Article

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Social classes and subaltern groups: Theoretical distinction and political application

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Abstract
The purpose of this article is to draw a theoretical distinction between the notions of 'social classes' and 'subaltern groups' as defined in *The Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci. This distinction will involve a brief discussion about the notions of 'social classes' evolved by other key authors in the area, apart from Gramsci himself, such as Marx, D. Bensaïd, E. P. Thompson and N. Poulantzas, who, on this question, have close affinities with the ideas of Gramsci. Finally, I seek to make suggestions about how this distinction can be applied, together with some critical observations on 'Subaltern Studies' and some final considerations with regard to this article as a whole.

Keywords
Antonio Gramsci, class struggle, social classes, subaltern groups

Introduction

The aim of this article is to outline, in its essential features, the way in which Gramsci relates the concept of 'social classes' to that of 'subaltern groups' and how this link can be applied to a political analysis of the force relations within a given capitalist social formation. The first part sets out the criteria and methods employed by Gramsci for investigating the subaltern groups and explores what bearing this analysis has on the notion of social classes and with the levels of structure and superstructure. In this first part, I will also examine more closely the theoretical and political aspects of the

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distinction and/or common features between the concepts of 'social classes' and 'subaltern groups' in Gramsci. The second part will draw on some of the main authors concerned with the issue of social classes who have some affinity with the concepts of Gramsci, such as Bensaïd, Thompson and Poulantzas. The purpose of this is to illustrate how the Gramscian concept of social classes, to some extent, directly echoes the key authors who have developed a strictly dialectical perspective of classes. As an example of the application of these features of distinction and proximity, I will conduct a brief critical discussion that will involve assimilating these Gramscian concepts (as expressed in 'Subaltern Studies'). This article will conclude with some final observations regarding this study.

Social classes and subaltern groups

The underlying assumption of this study (and which I believe to be a common feature of Gramsci and the authors that will be examined in the next section) is that social classes are not empirical groups confined to a particular time or space or simply a set of individuals who are located in a particular position in the material production process of society.[1] In conducting a political analysis of classes and fundamental social relations in the social capitalist formation, I have chosen a path that offers an escape route from the watertight dichotomy of the 'State' *versus* 'civil society'. This dichotomy that sees in the latter an organic, independent and autonomous social dimension that is set against a 'political society' eliminates the dialectical wholeness with regard to these levels of force that was renewed by Gramsci. How should the question of social classes and subaltern groups be addressed when this wholeness is taken into account? In Gramsci, the separation between 'political society' and 'civil society' is a methodological procedure that allows new levels of force relations to be located in society.

Gramsci adopts three kinds of approach for studying subalterns: (a) devising a methodology for subaltern historiography, (b) examining the production process in itself with regard to the history of subaltern classes and (c) adopting a political strategy of transformation based on the historical development and existence of subalterns. By means of this threefold approach, Gramsci created a nexus where a variety of Gramsci's concepts converge (Green 2007: 202). For this reason, it is only recently that the category of the 'subaltern' seems to have been studied in greater depth by researchers of Gramsci's works after a time when he was the victim of constant misunderstandings and 'improper' appropriations. In this case, perhaps a part of the explanation (at least in the anglophone world) lies in the fact that a significant proportion of the works are based on what was, for a considerable period of time, a single translation of the *Notebooks*, in fact a selection of articles compiled by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, in 1971 (New York: International Publishers, 1971). Green (2007) explains that

> the selection only contains some of Gramsci's notes about subalterns and from the time when these notes were included in a section where some notes are concerned with the Risorgimento, with the title *Notes on Italian History.* It can be believed that Gramsci's interest in subalterns, as a concept, was closely linked to his study of the Risorgimento, whereas in fact the author's interest in subalterns lay within his comprehensive analysis of Italian history, politics and

> culture, as well as the relationship between the State and civil society in Italy. Based on the notes included in this selection, it is not evident or conceivable that Gramsci could have written many ideas about subalterns or that he had devoted an entire notebook to this concept. (p. 199)

To some extent, this has harmed the precise comprehension that 'subalternity' is a heterogeneous condition of social groups that include both classes and non-classes (politically and socially marginalized groups that are scattered and disaggregated) and, since as Baratta (2011) points out, it is an enhancement of Marxist categories. There are several 'degrees' or 'levels' of subalternity, as Gramsci shows us. The most 'advanced' require political unification as social classes. Hence, the importance of the distinction between 'subaltern social groups' as an abstract category and 'subaltern social classes' as a historical phenomenon for the political unification of the determined subalterns fractions. Thus, according to Baratta (2011), 'the "subaltern" category is stratified in a way that must be taken into account to avoid falling into predetermined abstractions' (p. 157).

The study of classes and subaltern groups through a Gramscian lens is a praxis that leads from historiography to political science. An examination of the subaltern conditions of past and present lives can clarify the traditional and current alternatives for the systematic aggregation of classes and groups or in other words, the possibility of becoming *parties in a struggle for hegemony*. The *possibilities* let us be clear. There is not always a revolutionary alternative available and when it does exist, the circumstances for taking advantage of it will depend on what effective action can be taken by the organic intellectuals from the subaltern class. These involve organizing them, forming new organic intellectuals, cultivating a sense of autonomy and expressing a difference and opposition to the dominant and ruling classes: 'the classes they belong to which are wholly deprived of alternative courses of economic action are the only people for whom an alternative policy is open' (Pizzorno 1974: 43). Although an era of 'organic crisis' does not necessarily culminate in the revolutionary means of overcoming the crisis of the old historical bloc, the same 'crisis' will appear when 'the politically passive masses are induced to make new claims' or when their latent needs are turned into political demands (Pizzorno 1974: 48). The central role played by the activities of organic intellectuals in this process is also highlighted by Benedetto Fontana. Bearing in mind that the stirring of intellectuals to take political action requires a unified theoretical 'understanding' of their knowledge, together with the 'feelings' and 'passions' of the masses, he notes that

> The sophisticated and elaborate knowledge of the intellectual is transformed into life and politics when it is connected intimately to the experience and passion felt by the people. The feelings and passion of the people are infused with direction, purpose and coherence by the intellectuals who act and function as filters and mediators. (Fontana 2015: 58)

An integrated organic relationship between the ruling classes, in turn, is only possible on account of the organic unity between the State and civil society in the bourgeoisie's historical bloc. The subaltern classes and groups exist because of this historical bloc, but, at the same time, they are in a discontinuous and disaggregated relationship not only with each other but also between themselves and political society. For this very reason,

they represent a potentially destabilizing threat to that organic integration of the ruling classes. In the view of Pizzorno, this potential threat arises in two circumstances: (a) an 'organic crisis' and (b) the presence of a new social entity (usually the party) which asserts the integral autonomy of the subaltern classes, which is capable of exercising hegemony, creating 'new historical and institutional values for bringing about an opposing historical bloc which is the nucleus of a State' (Pizzorno 1974: 53–54).

The unity between political society and civil society in the form of an 'integral State' is only experienced in an organic way by the dominant and ruling classes. Strictly speaking, there can only be a 'State' (in the sense of 'integral') if there is this unity. It can thus be understood why the history is a 'history of States and groups of States' (Gramsci 2001: 2288). It is precisely for this reason that subalterns are 'on the margins of history' or, in other words, do not take part in the integrality or organic unity of the State in which they are subjugated. For this reason too, their history is disaggregated and their 'politics' lacks organization. It is within that 'nucleus' of the State represented by the party (always conceived in the broad sense of 'The Modern Prince') that the *possibilities* and *alternatives* can be found for undertaking the struggle for hegemony through the partial unification of the subalterns with a view to becoming hegemonic groups and building a new historical bloc.

There is clearly a need for an organization ('generally, the party') of subalterns, which can represent the 'nucleus of a State'. This condition can be related to the passage from the *Notebooks* about the 'levels' of political organization among the subaltern classes and groups and even the different moments of political force relations between the classes and social groups that are present. Thus, it can be concluded that before the historical unification of subalterns in the new State, the party must carry out the political task of uniting the fractions of subaltern classes and groups.[2] This unified fraction of subaltern groups is leading to a dispute about how to construct the new historical bloc. It is a question here of a vanguard movement emerging from the heart of the subalterns themselves, together with the training, improvement and multiplication of their organic intellectuals: 'Before new values and historical forms can be created, new systems of organic representation (and hegemony) must be firmly established by the subaltern classes' (Pizzorno 1974: 58).

Thus, the direction of the masses or its vanguard movement can – and in truth should – originate from the subaltern masses themselves and the intellectuals who retain an organic bond with them. The subalterns are unable to escape from their inherent condition if they continue showing a purely spontaneous kind of resistance and revolt against the dominant classes. It is not a question of a direction that is brought or imposed 'from outside' of the subaltern masses, but there should arise from within themselves or at least in a proportion of them, a qualitative leap that is represented by political organization. The importance of devising a theory of 'integral history' or the history of subaltern groups has a political purpose that is to know the temporal and spatial heterogeneity of the masses and the place where it is expected that organized political movements might emerge in the struggle for hegemony. This entails preparing the history of groups who have been thwarted in their attempts to evolve through hegemonic narratives. In the practical and analytical task of constructing a history of subaltern groups in a systematic way, Gramsci distinguishes particular periods that should be noted. In his words,

> It is necessary to study: 1) the objective formation of the social subaltern groups by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production, their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a certain time; 2) their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programs of these formations in order to press claims of their own and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3) the birth of new parties of the dominant groups intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and maintain control over them 4) the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce in order to press claims of a limited and partial character; 5) those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups but within the old framework; 6) those formations which assert the integral autonomy, etc. (Gramsci 2001: 2288)

These various 'levels' of the political organization of subaltern groups should not be confused with 'stages' of a diachronic movement which must necessarily go on until it reaches a situation of integral autonomy. They are different historical, political and social situations *already present* within a set of subaltern groups and which accurately characterize their *heterogeneity.* It is the study and analysis of the opportunities for development in this process that can be found in Gramsci's Notebook 25. A differentiated analysis of the 'subaltern classes' is important to reflect the entire range of conditions through which Gramsci effectively employs the concept and only supports the possibility of 'unifying' these classes when they are turned into a 'State'. Hence, a higher level of organization among these classes can only be expected in a situation of 'integral autonomy', and without this 'prerequisite', one cannot hope for their transformation into a State.

Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that in drawing these distinctions (a theoretical process which is clarified through a record of his 'methodological criteria'), Gramsci looks at social classes from a sophisticated perspective. As Liguori (2011) suggests,

> The fact is worth recognizing that with the pairing of the terms 'hegemonic/subaltern', Gramsci is providing us with more comprehensive categories than those used by classic Marxians (bourgoisie/proletariat), because the former intertwine the social position and subjectivity and the structural with the cultural and ideological elements. […] Thus, the category of the subaltern appears in a framework that enhances the traditional categories of Marxism. (pp. 40–41)

This hypothesis of Liguori makes a valuable contribution to what I wish to outline in this article, as well as providing various analytical 'levels' for the condition of subalternity that are highlighted in the note on the 'Methodological Criteria' of Gramsci. These criteria, as Green (2007) reminds us, can be read with strict regard to the various 'levels' of political force relations described in Paragraph 17 of Notebook 13 (p. 214).[3]

All these considerations suggest that the study of social classes has a direct bearing on the analysis of force relations in society. In other words, it is linked to the different degrees of political organization of the subaltern groups (since, on the other hand, it entails recognizing that the classes that *exercise* hegemony have their political organization guaranteed within the State apparatus).[4] It is in this sense that the traditional definition of 'social classes', which links a determined group of individuals to their role or

position in the general process of social production, has limitations with regard to its analytical and political characters. The problem with its analytical character is that it necessarily requires an economicist model for a class struggle approach that narrows the field of vision with regard to other dimensions of class struggle that cut across and condition the contradictions of the present historical bloc. Its political character has limitations because it leads to an a priori and deterministic choice of the historical subject who is destined to play a leading role in the revolutionary process. Both the limitations are closely bound up with an interpretation that gives central place to the development of the productive forces by detaching them from any real social formation and making a dichotomous distinction between the social means of wealth production and the combination of an ideological 'superstructure'.

Given the fact that the presence of classes and subaltern groups is a part of existence, functionality as well as the production and reproduction of capital, it is paradoxical to regard subalterns as an 'excluded contingency' that is separated in a sluggish dimension of social life without any objective means of intervening in the condition of subalternity. Its very existence is a cause of anxiety and tension in social hegemonic relations. It involves knowing how subaltern groups or their fractions can take historical initiatives. My hypothesis is that if the classes are formed in terms of a class struggle, they are formed based on subaltern groups' fractions which take the initiative in a conscious way so that they can question the bourgeois hegemony in some of its dimensions. For this reason, a Marxist political analysis must remain attentive to the dynamics and anxious composition of the subaltern groups, if it wish to understand what opportunities there are for social transformation at a particular historical moment. It must also remain aware of the most extreme kinds of tension between the subalterns and the ruling and dominant groups and based on a concrete analysis of real conditions must distinguish between what part (or parts) of the subaltern groups can be found at advanced levels of organization and political consciousness. It is in this 'part' or 'parts', as well as among the organic intellectuals that the best chance of establishing an alternative hegemonic nucleus can be found, the existence of which depends on maintaining suitable force relations by means of a permanent struggle.

A brief note on the concepts of class in Gramsci, Bensaïd, Thompson, Poulantzas and Marx

As stated in the 'Introduction' section, the aim of this study is to outline the concepts of class in authors such as E.P. Thompson, Daniel Bensaïd and Nicos Poulantzas (together with the basic principles set out by Marx and the guidance provided by the Gramscian concepts examined here) for comparative purposes with the concepts of Gramsci about social classes and subaltern groups. It is suggested that important parallels can be found between these authors and the Gramscian method.

When a 'social class' is regarded as a category (an idea conceived to obtain an understanding of certain aspects of reality), it should be interpreted within an appropriate and dynamic way of addressing the issue of real social struggle. The concepts of the bourgeoisie, proletariat, peasantry, lumpenproletariat, and so on are employed to seek to determine the singular and peculiar features of different *phenomena* under the general category

of social classes. These concepts are interdependent and are revealed as distinct and/or antagonistic moments for a set of social relations that are the defining elements of capital.

When handling the notion of *classes and subaltern groups*, it is necessary to seek to understand why Gramsci preferred to employ this rather than standard terms such as the proletariat, working class and peasantry. According to Del Roio (2007), the most likely reason is that he was concerned with tracing a development in his analysis which set out from the specific features of questions regarding the working class and then moved on to address matters of greater complexity and wider scope in search of a scientific definition that took account of the elements required for building a new civil society that was anti-capitalist.

While he was living in Turin, Gramsci witnessed and had extensive experience of factory councils in the period 1919–1920. These gave rise to theoretical reflections that he expanded, especially through the journal that he edited, *L'Ordine Nuovo*. This stimulated him to conceive the idea of a revolution that would give birth to autonomy and self-organization within the factory system in which the councils would form the basis of a workers' democracy (Del Roio 2007). However, the defeat of the international socialist revolution in the 1920s, which was notably characterized by the reverses in Germany and Italy, had compelled Gramsci to turn back to the diversity of particular national features, as a matter of priority.

It was only gradually, but mainly at the end of the European revolutionary cycle in 1923, that Gramsci embarked on his search for the reasons that could explain the defeat of the *Biennio Rosso* and to find a path toward the socialist revolution in Italy and the rest of the world (Del Roio 2007). It was necessary to know the specific nature of national characteristics. The abstract concepts of 'proletariat' and 'peasantry' were not sufficient for an understanding of the class struggle in Italy in its true nature and all its ramifications. The differences between the north and south, the conflicts between the workers themselves in one or another region and the differences in culture that reflected class differences, all needed to be carefully investigated if he wished to outline a socialist strategy that was suited to Italy. In the opinion of Antonio Gramsci (2001), the history of the subaltern groups is necessarily disaggregated, and any attempt to bring about their unification could only be achieved through a permanent political victory (p. 2283).

In his view, the subaltern groups are formed by all the dominated masses but without any class aggregation. The subaltern groups are not necessarily unified in terms of social classes because for this to take place, there must be a social formation as an aggregate of class relations, which can make political interventions among the prevailing social forces within a determined social formation. In the light of the 'fundamental historical unity' which resulted from the organic relationship between the State and civil society, Gramsci (2001) concluded that, 'by definition', the subaltern classes are not unified and could never be unified so long as they were unable 'to become a State' (p. 2288).

The French philosopher Daniel Bensaïd (2010) believes that from the standpoint of historical materialism, 'there is no sociological conceptualization of class. Rather, there is a strategic concept of class as something that is achieved through struggle'. The notion of class in Marx is reducible neither to an attribute of which the individual units comprising it are the bearers nor to the sum of these units. It is something else; a relational

totality and not a mere sum (Bensaïd 1999: 147). A class only exists in a relationship of conflict with other classes and is thus revealed 'in and through the movement of capital' (Bensaïd 1999: 153). Hence, the idea of classes presupposes the existence of conflict. Bensaïd argues that the way the labor theory of value and surplus value that is set out in *Das Kapital* already corresponds to a theoretical approach to the social classes. This is the case as far as this account exposes an antagonistic relationship based on exploitation, although in this case, there is still a lack of mediations that can allow a fully determined class to be attained (Bensaïd 1999: 154).

Daniel Bensaïd (1995) argues that a large number of the 'self-proclaimed' heirs of Marx are no more than 'classifiers' in their way of handling the issue of social classes, owing to the difficulty of understanding the original words of Marx on the subject and the confusion that often arises in discussions of classes, castes, social orders and so on (p. 107). Class as a 'relationship' is, above all, the 'collective social expression of exploitation and, of course, resistance to this fact' (SAINTE-CROIX, *apud* Bensaïd 1995: 111). Thus, class is not a given inert structure. 'Resistance' forms a constituent part of its determination.[5]

According to this French philosopher, this approach will be clearer within the context of the 'Anglo-Saxon debate', where there is opposition to the supporters of a structural way of determining the classes (an allusion to the structural reading of Marxism, mainly represented by Althusser and the 'first' Poulantzas). In this debate, there are also supporters of a 'primacy of human action' (lived experience, preferences) influenced by the writings of the British historian E.P. Thompson with regard to the formation of the British working class (Bensaïd 1995: 111). In fact, in his preface to '*The Making of the English Working-Class*', Thompson (1987) argues that 'class' is not a 'structure' or a 'category' but 'something which happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships' (p. 9). Thus, the social class is a historical phenomenon unifying a number of disparate and seemingly disconnected events both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness (Thompson 1987).

In what way does Thompson attribute the rise and making of a class to experience? In his view, the class 'happens' when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests, share and express a feeling of uniformity with regard to common interests as between themselves and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. 'Class consciousness' is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms, embodied in traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class consciousness does not. Consciousness of class arises in the same way at different times and places but never *just* the same way. It is not possible to predicate any law (Thompson 1987: 10).

Thompson regards 'class' as a *process*, and not a 'thing', or something that is quantifiable. Its 'consciousness' or its 'interests' are not a priori, and do not expect to be discovered or attained, but are formed *in the occurrence* of the class. This understanding of class brings with it the notion of a relationship that 'is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure' (Thompson 1987). The author goes on to state that there would not be classes if history was 'frozen'

at a particular point in time but only a 'large number of individuals with an accumulated experience' (Thompson 1987). The manifestation of classes will appear when these men are examined over a suitable period of social change in which patterns of relationships, ideas and institutions can be observed: 'class is defined by men as they live their own history and in the end, this is its only definition' (Thompson 1987). It is worth noting here its demand for a 'history' to ensure its existence as a class. Gramsci (2001), when addressing the same need on the part of the subalterns, points out the inevitability of their own historiography (p. 2288).

Thus, in Thompson's view, class is definitively a historical category derived from social processes in the course of time. Classes will be known because people are repeatedly behaving in a 'classist' manner and giving conventional responses to analogous situations in different places. According to the author, this underlines the fact that 'in its heuristic usage, [class] is inseparable from the notion of "class struggle"' (Thompson 2001: 274). Thompson lays stress on what he regards as the 'distortions' of much of Marxist theory and historiography caused by the examination of class in accordance with categories such as 'base' and 'superstructure', or even sanctioned by the terms 'structure' and 'superstructure' from Marx's (1983) Preface to his '*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)*'. The mistake lies in the interpretation according to which the productive forces and relations of production supply the 'base', which is assumed to be real and objective, and from these, class consciousness emerged as a 'derived' superstructure (Thompson 1987: 278). This is a critique that Gramsci was also concerned with, as he sought to carry out a reinterpretation of Marx's 'Preface' which could go beyond the 'economicist' and determinist interpretations that had resulted from it.

It is known that setting out from an analysis of the 'Preface', Gramsci characterized the historical movement grounded especially in the idea of force relations, or even, in the last analysis, politics. In the dialectical analysis of Gramsci (2001), the 'structure-superstructure' relationship evolved to different moments of force relations in a framework designed for the development of a determined social formation:

> I) A relation of social forces which is closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences […]. II) A second moment or level is the relation of political forces, in other words, an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-consciousness and organization attained by various social groups […]. III) The third period is the relation of military forces, which is the decisive moment in each case (historical development continually fluctuates between the first and the third moment with the mediation of the second) […]. (pp. 1583–1586)

What Gramsci classifies as the first level of force relations (that which directly refers to the economic structure of a determined social formation) has already been defined and consolidated in the contemporary phase of capitalist development. According to Cospito (2000: 100), Gramsci was already refining his treatment of the question with regard to the relations between the structure and superstructure when he analyzed the economic crisis of 1929 (where he believed that since it concerned a process that was open to several definitions, it was impossible to assign a single cause). In the opinion of Gramsci (2001), it was a process with various manifestations where the causes and effects

were intertwined (pp. 1755–1756). These observations by Gramsci led to two important conclusions: (a) since the crisis of 1929 did not bring about the expected overthrow of capitalism, it assisted in encouraging a refutation of the strictly causal relationship between structure and superstructure and (b) this refutation meant a rejection of the image of a 'base' on which a determined superstructure was erected and that in a period of crisis was destined to collapse. Hence, according to Cospito (2000), there was a need to overcome this way of analysis, since it had been postulated in terms of a relationship between the structure and superstructure (p. 101).

Cospito points out that as early as 1930 (while having conversations with his comrades in prison, and seeking to break away from those who accused Marxism of being mechanical, fatalistic and economically determinist, etc.), Gramsci suggested that one should no longer speak of a 'structure' and 'superstructure' but only of a 'historical process', in which all the factors are combined and form a part (Cospito 2000: 104). In Gramsci's view, the reason for this was that it was necessary to frame the question in 'historico-political' terms. The structure–superstructure duality was thus converted into a dialectic between subjective and objective forces which would become less dichotomous since Gramsci believed that 'objective' means 'humanly objective' and thus also 'humanly subjective 'and possesses a 'universal subjectivity' (Cospito 2000: 105).

In the opinion of Burgio (2002), it is possible to make a multi-interpretation of the Gramscian analysis of force relations (p. 114). On the basis of a simple reading, the three 'moments' of the force relations (social, political and military) represent a frame of reference for a socio-political analysis, an analysis which should set out from a recognition of the social composition, investigating the state of political subjectivities and finally preparing the ground to international conflicts (Burgio 2002). In this sense, it can be said that the theoretical objective of the 'tripartite system of force relations' is to provide a general framework for articulating a socio-political totality on the basis of which conflicts evolve into the conditions for determining a historical crisis (Burgio 2002).

Thus, when stated in absolute terms, the relation of 'social forces' (referring to the *social* 'moment') constitutes the representation of class conflict from an economicist/determinist standpoint, as, for example, the Sorelian Revolutionary Syndicalism viewpoint, not a fortuitous object in the criticism of Gramsci. The relations of 'political forces', on the other hand, corresponded to a critical theory raised to the level of complexity of a Marxian analysis of capital as a social relation (Burgio 2002). In this domain, the subjects are constituted as 'socio-political' forces determined in a context of social relations which are relatively independent from immediate production process and on the basis of a critical elaboration of their own functions. Finally, the relation of 'military forces' reflects a mature analysis of wars viewed as an external projection (and extreme manifestation) of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. This analysis was underlying the idea – central to Lenin's analysis of imperialism – that the dynamics of capitalist accumulation would inevitably lead to war, given the close ties between national economies in the international scene and through the tensions arising from the monopolistic control of consumer markets, raw materials and energy sources (Burgio 2002).

The dialectical conception of the structure–superstructure nexus was a defining characteristic of Gramsci's Marxism and is one of the fundamental axes of his anti-determinist and anti-economicist critique, where he recognizes the capacity of the subjective moment

to influence the structural terrain (Burgio 2002: 121). From the standpoint of historical materialism, its dialectical nature (of reciprocal action) would endow the structure–superstructure nexus with meaning in all social formations. The significance of this question bestowed a specific and historically based meaning on the Gramscian analysis. The emphasis weighs heavily on the practical (political) consequences of the contradictory nature of the social relations. In its turn, these consequences – the updating of a revolutionary perspective as a real possibility – take us back to the advances made by the subaltern masses in the domain of self-consciousness and the concrete historical development of modern society (Burgio 2002: 122).

By thus asserting the capacity of the subjective element to be also involved in the determination of the structural dimensions of the social formation, Gramsci, as has been observed, turns the 'structure × superstructure' dichotomy into a field of political force relations, by anticipating a question similar to the 'experience' claimed by Thompson. This, in turn, contradicts the structural readings of Marxism, such as that by Poulantzas (1977), for example, for whom social class was a 'concept' which indicates the effects of structures of a mode of production 'or of a social formation' on the agents which constitute its 'supports' (p. 65). At all events, even for Poulantzas, social classes were not 'an empirical thing'. Once again, they show 'the effect of an ensemble of given structures, an ensemble which determines social relations as relations of class' (Poulantzas 1977). According to Poulantzas, these effects would be produced more exactly through an adjustment of structural levels (economic, political and ideological) which would specify a determined mode of production or social formation. Although the notion of 'effects' seems to neutralize any possible prospect of class initiatives, Poulantzas (1977) provides a way of overcoming this problem when he states that 'classes always connote class *practices*, *and these practices are not structures*' (p. 66). The constitution of the classes is not only based on their economic level but also based on a combination of levels of either a mode of production or a social formation: 'the organization of instances as economic, political and ideological levels is reflected in social relations, in economic, political and ideological class practices and in the *struggle* found in the practices of various classes' (Poulantzas 1977).

In Poulantzas, the structural levels both of the mode of production and the social formation are blended and founded in a reciprocal and intersected articulation. This because in his view (basing himself on Althusser), a social formation was the result of the presence of a set of structures of different modes of production together, with the fact that one of them was the dominant mode of production at a particular time. The definition of Olin Wright (1985) seeks to make an advance from the Poulantzian assertion, when he suggests that 'the social organization of production determines a structure of "empty spaces" in the class relations which will be filled by people'. In this way, a 'class structure' will be constituted (Olin Wright 1985: 10). However, the 'formation of class' refers to organized collectives within the 'class structure' and based on interests molded by that very 'class structure'. The class formation was thus a variant. The author draws a distinction between modes of production and social formation based on levels of abstraction. From the most abstract to the most concrete, there is a mode of production, social formation and finally what the author calls 'concrete situations'. Societies, individuals, groups and organizations make up the 'units of analysis' of this latter level. In this way,

the analysis of the degree of trade unionization, the formation of parties and social movements based on class will be analyzed in terms of the social formations at their most concrete levels (Olin Wright 1985: 10). Thus, one of the analytical tasks for the study of social classes would be to undertake a translation of the structure of class relations for the formation process of collective players. Thus, one would move from the abstract level of the analysis of class structure to the concrete level of an analysis of 'class formation' (Olin Wright 1985: 123).

But what is a strictly Marxian definition of structure and the formation of social classes or what exactly is a social class, strictly speaking in the words of Marx? It is well known that Marx did not outline a clear definition with regard to this and the literature abounds with debates and clashes of opinion about the issue. However, I believe that it is possible to find in Marx signs of an awareness of the conditions for the existence of classes that are of an eminently political character. In the words of Marx, in the *German Ideology*, 'the separate individuals only form a class insofar as they have to carry on a battle against another class, otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors' (Marx & Engels 1998: 61).[6] In turn, in the *Communist Manifesto*, we read that 'every class struggle is a political struggle' (Marx & Engels 1988: 75), as well as the observation that the organization of the proletariat into a class is its organization into a 'political party' (Marx & Engels 1988). Based on this reasoning and going back to my hypothesis derived from Gramsci, it can be stated that the dominated classes are formed as *classes*, since parts of the subaltern groups were organized with the aim of restraining, combating, questioning or threatening some material basis of the class relations in force. While the classes and parts of the dominant classes are found to be permanently organized by the apparatus of the capitalist State, the dominated classes are, in political and ideological terms, scattered in the form of *subaltern groups*.

Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* sets out some key factors required for this distinction. In this study, it is demonstrated by the author that once the bourgeoisie has been organized into a State (or at least its dominant fractions), paradoxically, it brings together the conditions for withdrawing as a class and leaves intact the state bureaucratic structures that are designed according to its material interests. This structure can be occupied or administered by agents who found themselves relieved of the burden of any direct representation of the bourgeoisie as a fundamental class. It is by being an administrative and military structure established as the result of the vested interests of the dominant classes that explains why it is not enough for the proletariat to occupy it, as is stressed by Lenin in *The State and Revolution*. Rather than this, it seeks to destroy it and erect a new State structure formatted according to the general interests of the proletariat. The dominated classes do not 'fit in' as rulers of a structure of domination that was originally established against their interests; hence, there is a need for them to build their own structures. The organization of the proletariat as a dominant class (and hence a State) is the culmination of the process of its constitution as a class.

In the preface to the second edition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, when speaking of the conflicts in Ancient Rome, Marx (2011) located 'the large mass of productive people', the slaves, beneath whom he thought there was a dimension of class struggle, 'that took place within a privileged minority between the free rich and the free poor […]' (p. 19). The fact that the subaltern groups of today are made up of people who possess the formal

status of 'citizens' does not necessarily leave them in a better condition for political organization than the slaves of Rome. The population of slaves, a large subaltern mass, were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of the socially dominant class. Moreover, once they were placed here, they faced every possible kind of material difficulties, including that of organization.

In another part of the *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, we can find a passage that sheds light on the distinction between the subaltern groups and social classes:

> […] Thus, the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes such as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. Insofar as millions live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. However, insofar as there is only a local interconnection among these smallholding peasants and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not constitute any class […]. (Marx 2011: 143)

The absence of a second set of conditions attributed by Marx to the process of constituting a social class is what characterizes the subaltern groups. Thus, these groups comprise disaggregated masses who are prevented from exercising a politically guided struggle. All this allows us to put forward the possible idea that the formation of a social class will begin by being *politically conditioned*.

Finally, these are the views that were found both in Bensaïd ('strategic conception of class based on struggle') and in Thompson (the social class as a process) and even in Poulantzas ('classes always connote class *practices*, and these practices are not *structures*'). These are powerfully anti-determinist and anti-economicist conceptions. It is a question of an anti-determinism and anti-economicism developed also by Gramsci, based on a dialectical reading of the relations of structure and superstructure, a reading that as Liguori (2015) reminds us 'weave together social positions and subjectivity more effectively, as well as the structural and ideological/cultural factors' (p. 130).

The subaltern groups and the 'Subaltern Studies'

There is a subalternity determined by imperialism, whose subjects have their history erased or prevented by the hegemonic narratives. On this question, for example, Edward Said (2007) is precise when he described the 'east' (here the political conception of Gramsci and the 'cartographic' conception match) as a historic creation of the 'western' white imperialism, which is responsible also for the eastern characteristic subalternity. In criticizing the inadequacies of the first English edition of *Prison Notebooks*, compiled by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in 1971, Said investigated the reasons for an important 'cut' in Paragraph 12 of Notebook 2, of an extract in which Gramsci incites a critical 'inventory' of the historical process that has left us permanent traces without any advanced warning.[7] Compiling this 'inventory', if we talk about subaltern groups, is in fact the very constitution of these groups' history. It is this self-recognition or 'making out' of these groups in this other history that endows them with a political existence in the dispute over the hegemonic narratives. In that case, the kind of social origin of the

intellectuals who write about it does not matter very much. There is little point in having a discussion about the 'representation' × 'the voices themselves' of the subalterns if they can make claims for themselves and are recognized in a new historico-political version of their position in the world. A *philosophy of praxis* is carried out here in which the historical analysis supports the theory, and the theory supports the political practice or, in other words, 'a unity is brought about between historical analysis, theory and practice' (Green 2007: 227). This unity relies on 'the elements for breathing life into the integral, practical organization of society' (Gramsci 2001: 1434). In preparing a history of subalterns, theory and practice reach a meeting point between 'those who know without feeling or understanding and those who feel without knowing or understanding […]' (Baratta 2010: 164). This is the means of articulating a *praxis* between intellectuals and subalterns.

In contrast, the postmodern position attempts to justify plurality and multiplicity and in this way ends by advocating a political and social situation which maintains subaltern groups exactly as such, that is, in a state of subalternity, disaggregation and historical marginality. Despite her sophisticated reading of the Gramscian text, this is the state of confusion into which Chakravorty Spivak (2010; one of the leading exponents of the so-called *Subaltern Studies*) falls, when she casts doubts on any prospect of an autonomous organization being achieved by the subaltern classes:

> Yet an account of the phased development of the subaltern is thrown out of joint when his cultural macrology is operated, however remotely, by the epistemic interference with legal and disciplinary definitions accompanying the imperialist project. (p. 55)

It is thus that it can be concluded from Spivak that the subaltern 'cannot speak'. The author considers the 'subproletariat's women', in the case of India, as an example of the extremes of subalternity, in the name of whom intellectuals are not in a condition to speak, and for whom there are no social spaces for them to spread their own speech. It should noted here a detachment of the Gramscian analysis of subaltern groups, or in other words, the heterogeneity of the social composition is discredited as well as the political organization that can be found in diverse subaltern groups.

Apparently, it is in line with that incomplete English edition of the *Notebooks* that the *Subaltern Studies* group brings the essence of its interpretation of 'subalterns'. It involved a group of Indian researchers led by the historian Ranajit Guha, whose objective was to bring about a renewal of Indian historiography by focusing on the history of its subaltern groups. The idea was to do in India what Gramsci recommended for Italy. In the words of Edward Said (2007), 'their aim was nothing less than a revolution in historiography, their immediate goal being to rescue the writing of Indian history from the dominant elite and restore to it the important role of the urban poor and rural masses' (p. 464).

Spivak (2010) referred to the aims of the *Subaltern Studies* as being 'to rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation' (p. 56). Although Spivak (2010) seemingly recognizes the differentiations that characterize the subalterns, she argues that 'the colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous' (p. 57), the conclusion of her reasoning is that it is impossible for a subaltern historiography to be created from the politically

organized sector of these heterogeneous groups: 'I cannot entirely endorse this insistence of determinate vigor and full autonomy, since practical historiographic exigencies will not allow such endorsements to privilege subaltern consciousness' (Spivak 2010). In addition, in a definitive statement by the author, 'in the context of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak' (Spivak 2010: 67).[8]

Thus, in the view of Spivak, the subaltern 'cannot speak' and is not in a condition to be organized or to have political representation since it is through this set of features that subalternity is defined by the author. In this way, the proletariat cannot be regarded as subaltern, 'because it is organized in several contexts' (Green 2007: 224). This is the conclusion of Spivak ideas. They are found to be in disagreement again with the existence of various 'levels' of political organization of the subalterns postulated by Gramsci. The most advanced of these is the party itself which comes to constitute the 'nucleus of the State', a center which spreads a hegemony that is an alternative to that which is in force. According to Spivak, 'when a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony' (Spivak *apud* Green 2007: 226).

There is an analytical problem here. In a pertinent question that Green asks, if there is organization and representation, does this mean the subaltern groups are no longer subaltern? If they are 'half-way' can they become ruling groups? Are they being given free rein to build a new historical bloc? It is unlikely that this is the case. Moreover, the subtle defense of 'citizenship' and 'institutionality' shows how far Spivak is from the Gramscian question. The 'long march in the direction of hegemony' makes it difficult to accept (as a *strategy*) the march toward gaining admission to the institutions of the *current* historical bloc, which is exactly what they wish to be *superseded*. Clearly, there are internal contradictions which need to be *tactically* explored, but the dialectical method cannot be employed in a inconsequential way. The classes and subaltern groups must build their own institutions and have their own values, ways of production and cultural stature so that they can create their own material conditions. The struggle of the subalterns must be linked to the construction of their hegemony and the prescriptions of classical liberalism such as 'citizenship', 'building democracy', 'the democratic path', and so on is a discourse that is far removed from what is found in the writings of Antonio Gramsci.

The exercise of hegemony under the 'Integral State' ranges from the simplest production of exchange values to the highest artistic creations expressed by the spirit of an epoch. It always entails the reproduction of a determined conception of the world in force and the social relations that are consolidated and 'protected' by the ruling and dominant classes. One of the greatest obstacles facing subalterns is how they can overcome their condition (a subordination that is both economic and cultural). It is the difficulty involved in the formation of intellectuals and leaders for an organization that seeks to provide the subalterns with unity, direction and cohesion. The characteristic fragmentation of common sense within these groups is the cause and result of the lack of critical features that allow a unified culture to form around the political aim of overcoming subalternity, as well as forming permanent internal groups of political leadership. It is a task of the most organized sectors of the subaltern groups to fight for a critical inclusion in the dimensions of culture and power of the dominant classes. In addition, they must work out their own institutional cultural domains as a strategic face of political

organization in the midst of a set of subalterns or as a strategy for the creation and consolidation of an alternative world conception that is unifying and critical. In the heterogeneity of subaltern groups, it concerns a question of difference of

> Degrees [of cultural and political organization] depending on the varying conditions of the different subaltern groups. The least advanced subaltern groups who have been deprived of institutional political participation face a greater difficulty in raising critical consciousness than a more organized subaltern group. (Green & Ives 2010: 304)

Thus, the demand for critical inclusion in the political and cultural institutions in force is justified in the *tactical* face of class struggle because it *also* concerns an 'active' resistance to the fact that, given its unequal development, capitalist modernity implies a restriction of the cultural opportunities of the masses in some countries. However, the elaboration of a conception of the world is also an educative or self-educative process. This *praxis* presupposes an organic element that while being embodied in class is also capable of being constituted as a real vanguard movement (Liguori 2011: 38). The party is at the same time an organic part of class and able to override its 'common sense', which is the conception of the world of subaltern groups. This overriding cannot occur in a spontaneous way, and this is the function of the political party of the proletariat and the subaltern groups.

Provisional conclusion (or hypotheses)

The reflections above were explored with the aim of providing some evidences of what I consider to be a theoretical distinction between the notions of 'social classes' and 'subaltern groups' in Gramsci, which is a useful distinction for classist political practice against bourgeois hegemony. Finally, how can the application of this distinction be generalized at an abstract analytical level?

The logic concreteness of capital reproduction is in entanglement of everyday social relations of strength, power, ideology, domination and exploitation, that is, a conformer set of class relations. This is the equivalent of assuming that the antagonism between capital and labor does not *determine* or *condition* the 'superstructural' relations, but metamorphoses itself in them, acquires different incarnations in different dimensions of life. What this means is that in order to be reproduced, capital needs various kinds of representation such as in culture, leisure activities, the political scene and social relations in general. Moreover, each new objectification must be accompanied by a new pedagogical process together with the subaltern groups, in a continuous movement that involves restructuring bourgeois hegemony. The 'way of life' of the popular classes is constituted, or *tends* to be constituted, by that pedagogical process, in forms that are favorable to the hegemonic stability of capital. This is an essential function of private apparatuses of hegemony because they are the immediate *front* of the capitalist State.

Although sets of changeable and mutating identities can be found in society, whether as sets of competing interest groups from a 'polyarchical' standpoint, or as a web of power micro-relations, in a Foucault mode, capital continues to be the structuring power relation of contemporary modes of material, spiritual and symbolic life. In addition, this

takes place for the following reason: the mosaic of 'identities' and 'power relations' which constitute society in a capitalist social formation is not random but is revealed through the prospect of fixed constraints on the limits imposed by the need for the capital valorization.

The class relations, hegemonized by the bourgeoisie as the dominant class, condition the concrete existence of the classes. Apart from the bourgeoisie (considered here with all its fractions), all the members of the general 'public', workers, rural workers, public employees, service employees, peasants, students, self-employed, informal workers, homeless, landless, beggars and so on, are included and comprise the social fabric of class relations since they are both their products and producers, causes and effects. Can it thus be said of all these people and groups that they form social classes? If one alludes to the thoughts of Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* on the French peasantry, the answer is yes and no. It is yes as far as they conform *social class relations* among themselves, and with the bourgeoisie, they exist in economic conditions of exploitation and subalternity that separate 'their modes of life, their interests and their culture from the modes of life, interests and culture' of hegemonic classes. The answer is no, in so far as that common situation does not 'generate any common factor among themselves' or any political union. Thus, they cannot be identified in an a priori way as belonging to *determined classes of a distinct and specific kind*. The a priori identification cannot be made without recourse to a methodology that is riddled with economic determinism and continues to adopt the slippery expedient of only distinguishing between classes in accordance with the positions that different groups occupy in the process of material production. From here, there is only a short step to the old idealistic way of defining the revolutionary subject. It is for this reason that this is an opportune time to regard the analysis of the Gramscian concept of *subaltern groups* as a useful way of bringing together all the subjects and groups outlined above, together with all their differences and distinctive features. These are the subaltern *groups* that are both created by and the creators of *social class relations* under the bourgeois hegemony, and the origins of a network of relationships from which the dominated classes have *emerged as classes, as such*, or in other words, *as politically orientated for struggle* in an arena of force relations which was at first unfavorable to them. This means that the constitution of groups and subdivisions of subaltern groups into social classes *is in itself a class struggle*.

The *emergence* of a combative dominated class (or classes) in the cauldron of heterogeneous groups who offer a fragmentary and irregular kind of resistance, the social groups that are not politically united and the subaltern groups, are shaping what can strictly be regarded as a class struggle. This is the struggle among *politically organized* fundamental classes, a struggle for hegemony in a determined social formation and a class war either for the maintenance of the historical bloc in force or that seeks to begin to construct a new one. The form that this struggle will take by the subaltern groups depends on the objective conditions of each national or international situation.

Notes

1. As occurs, for example, in Lukacs (1974), 'In the spirit of Marxism, the division of society into classes can be defined by its place in the production process' (p. 59). Or also in Bukharin (1980),

> We can see that a social class can be understood as a set of people playing an analogous role in production and having identical relations with other people involved in production and these clear relations are also in things (the work environment). (p. 323)

2. Compare the passages of Gramsci in Note 17 of the Notebook 13 (pp. 1583–1586) on the various 'moments or degrees' of power relations and in Note 5 of the Notebook 25 (p. 2288) on the different levels of political organization of the subaltern groups.
3. Despite appearing on different occasions in this article, they are brought together here for a direct comparison, in the order in which they appear in the *Notebooks*:

> It is important to distinguish between the various moments or levels of forces existing in society.: I) A relation of social forces which is closely linked to the structure, objective, independent of human will, and which can be measured with the systems of the exact or physical sciences […]. II) A second level or moment is the relation of political forces, in other words, an evaluation of the degree of homogeneity, self-awareness and organization attained by the various social classes […]. The third relation is that of the relation of military forces which is from time to time 'directly decisive' (historical development oscillates continually between the first and third moment with the mediation of the second) […]. (Gramsci 2001: 1583–1586)

> It is necessary to study: 1) the objective formation of the subaltern social groups by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production, its quantitative diffusion and its origins in pre-existing social groups which conserve for a certain time, their mentality, ideology and objectives; 2) their active or passive affiliation to the dominant or passive formations, their attempts to influence the programs of these formations in order to press their claims and the results of these as consequences of processes of decomposition and renewal or new formation; 3) the birth of new parties of the dominant groups intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4) the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce in order to press claims of limited or partial character; 5) those new formations that assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups but within the old framework; 6) those formations which assert the integral autonomy, etc. (Gramsci 2001: 2288)

4. In addition to being a Marxian assumption which Gramsci develops, this analysis of power relations in society for the characterization of classes is a feature that is also found in the ideas of Bensaïd, Thompson and Poulantzas, as I seek to demonstrate in the next section. Thus, it is worth establishing, following from the Gramscian perspective, that there are contemporary thinkers who put forward these anti-determinists and anti-economicist conceptions with regard to the treatment of social classes.
5. This 'constitutive resistance to its determination' finds a parallel in the 'phases' of constitution and development of particular subaltern groups. The elements of resistance and autonomy are the most developed moments (see Gramsci 2001: 2288).
6. Marx proceeds as follows:

> On the other hand, the class in its turn achieves an independent existence over against the individuals so that the latter find their conditions of existence predestined and hence have their position in life assigned to them by their class and become subsumed under it. (Marx & Engels 1998: 61)

> What is addressed here is not the question of *social classes* as understood in this article but rather scattered group subject to determined *class relations*.

7. The extract cited by Said is as follows:

   > The beginning of a critical elaboration is the awareness of that which really is, that is to say a 'knowing of one's self' as a product of the process of history that has unfolded thus far and which has left in you an infinity of traces collected without the benefit of an inventory.

   Following this is the missing part in the English translation: 'It is first necessary to compile this inventory' (Gramsci 2001: 1376).
8. Edward Said (2007) replied to Spivak that 'For indeed, the subaltern can speak, as the history of the libertarian movements of the 20th Century eloquently attests' (p. 445). While Spivak concludes that political organization ('speaking') of subalterns is unattainable, Guha regards them as a stratified sociological sphere which, although he recognizes the heterogeneous nature of its composition, has little relation to the dynamic levels of political organization of classes and subaltern groups discerned by Gramsci. Guha states that the term subaltern is used as a synonym for the 'people' (Guha & Spivak 1988: 44). It is evident that this gives rise to a rather imprecise extension of the category which impairs rather than improves the prospects of being able to analyze power relations in the sphere of classes and subaltern groups.

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