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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JANUARY 9, 2019

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10.01.2019

Is the Historical Subject Returning, Wearing a Yellow Vest?

If someone were to ask me the meaning of politics, I would say that it is concerned with the contestation of power; that it is agonistic, even antagonistic. And that it has to be, because what it contests is the balance of power wielded by different class interests. As Marx recognised, the underlying purpose of the social, political, economic and even legal institutions of capitalist society is to preserve the monopoly of power enjoyed by the capital-owning class. And, consequently, any attempt to challenge that monopoly, in whatever sphere, is going to be countered, as the yellow-vested protesters are currently experiencing on the streets of Paris.

I point this out because the nature of politics seems to have radically changed over the last couple of decades. Dare I say it, it has become rather apolitical. – concerned more with ameliorating the excesses of capitalism than with challenging the system itself. The dramatic protests against global capitalism that marked the end of the 20th century have now settled into a not uneasy truce, as new ‘transnational’ actors have emerged to fill and ‘depoliticise’ the radical space previously occupied by the working class. These new players comprise a panoply of ‘Global Social Justice Movements’, (‘GSJMs’) and ‘Non-Governmental Organisations’, (‘NGOs’) which impose themselves on inchoate civil society all over the globe. Whilst the range of their particularistic interests is vast, they are generally united in the denigration of working class politics. These movements, which tend to be managed by western, middle class personnel,^[1] and are very often funded, directly or indirectly by western corporate interests and unelected bodies,^[2] eschew the

representational demands of the 'old' class politics, insisting instead that their 'individualistic' agenda wields a higher moral authority. In the eyes of these new global players, 'collective' politics, with its demands of representation, constituency and even democracy are discredited artefacts of a broken system which needs to be superseded by a more moral form of global governance.

The rapid multiplication of these, media-savvy, global players, which act very much like lobbyists, negotiating concessions at capitalist summits, isn't simply a crude manifestation of an expanded global capitalism. Although World Bank requirements that third world governments seeking aid involve NGOs and advocacy groups has clearly helped fan that development. There is also a philosophical justification underpinning the emergence of these post-political movements, and the consequent replacement of the collective subject focused on class politics with a more compliant apolitical partner. What may seem surprising, however, is that global capitalism's new partner, should largely be a creation of the Left. For whilst neoconservatives bent on rolling back the state, welcomed the hugely influential work of neo-liberal philosopher John Rawls, which heralded the primacy of the autonomous individual and provided a philosophical justification for the fiction of 'trickle down' economic.^[3] It was the Left's embrace of postmodern thinking with its distinctive disparagement of historical narratives that has led to the abandonment of the working class as the historical subject, i.e., in Marxian terms, as the class capable of effecting historical change.

A corollary of this supposed moral evolution in trans-global 'politics', is the depreciation of the former political objectives fought for by organised labour and its associated imperatives of solidarity and community: terms which are notably absent from the new 'corporate-friendly' moral lexicon. Indeed, the vilification of the working class, which has become a cultural meme since the 80s, has proved an invaluable aid to the ushering in of this new apolitical elite. For the flip side of the worthy coin that is GSJM is the unworthy, feckless and irresponsible working class. By falsifying working class politics as greedy and self-serving it has been relatively easy for the capitalist media to delegitimise their demands. What is now approvingly taken up instead is a pluralism of social and cultural interests none of which has the political leverage, nor the desire it would seem, to challenge the status quo.

Urban geographer, Mike Davis discusses the NGO revolution under the heading 'Soft Imperialism', and regards it as responsible for 'hegemonising the space traditionally occupied by the left' and 'de-radicalising urban social movements.' Housing activist, P.K.

Das is more forthright, suggesting that the aim of such movements is to “subvert, dis-inform and de-idealise people so as to keep them away from class struggles.” At the same time encouraging people to beg “for favours on sympathetic and humane grounds rather than making the oppressed conscious of their rights.”[4] David Chandler describes these newly emergent political actors as ‘anti-political and elitist’ which seems spot on.[5] In many ways their actions mirror those of their missionary forebears: placating the natives and clearing the ground for the expansion of empire. However, his suggestion that the shift away from class politics stemmed from the fact that the leftist programmes of the 70s and 80s were empty and exhausted isn’t correct. Quite the opposite, as a brief glance at the progressive policies put forward at that time reveals. In fact, the compensatory consumerism launched by neo-conservative governments in the deregulated 80s, which has led to unprecedented levels of private debt, was the very antithesis of the socialist projects suggested a decade earlier, when workers had sought to found an alternative society on something other than a destructive and wasteful capitalism. A more accurate summation of those years of contestation – what might now be called ‘extreme politics’ is not that the leftist programmes were exhausted, but that their policies were never implemented. Certainly in the UK, striking workers were deceived by their own representatives, both in and out of government, but also by the political system itself, which used undemocratic means to block the implementation of manifesto pledges promising irrevocable and fundamental change to the economic system. What evidently united the forces against the workers was their demand for more direct democracy and involvement in the political and economic process, which was a challenge both to capitalist control and to bourgeois clientism. In the cultural shift from contesting capitalism to accepting it, it is acceptance which now seems to be the governing ethos determining and directing what passes for ‘leftist’ politics. It therefore seems timely to reflect on that earlier era, not so long ago, when a politics of contestation dominated the public space and being ‘on the left’ was a socialist stance, incontrovertibly bound up with working class demands for a fairer and more just society.

In the UK of the 1970s strikes, sit-ins, worker occupations and even work-ins (most famously perhaps at the Upper Clyde Ship Building works (‘UCS’)) were common events. Angry grey men, huddled around braziers, were a regular sight on the nightly news, and everyone seemed to be locked in debate about the economic and political future of the country. When Ted Heath, the Prime Minister of the Tory government then in power, called an election in 1975, (after declaring 5 states of emergency in so many years), asking

the people ‘Who rules Britain?’ the electorate decisively answered that it was not him and returned a Labour government. It was, indeed, a time of flux. And there was a real sense that fundamental change was possible; a confidence perhaps best conveyed by the appearance of the UCS shop steward on a BBC chat show. It seems incongruous now, in the era of ‘bake-offs’ and similar inanities, that the highlight of Saturday night television could be something as prosaic as a discussion of working class politics. That the chair usually occupied by Hollywood types on promotional film and book tours should seat the charismatic communist, Jimmy Reid, promoting nothing other than the interests of ordinary people seems quite extraordinary. But so it was.

What is not so surprising, perhaps, is the fawning media’s denunciation of that time, dubbed ‘the winter of discontent’ as an era when the country was on the brink of economic collapse.[6]Eager to hail Margaret Thatcher’s emergence on the political scene as nothing short of messianic, it suited the Tory press to denigrate the striking workers and present their demands as greedy and self-serving. However, what the workers were primarily asking for wasn’t money, it was power and more involvement in the productive process itself.[7]With many manufacturing industries closing down, due to a combination of mismanagement and under-investment, often notwithstanding considerable government subsidies, the workers could see a way forward through the production of socially useful goods, like dialysis machines and efficient heating systems for pensioners. In their demands for greater involvement, workers – through Worker Councils – were putting forward industrial strategies that recognised the importance of diversification, social goods, green energy, environmental constraints, worker cooperation and responsibility. In ‘Socialism and the Environment’, published in 1972[8], several years before ‘Green Politics’ came on the scene, the connection between the expropriation of the environment and that of the worker was recognised, as was the need to end the destructive and wasteful consumerism that was polluting the planet and threatening to make it uninhabitable.

For young people today, the passivity of ‘apolitics’ rather than the contestation of politics is the norm. The class divisions that animated society in the 1970s have since become institutionalised and repackaged as career paths for the ‘caring middle classes’ or passed off as market exigencies beyond the reach of government, as much of what constituted civil society back then has been destroyed or privatised. Margaret Thatcher is perhaps best remembered for her role in deregulating the financial sector and selling off state assets and social housing in an attempt to create an expanded middle class, but her main target was always the destruction of organised labour which she rightly recognised was the main

challenge to the capitalist monopoly. As victims of the cult of individualism which began to throttle society in the 1980s, and is evidently nothing more than ‘consumer grooming’, it is difficult for anyone growing up in post-industrial capitalism to appreciate that it was calls for solidarity, justice, worker co-operation and a new vision for productive capacity that shaped much of the debate around industrial democracy, which is precisely why there was so much opposition from the city and corporate interests, the media, the civil service and even the security services. What most exercised all these concerns was the realisation that their long held fears about organised labour being capable of effecting historical change were real. And that the only way to see off that challenge and to secure their monopoly was to destroy the collective power of the working class using every possible means. Structurally that meant emasculating the trade unions with onerous legislative controls, and eradicating those elements of civil society which inculcated notions of community and solidarity. Culturally, it meant effecting a radical shift in society’s perception of the working class so negative and pervasive that few, whatever their economic circumstances, would wish to be identified as, let alone associated with, working class ideas and values. Aply caricatured by a relentless and reactionary media, membership of the working class soon became synonymous with being a ‘benefit cheat’ or a ‘scrounger’. You could also expect to be imputed to hold racist and sexist views and would almost certainly be perceived to be lacking in aspiration. However, it is the label ‘underclass’, or ‘feral underclass’ for working class youth, which perhaps best conveys the dramatic fall and political invisibility of the working class, who were effectively erased from the political spectrum. With the withdrawal of the state and the promotion of the neoconservative mantra of ‘individual responsibility’, it became easy to present poverty and unemployment as personal failings rather than political objectives. What was thereby ensured was that the ‘irresponsible’ and ‘unaspirational’, seared by their shameful failings, would obligingly delete themselves from the political play list, as indeed they have.

Mike Savage’s ‘Social Class in the 21st Century’, published in 2015, which reveals the results of the biggest survey of class ever undertaken in the UK, with 161,000 participants, reports that not a single cleaner or worker in the ‘elementary services’ responded to the survey.^[9] Savage acknowledges that there are ‘telling patterns’ in the survey results, particularly as there was a ‘dramatic over-representation of business and related finance professionals’, and with the responses received from CEOs being more than 20 times the number expected. Unfortunately, he doesn’t seem able to tell us what they are. He reports that “the proportion of respondents who do not think they belong to a class rises as the

class hierarchy descends,” with only a quarter of the ‘precariat’, (the class who occupy a precarious position in society due to no or poor work opportunities) acknowledging their low class status. Whereas, “Nearly half of the elite think they belong to a class.” Savage suggests that this is a “fascinating inversion of what Marx might have thought, that class consciousness intensifies among the proletarianized, who ‘have nothing to lose but their chains.’” Whereas, “In fact, those at the bottom of the pile are the least likely to think of themselves as belonging to a class.”^[10] Apart from the obvious fact that what people think and what they say are often very different things, and the observation that nobody wants to volunteer for the losing team; there is no inversion of Marx’s thesis here. A better explanation for the proletariat not rattling their chains is perhaps because there is little chance of losing them in a time when their incarceration has been normalised, i.e., depoliticised. At such a time all that rattling achieves is to remind you of your sorry, forgotten state. Lenin’s observation concerning the working class’s perpetual ‘cultural enslavement’ certainly seems truer than ever.^[11]

Savage’s work is also instructive in revealing the social vulnerability of the middle classes and how class itself has now assumed a cultural significance as an aspect of personal identity: as a signifier of moral and intellectual value. Which would, perhaps, explain why GSJM personnel are drawn primarily from this class. However, the survey’s division of the populace into 7 separate class divisions obscures the bigger picture of winners and losers, which is what the dramatic differentiation in response rates so eloquently reveals. A less obfuscating analysis of that trend is perhaps provided by the simple societal distinction drawn by Thorstein Veblen in ‘Vested Interests and the Common man’. In Veblen’s study, which concerned the US at the turn of the century, all the ‘Vested Interest’ group requires from the capitalist class with whom they negotiate, is “a narrow margin of net gain”. In return for this moderate benefit, Veblen suggests, they will happily “shape their sentiments and outlook” in support of those business interests. If anything, at a time when social and cultural capital have attained new levels of exchange-value following capitalism’s colonisation of the cultural sphere, Veblen’s analysis seems more relevant than ever. For, in the era of trans-global capitalism and the accompanying expansion of apolitical social and cultural movements there are many more margins for gain.

The abandonment of the working class as the historical subject is generally traced back to the emergence of post-Marxian/post-modernist thinking in France in the 70s, with its defining denial of over-arching historical narratives. The work which has provided moral and political authority for that abandonment is ‘Hegemony and Socialist Strategy:

Towards a Radical Democratic Politics', by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, published in 1985. In that post-Marxist text, Mouffe and Laclau argue that the working class is no longer the historical subject, essentially because there is no historical subject and therefore no ontological privilege attaches to the working class as the effective historical force against capitalism. Instead, they suggest that a range of social interest groups, (e.g., feminism, anti-racism, environmentalism etc.) can, through 'moral and intellectual' leadership, (as opposed to mere 'political' leadership) combine to effect such a challenge. Workers remain relevant to that amalgamation of interest groups, but only through their lived, concrete experience and not because of the historicity of their position. It is in this new 'unity of an ensemble of sectors' that a 'structurally new relation, different from class relations, is to be forged. And such an ensemble, the work suggests, will form a 'radical democracy.'^[12]

It is in what Mouffe and Laclau call the 'decisive transition' from the political to the moral/intellectual plane that a new concept of hegemony 'beyond class alliances' takes place. The reason that a shift away from the political is thought necessary is because there is a perceived need for an ensemble of ideas and values to be shared by a number of sectors – "that certain subject positions traverse a number of class sectors." It is Mouffe and Laclau's contention that it is only by leaving class politics, and the inadequate "conjunctural coincidence of interests" that political alliances have forged in the past, that a new singular movement can be established. Part of the reasoning for this is the supposition that the working class cannot think for the rest of society: that it cannot get beyond the "narrow defence of its corporative interests."^[13] History, however, does not bear that out. As seen above, the UK of the 70s: a time when working class power was growing, was a very enlightened time. Anti-racist and Anti-sexist acts were passed and there was also progressive legislation protecting the rights of homosexuals, legalising abortion and making divorce easier. Workers even went on strike to demand more money for old age pensioners. In fact, it is difficult to think of an area of social life which was not considered to be part of the socialist plan for reform.

Reflecting on the fact that students and immigrants as well as factory workers were involved in the mass strikes which broke out in France in 1968, Mouffe suggests that "Once the conception of the working class as a universal class is rejected it becomes possible to recognise the plurality of the antagonisms which take place in the field of what is arbitrarily grouped under the label of 'workers struggles.'^[14] However, exactly what is 'arbitrary' about that label and what benefit is to be derived from abandoning it in

favour of a plurality of different labels which have no political significance in the context of a workers struggle is difficult to determine. Dissolving the solidity of the working class into a multitude of antagonisms seems aimed at destroying solidarity; it also looks like political suicide. In the famous Grunwick strike of 1976, started by non-unionised Asian women working for a pittance in extremely poor conditions, a powerful message of worker solidarity was sent to the Labour government then in power. Issues of ethnicity and gender were swept aside as the biggest mobilisation of worker solidarity ever seen in the UK was put in place and over 20,000 workers turned up on the picket line to support the strikers. The strike even went international: with dock workers in Belgium, France and the Netherlands blacking goods from the Grunwick, film-processing factory. It was precisely the widespread solidarity of the movement which terrified the government, as what was then evident was that worker solidarity could transform society, which is why the government resorted to heavy policing to break up the strike, (the same tactic the Thatcher government would use against the miners a few years later.) Mouffe asserts that pluralism can only be radical if there is no 'positive and unitary founding principle'. But it is hard to see what can act as a unifying force in anti-capitalist struggles if it isn't the commonality of exploitation. Who could the predominantly Gujarati women strikers: newly arrived immigrants from East Africa, have called on if it wasn't their fellow exploited workers? And how effective would their actions have been in the absence of that solidarity?

In their attempt to justify this dramatic shift away from class politics and the historical interests of the working class, Mouffe and Laclau draw on Gramsci's notion of the 'collective will', which he regarded as a national and popular movement capable of expressing the shared interests of the masses, and also on Gramsci's recognition of the importance of moral and intellectual leadership. However, with regard to both these aspects of his political strategy, Gramsci's thinking remains grounded in the historicity of the working class. For whilst he recognises the need for alliances and doesn't see the working class holding out on its own, he does recognise it as the directing force. The whole point of a collective will is that it is a single, focused will, and not a disparate array of tactics and objectives. In fact, Gramsci opined that what had blocked the formation of just such a will in the past was an array of specific social groups. "All history, from 1815 onwards shows the efforts of the traditional classes to prevent the formation of a collective will of this kind and to maintain 'economic-corporate' power in an international system of passive equilibrium."^[15] The fact that Gramsci identifies the need for moral and

intellectual leadership in the formation of such a will does not mean that it loses its political/economic base. On the contrary, not only does he regard it as self-evident that such a movement needs to be led by a party grounded in politics.[16] But he also recognises that moral and intellectual policies are nothing without structural change: “Intellectual and moral reform has to be linked with a programme of economic reform – indeed the programme of economic reform is precisely the concrete form in which every intellectual and moral reform presents itself.”[17]

By elevating a spurious moral leadership above class politics a platform has been created for an open-ended plurality of apolitical causes. The effect of which has been to radically depoliticise democracy by removing from its preserve the defining issues of working class contestation. Whilst Mouffe suggests it is the very fragmented, separate identity of these specific ‘antagonisms’ that produces a “deep pluralistic conception of democracy”, the reality has been just the opposite. As Ellen Meiksins Wood points out in ‘Democracy as Ideology of Empire’ it is precisely the disappearance of politically defined class relations that makes this hollowed out, ‘de-socialised’ version of democracy so attractive to global capitalism. Because, by putting the former social and political concerns of class politics beyond the reach of democratic accountability, politics is easily subordinated to the market.[18] Claus Offe too recognises that the “neoconservative project of insulating the political from the non-political” is served by a restrictive redefinition of what can and should be considered political, thus enabling governments to eliminate problematic social demands from their agendas. At the same time, he observes that the emergence of new social movements, operating in non-political spheres of action, usefully serves to exonerate that de-politicisation.

The Yellow Vest protest is a response to an increasingly ‘desocialised’ version of democracy and to the power of the elites which has only increased under Macron. What began as a protest against increased fuel tax is now so much more. Emboldened by widespread solidarity, the workers are demanding an end to the elitism and corruption of government and a recognition that the working class want more than crumbs. The overthrow of Macron, the ending of political corruption, a new republic, the emergence of a new political party for the working class? It is impossible to forecast how the protest will end. But it would not have lasted as long as it has if it had not been for the widespread solidarity the workers have shown. Solidarity is grounded in a love of justice, which is the life blood of working class politics and therefore until injustice is ended, contestation must

continue. For, as the father of political philosophy recognised, “it is always the weaker who seek equality and justice, while the stronger pay no attention to them.”[19]

Notes.

[1] Claus Offe, *New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics*, *Social Research* 52:4 (1985:Winter) 832

[2] James Heartfield, *The European Union and the End of Politics* (Zero Books: Winchester 2013) 117

[3] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1972)

[4] P.K. Das, ‘Manifesto of a Housing Activist’ quoted in Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums*, (Verso: London, 2006)

[5] David Chandler, *Deconstructing Sovereignty in Constructing global civil society in Politics Without Sovereignty*, (UCL Press: London 2007) 150

[6] John Medhurst, *That Option No Longer Exists – Britain 1974-76*, (Zero Books: Winchester, 2014)

[7] *State Intervention in Industry – a workers’ inquiry* (Russell Press Ltd.: Nottingham, 1980)

[8] Ken Coates, *Socialism and the Environment*, (Spokesman: Nottingham, 1972)

[9] Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, (Pelican: Random House, 2012) 11

[10] *Ibid.*, 367

[11] V.I. Lenin *Collected Works*, vol. 27, (Moscow, 1965) 464

[12] Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy – Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (Verso: London, 1985) 64

[13] *Ibid.*, 66

[14] Mouffe, *ibid.*, 167

[15] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, (Lawrence and Wishart: London, 2003) 132

[16] Gramsci, *Ibid.*, 129

[17] *Ibid.*, 133

[18] Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy as Ideology of Empire in The New Imperialists* (Oneworld Publications: Oxford, 2006) 9

[19] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans., Joe Sachs (Focus Publishing: Newburyport, 2012) 1318b