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Is Wage Labor in Highly Developed Capitalism Today Still a Force of Social Transformation?

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Is Wage Labor in Highly Developed Capitalism Today Still a Force of Social Transformation?*

Martin Kronauer

Abstract

The article deals with the question why in many European countries as well as in the USA significant parts of the working classes today support nationalistic and xenophobic political parties and movements. It reviews two different answers which are currently hotly debated in the political left. One answer refers to an imperial mode of living in highly developed capitalist countries which cuts across class divisions and also includes the working classes. The argument holds that the latter, too, defend their (relative) privileges based on the social and ecological exploitation of the global South. Another answer points to the political and symbolic marginalization of the working classes due to the reign of neoliberalism and the failure of the left to fight it. The turn to the right seems in this light to be a misguided response to the effects of neoliberal globalization on the working-class conditions and the lack of a credible left alternative. The article discusses merits and shortcomings of both answers. It then takes another approach to the issue of the marginalization of the working class, suggests to enlarge the social and political perspective to include a much broader variety of wage labor, and to address their common grievances in order to form new alliances for social transformation. Struggling for a more egalitarian society, the article holds, would also be a necessary step to address the pressing issues of global social exploitation and ecological devastation.

Keywords: working class, right-wing tendencies, social transformation, wage-labor alliance

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Nothing less but a deep social transformation would be required in highly developed capitalist countries to significantly reduce the growing inequalities and social cleavages which are currently exploited by the political right. And an even much more radical social transformation would be required to overcome capitalism's devastating effects on the global ecological system on which not only mankind's survival depends (don't forget animals and plants!). For the time being I don't see any social actors, beyond marginal minorities, who were ready to fight for and bring about these much needed transformations.

From a Marxist point of view it is particularly disturbing that in many European countries and in the USA the political right is currently able to recruit followers and voters in considerable measure from the ranks of the working class. I am aware of the shortcomings of opinion polls and official statistics. But there is enough evidence that workers are over-represented among the supporters of nationalistic and xenophobic parties and movements compared to their share of the population. Why is this the case?

To be sure, workers are only a segment of the much broader social category of wage labor, and I will argue later that it is necessary not least for political reasons to extend the view beyond the working class proper. But the segment which workers represent is still significant, and at a conference dedicated to Karl Marx it seems even necessary to consider why right-wing parties and movements are currently so attractive to workers. I will first look at two different answers which are hotly debated in the Left. After having discussed some of their merits and shortcomings, I will return to my opening question.

The first explanation why significant parts of the working classes today opt for the nationalist and xenophobic right refers to the "imperial mode of living":

The argument of the „imperial mode of living“ cutting across class divisions

This strand of arguments sees the working class in highly developed capitalist countries just in line with all other classes, being enmeshed in an „imperial mode of living“ that benefits from the exploitation of people and natural resources in the Global South. I am referring here to Ulrich Brand's and Markus Wissen's book „Imperial Mode of Living“. Stephan Lessenich in „Beside Us the Deluge“ also argues in the same vein. The argument itself has a time-honored tradition. It reminds me of Lenin's critique of the labor aristocracy during WWI. Differences of class position no longer seem to make much of a difference inside the „imperial mode of living“, even though the ruling elites benefit more from global exploitation than the subordinate classes. When push comes to shove, and this is the case with global migration, global warming, and the appropriation of global resources, the rich and the poor, capital and labor in highly developed capitalist societies stand united in the defense of their consumption habits and relative privileges.

No doubt, this argument helps to explain why we currently witness all over Europe strong popular support for making the fortress Europe even more impermeable for refugees and migrants from the South. But what does it lead to in political terms? It results foremost in an appeal to everyone in the most developed countries to realize that the „imperial mode of living“ is not sustainable. It has to be radically altered. Or restating it in the context of the question which is up for discussion here: The much needed social transformation is no longer an issue of struggles centering on wage labor but of raising critical awareness with regard to consumption. The appeal to break away from the imperial mode of living is directed at all classes but particularly at us, members of the middle classes, even if we don't drive SUVs but „only“ use the internet regularly.

To be clear about my position: I subscribe to the argument that the ways of life in the highly developed capitalist societies are not sustainable. Matters become even more complicated, though, since most people on earth, including people in China, India, Brazil and the Global South

altogether, strive for exactly the same unsustainable way of life that we enjoy. China in particular is already rather advanced on that road. I therefore prefer the notion „capitalist-consumerist“ instead of „imperial“ way of life since it is also present in the Global South. This is not to be taken as an excuse for us because it's still us who are responsible for the most damaging exploitation of natural resources and human beings. It only shows how difficult it is to get rid of capitalism since it is the only mode of production ever established on earth which not only satisfies specific needs but first and foremost creates the needs which it seeks to satisfy for the only purpose of generating profits. Most if not all of us have to admit that in one way or the other we are “corrupted” (Givsan 2019) by capitalism's capacity to shape our needs.

I am not so convinced by the second main argument which holds that class differences no longer matter much with regard to social transformation, given the all-encompassing allegiance of the people to the more or less privileged ways of life in the comfort zones of the world. To be sure, there is no reason to assume that the working classes in the highly developed capitalist societies are less enmeshed in the capitalist-consumerist way of life than the middle classes and the ruling classes in those societies, despite class related differences in resources and tastes. But it would be misleading to gloss over the fact that inequality has sharply increased in the societies of the „imperial mode of living“. And it would be equally a gross mistake not to take class divisions seriously.

Unfortunately, the most obvious proof of the reason why class divisions are so important today is not comforting. As pointed out before, not all, but significant parts of the working class, long neglected in politics and public discourse, seem to take revenge by turning to the nationalist and xenophobic political right. If workers want to see Europe and the USA transformed into closed shops, they do so not least in opposition to the globally oriented cultural and business elites. Class in deed does very much matter today, for better or for worse.

This leads me to the second explanation:

The argument of the marginalized working class

In contrast to the first line of argument, with the focus on the „imperial mode of living“, this explanation very much emphasizes class differences. Many books and articles have been published meanwhile to account for the rather unexpected and discomfoting support of workers for Trump, Brexit and the extreme right. Several outstanding qualitative studies about the work, life, and morality of workers that had been conducted already in the 1990s in France and the United States also provide important clues.

In this literature, one theme is repeated over and over again: „The worker: a blocked out social reality“ („Der Arbeiter: eine verdrängte gesellschaftliche Realität“). This is the telling headline of the preface to the book by Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux (2004) which had been published in German with the title „Die verlorene Zukunft der Arbeiter“ („The lost future of the workers“). The two scholars who cooperated closely with Pierre Bourdieu, did over an extended period of time intensive field research at the Peugeot plant in Sochaux-Montbéliard, France.

Similar observations or even phrases are to be found in writings about the white working class in England and the USA. I quote from the instructive book of Joan C. Williams „White Working Class“: „It's a simple message: when you leave the two thirds of Americans without college degrees out of your vision of the good life, they notice“ (Williams 2017: 129). Striking is the subtitle that Williams chose for her book. It reads „Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America“. Indeed, the mere existence of a working class had already for decades been blocked out of public awareness, let alone that it drew political attention. This holds true not only for the USA but also for France, Britain and other European countries. In Germany, even the word worker has become out of use. Williams also points to the trick that makes class disappear from public awareness: „A central way we make class disappear is to describe virtually everyone as 'middle class'" (Williams 2017: 9). Sounds familiar, doesn't it? (For a critique see Kadritzke 2017).

How could it happen that a still large part of the population called „workers“ who once were the

foundation of rather powerful social and political organizations striving for better living conditions if not for more radical social transformations, disappeared from public and political representation? The mere decline in size of manufacturing employment cannot provide a sufficient explanation. There are still considerable numbers of workers to be found in the statistics. And at the same time when manufacturing employment declined, the number of lower-white-collar workers increased.

From psychoanalysis we know that blocked out realities not really disappear, they just make themselves felt in rather disturbing ways. This holds also true for social phenomena. What, then, are the consequences of the blocking out of workers' lives from public representation? Various participants in the left debate (among them prominently Nancy Fraser, Didier Eribon and Paul Mason) would answer: With the victory of neo-liberalism, genuine working-class interests have been pushed aside. And the left has not come up sufficiently in defense of those interests, it has to the contrary often promoted the dominance of markets over people. The consequence is what we see today. Significant parts of the working class turn to the far right to finally make themselves heard. To counter this shift, self-criticism of the left is urgently in order.

Is there any empirical base for such an argumentation? Fortunately, a few scholars and writers did not follow the mainstream path of academic ignorance and public denial but insisted to learn more about the social reality of the lives, self-perceptions and morals of workers today. They dug deeply into that hidden reality, mainly with qualitative approaches and all with methodological accuracy. I mentioned already the study by Beaud and Pialoux about the workers at Peugeot. François Dubet's (2008) inquiry into French workers' understanding of justice and their experience of injustice at the workplace adds invaluable information. For the USA the research by Hochschild (2016a, 2016b), Cramer (2016) and others provide important insights, concisely summarized and interpreted with her own sharp look by Joan C. Williams (2017). Indispensable for an understanding of similarities and differences between the morality and social boundary-drawing of US-American and French workers is Michèle Lamont's (2000) comparative study „The Dignity of Working Men“. To close my incomplete list, I want to add the

biographical narratives of Didier Eribon (2016) and, for an English experience, Paul Mason (2017) because they provide episodic but reflected insights into the fate of the French and English working classes in recent times.

Unfortunately we don't have any study comparable in approach and quality for Germany. The sociological tradition of in-depth field research is weak in Germany, much weaker than in France, Britain and the US. Unfortunate is also that the findings of the literature which I referred to above cannot be generalized, since they differ in focus, theoretical framework, methodology and national contexts. But they all deal with the same issue in their respective countries, the decline of workers' representation in public, and some address directly the support of workers for the extreme right. I therefore dare to use them to extract some clues which deserve further inquiry and, most of all, political attention and might be of significance for Germany as well.

The first clue concerns the time at which the working class began to disappear from the public scene. The 1970s and 1980s seem to have been crucial turning points. They included the election of market radicals into government in Britain and the US and the wars they waged against trade unions. In France, the election of François Mitterand seemed at first to stem the tide of neoliberal onslaught. But it only softened it.

The second clue concerns economic and social changes. In the 1980s, the post-WWII period of male full employment, rising wages and income compression had definitely come to an end. But before, significant changes had already taken place: on the labor market the shift in the composition of the workforce from manufacturing to service employment; the increasing employment participation of women; upward mobility in and out the working class facilitated in part by labor migrants who took the places of „indigenous“ workers in the lower ranks of the internal class hierarchy. All of this was not least a result of strong unions and the representation of workers' interest in the realm of politics. But the very successes in the end also lead to a growing detachment of the newly composed workforce from unions and a decline in union membership.

The new period that now emerged was and is characterized by the return of unemployment, increasing income inequality, de-industrialization, internal fragmentation of the workforce at the shop floor, the implementation of corporate strategies furthering such labor-force fragmentation and taking advantage of it also in the global chain of production. All in all it lead and still leads to a further weakening of workers and of the working class altogether in terms of numbers as well as of power. It struck me to find both in the French study of Beaud and Pialoux and the American study of Williams references to Germany as a positive example for still protecting labor rights more strongly and still embarking on industrial policies. We should take these comments seriously.

The third clue concerns culture and symbolic representation. Distinct patterns of working-class attitudes and morals are still alive, with national variations and internal differentiation according to ethnic and occupational subgroups. The strong valuation of hard work is part of the culture, the appreciation of responsibility, straightforwardness and reliability in social relations, the emphasis on family and community ties. Those values are under considerable stress, confronted with the devaluation of manual work in society. Opinion leaders of all kind, including academics, preach mercilessly intellectual over manual skills, self-reliance and self-improvement over collective achievement, competitive attitudes over solidarity, networking in weak and if necessary global ties over the strong ties of family and community. Managing one's life successfully replaces hard work as ethical imperative. Even commercial advertisements are nowadays full of such appeals.

Ambivalent and still too often a trap for working-class families is in this social context the overarching importance attributed to education. It signals that this is the road to take in order to leave the working class behind (and what else should one aspire to do?). At the same time education is considered a must if only to avoid social decline. But for working-class families and their kids, education is still a troublesome challenge, much more than for middle-class families and their offspring. Even if the road is taken, it might not end up in the promised land, given the

devaluation of certificates and the importance of class-based habits of social performance to climb up career ladders. Upward mobility is still too often blocked and the status quo at the same time more difficult to uphold for the next generations.

The issue of racism as cultural attitude deserves attention in the context of our question. For the US, Williams makes the strong point that racism is not a specialty of the white working class. It rather permeates society at large and is equally present in the professional elite, only expressed in different ways. White workers claim superiority by their moral standards, professionals claim superiority by their ability to achieve to justify their racist attitudes. „There is no excuse for either kind of racism“, Williams writes. „Here's the point: privileged whites should stop justifying their refusal to acknowledge their class privilege over less privileged whites on the grounds that those 'others' are racist“ (Williams 2017: 63).

Compared to American workers, Michèle Lamont found in the 1990s French workers to be more resistant to racism by using a language of solidarity. But she also cautioned that this might wear off „with a sharp decline of the left and a greater availability of neoliberal ideas that would make solidarity less salient“ (Lamont 2000: 243). Both, it seems, has taken place in recent times. Racism in any case is evidently not an inherent cultural trait of any specific class but, as Norbert Elias (1993) has convincingly demonstrated, an outgrowth of inequality in the distribution of power in societal relations. To fight racism, therefore, requires to fight the given constellations of power that produces it.

The fourth and last clue concerns political representation. Working class communities with their particular institutions which once buttressed the working-class attitudes and political affiliations have largely dissolved in the period of rising living standards and upward mobility. This again testifies to the considerable achievements of organized working-class power in the past but also in the end helped to erode this very power even further.

Together with their symbolic representations working class' political representations vanished

as well. Symptomatic is the dissolution of the Communist Party in Italy even though it had steered a course of independence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Symptomatic is the abandonment of all working-class rhetoric and allegiance by the German Social Democratic Party and by „New Labour“ in Great Britain. Both became stern advocates of the creed that human beings have to adapt to imperatives of the market instead the other way around. Today it turns out that this might not have been such a good idea. All over Europe, social democratic parties are pulverized (maybe the change in course by Corbyn in England can prevent this definite fate for Labour).

The erosion of the social contract, the rise of the right, and consequences of the „marginalization of the working class“

In the back of all the developments briefly sketched so far we can recognize a deepening of social divides along the lines of class but also of social and political rights. It affects the rules of living and working together in the respective society and country. To establish and stabilize such rules is always difficult and contested, and this holds particularly true for capitalist societies with their inherent contradictions and tendencies to produce and reproduce social divisions. Living and working together despite such divisions requires an implicit social contract, to use a term by Barrington Moore (1987), i. e. it requires to establish relationships of reciprocity between dominant and subordinate classes and strata which are contested but also respected by both sides.

Evidence suggests that in all the countries considered here the implicit social contract that has been institutionalized in the first decades after WWII is about to wear off or already broken. The ruling economic elites, affiliated with the financial markets and operating on a global scale, have detached themselves from responsibility for any particular firm, corporation, or workforce. Neither are they constrained by obligations for the well-being of any particular population. Workers who in their everyday lives very much depend on the functioning of explicit and implicit rules of reciprocity at the workplace as well as in their extended social environment are keenly aware of it.

This is the constellation in which the extreme right steps in to offer another, in fact very old vision of social cohesion, built around national identity, the seeming recognition of the plight of ordinary people, and the exclusion of foreign competitors for resources. Authoritarian but benevolent rulers are called for to force national responsibilities upon globalized corporations. This at least is part of the Trump appeal, it doesn't seem to play much of a role in the French and German right yet. In any case the right promises to preserve the ever smaller cake which capital has left for ordinary people to be consumed by nationals only.

It might well be that some or even all of the clues that I have discussed so far lead to nowhere in the case of Germany. But I doubt it. Interviews with labor-union activists point in the same direction (Dörre 2018; Dörre et. al. 2018).

What are the political consequences suggested by the argument of the marginalized working class? The most obvious conclusion would be, if you want to take sides with the symbolically and politically marginalized working class you have to give it a voice. But what language does this voice speak? Is it the language that goes to the heart of the working-class condition today and addresses its causes? Or is it the language which the right can exploit or which the right even suggests, i. e. the language that diverts the anger of workers from its causes and directs it against scapegoats? It requires to be very clear on this alternative (Kronauer 2018). Unfortunately, too often even people considering themselves to be on the left are not clear about it, make concessions to workers' nationalism, to anti-migration sentiments and to polemics against minority rights and diversity politics which are declared to be fads of privileged middle-class folks aligned with the global business elite.

Not so obvious but by no means less important is another conclusion. If you want to address the real causes of the working-class condition and if you want to overcome its symbolic and political marginalization, you have to situate it in the context of the critical conditions that most people are facing who are engaged in wage labor today. The intensification of work, the growing

insecurity in living and working conditions, worries about the future of their children are present also in the lives of private and public service employees and reach into large shares of the middle classes. The latter also depend for their livelihood on wages, and if they do not want to realize that they, too, are wage laborers, it is necessary to enlighten them about it in their own best interest. From this starting point, it makes very much sense to address the grievances related to wage labor in all its variations, to seek alliances across internal divisions of the wage-labor force, without losing sight of the particularities of the working-class condition, and to go for a social transformation of society that allows for new forms of social reciprocity.

Why can wage labor still be a force of social transformation and what should be done to realize it?

Robert Castel (2000) in his seminal work „From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question“ (in German: „Metamorphosen der sozialen Frage: Eine Chronik der Lohnarbeit“) characterizes the capitalist societies as they emerged after WWII in much of Western Europe as „wage-labor societies“ („Lohnarbeitsgesellschaften“). In contrast to the often declared „end of the society of work“ (meaning the end of a society based on wage labor), wage labor has spread throughout society and increased in importance in ever more peoples' lives. If there is any chance for a social transformation to the better at all, it is linked to the prospects of wage labor.

The term „wage-labor society“ as used by Castel refers to a specific historical context in which wage labor became the dominant form of work. Its expansion was closely linked to economic growth and the welfare state. The extension of labor rights, of social insurance, of public-service provisions were all connected with wage labor and contributed to its spread and internal differentiation. The combination of these elements provided the basis of the social contract which characterized the first decades after WWII. But the dominance and internal differentiation of wage labor also entailed the decline in social importance of the particular form of wage labor incorporated in the manufacturing working class. Without that decline in the

context of the generalization of wage labor, the marginalization of the working class in terms of its symbolic and political representation could not have taken place.

The historical context in which the wage-labor society emerged and was institutionalized has drastically changed during the last thirty years. The nexus between employment and social protection is eroding. Markets and capital take an ever stronger hold on peoples' lives. Social vulnerability is hardest felt in the working class. But insecurity also creeps into the lives of wage-earners in the higher ranks of the class hierarchy. Even for members of the wage-dependent middle class flexibility becomes a threat rather than an option when dictated by employers; self-determination turns out to be a false promise with the ever stronger dependence of one's life on markets.

Doesn't this constitute a common ground on which an alliance could be built, bridging the internal divisions of wage labor? Could self-determination not be a common cause to fight for? It has always been a central goal of any emancipatory movement. Self-determination essentially requires protection from markets and democratic control of the power of capital.

And isn't there still a widespread agreement on the importance of public and merit goods (education, health care, housing, utilities, mobility, natural environment) for societal life? Such goods have to be reconquered from and protected against profit making. Why should the proven fact that „less inequality benefits all“, which finally even the OECD (2015) has acknowledged, not be a programmatic cornerstone of a wage-labor alliance fighting the dominance of capital on all levels – the local, national and European one? At stake is the foundation of a new social contract, based on reciprocity and solidarity.

And what about the capitalist-consumerist way of life? There are good evidence-based reasons to assume that a more egalitarian society with reliable rules of reciprocity reduces social fears and can therefore be more open to the outside world, including migrants and refugees, without perceiving it as a threat to social cohesion. This is at least a necessary if not sufficient

requirement.

Struggling with capital to reduce inequality and establish new rules of reciprocity might even be a first step to shoulder the Herculean task of breaking with the capitalist-consumerist way of life. Progress in this respect will only be possible if broad shoulders will have to bear the consequences of the necessary drastic changes in the patterns of consumption and production, not just the least privileged ones.

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