

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5902/2236672548530>

Recebido em: 08/09/2019. Aprovação final em: 30/07/2020.

**“CLASS STRUGGLE IS NOT A GAME”:  
DANIEL BENSÃID’S RELATIONAL CONCEPTION OF CLASS.**

*“A LUTA DE CLASSES NÃO É UM JOGO”:* A CONCEPÇÃO RELACIONAL DE CLASSE EM DANIEL BENSÃID.

*“LA LUTTE DES CLASSES N’EST PAS UN JEU”:* LA CONCEPTION RELATIONNELLE DE LA CLASSE CHEZ DANIEL BENSÃID.

*“LA LUCHA DE CLASES NO ES UN JUEGO”:* CONCEPCIÓN RELACIONAL DE LA CLASE EN DANIEL BENSÃID.

Cinzia Arruzza\*

Patrick King\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** While Daniel Bensaïd’s writings on Marxism, socialist strategy, and historical temporality have gained increased attention in the years since his passing, there remain relatively few accounts of his thinking on class. This article seeks to correct that gap by situating Bensaïd’s various texts on class theory in relation to other key reconceptualizations of class in the Marxist tradition that sought to avoid sociological determinism: E. P. Thompson’s lens of class formation and the Italian Workerists’ methodology of class composition. In tracing these connections, we argue that Bensaïd’s conception of class is at once historically grounded and attuned to the open-ended conflictuality and multiple terrains of class struggle.

**Keywords:** Class theory; Marxism; Class formation; Strategy; Exploitation.

**RESUMO:** Ainda que os escritos de Daniel Bensaïd sobre marxismo, a estratégia socialista e a temporalidade histórica tenham atraído mais atenção nos anos que se seguiram à sua morte, houve poucas tentativas de examinar sua análise de classe. Este

\* PhD in Philosophy; Associate Professor, Philosophy Department at The New School for Social Research (NSSR), New York, NY, US; E-mail: [arruzzac@newschool.edu](mailto:arruzzac@newschool.edu)

\*\* Doctoral student in the History of Consciousness Department at The University of California (UC), Santa Cruz, CA, US; E-mail: [pking@ucsc.edu](mailto:pking@ucsc.edu)

*“Class struggle is not a game”: Daniel Bensaïd’s relational conception of class.*

*artigo pretende corrigir essa lacuna situando os vários textos de Bensaïd sobre a teoria de classes com outras reinterpretações de classe na tradição marxista que buscam evitar o determinismo sociológico, a saber: a perspectiva da formação de classes em E. P. Thompson e a metodologia de composição de classe no operariado italiano. Ao traçar essas articulações, sugerimos que a concepção de classe de Bensaïd está historicamente enraizada e atenta ao conflito aberto e aos múltiplos terrenos da luta de classes.*

**Palavras-chave:** Teoria das classes; Formação de classe; Marxismo; Estratégia; Exploração.

**RÉSUMÉ:** *Bien que les écrits de Daniel Bensaïd autour de Marxisme, la stratégie socialiste, et la temporalité historique aient attirés plus d’attention dans les années suivant son décès, il y a eu quand même peu des tentatives d’examiner son analyse de classe. Cet article vise à corriger ce vide en situant les textes diverses de Bensaïd sur la théorie de classes avec autres réinterprétations de classe dans la tradition Marxiste qui cherchent d’éviter un déterminisme sociologique: l’optique de la formation de classe chez E. P. Thompson et la méthodologie de la composition de classe dans l’opéraisme italien. En traçant ces liaisons, nous suggérons que la conception de la classe chez Bensaïd est à la fois enracinée historiquement et attentive à la conflictualité ouverte et terrains multiples de la lutte des classes.*

**Mots-clés:** *Théorie de classes; Formation de classe; Marxisme; Stratégie; Exploitation.*

**RESUMEN:** *Aunque los escritos de Daniel Bensaïd sobre el marxismo, la estrategia socialista y la temporalidad histórica atrajeron más atención en los años posteriores a su muerte, todavía se han habido pocos intentos de examinar su análisis de clase. Este artículo tiene la intención de corregir este vacío situando los diversos textos de Bensaïd sobre la teoría de clases con otras reinterpretaciones de clase en la tradición marxista que buscan evitar el determinismo sociológico: la perspectiva de formación de clase en E. P. Thompson y la metodología de composición de clase en el operariado italiano. Al rastrear estos vínculos, sugerimos que la concepción de la clase está históricamente arraigada y está atenta a la conflictualidad abierta y los múltiples terrenos de la lucha de clases.*

**Palabras clave:** *Teoría de clases; Formación de clase; Marxismo; Estrategia; Explotación.*

Defining what classes are and what counts as class struggle is one of the most daunting tasks in Marxist theory. It is also the implicit or explicit subject of recurring controversies and organizational debates about the opposition or relation between class politics and “identity politics.” Daniel Bensaïd’s treatment of class from his main theoretical opus, *Marx for Our Times*, onwards is one of the least studied aspects of his work.<sup>1</sup> While in recent years several studies have appeared addressing Bensaïd’s critique of teleological philosophies of history, his critical engagement with Marxism and his writings on strategy<sup>2</sup>, his critique of sociological and classificatory conceptions of class has not yet received the attention it deserves.

Daniel Bensaïd’s most extensive treatment of class can be found in the second part of *Marx for Our Times*, which bears the evocative subtitle “Marx’s Critique of Sociological Reason.” The term critique here does not have the Kantian sense of setting the limits of proper use; as Bensaïd contends, any understanding of Marxism worth its salt must grasp its status as a “critical theory of social struggle and the transformation of the world” (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 4). The conception of class that Marx, Engels, and those they directly influenced elaborated is a neuralgic point in historical materialism precisely insofar as it indicates the determinate entanglement of revolutionary practice within “the social relations and economic rhythms of capital” and the non-linear logic of its temporalities.” The knowledge that a materialist analysis of class conflict produces is not “mechanically subject to sociological determination; it still requires constant confrontation... with the political horizon of its own scientific practice” (Bensaïd, 2002, pp. 230, 233). The conception of class articulated in *Marx for our Times* can also be found in a cluster of subsequent conference papers and books (Bensaïd, 1998; Bensaïd, 2000, ch. 3; Bensaïd, 2001, pp. 30-34; Bensaïd, 2007; Bensaïd, 2008b; Bensaïd, 2008c) and it inspires Bensaïd’s critical engagement with the notion of multitude in *Éloge de la politique profane* (Bensaïd, 2008a). What emerges from these writings is an anti-deterministic and anti-sociological understanding of class, which is explicitly inspired by

1 As a partial exception, see Galastri (2018), which discusses the similarities between Thompson, Poulantzas and Bensaïd.

2 See, for example: Garo (2010), Pelletier (2010), Traverso (2010), Antentas (2016), Kouvelakis (2016), Lafrance and Sears (2016), McNally (2016), Traverso (2016), Roso (2018a) and Roso (2018b)

E. P. Thompson’s work on class formation. As we will argue in this article, Bensaïd’s work on class presents also interesting similarities with the notion and method of class composition elaborated by Italian Workerism in the 1960s. Like Thompson and the Italian Workerists, Bensaïd reconceptualizes class as a structured socio-political process and relationship. His critical examination of Marx’s ambiguous – or at least incomplete – treatment of class and his rejection of what he calls the “sociological wager” offer fruitful insights for rethinking what class and class struggles are in a new context shaped by profound transformations of what Italian Workerists would define as the technical class composition and by a proliferation of struggles and forms of conflicts that present a class character while also being irreducible to traditional understandings of class struggle.

### ***Against the sociological wager***

While discussing the *Communist Manifesto* in *Le Sourire du Spectre*, Bensaïd critically notes how in this text Marx’s answer to the central question of the transformation of the proletariat into a ruling class seems to rely on a “sociological wager.” This sociological wager consists, first, in taking classes to be definable things, which can be apprehended through static categories, rather than being historical processes and relations. This corresponds to what Ellen Meiksins Wood calls a synchronic sense of class relations, one focused on structural location (Wood, 1995, p. 76; Camfield, 2004-2005, pp. 423-424). Second, the sociological wager consists in thinking that the social development of a proletariat so understood (i.e., the progressive division of society into two antagonistic classes and the numerical growth of the proletariat) will mechanically lead to its political emancipation and enable it to become the ruling class (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 67-68). To use David Camfield’s words, some of Marx’s formulations seem to suggest that being will determine actions, i.e. that the essence of the proletariat will compel it to do certain things (Camfield, 2004-2005, p. 429). This kind of magical thinking, for which the solution to eminently political and strategic problems can be found ready-made in the social dynamics of capitalist accumulation and seemingly underpins some of

Marx's formulations in the *Communist Manifesto*, fueled the illusions in historical progress that characterized much of the twentieth-century workers' movement.

Bensaïd criticizes both tenets of the sociological wager. To the first, he opposes what we may call a historical and relational view of class, inspired by E. P. Thompson's notion of class formation. To the second, he opposes an emphasis on the distinction between the social and the political, the class and the party (or better: parties), and on the role of strategic reason, which – he insists – is irreducible to sociological analysis.

Let us begin with the first tenet, i.e. with the thorny question of defining what a class is.

In spite of some slippages, according to Bensaïd the *Communist Manifesto* does not actually articulate a sociology of classes:

While positivist sociology claims to treat social facts as if they were things, Marx conceives of them as relations. He affirms the actuality and centrality of their struggle. His thought is not essentialist, but thoroughly relational: classes only become thinkable on the basis of their antagonism. In contrast with an instrumental rationality, which orders and classifies, make inventories and repertoires, asuages and pacifies, his critical theory embraces the dynamic of conflict (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 77-78; our translation).

This key aspect of Marx's thinking about classes emerges more clearly in his later political writings and in his critique of political economy, on which Bensaïd focuses in *Marx for Our Times*. But even there, we should not expect to find the ready-made definition of a class. Commenting on the unfinished Chapter 53 of *Capital*, Volume Three, Bensaïd makes two crucial remarks. One is that, rather than defining class once and for all by using classificatory criteria and attributes, Marx pursues the logic of its multiple determinations. The second is that “an isolated class is not a theoretical object, but a nonsense” for class conflict has epistemic priority over class (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 111): it is only in the light of their reciprocal conflict that classes can be apprehended.

The first remark should also be read as a warning that we

cannot take the analysis of exploitation in *Capital*, Volume One, as the whole truth of class relations. On the contrary, the “relation of exploitation between wage-labour and capital is only the first and the most abstract of their determinations”. Volume One introduces “the specificity of modern classes, grounded in the formal freedom of labour power”, and the class struggle as “the presupposition of the relation of exploitation” (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 105), but it is far from developing a fully determined and systematic conception of classes.

In Volume Two we find a further determination insofar as class relations are addressed in the unity of production and circulation and from the angle of the “conflictual negotiations over labour-power as a commodity” (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 106). From the angle of the sale and purchase of labor-power, conflicts turn around the value of labor-power understood as a commodity, hence around the wage. This determination is no less essential to class relations than the determination found in Volume One and focusing on the immediate extraction of surplus-value within production.

It is not by chance that we find the unfinished chapter on classes only at the end of Volume Three, for it is only when considered as determined by the combination of extraction of surplus-value in the production process, wage relation and distinction between productive and unproductive labor, and the distribution of revenue in reproduction as a whole, that class becomes conceptually thinkable (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 78-79). And yet, even this determination is incomplete, in that Volume Three does not address the conditions of reproduction as a whole and, therefore, the mediation of the State. The unfinished chapter is an additional step in the concrete determinations of class, but it is not the final one, for further determinations would emerge by taking into account, for example, domains of social reproduction (health, housing, education) and the political struggle (Bensaïd, 2002, pp. 108-109). What is missing in *Capital*, therefore, is the full, multifaceted concreteness of social formations, which are not reducible to the “bare skeleton of the mode of production” (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 109).

The second remark, that classes do not exist in isolation, but only within the dialectic of their struggle, makes clear that even pro-

gressive determinations of a class that follow the movement of the progressive determination of capital in Marx's critique of political economy would be insufficient to define what a class is, if not supplemented with a consideration of the historical lines of polarization and struggle along which classes confront one another. In other words, the whole set of determinations necessarily include political determinations *together* with the economic ones. It is for this reason that for Bensaïd we find Marx's last word on the subject of class only in his political writings (*Class Struggles in France, The Eighteenth Brumaire, the Civil War in France*), for it is only in those writings focusing on struggle that the relational, historical and dynamic complexity of classes is in full display (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 79-80; Bensaïd, 2002, p. 99). Bensaïd speaks of *political* determinations, because his notion of class struggle is an eminently political one. What he has in mind is not just the confrontation in the workplace between workers and capitalists around wages, benefits, and labor conditions, but rather a fully-fledged antagonism that takes place at various points of the process of reproduction of capital as a whole and of capitalist social formations and that necessarily involves the state, for "in the sphere of the political, the relations of production are articulated with the state" (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 112).

This leads us to the second tenet of the sociological wager, namely the purported correspondence between being and existence, between the essence of the proletariat and its ability for and process toward self-emancipation. This kind of magical thinking or "philosophical incantation" (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 119) can be seen at work in Marx's distinction between class in itself and class for itself in *The Poverty of Philosophy* and in the way it has been subsequently interpreted in the Marxist tradition. As Bensaïd notes, this formulation echoes the account of the self-development of historical subjectivity in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and prepares the ground for György Lukács's reinterpretation of the passage from the 'in itself' to the 'for itself' in terms of self-knowledge and class consciousness. One may go a step further in the critique and remark, as Salar Mohandesi does in a recent article, that the problematic of class consciousness is fundamentally an idealist one, in that it essentially refers to the

mind, that is, to the way a class comes to think about itself. The shift that it requires is merely one in perceptions, beliefs and attitudes. Moreover, this focus on the life of the mind licenses interpretations of the process of class formation as being governed by mechanical causation (Mohandesi, 2013, p. 82).<sup>3</sup> Bensaïd does not entirely reject the notion of class consciousness – which he continues to use in his writings, at times for want of better available formulations –, but he radically subverts it by reinterpreting the relation between the political sphere and the social one in a psycho-analytical vein:

Revolutionary theory has something in common with psychoanalysis. Political representation is not the simple manifestation of a social nature. Political class struggle is not the superficial mirroring of an essence. Articulated like a language, it operates by displacements and condensations of social contradictions. It has its dreams, its nightmares and its lapses. In the specific field of the political, class relations acquire a degree of complexity irreducible to the bipolar antagonism that nevertheless determines them (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 112).

Political struggle is irreducible to the mere expression of fundamental social contradictions for it takes place within the complexity of a historical social formation. Among the elements that play a role in determining the concreteness of the struggle dynamic are the State, the differentiation among class fractions and their intersections, the middle classes (which have an ambiguous location within a society divided by the fundamental antagonism between bourgeoisie and proletariat), the effects of practical victories and defeats, the divisions within the working class caused by the very dynamics of capitalist accumulation, and the relations of dependence and domination between nations on an international level (Bensaïd, 2002, pp. 112-114).

Consistent with his critique of the notion of a mechanical passage from the “in itself” to the “for itself” governed by class consciousness, in “Strategy and Politics” Bensaïd stresses the relevance of Lenin’s break with Kautsky’s understanding of the role of the political party after 1905. According to Bensaïd, while persuaded of

---

<sup>3</sup>For a genealogy of the usage of class consciousness in the Marxist tradition, written by a fellow member of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, see Weber (1975).

being an orthodox Kautskyist until the war and the German Social Democracy's vote in favor of war credits, in fact already since his writings after 1905 Lenin elaborates a notion of revolutionary crisis, in which a new figure of the party emerges, one at odds with Kautsky's position:

The party is no longer the Kautskyan pedagogue whose task is limited to rendering unconscious experience conscious and illuminating the path already sketched out by history. It becomes a strategic operator capable of seizing the propitious moment, of organising – if necessary – an orderly retreat, of seizing the initiative in a counter-attack and switching to the offensive, of taking decisions in relation to the ebb and flow of the class struggle (Bensaïd, 2018, p. 15).

A revolutionary crisis requires a party of this kind for it is not the mere extension of the social and economic antagonism expressed at the point of production. It is rather a general crisis that involves all classes and social fractions of society and their reciprocal relations as mediated by the State: it is at this extremely complex level that party politics must operate. In this light Bensaïd interprets Lenin's claim that "class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle" in the latter's polemics against economistic currents of his party (Lenin, 1961, p. 422). This claim suggests that class political consciousness is not a simple reflection of the economic confrontation between workers and employers within production: it is rather "born outside of the economic struggle... but not outside of the class struggle" (Bensaïd, 2018, p. 17). Moreover, it requires not only political knowledge of the relations among all classes of society, but political *intervention among all classes of society* ("To bring political knowledge to the workers the Social Democrats must go among all classes of the population" (Lenin, 1961, p. 422); see the commentary of this "uneven, delayed" rhythms of organization and practice within this struggle in Macherey (1982) and its connection in Balibar (1978).

Bensaïd goes a step further than Lenin in his elaboration on the irreducibility of the political sphere to the social. In "Hegemony and the United Front", for example, he insists on the fact that – insofar as classes are internally heterogenous, filled with internal

divisions and antagonisms that can find a solution only through the political struggle of tendencies, groups and parties – a single class can generate several parties. *Vice versa*, one single party can rest upon fractions of different classes (Bensaïd, 2007). In other words, Bensaïd breaks with the Lukacsian confusion between the “multi-form historical movement of the class” and the party (Bensaïd, 2002, p. 116) by insisting that confrontations between competing political representations of the class and its fractions are integral to this historical movement. “Hegemony and the United Front” identifies in the notion of hegemony an antidote to the temptations of the sociological wager and to the myth of the great historical subject, for the notion of hegemony takes into account the irreducible complexity and plurality of the political sphere and its multiple actors and antagonisms. Referring to Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, Bensaïd clarifies that hegemony is not reducible to an arithmetical sum or an inventory of antagonisms, but is rather the principle of the articulation of plural and irreducible contradictions around class struggle – conceived of as the universalizing antagonism. It is also not the hierarchical classification of main and secondary contradictions, insofar as it is rather based on creating convergences which turn around *capital* as the great unifying subject.

What emerges from the cluster of texts examined above is a sophisticated conception of class and class struggle based on two main insights. The first, indebted to E. P. Thompson, is the conception of class as relational and historical, as a process rather than as a static thing, in opposition to classificatory definitions of what a class is based on structural location or level of income. It is only at the level of politics – the political analysis of processes of antagonism – and not of sociology, that we can find the full determination of a class. The second, strongly influenced by Lenin’s strategic writings, is the irreducibility of social and political sphere and, therefore, the impossibility of solving the problem of the political self-emancipation of the class by resorting to “philosophical incantations” based on the necessary and mechanical passage from class in itself to class for itself or to conceptions of the party as a great pedagogue.

## ***Class formation***

In *Le Sourire du Spectre* Bensaïd writes incisively that “classes form themselves and exist through the struggle” (Bensaïd, 2000, p. 80). This formulation echoes E. P. Thompson’s claim that:

[...] far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly a-historical) has been paid to “class”, and far too little to “class-struggle”. Indeed, class-struggle is the prior, as well as the more universal, concept. To put it bluntly: classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness (Thompson, 1978, p. 149).

Commenting on Thompson’s view of class, in *Les Irréductibles* Bensaïd summarizes the core of Thompson’s position by noting that it addresses class at the crossroad between a theoretical concept and a description born from the struggle. Being a historical phenomenon, classes produce themselves, hence they cannot be grasped through a definitive category (Bensaïd, 2001, pp. 31-32). Class is tied to *experience* – specifically a “symbolic and political labor” – and is shaped by the active, conscious participation of ordinary actors (Bensaïd, 2001, p. 32).

Thompson’s historical project recast the material features and sites of working-class formation. The concept itself remained largely implicit throughout his texts, operating through the dense thickets of historical description but receiving some degree of extended exegesis – in the massively cited six-page preface to his opus, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1966), in the polemical formulations of *The Poverty of Theory* (Thompson, 1978) and the less cited but more clarifying theoretical pages from the article “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?” (Thompson, 1979). William Sewell has critically remarked that Thompson at times asks

too much from the category of experience as a “mediator” between structure and process and has a habit to rigidly demarcate “social being” from “consciousness” (Sewell, 1986). But even so, the optic of class formation is supple enough to account for both the structuring determinations of capitalist relations and historical agents’ capacity to act within “concrete situations.” While there are slippages in Thompson’s notion of class and his usage of categories like experience, his framework allows for a rich account of the activities that result in something like a common class awareness or consciousness on the part of agents from multiple social stations, and the shared vocabulary and practical repertoire they elaborate.

The richness of his account of class arose from the fine-grained detail of historical description. Across the 800 pages of *The Making of the Working Class in England*, Thompson investigates the nuclei and cultural networks that drove the “ideas, organisation, and leadership” of the labor movement (Thompson, 1966, p. 193). Strikingly, Thompson directs pointed criticisms at both sociological and economic re-interpretations of the Industrial Revolution that, in the period he was writing, downplayed the “acute class-conflict” of the broad historical period between the 1770s and 1830s. Thompson indicates the diverse modalities of class formation in the chapter on the immense social changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution in Britain:

[T]he outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of “the working class.” This is revealed, first, in the “growth” of class-consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And, second, in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organisation. By 1832 there were strongly-based and self-conscious working-class institutions—trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organisations, periodicals—working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community-patterns, and a working-class structure of feeling...The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history. It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory-system. (Thompson, 1966, p. 194).

While the last two sentences demonstrate Thompson's problematizing of the base-superstructure model, the preceding lines reveal the constellation of agitational practices and knowledge-production through which "class-consciousness" took root and survey the range of social forces and types of laborers which made up that working class. Thompson read the underground, "unstamped" pamphlets, newsheets, poems, and ballads that circulated among self-educated common people. In "Class Struggle Without Classes", Thompson talked about the "class field-of-force" that played out between the plebs and the gentry in 18th-century English society and the way in which previous social solidarities were slowly transformed, how "the fragmented debris" of plebeian culture were "revivified and reintegrated" vis-a-vis the constraints of gentry hegemony. (Thompson, 1978, pp. 157-158). In his later thinking, he would examine the role of legal and state institutions in the formation of the working class (see Thompson, 1975; Balibar, 2014).

*The Making of the English Working Class* was a significant intervention in the political moment it appeared. Thompson's historiographical work had ripple effects within debates in the British New Left and the international socialist movement. The recasting of class as an ongoing process rooted in a set of sociopolitical practices resonated with heterodox currents of Marxism in Western Europe and the United States that emerged over the course of the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> The flourishing of new venues for political analysis, particularly the New Left clubs, gave activists outside the orbit of left sects and the established trade unions a place to discuss texts and weigh different strategies that were being disseminated. According to Stuart Hall, these clubs became convergence spaces for "those social strata emerging within and across the rapidly shifting, recomposing-decomposing class landscapes of post-war Britain" (Hall, 2010, p. 191).

As Madeleine Davis has recently argued, the multilayered

---

<sup>4</sup> There are significant resonances, for example, between Thompson's notion of class formation and the efforts by political organizations like the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the US, and its later manifestations in the Correspondence and Facing Reality groups, and Socialisme ou Barbarie in France to uncover "proletarian experience" in its distinct locations. George Rawick, a member of Facing Reality, wrote that Thompson's work was a major contribution to the study of "working class self-activity" – the capacity for workers to organize themselves outside existing institutional structures – and had a powerful influence on New Left politics and labor history (Rawick, 1969).

picture of class consciousness drawn by Thompson held a political efficacy amidst debates over the sources and senses of political agency in the radical activist milieus of the British New Left (Davis, 2014, p. 450). In particular,

Since history prescribed no easy correspondence between working class militancy (or its absence) and the economic situation, and since class consciousness was a process of active ‘making’, a product of ‘political action and skill’, the urgent task for socialists in 1960—and here [Thompson] saw the New Left as making a key contribution—was to endeavour to define and ‘fix’ a new class consciousness, to identify and nurture those promising and oppositional elements within it, on as broad a basis as possible.”

Thompson not only opposed his thinking of class to other Marxist theorists; he also explicitly targeted then-current schools in sociology and economics that reduced classes to “social roles” or and eschewed discussion class conflict in favor of stages of economic growth (Thompson, 1966, pp. 10-11, 195).

In his usage of the class formation framework, Bensaïd contrasts Thompson’s presentation of class – as a combination of situation and process – with a newer sociological trend, namely Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social fields and its attendant consequences for theorizing class. Bensaïd focuses on Bourdieu’s distinction between a “*probable* class” (“class on paper”) and a “mobilized class” or “actual class,” as well as on his overall reading of Marx (Bourdieu, 1985, pp. 725-27).<sup>5</sup> According to Bensaïd, on the surface Bourdieu adheres to a comparable conception of class as Thompson’s: a relational, non-substantialist understanding that leaves space for the dynamics of struggle, and does not view classes as the mechanical reflux of an economic infrastructure. But for Bensaïd, the probable/mobilized couple also raises difficulties. The very idea of a “probable class” itself gives too much weight to the class as a category “constructed by the sociologist”, and overlooks the need for a precise socio-historical investigation of the complexity of class situations, the heterogeneity

<sup>5</sup> Bensaïd argues that Bourdieu’s separation of a probable class from an actual class harkens back to Lucien Goldmann’s framework of “possible consciousness” and “actual consciousness,” developed through a critique of “linguistically based structuralism” (Goldmann, 1980).

of social, cultural, and political determinations that make up “class”.

Bourdieu holds that the “probable” class refers to “sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who... have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances,” thus presenting “fewer hindrances to efforts at mobilization” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 725). In charging the Marxist concept of class struggle as exercising a performative material effect on the social world, distorting its realities, Bourdieu falls into a position that *opposes* structure and history. Whereas Thompson, according to Ellen Meiksins Wood, takes into account “how objective class situations actually shape social reality... insofar as they establish antagonisms and generate conflicts and struggles” (Wood, 1981, p. 50).

In his multiple discussions of Bourdieu’s definition of the “probable” class, Bensaïd poses a simple query in response: “Why probable rather than improbable?”; and relatedly: “when a class demobilizes, does it disappear?” (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 72-73; Bensaïd, 2001, p. 32). What explains the similarity in conditions that Bourdieu asserts, and how do we explain the “persistence” of the “probable class” in the variegated tableau of contemporary labor forms? Classes, Bensaïd replies, “only become conceptually thinkable at the end of the process” (2000, p. 78). They cannot be described outside of the boundaries of struggle (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 80-81).

While sympathetic to the thrust behind Bourdieu’s rethinking of class, Bensaïd’s lengthy critical discussion of his work in *Le sourire du spectre* limns the nuanced difference between a “reasoned constructivism” and a “radically relativist” version, or a “sound constructivism and shoreless relativism” (Bensaïd, 2000, pp. 71, 73):

In Bourdieu’s work...[t]he very existence of classes appears, then, as a “stake of struggle.” To say that classes only exist in their antagonistic relationship is one thing; to claim that they only exist on the basis of the intensity of their struggles is another. Their existence would thus vary according to the number of days on strike and electoral results, to the point of disappearing when the struggle weakens. For Bourdieu, social classes are only in a “state of virtuality” in a “social space” of differences, “not as something given but as

*“Class struggle is not a game”*: Daniel Bensaïd’s relational conception of class.

something *to be done*.” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 687). Consequently, we surreptitiously slip from the class process, produced from its historical self-development, to verbal voluntarism.

Put otherwise, even if the theory of social fields allows for a refinement of our understanding of the plural temporalities and spatialities of social phenomena, there is still a guiding thread one can pick up: the “intimate dialectic of capital” that weaves together moments of exploitation, accumulation, and resistance. The invention of classes is not, then, a “theoretical *coup de force*,” but tied to ongoing, historically determined logics and corresponding practices (Bensaïd, 2000, p. 77).

### ***Class composition***

Although Bensaïd critically engaged with post-Operaismo, commenting in particular on Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno’s works, the elaborations by early Workerist authors are largely absent from the corpus of Marxist theorizations that represent his critical or positive reference points. The section on classes in *Marx for Our Times*, for example, does not mention works by Romano Alquati or Sergio Bologna on the notion of class composition and militant inquiry. And yet, the concept of class composition responds to preoccupations and concerns that are quite close to the ones Bensaïd addresses under the label of sociological wager and it articulates a non deterministic understanding of class that bears some significant similarities with Bensaïd’s own class theory.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of class composition was first implicitly elaborated and employed within Romano Alquati’s works of co-research in *Quaderni rossi*, but it became formalized with the creation of *Classe operaia* in 1964.<sup>7</sup> The notion was meant to emphasize the centrality of class subjectivity, which was the guiding thread of the inquiries

---

<sup>6</sup> Not by chance, in his article on re-orienting class analysis, David Camfield discusses the class theories elaborated by Gramsci, Thompson, Wood, Bensaïd, and Italian Operaismo as all breaking with reductionist understandings of class and as all treating classes as historical formations (Camfield, 2004-2005).

<sup>7</sup> See Alquati (1962-1963); Alquati (1964); Alquati (1965). On Alquati, see Sacchetto, Armano, Wright (2013).

Alquati organized with FIAT and Olivetti workers. By subjectivity Alquati had in mind the historically variable system of beliefs, worldviews, representations, know-how, desires, passions, and options, developed within the social interactions among workers in the workplace (Roggero, 2019, p. 35). The intuition that inspired the Olivetti inquiry was that explicit struggles between workers and management take place against the background of everyday latent conflicts and of a spontaneous cooperation among workers in a potentially antagonistic relation to the cooperation established by capitalist machinery and the organization of the labor process. This social background is further determined by the political sedimentation of past struggles, which prepare the ground for potential new ones (Cominu, 2014). To analyze class subjectivity and, especially, to participate in a process of class subjectivation, therefore, requires attention to these constitutive aspects.

In contrast to Thompson, Italian Workerists made the relation between class situation and class formation, or between structure and historical process, explicit by distinguishing between two aspects of class composition: technical and political. Technical class composition is determined by the technical structure of production, technological innovations, and the division and organization of labor within the workplace. The notion of class composition is therefore meant to grasp the dynamic relation between the capitalistic organization of labor and the formation of class as a collective subjectivity (Roggero, 2019, p. 34). This dynamic relation is mediated by the ongoing conflict between the process of class composition and capitalist class decomposition, that is, the capitalists' attempt to block the process of formation of a collective class subjectivity and to reduce workers to mere labor-power, or variable capital (Moulier-Boutang, 1986, p. 52).

While in the '60s, Italian Workerists tended to investigate class composition by focusing on the direct and immediate relation between workforce and labor process, Sergio Bologna would later expand the scope of the analysis in the pages of the journal *Primo Maggio*. Here, as noted by Steve Wright, Bologna started taking into account the formation of workers' subjectivity outside of the work-

“Class struggle is not a game”: Daniel Bensaïd’s relational conception of class.

place and the relevance of the various sub-cultures, in which workers participated, for their process of autonomous subjectivation. As Bologna writes in *Otto tesi per una storia militante*, an investigation into political class composition needed to take into account

the mass worker’s peasant past, its links (or break) with the familial clan, its past as migrant worker in contact with the most advanced technologies and with the society of the most advanced command over labour-power, its past as political or union militant or its past as a member of a patriarchal Catholic clan: these attributes are all translated into the acquisitions of struggle, into political wisdom, the sum of subcultures which catalyse on contact with the massification of labour and with its inverse process of fragmentation and territorial dispersion. Machinery, the organisation of labour, transmute and bring to light these cultural pasts; mass subjectivity appropriates them and translates them into struggle, refusal of labour, organisation. Political class composition is above all the result, the end point of a historical process. But it is also, and in a dialectical manner, the starting point of a historical movement in which the labour subsumed to capital interprets the productive, social and political organisation of exploitation and overturns it into the organisation of its own autonom (Bologna, 1977-8, quoted in Wright, 2002, p. 187).

The distinction between technical and political class composition presented two dangers: that of interpreting this relation as a mechanical determination of the second by the first and that of re-introducing, under a different label, the traditional relation between class in itself and class for itself governed by consciousness. The first tendency can be seen at work, for example, in Hardt and Negri’s writings on the multitude, where – as noticed by Bensaïd in *Eloge de la politique profane* – the ontology of the multitude replaces the dialectics of struggle (Bensaïd, 2008a, p. 290). For Bensaïd, the notion of multitude and the political project connected to it are, in fact, characterized by a double determinism: “technological (the effects of new technologies on the content and the organization of labor) and sociological (the irresistible rise of the Multitude in its march toward its fabulous destiny)” (Bensaïd, 2008a, p. 296).

However, as emphasized by Roggero, the notion of class com-

position was meant precisely to disrupt the facile symmetry between the structure of capital and class structure, in that it emphasizes struggle and antagonism as key to class formation and interprets class subjectivity as a battle-field, in a constant tension between autonomy and subsumption (Roggero, 2019, p. 34). According to Cominu, this is also how Alquati understood class composition. In a non deterministic vein, technical and political composition should be seen as analytical categories that grasp different aspects of a unitary object. Without this unitary approach technical composition runs the risk of becoming akin to a sociological description of the division of labor and organization of the workforce, while political composition risks to be reduced to mere cultural practice. Moreover, as Cominu notes, political composition cannot be identified with class for itself, because not all political class compositions are progressive (Cominu, 2014).

This anti-deterministic and non-teleological understanding of class composition is the one that more closely resembles Bensaïd's theorization of class. Like Bensaïd, Italian Operaisti working with this interpretation of the concept, challenged the usefulness of the distinction between class in itself and for itself and static and classificatory definitions of class, insisting rather on class composition as the outcome of a process of struggle and antagonism, constantly endangered by capitalist decomposition or counter-formation. There are, obviously, also significant differences. While for Italian Operaismo, the notion of class composition replaced that of Gramscian hegemony (Bologna, 1977-8), Bensaïd, as mentioned earlier, saw in hegemony an antidote to the illusions of mechanical progress and to the myth of the great subject. Working with the concept of hegemony allows to take into account political mediations articulating the living together of a multiplicity of antagonisms, not all of which are reducible to each other (Bensaïd, 2007). Finally, while the Operaisti dispensed with the notion of class consciousness, replacing it with that of class subjectivity, Bensaïd still employed the notion, albeit – as discussed above – in a modified form.

## CONCLUSION

A shared lesson of the texts and ideas analyzed in this article is that – insofar as class is the endpoint of a historical and antagonistic process – we should be alert to the ways in which the class character of struggles manifest itself today, rather than clinging to static and pre-constituted notions of what counts as class struggle. As Etienne Balibar has argued on many occasions – parallel to Bensaïd – class struggle should not be understood as a “complexity reducer” but as “essentially heterogeneous,” traversing and affecting multiple social practices in unexpected, often displaced or overdetermined forms (Balibar, 1988 and Balibar, 2009; Bensaïd, 2002, pp. 112). Recent political developments and social struggles have only confirmed the importance of this relational and compositional view of class. The transnational wave of feminist demonstrations and strikes which began in the fall of 2016, for example, has shown the limitations of dualistic understandings of the relation between class struggle and anti-oppression movements (Arruzza, 2018). Recent theorizations of social reproduction have also helped clarify the way in which class subjectivity is formed not just at the point of production but within the complex web of practices, activities, and institutions that reproduce the working class outside of the workplace. At a time where we are all orphans of the traditional workers’ movement that inspired the Marxist tradition’s writings on class struggle and political strategy, E. P. Thompson’s notion of class formation, the Italian Workerist notion of class composition, and Daniel Bensaïd’s relational and historical understanding of class offer crucial resources to analyzing the present and grasping within it the hidden potentialities for a new wave of class struggle, without remaining trapped in nostalgic attachments to a long-gone past.

## REFERENCES

- ALQUATI, R. *Composizione organica del capitale e forza lavoro alla Olivetti. Quaderni Rossi*, Vol. 2, June 1962 and *Quaderni Rossi*, Vol. 3, June 1963 (English translation: “Organic Composition of Capital

- and Labor Power at Olivetti”, translated by Steve Wright, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 3, 2013, available at: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/organic-composition-of-capital-and-labor-power-at-olivetti-1961/>).
- ALQUATI, R. Lotta alla FIAT. *Classe Operaia*, Vol. 1, January 1964 (English translation: “Struggle at FIAT”, translated by Evan Calder Williams, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 3, 2013, available at: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2013/09/26/struggle-at-fiat-1964/>).
- ALQUATI, R. Ricerca sulla struttura interna della classe operaia. *Classe Operaia*, Vol. 2, n° 1, January-February, 1965.
- ANTENTAS, J. M. Daniel Bensaïd, Melancholic Strategist. *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 24, n° 4, pp. 51-106, 2016.
- ARRUZZA, C. From Women’s Strikes to a New Class Movement: The Third Feminist Wave. *Viewpoint Magazine*, December 3, 2018 (available at: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2018/12/03/from-womens-strikes-to-a-new-class-movement-the-third-feminist-wave/>).
- BALIBAR, E. Marx, Engels, et le parti révolutionnaire. *La Pensée*, n° 201, pp. 120-35, October, 1978.
- BALIBAR, E. From Class Struggle to Classless Struggle?. Trans. Chris Turner. In: BALIBAR, E. and WALLERSTEIN, I. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso, 1991, pp. 153-184.
- BALIBAR, E. On the Aporias of Marxist Politics: From Class Struggle to Civil War. Trans. Cory Browning. *Diacritics*, Vol. 39, n° 2, pp. 59-73, Summer, 2009.
- BALIBAR, E. Communism and Citizenship: On Nicos Poulantzas. In: BALIBAR, E. *Equaliberty*. trans. James Ingram. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 145-164.
- BENSAÏD, D. Considérations inactuelles sur ‘l’actuel encore actif’ du Manifeste Communiste. Personal Archive (available at <http://danielbensaid.org/Considerations-inactuelles-sur-l-actuel-encore-actif-du-Manifeste-communiste?lang=fr>).
- BENSAÏD, D. *Le Sourire du spectre. Nouvel esprit du communisme*. Paris: Éditions Michalon, 2000.
- BENSAÏD, D. *Les Irréductibles. Théorèmes de la résistance à l’air du temps*. Paris: Les éditions Textuel, 2001.
- BENSAÏD, D. *Marx for Our Times. Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*. London and New York: Verso, 2002 [1995].

“Class struggle is not a game”: Daniel Bensaïd’s relational conception of class.

- BENSAÏD, D. Hegemony and the United Front. Working Class, Social Movement, Alliances – and the Limits of Radical Democracy. *International Viewpoint*. August 27, 2007. (available at <http://danielbensaid.org/Hegemony-and-United-Front?lang=fr>).
- BENSAÏD, D. *Éloge de la politique profane*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2008a.
- BENSAÏD, D. Politiques de Castoriadis. (Castoriadis corrige Marx ?). *Contretemps*, n°. 21, pp. 131-42, 2008b.
- BENSAÏD, D. La preuve par la bourgeoisie. 2008c (available at <http://danielbensaid.org/La-preuve-par-la-bourgeoisie?lang=fr>).
- BENSAÏD, D. Strategy and Politics: From Marx to the Third International. *Historical Materialism*, n°. 16, pp. 1-38, July, 2018, (available at <https://brill.com/abstract/journals/hima/aop/article-10.1163-1569206X-00001670.xml?crawler=true&mimetype=application%2Fpdf>).
- BOLOGNA, S. Otto tesi per una storia militante. *Primo Maggio*, Vol. 11, 1977-1978.
- BOURDIEU, P. The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups. Trans. Richard Nice. *Theory and Society*, Vol. 14, n°. 6, pp. 723-744, July, 1985.
- BOURDIEU, P. Social Space and Symbolic Space: Introduction to a Japanese Reading of *Distinction*. Trans. Gisele Sapiro and Brian McHale. *Poetics Today*, Vol. 12, n°. 4, , pp. 627-638, Winter, 1991.
- CAMFIELD, D. Re-Orienting Class Analysis: Working Classes as Historical Formations. *Science & Society*, Vol. 68, n°.4, pp. 422-446, 2004-2005.
- COMINU, S. Composizione di classe. *Intervento all’incontro sulla “composizione di classe” nel ciclo di autoformazione di Piacenza*, available at <http://www.commonware.org/index.php/neetworN/276YcomposizioneYdiYclasse>, 3 March 2014.
- DAVIS, M. Edward Thompson’s Ethics and Activism 1956–1963: Reflections on the Political Formation of *The Making of the English Working Class*. *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 28, n°. 4, pp. 438-456, 2014.
- HALL, S. Life and Times of the First New Left. *New Left Review*, n°. 61, pp. 177-196. January-February, 2010.
- KOUVELAKIS, S. Daniel Bensaïd: La dialectique du temps et de la lutte. *Lignes*, Vol. 32, n°. 2, pp. 59-66, 2010.

- KOUVELAKIS, S. The Time of History, the Time of Politics, the Time of Strategy. *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 24, n° 4, pp. 150-169, 2016.
- GALASTRI, L. Social Classes and Subaltern Groups: Theoretical Distinction and Political Application. *Capital & Class*, Vol. 42, n° 1, pp. 43-62, 2018.
- GARO, I. Un marxisme profane. *Lignes*, Vol. 32, n° 2, pp. 39-46, 2010.
- GOLDMANN, L. *Essays on Method in the Sociology of Literature*. Trans. and ed. William Q. Boelhower. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980.
- LAFRANCE, Xavier & SEARS, A. Beating Time in the Slow Movements: Bensaïd's Revolutionary Rhythms. *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 24, n° 4, pp. 129-149, 2016.
- LENIN, V. I. *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*. In *Collected Works*, Vol. 5. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961 [1902].
- MACHEREY, P. Théorie. In: BENSUSSAN, G. & LABICA, G. (Dir.) *Dictionnaire Critique du Marxisme*. Paris: PUF, 1982, pp. 1142-1148.
- McNALLY, D. Night Lights: Daniel Bensaïd's Times of Disaster and Redemption. *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 24, n° 4, pp. 107-128, 2016.
- MOHANDESI, S. Class Consciousness or Class Composition? *Science & Society*, Vol. 11, n° 1, pp. 72-97, 2013.
- PELLETIER, J. Le passé au présent: histoire et politique chez Daniel Bensaïd. *Lignes*, Vol. 32, n° 2, pp. 109-124, 2010.
- RAWICK, G. Working Class Self-Activity. *Radical America*, Vol. 3, n° 2, pp. 23-31, March-April 1969.
- RILEY, D. Bourdieu's Class Theory: The Academic as Revolutionary. *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*, Vol. 1, n° 2, pp. 107-136, Summer 2017.
- ROGGERO, G. *L'operaismo politico italiano. Genealogia, storia, metodo*. Rome: Derive Approdi, 2019.
- ROSO, D. Confronting the Triple Crisis of the Radical Left. The Workers' Movement, Strategy and the 'Crisis of Marxism'. *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 26, n° 1, pp. 37-67, 2018a.
- ROSO, D. Introduction to 'Strategy and Politics'. *Historical Materialism*, 2018b forthcoming (available as an advance article at <https://brill.com/view/journals/hima/aop/issue.xml>). <https://doi.org/10.1163/1569206x-12341670>

*“Class struggle is not a game”*: Daniel Bensaïd’s relational conception of class.

- MOULIER-BOUTANG, Y. L’operaïsme italien: organisation/ représentation/idéologie ou la composition de classe revisitée. In: TAHON, M.-B. & CORTEN, A. (Dir.). *L’Italie, le philosophe et le gendarme*. Montréal: VLB, 1986, pp. 37-60.
- SACCHETTO, D.; ARMANO, E. & WRIGHT, S. Coresearch and Counter-Research: Romano Alquati’s Itinerary Within and Beyond Italian Radical Political Thought. *Viewpoint Magazine*, Issue 3, 2013 (available at <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/coresearch-and-counter-research-romano-alquatis-itinerary-within-and-beyond-italian-radical-political-thought/>).
- SEWELL, W. H. How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-Class Formation. Center for Research on Social Organization, *Working Paper* #336, July, 1986 (available at <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/51104>).
- THOMPSON, E. P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Vintage, 1966.
- THOMPSON, E. P. *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act*. London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 1975.
- THOMPSON, E. P. Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class? *Social History*, Vol. 3, n° 2, pp. 133-165, 1978.
- THOMPSON, E. P. *Customs in Common*. London: Penguin, 1993.
- TRAVERSO, Enzo. Le passeur. *Lignes*, Vol. 32, n° 2, pp. 174-183, 2010.
- TRAVERSO, E. Daniel Bensaïd between Marx and Benjamin. *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 24, n° 4, pp. 170-191, 2016.
- WEBER, H. *Marxisme et conscience de classe*. Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1975.
- WOOD, E. M. *Democracy Against Capitalism. Renewing Historical Materialism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- WRIGHT, S. *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*. London: Pluto, 2002.