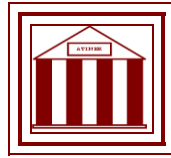


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**Does the Concept of Class Struggle Make Sense
in the Age of Neoliberalism?**

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Does the Concept of Class Struggle Make Sense in the Age of Neoliberalism?

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Abstract

The abundant literature regarding the extent of forms, criticisms, and actions to combat growing inequalities that has accumulated over the past several years has brought to the attention of the public ideological perspectives (Marxism) and concepts (class struggle) that had previously seemed to have been permanently abandoned. There is a growing opinion which in fact considers the inequalities associated with our current capitalist phase to be a factor of the reconstruction of classes, and protests against inequality to be a representation of renewed opposition between classes. The present paper aims to investigate, in the context of Western democracies: 1) how and to what extent the concept and forms of protest in the transition from Fordism to neoliberalism have changed; 2) whether the social conflicts and protests that have emerged since the economic crisis of 2007 may be interpreted through the reconstruction of the concept of class struggle. The argument is that while in the past the concept of class struggle was associated with the radical opposition between two ideologies and two worldviews, now the protests are largely subsumed within the neoliberal paradigm: people do not challenge the social-politico-economic model, but rather claim a full inclusion within its frame.

Keywords: Neoliberal society, Protest, Class struggle

Introduction

In the context of Western democracies the commonly shared opinion holds that the 1980s, characterised by the hegemony of conservative (from the ethical point of view) and Liberal, *laissez-faire* (in terms of economic policy) governments, represent the culmination of the success of the middle class as a singular social subject.

In line with this point of view, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of neoliberalism as the hegemonic economic doctrine ushered in the decline of the working class as a social and political subject. Up to that point the working class had always represented an antagonistic and virtually revolutionary foil to hegemonic economic doctrine, but here instead began to be absorbed into the middle class. In the middle class - depoliticised, organised and structured according to private enterprise criteria - the historic conflict between two classes and two world views appeared to dissolve (Rosanvallon, 2006). The governments of the 1980s, for which the middle class were the expression, consolidated the idea that social peace, within and between states, could only be possible through an adhesion to the principles of capitalist production both in society at large as well as in the workings of government.

However, if the end of the bipolar world and the rise of neoliberalism endorsed the conquest of new freedoms and new opportunities, it also produced new forms of inequality (Beck 1986, 2000a; Gallino 2000; Stiglitz, 2003; 2012). The abundant literature regarding the extent of forms, criticism, and action to combat growing inequalities that has accumulated over the past several years has brought to the attention of the public ideological perspectives (Marxism) and concepts (class struggle) that had previously seemed to have been permanently abandoned. There is a growing opinion which in fact considers the inequalities associated with our current capitalist phase to be a factor of the reconstruction of classes, and protests against inequality to be a representation of renewed opposition between classes.

After briefly reconstructing the framework within which the transition from Fordism to neoliberalism took place in the 1980s, I intend to analyse one case of protest which, from my point of view, paradigmatically brings about the emergence of successful neoliberal policies which would thereafter determine the breakdown of classes in terms of their integration into the dominant lifestyle. In the last section I will attempt to show that in Western neoliberal society it is in fact the middle class which continues to be the fulcrum of social stability and which supports politico-economic hegemony, even if it does so often against its own interests and even when they carry out protests that seem to defy the politico-economic hegemony. More generally, it will become clear that it is possible to distinguish between three forms of protest: two which are systemic, that is, consistent with the neoliberal society (those through which the middle class claiming the maintenance or expansion of a status within the hegemonic frame and those demanding inclusion within it), and one which is anti-systemic (challenging the dominant paradigm and claiming antithetical models on the economic, social, and political side).

This analysis is guided by adherence to the thesis that neoliberalism, in becoming the dominant ideology, has created mechanisms of neutralisation of the opposition (Dardot and Laval, 2010) or turned criticism to its advantage (Chiappello and Boltanski, 2014), in most cases reducing the anti-systemic effect of democratic participation of citizens to a mere fetish and condemning the nevertheless countless protests arising within it to irrelevance.

From Fordism to Neoliberalism

The tendency towards the formation of a large middle class originated through a combination of the effects of the Fordist model of labour organisation and Keynesian economic doctrine.

The welfare state was constructed upon the trends of Fordism and Keynesianism following World War II, and served as the framework for a progressive attenuation of the antagonism between classes, both through the expansion of the sphere of citizenship (with the constitutionalisation of political and social rights) and by means of a variety of actions aimed at promoting the integration of the masses into the production process (Marshall, 1949). Accompanied by extraordinary scientific and technological progress, in Western countries the welfare state model enabled strong economic expansion for some thirty years (not surprisingly called *Les Trente Glorieuses*¹), as well as widespread increases in well-being, with a consequent reduction in social inequalities. The welfare state thus served as a compromise between a planned economy and the free market, with the ambition of realising the ideals of social justice in a higher form of democracy capable of overcoming the ideological differences between Socialism and Liberalism. Such conflicts between these ideologies at the end of World War II still continued to support a rigid social structure characterised by class division.

Through investments, regulatory monetary measures, and social security measures, the welfare state aimed to reduce the risk of economic crises by guaranteeing employment levels and income, whereas the Fordist production model, with the institutionalisation of social partnerships and the enhancement of the role of trade unions, helped to ensure the existence of a space for democratic participation, weakening the radical conflict in the field of institutional politics and government.

Fordism played a fundamental role in limiting the conflict and in the redefinition of the boundaries between classes: through permanent contracts it assured regular work and wages for the working class (factors that allowed for the long-term planning of the family and social life of employees), their access to mass consumption and, above all, their children's access to a state education and to a range opportunities that did not depend on specific class membership.

¹J.Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975*, Paris, Fayard, 1979.

Regardless of the historical judgment on the objectives achieved by the welfare state in the second half of the 20th century, it is important to remember that its establishment and development were marked by sharp criticism, including from opposing ideologies, and by often violent social conflicts denouncing the persistence of serious economic inequalities and the perpetuation of the bourgeois, 'classist' character of society and the state.

The protests of 1968 and the terrorism of the 1970s in some European countries are emblematic examples of this, but so are the conflicts that in many countries accompanied the adoption of certain laws, such as those regarding divorce and abortion, which were by nature highly polarising (i.e. attributable to ideologically opposed horizons of values). In the first half of the 1970s, then, the social conflicts and protests that characterised the decade featured the use of the classic Marxist categories and the dichotomy of bourgeoisie/proletariat. Criticism and protests were rooted in ideology, in the contrast between two radically different visions of how to structure the roles of the individual, of society, of the economy and of the state.

Only in the late 1970s did the reference to classes and class identity gradually begin to disappear from the political, cultural and media horizon of representation (Chiapello and Boltanski, 1999). The factors around which existence was redesigned, especially for the working class, changed in two ways: one temporal, the other substantial. If in the Marxist philosophy of history the emancipation and fulfilment of the proletariat were situated on a future horizon, the general improvement in living conditions and work, mass production, and access to credit now changed the hierarchy of values of the proletariat and steered action towards the immediate enjoyment of consumption, thus shifting perceptions of identity and belonging beyond the traditional dichotomy between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

The erosion of the counter-hegemonic ideological roots of the working class occurred not in the name of what has been called a "denial of class consciousness" (Dirn, 1998), which refers to the strategy of defining one's identity without needing to contrast it with other identities, but in the name of two closely related phenomena: fear of the loss of acquired positions and progressive adherence to a specific worldview. The first aspect concerned the threat of exclusion from entitlement to a growing, widespread prosperity that largely aligned the existential expectations of the proletariat with those of the middle class in terms of standardisation of needs, behaviour and expectations. The second aspect concerned the adjustment of the working class to a new model of economic, social and political organisation based on criteria such as the individualisation and dematerialisation of production processes, the privatisation of the economy, and the dismantling the welfare state and trade unions - all factors that, as they result in the breakdown of class identity, would determine the subsequent neutralisation of the idea of class in the political sphere as well. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, this process became fully evident in the repositioning of the identity of the electorate in political parties. For, with the disappearance of the working class, workers' parties also disappeared, and the new party aggregates completely transcended the social status of their supporters.

The decade from 1979 to 1989, beginning with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom followed by that of Ronald Reagan in the U.S., and ending with the collapse of the Soviet Union, symbolically represents the path of consolidation of neoliberalism as general theory of the world. The combined reading of these three events has been presented, by neoliberal rhetoric, as proof - in theory as well as in practice - of the failure of possible alternatives to the principle of capitalist competition.

In this period the development of neoliberal society was completed, the main feature of which has been identified in the extension of the logic of competitiveness of the free market economic model in all aspects of individual life and relationships (Sennett, 2000; Beck 2000b, Harvey 2007).

Often used in polemic, critical language to describe the advanced capitalism phase, the term 'neoliberalism' identifies a variety of theoretical families and political practices that share 1) the belief in market self-regulation; 2) the consequent belief in the necessity for minimum functions of the state; 3) the application of the rules of competition and the company model to different aspects of individual and social action. Favoured by economic factors (the American rhetoric of individualism and freedom opposing the spectre of Soviet collectivism and authoritarianism), the establishment of neoliberalism in industrialised countries as well as in developing countries took place in the name of the desire to liberate society and the economy from regulatory intervention by the state. The theory of the *Minimal State* was in fact a direct result of the vision - which for neoliberals is a scientific law - of the free market as a spontaneous, self-regulating system, all the more efficient the less it is subject to artificial constraints.

In this context, which coincided with increasingly evident standardisation of lifestyles and behaviour patterns, the image of a peaceful society, healed of class conflicts and focused more and more on the centrality of a single middle class, was reinforced not only by the progressive reduction in the number of industrial workers and the concomitant increase in the number of workers in other sectors, but also by the rhetoric of co-responsibility (engagement) among individuals, political institutions, and the market in defining the objectives of growth and in rewriting the criteria of social justice and common interests under the banner of discontinuity with the welfare state model.

Neoliberalism acted in the process of the breaking-down of social classes via strategies that aimed to pacify civil society in terms of the definition of new aims and values (work, free time, income, behaviour patterns) in order to neutralise opposition and protests against the government and against the market. Meritocracy, continuous assessment of individual performance, and efficiency became the criteria for inclusion in the various dimensions of neoliberal society.

In this context, forms of protest were not eliminated, though they were no longer attributed to the usual conflicting dynamics typical of the class struggle. Protest underwent a process of redefinition which, in most cases, would eventually let it break away from the aims of the radical protests against the dominant political and economic system.

Miners, Homosexuals, and Margaret Thatcher. Class breakdown and attempts at reconstruction

The miners' protest against Thatcher government policies may be viewed as a pivotal moment in the process of social class breakdown as well as with respect to the process of the redefinition of forms of protest. In Britain, between 1984 and 1985, there was well-known and prolonged miners' strike to protest against the social and economic policies of the Thatcher government. Ending with the defeat of the miners, the protest received international media coverage not only for its duration (one year) but also because it involved a very large number of workers and geographical areas entirely dependent on that economic sector. The closure of the coal mines, which according to the government's calculations were no longer economically viable, was an integral part of the anti-Keynesian and neoliberal reform programme of the Conservative government, spelt out by the slogan "There is no alternative", to indicate adherence to the thesis of the failure of any alternative to the principle of capitalist competition. Thatcher's political programme in fact converged remarkably with the thesis of the neoliberal economists F. Von Hayek and M. Friedman, first and foremost from the 'naturalist' concept of the market to the Minimal State theory, by exalting individualism as opposed to socialist collectivism.

In an interview from 1981, Thatcher explained her economic philosophy, arguing: "What's irritated me about the whole direction of politics in the last 30 years is that it's always been towards the collectivist society. People have forgotten about the personal society. And they say: do I count, do I matter? To which the short answer is, yes. And therefore, it isn't that I set out on economic policies; it's that I set out really to change the approach, and changing the economics is the means of changing that approach. If you change the approach you really are after the heart and soul of the nation. Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul"².

Thatcher's political programme was however also strongly characterised by criticism of moral decay (attributed to the lax, permissive welfare policies of the 1960s and 70s) and the desire to restore the so-called "values of the traditional British family" (e.g. with anti-feminism, the campaign against assisted contraception, and the cutting policies meant to support unmarried mothers and grants to young people). A prime example of these policies is the denigrating campaign and regulations against homosexuality, adopted not by chance following the spread of AIDS and the portrayal in public opinion of the connection between disease and sexual behaviour considered transgressive.

This gave the period of Thatcherism the reputation as the era of convergence between apparently contradictory claims: on the one hand neoliberalism (based on the principles of the free market and Minimal State) and, on the other, moral conservatism (which suggested a strong state, with a paternalistic, disciplinary character).

² M. Thatcher, Interview for Sunday Times, 1981 may 1, www.margaretthatcher.org.

In this rearguard context with respect to the extension of certain civil liberties and social rights that the welfare state had guaranteed, the miners' protest too, which began in the name of ideological opposition and the defence of class identity, ended up being absorbed into the government's neoliberal strategy. This occurred mainly through two government strategies aimed at changing social rights and the labour market, the first consisting of a set of legislative measures that altered the forms and legal instruments of protest, and the second, "*which aim[ed] to change the heart and soul*", consisting of actions which affected perception of belonging, unhinged the principles of community and class solidarity, and transferred to the individual the full responsibility of his destiny (Beck, 2000b). In fact, after generalised solidarity at the start (from metal-workers to railway workers, from dockworkers to the printers of the *Daily Sun*, who for a time refused to print the newspaper that supported government politics), the miners became isolated. The protest, which initially aspired to link all the protests of the working class against the neoliberal trend, was instead relegated by the government and media simply to the miners' 'cause', considered unable to grasp the economic and technological changes that were supposed to steer modernisation of the country. Defining the leaders of striking miners as "internal enemies" of the nation and democracy, Thatcher declassified the anti-hegemonic protest of the miners as a reactionary 'civil war'³.

With the privatisation of essential services, the fragmentation and flexibility of the labour market, and in particular with the rhetoric equating the miners' protest with the defence of parasitic privileges, the Thatcher government gave rise to social repositioning of the working class more and more towards individualisation and the logic of competition rather than towards the defence of identity and class.

The failure of the miners' protest shows therefore, first of all, the effectiveness of the neoliberal strategy in breaking down and fragmenting the working class. But, it was also a focal point in the process of redefinition of the social classes and their political stance. An example of this phenomenon may be identified in the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners Movement (LGSM) that rallied round in support of the miners' protest. The case was recently revived in the film *Pride*, directed by Matthew Warchus (2014). It reconstructs the social context of Thatcher's England, highlighting the contradictions and cultural distance between equally stigmatised social groups whose needs, while very different, were also excluded from the government's political agenda.

Against the backdrop of a society that reacted to the economic crisis by clinging to reassuring, moral, conservative pillars, the film tells of the attempt of Lesbians and Gays Movement to strengthen its own opposition to Conservative government policies by adhering to the protest of the striking miners.

What the miners and gays had in common was the same condition of social ostracism. The link between the two groups arose because both were victims of the disapproval of the government, the police and the tabloids.

³ Speech at a private meeting of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbench MPs at Westminster (19 July 1984), www.margaretthatcher.org.

The narrative in the film primarily revolves around the construction of a process of mutual recognition and acceptance: on one side, the miners, heirs to a Marxist political culture, adhering to a traditional view of society and relationships; on the other homosexuals, devoid of strong ideological references and fully assimilated into a post-Fordist economic and social system. The former, therefore, conservatives (from the moral point of view) and anti-neoliberal (from the economic point of view), and the latter anti-conservative, but supporters of the opportunities (and freedoms) promised by neoliberalism. These represent contradicting claims and identities therefore, but both were included in a common protest against a government that was both conservative and neoliberal.

What is interesting in this story, however, is what remains unexpressed or only marginally explicit in the film, namely precisely the break-up of the working class and its absorption into the middle class. The process of intersection of traditionally opposed values, interests, and language actually produced a movement no longer identifiable as a *social class per se*, and in particular shifted the reasons for the protest from the contrast between two world views (economy, society and the state) to the claim for full access to the taking advantage of the values and resources of the affluent liberal democracies.

It is no coincidence that the solidarity of homosexuals with the miners, who started their protest claiming working conditions and life were no longer consistent with the hegemonic political-economic model, eventually resulted in human solidarity (financial aid needed for the survival of the miners and their families), while the presence of the miners at London's Gay Pride Parade, which concludes the film, takes on the meaning of specifically political participation, insofar as it contributes to strengthening the image of the protest as a demand for inclusion in, rather than contrasting with, the hegemonic paradigm: a protest by a "non-class", stimulated to join together, ignoring class interests and identity precisely because it insisted on being included in the enjoyment of rights and freedoms fully consistent with neoliberalism.

Systemic and Anti-systemic Protests in the Age of Neoliberalism

The 1985 London Gay Pride Parade anticipated a series of phenomena that were to become constant in contemporary societies: first, the more or less aware participation in neoliberal ideology tending towards individualisation and competitiveness; second, the success of neoliberal policies in the process of breaking down class and neutralising the conflict between classes; third, the expansion of the middle class as a necessary element for the expansion of capitalism. This profoundly changed both the meaning of the concept of the middle class, and the ability to continue to define this new class as heir to the Marxist concept of the bourgeoisie for three reasons: 1) because the concept of middle class was extended to encompass all the social space between the very rich and the very poor, i.e. a series of subjects and situations so varied as to make at least the plural expression 'middle classes' more adequate; 2) because the axiological bond

between the components of this ‘new class’ no longer concerned the ideological confrontation with other classes of the same cultural context⁴ 3) because the protests of the middle classes did not challenge the dominant world view and for this reason may be defined as systemic, i.e. consistent with the neoliberal system, generated by the system in view of its own adjustments and not due to radical upheavals.

Indeed, on the one hand, the protests of the middle class do not extend beyond the threshold which threatens the conservation of acquired positions, values and status, and on the other, and indeed because of this, they bring about the insertion into neoliberal values traditionally considered foreign to the logic of capitalism and the expansion of the free market.

This does not serve so much to prove or measure the ability of the middle classes to influence political processes and economic decisions, but rather to show, vice versa, the capacity of neoliberal ideology to steer the goals and values of individuals by a manipulation of the context in which they act.

Neoliberal ideology, in fact, by pervasively penetrating all aspects of the lives of individuals, has also created the mechanisms for the neutralisation of protests, diminishing in most cases the counter-ideological effect of democratic participation and citizen protests. This has resulted in the immediate relegation to subversiveness of those protests which, as early as the end of World War II, have been focused around the criticism of those who would become the axioms of the neoliberal society. The participation of the LGSM in the miners’ strike is also emblematic of this tendency of neoliberal ideology: bringing social conflict back into the flow of the dominant frame and declassifying anti-systemic protests into a variety of meanings ranging from the subversive (the miners’ strike was opposed by using the army) to the naive (the Gay Pride Parade). This happened (and continues to happen) with respect to a series of ever-changing issues following the constant representation of the middle class, portraying it as a subject that continuously challenges the system, but, upon closer inspection, revealing that the system tolerates and often induces the protest of the middle class only as a systemic protest.

Emblematic examples of this process are the attention to environmental issues, issues which the middle class gradually included among its values and which were then integrated into the electoral programmes of almost all political parties; protests in the area of civil rights (gay, feminist and black movements); protests against growing inequalities; and criticism of the functioning of democratic political systems.

Furthermore, the engagement rhetoric, which aimed to create a virtuous circle between the actions and values of the political institutions, the market and individuals, triggered a process of declassification and absorption of a number of potentially anti-systemic protests into the flow of physiological political discourse. This approach guided both the redefinition of state commitment in policies for combatting social inequalities, and the corporate

⁴ It more likely concerned the criteria of their own survival, now threatened by insecurity and the risks associated both with increased economic competitiveness and international policy, and with migratory flows and the consequent creation of new enemies to fight as if they came from ‘different religions’, ‘different races’ or ‘different civilizations’.

policies that gradually eroded the rights of workers. In the first case, the responsibility and commitment of the state has been transferred to the civil society (non-profit sector, voluntary work), while in the second, it exchanged work with the renunciation of important acquired rights.

Even the world economic crisis of the last decade, which has eroded the paradigm of values of the middle class, has produced reactions and forms of systemic protest that are paradoxically aimed at maintaining the neoliberal paradigm and oriented towards the assertion of policies for restoring the pre-crisis conditions of growth and prosperity. In Italy this has led a large majority of citizens to lend legitimacy first the right-wing government of "technicians" (experts in different fields rather than politicians), and then to the centre-left "scrapping" government (as self-defined by Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in his desire to eliminate and move on from older Italian politics), identifying in both cases, although on different semantic registers, the responsibility for the economic crisis both in the incompetence of politicians and in the criticism of representative democracy.

Nor was it by chance that even the protests and programmes of many of those who joined the "Stop Austerity" movements moved on to so-called anti-political attitudes, contesting the model of representative democracy rather than economic and financial logics, which transcend the form of government and, even more so, the form of democracy.

The criticism of representative democracy, which originated in doctrines that preceded its historical materialisation and are periodically repeated, were used to group together the protest movements and programmes of post-crisis political parties. This criticism was expressed to different degrees and produced just as many different solutions, ranging from the proposal for radical assembly democracy to that of deliberative democracy, passing through participatory democracy. These models that might all be very different, but were often used interchangeably, their implementation currently linked and entrusted to the potential of the web and the rhetoric of the web as a universal agora. It is now possible to leave aside these differences and note that currently the reasons for the protest against representative democracy have been integrated into the programmes of all political leaders governing post-crisis European countries, also in this case by a process that relegated the most radical and therefore most anti-systemic protests to the world of utopian visions or to the role of disruptors.

Indeed on the one hand, media and political leaders have highlighted the inability of the proposals of the more radical movements (from the Indignados to different 'Occupy' movements) to turn their criticism into workable solutions or have described the violent protests that have regularly emerged in more marginalised places (the Parisian banlieue rather than black neighbourhoods of Baltimore or Detroit) as forms of urban hooliganism. On the other hand, solutions emerged that were able to aggregate electoral support but that paradoxically intensified the democratic deficit and depoliticisation of citizens.

In fact, while the criticism of representative democracy originally emerged as anti-systemic and based on the condemnation of elite professional politicians, of the inefficiency of the decision-making system and its inability to respond to citizens' questions, and of the oligarchic

concentration of powers, these protests were used by many leaders of the protest movements and by politicians to instrumentally justify populism and technocracy respectively, in a socio-economic frame that consolidated, rather than undermined, the oligarchies and the confusion between political, ideological (media), and economic power.

It suffices it to think of the emphasis with which governance practices were spread and the pervasiveness with which the process of disintermediation (namely the process of eliminating intermediate bodies such as parliaments, trade unions, cultural mediators) was invoked at all levels of political decision-making to create, on the example of the Web and often through the instrument of the Web, the immediacy of relationships between leaders and the people, consumers and producers, workers and top managers.

The multiplication of governance processes, based on the involvement of a number of actors, often technical rather than political, has decentralised decision-making processes and move them towards ‘specialised agencies’ not subject to electoral scrutiny or to a democratically pre-defined controls. This has ended up shifting the focus of the political process from the search for shared solutions to the search for epistemic solutions in terms of science and technology. This has however shifted the solution against the democratic deficit from the demand for greater participation of citizens to the claim to further knowledge of the problems and so-called ‘expertise’.

The paternalistic and manipulative aspects of this solution are also evident in the rhetoric of the criticism of parties and parliamentary mediation embodied through populism, which, as we know, entrusts the solutions to political problems to proximity and identification between leader and people.

Technocracy and populism are therefore systemic reactions to originally anti-systemic protests. In particular, the processes of the disintermediation of the decision-making bodies, conveyed through the rhetoric of the Web as a global agora, highlight a reality which is far from embodying processes of participatory democracy. On the contrary, they seem to evolve towards the centralisation of powers in the hands of the leaders of the moment, whether in government or opposition, uninterested respect for the citizens’ opinions, unless we count ‘tweets’ and ‘likes’ as the extent of the participatory process.

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