EDITORIAL

The dynamics of class and the radical right

Many plausible explanations are currently offered for the rise of the far right in modern Europe, and indeed for the broader shift to the moderate right in most European countries today.[1] Fear of crime and insecurity, and hostility to immigrants, refugees and ethnic minority communities, are most often cited as the anxieties which underlie this rightward current. The complacency of the political establishments in most European countries, and their privileged detachment from everyday experiences and struggles, are also offered as explanations for the rise of parties that claim in these conditions to be speaking up for 'ordinary citizens' against self-serving or corrupt governing classes. The collapse of Communism, and the destruction, confusion and weakness of the former parties of the left, is another factor contributing, as no one quite anticipated it would, to the emerging ascendancy of the right. Since there is no longer any robust voice speaking for the disadvantaged from the left, space has been opened up for protests to be made on their behalf by movements who claim to speak and fight for them against a different enemy. Instead of the rich and powerful, ethnic competitors for territory, jobs, and social benefits are characterised with dire effect as the most tangible and remediable cause of the problems of the poor.These explanations have some purchase on the present situation, and must be considered in the attempts to devise responses to it. But it is necessary at the same time to look for deeper social changes which are contributing to this disturbing shift in the political climate. This article will suggest what these changes are, and the large problems that these signify for progressive politics.

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1. Recent election successes for the far right include an 18% vote for Le Pen in the second round of the French presidential election in 2002; Pim Fortuyn's List's second place in the Netherlands in 2002; 9% for the Popular Party in Portugal in 2002; 12% for the Danish People's Party in 2001; 27% for the Austrian Freedom Party in 1999; 9.9% for the Flemish Block in Belgium in 1999, with 20 out of 50 seats won in Antwerp; 14.7% for the Norway Progress Party in 1999; 22.5% for the Swiss People's Party in 1999; the British National Front's three council seats in Burnley in the UK local elections this year; the right-wing coalition of Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the Allianza Nazionale (a post-Fascist party from the south, led by Fini) and Bossi's Lega Nord, which has governed Italy for over a year.

Relations between social class and politics have for shorthand purposes often been constructed as a set of correlations between political affiliations and positions of relative advantage or disadvantage in labour and property markets, established at various snapshots in time. 'Rational choice' models of political preference suggest that equilibriums are formed when those social fractions representing the relatively privileged, and those representing the relatively disadvantaged, make up equal sized blocks. It is this 'equilibrium assumption' which explains why so much political attention is usually focused on the 'middle ground', on attracting the votes of those balancing fractions whose fluctuations of allegiance make the difference between the success or failure of centre-left or centre-right coalitions. In reality, as everyone knows, political allegiance by no means correlates closely with relative wealth or poverty, there being many other variables of collective organisation, gender, and political or religious tradition, which have always complicated models of the relations between class and politics. But if such models are of little use in their simplistic forms, they have long explained a great deal about the material correlates of political allegiance. 'The economy, stupid', was a famous recent expression of this insight.

Indeed, even on the left, the size and composition of these fractions of the advantaged and the disadvantaged, or to put it another way, the size and composition of different social classes, has long been a central dimension of political analysis and strategy. Eric Hobsbawm's *The Forward March of Labour Halted*, which in 1978 drew attention to the ongoing demographic decline of the industrial working class, and its implications for progressive politics, sounded an alarm bell whose significance was accepted both by the revisionists of New Labour, and by those of the New Left.[2] Each of these tendencies correctly drew the conclusion from this emerging social demography that the left could no longer count on its latent 'class majority', since the core working class on which its base was built was now in decline. New social constituencies would have to be found to sustain the parties of the left, if they were to remain contenders for power and hegemony. It is the failure to construct such a new hegemony, in a way which does not exclude and marginalise working-class constituencies, which

2. Eric Hobsbawm's article was first published in *Marxism Today* September 1978. See also, for a more upbeat post-industrial interpretation of the same period, Andrew Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, 1980 (English edition Pluto Press 1982).

has created the opportunities for movements and parties of the radical right.

But while arguments of this kind have their validity, they are still inadequate to map what may now be happening to the political landscape of advanced European societies. The critical issue is not the relative numerical size of different classes or class fractions, and their relative weight in a democratic system which articulates these through the competition of the electoral system. Although one can model the relative success and failure of the left through such snapshots of 'demographic power', plotted over time, longer-term changes require a more dynamic analysis. Such an analysis needs to make explicit some hitherto taken-for-granted assumptions of socialist politics which may now, with potentially grave consequences, be losing their validity.

Suppose one thinks of class systems not as distributions of wealth, power, and life-chances, at different moments of time, but instead as patterns of collective mobility, upwards or downwards. That is to say, suppose one imagines social classes not as *structures*, nor even as *antagonisms*, but instead as upward or downward *flows* of groups held together by some kinds of collective identification and solidarity.[3] Suppose that the predominant orientation of a social class has always depended not so much on its relative position in a structure at a given moment of time, and its sense of relative deprivation or advantage within this, but instead on its longer-term direction of advantage or disadvantage, its *collective social trajectory*. It is not that questions of relative deprivation or advantage do not matter - plainly they do. These variables account for many local fluctuations in political support, election by election, and for many decisions taken by politicians as they try to win such support, for example by conferring material benefits on different fractions of the electorate. But while these distributional variances account for many political choices within short-term frameworks, the long-term - the *longue durée* of class politics - may have a different dynamic.

The left has been able to take for granted for nearly two centuries that the working class, as it has constituted itself, is a broadly progressive social force. 'Progressive' - especially by contrast with the current ascendancy of xenophobic and exclusionary social attitudes - has always meant universalistic, inclusive,

3. This argument about the centrality of flows has been influenced by Manuel Castells' *The Rise of the Network Society,* Vols 1-3, Blackwell (1996), John Urry's *Sociology Beyond Societies*, Routledge (2000), and Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity*, Polity (2000).

and optimistic. Marx, and the broader socialist tradition, held that it was reasonable to identify the interests of the working class with the interests of humankind at large, and to represent this class as the bearer of a universal human interest, as they held the bourgeoisie to have been before it.[4] This assumption that the emancipatory demands of the working class were broadly linked to universal human aspirations for democracy and freedom has not recently been much in anyone's mind, as the political role and voice of the working class has diminished. Knocked about by demographic decline, by criticism of its own particularisms and moral limitations (for example in the domain of gender and race), and by the failures and inhumanities of communist regimes which had claimed to equate working-class with universal human interests, this paradigm of progress has for the time being at least faded from its earlier prominence.[5]

The possibility now needs to be considered that the working class can no longer be unproblematically identified with a broadly universal and progressive interest, painful and disturbing as this may be. It is the analysis of classes in the dynamic terms of collective mobility that gives rise to this possibility.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the industrial working class embodied, on balance and in general terms, a general and universal interest. Its two great achievements were political democracy, which could never have been achieved without the action and advocacy of working-class movements, and a large measure of social and economic democracy, through the winning of universal entitlements to some measure of provision of health care, education, and economic security. Because of these political achievements, and also because of the key role of the industrial working class in a growing economy and thus in the achievement of higher (though unequal) standards of economic well-being

4. Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848) forcefully explained the bourgeoisie's claims to speak for a universal human interest as an outcome of its growing ascendancy.
5. Marxists once saw themselves as the legitimate intellectual inheritors of the political economy of the Enlightenment, mapping the stage of development that followed the theory of nascent capitalism developed by Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, Jeremy Bentham et al. Now it seems that the descendants of political economy in its original form have triumphed. We have a historicism without the proletariat, a class-based theory of progress in which the bourgeoisie retains its historic role for all time.

for all, the industrial working class experienced over most of two centuries a large measure of collective upward mobility.[6] There were of course massive setbacks to this long-term rise, of which Fascism and Nazism were the most important, and widespread suffering along the way, especially in the earlier phases of each nation's industrial revolution. Much everyday political conflict has been about these temporary setbacks and how to overcome them. But the continued assumption that this rise was the normal long-run historical condition has provided the underpinning framework for socialist political thought, in both its revolutionary communist and its evolutionary social democratic variants.[7]

Throughout most of these two centuries, the industrial working class of Europe was in a process of emergent ascendancy relative to the agrarian populations of feudal and post-feudal landowner-dominant Europe. Thus the cities were generally progressive in politics and culture, the countryside generally conservative, reflecting their predominant class compositions.[8] Of course the rising urban bourgeois classes were also a key element in this progressive evolution, their alliances with the industrial working class in the achievement of civil rights, political democracy and social democracy being intermittent features of this process of social advance. (The post-war boom, under the 'regime of accumulation' of Fordism, was a recent phase of this ambivalent class alliance.)

But over the last decade or two, it has become plain that the industrial working class is no longer a rising social class in Europe but is in a state of relative decline and marginalisation. Its absolute and relative numbers are falling in the population, as those of agrarian workers and peasants did before it. This decline has different and interlinked causes. These include the displacement of

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6. Some class fractions - 'the labour aristocracy' as it has been called - were of course more upwardly mobile than others, and this was a long-standing source of political division within the working class. These divisions did not however preclude the long-term rise of the working class as a whole.
7. The idea that conservative ideology was a product of declining social classes, and universalistic, progressive ideologies the creation of ascendant social classes, is a major theme of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1936). Differences in the cultural formations of rising and declining social classes, or 'dominant, emergent and residual' culture as he termed them, were explored by Raymond Williams, for example in *Marxism and Literature* Oxford University Press (1977).
8. W. Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Penguin 1967) explains these alternate patterns of national development largely by reference to the respective roles of the peasantry and the urban working class in them.

industrial work by labour-efficient technologies; 'globalising' shifts of industrial production into parts of the world where labour protection, collective organisation and labour costs are low; and the deliberate disorganisation and weakening of the working class by alliances between conservative governments and corporate interests.[9]

The electoral consequences of this decline have long been recognised by most parties of the left and centre: the quest for more middle-class, 'post-industrial' sources of support is the *leitmotif* of the Third Way and 'New Labour', and of kindred political formations in Europe and indeed in the United States and elsewhere. But what has been less recognised are the implications of this seismic shift for the entire 'imaginary' and vision of progressive politics. It may be that the experience of the long-term and apparently inexorable decline of the industrial working class is undermining its identification with an inclusive, universal future, its confidence that its own demands ultimately stand for the demand for a better and fairer society for all human beings. And it may be that this attrition of universalistic expectations and aspirations could be the most critical and damaging feature of our post-industrial times.[10]

Let us consider the possibility that the broader dynamic which shapes political imaginaries is the alternation between those social formations which are universalistic and inclusive because their experience is of collective ascendancy, and those which are particularist and exclusionary because their experience is of collective long-term decline. Our argument is that it is the rise and fall of classes, not their relative power at any one moment, which explains whether they are, in general, embodiments of a broader human interest, or representatives of merely sectional privileges. Can we not explain the rise of the xenophobic and exclusionary right across Europe (and the pre-emptive adaptation to its demands by 'respectable' parties) principally by reference to these collective trajectories, what one might call the *dynamic* dimension of class

9. One could say that the 'decline of the working class' signals a political and cultural defeat, more than a demographic fact, since although the 'industrial working class' has undoubtedly declined, the number of those who live by wage labour has grown as women have entered the workforce in large numbers.
10. A recent example of the importance of such inclusive perspectives was seen when the African National Congress came to power in South Africa a decade ago. The partially communist formation of the ANC was an important factor in its framing of its strategy in universalistic rather than particularistic terms.

structures? It is, after all, the most salient and important fact about the rise of contemporary right-wing movements that their principal constituencies are not the petit bourgeoisie of earlier Poujadist movements, but the distressed populations of working-class industrial cities, whether in Rotterdam, Lancashire, or former East Germany. These populations are turning on their ethnic minority neighbours, or on phantom immigrant influxes and 'swampings', since they now see themselves not as members of a larger collective embarked on a journey of social improvement, but as a threatened and impoverished population. They see themselves as engaged in a desperate life-and-death struggle for declining shares of goods and services of all kinds. Their perceived rivals in this struggle are both the privileged and condescending middle classes, and ethnic newcomers.

In an article in an earlier issue of *Soundings*, the New Labour project was characterised as one which aimed above all to create a hegemony of the upwardly mobile.[11] It is this project of upward mobility which explained New Labour's commitment to the inclusion of corporate business within its 'big tent', its earlier emphasis on 'education, education, education' as its principal vehicle of individual and collective social mobility, and its insistence that entry into the labour market, or training for this, must be the *quid pro quo* for entitlements to social benefit. Whilst wanting to demonstrate continuing concern for the victims of modernisation, New Labour has been in no doubt that its principal appeal needs to be to those who can contribute to and share in modernisation's benefits. Tony Blair's personal image - his energy, youthfulness, informality, and relentlessly upbeat style - is of course perfectly tailored to correspond to these aspirations for improvement. It seems hollow only when his own aura of personal success and privilege, and the similar aura of those who surround him, jars with the circumstances of the many of those who are asked to believe in him.[12]

11. Michael Rustin, 'The New Labour Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism', *Soundings* 14.
12. The problem with this would-be coalition of the upwardly mobile was that it was conceived as an assemblage of individuals, not as a collectivity of any kind. New Labour has tended to be embarrassed whenever it has tried to give its project an imaginative coherence, the Dome being an early example of this difficulty. Crucial conflicts of interest between labour (which needed to be reinvented in post-industrial terms) and capital were obfuscated by the formulations of the Third Way. Chantal Mouffe 'A Radical Centre: A Politics without Adversary', *Soundings* 9 described this as a 'politics without antagonisms', but in fact the not-so-hidden antagonists were those who still insisted on the realities of class.

It is now becoming clear, however, that the success of a strategy of this kind - of seeking an identification founded on a shared experience and expectation of upward mobility - is partly dependent on the response of those social fractions who feel themselves to be left out of this upward trajectory. Those who feel left behind are liable to behave politically as downwardly mobile and threatened groups in society usually do, that is to say in angry and exclusionary ways. Socialists are used to assigning such conservative and defensive mentalities to relatively 'backward' and traditional classes, in the countryside, or among the higher social classes who are necessarily threatened by moves towards greater equality. Their problem now is that it is the heartlands of the industrial working class in many European nations who are most exposed to these downward pressures, and who are giving force to new social movements of the right. (It must be said that the New Labour government has been doing somewhat better than its continental and United States allies in looking after its core constituencies. It also seems that in its recent policy changes - notably towards giving more support for tax-based public services, notably the NHS - it has at last recognised the dangers that threaten.)

There have of course previously been occurrences of relative immiseration, and their common political consequences are well known. Fascism in the 1930s was the product of a catastrophic loss of security in large groups of the population. Outbreaks of xenophobia in recent years in the Balkans, in Russia, and in the former East Germany, as state-socialist economies which had produced a modest measure of material prosperity collapsed, provide more recent instances of these effects. It seems highly unlikely, however, that economic insecurity and anxiety will take such dramatic or life-threatening forms in contemporary western Europe, and for these reasons movements of the far right are likely to prove more containable here than in some of those other catastrophic situations.

But the problem is that we may be seeing not merely local or cyclical instances of relative immiseration, but a larger trend associated with economic globalisation itself. The decline of the working class in Europe is inscribed in deep social and economic pressures, notably towards de-industrialisation, and is not merely the outcome of political timidity, compromise or misjudgement by left-of-centre parties, facts of life as these may be. What is more, this broader global crisis is actually being perceived and articulated by these new right-wing

parties and movements, in their own crude way.

Thus, hostility towards immigrants and their descendants, and 'asylum-seekers', should be seen not merely as an irrational displacement of anxiety and hostility on to conveniently visible scapegoats, but as a defensive and retaliatory response to globalisation itself. Anti-globalisation movements can, in other words, have right-wing instead of left-wing agendas. This is made clear by the salience of 'asylum-seekers' and 'new' immigrants in the agitations of the far right. 'Asylum-seekers', who are perceived as would-be 'economic migrants' seeking better lives for themselves and their families, and not only as victims of war or political terror, are seen as representatives of the myriad invisible competitors of European workers. The fear is that 'more would come if they could'. Hence the current political appeal of the idea of 'Fortress Europe'.

Paradoxically, the earlier achievement of working-class movements in creating social protection through welfare systems now contributes to this anxiety, as these social benefits seem to be threatened by market reforms and growing inequality on the one hand, and by increased competition from newcomers on the other. It seems that the more marginal the populations of industrial working-class areas feel, the less they are inclined to share their remaining systems of social support with perceived outsiders. It is these attitudes which connect hostility to immigration on the part of right-wing parties with nationalistic attitudes towards Europe and other supranational bodies which appear to limit the willingness or capacity of national governments to look after their own.[13]

The more tolerant attitudes of 'liberals' in the governing classes of Western European nations are attributed by right-wing movements, and not without some real basis, to the fact that the social strata to which they belong are not in any way threatened - as are the poor - by territorial or economic competition from immigrants. In many respects these strata may see immigration as offering tangible benefits to themselves, for example in providing employees vitally

13. Although these right-wing parties seek support from the streets by articulating hostility to immigrants, outsiders, and foreigners, they can also present themselves as thoroughly 'modern' populists in sharp suits, as is the case with Berlusconi and Fini in Italy, Haider in Austria, and was the case also with Fortuyn in Holland. They find support among emerging strata who feel excluded by corporatist establishments, as well as among those who have simply been left behind by change. This combination, and their alignment with their national cultures, is what makes them a serious threat to the mainstream parties.

necessary to keep the institutions they control functioning. (The health and social care system in many English cities is, for example, entirely dependent for its continued functioning not only on ethnic minority employees, but on continuing inward flows of these.) These are real conflicts of perspective and interest between the constituent elements of centre-left and even centre-right coalitions.

In these circumstances, the reversal of these alarming tendencies towards xenophobia and racism in European politics is going to be a very difficult task, and is one which requires the most searching analysis.

Economic and social programmes which can offer economic inclusion and benefit to *all* citizens are the fundamental requirement of a politics capable of holding at bay the new authoritarianism and xenophobia. If the movements which are being mobilised by the radical right (which are responses to globalisation whether this is made explicit or not) are to be effectively countered, left-of-centre parties need to develop coherent and effective responses of their own to the dangers to citizens which market-led globalisation brings. Particularly damaging and threatening in this respect are high levels of unemployment in Europe - it is quite clear that the trade-off attempted by many European governments, of relatively high levels of benefit for those displaced from the work-force in return for the toleration of high levels of unemployment, has not been successful and is leading to serious social disintegration. Higher levels of growth, and a continuing commitment to relative equality - a viable 'European model' such as Will Hutton advocates in his new book - are the precondition for reversing the growing right-wing tide.[14] The *extent* of inequality is relevant, in that the more unequal society is, the greater is the fear of downward mobility, and the hostility towards perceived competitors that this brings about. In more equal societies, on the other hand, which have a greater investment in common standards and well-being, there is less anxiety about relative position, and thus less fear.[15] Yet inequality, anxiety and fear are now on the rise.

The prospects for economic growth and political harmony in Europe thus

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14. Will Hutton, *The World We Are In,* Little Brown (2002).
15. The negative consequences for health and well-being of relative inequality are powerfully demonstrated by Richard Wilkinson in his *Unhealthy Societies*, Routledge (1996) and in 'What health tells us about society', *Soundings Special: The Next Ten Years* (1997).

depend on the renewal of more inclusive and egalitarian social policies. Electoral coalitions which have focused on too narrow and too privileged a social base are driving large numbers of working people into the arms of right-wing movements. Even the more enlightened fractions of capital may now, faced with the threat of the radical right, rediscover social inclusion to be in their better interests. For example, higher levels of immigration are now needed by business to expand a labour force being diminished by declining birth rates and an ageing population; and greater economic and political integration across Europe is also called for, if the Eurozone is to remain competitive. A resurgent right will tolerate neither of these developments.

In order to see off the threat of neo-fascism, and resume the development of its own project, the left needs to think again about its premature abandonment of the working class. It needs to recognise that although workers in manufacturing industry may no longer be in the majority, those who depend for their well-being on the fruits of their labour remain as numerous and preponderant as they ever were. If left-of-centre parties cannot again learn to speak for these populations, we can now see who will do so in their place.

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