC) and economic underdevelopment, had no allegiance to the traditions of the PCI affiliated trade unionised workers of the older Northern working class. In many cases they were brought in by the management with the deliberate intention of using them as scab labour. As a strategy this has to go down as one resulting in one of the biggest backfires in Italian, or even European, history. Although lacking the tradition of subordination to trade union bureaucrats, the new generation of Southern workers brought with them their own traditions of explosive resistance which led, ultimately, to the most intense and sustained period of heightened class struggle in postwar Western Europe.

It's a testimony to the creative power of periods of mass social upheaval, as well as a commentary on the stifling nature of official Communism, that this period also produced some of the most creative outpourings of new theorisation of class struggle, alongside the actual struggles themselves. The generation of young militants who, forced with a choice between the PCI's alliance with the bosses, and the wild, fierce indiscipline of the new worker youth, were to articulate a whole new universe of political theories and practices.

We cannot possibly do justice to this period here, instead we will try to pick out one or two concepts that are most useful to us in elaborating a theory of class. A number of the new theorists, aligned with the militant worker resistance of the 1960s, grouped around the journals Quaderni Rossi (Red Notebooks) and Classe Operaia (Working Class) became known as the *operaisti* (the workerists)[7]. Their number included writers like Raniero Panzieri (the co-founder of Quaderni Rossi), theorists like Mario Tronti, the founder of Classe Operaia, and a young Toni Negri, along with the

[7] The standard political reference, in English, for operaismo and class composition is Steve Wright's "Storming Heaven: class composition and struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism", Pluto Press, 2002. libcom.org

itless drive for expansion of capital is infinitely greater than the sum of the parts of the human desires of the global population trapped within it's system. In fact the task of meeting human needs for food, shelter, security and the means of self-development remains reconcilable with the sustainability of the planetary natural resources. On condition of being able to end the ever-accelerating rush to destruction of capital's growth.

If the sustainability of the environment is an "externality" to capital — that is, it does not factor at all in capital's blind monomania of selfless self-expansion — in the past, the resistance to the destruction of the land, was part and parcel of the direct producers resistance to capital. It still is today in many parts of the world where peasants resist the robbing of their land to build dams, the destruction of their virgin forests to ranch cattle and strip-mine minerals, and so on. Yet for the bulk of the proletariat, already divorced from the land, our separation means that our struggle to fulfill our own needs against the depredations of capital, is one in which the results for the environment are also external. This "double externality" of the natural world to both capital and proletariat is the primary reason why the rate at which the sustainability of the environment[15] is being undermined, appears to be beyond the capacity of capitalist society to even slow down, never mind reverse. Capitalism is literally costing us the earth. Rapidly. But the only means of overcoming the double externality of the environment, is to overcome our own separation from the land and means of production, that is the root cause of this drive to self-destruction.

[15] It should be noted that "the environment" is actually shorthand for the specific state of the environment that is most beneficial or supportive for our own existence. The threat of climate change not to live on earth in general, in geological timescales, but to human life and civilisation in particular, in our own time.

buy and consume varying things for the reproduction of their own subjectivity. With robots producing robots, the only limit to each "capitalist's" production would be the share of the available natural resources accessible to them. Assuming they could arrive at an agreed divvy up of these peaceably (i.e. without destroying each other in robot wars), there would be no further basis for competition, no consumer market and thus no point in exchange and, above all, no longer any point in accumulating money, i.e. capital would have ceased to exist. All of which to say, that capital grows out of the desires, not of the capitalist class, but of the dispossessed class, and it's active power is the alienated power of our labour and our desires.

In parenthesis, this fundamental asymmetry in the class struggle — both that our humanity is central and constitutive, and that of the other side is incidental and irrelevant, and that we have the potential to overcome our separation, whereas they can only reproduce it — is why we talk mostly of "the" class. The singular case signals not so much partisanship, as a recognition of our primacy in terms of historical agency and social ontology.

But if capital grows out of the needs and desires of the dispossessed class, that does not mean that its drive for expansion is nothing other than the growth of human desires to consume. Human desire is ultimately limited by the fact of our bodily existence. Capital's "desire" for valorisation is boundless. A subject-less desire, is a desire without object. And a desire without object can never be sated, can only be the abstract drive for limitless auto-valorisation. In order to overcome the potential for limit implied by human satiability, as well as to continually reproduce its command, capitalism continually reproduces artificial scarcity for the mass of the proletariat, while consuming the earth's resources in ever-more unsustainable volumes. The carrot of overcoming scarcity is dangled eternally in front of the proletariat, but the promised-land horizon of a life free from want and material precarity always recedes before us, remaining forever just outside our grasp. But the lim-

radical sociologists Romano Alquati and Danilo Montaldi, whose practice of *conricerca* (co-research) produced much of the raw material that fed the operaisti's re-thinking of Marxist orthodoxy. It is their theory of class composition that we are interested in here.

Class composition was seen as consisting of two distinct but linked concepts — the technical composition of the class, and the political composition — and two interrelated processes of decomposition and recomposition. The distinction between the technical and political composition of the class was taken, by analogy, from a heretical reading of Marx's Capital. In volume 1 and 3, Marx talks about the ratio between living labour and inert materials of production, plant, etc, in the immediate production process in terms of the technical and value compositions of capital. Roughly speaking, the technical composition relates the the physical organisation of the production process, along with a (conceptual) measure of the ratio in terms of objective "masses" of the relevant component — i.e. hours of labour versus kilowatts of electricity, kilograms or litres of raw materials and so on. The value composition is the ratio considered in terms of the cost price of the various inputs to production.

The analogy the *operaisti* took from this is the distinction between the objective composition of the working class — i.e. on a macro scale, how many people work in agriculture, manufacturing, public sector, housework, etc.; on the scale of an individual enterprise, how many people work on particular production lines, how many in the design office, how many in transport, etc. This represents the technical composition of the class, which changes according to changes in production methods, increases in productivity, etc, along with changes in the differing amounts and types of goods produced and circulated within a given society.

In contrast to the technical composition, the political composition of the class consisted of the "subjective" element — i.e. people's awareness of being part of a wider social group, their identification as workers, or people subjected to work, their identifica-

tion with or antagonism to their immediate bosses, and groups of bosses or representatives of the state in a wider social context. As well as purely subjective elements of beliefs, cultures, values and habits and practices of either collective or individual resistance or compliance, there are also elements of organisation — the creation of both formal and informal organisations to pursue distinct class goals, whether of self-defence or attack.

But the major innovation was an understanding of how these two compositions were related to each other and an understanding of how changes in each led to changes in the other, indeed became strategies for effecting change in the other. The official line from the PCI was that the "development of the forces of production", i.e. the introduction of mechanisation and automation in the factories, was a politically neutral "objective" increase in the social good of higher productivity, laying the basis for future socialist abundance. In contrast the operaisti understood that the introduction of new machinery by the bosses was a strategy in the class war. Specifically it was the changing of the technical composition of the immediate process of production, in order to break down the political composition of a working class power which sought to autonomously control and limit the rate of production for their own benefit. That is to say that the bosses were changing the technical composition in order to decompose the existing political composition that was proving a barrier to profitability or, abstractly, the boundless drive for the self-valorisation of capital. In response to the political decompostion brought about by such changes, the challenge for the working class was the recomposition of a new political composition capable, once again, of exercising counter-power in the newly transformed circumstances.

All of this (and more) the *operaisti* articulated as a result of their studies of struggles within the factories of FIAT, Olivetti and other Italian workplaces. But as the 1960s went on, the noises from movements and milieus outside the factory gates in wider society, grew too large to ignore. The coming of age of the post-war baby boom

arations such as private and public, state and civil society. But we have not talked so much of the foundation of that separation — the separation of the direct producers from the means of producing their subsistence and social existence. That is, the separation of the mass of people from the land. The transformation of a peasantry into a proletariat. The discussion of how that foundational separation came about, the social forms of property and the means of enforcing them (the state) necessary to effect it, belong properly in a fuller discussion on capitalism and communism. But there is another aspect to the results of this separation we need to deal with here — the effect it has had on the relationship between human reproduction and the environment.

Our class is the separated class — or the "dispossessed" as James Connolly so memorably put it. It is our separation that is the root of the very nature of capitalist society. The other class, the capitalist class, to this extent, exists only negatively in relation to us — that is, their property over the land and means of production is merely the device by which we are separated from them. Further, in the class struggle the opposing class is counterposed to our needs not in the service of their own needs, but rather as personifications of capital. The class struggle is not a competition between two groups of people each seeking to impose their needs over those of the other. Rather, it is between the needs of the dispossessed class and capital's drive for expansion. In this conflict the other class is a mere agent of something beyond and above them, the inhuman social emergent that is capital. Thus their subjective consciousness of pursuing their own interests is an incidental epiphenomenon. As a somewhat flippant thought-experiment to illustrate, we could say that if all the capitalist class were replaced by robots governed by artificial intelligence incorporating the profit-maximising function, then the capitalist system could continue. However, if the attempt was made the other way round, to replace the working class with robots, then capitalism could not exist as there would be no-one to buy anything, as robots neither get wages nor have desires to

reductionists" — who make that very mistake. However the argument between the "intersectionalists" and the "reductionists" over whose category is the truly universal one, is simply a competition within the same framework — that of universalism itself. The very search for a universal structuring of society tries to create in the imaginary and abstract, the very end which is yet to be achieved. That is to say, it is utopian, and falls once again within the specific utopianism of capital — that society is already, from the start, one undivided sphere of sociality.

Class, then, is only ever a partial category. It is the process not the product. As such, the search to define "a" working class culture, singular, is misguided and utopian. What's more it cannot encapsulate the totality of your subjective being on its own account. We all have to live in the sphere of subjectification, with its constructed polarities. We can never "just" be working class. We are always-already forced to be men or women, children or adults, part of the "norm" or part of some "minority"[14]. As such, class solidarity, is precisely the one that reaches across the lines of identity. Solidarity with people with whom you share a common identity is simply clannishness or tribalism. Only solidarity with those with whom you have nothing in common other than recognising that they are in struggle against the same globalised capital as yourself, is class solidarity. The attempt to posit class as a totalising identity could only ever be an obstacle to the principle of solidarity that transcends such boundaries and borders, and is, as such, self-contradictory.

Class and the Environment

We have talked about how capitalism is a unique social order in that it separates, however incompletely, social relations into spheres of the political and the economic. Associated with this are other sep-

[14] The irony of this term is the gift that keeps on giving.

led to a huge increase in the number of young people officially classed as students, as part of a strategy of masking chronic youth under-employment. Often these people, formally classed as students, had very little access to classes or lectures in a further education system woefully under-resourced to deal with their burgeoning numbers. In a state of social limbo, and for most, advanced poverty, the militancy of the students posed a challenge to the *operaisti*'s narrow factory-based view of the class. Here were masses of youth in conflict with the state and society over basic economic and political issues — where did their antagonism fit in the class struggle schema?

A second but no less important challenge to the factoryism of the *operaisti* came from the growing feminist movement. The feminists challenged the invisibility of women's unpaid work in the household and in reproducing the labour power of children and workers. Was their labour to be discounted entirely? If the latin word proletariat literally meant those who served the state by providing it with children, then how could those women who did that very thing be excluded from the working class due to a lack of a union card or weekly wage? What if the most tyrannical exploiter they faced was not a capitalist boss, but a husband or boyfriend?

In the face of these, and other challenges, the *operaisti* looked to some of the other ideas they had been developing in opposition to the theory of the PCI. Official communism held that there was a disjunction in capitalist development between the level of the individual enterprise, and the social level of capitalism as a whole. They used this to justify their support of automation of production in the factory, as politically neutral (as already seen) while still being in opposition to the "anarchy of production" at the overall social level. Further, they asserted that the advent of Keynesian social planning, at a social level, was actually a gradual transition to socialist planning. By contrast the *operaisti* rejected the idea that state planning was "un-capitalist" or transitional in any way, and elaborated a theory of "Social Capital" (as in Tronti's essay of the

same name[8]) as capable of carrying out planning, but according to a capitalist rationality.

The operaist notion of "Social Capital" became the foundation for the theory of capitalist social relations reaching its tentacles outside of the factory gates and embracing all of society into it's process and transforming society as a whole into a "Social Factory". Whereas they had previously theorised the clash between the older, skilled, craft unionised workforce in the factories, and the new unskilled, often migrant, labour put on the newly automated production lines, as the transition from the "skilled worker" to the "mass worker", now the "new composition" meant the rise of the "social worker" as the new dominant class figure. The social worker enclosed the new categories of precarious students, scraping by on subventions, informal economy work, and the unwaged housework of women.

Here we see that the notion of class composition can be developed in two directions. The first is to conceptualise class composition as the search for the new antagonistic social subject – the new "class figure" in the vein criticised by FARJ as we saw above. This has been the route followed, since the early days of operaismo, by the likes of Toni Negri and his followers, who have moved through a succession of putative class figures, beginning with Tronti's mass worker and social worker, through the precarious worker, the cognitariat or immaterial worker to today's "multitude". A similar line leads Paul Mason to his "networked individual", which owes much to Negri's immaterial worker. In both cases there is an implied technological determinism, hidden in Negri's case, openly admitted in Mason's. This occludes the phase of the political recomposition of the class in the original formulation, and to a greater or lesser degree takes it as given by the objective forces of historical

[8] Mario Tronti, "Social Capital", webspace.utexas.edu, originally "*Il piano del capitale*", ch 3 of "*Operai e Capitale"*, Turin 1971.

zines may congratulate women that they are the inheritors of the gains of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 70s, but women's wages remain 20% below that of men for the same work, on average. Similarly racism has never co-existed with equal opportunities of access to different sectors of employment for white and black workers.

This intersection works both ways. We can see the cross-contamination of the plane of subjectification into the plane of exploitation most clearly with the phenomena of the racialisation of class, or particularly, of the so-called urban "underclass". For example, in Ireland, a minority section of the inner city residents of the major urban centres (Dublin, Cork, Limerick) are stigmatised as "knackers" or similar. Here a double racism is in operation. On the one hand, the use of racist epithets normally aimed at Irish Travellers, deny their existence as a genuine Irish ethnic minority. On the other, the residents of the most deprived inner-city neighbourhoods are castigated as culturally ignorant, intellectually inferior, and sexually degenerate in the classic tropes of racism. As a result, a proportion of the urban working class, are practically forced to change their vocabulary, disguise or modify their accents and change how they dress in order to get employment in the very city in which they were born and brought up.

A fruitless search

The attempts by some to create a mono-dimensional category of "intersectionality" where particular identities/oppressions intersect with each other, and class as another identity, within a unified plane of oppression, are driven by the search for a universal category. By projection, they assume that those defending the particularity of class, must equally be proposing it as a competing universal category. Indeed, there actually are some — the "class

– the universal is the social plane within which all particular others are inscribed. To struggle against the oppressions specific to a given category of otherness is to assert your right to the universal. At least by default in the first instance, not that this is the predetermined limit of such struggles, by any means. Nor, let's be clear again, should we be opposed to the consciousness raising strategy of contrasting the ideal of equal human rights for all, with the reality of particular oppressions that make a mockery of such rights. It is both a natural and a necessary first step. The problem arises if, and only when, the composition of a movement against particular oppressions fails to go beyond that first step, and remains constrained within the bourgeois horizon of universalism — a horizon that fails to challenge the separation of the political sphere from the economic. Universalism is the utopianism of capital.

Its when sections of that movement break with those liberal or bourgeois elements determined to remain safely within the bourgeois horizon, and raise the question of the economic injustices accompanying and implicated with the particular political oppressions, that the intersection between domination and exploitation is opened up as an active front in the recomposition of an antagonistic counterpower.

The overlapping of socially-constructed identities must not be confused with the intersection of the plane of domination with the plane of exploitation. The intersection of the plane of exploitation with the plane of domination describes a line — the class line. That class line cuts blindly through all identities inscribed on the plane of political determination, without exception. There is no identity yet created from which capital cannot recruit agents to its side to represent its interests to those on the other side of the class line.

But if the class line can divide particular identities constructed in the place of subjectification, the hierarchy that sets some identities over others, needs to find an institutionalisation in the technical composition of social production, in order to materially reinforce its divisions. Within Western Europe and the US, consumer maga-

development – capital once again producing it's own gravediggers, as per the old orthodox Marxist belief.

The second take on class composition re-emphasises its nature as a process, not a "thing" (new composition equalling new heroic class figure, etc). From this perspective the assumption of the semi-automatic emergence of political recomposition is making the utopian error of presupposing what must be achieved. Further, all notions of history blindly marching to a predestined goal are dispensed with from the outset. Starting from the position of the decomposition of the class, through a change in the technical composition of production – such as the relocation of production across international production chains brought about by globalism – the political recomposition of the class cannot be taken for granted. It remains a goal that must be actively articulated, advocated, politically fought for and organisationally constructed in order to be made concrete.

This second position is the one I term the perspective of recomposition — putting the emphasis on the process, rather than the "object" of class composition. A generation ago,the US autonomist magazine Zerowork defined class recomposition as:

> the overthrow of capitalist divisions, the creation of new unities between different sectors of the class, and an expansion of the boundaries of what the 'working class' comes to include.[9]

More than this, even within the perspective of recomposition as process and project, we can draw a line between the instrumental and prefigurative approaches. That is, we can define a specifically anarchist or libertarian take on the project of the recomposition of the class. But before we do that, given that the political recomposition of the class necessarily involves the plane of subjectivity, there are a few other aspects we must look at first.

[9] Zerowork 1, "Introduction to Zerowork 1", www.prole.info

And yet it moves

In the late 19th and early 20th century, the foundational text of what came to be known as Second International or orthodox Marxism, was the commentary written by Karl Kautsky to the Erfurt Programme of the German Social-Democratic Party, adopted in 1891. Amongst many other issues, perhaps one of the great ironies of this text, was its title: "The Class Struggle". Despite such a promising title, in fact the actual term "class struggle" appears only twice in the text, as the title of the pamphlet and it's last chapter. On the whole, the role of the class struggle as "motor of history", is downplayed to the extent of being almost entirely sidelined, other than its sublimation into the "political struggle" — i.e. the electoral progress of the SDP. From this unpromising starting point, the depredations of Leninism and Stalinism, resulted in the "objectivist" vision of a capitalist system moving to the dynamic of its own abstract contradictions (e.g. "the long-term tendency of the rate of profit to fall") without reference to the class struggle itself. It was this "objectivism" that the *operaisti* revolted against. However, they were not the only Marxists to try and break from this stultifying view of the working class as passive victim of capitalist dynamics. In Britain the "New Left" Marxists who broke from the Communist Party in the wake of Hungary 1956, attempted to re-articulate a more historical and dynamic view of class and the class struggle than the dogmatic and mostly rhetorical concepts of the Stalinists. One of those new approaches that retains a freshness and relevance still today, was the work of E. P. Thompson, who outlined his revisited view of class in the Preface to one of his most well-known works, "The Making of the English Working Class" thus:

> By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasize that it is an *historical* phe-

before she even speaks. In drawing attention to these identities the speaker is only re-asserting what is already socially constructed, or imposed, as fact – even if the speaker is challenging the meaning of these social facts, or the power that constructed them. But in relation to class there is no such social recognition forthcoming, on the question of whether class is a social fact in the same way as femininity, blackness or queerness, there is only silence. And as Derrida taught us, we must listen for the silences because they teach us most of all.

Without pursuing that further, at this stage, we see also that there is a problem with the process of defining class on this basis, which after this conjugation is made, must, retrospectively, be carried out in an analogous manner to other particular oppressions. Because otherness is defined through exclusion and oppression, then class in turn must also be so defined. The experience of class then becomes reduced to social exclusion – the snobbery and exclusivity of the "middle class" — and the oppressions of economic deprivation – poverty. But to reduce class to a relation of economic oppression by poverty, is to reduce economic life to that privileged sphere of capitalist universality – consumerism. So long as class is reduced to economic oppression which is in turn reduced to relative deprivation in command power in the market for consumer goods, then it loses any meaning in relation to exploitation, the production of surplus value and the valorisation of capital and, ultimately, the active production of the totality of social relations. It becomes a passive category, a doubly passive one when we take on board the failure for it to be actively constructed by the dominant social discourse, as already noted. Reduced to this doubly passive status, the category of class becomes a mere ghost compared to the identities actively produced by the discourses of power, and must ultimately fade into the universalist background.

Because, let's be clear, the universal admits no other. That is, an other to itself, as opposed to the particular others it constructs by valorising corresponding norms. It cannot and must not do so

verge with the *operaisti*'s notion of political recomposition in the rejection of the objectivity of interests. That is, the rejection of "class interests" as a given, which "*can be defined almost mathematically*" externally from, and prior to, the actual messy, contingent process of building unity within the present-historical process of the class struggle and recomposition.

Class and Identity

Otherness is socially constructed. Through socialisation we become either man or woman, white or black, straight or queer, normal or other. In the social construction of otherness, both poles of the relation must be explicitly present. The normal defines the other by projection in ways described by feminist or queer theory authors or Edward Said's criticism of "orientalism" or Deleuze & Guattari's *becoming-other*. These mutually defining poles of subjectification multiply and proliferate in the social sphere and can be combined through conjunction.

But class, as we have seen, is not an identity, nor a socially constructed role. Hence the conjunction of otherness breaks down at the class line. There is no contradiction in the conjugation of othernesses when a person identifies, for example, as a woman AND as black AND as queer. We understand that each category of otherness neither wholly encompasses nor wholly excludes the others, that their conjugation is a process of defining the overlapping of these sets that are inscribed within the same social plane that constructs identities and particular oppressions through the operation of polarising normativities in contrast to othernesses. But when we try to add class to the chain of conjugation – woman AND black AND queer AND working class – something jars. Consciously or not, we perceive that something about the last term in the conjugation does not fit with the previous ones. Society not only does not contest that the speaker is a black queer woman, it asserts it

nomenon. I do not see class as a "structure," nor even as a "category," but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.

More than this, the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure. The finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context. Moreover, we cannot have two distinct classes, each with an independent being, and then bring them into relationship with each other. We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and laborers.[…]

There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx's meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day "Marxist" writing. "It," the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically—so many men [sic] who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which "it" ought to have (but seldom does have) if "it" was properly aware of its own position and real interests. There is a cultural superstructure, through which this recognition dawns in inefficient ways. These cultural "lags" and distortions are a nuisance, so that it is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theo-

> rist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be.[10]

This notion of class as "something which in fact happens" is key here. That is that class does not relate to something people *are*, but something they *do*, and in turn have done unto them. This primacy of acting over being — "*Im Anfang war die Tat!*"[11]: "*In the beginning was the deed*", as Goethe (and Marx) put it — is an essential guide for unpicking the tangled web that is often woven around the concept of class. Of course the legacy of historical class struggles leaves its mark in the beliefs, customs and practices of the class, in any given particular time and place. And such legacies in turn feedback into the next iterations of struggles and are an important part of the historical political composition of the class. But if we understand that class is a product of action, then we can see that any attempt to construct an essentialist notion of class is doomed. Such a project would be confusing the product for the process of production. By analogy with value in the classical Marxian schema, where the fact that value appears (is realised) in the sphere of circulation cannot obscure that it is originated in the sphere of production[12], so the fact that class appears in the sphere of subjectification or acculturation, should not obscure the fact that it is produced by the active processes of the class struggle. Class no more originates in the sphere of culture than value originates in circulation. To think otherwise would be to confuse cause and effect.

As for Thompson's criticism of the view that class is a thing with "*a real existence*" and which therefore has "*real interests*", which,

[10] E, P. Thompson, "The Making of the English Working Class", Preface, p. 9–10.

[11] Goethe, Faust, inspired by the eponymous protagonist's struggle to translate the first line of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the word [*Logos*] ..." see www.levity.com.

[12] In fact the actual relation between the moments of production and circulation in the production of value — a social relation — are a little more subtle than this, but that is outside the scope of this article.

like its 'thing-like' existence "*can be defined almost mathematically*", here we have a resonance from a much earlier formulation of this same dispute, this time within the Amsterdam Anarchist conference of 1907, between the revolutionary syndicalist Pierre Monatte, representing the proto-orthodox view of class (as thing), and the veteran Italian revolutionary, Errico Malatesta. In response to Monatte's suggestion that the anarchist movement should liquidate itself as a specific political organisational tendency and dissolve itself into the CGT and the other revolutionary syndicalist bodies of the time, amongst other points Malatesta replied:

> The basic error of Monatte and of all revolutionary syndicalists, in my opinion, derives from an overly simplistic conception of the class struggle. It is a conception whereby the economic interests of all workers – of the working class – are held to be equal, whereby it is enough for workers to set about defending their own particular interests in order for the interests of the whole proletariat against the bosses to be defended.
>
> The reality is very different, in my view. The workers, like the bourgeoisie, like everyone, are subject to the law of universal competition that derives from the system of private property and that will only be extinguished together with that system. There are therefore no classes, in the proper sense of the term, because there are no class interests. There exists competition and struggle within the working "class", just as there does among the bourgeoisie.[13]

Here, Malatesta's "*in the proper sense of the term*" resonates with Thompson's "*thing*" with a "*real*" existence and interests. Both con-

[13] "The International Anarchist Congress, Amsterdam, 1907", p. 52, ed. Maurizio Antonelli, translated Nestor McNab, www.fdca.it