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# CLASS AND PARTY. DANIEL BENSÄID'S PHILOSOPHY OF STRATEGY AGAINST THE RANDOMIZATION OF POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article argues for the centrality of the notion of class struggle in both political theory and praxis in order to counter what E. M. Wood, echoing P. Anderson (1983), has referred to as the «randomization of politics» (1986), namely a politics reduced to pure contingency where no causality between the social and the political is allowed. It suggests that class struggle is precisely the *lost cause* of radical politics, since class struggle operates as a synthetic principle informing a concept of society as a whole and a view of antagonism as a systemic and totalistic instance. Drawing on Daniel Bensaïd's «philosophy of strategy» and its critical reading of Marx's class theory (Bensaïd, 1995; 2002; 2011; 2016), the article suggests that class struggle be rethought as a new «strategic universalism» across the international division of labor. Along the lines of Bensaïd's understanding of politics as a «strategic art» of *recommencement* (Bensaïd, 1995), it will be argued here that radical politics cannot do without class struggle or without the party.

## Keywords

Class struggle, Party, Strategy, Daniel Bensaïd, Marxism.

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## Resumen

Este artículo defiende la centralidad de la noción de lucha de clases tanto en la teoría política como en la práctica para contrarrestar lo que EM Wood, haciendo eco de P. Anderson (1983), ha denominado la «aleatorización de la política» (1986), a saber: la política reducida a la contingencia pura donde no se permite la causalidad entre lo social y lo político. Sugiere que la lucha de clases es precisamente la causa perdida de la política radical, ya que la lucha de clases funciona como un principio sintético que informa un concepto de la sociedad en su conjunto y una visión del antagonismo como una instancia sistémica y totalista. Sobre la base de la «filosofía de la estrategia» de Daniel Bensaïd y su lectura crítica de la teoría de clases de Marx (Bensaïd, 1995; 2002; 2011; 2016), el artículo sugiere que la lucha de clases se reconsidere como un nuevo «universalismo estratégico» a través de la división internacional del trabajo. En la línea de la comprensión de Bensaïd de la política como un «arte estratégico» de *reinicio* (Bensaïd, 1995), se argumentará aquí que la política radical no puede prescindir de la lucha de clases o del partido.

## Palabras clave

Lucha de clases, partido, estrategia, Daniel Bensaïd, Marxismo.

## Classes are a-changing? Old myths, new utopias

Do classes still exist and does class politics still matter? A provocative way to provide an affirmative answer to this question may quote the words of US billionaire Warren Buffet from an interview with CNN in 2005: «There's class warfare [...and], it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning» (Buffet, 2005). Another all-too-easy way to reformulate the «proof by the bourgeoisie» (Bensaïd, 2008b) against the «superficial appearance which veils class struggles» (Marx, 2008, p. 24) would consist of stating that if capitalism is alive and (more or less) well, in spite of being caught in the never-ending cycle of its crises, so is class struggle. Or, in slightly different words: classes do exist precisely because class relations are crucial to the existing mode of production.

Yet, in the age of populisms – the «populist moment», to borrow from Chantal Mouffe (2018) – classes and class struggle as a tool for the radical transformation of the world we live in seem to have relentlessly waned and been supplanted by more fashionable constructs, such as «the people» and their democratic demands. While the widespread triumph of «populist reason» (Laclau 2005) in both contemporary political theory and praxis reinforces the conviction that politics in the present conjuncture will either be populist or won't be at all, and that left-wing populism constitutes the only sustainable counter-strategy to challenge, in the name of democratic pluralism, both right-wing populism and the sinking neoliberal hegemony of the New World Order (Mouffe 2018), this paper suggests a reconsideration of class as the *lost subject* and class struggle as the *lost cause* of radical politics. Class struggle, in other words, is not only the Cause that left-wing politics seems to have lost (and should regain), but also a crucial causal principle for conceiving contemporary politics.

Assuming that the historical metamorphoses undergone by capitalist societies and their structures in the course of the last two centuries never entailed the disappearance of class divisions, let alone the end of class struggle, this contribution does not provide empirical evidence for the «reappearance» of the class divide. Nor does it rely on a renewed sociological taxonomy of classes in order to argue in favor of a «strategic use» of the notion of class struggle aimed at promoting new processes of social and political recomposition. Rather, drawing on Daniel Bensaïd's «philosophy of strategy» and its critical reading of Marx's class theory (Bensaïd, 1995; 2002; 2011; 2016), the article suggests that class struggle be rethought as a new «strategic universalism» across the

international division of labor and affirms the strategic necessity of class politics *qua* party politics<sup>2</sup>.

The centrality of the notion of class struggle in theory and praxis will be newly posited here with respect to two crucial polemic targets. It will be argued that class struggle urgently matters against the «randomization of politics» (Wood, 1986) as well as against the unreformable drifts of reformist strategies, among them the left-populist option.

In fact, the alleged invisibility of class struggle is less the result of the vanishing of class divisions (Bensaïd, 1995; 2000) – that would have turned class into an irretrievably mythical subject cherished by old-fashioned leftists only – than the side effect of an accredited master narrative about the (indeed mythical) advent of a classless – yet still capitalist – society, a narrative that has been promoted at different degrees and in different fashions in the post-Marxist debates since the 1980s – from Gorz's *Adieux au proletariat* (1982) to Laclau and Mouffe's critique of class reductionism (1985) through the theses of the end of labor (Rifkin, 1995; Gorz, 1989). A certain kind of desperate irony results from the Left's inability to identify alternatives to the post-Cold War «end of alternatives» – or, to use Žižek's words, its inability to think the end of capitalism while the end of the world seems more likely to happen (Žižek, 1994, 1). Such a loss of hope has generated and nourished new political myths while advocating utopianism as the sole viable path. Two main utopias have dominated the entire spectrum of the Left in the last thirty years: on the one hand the naïve ambition to reform and contain capitalism within a social-democratic frame – which originally emerged as a concrete anti-utopian approach and proved to be the most utopian (and unrealistic) one; and, on the other hand, the attempt to reimagine emancipation from capitalism in a democratic shape, without class struggle and without socialism – another intrinsically utopian option, and the one that is still at stake in the left-populist project.

Along the lines of Bensaïd's critique of utopianism as the defeatist legacy of historical defeats (Bensaïd, 2008a, p. 179) and his praise of politics as a strategic art of *recommencement* (Bensaïd, 1995), it will be argued here that left-wing populist politics does not provide radical alternatives and that radical politics cannot do without class struggle or without the party.

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2. The expression «philosophy of strategy» is my own and does not appear in Bensaïd's works. It epitomizes Bensaïd's conceptualization of politics as a «strategic art» and the relevance of the notion of strategy in his philosophical corpus.

## People without class – or, the randomization of politics

At first sight the notion of «the people» may well resonate with the notion of class, to the point that one could even claim, as Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt did for the multitude, that «the people» is a «class concept» (Hardt and Negri, 2004, 103), especially if taken in its «we are the 99%» inflection, inaugurated by the slogan of the Occupy Movement. At a closer look, however, it appears that the conceptual resonance between people and class also generates dissonances. If, on the one hand, the category of «the people», far from designating an all-encompassing and homogeneous empirical unity, is meant to incarnate a fruitful watchword for Left politics, one that should allow it to grasp the current populist moment as a promising social conjuncture for processes of political recomposition, on the other hand, to what extent is class struggle compatible with the populist goal?

At this stage, compatibility is a major issue, if we take seriously Mario Tronti's warning against the anti-political danger of conceiving the people without the notion of class. As Tronti writes, «It is the notion of class that turns the people into a category of politics – namely of the politics that interests us, a politics immune from manipulation by dominant forces [...]. Without class, there is no people on a political level. [Without class] the people only exist on a social level. Or, on a national level. And both are forms of neutralization and depoliticization of the notion of the people» (Tronti, 2010, 10-11).

By emphasizing the need to think the people through the prism of class (as «laboring people» or «communist people»), Tronti implicitly admits the compatibility between the two concepts. Such compatibility, nevertheless, amounts to a mere possibility – people and class can converge or diverge depending on the political synthesis that is at stake – and for Tronti, the populist synthesis is not an option: rather, it constitutes an obstacle in establishing the class-people connection.

The real opposition, then, is not to be found between people and class, but between people and populism (and consequently between class struggle and populist democracy): «When there was the people, there was no populism», Tronti remarks. «Unlike today, when there is populism precisely because there is no people» (*ibidem*).

Yet, left populism may nurture the ambition to produce such a synthesis of people and class by reviving and reshaping class antagonism through the people-vs-élite divide. Antagonisms, though, are not all identical, and in the shift from class to populist antagonism, something crucial is lost in transition, namely the conflict between labor and capital, which is at the heart of the capitalist mode of production. It is no surprise

that the left-populist project portrays itself as democratic and pluralistic rather than as classist and anti-capitalist; as unsurprising is the way class struggle remains opaque to populism. Banking on the «élite-vs-the-people» divide to get rid of good old dichotomies such as the class divide and the left/right divide, populist rhetoric remains intentionally class-blind.

As Eric Fassin suggests in *Populism Left and Right* (2018), Mouffe's praise of the «populist moment» is premised on the political ambition to gain right-wing voters to the left, by bringing the latter back in touch with «the people». Because «opinion polls keep showing a declining interest in the division between left and right», left-populism partisans encourage the left to «replace the opposition between right and left by the one between 'us' and 'them', people from below and elites from above» (Fassin et al., 2018 p. 84-85). However, such a tactical option remains doubtful in the long run. What would a left-wing formation gain, except for punctual and potential electoral consensus, from accommodating ambivalent populist affects such as antiestablishment hatred, social resentment and chauvinism into its own discourse for the purpose of meeting the ideological needs of its virtual populist constituency? Gains are unpredictable, while losses can be more clearly foreseen: first and foremost, the loss of a chance to develop radical and sustainable non-utopian alternatives to the pervasive hegemony of «capitalist realism» (Fisher, 2009).

On a conceptual level, the left-populist project, as outlined by Mouffe (2018), shows its very incompatibility with the paradigm of class politics. By shaping populism as a «logic», an empty structure to be signified and fuelled by distinct and even opposite political perspectives, Mouffe aims to encourage left-wing organizations to reclaim «a symbolic mechanism» that must not be conceived as intrinsically equipped with given ideological content. Since «populist logic» is nothing but an abstract form, it is prone to being concretely filled with different matter. Unlike Mouffe's populism, though, Marx's class struggle is no abstract logic. Nor is it an empty ahistorical form travelling across history: rather, it is a political instance that historically mediates and reconfigures social contents by integrating them into totalizing pictures of society as a whole.

Class struggle operates as a dialectics in the technical Hegelian sense, i.e. as a medium for articulating concrete materials that, in turn, acquire new shapes and new significations through their dialectical incorporation. This means, to borrow Hegelian jargon once again, that class struggle «poses its own presuppositions» (Hegel, 2010, pp. 349-351): it does not apply to classes as pre-existing and predetermined social agents; instead, it produces classes as the structures emerging in and through the movements

of capital – production, circulation and reproduction – from within capitalist relations of exploitation.

While Mouffe praises the populist logic as an abstract form precisely in the name of its ideological plasticity, Hegel reminds us of the limits of formalism and abstraction: what is abstract, indeed, always originates from something and inevitably keeps the imprint of its origin. Therefore, abstract forms are actually never fully empty, as they may superficially seem, but always too full of contents hiding behind their formal texture (Mascat, 2018). This is why, in Hegel's terms, logical abstraction falls into crass empiricism by denying its own original concrete import. From this perspective, the functional logics underlying the two mechanisms prove that concrete class struggle and abstract populism are strongly opposed.

The option of isolating the populist form from its social basis enables Mouffe to value the populist logic as a formal device that allows for distinct ideological outcomes resulting from different processes of political synthesis. Such an option relies on Mouffe's well-known thesis of the autonomy of ideology and politics with regard to social and economic grounds as originally developed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), the work she co-authored with Laclau. According to the views put forward in the book, class interests and class positioning only exist at the discursive level of ideology; hence in the ideological realm everything – any sort of political synthesis – is possible. But possibility, as has been argued, here amounts to mere indeterminacy or lack of causal determination (Anderson, 1983; Wood, 1986). In the declared attempt to counter Marxism's alleged tendency towards determinism and class reductionism, Mouffe and Laclau's approach ends up producing a different kind of reductionism, one that reduces the political to absolute contingency by disarticulating and dismantling its rootedness in the social and the economic. It is what Anderson has brilliantly referred to as the «randomization of history», and what Wood has reinterpreted along the same lines as the «randomization of politics».

In *The Retreat from Class* (1986), Wood declared war on the New True Socialist (NTS) camp, which she named after Marx and Engels' polemic use of the "New Socialism" label in *The German Ideology*. "New True Socialism" stands for a constellation of eminent post-Marxist thinkers whose intellectual project started to emerge as early as the mid-1970s and whose most distinctive theoretical achievement consisted in the «autonomization of ideology and politics [...] from any class foundation» (Wood, 1986, p. 2). According to Wood, the NTS movement's major fault consisted in the «virtual ex-cision» of class concepts – class, class struggle and class interests – from socialist theory



and in the actual dismissal of the very relevance of these notions in socialist politics. Wood raises a good number of critical questions to challenge the NTS enterprise and show the paradoxical consequences that derive from taking their statements at face value: «Who has a specific interest in socialism? If no one in particular, why not everyone? If everyone, why not capitalists too, and why need there be *any* conflict and struggle? If interest is not the relevant principle, what is? And with or without interest, what about *capacity*? What kinds of people are strategically placed and collectively defined in such a way as to make possible and likely their constitution as a collective agent in the struggle for socialism? If no one in particular, why not everyone? But if some people and not others, on what principle of historical selection? If the analysis of history as class struggle, and the underlying materialist principles which accord centrality to relations of production, are wrong, or if they do not entitle us to conclude that class struggle is the most likely path to socialism, what alternative principle of historical explanation should we adopt, or what different connections should we draw between our emancipatory project and our understanding of history?» (p. 99).

Yet since the «struggle for socialism» has actually left the scene, replaced by the goal of democratic pluralism (or democratic populism), the «path to socialism» as a strategy does not deserve any particular attention in Mouffe's proposal; and in this respect Wood's objections may be rejected. At this stage, what is most relevant from our perspective is the general conclusion that Wood reaches from the thesis of the autonomization of ideology. The consequence, she suggests, is that «politics, like history in general, is random and contingent. Not only is there no absolute determination, there are no determinate conditions, possibilities, relations, limits, pressures. Anything – or nothing – goes» (p. 84).

A Marxist alternative to the «randomization of politics» has to restore causality to solve the impasse of pure contingency. To do so, it needs a synthetic principle informing a concept of society as a whole and a view of antagonism as a systemic and totalistic instance: class struggle is precisely such a principle.

## **Class: what's in a name?**

Marx's (and Engels's) writings provide several formulations of the notion of class – from *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* to *Capital* (1867/1885/1894) and the *Grundrisse* (1857-58) through *The Eighteenth*

*Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) and *The Class Struggles in France 1848-1850* (1850) – whereby the concept fluctuates, expanding and retracting in resonance with the turbulent *Zeitgeist* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theoretical endeavors aimed at developing the polysemy of the concept of class as inherited from Marx, investigating ongoing class metamorphoses, mapping the changes occurred in representations of class and analyzing new processes of class subjectivation gained prominence within Marxist and post-Marxist debates (Poulantzas, 1978; Hardt & Negri, 2004; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Roemer, 1982; Wood 1986; Wright, 1989). Daniel Bensaïd's most remarkable contribution to this wide constellation of debates is to be found in the second of the three sections that compose his *Marx l'intempestif* (1995), the outcome of a long and intense theoretical *corps à corps* with Marx's oeuvre (Bensaïd, 2002). Committed to brushing Marx's philosophy against the grain, the book stresses the critical and non-linear dimension of Marx's thought and provides a sharp systematic account of his work. While Section 1 illustrates Marx's non-teleological understanding of history (his «critique of philosophical reason») and Section 3 exposes his original engagement with science (his «critique of positivistic reason»), Section 2 focuses on Marx's «critique of sociological reason».

Drawing on Marx's anti-sociological approach to classes, Bensaïd proposes a strategic account of the notion of class that enables him to avoid both the hypothesis of a mere categorization of classes without class struggle – an option that gained currency in the 1980s thanks to Analytical Marxism (Cohen, 1978; Elster, 1985; Roemer, 1986; Wright, 1985; 1989) – and the thesis of «class struggles without classes» as proposed by Balibar (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991, pp. 153-184).

Liberated from the yoke of «sociological reason», Marx's notion of class ceases being a «thing» and emerges as a process, a relationship originating and taking shape in the struggles. Class *qua* process can be both negatively suffered (through the extraction of surplus value from surplus labor, i.e. through exploitation) and positively enacted (produced through practices of insubordination and solidarity) by the dominated. Yet, in spite of being a dynamic phenomenon, class cannot be reduced to pure performativity, as Bensaïd decisively maintains (Bensaïd, 2000, p. 71). The radical constructivism by which Pierre Bourdieu can dereify classes and conceive them as the outcomes – rather than the premises – of class struggle in capitalist societies must be mitigated by a careful awareness of the material entrenchment of social constructs (Bourdieu, 1984). As Bensaïd stresses (correcting Bourdieu's performative excess in distinguishing between the notions of «classe probable» and «classe mobilisée»), «as far as words and

things mutually determine each other, reality does not vanish into the game of signs which it itself determines» (Bensaïd, 2000, p. 71). But if the balance of power ends up privileging the performative side, opposite consequences may arise: on the one hand, absolute voluntarism – «‘Let class act, and class is’, says Bourdieu»; on the other hand, pure subjectivism – «Corollary: if it stops acting, will it disappear?» (p. 73).

Recalling with Thompson (1963, p. 9) that «the working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making», Bensaïd argues that Marx’s notion of class is a peculiar theoretical construct to be secured and protected from both substantialism and relativism. «It is one thing to say that classes only exist in their antagonistic relationship. It is another thing to claim that they exist only according to the intensity of their struggles», he writes (Bensaïd, 2000, p. 71). Indeed, he adds, «It has been well known since Spinoza at least that the concept of dog does not bark. But for the concept to have meaning, real dogs, barking and biting, are needed» (*ibidem*).

How, then, are *real classes* to be identified? Lenin provides a crucial definition of class in itself by affirming that real classes are determined on the basis of their position, relation, function and mode of economic existence:

«[Classes are] large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labor, and, consequently, by the size of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it» (Lenin quoted in Bensaïd, 1992).

Yet such actual classes, in Bourdieu’s terms, would be simply probable insofar as clearly «material interests do not spontaneously translate into political objectives, and even less into concerted political action» (Wood, 1986, p. 60).

At this stage, the rise of *class for itself* (class in action) remains to be explained, and this must be done by preventing two equally ruinous mistakes, namely teleology and determinism – or, in Bensaïd’s words, the naturalization of economy and the «fatalization of history» (Bensaïd, 2008a, p. 45).

Indeed, the logic underlying the historical emergence of class consciousness – which is one of the central tenets of Marxism – should not be conceived as a one-way transition from the socio-economic level to the political sphere, since «the social structure of class does not mechanically determine political representation and conflict» (Ben-

said, 2002, p. 114). The non-correspondence between class unconscious and class consciousness leaves no room for any automatic deduction, and the gap cannot be filled by relying on mere ideals of progress premised on the linear deployment of historical time. The tempo of the political, where classes emerge *in actu*, is always à contretemps, i.e. juggling multiple disaccordred temporalities: rhythms and cycles of capital, uneven and combined development, broken times of crisis, sudden moments of revolutionary change, accelerations and stalling.

In order to investigate the grounds and contradictions of class formation in the contemporary capitalist world-economy (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991, pp. 115-125), Bensaïd argues, there is no need to resurrect a proletarian metaphysics of class consciousness (Bensaïd quoted in Roso and Mascaro Querido, 2015). A reasonable constructivist approach, that could take into account the discursive/cultural component as a determining factor in the translation of the material interests stemming from class structure into class organization, is indeed enough to reconnect the functional inscription of classes into the mode of production and their ideological inscription into the political sphere.

If one can argue that there is no class consciousness without class organization (Chibber 2017), one should equally argue that class organization results from material class structures, although, once again, no political automatism is involved<sup>3</sup>. This implies, against Mouffe, that the notion of objective class interests can still be maintained, without any substantialist relapse, as a marker expressing the very configuration of the capitalist device (Wood, 1986, p. 60)<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, tracing class interests back to class

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3. Balibar says something similar when he states that «there is no such thing as the 'working class' solely on the basis of some more or less homogeneous sociological situation, but that it exists only where there is a labour movement. In the same way, it is a realization that the labour movement exists only where there are workers' organizations (parties, trade unions, stock exchanges or co-operatives)» (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991, p. 170).

4. Mouffe refuses the very notion of class interests existing beyond (or rather before) the discursive level: «How can it be maintained that economic agents can have interests defined at the economic level which would be represented a posteriori at the political and ideological levels? In fact, since it is in ideology and through politics that interests are defined, that amounts to stating that interests can exist prior to the discourse in which they are formulated and articulated. This is contradictory» (Mouffe, 1983, p. 21). In this respect, Wood aptly remarks: «What precisely does it mean to deny the 'objective interests' of the working class or to maintain that workers are no different from other 'social agents' in the degree to which their interests coincide with the objectives of socialism? It must be noted, first, that this is very different from simply acknowledging that material interests do not spontaneously translate themselves into political objectives, and even less into concerted political action. It implies that material interests do not exist unless they are translated into political objectives and concerted political action. This must mean that the conditions of capitalist exploitation are no more consequential in determining the life-situations and experience of workers than are any other conditions and contingencies which may touch their lives (which probably also means putting in question the very first principle of historical materialism, concerning the centrality of production relations and exploitation in the constitution of human social life). The implication is that workers are no more affected by capitalist exploitation than are any other human beings who are not themselves the direct objects of exploitation. This also implies that capitalists derive no fundamental advantage from the exploitation of workers, that the workers derive no fundamental disadvantage from their exploitation by capital, that workers would derive no fundamental advantage from ceasing to be exploited, that the condition of being exploited does not entail an interest" in the cessation of class exploitation, that the relations between capital and labour have no fundamental consequences for

structure does not provide a pattern accounting for the arising of causal determination from the non-correspondence of the economic and the political. For this purpose, new causal nexi are needed, whereby class functions and class interests, on the one hand, and class habits and class experiences, on the other, are all synthesized in the process – a vulnerable, precarious and unpredictable process (Chibber 2017) – leading to the appearance of the classes *für sich*.

If class interests represent the necessary although not sufficient condition for understanding the emergence of class experience, a new kind of political causality should account for the contingent transition from «probable classes» to «classes in action» at a given time in history, providing an answer to the «crucial question that asks what comes out in favor of probability rather than improbability» (Bensaïd, 2000, p. 72).

### **In defense of lost causes. Classes, totality and strategic mapping**

Revolutionary theory, according to Bensaïd, has something in common with psychoanalysis. «Political representation», he writes, «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).

The challenge to causally reconnect social relationships and political representations when it comes to class amounts, *entre autres*, to making sure that the uncertainty of revolutionary perspectives does not dramatically turn into indeterminacy. Such danger is always present when causes are lost and, to borrow from Anderson, «the notion of ascertainable cause starts to undergo a critical weakening» (Anderson, 1983, p. 48). In his famous article «In the Tracks of Historical Materialism», Anderson denounces the risk of the «randomization of history» appearing when the status of causal determination deteriorates and contingency becomes the only rationale available. Randomization, as distinguished from natural randomness, indicates a theoretical intervention aimed at questioning the very value of causality with regard to the difficult coupling of the social and the political.

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the whole structure of social and political power, and that the conflicting interests between capital and labour are all in the eye of the beholder (Wood, 1986, pp. 60-61).

If a third way has to be indicated «between a simplistic revolutionary chiasm and a total denial of any organic connection» so as to avoid a situation where if «there is no simple, absolute, mechanical, unilinear, and non-contradictory determination, there is no determinacy, no relationship, no causality at all» (Wood, 1986, p.62), Bensaïd's notion of class as a «strategic concept» can provide a fruitful alternative for the reconceiving of causality (Bensaïd, 2006).

Classes, as has been stated earlier, «posit their own presuppositions» by retroactively reconstituting and representing the very conditions of their existence. Their causal status is circular, and the circle rotates in two senses: virtual classes exist in the structure, and because of their structural positioning inside capitalist society they enable the shaping of class struggle; at the same time, virtual classes only manifest themselves through struggles whereby they actually emerge as real classes.

By affirming that class is a «strategic concept», Bensaïd does not simply highlight the non-essentialist nature of classes. His appeal to strategy is a statement regarding possible political uses of the concept for re-establishing causal relationships between the potential and actual existence of classes. Thus, class struggle mostly matters to Marxism on a strategic level, since it is more than «a principle of intelligibility of social transformation» (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991, p. 156): rather, it constitutes an inescapable strategic compass for thinking and doing radical politics committed to overturning the status quo. Its functioning is synthetic, since its mobilization reveals the representation of capitalist society as a whole and connects subjective class experience with the understanding of the social totality.

Drawing on Frederic Jameson's famous exhortation to elaborate a *cognitive mapping* of the capitalist world, it can be suggested that a strategic use of the notion of class struggle could allow for the possibility to grasp and fill «the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience» (Jameson, 1988, p. 353). As Jameson observes, «the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience» (*ibidem*). Therefore, in his view, the task of mapping the social structure in relation with conscious and unconscious representations of individuals or groups within it must be part of any socialist politics<sup>5</sup>. In addition, if capitalism organizes the social structure as a totality

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5. «But I do want to argue that without a conception of the social totality (and the possibility of transforming a whole social system), no properly socialist politics is possible» (Jameson, 1988, p. 355).

and implies a totalizing conceptualization of society, an equally totalizing concept should be employed for critically challenging capitalism and articulating anti-capitalist strategies. In that respect the main goal of cognitive mapping is to counter the tendencies of the micropolitical to disarticulate the macropolitical and synthesize the centrifugal forces of contemporary global economy that push the world apart and prevent class alliances across the international division of labor. Therefore, a totalizing comprehension of the social structure is absolutely necessary insofar as no understanding of capital and capitalism can do without adopting a systemic standpoint: there is, in fact, no capitalism without totality – and, as Jameson concludes, «if capital does not exist, then clearly socialism does not exist either» (pp. 354-355).

Class struggle is then needed as the conceptual lever functional to envisioning an end to capitalist domination in at least two senses: first, it operates heuristically as a synthetic prism for mapping insightful cartographies of the existing world and its dividing lines; secondly (but also consequently), it operates strategically by allowing subjective representations of the conflicting interests of opposite class positionings. Rather than classifying and declassifying classes, rearranging class struggle à contretemps, i.e. re-composing classes through their struggles against the background of the alleged disappearance of classes, reintroduces causation in the relationship between the social sphere and the political terrain, and emerges as the ultimate strategic task.

### **Strategic universalism. How, being nothing, to become everything?**

The strategic task of rearranging class struggle faces what Bensaïd names «the tragic enigma of the proletarian revolution»: how, being nothing, to become everything? (Bensaïd, 2008c, p. 41).

The strategist facing such a task is, for Bensaïd, the party. In his view, the party incarnates the strategic agent par excellence. Comparing Lukács' ultra-bolshevist conflation of class consciousness and class organization, that ends up turning consciousness into «nothing but the expression of historical Necessity», to Lenin's scrupulous distinction of class and party, Bensaïd sides with Lenin, arguing that the party is crucial to class action and class struggle as much as it is irreplaceable in respect to the accomplishment of socialist programs and revolutionary goals (Bensaïd, 2002, p.116; 2011, pp. 93-106).

For Lenin, «the most purposeful, most comprehensive and specific expression of the political struggle of classes is the struggle of parties», and the party is the tool – «the gearbox and the pointsman of class struggle» – that the working class must seize in order to organize itself autonomously and run for power (Bensaïd, 2007, p. 151). Bensaïd also notices that while the conquest of economic and cultural power by the bourgeoisie anticipates the conquest of political power, for the proletariat the conquest of political power must initiate social and cultural transformation; it is again a *sui generis* kind of circular causality that is at play here, whereby political power determines socio-cultural transformations, but at the same time social and cultural factors grant the proletariat the chance to gain political capacity.

Precisely because it is the agent of strategic causality, the party incarnates an antidote to pure contingency, on the one hand, and mere teleology, on the other hand. Once strategic causality as the only admissible nexus between the social and the political has been restored and mechanical determinism avoided, space and time for immanent politics *qua* strategic art are finally disclosed. This is the realm where decision and chance, kairotic times and timely interventions, weakest links and obstinate obstacles all arise.

Indeed, politics remains unthinkable when arbitrariness and fatalism are all that is left. Bensaïd recalls that even Alain Badiou's *Communist Politics of the Event*, in spite of its revolutionary commitment, does not allow for strategic thinking. Only the lucid awareness that nothing necessarily happens enables politics to eventually make something happen. Rising in the conjuncture of historically determined conditions, politics both originates in and gives shape to the field of the possible. «Politics inscribes itself within this tension between determinate contingency and necessary determination, between the constituting power of the act and the resistance of the instituted [...] This contradictory relationship, in which political action moves, is threatened with annihilation by the temptation to fetishize the event after having fetishized history» (Bensaïd quoted in Roso and Mascaro Querido 2015).

The notion of crisis expresses for Bensaïd a quintessential strategic value that is missing in the idealism of the event, always on the verge of reinstating fatalism and reactivating wait-and-see attitudes alike, while disqualifying the question of organization. Strategic causality, on the other hand, gets necessity out of the way and hinges on the possible, namely on the unexpected eruption of crises and on the unpredictable timeliness of politics to manouver such crises. The possible, praised by Bensaïd against the utopian, must be for politics an object of care. Strategy patiently takes care of the



possible, since patience is strategy's wise virtue, allaying revolutionary impatience<sup>6</sup>. Patient custody and care of the possible becomes a political resource in times of darkness (such as the 1980s), when revolution is not on the agenda, socialism has the same historical chances as barbarism, and political change appears to be possible precisely as it is not necessary (Roso and Mascaro Querido 2015). In the midst of this constellation of possibilities, the party acts as a remedy against an all-too-easy faith in progress, breaking with the passive naturalization of history and encouraging the development of strategy as a practical reflection on actual possibilities.

Facing processes of class decomposition, in the wake of the current neoliberal restoration, the party is meant to take up the challenge to confront the alleged disappearance of classes, as well as the heterogeneity of class experiences both on a local and a global scale. The party is designated to perform the synthetic function of bridging the gap between class structures and class representations, providing new «cognitive mapping». Drawing on Boltanski and Chiapello's diagnosis of the new spirit of capitalism, Bensaïd stresses the urge for radical politics to reconnect «exploitation and exclusion», articulating class demands with the revolt against all forms of oppression and discrimination (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007). In this regard, the party is assigned the delicate task of identifying and tracing class lines into emerging multi-sided struggles in which socio-economic interests (and conflicts of class interest) do not appear manifestly as such. Such a task does not amount to barely subsuming to class reductionism alternative and competing principles around which contemporary struggles – e.g. gender equality, antiracism, decolonialism, sexual rights, human rights and others – have been successfully organized; rather, it consists of disseminating and weaving class solidarity from within these struggles. The party as a «strategic operator» (Bensaïd, 2007, p. 151) does not work through the serial pattern of the *chain of equivalences* advocated by Mouffé and Laclau (1985), according to which distinct minority groups are all equivalently disadvantaged in front of hegemonic power while remaining incommensurably diverse. It is precisely by navigating the social field inhabited by non-equivalent and non-correspondent claims that the party makes its own intervention so as to introduce and relate class into different kinds of emancipatory demands with the goal of building up alliances and united fronts of struggle<sup>7</sup>. In this regard, the party acts as a «strategic universal»

6. On the dialectics of *patience* and *impatience* in revolutionary politics see D. Bensaïd *Une lente impatience*, Paris, 2004 (Bensaïd, 2013) and Lenin's appeal to the necessity for the avant-guard to patiently explain its convictions to the masses in the 1917 *April Theses*.

7. Can the strategic principle of class struggle be considered intersectional as to its synthetic function? The question exceeds the limits of this contribution. See B. Foley, *Intersectionality: A Marxist Critique* (2018) and S. Smith, *A Marxist*

reclaiming totality as a heuristic principle for both knowledge and action and operates as a connector binding together social and political claims through the partisan prism of class consciousness. The party's radical (and *sui generis*) universalism indicates its political hegemonic task towards the social sphere (Balibar, 2016, p. 83)<sup>8</sup>. Drawing once again on Lenin's well-known metaphor of the «tribune of the people» who can respond to «each and every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it takes place, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects», and «must be able to group all these manifestations into one a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation» (Lenin, 1987, p. 113), Bensaïd states that the party, while acting as the «resolute subject», must sharpen its listening skills – être à l'écoute – with regard to on-going struggles (Bensaïd, 2007, pp. 153-157)..

Premised on the variable and unstable existence of classes as social structures, the party's function is to make classes exist in the political sphere by countering and eventually overcoming the transient eclipses of class consciousness. If class divides do not cease existing where they seem to become less visible, rarefied or even disguised while other fights take center stage, they can and must be reactivated by the party through strategic organizing and propaganda aimed at promoting class conflict as the inescapable horizon of the social and the political; and this must be done in spite of all the pervasive attempts to wither and liquidate class discourse as an outdated and irrecoverable paradigm. By showing that class divides take shape at the intersection of multiple forms of domination, the party lays the foundation for the punctual reappearance of class consciousness.

The «major piece of a strategic puzzle», the party, as viewed by Bensaïd, is the *conditio sine qua non* of all radical politics, «since it is precisely the party form that enables us to intervene in the political field, to act on the possible and to avoid being passively subjected to the flowing and flowing back of class struggle» (Bensaïd quoted in Roso and Mascaro 2015; Bensaïd, 1991, p.121). Not only is there no class consciousness without class organization, but there is no politics without the party. «A politics without parties (whatever name – movement, organization, league, party – they are given) ends up in most cases with a *politics without politics*: either an aimless tailism towards the spontaneity of social movements, or the worst form of elitist individualist vanguardism, or finally a repression of the political in favor of the aesthetic or the ethical» (Bensaïd, 2007, pp. 161-162).

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*Case for Intersectionality* (2017).

8. Balibar (2016, p.83) remarks « Universalité et hégémonie deviennent dès lors équivalentes, et inversement aucune idéologie (aucun système de représentations, aucune figure de conscience) ne peut accéder à l'universalité si elle ne fonctionne pas comme un processus de domination, devenant une 'idéologie dominante' (herrschende Ideologie) ».

## Politics as a strategic art against the randomization of politics

In a context where the struggle – class struggle – is certain while its steps and its outcomes are always doubtful and unpredictable – as Bensaïd repeatedly states quoting Gramsci, for whom «in reality one can ‘scientifically’ foresee only the struggle, but not the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot but be the result of opposing forces in continuous movement» – strategy marks the primacy of politics (Bensaïd, 2011, p. 100). For Bensaïd, as for Benjamin, politics overrides history and history does not do anything. Hence, emancipated from the tyranny of history, politics gains its own time for initiative and decision<sup>9</sup>.

However, the autonomy ascribed by Bensaïd to the political with regards to the social has nothing to do with the autonomous status claimed by Laclau and Mouffe for ideology. Whereas the latter collapses into the arbitrariness of pure contingency, the former merely indicates the dissipation of all mechanical teleology, opening the right to the conjuncture for political strategy. Following Lenin, «a virtuoso of the conjuncture», Bensaïd stresses the distinction between class and party, separates the social from the political, and conceives their relationship as grounded neither in transparency nor in the immediate correspondence of the two spheres, but rather in translatability, premised, in turn, on the acceptance of the discording and disaccorded times of each terrain (Bensaïd, 2008a, p. 331; Bensaïd, 1995). Politics is tasked with representing the social by transposing and translating it into its own terms, given that there is no predetermined correspondence between them: «If class is susceptible to [meeting] a plurality of representations, there is a[n ongoing] game between the social and the political» (Bensaïd, p. 2008a, p. 55). Such a game is precisely the game strategy is meant to play, and the playing field is hegemony.

Bensaïd pulls Gramsci’s notion of hegemony out of Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical conception of the hegemonic processes, and reinscribes it into his strategic horizon. «Taken in a strategic sense the concept of hegemony cannot be reduced to an inventory, nor to the sum of equivalent social antagonisms». For Gramsci, Bensaïd maintains, «this is the gathering principle of class struggle» that opposes the unifying principle of capital by organizing converging struggles against it (p. 342).

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9. As Kouvelakis (2010, p. 66) highlights «C’est dans la pluralité des temps sociaux et l’hétérogénéité polarisée des espaces que se trouve la clé de la temporalité politique et stratégique [...]. Mais si l’hétérogénéité et la discordance des temps ouvrent sur la possibilité de la rupture révolutionnaire, elles ouvrent également, et pour les mêmes raisons, sur la possibilité de la catastrophe ».

Hegemony grants the political the space it needs to exert its autonomous function – politics has its grammar and syntax, as Bensaïd remarks – as well as a last-instance role with respect to the social. Echoing Lenin, Bensaïd recalls that «certainly class division is, in the end, the deepest foundation of political organizing», but it is only political struggle that can define this «last instance» (Bensaïd, 1997). Once again, the «last instance» of politics must be conceived in terms of political strategy rather than as pure political voluntarism. Manifesting the mark of the autonomy of the political, the logic of the last instance suggests a peculiar understanding of politics as the medium where representation operates to show what is absent (the social and its conflict), «where social reality is manifested through a permanent interplay of displacements and condensations» – and where, finally, time is shattered (*brisé*) and its course allows for timely interventions and abrupt changes of direction (Bensaïd, 2007, p. 154; Bensaïd, 1997).

Lenin's legacy plays a major role in Bensaïd's peculiar conceptualization of time. Indeed, Lenin, who in his notes on Hegel's *Science of Logic* famously emphasized the «leaps!» and the «breaks» that the author of *Logic* praised against gradualism, challenged historical evolutionism in the name of those unforeseeable sparks that suddenly erupt and «ignite the fire», namely revolutionary crises (Bensaïd, 1968).

Such unexpected crises, incarnating those rare and much-awaited moments when revolutionary possibilities are to be seized and led, precisely invoke political intervention. To that extent, in his 1920 text '*Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*', Lenin reaches two major «practical conclusions» that Bensaïd explicitly welcomes: «first, that in order to accomplish its task the revolutionary class must be able to master all forms or aspects of social activity without exception [...]; second, that the revolutionary class must be prepared for the most rapid and brusque replacement of one form by another» (Lenin quoted in Bensaïd, 2007, p. 156).

Crucial as they are as premises for opening revolutionary scenarios, crises *per se* are manifestly not enough. «It is not every revolutionary situation that gives rise to a revolution», Lenin says. «Revolution arises only out of a situation in which the above-mentioned objective changes are accompanied by a subjective change, namely, the ability of the revolutionary class to take revolutionary mass action strong enough to break (or dislocate) the old government, which never, not even in a period of crisis, 'falls', if it is not toppled over». Therefore, for both Lenin and Bensaïd, the role of the party-strategist appears absolutely crucial. In this sense the vanguard function of the party consists first and foremost of «being prepared», «ready for the improbable, for the unexpected, for what happens»: this is the lesson that Bensaïd draws from Leninist politics – «a politics

that is a matter of choice and decision» – which he conceives as an art of the possible and of the *contretemps* (Bensaïd, 2007, pp. 153-155)

While recalling Lenin's understanding of the party's strategic readiness as the «state of being available to act in relation to whatever event may arise», Bensaïd warns against considering the eruption of the political event as a religious miracle instead of rooting it into its conjunctural conditions of possibility (2007, p. 159). In doing so, he insists on duration *qua* endurance as a decisive component of revolutionary militancy and of the party's strategy.

Patiently enduring a «slow impatience» (Bensaïd 2013) becomes the party's political imperative, by keeping memory and legacy alive while taking over a strategic custody of continuity through an untamed time made of crises and catastrophes<sup>10</sup>. In its capacity as the vector of organized politics, the party is in charge of promptly managing the propitious times of revolutions as well as navigating the tedious times of defeat when political struggles are out of joint. In those exhausting times, similar to our own, when the «eclipse of strategic reason» can lead to the abandonment of the revolutionary compass (Bensaïd, 2008a), the party's strategic resistance to the spirit of the times (*air du temps*) amounts to cultivating the art of *recommencement*. «Of course, we had more evenings of defeat than triumphant mornings», writes Bensaïd in his autobiography *An Impatient Life* (2013), «and, by dint of patience, we won the precious right to begin again [*recommencer*]».

A right that must be patiently defended and an art that must be passionately cultivated, the resolute ability to recommence relies for Bensaïd on a political wager. If politics – paraphrasing Stuart Hall (1986) – is «without guarantees», political strategy is nothing but a *melancholic wager*: a necessary Pascalian wager facing «the improbable necessity of revolutionizing the world» (Bensaïd, 1991, p. 297). What intrinsically distinguishes a reasonable wager on the possible from arbitrary faith in change is, once again, strategic calculation as to its ability to decipher the present and its social hieroglyphs.

As Michael Lowy has highlighted, through his rediscovery of Pascal via Lucien Goldmann's *Hidden God* (1955), Bensaïd is «the first Marxist to place the wager at the center of a revolutionary vision of history» (Lowy 2005). His wager does not draw on historical necessity or naïve optimism; but neither is it resigned. Bensaïd's melancholic wager resonates with Gramsci's well-known «optimism of the will» that sustains and balances the «pessimism of reason». Far from surrendering to the temptations of utopianism and to

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10. The French title of Bensaïd's memoir *An Impatient Life* (2013) is *Une lente impatience* (2004).

realism conceived as *Realpolitik*, his political wager exceeds hope by means of strategy, i.e. investing melancholically – and patiently – in revolutionary militancy. Relentlessly haunted by the threat of «losing everything and losing oneself», Bensaïd's melancholic wager sounds first and foremost like a call to arms, a call to engage in the «work for the uncertain», whose uncertainty still proves to be strategically worth pursuing (Bensaïd, 1996).

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