

MODERN PREREQUISITES OF THE CONCEPT OF CLASS. THE TRANSITION TOWARDS THE CLASS OF WAGE-LABORERS

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses the Western modern prerequisites of class, namely, on the one side a presentation of the social forces and political conjectures that have lead to the formation of modern class. On the other a discussion of some of the elements of Modern political philosophy that have served as an apology or theoretical support to the asymmetric social structures determined by the revolution of the mode of production, namely the transition to capitalism. Modern class is the social expression of an abstraction that has the concrete historical determination of being abstract, such as it is built on the basis of abstract labor (the historically determinate feature of labor of being abstract). Our article has the objective of retracing the intricate relation between the origin of capitalism (the positing of its own condition of possibility and the real subjection of this conditions under the regulative idea of capital, of the law of value) and the social and philosophical movement of troupes that made possible the birth of capitalism, more precisely the co-determination of capital and class. The prolegomena of the concept of class can serve as means for a larger reflection on the nature of social composition and the dialectical relations that bind it to the mode of production.

Keywords: *class, genealogy, Western political theory, property, poverty, capitalism*

The concept of class seems to be making a comeback in the field of critical theory and political philosophy. It has been coined as a sort of 'return of the repressed', by Slavoj Žižek and other critical theorists, as if the political economy of class is something that haunts the collective social unconscious. Our hypothesis is that it was never gone as the social reality it points to has always been there since the beginning of modern capitalism. This paper will examine exactly the social and theoretical formations of Western modernity such as to bring forth the social processes

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and the political theory that contributed to the elaboration of the modern concept of class. In this sense, the return of class is justified by the scholarly endeavour of addressing the blind spot that the demise of class has left behind. Discussing this theoretical 'lapsus', Theodor Adorno links the disappearance of class with the massification of contemporary society - "mass society versus class society"¹ - where social hermeneutics regards the analysis of uniformization, conformism, grouping processes and individual and collective identity constitution.

This mass society or culture industry, as later Adorno will re-frame his concept, represents merely the cultural dissemination of the profit motive, where "the entire practice of the culture industry transfers it naked onto cultural forms"². As discourses on class left the arena of political science, class continued to exist, but as an anonymous "objective form of class"³. Although our societies have always been stratified, class divisions as the main structuring principle of society is a modern phenomenon, class itself being not only one of the effects of capitalist organization, but also a prerequisite for the capitalist system itself. The class system is not identical with social stratification, although class can be the expression of a specific type of stratification, but one that is grounded on the concept of inter and infra-class relations rather than merely focusing on hierarchies, differences and inequalities.

The theory of social stratification is complementary to the theory of class, but the two must not be confused, moreover, "such categories of stratification may render class invisible altogether"⁴. The form of categorization that class describes and criticizes has a specific historical and systemic determination, being traversed by and overlapping occasionally with other categories of social stratification and social differentiation, while retaining its particular specificity. Our approach to class is not a 'gradational' one, but a structural and historical one, "the definition of class meant to be objective, independent of indices derived directly from the lives of their subjects, however, much such indices may express a series of objective social realities"⁵. Although differences in income, education, status, property can function as an indication of the heterogeneity between classes, but also inside the same class, they tell us very little about the *form* of class as such and about *historical* determination of this form.

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Reflections on Class Theory*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 99

² Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry. Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, Routledge Press, London & New York 1991, p. 98

³ Theodor Adorno, *Reflections on Class Theory*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 97

⁴ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E. P. Thompson and His Critics*, in *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 9, 1982, p. 60

⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Late Capitalism Or Industrial Society?*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 112

As relevant empirical indicators, they are “generalizations of findings about single individuals and in this sense subjective”⁶, whereas the conceptual force of class derives from its structural-objective characteristics. The importance of such grounding lies in the social models that is taken as a general reference point. The political economy of class is founded on a structural approach to society itself, which can be translated as the critique of the structural laws that regulate and limit, historically, the (contradictory) development of society. For Marx, in the interpretation of the Frankfurt School, the three main laws were the law of value, the law of accumulation and the law of the recurrence of economic crises an effect of the well-known Marxist law of the tendency of the falling rate of profit. In this sense, at a structural level the theory of class merges with the theory of surplus value, thus coming into its truth as a social form-effect of the law of value, with the consequent “prohibitive difficulties of explaining the formation of classes objectively in the absence of a theory of surplus value”⁷.

Unlike gender, ethnicity, religious orientation, etc., class is not an identity and cannot be treated starting from cultural formations or various politics of difference. The political economy of class represents an inquiry into the process of class formation, the social objective factors of class situation and class condition, and later through the medium of political praxis a reflection on class representation, problematically defined as class consciousness. The distinction between class situation and class is tributary to the research of E. P. Thomson that distinguishes the two in order to account for the “contradictory historical process by which in determinate historical conditions, the former (class situation) gives rise to the latter (class)”⁸. Class cannot be confused with the relations of production, as it cannot be conceived as an effect of the mere relations of distribution. We use the concept of class as a dialectical one in which the historically material conditions of existence are determined by the structural laws of the capitalist system. We understand class as a concrete *abstraction*, class as a *thing*, “as an abstraction (scientific idealization, but also a lived abstraction as well)”⁹ - a categorical and relational form of representation that articulates a concrete social reality, one which allows a critical reflection on the structural and historical causes of socioeconomic inequality, the origins and determinants of social conflict and injustice¹⁰.

⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Late Capitalism Or Industrial Society?*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 112

⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Late Capitalism Or Industrial Society?*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 115

⁸ Apud., Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E. P. Thompson and His Critics*, in *Studies in Political Economy*, Vol. 9, 1982, p. 52

⁹ G. M. Tamas, *Telling the Truth About Class*, in ed. Leo Panich and Colin Leys, *Socialist Register: Telling the Truth*, MR press, 2006, p. 16

¹⁰ Apud., James J. Carrier and Don Kalb ed., *Anthropologies of Class. Power, Practice and Inequality*, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 37-38

The emphasis is on both these terms, concrete and abstract at the same time, but also objectivity and subjective (mis)representation. Abstraction, because it is an objective category, a form of conceptualization, a syllogism that links the relational antagonism that constitutes class with economic exploitation and profit extraction and creation. Concrete because it is a real existing social form that although has the determination of being abstract, generates and determines class-related subjective (mis)representations. A purely abstract concept of class would be merely a metaphysical concept of class. Being a dialectical concept, class expresses the real historically existent relations of power, domination and inequality, as Adorno puts it discussing the relationship between class and facts, it is “the concept of their relation to the present state of exploitation, which is contained in all factual material and determines it”¹¹.

Class determines and is determined by socioeconomic conditions, by means of a prior capitalist class structure that produces and reproduces this classification. As it concept it holds a trap: indeed, it represents for critical theory a valuable vantage point from which a critique of capitalist society can be uttered, but this critique it not complete unless class itself becomes an object of critique. Concretely, the use of class for social science must not convert into a naturalization or an unhistorical approach to class itself. Being an expression of a structural injustice, class can be used to render this injustice visible, but must not become an obstacle in the way of its critique.

In the case of class, the genealogy of the concept can offer the best indication of its critical force and object, therefore a prerequisite of its systemic and social constitution should be relevant to the ongoing debate regarding this contested concept. Moreover, such an inquiry would shed light on the historical and theoretical foundations of the concept of class, as it would later be theorized by Marx and other political philosophers or political economists. The contemporary uses of the concept of class are tributary to a modern framework of constitution, simultaneously in a historical, but also analytic sense. Modern enlightened class societies were born out of the negation of estates, corporations and all the other pre-modern forms of social division and classification, at least in the Western world. The origin of this process is the specific revolutionary change of paradigm starting in the English countryside as early as the sixteenth century and in the Dutch commercial-port cities that took place and came to be known as the birth of capitalism and modern class, “class is unique to capitalist society; a structural feature of the system; belonging to a class being a condition legally and socially, open to anybody”¹². Social classes, as we will see in this paper, rest on different social and economic foundations than the ones that permitted the constitution of estates, corporations, relations of vassality or sovereignty.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno, *Reflections on Class Theory*, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 101

¹² G. M. Tamas, *Telling the Truth About Class*, in ed. Leo Panich and Colin Leys, *Socialist Register: Telling the Truth*, MR press, 2006, p. 17

In a certain sense and especially in the Western world modern class was also the negation of the pre-modern types of relations of power, subordination and exploitation. A specific set of social relationships – class relations, determined by a particular form of social mediation – commodity form, became the surface expression of a deeper structural configuration. A new form of systemic contradiction determines and fuels social conflict, as the discourse upon inequality concentrates upon the polarizing force of capital and class and the social and historical effects of this polarization. Modern theory can help us understand why class is not an interchangeable concept easily replaceable with any other according to philosophical fashions *du jour*, why it is not that simple to just get rid of it. It also explains why larger reflections upon modernity come to impact class as much as failed experiments of socialism in Eastern Europe do, for example. Postmodernist rejections of class walk hand in hand with many ado-s about the end of modernity as post-structuralisms, post-foundationalism, post-modernisms dispute over new beginnings of history that proved to be just as many returns of the same old. A prerequisite of class imposes itself out of both theoretical cautiousness, but also out of the necessity of understanding not only theoretically, but also historically the conceptualization and the social mediation that class expresses. The common ground for understanding modernity gravitates around a few core points that seem to be shared by all, modernists, antimodernists and postmodernists alike. In this common narrative modernity represents a “composite of economic, political, and cultural characteristics, uniting capitalism (what classical political economist liked to call a 'commercial society'), legal rational political authority (perhaps, but not necessarily, with a preference for its liberal democratic form), and technological progress – or 'rationalization' in its various aspects as manifest in markets, states, secularism and scientific knowledge”¹³.

However, the actual realization of modernity, in terms of causes, the various processes of transitions and transformation of social modes of production forms a continuous object of quarrel among various philosophical and historical schools. Given our conceptual purpose, namely the genealogy of class, we will employ the historical reconstructions of modernity put forward by the school of contemporary historical political Marxism: Ellen Meiskins Wood, Robert Brenner and others. With their help, we'll show how class is in fact a modern problem, as the reality it predicates about was born out of the modern advent of capitalism and the relations and forces of production that it has liberated, negating the feudal

¹³ Ellen Meiskins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 2

*parcellization of sovereignty*¹⁴ and the use of extra-economical modes for extracting surplus-labour. Moreover, the historical reconstruction of the birth of class can also shed light on the typically modern process of the separation between the political sphere and the economic one, between the state and the market.

This idea will receive one of its first philosophical expression in Locke's writings about government and liberty, where liberal conceived liberty is foremost understood as "freedom from the intervention of government into private affairs, especially concerning property, unless citizens consent to it"¹⁵. Although, we speak of Western modernity, we must always keep in mind that this term designates a process that did not happen simultaneously and in the same way for the European states. The situation complicates further as we can accept the existence of various *Enlightenments* as so many forms of political articulations of specific historic conditions as far as the European diversity goes: "we may speak with caution about a 'European Enlightenment' ranging from Portugal to Russia, and from Ireland to Sicily [...], but even if we allow for an inclusive 'European' culture of Enlightenment, this cannot dispose of major contextual differences, such as those between French absolutism and English capitalism, which engendered different conceptions of equality and liberty and left very different political legacies"¹⁶.

As the scope of our inquiry regards the constitution of class, we will concentrate more on the rise of capitalism and class in England, while addressing the impacts this transformation has had upon other European states. Moreover, the emphasis on class and the specific historical character of capitalism, will rest on a refutation of linear maturation of various stages of European modes of production that wish to establish a continuity line that starts with the earliest Florentine merchant passing through the medieval burgher, the enlightened bourgeois to arrive finally at the industrial capitalist. What gets lost in this narrative is "a perception of the capitalist

¹⁴ Parcellization of sovereignty is a phrase usually used by historians in order to describe a specific feudal configuration of power and privilege and property, an indistinctness of all social spheres from the political one, concisely explained as a: "network of competing jurisdictions, bound together – when not in open conflict – by a complex apparatus of legal and contractual relations, meant that the the boundaries of the 'political' were ill-defined and fluid. The main political agent was not the individual citizen, but the possessor of some kind of secular or ecclesiastical jurisdiction, or a corporate entity with its own legal rights, a degree of autonomy and often a charter defining its relations to other corporations and superior powers" (Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 19)

¹⁵ Mark Blyth, *Austerity. The History of a Dangerous Idea*, Oxford University Press, New York 2013, p. 106

¹⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 292

market as a specific social form, the product of a dramatic historical rupture [...] the imperative of accumulation and profit maximization, which is rooted in the very specific social-property relations and which creates its own very specific drive to improve labour-productivity by technical means”¹⁷.

There is a historically significant rupture between capitalist and non-capitalist societies and the theories that point towards a natural and quasi-teleological advent of capitalism are not only historically inaccurate, but also complicit to naturalizing unhistorical accounts of capitalism. For this exact reason, we can neither speak of a historical, linear, non-contradictory, simply progressive maturation of class (societies). Progress it of course undeniable, but what is contested is the linear continuous character of this social and economic progress, a narrative that absconds the antagonist, discontinuous and contradictory nature of social and economic transformation through a long series of revolutions of the social structure and classes.

Because (agrarian) capitalism and its specific class structure¹⁸ were born in England we will try to offer a concise account of the development of this process and the way it differentiated itself from other versions of modern theory, state-practice and philosophy across the continent.

It was no historical oddity that classical political economy was primarily an English affair, moreover, political economy as a theoretical edifice both sustained and defended the needs of a new mode of production – the capitalist one, as it is argued also by the reputed historian scholar E. M. Wood: “where French science in the eighteenth century typically answered the needs of the state, English science, even a century earlier, was already answering the needs of property, and property in an

¹⁷ Ed. Larry Patriquin, *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader*, Haymarket Books, Chicago 2013, p. 227

¹⁸ The transition from feudalism to capitalism has been always the object of heated debate between historians, political economists, but also political philosophers. In the 1950, the American Journal *Science and Society* was the starting point of a discussion about this transition between Paul Sweezy and Maurice Dobb. In the issue no. 70 of the *Past and Present* Journal, Robert Brenner picks up this prior debate and publishes an article entitled “Agrarian Class-Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe”. This article will spark a heated debate, that came to be known as the Brenner debate, in the journal *New Left Review* in 1977. Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank were the opponents of Brenner’s thesis that argued in favor of an agrarian pre-industrial English capitalism and its specific class structure and imperative for productivity as the origin of capitalism, whereas Frank put forward his theory of the development of underdevelopment and Wallerstein a sort of critique of globalization and global systemic approach to capitalism. Brenner’s arguments are convincing and so were his counter-arguments against Wallerstein and Gunder. For a detailed discussion of the topic see T. H. Aston (ed.), *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class-Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe*, Cambridge University Press 1985 and Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977

increasingly capitalist form”¹⁹.

However, the philosophical issues raised by the modern interest in equality and liberty, reflections crystallized in various treaties about the just form of government and social organization, together with theories of individual forms of liberty and rights - the birth of modern citizen - posed great difficulties along the road of adapting dutifully to the specific set of economic inequalities, later translated as social injustices, that formed a part of the capitalist culture and organization. A series of antinomies haunted the English treaties about natural right and natural equality, as again E. M. Wood ironically remarks: “the English were especially creative in constructing a theoretical justification of inequality on a foundation of natural equality”²⁰. How exactly was (working) class born in England?

In the seventeenth century, the English situation regarding the property of lands displayed a large concentration of land in the hand of a few wealthy proprietors, which relied on the purely economic appropriation of profit upon the labour of their *tenant* farmers. The search for new means of increasing productivity in agriculture was driven by market-economic competitiveness in the empire.

The structure of English agrarian capitalism resembled a triad of hierarchical relations of appropriating profit upon labour involving solely economic means of profit extraction and appropriation. The dissolution of serfdom and entrenched peasant property in England paved the way towards “application of fixed capital and cooperative labour (especially in agriculture), in the presence of already favourable social-productive class relations”²¹.

At the top of the economic hierarchy, we have the large landowners, in the middle, the capitalist *free* farmer tenants and on the lower strata, the *free* working men these tenants employed. The economic agrarian structure was central for the development of English capitalism that profited by both the introduction of productivity standards in agricultural practice and the market-orientated production of these practices, but also from the steady industrial growth throughout the period. Moreover, the increases of productivity in agriculture have managed to insure the support of larger number of people off land and their subsequent employment in manufacturing and the new industries, free all as they were from land and other properties. The

¹⁹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 300

²⁰ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 307

²¹ Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977, p. 76

first proletarians were actually free peasants without land and money, having only their labour force to sell. As Perry Anderson states, the process of modern class formation regarded precisely the “whole historical process whereby heterogeneous groups of artisans, small holders, agricultural labourers, domestic workers and casual poor were gradually assembled, distributed and reduced to the condition of labour subsumed to capital, first in the formal dependence of the wage-contract, ultimately in the real dependence of integration into mechanized means of production”²². The social and economic configuration of class has changed significantly since then, but class itself still remains a valid category for social research.

Going back to early modern England, the relations between the landed gentry and the crown were shaped by the mutual warranty of the domain of power, a bargain that offered military sovereign power to the crown, in exchange of protection of private property rights. However, the situation was not without conflicts as “the more the propertied classes came to depend on economic exploitation, the less they could tolerate a state that continued to act in the traditional ways of a feudal monarchy”²³. In this context, for example, the Cromwellian (counter) revolution was possible. The English civil war 1642 – 1651 that culminated with a parliamentary victory settled a new balance between Parliament and Crown on the one side, and the labouring multitude of property-less people on the other. Out of the turmoil of the civil war came out few political theories ranging from English republicanism to the radicalism of Levellers political activism. In 1645, the pamphlet's *England's Miserie and Remedie* message was that “the people were sovereign – not Parliament, not some other representatives of the people, not the 'people' in the mythical corporate form, but the people as popular multitude”²⁴. The question of property and lack of was heavily debated and contested, especially under the aspect of associating private property with political and social privilege.

The main problem that these debates put forward was the dangerous social inequality that the right of property could engender and its incompatibility with the theory of natural rights of self-government relying on a notion of freedom centred on the self-property of every man of its person. The two main intellectual figures associated with the historical epoch under discussion are Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. We will mainly refer to the latter, as his ideas laid the foundations for the English

²² Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, NLB& Verso Press, London 1980, p. 33

²³ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 220

²⁴ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 233

apology of private property – as “not *things* but *rights*, right in or to things”²⁵ - and the social inequality that it produced: “Locke sets out to demonstrate that property itself does indeed exist by right of nature, and he not only denies that the notion of natural right represents a threat to the existence of social order, but even finds a way of turning the concept on natural right to the defence of property and inequality”²⁶. All of this is relevant in the larger context of the creation of (working class) as any social structure of inequality and domination must be backed by a political theory that prepares its defence and justification.

All the subsequent theories of class, even the most contemporary ones, refer to determination of a class position by means of property, and the juridical edifice that holds just such a form of social classification. To understand the power

²⁵ C. B. MacPherson, *Property. Mainstream and Critical Positions*, Basil Blackwell Oxford Press, 1978, p. 2 The text also offers a concise account of the shifting meaning of property and the conceptual confusions it has created. We must first of all understand that property makes reference to a right or a claim upon a thing and it is not a mere possession of a thing. Moreover, there are various types of properties that either overlap or exclude themselves according to social laws and customs in different historical periods. We may identify three major types of property: private, common and corporate. MacPherson defines property as “a right in the sense of an enforceable claim to some use or benefit of something, whether it is a right to share in some common resource, or an individual right in some particular things; what distinguishes property from mere momentarily possession is that property is a claim that will be enforced by society or the state, by custom or convention or law” (C. B. MacPherson, *Property. Mainstream and Critical Positions*, Basil Blackwell Oxford Press, 1978, p. 3). Property is not the same thing with private property. It is a right that must not be conceived as a morally just right. Moreover, MacPherson makes also evident the political foundation of the right of property as an enforceable claim that politicized the relations between the member of the society. Property works as a mechanism of either exclusion as in the case of private property or as a right of non-exclusion in the case of the common one. A special case is corporate private property that rests on the same mechanism of exclusion. The significant rupture in the history of understanding property is brought about by the extension and the creation of the capitalist market, “the more freely and pervasively the market operated, it appears that things themselves, not just rights to them, that were exchanged on the market. In fact, the difference was not that things rather than right in things were exchanged, but that previously unsaleable rights *in* things were now saleable; [...] limited and not saleable right to things were being replaced by virtually unlimited and saleable rights *to* things” (Idem., pp. 7-8). The thesis of MacPherson is very strong as it implies that the capitalist market needs to maintain this confusion between property as right and property as a thing. His observations serve also as an argument in the favor of the discontinuity thesis between pre-modern non-capitalist modes of production and modern capitalist mode of production, which we are also relying on in constructing the case for the specificity of class as a social capitalist classification form. For a longer discussion about the relation between property and market-capitalism, but also its connection to liberalism, see also the essay *Liberal Democracy and Property*, pp. 199-207 from the already quoted text, but also C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism (Hobbes to Locke)*, Oxford University Press 1962

²⁶ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 263

relations that class relations engender, a reflection on the nature of property is required. In this sense, the work of John Locke weight heavily in the history of class constitution, given also the fact that a class situation the first expression of differences in property, in both a quantitative and qualitative sense.

Locke operates with a chain of premises and conclusions in order to sustain the constitution of property and its subsequent implication upon civil society and social order in general, his theory representing the first occurrence of a case for “and individual right for (un)limited appropriation”²⁷. The first modern presupposition, a principle of civil society grounded in the doctrine of natural right, is the propriety upon one's person. This makes one's labour the subjective grounded source of any other type of property, more precisely, property over things, that translates as a private use of things, limited by the Lockean rule of “every man should have as much as he can make use of”²⁸. One's labour acts as a social rightful claim to 'laboured' private property by an individual. Labour creates property on the ground of a sort of ontological *dictum* of industriousness and common good, “[God] gave [land] to the use of the industrious and rational (and labour was his title to it), not to the fancy or covetousness of the quarrelsome and contentious”²⁹. This particular choice of words attests to a utilitarian and, *avant la lettre* instrumental, model of reason and rational social behaviour, which tries to combine an original natural state of commonly hold property over land and goods with private property, thus amounting to a juridical apology of individual appropriation of the commons and the subsequent enclosure of the latter.

There is an initial duality in Locke's understanding in the original natural state that starts from the presupposition of two divine gifts to mankind: earth and reason. The problem that arises is how to divide and allow the creation of the institution of property on that which is held in common, all this without the consent of the community. The mediation of labour serves and solves this first predicament, as “the labour of his body, and the work of his hands are properly his; whatsoever he removes out of the state that nature hath provided, he hath mixed his labour with, and joined it to something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property”³⁰. The second clause is aided by the social use of reason to the best advantage of life and convenience, thus in *productive* and non-wasteful manner. The limits of property are bound by enjoyment, or the interdiction of waste. No man can posses more than he has need for, because

²⁷ C. B. MacPherson, *Property. Mainstream and Critical Positions*, Basil Blackwell Oxford Press, 1978, p. 13

²⁸ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 115

²⁹ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 114

³⁰ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, pp. 111-112

otherwise things would go to waste and he would violate the principle of social rational use of things. Inside the limits of this rule, no consent from other fellow individual is needed in order to claim a property over something, once one's labour hath been mixed with it.

However, modern society and modern capitalist accumulation will later rest, and it already did, in (early) England on accumulation of capital or money hoarding a particular form of property that needs a specific justification. At this point Locke's theory of money comes into play, as money hoarding does not violate the principle of waste, having no negative impact upon the lives of other individuals, "the invention of money, and the tacit agreement of men to put value on it, introduced (by consent) larger possessions, and a right to them"³¹. Money do not go to waste, nor do they rot or deteriorate. With the creation of money, the construction of the theory of private property upon the basis of a natural common property reaches its apex. Moreover, once the difference in property that money introduces becomes established the initial grounding of property into labour becomes superfluous, as money can command more right to property than labour ever could. At the same time both forms of possession have acquired a legal status that makes socially equivalent the exchange of labour with money and the consequent buying of one's private labour in exchange of a market price that will later allow for the appropriation of this labour by the private proprietor of money and not of labour. *Avant la lettre*, Locke writes the sentence of Capital "for it is labour indeed that puts the difference of value on everything"³².

The contradictions of this situation will gain a central exposition in Marx's theory and in the social grounding of the concept of class as it will traverse the entire social theory of class until the present time. In this particular optic, the Lockean theory is of importance not only to modern classical political theory, but also for the current understanding of social inequality and the juridical foundations of property. Once Locke has established that money offer a way out of the limits of the rule of property, by allowing a harmless hoarding of wealth, an expression of "partage of things in an inequality of private possessions"³³, compatible with the limits of society and acceptable as a derivation of consensus of bestowing values upon gold and silver, he concludes prophetically "for in governments, the laws regulate the right to property and the possession of land is determined by positive constitution"³⁴.

³¹ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 115

³² John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 117

³³ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 121

³⁴ John Locke, *Two Treaties of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Ian Shapiro ed., Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 121

One main problem with the Lockean argument of justifying property is that it starts from an apology of property inside a 'things of consumption' related argument and it finishes with the justification of private property over capital and labour, two registers that should be kept separate as the two domains of validity do not overlap: "Locke was the prime offender in this respect. [...] His influence was so considerable that the illogic of his position had still to be pointed out, in the twentieth century by Morris Cohen, though earlier writers, from Rousseau on, had made the point that property is power and so it is at the heart of political question"³⁵. The debate upon the conceptual and social genealogy of property does not end in the with the classical authors of modernity, as it still enjoys a privileged place in the current debates around poverty and the role of the state, but also on the class nature of state and legal system. However, although property is a constitutive element of class and class position, it does not immediately imply that class revolves merely around the difference of property over the means of production, as most of the Marxist Orthodox scholars hold. Lack of property or negation of claims or rights over the means of production is an objective fact pertaining to the condition of wage-labourers, but class does not overlap completely with this statement of fact, as its critical and analytic sphere goes beyond the limits of property by which it is in fact juridically constituted.

We will continue our discussion on Locke with some considerations regarding a less known essay of his, namely *On the Poor Law and the Working Schools* dating from 1697, where he engages in a discussion of poverty providing us with one of the first moral condemnation of poverty and reconfirming his principles of industriousness as a moral value not only an economic one. Poverty and the poor are treated as a burden on the society, an evil that must be dealt with, "His majesty having been pleased by his commission to require us particularly to consider of some proper methods for setting on work and employing the poor of this kingdom, and making them useful to the public, and thereby easing others of that burden"³⁶. The rich classes are described as virtuous and productive, while on the side of poverty we have "relaxation of discipline and corruption of manners [...] [constant companions] vice and idleness"³⁷. One of the solution for the redemption of poverty, proposed by Locke, was also the creation of working schools where children from three to fourteen years should be put to work, in order for the labour not to be wasted and thus becoming useful for society. An inquiry in the real social and economic causes of this inequality gap is completely absent from the above quoted essay that resembles more a condemnation

³⁵ C. B. MacPherson, *Property. Mainstream and Critical Positions*, Basil Blackwell Oxford Press, 1978, p. 12

³⁶ John Locke, *Political Essays in Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, 'An Essay on The Poor Law', p. 183

³⁷ John Locke, *Political Essays in Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, 'An Essay on The Poor Law', p. 184

than a plea for a new social policy. Locke's theory of property remains a landmark in political thought, because it also entails a "redefinition of the political sphere"³⁸. It marked a transition of the relations of domination from the political sphere to the political one, after the landed propertied classes in England have managed to push for the creation and the protection of a juridical system that guarantees the right to private property over capital and land.

This is how it happened that by the time the civil and political rights got extended the non-egalitarian economic relations were also fully constituted and legally enforced. Later, this differentiation between the economic and the political sphere within capitalism will amount to a comprehensive and holistic view of society arranged according to sets of norms covering two distinct normative regimes, one that regarded the citizen and the other that concerned the proprietor: "the 'laws' of supply and demand, the production and the distribution of goods, or the formation of wages and prices, could for the purpose of economic science be treated as impersonal mechanisms; and human beings in the economic sphere could be perceived as abstract factors of production, whose relations to each other very different from the relations of power, domination and subordination that defined the political sphere"³⁹. Egalitarian political doctrines have since walked hand in hand with the reality of unequal distribution and production of wealth, serving as a critique of this reality from a normative standpoint or acting as a justification.

Central to Locke's theory of property was his principle of 'improvement', as labour improves the things it finds in nature rendering them with socially useful, a higher productivity that benefits the owner, but also society in general. The discourse about productivity that starts with Locke, but it can also be found in other English political theorists and political economists, was a part of a larger trend that was found its culmination in "the explosion in the seventeenth century of a body of literature devoted to improving agricultural practices"⁴⁰. The stakes were far from being merely intellectual as some theories were engaged in offering a response to the needs of a new economic system in the making. The importance of increases in productivity for market capitalist competition relates to the quest, initially in the form of English agrarian practices, of lower production cost and hence the augmentation of the relative extraction of surplus value, or profit: "under capitalism, surplus is systematically achieved for the first time through increases of labour productivity, leading to the cheapening of goods and a greater total output from a given labour force (with a given working day,

³⁸ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 315

³⁹ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 316

⁴⁰ Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 299

intensity of labour and real wage)⁴¹. The Lockean concept of improvement came later to have a very specific sense, namely productivity for profit, or a profitable use of property through labour, that ultimately came to “turn even the most egalitarian ideas into justification of dispossession”⁴², thus finally amounting to a division of society into classes of proprietors and classes of the propertyless.

On these foundations the English idea of progress was born and it had very little to do with, for example, the ideals of French Condorcean progress and emancipation of humanity. In this context, we need not be surprised by Adam Ferguson's (*Essay on the history of Civil Society*, 1767) historical division between a 'rude' stage of a nation that predates the creation of the institution of property and the subsequent division of labour - “by the separation of arts and professions, the sources of wealth are laid open; every species of material is wrought up to the greatest perfection, and every commodity is produced in the greatest abundance”⁴³ - in its path to refinement, culminating in the possibility of sustaining progress only through the realization of the commercial society. The commercial society, although for the Scottish author the highest stage of development, is not without internal and external threats, as these societies are ravaged by inequality a structural effect of commerce: “the principal objections to democratic or popular government are taken from the inequalities which arise among men in the result of commercial art”⁴⁴.

The poor classes, are not only on the outskirts of society, but they represent, for Adam Ferguson, a species pertaining to a prior stage of social development - “we refer to such *classes* as to an image of what our species must have been in its rude and uncultivated state”⁴⁵. In this case, the establishment of property represent a form of exclusion not only social, but also human, marking a difference between two stages of human development, as a sort of natural selection, whose conventional character has been conveniently and complicity forgotten. The poor live merely for subsistence and preservation hence being excluded on this ground from any legitimate claim of the right to participate in the political life, their situation and social position attesting merely the fact that “the exaltation of the few must depress the many”⁴⁶. We discussed Adam Ferguson's view of social class only to

⁴¹ Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977, p. 30

⁴² Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Liberty and Property. A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment*, Verso, London 2012, p. 308

⁴³ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. By Fania Oz-Salzberger for Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 173

⁴⁴ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. By Fania Oz-Salzberger for Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 178

⁴⁵ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. By Fania Oz-Salzberger for Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 177

⁴⁶ Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. By Fania Oz-Salzberger for Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1995, p. 177

point the violent and the stigmatic character that this classification has had since its origin, a sort of moral condemnation, but also to reveal its structural connection with the rise of a new economic system, a specific apologetic rhetoric that defended the upper strata of society, while accusing and condemning the lower strata. The relevance of these modern authors goes beyond the sphere of political philosophy, as their writings attest also the birth of a new economic system and a new web of social relations and social mediation. The contemporary concept of class is partially tributary and partly a reaction to modern theories both of political economy and political philosophy.

As early as the seventeenth century, both French and English political economist constructed various forms of social division into classes, using as a criteria the economic role played by these classes. In the context, for example, the Physiocrats based their argumentation on large-scale agricultural capitalism and the social structure that backed it. Thus, Quesnay acknowledges the existence of three major social classes, constituted and relevant exactly in relation to their economic function, namely the class of landowners, the productive class (the farmers), both counter-posed by the urban industrial commercial population (*sterile* in the Physiocrat doctrine, that gave precedence to production realized in agriculture, that completely backed and sustained any development in the industry). Quesnay's classification is completed by Turgot's who recognized five relevant social classes: proprietors, capitalist farmers, agricultural workmen, industrial capitalists and industrial workmen.⁴⁷ The work of mapping and fully explaining the social and economic determination of the industrial proletariat will fall on the shoulders of later political economists that will have dealt primarily with the industrial working class in the aftermath of the advent of the Industrial Revolution. However, even in the Early Modern political economy we can clearly notice a new mechanism of social division constituted by the apparition of wage-labour and the prior separation of large masses of people from the rural means of their subsistence.

As we stated in the beginning of this paper, the birth of *modern* class is cogent with the birth and development of capitalism. Understanding the true nature of class will shed some light on the way we can use it to criticize social injustice, but it will also show why it must also be turned into an object of critique. Class analysis rests on a structural model of analysing social and economic dynamics. The reason for this is that class it has never been merely a form of social division, nor does it simply represent a new category for classifying groups of people starting from differences in income, shares in profit, relation to the means of production or subaltern relations of power and domination. To put it concisely, and following Robert Brenner's research, we can argue that the class-system represents the social deployment of capitalistic conditions of development, classes being the social backbone of the economic system, class relations and the relation between labour and capital sustain the economic model

⁴⁷ Isaac Ilich Rubin, *A History of Economic Thought*, Ink Link Press, New York 1979, pp. 117-118

that created them, as much as the later reproduces them for its own survival. The general commodification of labour and capital and the class system that sustains it gain analytic primacy in relation to mercantile or market-centred approaches to capitalist analysis “the class-structured system of reproduction in which labour power is a commodity lies behind the capitalist development, while 'production for profit in the market' cannot in itself determine the development of productive forces”⁴⁸.

This approach that differs significantly from Wallerstein's, Sweezy's or Gunther's perspective (all three indebted to a neo-Smithian approach to economics), but also previously Smithian theory of market forces determination powers, does not only offer an account of capitalism's origin, but also connects historically and analytically the problem of class with the apparition and the development of this system. Class thus exits the domain of critical sociology or anthropology, becoming a category of (critical) political economy and political philosophy: “the historical problems of the origins of capitalist economic development in relation to pre-capitalist modes of production becomes that of the origin of the property/surplus extraction system (*class system*) of free wage labour – the historical process by which labour power and the means of production become commodities”⁴⁹.

In this historical account, the role of class situation and structure relates to the social mapping of economic opening or foreclosure of economic development and social mobility, “by conditioning the structure of income distribution and social demand and thereby the distribution of labour-power and the means of production”⁵⁰. In this sense class is not only a form of social classification, but also an economic form of leverage that adjusts capital's needs of valorisation and increased productivity. Class structure cannot be reduced or explained away by mechanisms of economic determination of society, thus as an inherent capitalist mechanism that serves purely economic ends, because while sustaining the social reproduction of capitalist conditions, class structure is a “direct and necessary (social) expression of the economy as a whole”⁵¹.

We retained relevant the discussion of this early modern process of class-making and the political theories that accompanied this process, firstly because it serves as a good starting point for understanding the re-conceptualization of class in Marx's or Weber's writings (as in fact the entire tradition of the classical elaboration of class in a way or another makes reference to the social processes and political theory

⁴⁸ Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977, p. 33

⁴⁹ Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977, p. 33

⁵⁰ Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977, p. 38

⁵¹ Robert Brenner, *The Origins of Capitalist Development. A critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*, in *New Left Review*, 1/104, July-August 1977, p. 51

discussed above), and secondly, because it represents a historical perspective of the modern specificity of class, beyond narratives of purely economic determinism. Also, such a historical account of the creation of modern class renders intelligible the fact that class is intrinsically something that it was *made or made up by*, rather than a simple *is*, thus immediately shifting the perspective away from any forms of essential-ism or substantial-ism, towards a structural or categorical approach within a specific historical context. As E. P. Thompson argues: “making, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making”⁵².

⁵² E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Vintage Books, New York 1966, p. 9