[T]he working class can never express itself completely as an active political subject: there will always be zones or regions or sectors which, because of historical reasons of development, will remain serialized, massified, alien to the achievement of consciousness. There is always a residue. There is a strong tendency today to generalize the concept of class consciousness and of class struggle as pre-existing elements antecedent to the struggle. The only a priori is the objective situation of class exploitation. Consciousness is only born in struggle: the class struggle only exists insofar as there exist places where an actual struggle is going on.

JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, Masses, spontaneity, party

The ‘Political Character’ of Class: From the German Ideology to Capital Volume III

In the course of this work, in particular in the previous chapter, we have insisted on the fact that Marx’s conception of class – which was absolutely central across his itinerary, from his first texts to his last – was based on the logic of its specific determinations. Marx sought to study class without falling into any sort of hypostatisation, be it ontological or sociological in character. In his research, Marx examined the distinctive traits of class, its relationship with the dimension of subjectivity, the difference between the proletariat and the working class, and to what extent this question was trans-historical in character: that is, understanding whether all epochs were characterised by the presence of class or whether it ‘exclusively’ appeared as an element of the capitalist mode of production, in its specific difference with respect to the preceding forms. Finally, he sought to understand the articulation of the ‘acting in common’ of the individuals making up a class, with its potential to break up the ‘present state of things’.

For the purposes of this study of the problem of class, it seems particularly worthwhile to refer to two works by the young Marx, namely his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, and the German Ideology.
the first text, we see the ‘capture of speech’ by the proletariat, the ‘class with radical chains,’ the incarnation and materialisation of ‘tort’, given its radical asymmetry with respect to the bourgeoisie. Indeed, while this latter has particular interests and thus seeks to fulfil a particular goal, the proletariat instead appears as a non-class class, the bearer of a sort of ‘partial universalism’ since, unlike the bourgeoisie, it has no particular interests to defend. We can speak of the dimension of universalism because the proletariat tends toward the overcoming of class society, and thus its own existence as a class, on the basis of a full negation of all particularisms. At the same time, however, this universalism is rooted in a determinate portion of society, is not neutral with regard to existing social positions, and thus assumes the ‘guilty’ perspective of the proletariat. This paradox of the non-class proletarian class is extremely productive on the theoretical and political planes, but at the same time presents certain difficulties.

The second text mentioned, the *German Ideology*, presents a consideration of great importance for our analysis of this problem: ‘The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class’. The thing that unites the individuals who come to constitute a

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1 Certeau 1998.
3 See Žižek 2004, pp. 297–8: ‘the only universal class whose singularity (exclusion from society of property) guarantees its *actual* universality, is the proletariat ... In Alain Badiou’s terms, proletariat is not another *particular* class, but a *singularity* of the social structure, and *as such* the universal class, the non-class among the classes’. See also Žižek 2008. For further insight on this declination of the proletariat, see Badiou 1992, which articulates a ‘politics of emancipation’, which ‘exists in sequences’ and is dependent on the ‘chance of the event’ that prescribes it; Badiou 1998 and 2009. On Badiou and Marxism, see Toscano 2007. We agree with some aspects of Badiou’s reflection on the proletariat as a partial universalism, but we consider this concept’s lack of specific determination problematic; indeed, this naturally flows from a conception of politics incardinated on the dimension of the event. A rather different perspective is the ‘democratic’ outlook of Rancière 1995a, with its theorisation of the ‘part of those who have no part’, the ‘recognition’ of wrong. See also Rancière 1995b, which addresses the paradox of the proletariat as a non-class class, interpreting subjectivation as the process of ‘disidentification’ or ‘declassification’. For a comparison between Badiou and Rancière, see Visentin 2009. Another framework incardinated on the element of democracy, though articulated in a manner different to Rancière’s, is that of Laclau and Mouffe 1989, in certain respects drawing on Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. However, with this approach the question of domination risks losing its constitutive reference to the ‘bond’ of labour. On Laclau and his engagement with Gramsci see Frosini 2009, pp. 105–20.