



FEPS

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FROM CLASS STRUGGLE TO STRUGGLING WITH CLASS

Is CLASS still a valid analytical category for understanding inequality in Europe?
How can it help shape progressive politics?

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FEPS YOUNG ACADEMICS NETWORK

The Young Academics Network (YAN) was established in March 2009 by the Foundation of European Progressive Studies (FEPS) with the support of the Renner Institut to gather progressive PhD candidates and young PhD researchers, who are ready to use their academic experience in a debate about the Next Europe. The founding group was composed of awardees of the “Call for Paper” entitled “Next Europe, Next Left” – whose articles also help initiating the FEPS Scientific Magazine “Queries”. Quickly after, with the help of the FEPS member foundations, the group enlarged – presently incorporating around 30 outstanding and promising young academics.

FEPS YAN meets in the Viennese premises of Renner Institut, which offers great facilities for both reflections on the content and also on the process of building the network as such. Both elements constitute mutually enhancing factors, which due to innovative methods applied make this Network also a very unique project. Additionally, the groups work has been supervised by the Chair of the Next Left Research Programme, Dr. Alfred Gusenbauer – who at multiple occasions joined the sessions of the FEPS YAN, offering his feedback and guidance.

This paper is one of the results of the fourth cycle of FEPS YAN, (the first one ended with three papers in June 2011, the second one led to five papers in spring 2013, while the third one saw the publication of six papers), in which nine key themes were identified and were researched by FEPS YAN working groups. These topics encompass: *“From class struggle to struggling with class”*; *“Are e-learning platforms a promising way forward for social cohesion?”*; *“Monetary v. economic policy: A bug in the Maastricht design?”*; *“Why the Left needs Europolitics”*; *“What impact have post-crisis public policies had on gender equality in EU member states?”*; *“Capital and labour in the post-crisis European context”*; *“Promoting labour rights and social protection in post-crisis Europe”*; *“EU asylum and migration policy – Towards an integrative approach to equality”* and *“Renewable democracy: towards full participation through representation deliberation”*. Each of the meetings is an opportunity for the FEPS YAN to discuss the current state of their research, presenting their findings and questions both in the plenary, as also in the respective working groups. The added value of their work is the pan-European, innovative,

interdisciplinary character – not to mention, that it is by principle that FEPS wishes to offer a prominent place to this generation of academics, seeing in it a potential to construct alternative that can attract young people to progressivism again. Though the process is very advanced already, the FEPS YAN remains a Network – and hence is ready to welcome new participants.

FEPS YAN plays also an important role within FEPS structure as a whole. The FEPS YAN members are asked to join different events (from large Conferences, such as FEPS “Call to Europe” or “Renaissance for Europe” and PES Convention to smaller High Level Seminars and Focus Group Meetings) and encouraged to provide inputs for publications (i.e. for FEPS Magazine “Queries”). Enhanced participation of the FEPS YAN Members in the overall FEPS life and increase of its visibility remains one of the strategic goals of the Network.

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Executive Summary

Transnational anti-gender mobilizations emerged almost simultaneously throughout the years 2012-2013 all over Europe, seriously challenging women's and minorities' rights, and attempting to undermine the very foundations of liberal democracy. Countries such as Croatia, Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain became the stages of fierce attacks on gender equality and the rights of sexual minorities, as well as attempts to revoke the post-war international consensus on human rights. It was not long before progressives around Europe started to address these new conservative movements. This paper aims to present and critically evaluate these progressive reactions. First, we provide a short overview of existing academic literature and reflect on the anthropological and political foundations of the anti-gender campaign. We then provide numerous typologies of progressive responses, and follow up with their critical evaluation, pointing to broader structural causes behind the rise of anti-gender movements. Finally, we provide recommendations as to how current responses to the anti-gender campaign could be improved.

Keywords: anti-genderism, gender ideology, conservative politics, right wing, fundamentalism, cultural wars, progressive politics

Hashtags: #ReclaimGender, #UnderstandingFundamentalism, #AligningForChange, #TouchHeartsToWinOverMinds, #ProgressivesUnite

Introduction : Does class still matter?

There is a notion that ‘class’ is an outdated category which fails to grasp fully the current academic and political debates on social stratification, inequalities and injustice. On the one side, academics has offered alternative categories such as ‘strata’, ‘social position’, ‘habitus’, ‘life chances’, ‘life styles’ or ‘individualisation’. On the other side, the mainstream political debate inclines to operate with categories which transmit in the public discourse more positive connotations. For instance, pre-election posters promise ‘equality’ or ‘fight for more equality’, ‘justice for everybody’ or ‘happy life in diversity’.

Therefore, it seems that class or class related issues have shifted to the periphery of academic and political discussions. The given paper aims at unravelling the academic and political discourses in dealing with class issues. In doing so, the paper poses two main questions: Is class still a valid analytical category to understand the economic, political and social landscapes of contemporary Europe? How can class be useful in shaping progressive politics and policies? To answer these questions we unfold our arguments in accordance with the following steps:

Firstly, we overview the theoretical background in the definition of class beginning from classic authors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Marx, Engels, Weber, Gramsci) until the contemporary debate (Negri, Hardt, Standing, Beck). In particular, we aim at comparing the main traditions in the analysis: class as a struggle (Marxian) and class as stratification function (Weberian). These two traditions are extended by Beck’s notion about ‘death of the class’ which has emerged in the late 20th century and coincided with to the neo-liberal transformations of societies.

Secondly, this explicatory analysis expands by looking at the evolution of category ‘class’ within the political economy lens. Particular attention is paid to the methodological transition occurred from the more inductive and pluralistic methods towards a marginalism and econometrics approach during the late 19th century. By stating that such switch to mathematics helped to set aside economics as a science in itself, even if within social science, it nevertheless has influenced the way economics is investigated today, namely through different objects of observation (free individuals vs. class) that brought to a new formulation of economic policy objectives.

Thirdly, in order to avoid generalisation, we explore through two national case studies – Italian and Bulgarian – the historical evolution in using the concept of class. These countries represent two different traditions of engaging ‘class’ in political and social discourses. Therefore, these case studies present various applications, transformations and the gradual disappearance of class as a tool of political analysis and debate.

In conclusion, we argue that previously, the ability to represent and defend class interests was fundamental in the political arena. Class was seen as a political subject with its own interest, and social movements mainly mobilized protests around such interests exemplifying the underlying and contradictory power relations. By contrast, now, the contemporary class detachment is not only symptomatically expressed by a range of particularistic forms of mobilization but has also contributed to weaken the attractiveness of collective progressive policies within Parliaments. Lastly, the paper highlights policy remarks in regards to whether the analytical category of class can return into the political narrative to understand and address the current inequalities. Thus, some policy recommendations are provided how to reintroduce an updated concept of ‘class’ as explicatory category on the distribution of economic and political power within the current period of political and economic crisis.

Chapter 1: The historical-theoretical definitions of class

The category of class has a long and controversial history which goes back to the 19th century. Without doubt it coined the dynamic of scientific and popular discourses of the 20th century. As a concept which finds itself in the limelight of such extensive and still ongoing debate, class has expanded with the vast and contradicting interpretations. In this chapter we aim at answering, first of all, how and why the concept of class emerged, how it has evolved and, at last, how it has shaped our understanding of social structure and inequalities. In order to answer these questions, we address some main traditions in the interpretation of class, namely the *Marxian* and *the Weberian*. The former has used class to explain the historical sources of social inequalities and what kind of conflicts they cause. The latter has attempted to explain the nature of the social stratification within the society, ranking of individuals in the particular strata. Additionally to these two traditions, it is worthwhile to mention the *Beck's tradition* which proclaims 'the death of the class' as a social unity due to the increasing individualisation in 1980s.

The Marxian tradition

Western Europe in the 19th century was characterised by a rapidly industrialising societies where a new social structure emerged. The accustomed hegemony of the nobility as a justified power of the feudal society was gradually overruled by the newly emerged class – bourgeoisie, a driving force of the capitalist order. In the revolutionary air of the political debate Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their *Communist Manifesto* (Marx & Engels [1848] 2009). In their view, the history of all societies was the history of social structures, where class struggles were embedded. After fulfilling its revolutionary role by displacing the nobility, the bourgeoisie outlived its societal function, Marx & Engels argued. It was the turn of an emerging working class – proletariat – to advance the society. The proletariat as an offspring of the capitalist order, capitalist production and increasing exploitation was supposed 'to take over the historical baton' of the class struggle. That was only possible in that case if/when proletariat perceived itself as a class through class consciousness and class solidarity. In spite of other classes, Marx & Engels focused on the opposing poles to underline the antagonistic character which sets the motor of class struggle in action.

The *Communist Manifesto* had begun the still ongoing discussion about social structure, division of

labour and unequal distributions of benefits. Additionally, it also offered a model of critical analysis to raise awareness and to seek for solutions in order to improve a society. The Marxian tradition has been the longest and the strongest one in engaging with the class issues. But it has considerably evolved during the 20th and 21st centuries, just to name few developments: Antonio Gramsci's notions of working class and its struggle for cultural hegemony, Negri & Hardt's notions on the multitude, Guy Standing's notion on precariat, an emerging dangerous class.

Cultural hegemony and working class (Gramsci 1971). As the proletariat's revolutionary role to overrule bourgeoisie was not completed and the latter preserved its dominance, Antonio Gramsci posed the question in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-1935): Which forces – besides economic – allowed a ruling class to preserve their status-quo in the capitalist state? Shifting the focus into the realm of education and culture, Gramsci attempted to overcome the economic determinism of Marxian approach. By granting culture a pivotal role in the relationship between classes and in the course of class struggle, Gramsci offered a sophisticated approach of class analysis based on the key concepts such as hegemony, civil society, state and intellectuals. As a class struggle and hegemony were intertwined, different social classes with intellectuals as their representatives were engaged in the struggle for – cultural, political, economic – hegemony within the frame of the civil society and the state. Following Marx and Engels, Gramsci granted the working class with a revolutionary role. But that role was supposed to be accomplished by achieving cultural hegemony and by imposing it on the other classes. Gramsci argued, the working class was destined to struggle for the cultural and political hegemony in order to liberate society from the oppressive ruling class and the oppressive capitalist order.

Many decades later after Gramsci insisted on cultural hegemony of working class, Antonio Negri & Michael Hardt in their book *Empire* claim that proletariat cannot anymore to pursue its revolutionary role to free the society from the oppression and exploitation (Hardt&Negri 2000; 2004). It is due to the fact that it can no longer be perceived as an agency of a collective change. The reason for that is twofold: first, the working class has been displaced from its privileged position in the development of labour relationships (Hardt&Negri 2000: 256). Second, a working class in the Marxian sense is a concept of exclusion. It includes neither unpaid domestic labour, nor the peasantry, nor the labour in the informal

sector, nor work of enslaved people, nor labour of poor and unemployed. That means all those who are excluded from the working class ought to alter to the struggles and to the political agendas of the working class. Negri & Hardt suggest a broader understanding of the concept of 'proletariat' which would 'refer not just to the industrial working class but to all those who are subordinated to, exploited by, and produce under the rule of capital' (Hardt & Negri 2000:256). In authors' view, the notion of the *multitude* could embrace the extensive understanding of the proletariat and capture collective agency, able and willing to act in common interest. In contrast to similar concepts as 'people', 'the masses' or 'the crowd', the multitude can act in common, on its own, denying any kind of leadership. It is that kind of plurality 'which persists as such in the public scene, in collective action, in the handling of communal affairs, without converging into a One' (Virno 2003: 22). Multitude is not only the form of collective agency but also the form of the social and political existence. Thus, class as initial construct remains in the interpretation of Hardt & Negri, gaining a new essence – multitude – more flexible and suitable in the current social reality.

Even though later Marxian tradition distances itself from the working class, it does not lose the initial function of a class as a struggle and as a political project. In his book *The Precariat, The New Dangerous Class* (2011), Guy Standing focuses on the emerging new class 'precariat', i.e. the proletariat in the uncertain labour and life conditions. The fruitful ground for emergence of precariat is provided by the rapid pace of globalisation, neo-liberal policies and individualization in the second half of the 20th century. As the national social structures become more fragmented, there is a need for a global social structure which Standing offers (2011: 7). At the top there is the plutocracy, oligarchs. Below the plutocrats there are the wage workers 'salarial', the employees of the large corporations, government agencies, public administrations. Alongside salariat there are 'proficians' ('professionals' + 'technician') who sell the valuable skills. They are followed by a shrinking 'core' of manual employees – a working class, resembling to the old proletariat. Beneath of these groups is increasing in numbers 'precariat'. (Standing 2011:8) The main feature of the 'precariat' is its engagement with the distinctive and insecure relation of labour. In the routine of their uncertainties and daily threats in the professional, personal, communal spheres, everyone is struggling on his/her own in order to survive. In their fear to lose the least, people turn upon each other, unable to reach and change the real sources of troubles: global

capitalism and its exploitation of the weaker, destructive effects of market liberalisation. Only acting as a class in itself can save precariat from falling as a victim of the global capitalism.

Thus, Marxian critical analysis was meant not only to describe conditions but give political and public voices to excluded or discriminated groups of a society. In the case of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels it was the European proletariat of the 19th century; in the case of Antonio Gramsci it was a working class whose advancement was hindered due to the blocked access to education at the beginning of the 20th century; in the case of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt it is unwaged workers or unemployed which are excluded from the class struggle of working class at the end of the 21th century; in the case of Guy Standing it is internationally dispersed and growing in numbers precariat at the beginning of the 21st century. In this tradition the main category is itself an instrument for transformation or a motto for the revolutionary barricades, i.e. 'class' as a struggle and for a struggle against injustice, 'class' as a political project.

Weberian tradition

More than half century later after the contribution of Marx and Engels, Max Weber engaged with the category of class in a different way. The book '*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*' (2002) offers Weber's stances of the social structure analysis, stratification and class. In Weber's view, society is composed out of different orders: economic, social, legal. The economic order, depicted in a term 'class', embraces the relationship of the production (labour market) and goods acquisition (goods market) in the capitalistic system. To explain the social order Weber applied a term 'status' as a social dimension of social inequalities. The person's status implied the set of values, understanding of honour, occupational affiliation and availability of social prestige. At last, the legal order – depicted in the terms of 'party' and power – presents the political dimensions of social inequalities. Accordingly, parties were meant to represent the conditional interests of classes and status groups. The division of power took place within the communities (*Gemeinschaft*), i.e. classes, status groups based on the social honour, and parties as political power. The economic component of the social division was extended to socio-cultural and political elements.

In his article '*Class system and stratification*', Talcott Parsons (1949), the main proponent of Weberian tradition, extended the idea of class as stratification. The latter is inevitable or even necessary for society to function. In his view, it serves to preserve the stability, the integration and order of social relationships within the social structure. The stratification system provides also a ranking of individuals in the whole social hierarchy. For this system to function properly, Parsons argued, there is a set of formal/informal sanctions and rewards; the former is applied as situational pressures 'to prevent or punish deviant tendencies' (Parsons 1949:18); whereas, rewards serve as a motivational element to encourage acceptable behaviour. Class is understood not only as a collective matter in terms of class solidarity, or ruling subaltern classes but primarily as a personal matter and personal choices such as decisions on professional occupation, personal traits and achievements. For Parsons, work, specialization and occupation plays the pivotal role in the class system. Additionally, Parsons' class system is based on the notion that the embedded differences cause the latent class conflicts which explain and justify inequalities (Parsons 1949:22–23).

Thus, the Weberian tradition, applies class as an analytical tool to depict and to describe the social division based on different access to opportunities and life chances. Accordingly, the Weberian tradition provided a framework based not on the attempt to change social disparities or eliminate social hierarchies but served as a rather flexible and highly descriptive instrument for class analysis. This approach implies class – besides status and party – not as a struggle but as a stratification function. It serves the depiction of social structure in its state-of-the-art with its distinctions embedded in the society.

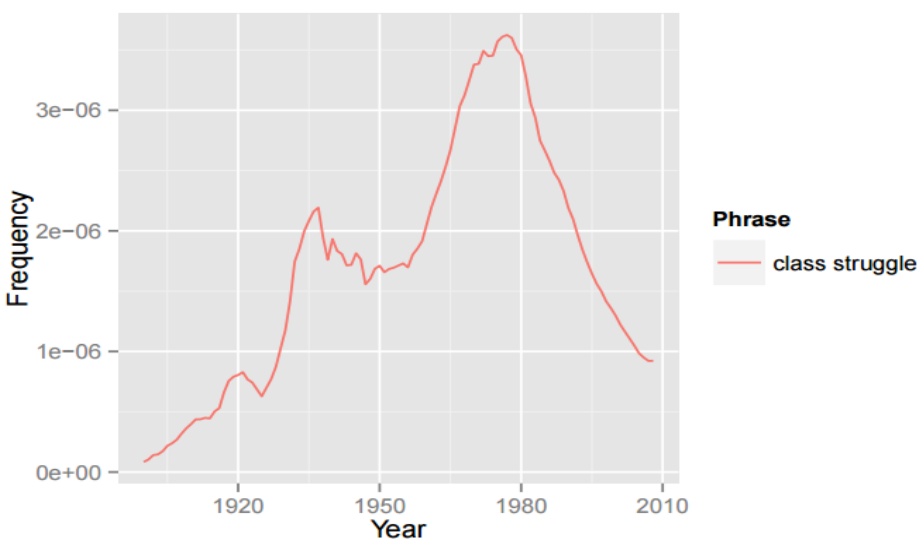
Death of the class

While some scholars have pleaded for the evolution or revolution of the class as an analytic category, its limitations and modifications – as we can see on the examples of Marxian and Weberian traditions – others claimed 'the death of the class'. Ulrich Beck has become especially influential in the persuading of this notion beginning in 1980s and following decades. In his book *Risk Society* (1986) he elaborated the theory of individualisation which neglects social classes as a prior structure of a society. According to Beck, individualisation is maybe desired by individuals but first of all imposed to individuals by a state

and modern institutions. 'Institutionalised individualisation' has been imposed since the late 1970s by the neo-liberal reforms, by dismantling of welfare state and by disembedding of an individual from the traditional social institutions such as family, church, class belonging (Beck 2007). By proclaiming 'death of the class' or class issues as such, Beck depicted the tendency which we can observe in the following chapters, dedicated to the discourse on class in economics and politics. To be more precise – we see the more consequent transition from the class debate (in the Marxian tradition) towards the neo-liberal ideas of individualisation, i.e. Beck's 'death of classes'. Nevertheless the position in respect to class in social thought has remain rather pluralistic as we can see on the example of Standing's ideas about precariat, Hardt&Negry's idea about multitude or even some open confrontations (Atkinson 2007) on Beck's notion that class is no more relevance for academic debate.

Chapter 2: The switch to individualistic android through the marginal revolution. Why the concept of class has been alienated within the academic discourse?

Once outlined the debate in the discipline of sociology, in this section we will look at the epistemological evolution occurred in economics on the issue of class and explore whether this trend has some consequences for the current socio-economic crisis. Looking back at the origin of the economic thought, before the enlightenment, economic phenomena were analyzed in an interdisciplinary way, grasping the relevant analytical categories from history, mathematical deduction and philosophy. However, after the end of the Cold War and the rise of neo-liberalism, pluralism in economics disappeared, and the concept of class, which grasped upon the theory of profit and value, with it. This has contributed to blind academics and students from approaches that could have exposed them to alternative political perspectives and question the set of ontological interpretation of the reality. Such silent transition towards mainstream categories and marginalization of the political economy analytical framework is observable by screening the citations and jargon use on academic journals but also by simply acknowledging at the disappearance of lectureships of ‘History of economic thought’ and ‘Comparative economic systems’ in many economics departments which now has given the reason for the creation of several movements around the globe advocating for pluralism in economics (i.e. Rodrik D., forthcoming). As it can be observed from the below graphs produced by the research engine “Google Books Ngram Viewer” showing the frequency of the use ‘class struggle’ in the published world, we can acknowledge a

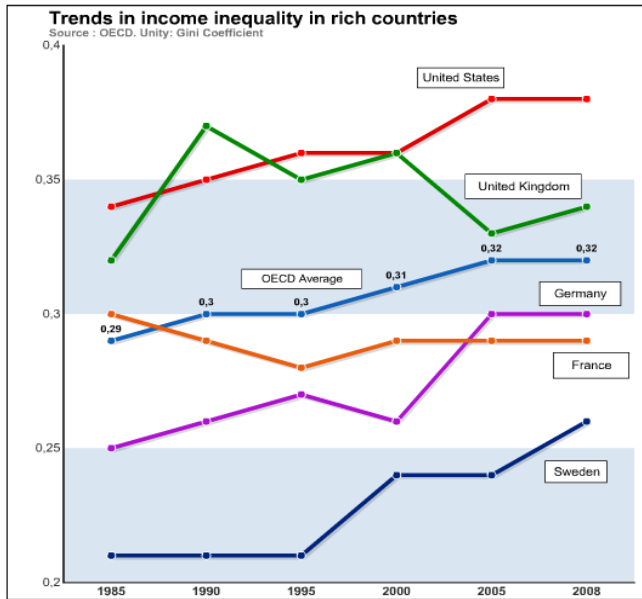


a sharp decline beginning in the early 1980s, namely the beginning of the neoliberal era. Such unilateral way through which economic phenomena are investigated, conveyed to an impoverishment of the debate and a shortage of policy tools

(Fine, 1997; Lawson, 2013). Therefore, even if still considered a social science, such monopoly helped to set aside economics as a mathematical discipline where interests can be aggregated.

The neoclassical approach, also called “mainstream”, which has dominated the strand of economic theories of the last 30 years through its deductivist approach and mathematical modeling, has in fact diverted the attention away from the concept of class, an essential analytical category to understand the distribution of economic wealth and power. By contrast, a new object of analysis emerged: the free rational individual.

But, what mainstream economics actually is? In a nutshell, the basic principles of mainstream economics are that: the market is the heart of human interaction; free competition among economic actors is objectively ‘ideal’ and is feasible only if market is free from state intervention seen as distortions; inputs and means of production are equally accessible by anyone through credit, and profit is the reward of risk takers; rational optimization and individual utility are the *fil rouge* upon which every consumer and producers ‘hang’ on this planet; in order to adjust market failures, the allocation of resources takes place through prices that will automatically converge towards the equilibrium of supply and demand. Lastly, the monolithic and homogeneous object of observation, the free agent, has the opportunity to climb the social steps only with its own efforts.



It is important to understand the characteristics of such framework because it is the theoretical foundation on which are based the most important austerity recommendations and structural adjustments of the international finance organization (i.e. The World Bank and FMI) for countries in economic crisis over the last thirty years. Such recommendations in fact have prevented the welfare state from promoting redistributive policies, promoting privatization, dismantling public services through liberalization which contributed to

wage cuts and labour displacements whereas private capital improved its profit margin. While the theory of surplus value, through which political economist tried to explain capitalistic dynamics of labour exploitation and consequent crisis of accumulation, disappeared, the Gini coefficient Index rose at unprecedented levels (See graph from OECD stats). In other words, once the debate about class stopped, socio-economic inequality restarted. There is no attempt to state a clear causality in these patterns, nevertheless, it is argued that this coincidence cannot be ignored and in the picture of the current crisis could contribute to reshape the debate towards underrated factors.

But why the way economic discipline is studied has to do with inequality and how the dominant theories impact on poverty? To answer these questions we need firstly to see how neoclassical theory sees and address inequality.

The vision of mainstream economics on inequality is that, through market coordination, the benefit obtained by profit makers will trickle down to waged labor and this automatic mechanism will eventually tackle inequality. The rationale behind it is that, if price is an indicator of resources abundance or scarcity and drives their efficient allocations, its tendency towards equilibrium will then make labour - treated in mainstream economics as a factor of production comparable to any other input such as land or copper- earn the value of its (decreasing) marginal productivity. Nevertheless, according to the

utilitarian framework, marginal utility of income becomes increasingly smaller for a wealthy person than for a poor one which creates an argument to make additional (marginal) profit less desirable which would thus limit inequality. Under such perspective it becomes obvious that applying redistributive policies or market regulations will create ‘unnecessary’ frictions and efficiency costs. However, it is observable that market needs and pushes towards the expansion and intensification of consumerism, especially of luxuries goods perceived by consumers as status symbols of economic power and indicators of social differentiations. This dynamic therefore confutes the rule of decreasing marginal utility of income, confirmed by sociologists and marketing experts who have in fact widely studied how capitalist society survival depends on ‘irrational’ consumerism (Elliott, 1997; Bauman, 2004). It follows that inequality, without interventions, is a *sine qua non* condition for the functioning of the market because the ‘decreasing marginality’ rule in high-income consumption does not hold. Moreover, not only the state is seen as legitimate to intervene only and after market failure. What happened is that the expected market based trickle down never happened and inequality has risen to a point of no return.

Therefore, the individualistic analysis is contributing to perpetuate inequality because wrongly based on the consideration that individuals are exclusively moved by rational decision and *extrinsic* material rewards with no acknowledge of their *intrinsic* and subjective standard of satisfaction or welfare taste, which can potentially be less or different from the maximization universally set (Wade, 2008). The underlying contradiction is linked to the focus on the individualistic rational choice as main agent structuring reality: it is rather inconsistent to state that each and every individual share the same values and taste on what is perceived desirable, necessary or optimal. As Lawson states, ‘the individuals have been studied for years as part of unique optima where everybody follow the same rules’. Such atomistic conception requires also that ‘atomistic factors have the same separate and affect whatever the context’ (2013:31). Such psychological behavioural individualism of the human being that aims at optimising its own utility holds very incisive consequences on how social problems have been studied in economics and how socio-political issues have been addressed.

In the debate behavioural economist states indeed that ‘The dependence of preferences on the formulation of decision problems is a significant concern for the theory of rational choice’ (Tversky &

Kahneman, 1981:453). In reality such frictionless interpretation of social relations has important implications: as we will observe in the concluding chapter, the political discourse was transformed and working class lost its existential legitimacy in claiming their stake because of the homogeneity of interests claimed by political parties and acknowledged in society. By the same token, deductivism, which infers economic knowledge by studying economic phenomena through mathematical exercise, is an unrealistic way to explain reality because it simply does not look at what people, business and governments actually do (Wade, 2007:9).

In reality, social agencies are not homogeneous and therefore they need to be analyzed for their contrasting and asymmetrical positions. As long as social reproduction is regulated by a capitalist mode of production, the use of the category class is still very relevant to understand distribution of political and economic power among actors. When it comes to social categories of gender, race, ethnicity, linguistic or religion minorities, mainstream economics indeed overlooks the institutional specificity and differentiations required. The market is the only factor that defines the interaction where a neutrality of interests interacts. One example that contradict with such a policy neutrality is the current Euro Zone crisis where monetary expansion is used as economic tool because more legitimate for higher classes respect to a fiscal policy, although known to be less effective, since it does not hurt specific groups of wealthiest. In fact, by taking decisions rationally and objectively it is possible to hurt powerful parts of the society. Thus, the predominant economic models based on social welfare cuts, privatization and regressive taxation are indeed not promoting distribution and keep protecting the most influential economic power in the political arena. As a matter of fact, the class of capital holders identifiable in the financial sector has deeply influenced, if not almost overlapped, with the political decision making system which reaffirms a situation of non-equal bargaining power positions.

Therefore, on the one hand, from a theoretical perspective the redistributive role of the state is perceived as invasive, based on the vision of society laissez affair, law abiding efforts and reward that do not produce 'welfare scroungers' relying on benefit (Wade, 2007:7). On the other hand, at the reality level the same state is practically controlled by the lobby of transnational corporate economic power which are disproportionately influencing public policies. The huge disproportion between wages of CEOs

¹ and unskilled labor shed lights on the unbridled pace of capital concentration and gives clear signal of this polarization trends. Moreover, OECD data shows that during the last two decades the productivity enhancements in the secondary sector have not been produced only through technological automation but especially through pressure on labor real wages, delocalization of factories to developing countries. Yet, forty of the fifty biggest firms in the world are making profit through financial speculation, meaning not contributing to the real economy in terms of employment and production. Put in another way, productivity enhancement has not supported wages improvement, as announced by thinkers such as Kaldor, but instead is responsible for 80% of labor share drop and causing rising of unemployment for unskilled workers (OECD data).

After having outlined such empirical evidences, it seems that neglecting approaches able to better analysis these trends, would look myopic. In fact less popular theories such as the Marxian labor theory of value, which admit that pre-established relations of wealth would instead shed light on the structural causes of gain concentration and widening of inequality. By contrast, distancing itself from the concept of class, market based analysis contemplates a zero-sum game with no conflict. However, reality seems to show that not everyone reaches the sufficient level of individual welfare through perfect capitalist market competition, and the looser category is the working class. In conclusion, when unbridled markets and free movement of capital have been left unregulated and public role shrunk in an inverse trends, inequality has grown as well. The decline of wealth redistribution and welfare state has thus brought to unacceptable and objectively undesirable low level of poverty among lower strata of society.

We will explore more in depth how these phenomena can be identifiable through the political debates on the examples of national – Italian and Bulgarian – case studies. In our conclusion we will see how the peak of ‘freedom of choice’ has distorted the concept of equality and jeopardized the role of progressive socialist parties. Social discontent, caused by “market failure”, are now addressed though populist and individual solutions based on the promotion of individual voluntarism, charity and private solidarity. The subjective moral push, which is a contradiction of the rational efficiency, and the core of class struggle needs to be put back on the table.

¹ In 2000 top CEOs earn in the US five hundred time more than an average worker.

Chapter 3 Class in the political debates: Italian and Bulgarian case studies

In the case studies we have chosen to focus on an historical perspective. This is necessary in order to analyze a concept like class, since a comparison with the past could help evaluating the actual relative absence of it in the public discourse. The timeframe we considered is relatively long (from the end of nineteenth century to the actual “decay of class”).

Due to the small size of the working group, we decided to focus only on two case studies. We have chosen Italy and Bulgaria because of our expertise and their peculiar differences.

A comparison between the two case studies has been in fact interesting because of multiple reasons: First of all, their different size, both in physical than political terms. Even if both countries had a relatively late economic development, Bulgaria could be considered as a more peripheral country and is a recent member of the European Union while Italy is a founder country of the European Community. Italy is an interesting case because of its complex political development, as the country was ruled by a fascist regime between the two World Wars and had the biggest communist party of the Western Bloc after the World War Two. Bulgaria has been part of the Soviet bloc which has influenced paradigmatically the shift in class relations.

This led to a very different development of the national class debate. It is believed that such a comparison exercise on such two different cases could give an insight on the possible different paths of the debate on class and provide further tools for reflection about the patterns that class struggles have had in the recent past.

3.1 The Italian case study: The concept of class in the political debate in Italy

In order to analyse the evolution of the use of the concept of class in the Italian political debate we should make some preliminary remarks. First of all, we cannot always make a strong distinction between political and cultural debates. In fact, since the end of the war and the creation of the republic, a very close link was established between intellectuals and politicians, especially in left-wing politics. The result was a remarkable politicization of intellectuals and a high political influence of some theoretical debates.

This peculiarity must be taken into account when dealing with an issue like class.

We can distinguish at least five different periods in the evolution of the category class. In the first one, from Italian unification to the Second World War, class progressively become more and more important in the political debate and then sudden disappear with the rise of fascism. In the second period, from the end of the Second World War to the end of the 1950s, the concept of class, even if present, was not central nor in the political neither in the intellectual debate for a number of reasons we will analyse later. In the third one, lasting from the beginning of the 1960s to 1967, a number of debates on the concept started to take place, by intellectual and political minorities. In the fourth one, which began in 1968 and ended more or less ten years later, mass movements, workers' struggles and increasing politicization of the society put the issue of class at the centre of political debate. After 1978, and increasingly in the 1980s the use of the concept declined sharply and a new consensus emerged, according to which interpreting society with a class framework was not useful anymore.

“Liberal Italy” and fascism

The foundation of the Italian Worker Party (then renamed as Italian Socialist Party) could be seen as a turning point in the systematic usage of the concept of class in Italian politics. The “social issue” was discussed also previously, but without specific reference to the concept of class (rather considering society as a whole). This was also due to the late industrial development of Italy. A real working class arose only around the end of the nineteenth century. The new Socialist Party was inspired by a marxian perspective, considering German SPD as a model. A classist reading of the society was part of his background. The legitimacy of “class struggle” as a key concept in the interpretation of the society and in politics wasn't recognized by Italian government until the beginning of twentieth century. Giovanni Giolitti, who served as prime minister five times, was the first to recognize the struggle between workers and capitalists and state that the should not interfere between them. The aim of such a recognition was to promote the organization of the working class in unions and parties which could support the government and thus used as a tool to regulate social conflict. This strategy was supported, within the Socialist Party, by Filippo Turati, the leader of the reformist fraction. An opposite idea was supported by the revolutionary syndicalist fraction, inspired by the ideas of George Sorel. Workers class should not join the government and compromise with the State, in order to avoid losing its autonomy.

After the World War I, class struggle grew sharply in intensity. In the so-called “Biennio Rosso” (red two years period) strikes were frequent and effective and, also because of the Soviet Revolution, revolutionary hypothesis were proposed. This led to the foundation, in 1921, of Italian Communist Party. But in the same years, fascist movement started to grow and, in the 1922-1926 period, Benito Mussolini managed to take the power. Fascist ideology was deeply in contrast with the idea of class struggle, rather fostering a “corporative” idea of cooperation between classes, which was related with a praxis of violence towards unions (which was replaced by official union organized by the regime) and parties, which became progressively illegal. So, during the fascism, the concept of class disappeared from the official public discourse.

The Reconstruction and the 1950s

After the war, political forces have chosen to focus on reconstructing the national economy. Italy was still a far less developed country than other European nations. Agriculture was still a fundamental part of the economy. The main political forces agreed that economic development was a priority and did not stress divisions within society. That was of course true for the main ruling party, Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy), which won the 1948 elections and was part of the government coalition until 1994. The party’s ideology, influenced by the catholic tradition, stressed the importance of cooperation between different parts of the society. In order to avoid that economic development could create a sharp division within society between workers and capital, DC pursued policies favoring middle classes (farmers, shopkeepers, artisans etc.) and practiced clientelism in order to build consensus on an individualistic basis.

It could be more surprising that the PCI (Partito Comunista Italiano, Italian Communist Party, the main opposition party) too did not mention very much the class issue in its political discourse. Actually, it was coherent with the strategy of the party. Since 1943, when the leader of the Party, Palmiro Togliatti, decided (with the so called Svolta di Salerno) to join a national unity government, the PCI tried to stress its national character rather than focusing on representing the interest of one specific class. Workers were, of course, a pillar of the strategy of the party but alliances with other social groups were needed. So, the ‘people’ was more used as a category than ‘class’.

Togliatti supported his politics by publishing the Prison Notebooks by Gramsci and interpreting them as in line with the party's strategy (Mezzadra and Capuzzo 2012). Concepts like *blocco storico* ('historical bloc') and *egemonia* ('hegemony') were seen as supporting the need to seek a wider consensus than a single class (Gramsci 1971). Italian capitalism was considered as underdeveloped and irrational because of the problems of the national unification process and of the perverse alliance between capitalists and landlords (which was the cause of the underdevelopment of southern Italy). The task of the party was to promote a different social alliance creating the condition for modernizing the economy and to achieve further, more progressive aims.

'Economic miracle' and Workerism

The prevision that the stagnation of the economy will continue did not fulfill. Between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s Italian economy started to grow at a really fast pace. Along with the economic development, major social changes were happening in the Italian society. Millions of people migrated from the South, starting to work in the factories of the North (mainly in the so-called 'industrial triangle', between Turin, Milan and Genua). Industry employment rose while the number of agriculture employee declined sharply. Consumption grew, changing lifestyles.

How to interpret those transformations? A number of debates started among intellectuals and left-wing politicians. One of the most significant took place within a conference on the tendencies of the Italian capitalism (Istituto Gramsci 1962). There were at least two main interpretations of such tendencies, which were linked to different political positions. Some of the speakers (first of all, Amendola, prominent member of the PCI) believed that the economic changes did not transform the fundamental characters of the Italian capitalism. Others (like Bruno Trentin) believed that those evolutions should lead to renew the paradigm: Italy was not an underdeveloped economy anymore, industrialization was changing the society, so the political aims should change too. A class perspective became thus necessary.

This more leftist perspective refocusing on the concept of class was developed by a number radical left groups, often composed by young people and related to reviews (like *Quaderni Piacentini*, *Classe*

Operaia etc.). The most important of those groups was related to “Quaderni Rossi” (Red Notebooks), an important review published between 1961 and 1966 (Wright 2002). Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti were the most prominent authors. They were the founders of “workerism”. The core idea was that it was necessary to restart studying the concrete situation of the working class within the factories that were deeply changed by economic transformation. This research had to be carried on together with the workers themselves (a method called ‘co-research’) along with a theoretical renewal based on a new reading of Marx’s Capital. One of the main findings of this research was the discovery of a new type of worker: the ‘mass-worker’. This worker was the result of technological changes in the productive process and of migration of new workers from the south. Without any specialization and tradition, the mass worker was different from the traditional specialized worker, who was the typical left-wing militant. Those workers, according to the workerist perspective were not available anymore to move their claims to the background because of the political strategy of the party. In fact, in 1962 violent strikes and clashes in Turin was the signal that a new season of labour unrest was starting. The society itself was explained starting from the factoring and the working class. Class was the starting point of this new theory. Also within the PCI, a new group (including, for instance, Rossana Rossanda and Lucio Magri, a group close to Pietro Ingrao) was struggling to put the class issue in a more central position within the political debate. They were defeated and some of them will be later expelled by the party and they will found an important newspaper, Il Manifesto.

The 1970s and the ‘golden age’ of class

As we saw in the previous paragraph, the debate on class started in the 1960s but it was limited to relatively small intellectual groups and political minorities. In the 1970s the discussion on class became widespread. The cause of such changes was of course the emergence of social movements. In Italy the 1968 student movements were followed by the so-called secondo biennio rosso, a period of really intense social unrests and strikes. After that a lot of extreme leftist political groups emerged (Lotta Continua, Potere Operaio, Avanguardia Operaia etc.) This atmosphere deeply influenced the political debate. One of their main references was of course the Marxian theory.

In this perspective, the major discussed problem was the question of a middle class. According to an

orthodox perspective, pushed by some leftist groups, there was an expectation of ‘proletarianization’ of middle classes. Rising unemployment between intellectual workers, negative effects of the economic crisis were seen as arguments supporting such a perspective. This idea was countered by a very successfully debated book, *Essay on social classes* by Paolo Sylos Labini (Labini 1974). Sylos Labini argued that the Marxian forecast of a progressive extinction of middle class was not realizing. On the contrary, its size increased. Of course, some of the traditional parts of middle class diminished, while some others (bureaucracy, public employees) rose constantly. The growth of the size of middle classes was, according to Sylos Labini, partly related to the evolution of the economy itself (growing complexity of companies and public sector), but also partly to pathological political logics. In his book Sylos Labini blames the ‘parasitism’ of a significant part of Italian middle classes and their perverse relation with the political class, searching for consensus in exchange for privilege.

Another important essay, *I ceti medi nel meccanismo del consenso* (Middle class in the mechanism of consensus) by Alessandro Pizzorno was also focused on the relation between middle class and the political system and the problem of creation of consensus. Pizzorno distinguished two main strategies which could be pursued to achieve consensus: ‘individualistic attraction’ and ‘institutionalization of collective claims’. The ruling coalitions in Italy always tried to pursue the first strategy, through strengthening middle classes with specific policies. Middle classes typically prefer individual improvement rather than collective one. Policies of the government not only accorded privileges to those classes, but also gave to them mediation tasks. This was a major factor of disintegration of the society, preventing clear class cleavages to emerge.

In the 1970s this sort of ‘individualistic’ mechanism of consensus was in crisis. Two solutions are proposed in the left-wing area: a revolutionary one, which would exploit the crisis to overcome capitalism, and a reformist one (endorsed, for instance, by Sylos Labini) which promote an alliance between the working class and the “advanced” and “enlightened” sectors of the bourgeoisie to fight against rent, speculative sectors of the bourgeoisie and ‘parasitic’ parts of the middle class. This shift towards a more collective perspective will not happen. The PCI will try to make an alliance with the DC (‘*compromesso storico*’, historical compromise), whose attempt failed completely, also because of the killing of the main

supporter of this strategy within the DC by terrorist group Brigade Rosse. Thus, in 1978 the long cycle of social struggles started in 1968, ended.

The 1980s and the coming back of individualism

Between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s the Italian economic system was deeply restructured, according to the guidelines of the neoliberal revolution but with national specific features. One of the aims of this restructuring process is disintegrating the working class. Automation of significant parts of the productive process and outsourcing of intermediate phases of processing were the strongpoint of this revolution. For instance, FIAT factories, where the most important workers struggles took place, were deeply transformed and a lot of employees were fired. Later, in the '90s, also the public sector corporations, grouped within the IRI Holding, which controlled still an important part of the Italian economy, were largely privatized. A large number of small and medium enterprises were created in order to fulfil the orders of big companies, which started to close their factories. Some of them were managed by former factory workers, which became entrepreneur. The effect of this revolution was the end of the workers consciousness of belonging to the same class. An individualistic ethos was spread among them. This process was sustained by a general significant rise in mass consumptions (also generated by huge fiscal expansion which caused a steep rise in public debt) and by new models and lifestyles spread by advertising and television. At the same time, the concept of class started to be considered as not significant anymore. Former and actual working class people started to consider themselves as a part of the middle class. New lifestyles spread among society and a long-lasting crisis of collective organizations (political parties, trade unions etc.) started. In the political discourse and in the public sphere the concept of class was increasingly considered as old and outdated.

3.2 The Bulgarian case study: Bulgarian debates and conceptions of class and class structure

When we talk about political ideas in Bulgaria, we have to admit that in most cases they are 'stolen' or 'copied' from the developed countries mostly in the west part of Europe, especially Germany. An exception of this 'tradition' can be observed in the period when Bulgaria was a 'satellite' of the Soviet Union and the Bulgarian public discourse was strictly subordinate to it. Under these circumstances Bulgarian politicians and writers have always searched the ways and tools to compare Bulgarian scientific

reality with the ideas and conceptions imported from outside.

The development of the conception of class in Bulgarian political debate can be divided in three parts linked to the three major periods in Bulgarian history after the end of 19th century – before the creation of the Eastern Bloc (1878 – 1944), the period in which Bulgaria was part of the Eastern Bloc (1944 – 1989) and the period of transition after the end of the Cold War (1989 – 2015). The conception of class was developed in Bulgaria in the first period due to the foundation of The Bulgarian Social Democratic Party. This created a debate between conceptions of the class and the estate which is used in the tradition of Abbe Sieyes and French Revolution. The last one was developed by a specific agrarian party (Bulgarian Agrarian Peoples Union). The crucial point of this period was the fact that approximately 85 percent of the Bulgarian population was employed in Bulgarian agricultural sector. So the debate between both conceptions was crucial. It was strongly connected with the struggle for influence within this majority of the Bulgarian population on access to land.

The first publications of Bulgarian social democrats about the economic and political situation in Bulgaria and the development of the Bulgarian society contained concerns about the lack of industrial development. The main text, written by the founder and first leader of BSDP (the BSP) Dimitar Blagoev is called 'What is socialism and is there a soil for it in Bulgaria?' (Blagoev [1891] 2005) It is obvious that Blagoev was not convinced about the future development of the working class and the Socialism. In the text it is paid more than enough attention to the development of the Bulgarian capitalism and especially of the Bulgarian industry. Less than twenty years after the formal escape from feudalism of the Ottoman Empire (1878) less than 10 percent the population belonged to the industrial workers which means that Bulgaria was undeveloped country without industry and significant number of working class. But there was even a greater problem – the majority of the Bulgarians employed in agriculture was the owners of the plots which they cultivated, which made their social position too different from the proletariat in the west part of Europe.

In 1893, during the Zurich Socialist and Labor Congress, the report from BSDP made by other Bulgarian social democrat Nikola Gabrovski presented a different Bulgarian point of view (Kandilarov, 2009).

Gabrovski declared that near 5 percent of the Bulgarian population sold its labor-power which defer from other estimation in that period. The statement did not sound near to reality. The result was based on the fact that those social groups involved also the employment in agriculture which was crucially important for Bulgarian social democrats who needed this part of the Bulgarian population in the working class. But at the same time there was a contradiction, because from the point of view of Communist Manifesto (Marx & Engels [1848] 2013) the same considerable part of the Bulgarian population was still in 'the idiocy of rural life'. They were not industrial workers; they were not concentrated in city areas. Their employers were working together with them. The specific Bulgarian issue, which the social democrats would not like to discuss, was that even Bulgarians who were employed to work on the lands of richer Bulgarian farmers, were often owners of small land pieces. But if Bulgarian social democrats accepted more strictly the criteria about the meaning of the working class, it would mean that proletarians in Bulgaria were less than 10 percent of the population which would decrease drastically the influence of the party.

At the end of the 19th century this broader and flexible concept of the Bulgarian working class was not comparable with the working class of the Western Europe where the industrial workers were the largest part of the population and the development of the society corresponded with those described by Marx. But three or four decades later the need of this kind of predefinition of the working class increased, because in the most developed country like the USA, Great Britain and Germany the industrial workers started to decrease as a proportion of the population. Almost hundred years later the predefinition is needed even more.

Blagoev was strictly following Marx theory and was convinced that Bulgaria was an undeveloped country and should past at least decades to form a national bourgeoisie and a working class. Then the follow the opportunity for Bulgarian social democrats to gain power and to begin the revolution would appear. In fact the question of power was crucial. The opponents of Blagoev like Gabrovski and Sakazov did not want to wait. According to their opinion the majority of poor people were the majority of proletarians. Bulgarian social democrats only need to work hardly on the class consciousness of that majority and the success in the class struggle would have come soon. It is interesting to mention that Blagoev admitted

the correctness of the Gabrovski's views, but they were contradicting with the Marxist theory. This explains the contradiction between Blagoev 'orthodox' vision and Gabrovski's flexible interpretation of the Marxian theory, compatible with the Bulgarian reality.

Until the beginning of 20th century this conflict was temporary overcome. But the contradictions in the left forces in Europe after the beginning of the revisionism (1899) were enough to split the left in Bulgaria again and finally. While there was a debate on the content of the working class, the leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian party Alexander Stamboliyski developed his ideas about the different estates and especially 'the agrarian estate'. Due to this theory and the development of the Bulgarian economy the party leaded by Stamboliyski was more influential than the social democrats in Bulgaria in the first quarter of the 20th century. From this period of the theoretical debates there were some specific moments in the ideas of Dimitar Blagoev that should be outlined. The class struggle was understood as a struggle in the electoral campaigns. The revolution would begin when the social democrats in Bulgaria won the elections for the national parliament and started the revolutionary legislative transformation. In this way Blagoev elaborated his own specific Bulgarian vision which differs from the revisionism and orthodox Marxism. The Bulgarian history proved that there was something right and something wrong in his ideas.

After the end of The First World War defeated Bulgaria faced so called 'The Second National Catastrophe'. As a result old right parties lost power and Stamboliyski's Agrarian party (Bulgarian Agriculture People Union, BAPU) gains the power after elections. They started reforms using the majority in the Parliament. Three years later (1923) when they were preparing to change the form of government into a republic, a military coup d'état was made and the conservative parties gained the power united against their enemies. Stamboliyski was brutally killed. The idea of a peaceful revolutionary change was forgotten for a long time. In Bulgaria began the years of terror which gave an opportunity for the left parties, agricultural and socialist, to unite against the conservative forces.

The violence used by the right forces against the government of BAPU, against the BAPU activists and the communists drastically changed the political debate between the concepts of the working class and the

agricultural estate. In fact, this kind of debates disappeared almost at all. The new leaders in the left and especially Georgi Dimitrov started to talk about the popular and united fronts. This idea would dominate the next two decades until the end of The Second World War. The Communist united their forces with parts of BAPU and other political formations in which there was something left against the extreme right, against fascism and war. The first period of the development of the conception of the class ended with the end of the war. In fact, it finished twenty years before The Second World War when the arguments in political debates were defeated by the violence.

The second period, influenced by the Soviet Union, was connected with the industrialization of the state and 'production of the working class' in the Bolshevik tradition. In the first five years after the end of The Second World War all party leaders of the period before 1939 died. The new generation of Bulgarian politicians was selected entirely by the Soviet Union. The idea of having unique Bulgarian ideas about the class and especially the Marxist theory was lost in the first decades after the creation of the Eastern Bloc. Bulgarian leaders and especially Todor Zhivkov chose that way of development, without verbal or written difference between political conceptions in Bulgaria and in the Soviet Union. Zhivkov developed his own concepts with regards to the practice of Bulgarian economy and society.

The term 'class', underestimated by the bourgeoisie in the previous period after 1944, was 'everywhere'. But Bulgarian visions about the class, class analysis and class struggle were totally dominated by the theory of Marxism-Leninism. The new name of the party – the Bulgarian Communist Party – leded Bulgaria in the direction of fast industrialization which means also working class creation. The first step was the modernization of the agriculture which resulted in a drastic reduction of the people needed to be employed in this economic sector. The manpower released from agriculture was employed in the new industries. The efforts towards forming a working class were made in few directions. The state tried hard to raise the living standards of the new industrial workers by increasing the wages, constructing new homes and upgrading the new city areas. However, in Bulgaria there were not cities in the West European or American meaning of the word. Only Sofia for several decades after the Second World War became a proper city with more than a million inhabitants but for Bulgarian standards, centers with a population of thirty or fifty thousand people are still classified as city. Because there is only one word

'grad', the state called 'grad' more than two hundred cities. There were constructed industrial factories where the majority of the population was employed. So there was a majority of Bulgarian population which was formally industrial workers in city areas almost as described in the Marxist tradition. The party structures disposed in the factories were working hard in the formation of the class consciousness. Factories workers were often better paid than even high qualified professionals, officers in the army and secret services etc.

In the last decade before 1989, without even trying to formulate a new ideological conception, the governing Bulgarian Communist party started to implement some market relations and institutions. Also for the first time it gave a priority not to the traditional working class, but to the new high qualified professionals. The theoretical and ideological background of this new policy will be developed after the beginning of the transition.

The third period started in 1989. After the changes in 1989 there was some kind of 'diffusion' in the use of the word 'class' and the ideas about it, which makes it unexpectedly resistant. The concept of 'working class' has gained an ironic connotation. More often in the political debates and social analysis is used 'middle class' which means the part of the population which is not rich or poor and is 'middle', because of its middle income. Bulgarian politicians and social analysts often write and speak about the ways to enlarge this part of the population which they regard as a very important factor for the successful development of Bulgaria. A specific use in popular usage of the word class is the term 'political class' or 'class of the politicians'. The idea is that politicians are a specific group in Bulgarian society which steal the production and wealth of the Bulgarian people and is guilty for the current situation and status of the Bulgarian citizens.

Due to the rise of the service sector in the new economy, the former leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) Alexander Lilov developed the idea of forming a new class of highly educated professionals. Without using the old terms, he describes this group as a class of the future, the new vanguard which should replace the working class even if there is still a place for a working class in the society. Almost the same are the theories of another socialist Vladimir Topencharov who called the new class 'intellectuals'.

Topencharov tried to use Marxist tools in his analysis. He even called this new class 'new proletariat'. In his works he criticized the effort of the BCP (Bulgarian Communist Party) in the years of totalitarian rule to change the majority of the party members who in his opinion was not the majority of the working class before The Second World War. Topencharov is convinced that in every period of the history of the party intellectuals were the majority of the party members and party elite. He tries to connect the development of the Bulgarian Socialist Party with the development of world economy, globalization and formation of informational society. In the new economy totally dominated by knowledge, high qualified professionals have a crucial significance in the production of goods. Topencharov stated that the new proletariat and the left forces especially in Bulgaria and Europe should connect the political action with the needs of this rising social group. Topencharov declared that it will be a difficult task, because that class is too heterogeneous, but this is the right way for socialists and social democrats.

These conceptions of the new classes are not criticized from the other politicians and scientists. The problematic aspect in the debate about the modern left in Bulgaria and about the future of the left parties – and most important of the left policies – is that internal party debates are too far away from ideas, social and economic analysis. They are too much concentrated in politics as public relations and media presentation. The entertainment of the political product becomes increasingly important than the quality of the product. So there is no decline of the conception of the class per se, but decline of the scientific political debates.

Conclusions and reflections

In this paper we went through multiple dimensions of the concept of class. We firstly looked at how class has been studied in two social science disciplines, in particular firstly by looking at the evolution of class as definitional category in Sociology and then assessing to the disappearance of class category in Economics. We then critically looked at class relations and struggle through two European countries, namely Italy and Bulgaria.

As the previous chapters highlighted, in general terms we acknowledged the fact that the use of the concept of class in politics declined significantly in the last decades, along with the rise of neoliberalism. As consequence of the decline of the 'golden age' where public sphere played a role in society engine, people have shaped their identities on a more individualistic basis. Looking at previous attempts to homogenize and therefore muddle class interests, we may find the success of the 'Third way', which was seen as an alternative towards the traditional strategy for progressive parties in the 1990s. According to the 'Third Way', the decisions of the voters were not based on ideology or class belonging anymore. Thus, the concept of socio-economic class became less meaningful than other concepts, which instead became more appeal: governance, civil society, leadership, stakeholders: inventing a simple and attractive message to the electorate and to the masses was more attractive, easier and rewarding for parties rather than representing the interests of a specific segment of the society in contraposition with another.

Nowadays, due to the multiplication and transformation of new jobs profile, and due to the relative easier access to opportunities that western societies benefit from, the traditional class categories i.e. "working class versus bourgeoisie" faded in a common, blurry 'middle class' identity which embrace the whole society.

Thus as a reflection of that, also among social sciences and academia the concept of class struggle started to be considered outdated and not useful. In reality, as a matter of fact, nowadays it is impossible to go back to a pure class identity divided into working class and capitalistic class, as it was present in the Fordist industrial age. Instead, it is acknowledged that the positions of power within contemporary

societies are the result of intersectional factors where income is one of the many elements determining political identities and belongings of the electorates.

Nevertheless, due the increasing income inequality, (exacerbated by the economic financial crisis), it can be observed a reemergence of class discourse under different forms. Precisely, the consequences of the neoliberal policies been implemented over the last 30 years and the effects of the new division of unskilled labor across the globe driven by the globalization provoked a huge increase of unemployment and impoverishment of job conditions in the West.

Moreover, because of the lack of effective redistributive fiscal policies, the effects of the current crisis hit stronger on the weaker strata of the society, especially young people, women and unskilled workers leading to a further polarization of income and wealth.

By acknowledging and challenging the root causes of such inequality, new and informal political movement emerged. New parliamentarian parties took advantage of the crisis– for instance Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy, UKIP in the UK or Jobbik in Hungary, Fronte nationale in France to push for a populist narrative against immigrants and the European cooperation. Also, movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Indignados, Podemos emerged outside the Parliamentary arena identifying themselves as the deprived 99%. Their critics are on the process of financialisation, on power of lobbies and corporate elite, plutocracy and inequalities. Although such movements do not use a “a class narrative”, their radical ideas are supported by precarious workers, young people, unemployed workforces who represent a big chunk of the “looser” of this economic cycle. In reality, their strategies fall most of the time into a “class abnegation”, bringing up individualistic arguments and solution as policy response to the economic crisis (i.e. localism, nationalism, self-sufficiency) without spelling out the causal effects, the class patterns and their antagonism.

Trying to acknowledge the mobilization capacity of these grassroots movements by decodifying the patterns of such indignation, some authors call such phenomena with the name of ‘prefigurative politics’. In particular, it is argued that they embody an alternative to classical central authority, claiming

the obsolescence of representative democracy in favor of more direct tools of representation and policy implementations (see for instance Young et al. 2012). It is important to underline that both extreme right parties and extreme left movements perceive the EU as a supporter of a neo-liberal agenda, and do not recognize the European Institutions as promoters of pro-poor and/or progressive policies. A plausible explanation might be that traditional political parties lost their accountability towards particular socio-economic interests within the society. In particular we have observed how weak “target groups” still exists and their relative wellbeing has declined because of the current policies. The still existing parties are both at national and European level shaped by “blur brackets” without any exact understanding on where they stand and what they stand for within the political and economic system. As consequence, we can observe a deep disengagement of the electorate during elections across the EU, which proves the necessity for a serious reconsideration of their representation capacity.

As discussed through the paper, the contemporary class detachment is not only symptomatically expressed by a range of particularistic forms of mobilization and closure, but has also contributed to weaken the attractiveness of collective progressive policies within Parliaments. What we are observing as a reaction to the crisis has been instead a return to individualism, racism, battles of have-not, which became the main elements of the populist answer to the crisis. We should all know by now that the solidarity among workers and people in general, which is the basis of ‘class’ identity, is not always a spontaneous process. If class should be not only a sociological category, but also a political reality, it is crucial to find ways to organize and channel socio economic discontent in a more accountable way within the existing democratic institutions, avoiding bureaucratization and separation between the party and society.

So, is it possible for people to renew a feeling of collective belonging? This question can be affirmative if a “classist” proposal today takes into account of the inequalities within the society and the conundrums of the labor market and openly embrace the causes and the triggering mechanisms of such problems. American billionaire Warren Buffett told once that class struggle still exists but his class is winning it.

Policy Proposals:

- 1) The discontent with the canonic parliamentary institutions and progressive parties should be taken into consideration. In this context, it is believed it has raised the necessity to reframe the class concept within the academic and political discourse. As we observed within academia and in some of the political movements there has been an attempt to re-understand and re-create an updated and fitting meaning of the contemporary “class” categories.
- 2) The role of the “policy” and think tanks is fundamental in this moment to catalyze the transformations of the society and through a greater synergy between academia and politics to clearly state towards which direction a progressive agenda should be developed.
- 3) At political level, only through an honest review of the mistakes made in impoverishing public services and in embracing the needs of the weakest during economic slowdowns, left-wing progressive parties will have a chance to survive. This process would start by acknowledging that the interests of profit have been disproportionately protected at the expenses of a trans-national class of unemployed and precarious workers across sectors at an unprecedented level. A burning example is the weak response provided by progressive leaders and parties to the austerity measures as answer to the economic crisis, which were supported by liberals and conservatives and weakly pushed back by socialists at European level. The Juncker Commission European Fund for Strategic Investments, not only showed to be not enough to overcome the crisis and to tackle structural inequalities and unemployment in the long run, but proved once again that progressive forces once again did not engage at all with the implications of the neoliberal paradigm, which abuse has been accepted without resistance.
- 4) The European socialist party should be used as a platform to boost and create synergies among national forces to increase the strengths of their position against those regressive measures. Moreover the Trade Unions, which are supposed to defend workers’ rights are now able to represent only a small category of the working population and do not engage with the most marginalized and precarious parts, creating the need to re-discuss their scope and forms of bargaining.

- 5) As we already admitted, movements and temporary mobilization are not enough. Thus, the problem of renewing our understanding of the concept of class is strictly linked to the problem of political organization. But in order to push further the efforts towards progressive politics, leading to a real “Social Europe”, a greater ability to build a truthful dialogue with movements is needed. Building and politicizing new societal coalitions would give strength to the struggle for a different European agenda. The progressive party has the opportunity to express within the existing parliamentary institutions the injustice and discontent the movements of 99% have screamed on the streets without any substantial results and without any effective political power.

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