Class, the Working Class, and the Politburo

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Abstract

The experience of socialist countries, which Geoff Eley and Keith Nield do not address, raises fundamental questions about their argument. Class-based thinking and rhetoric under Soviet socialism served as a weapon in the hands of the authorities, not as a vehicle for critical analysis, let alone for human emancipation. Before 1917, class-based ways of looking at the world presented enormous, indeed insurmountable obstacles for a liberal-based politics. Eley and Nield, while embracing liberalism, want to retain a role for class, but their vague proposals are almost exclusively rooted in historiographical polemics of overblown significance.

What Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have written resembles less sophisticated discussions inside the Soviet Communist party *apparat* during the 1970s or 1980s. The Brezhnevites, too, were wondering what to do about the urgent matter of class, especially of the working class. Of course, for the Communist authorities, these were not academic questions relating to the fortunes of social history and socialist historians at British and American universities. These were questions touching on the organization of the state and the self-understanding, indeed the legitimacy, of Communist rule.

Like the historians justifiably taken to task in Eley and Nield's essay, *apparatchiks* would have been blithely unconcerned with gender. But they would have needed little schooling in what Eley and Nield call state theory. As for the finer points of Gramscian hegemony, bitter experience was reteaching some of the *apparatchiks* what Stalin had known regarding the unavoidability of obtaining popular acquiescence even in a dictatorship (especially since Stalin's successors had less recourse than he to repressive measures). Finally, the *apparatchiks* would have been unimpressed by suggestions to explore Michel Foucault to show "how" class analysis could become more viable again. That is because what Eley and Nield call Foucauldian culturalism around the concept of class had already been tried, and although the Soviet Union's "Foucauldianism" worked to a very great extent—the party was in power—its future looked grim. In the Soviet Union, the crisis of class and the working class was not in the historiography.

In the Soviet Union, the state and party paralleled each other, yet the party bureaucracy was not redundant to the state, it was argued, because even though both the party and state were charged with managing society, the party had an additional task: ensuring correct politics. The party was class incarnate.

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Think of the political commissars of the Russian civil war, introduced alongside the tsarist-era officers who were incorporated into the Red Army. The officers knew military tactics, but could they be trusted to have or uphold proper class consciousness? Probably not, so the commissars would watch the experts—in the military, then in government, in education, everywhere. The party came to shadow society and the state, but the state continued to exist; in fact, it grew and grew. And even after the state experts also became "red," as a result of being born in the Soviet era and receiving a Soviet upbringing and education, the party watchdog structures supposedly expressing class and class consciousness were kept in place. But since Soviet state officials were predominantly party members, the separate party cells in each agency or organization, as well as the larger party bureaucracy, came to seem redundant. Why not just get rid of the party? That is what happened, and unfortunately for the Union, although the party was a strict pyramid, allowing for centralization, the Soviet state was federal and voluntary. The republics, without the party to keep them together, chose to withdraw. Class, incarnated in the party, was the core of Soviet socialism and of the Soviet Union qua union.

Beyond being the key to Soviet institutional structures, class thinking also served as the motivation and rationale for specific Soviet policies. True, over time the authorities tended to back off from some class-based policies such as criminal sentencing guidelines or restrictions in citizenship and welfare provisions. But the authorities never backed off from the institutionalization of class in the party—at least not until the party and class ways of thinking proved to be beyond salvation. Thus, if the Soviet case has taught us anything, it has taught us that in the twentieth century class has been very important and it has been very dangerous. I do not mean in Louis Chevalier's sense of deeply held bourgeois anxieties over laboring classes as dangerous classes. I mean class as a tool of coercion, domination, or if you prefer, hegemony. Eley and Nield are on to something when they suggest that the power of class for labor history was its "totalizing utility." For "labor history," however, substitute "the *nomenklatura.*" While labor historians were debating whether class was still a viable vehicle for societal emancipation, the Politburo was reaching the limits of class as an instrument of dictatorship and social control. Of course, there is no need to feel sorry for the *apparatchiks;* they privatized the property they controlled and turned the place back into Manor Farm, much as George Orwell had predicted in 1945.

Even after 1991, one could, I suppose, still engage in arguments about whether the Soviet Union was Marxist, deviationally Marxist, un-Marxist, anti-Marxist, and so on. But the fact remains: The Soviet Union not only deliberately created an industrial working class unprecedented in size, but it celebrated that class in image, word, and to an extent, policy. By the same token, class categories were a very effective weapon of Communist rule—and finally, for overthrow of that rule. What made events in Poland so dramatic was precisely that Polish industrial workers proved the potency of the notion of a working class by turning, as a class, against the very regime that promoted them. Anyone in

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search of the relevance of class and class categories, of the existence (discursive and sociological) of an industrial working class that was seen and saw itself as such, can stop looking. Likewise, anyone in search of the repudiation of class as an organizing principle for politics can also stop looking. Polish Solidarity rejected class as a basis for political organization in favor of more inclusive principles—they called themselves society, or civil society. Farewell to the working class indeed.

Eley and Nield know all this. They may evaluate it differently, but that we do not know. Despite their insistence on the importance of the political, their discussion of politics remains vague. What in fact are they up to? At one level, Eley and Nield admirably play Rodney King. They urge old-style labor and social historians to accept discourse and gender (whose virtues are extolled at length). And they plead with the *savoir-pouvoir* crowd to reciprocate by affirming "the usefulness of social historians continuing to do their work." In short, can't we all get along? Such exhortations, like the genuflecting to Joan Scott's alleged agenda-setting manifestoes, would seem to be neither here nor there. More to the point, in my opinion, would have been an analysis of the reasons why the *savoir-pouvoir* proponents have subjected the social historians to such "profession cleansing." Why would labor historiography require an Eley-Nield-brokered peace, unless it had become a substitute for political engagement during the death-agony of class?

Beyond peacemaking, however, Eley and Nield also advocate somehow getting back to class, which they note is "discomforted." Tellingly, they begin this resuscitation campaign by briefly pointing to pre-1914 Germany and the Social Democratic party (SPD), and one can only agree with their time-bound reading of class categories. Indeed, what is there left to say when the authors themselves write of "distinctive proletarian worlds between the 1880s and 1920s," of class politics as an "historically located repertoire"? What can one add when Eley and Nield write that "class emerged historically as a set of discursive claims," except perhaps to ask what nondiscursive claims look like? And yet, despite their brilliantly sober account of the origins and trajectory of class notions in an epoch now gone by, they want a revival, and for political reasons. This is very hard to fathom, and Eley and Nield do not provide much motivation. On the contrary, once they themselves underscore the servitude—notwithstanding all the nuances—of even non-Communist leftist parties to notions of class, it would seem that Eley and Nield would want to run from leftism as fast as from class. But having written in detail about the exclusions and limitations of class, they nonetheless uphold class as "a never-finished project" that "opens a space for politics." What kind of politics would that be?

To put the matter another way, when Eley and Nield insist again and again, as if battling against some formidable opposition, that the "discursive move" can be "extraordinarily fruitful" for understanding class, one is provoked not to disagree but to ask, Who precisely needs class, and for what purpose? Certainly not for building a political movement that encompasses all members of a society. Their chatter about "resisting power," about the "hegemonic 'imaginary'" of

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Thatcherism-Reaganism, about the "discursive maneuvers" of New Labour against Old might have been easier to take if it had been accompanied by a discussion of private property, civil liberties, civic associations, and the rule of law—and the relation of these to social justice, gender equality, and welfare politics. Either all that is too obvious to discuss, or we have a concrete example of "protesting ineffectually from the side."

Eley and Nield acknowledge that their expertise is largely limited to Western Europe. I'll leave it to others to discuss Eley and Nield's assertion that their attempt to revive class "could easily be carried to African, Latin-American, and South Asian contexts." Instead, I will conclude my remarks where I began, with the Russian/Soviet case.

For the past thirty years, much of the historiography on 1917 has been organized around labor and workers. Some historians explicitly argued, while others implied through their choice of subject and the content of their analysis, that 1917 was a workers' revolution. By this they meant that instead of a coup by the radical intelligentsia, the events in Russia were a revolution carried out by workers, who were class conscious. As I have argued elsewhere, 1917 was a workers' revolution, though not because workers participated in and supposedly drove the process. Rather, it was a workers' revolution in that class categories, particularly workers and the working class, were institutionalized. Here is Eley and Nield's "discursive move" with a vengeance: a "conspiracy" of analytical categories more powerful than anything the Bolsheviks may have fantasized about.

Since 1991, the idea of a workers' revolution is not much discussed in the historiography of revolutionary Russia, certainly not to the extent it used to be. But William Rosenberg, in a recent article on the place of workers in the worldview of prerevolutionary Russian liberals, comes close to an analysis of the workers' revolution as an organizing principle or concept, rather than in sociological terms. He argues that for liberals no less than for Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, "representing workers was also an act of self-definition." But the special challenge faced by liberals competing for the worker constituency was to appeal to workers without sanctioning the language of class that called into question the bedrock liberal belief in the universalism of law. Liberals wanted workers not as workers but as citizens. Caught between an arbitrary administrative state, which claimed to be above class (*nadklassnost'*), and tactical alliances with opposition groups predicated on socially based identities, the liberals split. Rosenberg concludes that the liberal "failure" in Russia had as much to do with categories of politics as with Russia's social structure.[1]

The upshot of Rosenberg's tour-de-force essay is not simply that class-based thinking was an obstacle to liberalism in Russia, but that class-based thinking pervaded imperial Russian politics. The question that comes to mind is why? Why was class-based political language so pervasive and difficult to counter in Russia, compared with the case in other societies that had larger numbers of workers and more robust working-class parties? Part of the answer is that the "civic revolution" that more or less incorporated Western European workers into a democratized liberal polity remained "incomplete" in late imperial Rus-

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sia.[2] This may seem a strikingly banal point, but it goes to the heart of what I understand to be Eley and Nield's not fully articulated agenda for today: how to retain some of the critical perspective of class, while rejecting class as the organizing principle for politics. That is a challenge, particularly in the aftermath of 1989–1991, that I would like to hear more about.

NOTES

1. William G. Rosenberg, "Representing Workers and the Liberal Narratives of Modernity," *Slavic Review* 55 (1996):245–69.

2. See Laura Engelstein, "The Dream of Civil Society in Tsarist Russia: Law, State, and Religion," in *Civil Society Before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe,* ed. Philip Nord and Nancy Bermeo (forthcoming 2000).

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