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*Theorizing class and far right politics through a cultural materialist framework: towards a new research agenda**

Abstract

The recent electoral tide of the Far Right in Europe and the US has revived the old debate on working-class susceptibility to nationalism and exclusivism. Political analysts and mass media invoked an empirical, but theoretically uninformed concept of class, open to misuses in the framework of hegemonic discursive practices that nurture stereotypes and simplistic interpretations of class manifestations. The present paper lays out a cultural materialist research agenda for the study of the nexus between class and far right vote from a multi-disciplinary and multi-scale perspective (local, national and transnational level of analysis). The aim is to provide a synthetic view that will enable a critical reformulation of the argument of the inherent working-class backwardness with the aspiration of contributing to a better understanding of its conditionality.

Keywords: cultural materialism, working-class, far right politics

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Introduction

The rise of right-wing populist parties or candidates in Europe and the US after the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008 has unsurprisingly overwhelmed both the research agenda and the intellectual production in various social science fields. Trump and Trumpism in the US, the populist right-wing framing of the Brexit vote in the UK, and the recent electoral gains of far right parties across Europe (i.e. FPÖ in Austria, AfD in Germany, PVV in the Netherlands, DF in Denmark, True Finns in Finland, FN in France, Jobbik in Hungary), along with the resilience of parties of the Extremist Right (see for instance, Golden Dawn in Greece) have been mapped as a global trend with national, regional and local specificities. Apparently the interpretations of the commonalities of the far right resurgence vary depending inter alia on the conceptual framework adopted.

Concepts such as radicalism, extremism or populism constitute a contested terrain upon which scholars of Far Right and Extreme Right argue on classification and party-family issues since the 1990s (Mudde, 1996). The discussion is also conditioned upon the analytical focus; much attention has been given to the conflict between supply-side and demand-side explanations. The scales of the conducted research (local, national or international), the units of the analyses (individuals, groups, collectivities) and the research techniques may also impact on the responses to the abovementioned questions.

However diverse in scope, aims and objectives most of the studies on the Far Right are more or less entangled with the task of exploring the social origins of the influence of far right parties (Arzheimer, 2013). The demand-side arguments in particular emphasize the grievances that render such parties appealing to the electorates and are more concerned with the socio-cultural components of this phenomenon. Golder (2016) classifies demand-side explanations in three large categories: modernization, economic grievances, and cultural grievances. According to the modernization thesis the far right gains relate to the grievances that arise during the modernization process. Through typical socio-psychological interpretations of the narratives of those labelled as “modernization losers”, many scholars conclude that individuals who face difficulties in coping with rapid postindustrial societal changes turn to the Far Right (Golder, 2016: 481-482).

For scholars who focus on the context of economic scarcity, the problem lies in the fact that social groups with conflicting material interests compete over limited resources and therefore, members of the in-group tend to blame the out-group for economic problems, engendering therefore prejudice and discrimination (Golder 2016: 483). Part of this group of scholarship has evolved to include patterns of social and economic interaction as determinants of the far right vote, for example occupational, market and communicative skills and competences (Ellinas, 2007: 356). Finally, scholars who work within a framework of cultural grievances assume a “like-to-like” pattern of social and political behaviors that relates to an inherent desire for self-esteem and causes people to perceive their in-group as superior to out-groups (Golder, 2016: 485). Far right parties attract those voters by

underscoring how incompatible are the migrant behavioral norms and cultural values with those of the native population.

Cultural arguments have been made in other directions too: Bornshier and Kriesi (2013) support a cultural modernization explanation according to which individuals who disapprove the universalistic norms that have become more widespread in the past decades, have primarily lost in cultural terms, in the sense that for them the social change denotes a fundamental loss of certainty and the withering of a “golden age”, when their individual norms were in tune with those in society. As it is stressed below, nostalgia for the “good old times” of the full employment patterns and the social protectionism has often been stigmatized as a cultural reaction of the “globalization losers”, linked with reactionary and exclusivist agendas.

Despite their importance neither the conceptual nor the methodological challenges of the literature on the Far Right are questioned here. My concern is the use, the non-use and the misuse of class in the exploration of the current rising of parties or candidates that combine nationalism and populism, with radicalism or extremism. The argument of the “proletarianization” of the right-wing populist pool of supporters (Ignazi, 2003; Betz, 1994) has once again been brought to the fore on the occasion of the recent achievements of the Far Right in Europe and elsewhere (Rydgren, 2007; Ivarsflaten, 2005), and although it seems quite compelling, it often lacks strong evidence on the cultural and material processes that allowed (or in other cases impeded) such a transformation. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of class and culture in political sociology, a field where the cultural approaches of class have been rather downplayed (Harrits: 2013). To this end I expand the framework of cultural materialism as exemplified in Raymond Williams’s late work, incorporating new socio-cultural analytical categories that I find particularly useful in exploring the class dimensions of the far right attitudes. Theory of practice, sociology of emotions, interpretive approaches and geography of labour, constitute the main sources of this re-working of cultural materialism under the prism of the fundamental question: Why and under which circumstances the working-class supports far right parties?

The first section of the paper gives some examples that showcase the need for an opening of the research agenda towards multidisciplinary accounts of social class. Focusing on Trump’s election in the US and its socio-cultural explanations purported by prominent academics and intellectuals I discuss some common loops in the analysis of the social basis of the exclusivist politics. As I try to argue a deeper analysis of the working-class attitudes towards far right politics, is hampered not only due to the intellectual trends of “classlessness” articulated from a postmodern perspective, but also due to inadequate responses of conventional “structural” explanations. The second section summarizes the end-of-class debate and its developments in various fields of social sciences. The waves of the anti-class criticism of the second half of the 20th century and the most salient responses to this criticism are discussed here, focusing on critical insights from the field of social history. The last section of

the paper stresses the added value of applying a cultural materialist framework that could contribute to more complex class analyses of the global far right tide.

The use and misuse of class in the study of far right parties: shifting the blame theoretically speaking

Although the “classlessness” argument is quite strong in various domains of social sciences (see below), the mainstream agenda in the political research of the contemporary Far Right has been rather shaped by the idea that since the 1990s the working-class in advanced capitalism gradually became the most receptive audience of parties such as the French Front National, the Austrian FPÖ, the Progress Party in Norway, the Danish People’s Party, or the Belgian Vlaams Blok (Mayer, 1998; Riedlsperger, 1998; Minkenberg, 2013; Betz, 1994; McGann and Kitschelt, 2005). This line of reasoning has also been applied quite early by H. Kitschelt (1995) in his comparative work on national case studies and has been further scrutinized in the more recent cases of thriving far right politics.

A quite common pattern employed in the analysis of the far right elements embodied by the Tea Party (Parker and Barreto, 2013) or by Donald Trump (Mudde, 2015) in the US, or by the UK Independence Party (Ford and Goodwin, 2014) in the UK, regards the moral/ cultural narrative. Pertinent both to the modernization line of argument and the cultural thesis, the moral narrative portrays white workers as antagonists clinging to the unfair advantages of an earlier time, whose concern is how to resist to progressive change in order to maintain power over ethnocultural minorities (Gest, 2016: 3). In the British context the moral inferiority that allegedly characterizes the “undeserving poor” this ‘apolitical section in society who are neither deserving nor poor’ (Usherwood, 2007) leads to class stereotyping or in some cases brews working-class demonization (Jones, 2011; see also Wray, 2006). The use of terms such as “angry white men” (Ford and Goodwin, 2010), or “losers of globalization” (Kriesi et al. 2006) in academic literature has also raised concerns for normative biases (van der Brug et al., 2013: 52). In the same vein, other authors accuse the American white working-class for having succumbed to a decay of its industriousness, while losing religiosity and becoming less bounded by linear marriage pathways (Murray, 2012).

According to Gest (2016: 5) there are two distinct, but closely related hidden agendas here: the first invokes the deviant norms of the white working-class in order to justify the latter’s lower social position; the second focuses on deteriorating mores in an attempt to signal a crisis within the white working-class itself. Both agendas underline the cultural resources of the far right appeal.

While the cultural-moral narrative and its stereotyping implications are quite common in public discourse and academia (Raka, 2017), the economic aspects of the abovementioned political phenomena have also been negotiated in tandem with the growing social inequalities debate. Advocates of a resource-oriented perspective argue that while ethnic,

gender, and cultural backgrounds are factors that should be taken into consideration when observing political behaviors, social class still matters. More specifically, the disengaged political behavior that fuels far right attitudes is strongly associated with the juxtaposition of the outmoded white working class with a white upper-middle class that has drawn economic and cultural boundaries between itself and those who failed in socio-economic terms (Schlozman, Verba and Brady, 2013).

Despite the presence of elaborated accounts of social class in the academic literature on far right parties -mostly in what regards the period before and right after the global economic crisis of 2008- the current discussion on the economic and cultural preconditions of the nationalism and working-class nexus still lags behind. Even when class is used in a sophisticated framework that mixes moral, ideological and socio-economic understandings of nationalism or populism, this hardly taps into a broader agenda of reworking class as both analytical category and political subject. Concomitantly questions on the conditioning of working-class support to far right politics are dissolved into general assumptions that lack empirical grounding either at local, national or international level, while little attention –if any- has been paid to the “silence” of the working-class (Tilley and Evans, 2017; Bornschieer and Kriesi, 2013) or even its left-wing responses.

In a very interesting opinion article titled ‘Trump and Trumpism’ Wolfgang Streeck (2017) suggests some core explanatory factors in order to shed light on the election of Donald Trump, which is understood as part of the international phenomenon of the far right upheaval. Social class and its relevance with Trumpism is negotiated in regard with the identities, the feelings and the expectations of the disorganized and demobilized working-class of the diminishing regions: ‘Trump won the United States presidential election with the support of a disorganized declining class, the industrial workers of middle America, who are comparable in their own way to Marx’s smallholding peasants of mid-eighteenth century France’ (Streeck, 2017). In a national context that converts the country into a “polity of status groups” the demobilized class suffers from a triple disease: a) it lost its sense of identification, b) it feels abandoned, and c) it is ‘blamed for a rich variety of social malignancies, from racism and sexism to gun violence and educational and industrial decline’. The latter blame-attribution pattern has also been noticed by Gest (2016: 16) who constructs his critical argument as follows:

Politically, white working class people face a catch-22: should they complain about the promotion of ethnic minorities at their expense, they are labeled racists. Should they blame an economic model featuring expanding inequality and increasingly unstable employment, they are deemed to be lazy. Consequently, the politics of race and demographic change is fought indirectly, and often in coded terms.¹

¹ This is not surprising from a perspective of historical sociology. It bears a striking resemblance with what Bauman has described in his book ‘Memories of Class: the Prehistory and after-life of Class’ concerning the late

Streeck connects the working-class political cynicism that anchored Trump's performative campaign, with a double political choice that the American political elites made: Clinton and the center-left politics of identity focused on status rather than class, giving the floor to Trump who spoke to 'the silenced majority of a disorganized class'. The resentful response of the working-classes and its implications in the negotiation of the national identity has also been problematized elsewhere (Mann and Fenton, 2016).

Although Streeck provides an insightful mapping that avoids the oversimplification of the class experience, which in turn paves the way to stereotyping uses of the "working-class" concept, a rigorous analytical canvas of class making and remaking in specific historical contexts is missing. In his response to 'Trump and Trumpism' Ben Tarnoff (2017) notices that Trumpism in the West is not an exclusively working-class formation, meaning that it draws its strength from a coalition composed of both working-class and petty-bourgeois elements. The Leave vote in Brexit referendum, Tarnoff says, was won with the support not merely of blue-collar residents from the deindustrialized North, but of suburban Middle Englanders from the more affluent South and the same applies for Marine Le Pen's National Front electoral sources.

The problems related to a poorly supported fixation of the class proportions of the various "Trumpisms" lead either to overestimations of the endorsement of the Far Right from the working-class, or more often, to an empirically and theoretically uninformed use of class that fails to deal with complex phenomena, such as the current electoral success of right-wing populist politics.² In addition this failure contributes further to the marginalization of class theory in the studies of the Far Right and leads to a vicious circle that postpones a fresh understanding of how and why almost all the mature industrial societies underwent this shift towards nationalism and populism.

This is not to suggest that recent theoretically innovative and evidence-based studies on the class patterns of the far right vote are totally absent. I have already mentioned the contribution of Bornschieer and Kriesi (2013) who draw on an eight-class schema in order to attest their hypothesis that cultural world views rather than economic grievances explain

18th century pre-industrial workers who were perceived by the elites as the personification of social danger: 'Following workers' own habits was foul, indecent, or immoral not because it offended high ethical standards of the employers; not even because it threatened the level of anticipated profits. It was condemned simply as an expression of workers' autonomy. It would be, one can guess, similarly condemned and persecuted in whatever behaviour this autonomy might have been manifested' (Bauman, 1982: 63).

² The examination of the relationship between class and vote continues to produce very interesting research projects though. See for example Evans and Tilley work (2017), which shows that while the size of class groups in the UK has changed, there are remarkably stable class divisions in values and policy preferences. Class division thus remains a key element in Britain's political picture, but in a new way. Whereas working class people once formed the heart of the class structure and the focal point of political competition, they now lack political representation. Tilley and Evans (2017) have supported convincingly that the great majority of working-class people, has simply turn their back to politics and this was the case in 2015 and 2017 elections as well.

the propensity of parts of the working-class to support the Extreme Right. Holistic approaches of work that pertain hierarchy, occupational trajectories, skills, interaction within the workplace have been employed to examine class patterns in political preferences (Oesch, 2006), or to compare New Left, Social Democracy and Extreme Right appeal to the working-class in different national settings (Oesch, 2013; Bale et al. 2013). Most of those scholars operationalise social class through neo-weberian class schemata of five, eight or eleven classes (with the Erikson Goldthorpe Portocarero scheme [EGP] being the most common) controlling for the impact of other economic, political and cultural factors on political preferences. Although comparative studies across Europe have demonstrated considerable progress in moving away from simplistic explanations on how class associates with far right or extreme right party preferences (Goodwin and Cutts, 2013: 190), there are methodological puzzles that remain unresolved; the misleading use of EGP or similar schemata as constructs that capture experiences and preference formation in advanced capitalism has been acknowledged as a major one (Kitschelt, 2013: 232).

As I try to show below, a revived class theory could assert a distinct position in an originally multidisciplinary research agenda where the questions over the socio-cultural components of the major political challenges of our times can be negotiated in a comprehensive way. The task of suggesting a new multidisciplinary framework of class analysis in political sociology entails an overview of the epistemological challenging of class in social sciences. With the next section I briefly discuss the historical background of the “end-of-class” debate and the most salient responses that opened the “window of opportunity” for a new class theory in political studies, which is the subject of the last section of this paper.

The endless debate on the end of classes: contextualizing the cultural responses to the renewal of class theory

The developments of the past forty years in the fields of social history and cultural studies have left their tremendous impact on the class debate. The economic or sociological reductionism, mostly connected with Marxist or Weberian notions of class and class structure, has been heavily criticized for failing to decode the multilevel shifts that the European and American societies were undergoing by the end of WWII and onwards. Three broad responses followed: a) those who denied both the analytical importance of class and its actual existence in late capitalism, b) those who elaborated on structuralist tradition resting upon statistical categorizations of socio-economic variables, and c) those who defended the class, in the sense of a concept which is meaningfully mediated by culture and not something reified, stable and substantiated.

Kirk (2007) highlights the two cornerstones of the end-of-class debate of the second half of the twentieth century: the embourgeoisement thesis of the late 1960s and the post-

industrialism euphoria of the 1980s and 1990s. In the aftermath of WWII the assumption of affluence of the working class challenged the class divisions, even though this affluence was rather imagined. As Goldthorpe et al. (1967) have shown the explanation of the increased Conservative voting among manual workers through the so-called process of *embourgeoisement* had an insufficient empirical grounding. Nevertheless, the affluence thesis has been proved particularly influential despite the important methodological criticisms that have been launched in the 1970s (Critcher, 1979: 31; Mackenzie, 1974).

The narratives predicating the “end of class” re-emerged once again during the 1980s. According to the main line of argument working-class has departed the social landscape, either as a distinct cultural formation, as an economic entity defined by types of work, or as an agent of political change and action, while work has lost the central position that historically held since industrialization (Gorz, 1980; Bauman, 1998; Beck, 2000). This has led to a) a shift towards a new emphasis on identity politics and new social movements as political conduits of action and b) a move from the politics of redistribution to that of recognition (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; For a critique, see Fraser, 1995) assuming greater importance to race, gender, and ethnicity. The fourth revolution and the emergence of the new information economy have been added to the processes that are further fragmenting the class character of the social reproduction (Castells, 2010).

Class theory and its responsiveness to the theoretical challenges related to the transformations of the post-WWII societies has promptly opened the way for a creative defence of class that could metabolize the critiques against economic determinism attributed both to Marxist tradition (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) and reified formal theory. Two major epistemological components can be distinguished here: a) class theorists who called for a reformulation of class categories (Dahrendorf, 1959; Giddens, 1973; Wright, 1985), and b) social historians who argued that class is not a “structure” but a conscious experience of a group life (Thompson, 2013 [1963]; Calhoun, 1982).

The first current led to interesting and sophisticated mappings of class positions in modern societies, rendering class an indispensable tool for the examination of social inequalities. To give some examples, Ralph Dahrendorf (1959) argued for a modification of Marx’s concept of class, and suggested that the crucial question was not the ownership of the means of production, but authority in production relations. Eric Olin Wright (1985) with his parsimonious mappings of contradictory class locations broadened the structural perceptions of class. The same applies to the neo-weberian analytical tools employed by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), Erikson, Goldthorpe, Portocarero (1979), Chan and Goldthorpe (2010).

Despite its methodological novelty, interdisciplinarity and openness towards complex quantitative research methods, the view of class-as-location neglected important aspects of class formation, such as the multiple divisions and splits occurring in the inside of class. As Johnson (1979) noticed quite early:

These internal divisions –within factories, within industries, between occupations, between the sexes and between the employed and the reserve armies – ought to be an object of any primary theory of the working class. We need to start, indeed, politically and theoretically, not from the assumption of simplification and unity but from the assumption of complexity and division.

Without overlooking their revitalizing effect on the debate against the postmodern ‘classlessness’ exaggerations, one should also add that structural theories are generally less sensitive in assessing complexity and division. While important for an outline of the social structure, surveys premised on socio-economic categorizations need to be complemented by qualitative in-depth studies which explore what class means for individuals today and the ways the same individuals act out class in their daily interactions (Reay, 1998a: 265). Moreover, the difficulty to deal with the raced and gendered experience of class has been a recurrent point of criticism against macro theories of the working class (Lavelle, 2012: 56). These remarks give premises to a methodological preference for ethnographic examinations that could disclose how class is “lived” in gendered and raced ways complementing ‘the macro versions that have monopolized our ways of envisaging social class for far too long’ (Reay, 1998a: 272). As scholars of the new working-class have pointed out the revitalization of class theory could hardly be attained without a) a robust research design both at micro- and meso-level and b) an involvement of diverse disciplines from the studies of the new working class (Russo and Linkon, 2005). The pursuit of an encompassing new class theory is hardly new though. Those recent remarks that are formulated from a cultural perspective have their own points of reference in the epistemological processes of the second half of the twentieth century.

The developments in the field of social history from the late 1950s and onwards laid the foundations of the new class theory. The social historians of the ‘60s and ‘70s and most famously E.P. Thompson (2013) [1963] stressed the importance of a variety of symbolic content ranging from symbols, rituals, everyday practices, to songs, literacy, newspapers, informal means of education and so on. To be more accurate the roots of social history can be traced back in the 1880s in the beginnings of the popular histories, part of whom is Fabianism and the Radical-Liberal appropriation of the labour movement history of the early twentieth century (Johnson, 1979: 46). The postwar “re-invention” of labour history by GDH Cole and the work of the communist historians Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr, prepared a new rendering of culture and a break with the restricted categories of economic history (Johnson, 1979).

The historical context of this “re-invention” of labour and class struggle is fascinating. Briefly put, the History Workshop and the concomitant oral history movement whose members called for a history ‘relevant to ordinary people’ (Johnson, 1979: 66), the important works of Richard Hoggart (1960), Stuart Hall (1958), Raymond Williams (1960; 1961) along

with the contributions made by those associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, received a strong influence from other contemporary intellectual movements of that time such as: the French structuralism (see for example, Louis Althusser with the notion of ideology, despite the later culturalist-structuralist opposition), the revival of Antonio Gramsci's seminal work, Levi-Strauss's anthropology, the recurrent interest in Marx's early work, the Frankfurt-school Marxism, the attempted synthesis with Freudian psychoanalysis (Johnson, 1979: 65). Radical ethnomethodology and other sociologies (sectoral or sub-sociologies) as well as the French *Annales* tradition, had also their share to this conscious reaction to the dominant functionalism of the theoretical systems, while the same applies to Foucault's concept of discourse, the Saussurean linguistics and semiology. Therefore, it is not surprising that the riddle of class is still shaking the contemporary research in social anthropology (Spyridakis, 2017). One should also add here the re-discovering of Georg Lucacs's contribution in the area of class consciousness.

One of the most celebrated outcomes of this epistemological turn is Thompson's exemplar work *The Making of the English Working-Class* (2013 [1963]) which elaborates further the cultural theorizing of class. Craig Calhoun's three novel recommendations are also indicative of this development. Calhoun (1982) suggests to look first at the objective social structure, in its large supra-individual sense; second, at a culture even in its most traditional manifestations; and third at the immediate social relations which make up the daily lives of individuals, knit them together in communities and provide the basis for both collective action and collective understanding. In the same vein, other major contributions from the field of historical sociology shaped the terrain for a renewed class theory. Influential conceptualizations such as Ira Katznelson's (1986) four connected layers of theory and history (structure, ways of life, dispositions and collective action) contributed further to a culturalist understanding of social class that could be compatible with historical materialism.

To put it different, the abovementioned developments engendered the culturalist "renewal" of the class project (Devine and Savage, 2000), which entails a 'wider and deeper' (Reay, 1998b) concept of class, without aphorisms against structures and interests. According to Bottero (2004: 986), a 'closer investigation of interests and identities' (Crompton and Scott, 2000: 5) is associated- with approaches based on 'social class analysis [...] premised upon the interrelationship of the "economic" and the "social"' (Crompton, 1998: 119). This interplay of the economic and social has been exemplary in certain culturalist analyses that avoid the multiple threats of reductionism. The last section of this paper suggests a new framework for a multidisciplinary reworking of class as an explanatory factor of far right attitudes, relying on past and current developments of cultural materialism.

Cultural materialism: towards a new framework for class analysis

A cultural materialist account of class in advanced capitalism could be the conduit of alteration between the individual and the collective, the structural and the contingent, the universal and the local. As I will try to show below the shift of the analytical focus on the classed nature of particular social and cultural practices, in a way that does not negate structural and economic interpretations of class, has not only a worth noting past, but also a promising future in social sciences and political sociology in particular. Although the cultural materialist research agenda envisaged here builds upon the legacies of the 1960s and the 1970s it also rests upon the following theoretical building blocks: *theory of practice, sociology of emotions, interpretive approaches, and geographic theories of labour*. In other words, *the proposed uses of class deploy historicity in its intersection with relationships, experience, discourse, and space*, and therefore it challenges postmodernism in its own privileged field. Moreover, it is crucial to stress at the very beginning of our analysis that culturalism is not adopted unconditionally.

A distinct scholarship within the culturalist class theory of the last two decades holds that both the postmodern “death of class” debate and the traditional class analysis fail to acknowledge the “paradox” regarding the resilience of class cultures within a framework of class dis-identification (Bottero, 2004: 989). The basic “culturalist” axiom that seems particularly relevant in the contemporary analysis of the alleged working-class support for far right parties is that class processes can be fully operational even if people do not explicitly recognize class issues, or even when they hardly identify themselves with discrete class grouping (Bottero, 2004: 989). This axiom goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between “Klasse an sich” and “Klasse für sich” as it calls for an exploration of those class processes that are experienced even if (and especially when) they are not explicitly negotiated through the discursive field.

Andy Medhurst (2000: 19-36) summarizes the metanarrative of class in the framework of Cultural Studies as follows: ‘Class is never simply a category of the present tense. It is a matter of history, a relationship with tradition, a discourse of roots [...] a question of identifications, perceptions, feelings’ (Medhurst, 2000: 20). Munt (2000) and the other authors of the collective volume *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change*, provide a cultural matrix of economics, education, ethnicity, gender, and geography and argue that culture creates class. While this fresh contribution adds great value to more complex understandings of class manifestations, a cultural negotiation of class grounded to a solid structural and historical context could not be fully perceived without going back to the fundamentals of the cultural turn in working-class studies.

The approach of cultural materialism is inscribed in those cultural responses for a new class project that resisted in throwing the baby (inequalities and power relations embedded in structures) out with the bathwater (static representations of structures). Marvin Harris coined the term cultural materialism, in his book titled *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*

(1968). It was Raymond Williams (1980:243) who introduced it (quite modestly though) in the field of cultural studies suggesting the following formulation:

Cultural materialism is a theory of culture as a (social and material) productive process and of specific practices, of “arts”, as social uses of material means of production (from language as material “practical consciousness” to the specific technologies of writing and forms of writing, through to mechanical and electronic communications systems).

An interesting aspect of Williams’s theorization is his ambivalence towards the relationship between cultural materialism and cultural studies, since he registers the former within a tradition of historical materialism as a particular argument within cultural studies and even against it (Milner, 2002: 20). Other scholars find that cultural materialism is closer to other intellectual legacies, which themselves are more “historical materialist” than Marxism, most notably feminism and Foucauldian post-structuralism (Bennett, 1990: 35-36). Milner on the other hand, underscores cultural materialism’s proximity with Western Marxism, but also with the various post-structuralisms, which have in different ways emphasised the “materiality of the sign” (Milner, 2002: 22). Despite this proximity with post-structuralism, Williams stays loyal to historicity, both at his first approaches of culture as a whole way of life and at his late work wherein culture is redefined as a ‘realized and related signifying system’ (Williams, 1981).

With regard to the need for a new multidisciplinary class project the far-reaching impact of Williams’s cultural materialism is its contribution in unearthing the complex realities of contemporary working-class life. This is not to suggest that his theorization of culture does not suffer from limitations. For instance, one should not ignore the difficulty in Williams’s cultural materialism to move from generalized constructs (e.g. generalized practices) to operational analytical units in view of the empirical field (e.g. specific practices). This in turn poses not only methodological questions but also epistemological ones (Zinman, 1984: 246-247).

Williams’s scepticism over a complete abandonment of the structures and the macro-level constructs is quite evident throughout his entire work. The same scepticism is shared among other culturalist theorizations of class, who also approach culture as praxis. Culture should be perceived here in its inclusive sense with an emphasis upon the experienced nature of cultural practices. Williams conceptualizes culture as interrelated material-social practices that actively organize the social world: ‘[Culture is] a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also in institutions and daily behaviour’ (Williams, 1998: 48). The following notes on more recent cultural approaches of class, explore new ways of supplementing Williams’s cultural materialism so that fresh and more complex operationalizations of class are rendered possible.

A cultural mediation of class could not neglect Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and the two interrelated concepts of *field* and *habitus*. Linking William's late cultural materialism with Bourdieu, Milner (2002: 168) highlights the following points of convergence between the two intellectuals:

A shared sense of the continuing importance of social class to the social structures of advanced capitalism; a shared suspicion of the pretensions to exclusive legitimacy of bourgeois 'high culture'; a shared sympathy for popular cultural aspirations; and a shared assessment of the centrality of culture to the social organisation of contemporary capitalism.

Habitus, cultural capital and field, can be particularly useful in a materialist account of working-class culture. Briefly put, habitus is a durable, transposable set of dispositions that ensures a certain consistency in the collective orchestration of action without directly implying conscious agency or deliberate intentions (Bourdieu, 1990a: 52). Although habitus functions as an embodied socio-biographical narrative, it may change in those cases in which turning points include socializing experiences that are contradictory, disorganizing, stressful, disruptive or challenging (Horvat and Davies, 2011; Christodoulou and Spyridakis, 2016). In line with Bourdieusian terminology, field is a term that expresses sets of social relations that characterize particular learning sites, educational institutions, and occupational workplaces, in addition to their associated practices (Colley et al. 2003: 477). According to Bourdieu the relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On the one hand, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus. On the other hand, it is a relation of knowledge: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world.

This line of argument renders the spatial dimension of class a vital component of a renewed culturalist class analysis, although we should not overlook Bourdieu's criticism both against the one-sided economist and culturalist approaches. For Bourdieu and Passeron (1969) culture should be seen neither as an epiphenomenon of the economic sphere, nor as a domain where charismatic individuals operate, free from the play of interests and power, but rather as an arena *sui generis*, with its own forms of power, its own social logic, and its own "market" of symbolic goods (Rupp, 1997). In Bourdieu's view social space and its dimensions are real; classes are constructions that do not operate in a social vacuum but are subject to the social constraints of social geography (Bourdieu, 1990a: 218-29).

Stanley Aronowitz (2004) locates Bourdieu's class theory on the borderline between classical Marxist approaches and functionalism and criticizes his emphasis on space at the expense of time and historicity. Both Aronowitz and Bourdieu though, are aware of the agency as a *sine qua non* for the formation of class. Agents who occupy similar positions find themselves in similar conditions, subjective to similar conditionings, and they have every

chance of developing similar dispositions and interests. But groups of agents are not given in social reality; they have to be made (Rupp, 1997: 222) and this could be exactly the thread that connects the Thompsian heritage of class-making with our attempt to understand contemporary class in socio-cultural terms and successfully disengage ourselves from the bonds of positivism pertained in many current electoral analyses of the far right victories. Apart from avoiding the pitfalls of structuralism, the abovementioned contributions both of cultural materialism (Williams) and action-oriented paradigm (Bourdieu) enable a new class theorization which can also be protected against the risk of cultural essentialism, or else the circularity of cultural argument that occurs when a solid definition of culture is missing.

Interestingly the kind of culturalism that remains immune to cultural reductionism could also be sought to developments in the field of emotions that for many years have been ignored. As Goodwin et al. (2001: 6) has put it 'More at fault is the sociology of culture, which has proliferated terms and concepts for understanding meanings and boundaries and the more cognitive aspects of culture— frames, schemata, codes, tool kits, narratives, discourses —but has offered little that would help us grapple with feelings. Cultural sociology, so powerful in many ways, has been nearly silent about emotions'.

In his book titled *Emotion, Social Theory and Social Structure*, Barbalet (2001) dedicates a chapter in exploring how emotion couples with analysis of class actions. As he observes 'Emotion is essential to social processes not only in being central to identity and affiliation, in which its role is frequently acknowledged, but also in being the necessary basis of social action and in being responsible for the form which action takes.' The acknowledgement of the influence of emotions on class actions does not entail a reduction of social-class phenomena to individual-level interactions. Emotions inhere simultaneously in individuals and in the social structures in which individuals are embedded. Connecting emotion with different phases of social structure through time does not undermine the class formation (2001: 65). Barbalet's analysis underscores the significance of a specific emotion – resentment, namely a feeling that another has gained unfair advantage - in class formation (2001: 63). Doing so, the writer appraises the risk of circularity of cultural explanation, when the culturalist scholar ignores not only the discontinuities within but also the organizational and political sources of life patterns and practices about which contestation is continuous and uneven (2001: 78). To sum up, emotion here can be seen as having been grounded in social relations as well as in the reality of individual experience. The methodological question that arises concerns the ways through which the work of emotions over the "hurts and minds" of the people is intelligible. How could we explore *the emotional public spheres* (Richards, 2013), or the *structure of feeling* (Williams, 1977, 1979) of the working-classes, or else the collective – shared emotions?

One possible route could be the one proposed by the collective identity scholars. As already noticed, identity is usually contrasted to "interest". Most commonly, identities are based on ascribed traits such as sexual preference, nationality, race, class, and gender—

although one can also identify with beliefs or principles, such as religions (Goodwin et al. 2001: 9). Although most discussions portray collective identity as the drawing of a cognitive boundary little attention has been paid to the fact that identity includes affection for group members and, frequently, antipathy toward non-members. Or else, the “strength” of an identity, even a cognitively vague one, comes from its emotional side (Goodwin et al. 2001: 9). The agreement against the dichotomy between cognitive and affectual is a common ground for varying cultural theories of emotions.

Barker rests upon the dialogical tradition of the 1920s (Bakhtin, Volosinov, Vygotsky) in order to determine emotion as analytical category for investigating working-class actions. In Gdansk events that Barker explores it is the emergence of new ideas and feelings, embodied in new social relationships, institutions, and collective power that matters. As he concludes:

In a dialogical account, we see people shifting the meanings of their identities, adopting new ones, both personal and social, in processes of communicative action full of their own emotional colors. The salience of different identities (Reicher 1996a, 1996b) shifts through their interactions with the regime and among themselves, in a making, not a loss, of identities (Barker, 2004: 194).

Both the study of emotions and the collective identity scholarship, focus on the intersection between the individual and the social, the historical and the spatial. The cultural material which could elucidate the texture of the class formation in its historical and spatial specificities can also be accessed through the analysis of narratives. According to Margaret Somers’s relationist approach, social identities are constituted through narrativity (Somers, 1997). Her methodological remarks give us useful insights regarding the questions of class:

An identity approach to action assumes that social action can be intelligible only if we recognize that people are guided to act by the relationships in which they are embedded, rather than by the interests we ascribe to them. The identity approach focuses on how people characterize themselves in relationships. It is within numerous and multilayered narratives and social networks that identities are formed and challenged. The narrative dimension of identities is intelligible only if we recognize the one or many ontological and public narratives in which actors identify themselves [...] Which kind of narratives will socially predominate is contested politically and will depend in large part on the actual distribution of power (Somers, 1997).

Narratives can be particularly telling about working-class identities and vice-versa. Joanne Lacey (2000: 42) convincingly assumes that narratives of one's life can be used as material to theorize class: 'Using the complexities and contradictions embedded in their own working-class histories to frame working-class identity within a poststructuralist paradigm, they present these class identities as now fragmented, contradictory, performed, lived as narratives and fantasies'. As Lavelle (2013: 93) observes: 'these narratives proposed by Lacey might argue that other narratives must be subordinated as a person's self is subordinated to the character claimed by the mask. The narrative of masquerading also proposes, at some level, that other narratives within the metanarrative of working class might oppose the metanarrative of the middle class, and produce signs allowing for small group separation'.

Concluding his theorizing of class through identity, which is in turn constructed through ideology, Lavelle gives credit to the narration of identity as a concept that allows multiple diverse identities to be conceptualized within the study of class. Consolidating his interpretive approach Lavelle (2013: 187) suggests studying class not in the basis of interests, but in the basis of in-group or out-group attributes and reactions to attributes. This position does not negate "agency" in meaning-making and certainly does not downplay its complex interaction with structure: 'Like the concepts of culture and ideology, "agency" may connote several levels of abstraction; at its most basic level, agency is the ability to make meaning, without which action, be it physical or mental, is not possible [...] Agency as power can be seen as the performance of personal identity. Structure equals how those in a power position react to this performance' (Lavelle, 2013: 197).

Although Lavelle would probably deny that hierarchy and power relations could be effectively explored through the lenses of class analysis, there is much evidence in current culturalist approaches that the reproduction of hierarchy and concomitantly the growing social inequality structure enables, rather than prohibits, a renewed understanding of class operation through individualized distinction (Savage, 2000: 102).

Among other crucial dimensions of the way that agency is intertwined with ideology and structure the spatial is one of the most promising, particularly for comparative politics. Far from being an "empty vessel" space, as well as place and scale, construct work and shape workers' economic and political actions in response. Therefore, working-class identities and the abovementioned class formation determinants at the micro- or meso level of theorizing class are better understood once the spatial dimension of class formation has been taken into account. This is also a connecting point with electoral sociology, as the maps with voting preferences are very often read in parallel with the socio-economic geography of the vote. The interpretation of the spatial elements of the nexus between class and vote can lead to more complex understandings of political phenomena such as nationalism, provided that the indications of social geography inform the research questions and the empirical findings of the qualitative study at the local level. In this regard Labour Geography gives an active conceptualization of workers as engaged in the uneven development of capitalism, and thus

could also add to the task of unearthing the working-class experience as determinant not only of exclusivist politics but also of solidarity politics (Herod, 1997). This is a last suggestion for a multidisciplinary renewed class project built upon the foundations of cultural materialism.

To sum-up, a cultural materialist framework of reworking class both as analytical construct and political subject, would entail multi-scale (local, national, international), multidisciplinary synergies between core fields of political science (electoral studies, social movements) and other social sciences and disciplines (cultural studies, sociology of emotions, labour geography), through the deployment of mixed methods with a priority given to qualitative components (ethnography, narrative approaches, discourse analysis). A cultural materialist research agenda would critically add to the comprehensive approach of the foundations of the far right rise in Europe and elsewhere and, why not, the preconditions of the far right fall.

Concluding remarks

Far from being totally new and groundbreaking the call for a renewal of class theory re-emerges in a context of growing academic and public interest about working-class political preferences and attitudes. Columnists, political analysts and academics shift recklessly the blame for the rise of the far right populists to the disorganized and disidentified working-classes in Europe and the US hardly questioning core aspects of this turn. The internal splits and the divisions within the working-class, the share of the workers' far right vote and also the *silence* (abstention) of the working-class, as well as the sporadic but existing gains of the left-wing working-class vote remain unexplored for the most of demand-side interpretations of the Far Right. This intellectual trend of treating classes as unified and static categories has already shown its limitations in studying past social formations. To be more particular, perceiving the industrial workers and the precariat as passive agents of nationalist discourses seems analogous to an older pattern of presenting working-class as fully subordinated, enchanted, corrupted, or instrumentalized by Nazism. The argument of a German working-class fully incorporated into the Third Reich, is constructed upon the same misleading epistemological premises that I tried to decompose here. Unsurprisingly the most convincing counterarguments came from a social history perspective.

One of the most penetrating and evidence-based historical accounts of the failure of the Nazi regime to successfully integrate workers into the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* was elaborated by a scholar who treated class as a relationship among real people, a "lived experience", just like his exemplar, Edward Thompson did (Caplan, 1995). Timothy Mason's work and particularly his contribution titled 'The containment of the working class in Nazi Germany' (1995) showcases how a rigorous negotiation of working-class lives and experiences, with their contradictions and internal splits elucidated by a critical Marxist

perspective, enriches our understanding of a complex political and socio-cultural phenomenon such as Nazism. While Mason's initial research departs from the institutional structure of the Third Reich, his turn to the field of social history metabolizes all the stimulating cognitive and epistemological developments of the 1960s and relates to the pertinent interest for the cultural and symbolic aspects of Fascist politics. Perhaps the contemporary study of neo-nationalism and its far right manifestations require a respective turn towards culturalism, in a critical perspective as well.

A cultural turn in class theory has already been suggested by contemporary scholars – mostly in fields of sociology- alongside with a new analytical use of “class” in a cultural, individualized, and more implicit way. In this vein, the departure from older versions of class theory – as collective, explicit and oppositional- is celebrated as the comparative advantage which ultimately leads to the intended break with class categories. While there are merits in moving beyond the traditional burdens of class theory and searching for a fresh understanding of the wider implications of inequality considered as hierarchy, I find that the reluctance towards the collective enacting of class, as well as the abandonment of the class conflict and exploitation as meaningful analytical categories, constitutes a wasted opportunity for a multi-scale account of class.

Such an account could effectively a) tap into the dynamic classed processes of culturalist analysis at the individual or group level, and b) interact with more structural and collective aspects of class, such as organizational cultures, workplace relations and other structuring elements that shape taste, social capital, emotional sphere and, last but not least, political preferences.

Nevertheless, this regression between individualized and collectivized uses of social class needs an elaborated, conscious and reflexive conceptualization, or else the new project will suffer from the overstressing symptom: attributing too many meanings to a concept without explaining too much. The cultural materialism framework suggested here holds the door open not only for a comprehensive analytical operation in the field of far right politics, but also for a critical theorizing of class both as an analytical concept and political subject, which is constructed by social reality and yet constructs social reality. This integration of the objectivist and subjectivist moment in the analysis of class could be also identified within a relational epistemological approach (Bourdieu, 1987) though in a more abstract level.

Building upon Raymond Williams's claims for a theory of culture both as (social and material) productive process and specific practices, the present paper attempted to show how different approaches that are ranging from Bourdieu's theory of practice, to sociology of emotions, and from interpretive approaches to labour geography, can be combined in a cultural materialist negotiation of the fundamental question: *why, when and under which circumstances* the working-class supports neo-nationalist, racist or exclusivist politics and on the contrary *why, when and under which circumstances* the working-class adopts class solidarity politics? This framework would allow for explorations of both class collectivities (along with their structuring structures) and individualised classed practices, both at the

local, national and international level, through a genuine multidisciplinary synergy (electoral studies, cultural studies, sociology of emotions, labour geography).

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