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Workers and the Radical Right

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In 2009 the French sociologist Didier Eribon published *Retour à Reims*, a partly autobiographical work that describes growing up in a working-class family in the old city of Reims. The highly intelligent homosexual young man gladly moved to Paris in the early 1970s, heading for academia and freedom. For many years he had not seen his family. But when informed that his father had died, he returned to Reims to discover that his previously communist relatives now supported the radical right-wing Front National. "Workers" no longer confronted "capitalists," but "the French" were pitted against "the foreigners." *Retour à Reims* appealed to a broad readership and was adapted for the stage.[1] The book illustrates a worldwide trend: the rise of a Working-class Radical Right. This development has two sides: the crisis of the old Left workers' parties, and the growing working-class support for radical right-wing populism.

The crisis of the traditional Left is a global phenomenon.[2] Social democratic and labor parties are not doing very well electorally—most of them reached their peak of support between 1940 and 1989, though Portugal and Brazil were a bit later—and they are struggling with a fundamental identity problem. In the age of economic crisis and globalization, national states cannot implement Social-Keynesianism as effectively as they could in the past. And many new challenges have appeared. Traditional political centralism has to be reconciled with grassroots movements, and feminism with an androcentric culture. The environmental movement needs to be taken seriously without abandoning the pursuit of economic growth, the condition for redistribution in a capitalist context. Generalized confusion has resulted in a tremendous increase of floating voters, ageing and decreasing party membership numbers, and the virtual disappearance of active working-class members, thus weakening ties with trade unions.

Communist parties are not faring any better. For most of them the high point was in the 1940s; now, many are having a hard time. In quite a few countries, the parties were dissolved after electoral declines, splits, or bankruptcy. This has been the case in Britain (dissolved 1991), Italy (disbanded 1991), Finland (bankrupted 1992), and Brazil (internal coup and split 1992). Other parties have gone through mergers, for example in Mexico (founding of the Unified Socialist Party in 1981). Even the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M) in West Bengal, which was a major party from the 1970s until 2011, has been reduced to a minor player because of its virulent neo-liberal policies. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule—the South African Communist Party comes to mind—but the general trend is downward.

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More or less independent of these developments, there was another: From roughly the 1970s, a new Radical Right emerged. In Europe, the movement includes the Danish and Norwegian Progress parties, the Italian Lega Nord, and the French Front National; in the United States, the Christian Voice and similar organizations; in India, Hindu nationalists. Most of these movements distance themselves from "old" fascist and Nazi politics, while rejecting the dominant cultural and political systems. As political scientist Hans-Georg Betz observed for the European parties: "They are right-wing first in their rejection of individual and social equality and of political projects that seek to achieve it; second in their opposition to the social integration of marginalized groups; and third in their appeal to xenophobia, if not overt racism and anti-Semitism. They are populist in their unscrupulous use and instrumentalization of diffused public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment and their appeal to the common man and his allegedly superior common sense."[3]

The breakthrough of the Radical Right typically took place in the 1990s or 2000s, and coincided to some extent with the decline of left-wing workers' parties. Many right-wing parties attracted a working-class base. In Europe, workers have become the core of, inter alia, the Austrian Freedom Party, the Belgian Flemish Block, the French National Front, the Danish People's Party, the Norwegian Progress Party, Law and Justice in Poland, and the Hungarian Civic Alliance. It has even been argued that since the 1990s right-wing populist parties have turned into "a new type of working-class party."[4] Similar shifts took place in the United States with the presidential election of 2016.[5] The Indian historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has called this trend the "vernacularization of labour politics," which he defines as "solidarity of people with a common cause which may be social or cultural or sometimes regressively religious; the solidarity thus obtained can be and is used to pursue an agenda that runs parallel with or replaces that of trade unions."[6]

Of course, this is not the first time that large sections of the working-class lent their support to radical right-wing movements. Research has revealed that at the end of the Weimar Republic the German Nazi-party attracted a significant portion of the working class, especially but not exclusively, in Protestant rural areas.[7] This was also the case with other fascist movements of the interwar years.[8] But the parallels between these earlier right turns and the present situation are of limited usefulness. More research is needed, but that which has been undertaken suggests that the mixture of economic, social and cultural factors behind the rise of the right are different today, although causal configurations vary from place to place.

In his illuminating contribution to this forum, Ernesto Semán warns of facile comparisons. Critical of the supposed parallels between Peronism and the Trump phenomenon, he points out that during Perón's rise to power the Argentinian trade-union movement was not in decline and working-class living standards were not falling. Sardonically he remarks: "Crisis-leads-to-populism is a trope that feeds into the narrative of workers' irrationality when cornered by economic constraints (allegedly, unlike bankers or architects

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who supposedly absorb setbacks with the utmost sobriety)." Similarly, the current rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany is taking place at a moment in which the German economy is doing quite well.[9] Macro-economic performance does not always appear to be decisive. Perhaps more important is a combination of some of the following economic and socio-cultural factors:[10]

- In recent decades, many jobs have shifted from industry to services, resulting in unemployment in de-industrialized areas and precarity and lower wages in the new service sectors.
- Many well-paid jobs have clustered in big cities, thus reducing the economic prospects and social status of employees in smaller cities and suburbs.
- The growing emphasis on entrepreneurialism and high levels of skill has undermined self-esteem based on being a "hard worker."
- The institutionalization of policies for racial and ethnic equality has threatened white male social status, which was built on racial and ethnic boundaries.
- The increased participation of women in the waged economy may have diminished the self-esteem of men, especially among those who have no other sources of status.
- Social cohesion and a "web of trust-based reciprocal obligations that address the anxieties of working families"[11] have been lost.

Factors like these, singly or in combination, may lead segments of the working class to feel a lack of respect or insufficient recognition relative to other groups in society. Gilda Zazzara's essay reveals that in Northern Italy, growing precarity, deteriorating standards of living, devaluation of manual labor, erosion of working-class identity, and disappearance of forms of class sociability have led to a serious "working-class malaise" and a situation in which workers, especially younger ones, feel "apathy, solitude, fear and frustration." In the absence of strong community-based progressive organizations, important segments of the working classes feel powerless and are angry that no one is listening to them. This *problématique* gets a special twist in the former "socialist" countries where workers believed that their situation would improve under capitalism. Once learning that this was not to be, it was very difficult for them to articulate their dissatisfaction along anti-capitalist lines. David Ost describes this in the case of Poland where "workers were *experiencing* capitalism as a system of class exploitation, but lacked any class-based ways to express their dissatisfaction. And the right began to fill that vacuum."[12]

Workers' support for radical rightwing politicians often seems to be a cry for attention. In his study of workers in the United States, Michael McQuarie found that "Donald Trump gave Rust Belt voters the opportunity to express their anger and disappointment by exacting revenge on the party that had turned its back on them. This anger and disappointment was not simply about the physical collapse of their communities and the decline of their material circumstances. It was also rooted in expectations that are a legacy of white

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supremacy."[13] Didier Eribon observed that people may vote for the far right even if they are aware that this is against their immediate interests, but they want to be heard.

Two qualifications are in order. First, there is no iron law that the working-class's dissatisfaction with its situation and with the traditional labor movement always results in sympathies for the Radical Right. In her case study of the Right to Housing movement in contemporary Madrid, Sophie Gonick shows that "the endurance of a right-wing Spanish elite, inherited from the Franco era," made the opposition "embrace a left-leaning ideology." Sometimes, a left-wing populism may also win the day. And second, in the longer run, even the Radical Right needs the active consent of its working-class constituency if it wants to solidify its political position. Smriti Upadhyay demonstrates this with the example of the Indian right-wing union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, which has to organize "the cooperation and consent of the working class through the pursuit of hegemonic strategies." If such a hegemonic strategy fails, it may unleash surprising dynamics.

The question of the hour is how labor movements can reconnect with working-class families who feel excluded and ignored. To answer this question, we will have to acknowledge that the current weakness of labor around the world is not a random catastrophe, but has its roots in capitalist globalization and the absence of a convincing response. For many years, Immanuel Wallerstein has maintained that labor movements are powerless in the face of the world system. The capitalist economy is a world economy, and the working class *an sich* [in itself] is therefore by definition a world class. On the other hand, "classes *für sich* [for themselves] organize themselves (or perhaps one should say disorganize themselves) at the level of the territorial states," because in the capitalist world system political power is organized through states. This makes it impossible for "labor movements" to operate effectively on a global scale.[14] The only way out seems to be a fundamental reorientation, which does not confront right-wing nationalism with a left-wing nationalism, but with a truly internationalist approach. That is much, much easier said than done.

NOTES

1. Published in English as *Returning to Reims*. Introd. George Chauncey, trans. Michael Lucey (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

2. This paragraph and the following are based on Marcel van der Linden, "Global Labour: A Not-so-grand Finale and Perhaps a New Beginning," *Global Labour Journal* 7:2 (2016): 201–10.

3. Hans-Georg Betz, *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 4.

4. Daniel Oesch, "Explaining Workers' Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland," *International Political Science Review* 29:3 (2008): 349–73, at 349–50. See also Marcel Lubbers, Mérove Gijsberts, and Peer Scheepers (2002). "Extreme Right-Wing Voting in Western Europe," *European Journal of Political Research* 41 (2002): 345–78.

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5. The extent to which Donald Trump has received working-class support is, of course, contested. But even scholars who believe that the shift has often been exaggerated have had to admit that important sections of the working class voted Republican. See, e.g., Mike Davis, "The Great God Trump & the White Working Class," *Catalyst* 1:1 (Spring 2017): 151–71.

6. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "Introduction," in *The Vernacularization of Labour Politics*, eds. Bhattacharya and Rana P. Behal (New Delhi: Tulika, 2016), 2.

7. Jürgen W. Falter, *Hitlers Wähler* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1991). A useful publication in English is Conan Fischer (ed.), *The Rise of National Socialism and the Working Classes in Weimar Germany* (Oxford and Providence: Berg, 1996).

8. See, e.g., the massive volume Stein Ugelvik Larsen et al., *Who Were the Fascists. Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1980).

9. Hanna Schwander and Philip Manow, *It's Not the Economy, Stupid! Explaining the Electoral Success of the German Right-wing Populist AfD.* Center for Comparative and International Studies, Working Paper No. 94 (Zürich: ETH Zürich/University of Zürich, 2017).

10. I have borrowed the first five points from Noam Gidron and Peter A. Hall, "The Politics of Social Status: Economic and Cultural Roots of the Populist Right," *British Journal of Sociology* 68:Supplement 1 (2017): S57–84.

11. Paul Collier, "The Importance of Belonging," *International Politics and Society* (2017) [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung], available at http://www.ips-journal.eu/in-focus/they-dont-care-about-us/article/show/the-importance-of-belonging-2416/ (accessed 17 February 2018).

12. An instructive Hungarian case study is Eszter Bartha, "'Would You Call the Capitalists Back?' Workers and the Beginning of Market Socialism in Hungary," *Social History* 34:2 (2009): 123–44.

13. Michael McQuarrie, "The Revolt of the Rust Belt: Place and Politics in the Age of Anger," *British Journal of Sociology* 68:Supplement 1 (2017): S120–52, at S144.

14. Immanuel Wallerstein, "How Do We Know Class Struggle When We See It? Reply to Ira Gerstein," *The Insurgent Sociologist* 7:2 (1977): 104–6, at 105.

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