



# LUXEMBURG

GESELLSCHAFTSANALYSE UND LINKE PRAXIS

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D E F E N D   D I G N I T Y

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# NEW CLASS POLITICS PREFACE

The question of class rests at the center of a left-Marxist project. Nonetheless, ›class‹ has not really played much of a role in recent strategic debates and political praxes. The reasons are manifold: since the 1970s, social democracy has abandoned the question of class in favor of models that assume a diversity of social strata; distancing themselves from an understanding of class reduced to male industrial labor, new social movements have turned to questions of gender relations, the post-colonial legacy and ecology; and the ›end of socialism‹ has also done its part. At the same time, social antagonisms have intensified in Western industrial countries as a consequence of a financialised capitalism in crisis and declining profit rates. The latter are being ›compensated‹ for by means of flexibilization, downward pressure on wages, and the destruction of public infrastructure, carried out on the backs of the majority of the population. Most recently, the successes on the right – from BREXIT through the Front National and AfD up to the election of Donald Trump in the US – have, in a strange way, put the question of class back on the agenda: legitimate anger on the part of those who feel they are being held back by this system and aren't being represented has in many places been expressed by a rightward turn.

How could critique of the current state of democracy and social inequality be artic-

ulated differently? Could left-wing politics by making ›class experiences‹ once again their subject demarcate a clearer difference from ruling elites? Could this help forming a ›connecting antagonism‹ (Candeias) from different perspectives?

The answer cannot lie in going ›back‹ to old conceptions of ›class struggle‹! Collective effort is required to map out a ›new class politics‹ that does not posit identity politics and the social question as antagonistic to each other, but rather overthrows all the relations under which so many suffer. Herein lies a chance to both sharpen emancipatory struggles in terms of class politics and draw the line against their selective integration within neoliberalism, as well as to read feminism, ecology, and anti-racism as integral aspects of ›questions of class‹, thus (finally) placing them at the center of a left project.

How can various parts of the class be connected? How can we read precarious labor in traditionally female vocations as a question of both gender relations and class relations? And how can racism be recognized as a form through which one part of the class is pitted against others? Creating solidarity is complicated, but more urgent than ever!

The *LuXemburg Magazine* has worked on some of these questions. The present brochure assembles a selection of texts on the topic.

# A QUESTION OF CLASS

## NEW CLASS POLITICS – A CONNECTIVE ANTAGONISM

BY MARIO CANDEIAS

It's not that the class question could ever be pushed aside totally. It preserved a shadowy Marxist existence. Sometimes, however, it surfaced surprisingly in the feature pages of newspapers, only then swiftly to disappear again. At this point, hardly anyone denies it: we are living in a class society (again). Inequality is rising, social divisions are becoming more entrenched, social guarantees once taken for granted have yielded to a generalized culture of insecurity and a common fear of decline. Even the putatively secure middle classes need to make an ever greater effort to maintain their status. Oliver Nachtwey (2016) has metaphorically expressed this in the image of an escalator that is moving downward: one must not stand still, if one does not want to drift downward, and one needs to make quite an effort, if one wants to make it a little further up, against the direction in which the escalator is moving.

Only a very few arrive at the top. Entry into the upper classes is barred, the prosperous are isolating themselves.

Once it was the Left Party that lent expression to the protest of the precariat. A class faction that was so difficult to grasp because it defined itself primarily in negative terms: no one wants to rank among the precarious. And yet precarization has long ceased to be the problem of a small few. But it's not. It concerns illegalized migrant cleaning women, security personnel or cashiers as much as the well-trained East German temp worker in the Ruhr, the (pseudo) self-employed trucker or the computer proletariat in call centers. It also concerns (forcedly) mobile software engineers working on short-term projects, independent journalists, freelancing creative artists or scholars. They are all subject to various forms of flexploitation (Bourdieu).

In the course of transnational relocations and new rounds of layoffs, even core workers are no longer safe. The pressure – including pressure brought about by the precarious – is ubiquitous. The issue is not only one of employment relations bereft of security, but also one of insecure living conditions, the absence of recognition and future prospects, the dismantling of social infrastructure, displacement through drastic rent hikes, and the absence of planning certainty within one's life plan. What separates these groups, and might there be something that unifies them? What is at stake here is working out the »re-making of the working class« (Candeias 2009).

### THE CLASS QUESTION FROM THE RIGHT

Today, the class question is no longer associated with left-wing, but rather with right-wing protest. While the membership base of parties such as the Alternative for Germany or the Front National, and of movements such as Pegida or »Manif pour tous« (opponents of homosexual marriage in France), consists largely of groups from the economically secure middle classes or the petty bourgeoisie – and mainly of men –, these parties and movements are now able to attract a relevant number of workers and unemployed persons as well. Didier Eribon (2013) calls this electoral decision in favor of the radical right an »act of political self-defence« – a measure taken in order to feature within political discourse at all, if only in the form of »negative self-affirmation«. Eribon's autobio-

graphical self-experiment, his *Returning to Reims*, was no doubt the surprise bestseller among last year's political books. A book on his return to his parental home, which he had left as a »class refugee«, in order to be able to live out his homosexual orientation and become a professor of sociology – and not to return for decades. The many-faceted book, which narrates tales of shame, of the life and nightmare of the working class, and especially of women, attempts to furnish elements of an explanation why a working class that once voted left – at least to a significant degree – is now voting right. Sold out by social democracy, disappointed by the ineffectiveness of the Communist Party, many turn to a powerful new narrative: that of defending hard-working people, the nation and culture against others, »Islam«, »immigrants«, globalization, gay and LGBT persons, the »moralizing members of the 1968 generation«, who are now in power, etc. Eribon strikes a nerve.

The class question has also been invoked to explain the electoral decision that led to Brexit: The Brexit vote, Owen Jones (2016) argues, was a »working-class revolt. Perhaps it was not the kind of revolt against the political establishment that many of us would have wished for. But the outcome of the referendum is without doubt due to the voices of an angry, politically alienated« working class, at least of a predominantly white and male. This development is evident in many European countries (least of all in Greece, Spain and Portugal).

As for Donald Trump being elected president of the USA, the majority of his supporters were not working-class. Nevertheless the fact that a significant number of male white workers shifted their support to Trump in certain states lent him the decisive advantage and led to his winning the election. Even more important, perhaps, was the sense of alienation Hillary Clinton, a representative of the establishment par excellence, inspired in large parts of the working class. These workers voted right, or even more of them not at all (see also Hochschild in *LuXemburg* 3/2016). How should the left react to such a development?

### **THE THIRD POLE: A »LOWER-MIDDLE« ALLIANCE LACKING THE »LOWER«?**

The radical right articulates the counter-pole to the authoritarian neoliberalism whose exponents range from Merkel and Schäuble to Macron, and which governs in an authoritarian manner. The SPD was briefly able to disrupt, through Martin Schulz, this polarization between neoliberalism's more-of-the-same approach and the right-wing authoritarian promise to provide all »Germans« with protection within the competitive community of the nation. Many had high hopes that the SPD would finally strive for majorities from the left. But it is obviously unwilling to do so. The brief moment of optimism is over, the bubble has burst. Social democracy remains in an existential crisis. It does not want to participate in lending a voice to the great »camp of solidarity« (Kipping/

Riexinger) – i.e. to all those who strive for a democratic, social and ecological way of life. Yet absent a genuine left turn, the right cannot be combated effectively. This is demonstrated by the outcome of numerous elections. Mélenchon was able to help this »third pole« become visible briefly, during the first round of the French presidential elections, just as Bernie Sanders had done before him, in the run-up to the US elections. The Left Party must, for the time being, rise to this challenge without the support of other parties.

What is required to counter authoritarianism from above and from the right is the defence of a democratic and solidary way of life, one that extends far beyond the elements of a left mosaic and well into middle-class circles. Such a third pole already exists »in itself«, and it is surely most visible in the countless welcome refugee and citizens' initiatives, as well as in social movements. But it has not yet found political expression (and it is doubtful whether one should be thinking, in this case, of a party-political expression in the strict sense). This is something that needs to be worked on, so as to create the preconditions for a change of course within society – and in government. The Left Party is an indispensable part and a driving force behind this endeavor. And it has done much to create an open and solidary society, when parts of society turned against refugees and immigrants and insecurity was on the rise. As the elections in other countries demonstrate,

the chances, including in terms of electoral arithmetics, of moving beyond the »ten-percent-niche« have improved. The Left Party has a duty to assertively occupy the party-political space left vacant by the SPD and the Green Party.

To date, the third pole has however manifested itself mainly in the »solidary middle of society«, among those with high levels of formal qualification, in urban milieus and class factions. It is much less rooted, by contrast, in the so-called popular classes, in the »endangered middle of society« and among those subject to precarity. The »dissident third« (Thomas Seibert) in society is too small – to focus on it alone is to do too little. This imbalance in society's composition also concerns the Left Party, which is now strongly shaped by persons with an academic background – in spite of also being, in some cases, more rooted among the so-called left-behinds. What is lacking for the indispensable creation of a »lower-middle alliance« (Michael Brie) is largely the »lower«. The party does not reach, or no longer reaches, large segments of the popular classes; it is losing them to the right. More frequently still, the popular classes withdraw and seclude themselves. This class-specific discouragement is an existential problem for the Left Party: no matter how many value-oriented people were to vote for it, the result would resemble a process of internal erosion. If this situation does not change, the best the Left Party can hope for is an imaginary proxy politics.

## A NEW CLASS POLITICS

A change of perspective is therefore needed: a new class politics that does not negate the variety of interests within the left mosaic. A straightforward return to the class struggle of former times cannot be the answer. Issues such as racism, gender relations, social issues, ecology and peace are inextricably interwoven. There is a connection between different relations of exploitation and oppression. It is not for nothing that we ought to »overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being« (MECW, vol. 3, p. 182; emphasis in original).

Authoritarianism and right-wing populism have driven emancipatory forces into a defensive position. We are told that an excess of »gender madness«, »early sexualization«, the »quota«, »pink hullabaloo« and »green paternalism« has alienated the social left from »normal« people and workers. Feminism, LGBTIQ rights and ecology are described as elite projects. In fact, left-wing feminism and critical political ecology have always criticized the forms assumed by a feminism »from above« or an »ecological lifestyle« for the affluent, forms that allow for recognition or an ecological »clean conscience« without any redistribution of wealth and power (Fraser), and which are incapable of reflecting upon gender relations and society's relation to nature in terms of society (as a whole), or even as relations of production. The critique of a



one-sided orientation toward recognition should not, however, lead us to throw the achievements of emancipatory struggles for recognition overboard: what has been successfully struggled for in terms of gender equality, the recognition of gay and lesbian life styles, diversity of sexual orientations, cultural openness and small steps towards a more ecological way of life etc., needs to be defended. We need more of this rather than less.

Differences ought therefore not to be treated as secondary contradictions or thought of in hierarchical terms. Moreover, diverging concerns and interests cannot simply be added together – they need to be actively connected to one another. This is only possible when done with the people themselves, by being present, organizing alongside them as part of their everyday life, in the neighborhoods and at the workplace, by enabling people to empower themselves. This is also the basis upon which the Left Party can regain credibility. Such credibility can serve as a pedestal for efficient parliamentary representation, and it can develop an appeal for the many persons who do not wish to or cannot become politically active.

What is needed is a stronger emphasis on socio-economic issues. But who is the class? Who represents the class? The coal miner in Lusatia, the industrial worker threatened by digitalization, the DHL courier who finds himself at the end of an IT-controlled logistics chain, or the nurse in a modern hospital corporation? The class is undergoing constant change.

It should not be confused with the old white, male working class of disadvantaged regions that are home to aging industries. This is the part of the working class that is so readily invoked when speaking of Brexit, Trump, Le Pen, the Alternative for Germany and so on. Naturally, this class faction also has legitimate interests. But the class as a whole is more varied, always has been, and all the more so today: we are confronted with an enormous precariat, part of which has an academic background, is cosmopolitan and urban. This part is relatively amenable to emancipatory positions and an essential component of the protest movements of the past decades, which many of us are also part of. And then there is also a formally less qualified precariat that usually lives in other, disadvantaged urban neighborhoods. It tends not to be politically organized and participates in elections more rarely, if at all, though it would nonetheless be available for a left-wing politics, if only someone were to reach out to it.

If nothing else, the class today is a considerably more female, (post)migrant and motley one, boasting the most varied sexual orientations and identities. The greater part of the immigrants and refugees coming into our country are themselves part of the working class. And the working class has long since been united across borders by virtue of the work it performs within global production chains – it is at least subject to transborder exploitation; transnational organization has still only begun. Thus the



social question also has to (and always has had to) be posed from the perspective of migration, for the immigration society has long become a reality (cf. Kron 2017). When we speak, then, of a necessary return to the question of class, we are not speaking about a return to a reductionist concept of class or a putative main contradiction; rather, we are speaking about a new class politics that always takes into account, from the outset, but without any sort of patronizing political correctness, the interwovenness of relations of oppression (intersectionality, as one says today), as exemplified by Lia Becker at the 2016 fall academy of BdWi and the RLS, »Europe, What's Next?«.

This means class needs first of all to be rendered visible in all its diversity. What do they think, feel and want – the coal miner in Lusatia, the precariously employed Amazon worker, the nurse in the health factory, the young female student, the ordinary people of the welcome refugee initiatives or the migrant who has been living here for forty years and is faced with growing hostility to Islam, as well as with violence? These diverse situations, concerns and hardships need first of all to be met with empathy.

### **CLASS POLITICS: CONCRETE AND LOCAL**

Class politics also means venturing forth, to go out, and building real connections to the popular classes, particularly in disadvantaged areas, beyond the usual suspects. Creating structures of solidarity, rebel neighborhoods and rebel cities, becoming more numerous, organizing a

stronger social base – all of these things are indispensable, if the Left in general is to become effectual (Candeias/Brie 2016). Some of these projects are already getting off the ground. The Left Party bears a responsibility, here, that the SPD and the Green Party refuse (so far) to shoulder: it needs to embody an alternative that breaks with business as usual.

In concrete terms, this also means doing things that can seem so very difficult: approaching people, going from door to door, mainly in the present and former strongholds of the Left Party, especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and across the country (cf. Steckner in LuXemburg 1/2017). Regardless of whether we are dealing with German natives, first-generation immigrants or persons with a postmigrant background, and regardless of whether they have the right to vote or not, or whether they are newly arrived refugees – we need to establish connections. This requires perseverance. We need to listen, discuss, issue invitations to local assemblies addressing local problems of everyday life, such as those related to issues of housing. We need to come back, try again. It is a surprising experience for both sides to even be approached and begin a personal conversation on everyday problems and politics. The approach must not be a purely instrumental one, simply a matter of recruiting members for one's organization or winning votes. It is a question of establishing local nodes of resistance and forward-looking action.

The activists who go from door to door have »repeatedly faced prejudice, resentment, everyday racism and verbal violence, including from persons sympathetic to the Left Party. But only a very few had a coherent worldview or were utterly unamenable to argument – differently from what the current debate on post-truth thinking would lead one to expect. The challenge consisted, rather, in articulating common interests – where such common interests existed – by means of intelligent questions or succinct proposals, without watering down one’s own position or denying the reality of people’s experiences,« says Anne Steckner in a first assessment of the canvassing projects. We need to look closely and take those who are approachable seriously, to explore commonalities to the greatest extent possible, without becoming spineless. And we need to challenge opinions in such a way as not to lose our counterpart altogether: »Today’s experience tells me that it is not just wrong, but also completely unnecessary to conceal or even abandon our anti-racism in order to begin a conversation with people whose everyday thinking is riddled with racist clichés. I have challenged or openly contradicted racist statements and was nevertheless able to speak to people about low pension payments and expensive day care centers,« says Felix Pithan, regional representative of the Left Party in Bremen.

»The main effect is not so much on the persons whose doorbells you ring, but on those who are going door to door. In

my view, this is a »salutary« and productive experience, because you can’t babble and fret over the world with your left-wing friends; you have to make your own politics communicable, such that you have to be able to explain, in simple language and in only a few sentences, what the problem is and why left-wing politics is the right answer to it,« says Moritz Warnke, member of Berlin’s local Left Party’s executive.

The next step from there is concrete organizing in disadvantaged residential neighborhoods, so-called deprived areas, in the form of tenants initiatives, welfare counseling, systematic support of labor struggles, be it at Amazon or in hospitals, or in the form of welcome refugee initiatives. In brief, it is a question of building solidary structures in everyday life, as sites of mutual aid and political organizing.

How this works is something one can learn. That is why, in addition to training persons to do outreach work, we also need training courses on transformative organizing. Within any organizing process that does not want to get stuck in the local, the question concerning the relation and the link between different levels of politics quickly arises. So we need to begin anew, starting at the local level, from within the neighborhoods, very much inspired by rebel cities, but in a manner that is integrated into countrywide as well as European perspectives and practices. It is also worth considering adapting the model of Solidarity4all<sup>1</sup>, so as to ensure there is sufficient personnel and an adequate resource base

for supporting and promoting what people embark on within such organizing processes – be it within or outside the Left Party.

To date, this is also the only way to win back those segments of the popular classes we have lost. In part, this is a question of the justified fears and problems of the endangered middle of society and of precarious workers – people who no longer feel represented, who feel they have been pushed out of political discourse. This does not imply that all of the interests of these groups should be addressed by the left: group-based discourses of denigration and anti-emancipatory positions that reproduce domination are where we draw the line. After all, our goal cannot be that of operating on the same terrain as the right. It would make sense to make »other themes, perspectives and values« the decisive (electoral) issues, as Horst Kahrs (2015a) argues in one of his analyses of the link between the drift to the right and the question of class. For it is quite common to forget those roughly eight million persons who are actively engaged in supporting refugees. Their interests and their quiet political commitment to a solidary and democratic way of



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life are discussed far more rarely, in the public debate, than the (much smaller) protests of the radical right.

What it all comes down to is the question of what has shaped one's particular everyday experiences – practical solidarity in the neighborhood and at work, or ubiquitous competition and isolation. This is why it is far from impossible that successful solidary practice should be more attractive than a right-wing project, which is associated only with an imaginary self-empowerment. Two factors must, however, not be underestimated: (a) »imagined communities« (Anderson) such as the »nation« have always been enormously mobilizing interpellations, whereas left-wing organizing requires much patience and the courage to stand up to the real powers that be; (b) integration into a right-

wing project alters the segments of the popular classes affected. Winning them back is harder than winning them over in the first place.

## FROM SOLIDARITY TO SOCIALISM

Right-wing activists operate on the basis of fear, resentment and hatred. We must oppose to this solidarity and hope, not as an appeal, but as a concrete practice. Bernie Sanders' political revolution is paradigmatic of such a perspective, as are the rebel cities in the Spanish state. It is good and it does one good to be solidary. A solidary practice that addresses refugees and minorities as well as the downwardly mobile and the endangered middle of society: persons subject to the Hartz IV workfare system, unemployed persons and low-wage workers, all those who are caught in the rat race, trying to earn a »good life« for themselves, and who may sometimes be angry at putative underachievers. People need to feel not only that their interests are perceived, but that their situation and their existence are met with empathy. On this basis of the recognition of needs, connective and solidary practices can be developed. The question concerning a new class politics needs to be developed in concrete terms in each particular case, i.e. as an inclusive, feminist/intersectional class politics, as an ecological class politics, an internationalist, anti-racist/post-immigrant class politics, with regard to socio-economic issues in Germany or Europe, with regard to the question of social infrastructures, from healthcare to accom-

modation for all, whether they be refugees or recipients of Hartz IV payments. But also with regard to work 4.0, the question of conversion in coal-mining regions, questions of migration and the struggle against the right, in trade union work, in educational policy, with regard to the question of democracy, or to questions touching upon the organization of the mosaic and the building of political parties etc. – here a class perspective could make a difference.

Orienting the problematic to class politics serves two purposes. First, it aims to strengthen left-wing approaches and perspectives within feminism, ecology and anti-racism, or with regard to LGBTIQ issues, while allowing for a clearer distinction between left-wing approaches and more limited liberal approaches centered on gender parity, ecological modernization etc., taking up the positive aspects of such liberal approaches and radicalizing them – within a »feminist« (Fried in this issue) and »queer« class politics (Woltersdorf in this issue), an »ecological class politics« (Röttger/Wissen in this issue), an »antiracist and post-migrant« class politics. Each of these needs to be spelled out in detail. For merely to claim intersectionality/interwovenness is not enough. Within practical projects, it is already difficult to relate two contradictions, e.g. class and racism, to one another in a dynamic and productive way. And we need to develop projects and practices that reach beyond the usual suspects and tap into the diversity of the popular classes, projects that are borne by these classes themselves.

Secondly, social justice has always been the left's »core brand«. With a new class politics, the left can promote social justice in a more pronounced way, unambiguously making reference to and connecting with the class »below« and clearly positioning itself as an opponent of the ruling class »above« and »on the radical right« (cf. Can-deias 2015). Such a new class politics could become a kind of connective antagonism.

As a political party, the Left Party can embody such a class politics while simultaneously overcoming the false opposition to putatively »soft, purple, pink, green« issues. Feminism and ecology are not only for the elite – they are class issues. Again and again, they are treated, perhaps not as secondary contradictions, but as additional issues, juxtaposed to »hard« fields such as narrow economic and social questions. A new class politics could help bring these issues more strongly to the fore while relating them to one another and binding them inextricably together. An additional benefit of this is that traditional class politics is retrieved from the dusty niches of the main contradiction and conceptualized in a broader and more inclusive way. It is only when they are considered together that the (Gordian) »knot« of the various relations of domination can be cut (Frigga Haug).

Moreover, a new class politics cannot be realized within a nation-state framework. It needs to take a stand for global social rights in an internationalist manner if it is not to produce new exclusions. An approach that takes social, cultural and

political rights seriously can supplement a class-based approach; both aim at organization and the collective appropriation of social conditions of existence. So when we speak of a necessary return to the question of class in the form of a socio-economic, feminist, inclusive, intersectional, socio-ecological, anti-racist/post-migrant and international class politics, we are speaking of something that still needs to be developed, for which no blueprint exists.

The class is divided in a variety of ways, along lines of division that are professional and generational, related to formal education, to gender, ethno-national and other (self-) ascriptions, or – of course – to one's position within the social process of (re-)production. This has never been otherwise. To this extent, it is always a matter of a making and re-making of class. And this always occurs in relation to other – mainly subaltern – classes, not the least of which is the class of peasants and subsistence farmers, especially in times of transnationalization. It is not putatively »objective« interests that are at stake, but rather the diverse interests of various groups and class factions, interests that are not simply given, but only take shape through engagement with others. Here, contradictions arise that we must navigate. And many of these contradictions bisect individuals themselves, because each individual (and his/her or family or set of significant others) also needs to reconcile a variety of interests: the search for work, ideally good work, but also for time – in

which to care for others or oneself, or to pursue political and cultural commitments –, and the interest in a healthy environment, in the prospect of a life worth living for one's children, or in an affluent, and public, social infrastructure.

It is a question of working through contradictions in a solidary manner, a matter of a new class politics that links up with a democratic way of life. And this is impossible without the prospect of fundamental transformation.

Given this need for radicality, the Left Party finds itself in a situation of tension vis-à-vis the third pole, which cannot be understood primarily as »left-wing«, and which places the main emphasis on the defence of a solidary and democratic way of life. Yet we need to refer to our notions of a solidary, democratic, feminist, anti-racist post-growth society by a name that is new and old, the unfulfilled: socialism. We need to argue over what this socialism ought to mean in the 21st century – a good, solidary and just society, the »simple thing – so hard to achieve« (Brecht). Not everyone will sign their name to this proposal, but what should be accepted as self-evident is that a transformational left, within the left mosaic or the third pole, stands for socialism.

Why is all this important? Once again, the social left is threatening to fail because of its internal divisions. We are dealing with difficult contradictions and necessary confrontations. For instance: What position should the left take with regard to flight and immigration on the one hand and a

growing, increasingly radical right-wing populism on the other, this last going hand in hand with an authoritarian security policy on the part of the government, and with the European border regime? Once again, the debate is highly emotional, and its emotional nature is amplified by social media. Emphasis is placed on that which separates us. Ascriptions, insinuations and undue simplifications, phrases taken out of context – all this is put to use and exaggerated. The debate is overshadowed by many petty inner-left struggles for distinction from one another and many major political image neuroses. Different inner-left perspectives were brought into exaggerated opposition, instead of searching, together, for ways in which they might be connected. Overstatements are popular, supposedly because they promote debate. In fact, the opposite is the case: debate is prevented; in the best possible case, it is temporarily muted by formulaic compromises. The established media also do their part in aggravating the divisions within the left and producing false oppositions. In this complex situation, it becomes difficult to even articulate new ideas without immediately being associated with one camp or pigeonholed. Language becomes a minefield, and reflection is stalled. There is a truly massive need for unifying perspectives and practices. Self-fragmentation is a luxury we cannot afford given our dramatic situation, characterized by a polarization of the political between neoliberal authoritarianism and the radical right. Addressing



this problem should be a prime task of organizational work. But this would indeed amount to a cultural revolution within the left. For we love our divisions. Too many »green-pink« issues, too much gender »hogwash« and political correctness, says one side; too much willingness to see things from the perspective of supporters of the Alternative for Germany, says the other. Mediating and connective intellectuals are needed, more than ever. But their task is not easy. And that task ought, after all, to be one we all help accomplish together.

*Translated by Max Henninger*

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1 In Greece, the Solidarity4all network serves to promote links between solidarity structures and to empower those structures. Each of Syriza's members of parliament donates a substantial part of his or her earnings to the Solidarity4all fund, and at least one assistant of each member of parliament is released from duty so that they can work within social movements. Solidarity4all operates independently of Syriza. Yet Syriza was enormously important as an infrastructure by which to build the solidarity movements. Many common members of the party, but also party leaders, members of parliament and parliamentary assistants have for years been active not just within Syriza, but also within extra-parliamentary initiatives and struggles. Syriza was present in the movements, but has never tried to control them. The party thereby represents a new type of political party, one perhaps best characterized in terms of Mimmo Porcaro's concept of the »conjunctive party«. This particular attempt to create a connective party has failed. There are many reasons for this failure, which I cannot enter into here (cf. Candeias 2016). But we should learn from this experience.



# AN ENTICING OFFER

## DIE LINKE AS A PARTY OF TRADE UNION RENEWAL

BY BERND RIEXINGER

The 2007 founding of Die Linke, or the Left Party, in Germany marked a crack in the social-democratic hegemony that characterizes Germany's trade unions. This hegemony had been eroding since the 1990s, but in the wake of mass protests against the »Agenda 2010« reforms, fractions of the trade unions finally broke with the neoliberalized Social Democratic Party (SPD) to participate in the founding of Die Linke.<sup>1</sup> The party has thus far been able to fill the gap it created and establish itself as a strong minority wing within the trade unions. At the same time, it faces the challenge of extending its support to unionized wage earners and expanding its »use value« within the struggles for better living and working conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Partly in an attempt to address these challenges, Katja Kipping and I have been working towards renewal of our party's culture and strategy as a »connective party«

(see Kipping/Riexinger 2015) since 2012.<sup>3</sup> This comes from the insight that a change in the relation of forces in society is the only possible basis for shifting the balance of forces within the state, and thus for even considering participation in government. Socialist parties must not limit themselves to the parliamentary representation of existing social forces. Their function is to actively build the class power of working people and social hegemony for emancipatory and socialist goals. With the cancellation of the welfare state class compromise in neoliberal capitalism, the balance of forces between capital and labor has shifted in favor of capital. The use value of a socialist party thus must be measured by its ability to build organizing power, identify shared interests, and formulate and represent political goals among different sections of wage laborers. The concept of the connective party thus means that Die Linke ought to view itself

not only as the parliamentary representative of wage laborers, but also as an »organic« and active part of the trade union movement itself. Contrary to Lenin's concept of the party, this does not mean subordinating the trade unions to a party that holds a monopoly on political struggle, but rather an alliance of equals that encourages the development of independent initiatives within the trade unions. This must be judged by its ability to resonate among the majority of working people, including the unemployed, to create connections of solidarity among different groups of employees, and to reach out with its own goals into the SPD's base.

### **GETTING OUT OF THE DEFENSIVE: SUPPORTING NEW STRIKE INVOLVEMENT**

The flipside of what neoliberal economists and the German government describe as the »German miracle,« namely, the overcoming of the deep collapse during the global economic crisis of 2008–09, is intensified polarization and precarization of the working and living environment. Millions of people, 25–30% of all wage-earners, are employed on temporary contracts as casual staff, as contract workers, or in so-called »mini-jobs.« The national government's introduction of an hourly minimum wage of €8.50 did not eliminate Europe's largest low-wage sector, while even many people outside this sector struggle to get by on their current wages.

The IG Metall, the single largest union in Europe with over two million members, has managed to stabilize its

unionization rate and even win moderate pay raises. That said, both the manufacturing industry and the booming export sector are witnessing a hardening division between the so-called core workforce and the 20–40% of precarious employees. The outsourcing of work to contracting firms is linked to employers' ongoing withdrawal from collective bargaining agreements with the unions, wage dumping, and the weakening of social standards. The same goes for privatization and the relocation of hospital workers and employees of other public institutions into the ranks of private subcontractors. This development has had fatal consequences for the organizational power and influence of unions. Coverage by collective labor agreements has been dramatically reduced, and is now at only 51% of employees in the west and 37% in the east of the country. This has direct consequences on wages, since there is a roughly 18% difference in pay between employees covered by collective wage agreements and those who are not.

In recent years, and against the background of decades of relatively low strike activity, new strike movements have developed, such as those in the retail sector, the security industry, call centers, food production, cleaning, the food service industry, teaching, and nursing staff in hospitals. New agents of struggle have emerged from the strikes in the service industries; the participation of women and migrants is often particularly high. Building on these tendencies in the class

struggle and making them the springboard of a political offensive must be at the heart of a connective party's trade union strategy. It is a central task of Die Linke to support union revitalization efforts towards conflict orientation and the democratization of strikes. The party can contribute to this by creating spaces for the exchange of experiences between strikers from different companies and industries, wherein a mutual learning process can take place and a political culture of solidarity can develop. These activities can't be organized by the unions alone, and more importantly, such initiatives strengthen Die Linke by anchoring it in the trade union rank-and-file – a key goal of the party in the coming years.

Given our limited resources, it would be wise to set priorities, engaging in model conflicts and industries in order to make Die Linke's potential value evident to all workers and achieve tangible victories. As a first step, we want to concentrate on the social, health, and nursing professions. More people work in the social services sector today than in all of Germany's export industries combined. Policies of deliberate under-funding and economizing social services are part of the neoliberal export model. This sort of care work, mostly conducted by women, is devalued in comparison to labor in the export industries.

A historical victory was won in this sector in April 2016 by the nursing staff of Berlin's Charité hospital – namely, staff won their first contract stipulating an increase in the number of hospital personnel

so as to reduce overall stress for workers. This fight had been prepared for years through the deep involvement of workers whose success was not least due to new approaches such as »wage councilors« (Wolf 2015). With a so-called »bed-and-station closing strike,« a high strike level could be achieved even in sensitive areas such as intensive care, making it possible for workers to apply real economic pressure. Moreover, demands for more personnel and less work stress fostered alliances with patients and other segments of workers. Active party members and social movement activists formed a coalition to support the strike, drawn in by the struggle's connection to quality health care and good employment conditions for all as an alternative to permanent stress. Slogans such as »more of us is better for everyone« or »striking against the burn-out society« struck at the heart of the matter. The Charité case is now reverberating in hospitals across the country, where the experiences gathered in Berlin are being discussed as actions are planned.

In the context of an ongoing campaign against precarious working and living conditions, we are attempting to provide political support to the struggle for more social sector personnel and connect to conflicts in the workplace, encouraging employees, patients, and other interested parties to come together and cooperate in loose, open campaigning groups. Our objective is to connect the various conflicts in hospitals, day-care, and schools and



forge a socio-political struggle to raise the value of social services and expand good education, care, and healthcare for all.

### **POLITICAL OFFENSIVE FOR NEW NORMAL WORKING CONDITIONS**

Truly moving out of a defensive position, however, is only possible through a cross-sector shake-up of political and social relations. This is because, although it's possible to win an admirable struggle in isolated cases – such as happened in the retail sector in 2014 – or even to repel a direct attack on sector-wide bargaining agreements, more and more firms are simply withdraw-

Carsten Bach ①

ing from such agreements unilaterally. The most important strike at Amazon lasted for two years for this very same reason, namely, that it is objectively difficult to win a labor conflict and exert pressure on the capital side with a largely temporary workforce subject to constant personnel changes. In 2015, tens of thousands of people in the social service and education sectors went on strike for a significant pay raise, and with it the increased social recognition of their important but underpaid labor. Nevertheless, facing the pressure of deficit reduction

policies and the fiscal emergency afflicting many local governments, they were only able to achieve in part the aim of a sustainable improvement of social work, even in this well-organized and strike-inclined sector with a longer history of struggle.

The union apparatuses, still strongly influenced by Social Democracy, are poorly prepared for these challenges. Although the Social Democratic Party (SPD) hardly achieved improvements for working people in the grand coalition with the conservative parties aside from the introduction of a porous and too-low minimum wage, union leadership clings tightly to a kind of stand-still agreement with the grand coalition. In return for the government refraining from a full-on socio-political assault, the union leadership refrains from unifying political struggles and from political mobilizations against precarious work and corporate withdrawal from labor agreements – let alone from a broader confrontation with neoliberal politics.

In this situation, Die Linke's task is to push forward debates about the trade unions' political mandate and become the central force of political change opposing deregulation and precarization. Towards this goal, we are introducing the project for »new normal working conditions« (see Riexinger 2016a) into union discussions. This should help to identify the interests of different class milieus and connect them with one another in solidarity. Against the neoliberal strategy of divide and rule, we seek an alliance between the unemployed,

different groups of precarious workers, employees still covered by labor agreements in manufacturing and the public sector – especially the growing number of education, healthcare, and nursing professions – and members of the so-called urban left milieus, meaning mostly higher qualified and younger people.

With this strategy, a whole set of overlapping problems can be taken up, including popular demands for »good work«: collective bargaining agreements with social insurance must again become the norm, and wages must cover living expenses and be adequate for retirement in accordance with dignified living standards. New regulations cannot simply be a return to the old normal working conditions, with rigid, full-time working schedules and life-long employment at one company. Rather, our campaign is a struggle for hegemony from the Left: work must become secure for all people, working hours must be shortened, gender justice must be a priority, and work must be equally shared, self-determined, and democratically co-created (see *ibid*). Instead of mass unemployment, constant stress, and existential fear, what society needs is the redistribution of work – not least between genders. Our current predicament of overtime and over-exploitation on one side and structural under-employment by way of mini-jobs and involuntary part-time work on the other could be overcome with a new, flexible work regime, centered around a thirty- rather than forty-hour work week.

In contrast to the concept promoted by the SPD and the Greens, which focuses exclusively on flexibilization, ours is concerned primarily with social security through compensatory wage increases, pension hikes, shorter working hours, and the redistribution of productivity gains.

That said, new normal working conditions can only be implemented as part of a transition to another path of social development, which includes the expansion of the public in the direction of social guarantees for quality healthcare, education and care, affordable housing, energy supply, and mobility for all. In light of the deep crisis of the EU, an economic-political change of direction in Germany is immediately necessary. The demand for a radical redistribution of wealth must be an offensive one, just like the demand for the democratic decisions over public investment, which could lead to a broader demand for cooperative property. Through the development of a public future sector, in which both research and development as well as industrial production could be ecologically and democratically developed on the basis of new technologies, in the form of public companies, cooperatives, and collectives, technological innovations could be shaped democratically and with a view towards socially useful objectives. From the radical perspective of a social-ecological, economic democracy, the necessary transformation of industry, energy supply, and mobility is to be connected with steps towards the socialization of economic

leadership. These days, such a transformation can hardly occur within the framework of nation states alone.

In the next years, we aim to anchor this initiative for new normal working conditions in the unions. As an initial project, we aim to establish broad coalitions for the reconstruction of the social foundations of our democracy, capable of reaching deep into the Social Democratic base. At the moment, Die Linke is not in a position to win the struggle over hegemony as a whole. Following years of defeat, the trade union movement must first win concrete victories and improvements in living conditions through organizing and social protest. To do this, it is necessary to connect union struggles and engage in political conflict against neoliberal policies. Two potential starting points are conceivable:

**1 | *The demand for a living wage and a planable future.*** This demand is already shared by very different groups of employees. Recent studies show that as a result of declining pension levels following the Schröder government's neoliberal pension reforms, wages below €12/hour lead to poverty in old age. Almost every second person who enters retirement beginning in 2030 risks living on a pension below the poverty line. Two-thirds of the population do not trust the grand coalition to reverse this growing avalanche of old-age poverty. Accordingly, the unions plan to make pensions a key issue of the federal election in 2017. Die Linke will intervene in the coming debate



over pensions and address the connection between pensions and weak wage growth resulting from precarious employment and many employers' withdrawal from collective bargaining agreements.

**2 | *Opposing employers' withdrawal from collective bargaining agreements.*** Whether collective bargaining agreements cover all workers is, at its core, a question of political power. The unions must fight so that they can submit their proposals directly in the future, instead of having to first consult with the capital side, as is currently the case. It must be made illegal for employers to avoid collective bargaining agreements through outsourcing and temporary contracts. The socio-political struggle against precarious work, beginning from branch-specific conflicts such as the retail or logistic sector, could be more effectively conducted from such a perspective.

## **FOR A COLLECTIVE BREAK WITH NEOLIBERALISM AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM**

The struggle against precarization and processes of division also has political implications for the fate of the trade union movement. The population's experiences of unfettered corporate power and everyday insecurity are a breeding ground for right-wing populist and authoritarian forces. A glance across the border at our European neighbors shows that Europe is in a deep and gripping crisis, characterized by the erosion of Social Democracy and, connected to this, the social foundations of democracy

itself. The Right has inserted itself into this vacuum of representation left by neoliberalized Social Democracy. For years, studies have shown a relatively widespread dissemination of racist, nationalist, and authoritarian thought patterns within the unions. In the regional elections in March of this year, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) received strong, above-average support from unionists: over 15% of union members in Baden-Württemberg and 24% in Sachsen-Anhalt voted for the AfD, despite the fact that the party actually cultivates a strongly anti-union stance. There is a danger that the Right could succeed in permanently shifting the direction of conflicts over social questions in a racist direction. Many people hardly believe in the possibility of a real redistribution of wealth, and thus differentiate themselves in the everyday struggle for survival over a piece of the »cake,« widely perceived as shrinking, from those »outside« and »below« them – the undeserving poor, lazy immigrants, etc. This fatalism signifies the central weakness of the societal left, namely its inability to bring about gradual changes in common sense and public understanding. Die Linke sees itself in this situation as the organizing power, the connective party of a social alliance against neoliberalism and right-wing populism (see Riexinger 2016b).

The destruction of the livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, especially in the Global South, through land-grabbing, the plundering of resources, and the consequences of ecological crisis and war



have led to strong waves of migration. Historically, capital has always used migration to sharpen the competition between waged workers and promote divisions within society. It is necessary to lead the struggle for the minds of the union's social base: to clearly oppose racism and nationalism, while at the same time entering into a jointly organized struggle for equal rights and living conditions.

Together with many active union members and other progressive sections of civil society, we are building a broad alliance against Germany's rightward drift. This is how the coalition *Aufstehen gegen Rassismus* (Stand Up Against Racism) emerged, which is currently training ten thousand people to intensify the ideological struggle against the AfD in neighborhoods, schools, associations, and workplaces across the country.

The central challenge for the union movement and Die Linke involves, however, the renewed sharpening of the social question: towards a struggle against the ultra-rich and those who profit from poverty and injustice. Together with unions, social organizations, Attac, migrant organizations, refugee supporters, and antifascist initiatives, we want to put forward a new initiative for the redistribution of wealth, good working conditions, retirement without poverty, good health and hospital care, education, and affordable housing for all people.

*Translated by Rob Ogman*

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1 Agenda 2010 was a comprehensive reform package passed by the SPD-led government in 2003, which, among other things, made the labor market more precarious, retrenched the social welfare system, and reversed progressive taxation. [Translator's note]

2 Also in the context of the economic and financial crisis, Die Linke was able to win 17.1% of union member votes during the federal election of 2009, with the Social Democratic Party winning 33.5%. By the federal election of 2013, Merkel's CDU had achieved large gains among unionists, and with 32.4% was nearly equal to the SPD (35.9%). The Left Party won 11% – in view of the internal party crisis at the time, a good result.

3 The concept was originally developed in discussions in the circles of the *Rifondazione Comunista* (see Porcaro 2011 on this issue).

# »FEMINISM IS FOR EVERYONE«

## PERSPECTIVES FOR A FEMINIST CLASS POLITICS

BARBARA FRIED

2017 began with a global wave of feminist protests. Opposition to Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States was expressed most visibly by the Women's Marches – and not only in the US itself. In Poland, resistance to restrictions on reproductive rights by the country's right-wing government continued, while 8 March brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets from Buenos Aires and Istanbul to New Delhi. In Germany, as well, International Women's Day witnessed demonstrations the likes of which we had not seen in decades.

At the same time, right-wing parties and movements are successfully taking up, articulating and mobilising widespread and to some extent justified popular anger in the ongoing organic crisis of neoliberalism: anger at a society in which the needs of the many are trampled upon while obscene wealth coexists with growing existential

crisis and social inequality; anger at a society in which democratic structures and procedures are hollowed out and in which ongoing pressures towards flexibility and market pressure are a daily reality for many, making it impossible to reconcile wage labour, reproductive necessities and other wishes and desires. These »neoliberal breaking points« (Goes 2017) are not actually solved by the Right but rather taken up so effectively that they sometimes appear as the most visible pole of »resistance« to the status quo. With their mobilisation against »gender mania«, »early sexualisation« and »marriage for all«, they organise massive assaults on the achievements of the women's and gay movements, and against anyone and everyone who fails to conform to the stereotype of a heterosexual, white »normal citizen«. By offering national-social and seemingly simple solutions tied to an allegedly homogenous and harmonious

collective, they have pushed emancipatory forces onto the defensive.

This constellation has brought renewed attention to existing praxes and approaches towards every day, connective and organising politics across the broader Left. In light of the AfD's rise in Germany, Brexit in the UK and Donald Trump's victory in the US, the publication of Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* in German translation also helped to push the question of class back to the centre of the Left's agenda (see the debate in *LuXemburg-Online* 2016 and Candeias 2017), as relevant segments of the working class expressed their dissatisfaction with neoliberalism's unfulfilled promises by voting for right-wing parties. Why is it that the Right manages to operate as an articulation of anti-neoliberalism? What does this have to do with left-wing politics in recent decades? And most importantly: why are feminism and the women's movement – aka »gender mania« – so easily depicted as part of the despised establishment? What does this mean for future feminist responses – what could a feminism look like that takes on these questions, or even formulates a feminist class politics?

### **THE LEFT: NOT ENOUGH CLASS, TOO MUCH »HOOPLA«?**

The common criticism heard lately is that the Left neglected the social question by devoting its attention to »identity politics«. It spent too much time on feminism and other alleged fringe topics, and thus helped

pave the way for the Right's success. Both of these are of course not true. It is true, however, that the Left has grown disconnected from large segments of the working classes and unemployed. This is particularly true of social movements and the so-called »emancipatory Left«, but to a certain extent also applies to the party and trade union-oriented social Left, which is also mostly confined to academic and professionalized contexts and often fails to take up the everyday concerns of many people in a way that speaks to them. This is not only the case for overwhelmingly male workers in the former industrial cores, but also for migrant service workers and precariously employed knowledge workers. Left-wing praxes are mostly not a point of reference for them.

It is not the case, however, that this »alienation« is the result of *too many* »pink-violet-green« topics. On the contrary: even today, feminist and migrant perspectives as well as ecological questions barely make it into the canon of the political Left (and only partially into that of the movement Left). They are treated, sometimes with good intentions but often in a delimiting and dismissive way as a bunch of »hoopla«. A systematic interweaving of feminism and left-wing »core topics« remains uncomplete, so that »women's politics« is often still viewed as a sectional demand, unrelated to the critique of labour relations, the distribution of wealth and financial crisis. This division must be overcome by pushing forward the development of a feminist class politics.

## FEMINISM ON TRIAL

On the other hand, it is also true that the concerns of many »non-white« women as well as women from socially marginalised backgrounds remain largely absent within feminist struggles – even those beyond bourgeois feminism. The issues of the women's and environmental movements and the struggles for social acceptance and equality of different ways of life (whether LGBTIQ or migrant) have grown detached from the concerns and everyday realities of many people. Some of them were »expropriated« and selectively integrated into hegemonic projects – such as demands for gender quotas in the boards of major German corporations, diversity programs for executive personnel, as well as a parental allowance that disproportionately benefits high-earning families. This made them appear more like attempts to provide careers to highly-qualified, flexible individuals ready to perform, effectively turning them into projects of the elite (see Hajek 2017). In this process, parts of the movements named above were painted into the corner of the politics of recognition, and neglected to conceive their concerns systematically as questions of social justice, to discuss poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation as central moments of racism and sexism, and to analyse gender relations as a social and economic structural category.

It is for this same reason that the gains in emancipation and freedom won by various social movements were so easily integrated into the neoliberal project,

whereby »diversity« has been reduced to an ingenious technique of neoliberal hegemonic rule. It is precisely because of this reality that so many are inclined to accept a rebellion against the status quo cast as a struggle against the »musty 1968ers« and their alleged political correctness.

## FEMINISM AS AN ACCOMPLICE OF NEOLIBERALISM?

Nancy Fraser is probably the most prominent representative of this (self-)criticism, the foundations of which she already began to formulate at the turn of the millennium (2001, see also Haug 1998). She sharpened her argument in the wake of the Trump shock, speaking of feminism's »complicity« with »progressive neoliberalism« (2017), allowing itself to be taken over without resistance and thus separating justice from diversity, the latter reduced to a neoliberal and individualistic husk. This circumstance calls for fundamental renewal. Sarah Leonard, editor of *The Nation* and a feminist activist in the US, sees in the current crisis and in the American context more generally the need, but also the chance, to reformulate feminist politics by developing a »feminism for the 99 percent« (2017).

In the process of exploring perspectives for an inclusive feminism, we must (self-)critically reflect upon the mechanisms of passive revolution and neoliberal integration sketched out above, albeit without dramatically dismissing all hitherto existing feminist praxes as Fraser's diagnosis sometimes seems to suggest.

Not only were significant steps made worth defending, but there were and are always other, subaltern forms of feminist struggles which were often viewed as something of a kill-joy in the era of business feminism embodied by Hillary Clinton in the US and Kristina Schröder in Germany, and thus often confined to the margins. In many of the conflicts occurring here, social questions are indivisibly tied to racist discrimination and gender disparities: whether autonomous women's shelters, projects against sexual violence, anti-racist/feminist organisations like the Respect Network, the self-organisation of women refugees, as well as countless groups conceiving of themselves as alternatives to the mainstream gay and lesbian movement. These kinds of praxes must be sought out and engaged in a serious dialogue while also further developing our own politics, rather than risk obscuring them in our critique.

### **WHY ANTI-FEMINISM ATTRACTS SOCIAL DISCONTENT**

Equally if not more important, however, is understanding why so many people seem willing to oppose the curse of authoritarian neoliberalism in the form of anti-feminism. Why is frustration with the system so easily attributed to »gender mainstreaming« and »marriage for all«, turned against those who actually or usually only allegedly have profited from it? What desires of the subaltern classes are being tapped into here, and to what extent does this also express moments of

rebellion against moments of neoliberalism's selective integration?

Arlie Russel Hochschild's most recent book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, takes on precisely these questions. Based on conversations with Trump voters in the Mississippi Delta, she describes how many felt »slapped in the face« at »the entrance gate to the middle class« (2016). In this worldview, social mobility resembles a seemingly endless queue in which one waited patiently for years while others constantly skip ahead. It is always the Other which neoliberalism allows to jump forward at the decisive moment – or at least, that is how it is perceived. The justifiable anger of many at not having »their turn« after so many unfulfilled promises is channelled into a conformist revolt against those who actually or usually only imaginedly or merely symbolically profited from neoliberalism.

In the early 1980s, the Projekt Sozialistischer Feminismus published a text on gender relations and socialist women's politics, arguing that the movement's »victories carry the markings of the social order under which they were achieved.« With view to the proletarian defence of nuclear family relations as discussed at the time, they went on, »every piece of privacy is also an escape from capitalist relations of production [...] The defence of women's oppression [as housewives] would thus be an element of a specific form in which the working class opposes capital« (PSF 1984, 83).

Looking at today's situation against this backdrop, the modern version of

this clinging to or »reclaiming« of the heterosexual nuclear family by the Right could (also) be read or deciphered as such an oppositional moment against the thoroughly economised way of life. There are obvious gains in individual emancipation associated with the tendential dissolution or questioning of the stagnant nuclear family characteristic of Fordism: both the economic independence of women as well as the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships – that is, a degree of de-heterosexualisation and freedom of choice in this arrangement – as well as, implicitly, the notion that gender is ultimately a social construction. At the same time, however, it has led to sharpened forms of increased pressure to valorise and a double burden pushing people towards exhaustion when all adults are expected and forced to work according to the so-called adult-worker model. Moreover, this means privatisation and individualisation, as the nuclear family was not replaced with plural and socialised care arrangements, but rather with constellations of joint family liability no longer necessarily based on lineage or genealogy. A »defence« of the sheltered family space and with it traditional ideals of femininity is thus an oppositional moment against pervasive neoliberalism, unrestrained flexibilisation and society's ongoing abandonment of responsibility for the conditions of social reproduction. From a (queer-)feminist perspective, of course, this cannot mean calling for the »defence of the family«, but we neverthe-

less must take this oppositional nature seriously. Otherwise, we will never be able to understand why right-wing and even conservative Christian narratives are so attractive (see Hajek 2017).

This observation facilitates another perspective on the otherwise seemingly plausible claim that (queer-)feminism's demands contributed to the Right's success. It is neither true that feminists are at fault for their rise, nor is it the case that it had nothing to do with the changing ways of life which were, at least partially, achieved by the women's movement. The feminist goal of gender equality in neoliberalism replaced the »unemancipated housewife« with the constantly active and highly capable family manager. It is the latter, however, which today proves to be a burden for so many women and men alike (albeit in different ways), experienced as a functional shift beyond mere economic pressure, including a devaluation of prior social roles and qualifications, destabilising self-confidence and emotional securities. Against this backdrop, then, right-wing ideologies of the family can *also* be understood as a reaction to these changes, perceived as »feminist« rather than »neoliberal«. That the Right manages to gather support for »anti-feminist« positions outside of existing right-wing and racist/reactionary milieus is partially due to this fact.

## HOW FEMINISM COULD RELATE (DIFFERENTLY) IN EVERYDAY LIFE

When searching for new feminist praxes and politics, we have to ask ourselves which

experiences and moments of everyday consciousness a class-oriented feminism could relate to, as it is only through this lens that we can identify shared perspectives for social change. The central question is thus: which desires and needs does right-wing discourse take up, and how could they be interpreted differently, reprocessed and articulated in an emancipatory way?

One example: in the context of a neighbourhood organising project sponsored by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung (see Pieschke 2017), a neighbourhood meeting was held last summer under the motto of »What do we want to and what can we change in our district? What concerns us the most?« After touching on several topics, the recently-finished refugee shelter next door (inevitably?!) came up: a young single mother suddenly burst out, »They have a brand-new playground and a massive high fence around their house!«. Only over time was it possible to work out where her envious glances came from, as well as the notion that »locking in« the adjacent refugees somehow constituted an undue privilege. For this single mother working full-time, a situation in which children could play safely or even under the supervision of security guards seems paradisiacal compared to her lived reality, in which parents must either be constantly present – which, given the packed day, means stress – or constantly worried that their five-year-old daughter could »get away« from the open courtyard of their apartment block – a common fear among

parents today, stirred up by contemporary domestic security discourses. Independent but safe play seemed possible in the refugee shelter, unlike in her own apartment block. Here, an understandable wish is articulated in the form of racist notions of competition: »Why do ›they‹ get that while ›we‹ don't?« A discussion emerged about how to »create security« in the residential area beyond meters-high fences. Who had similar fears and wishes? How could mothers in the apartment block band together? Who else could keep an eye on the children playing in the actually quite delightful and green, but also open courtyard?

Struggles against (sexual) violence and for the right to move safely and freely in public space are distinct feminist concerns, and the fact that the Right always plays the children's safety card does not make the issue any less important. So why not think about how feminist debates around »self-organised security« (see Brasselle 2017) can be conducted to move beyond left-wing scenes and relate to the concerns of these mothers, as well as those of refugee women? A neighbourhood meeting like this is still a long way away from ending fear. What it shows, however, is that we as the Left have to make an effort to find out which individual claims and desires can be articulated in the language of the Right. This is not always obvious. We have to find forms of first recognising and, ideally, differently articulating *and* addressing them. This will require a great deal of translation work (see Steckner 2017).





Conflict and development ① ② ③

## FEMINISM FOR ALL – RENEWING FEMINISM

The question facing feminist class politics is: which of the demands we have raised thus far relate to whose interests? And are we capable of communicating our goals in a way that they can even be «heard»? How can we orient our projects towards representing the concerns of the many?

Here, insights from early intersectionality debates are crucial. Audre Lorde, a black poet and lesbian feminist activist, for example, pointed out that «equality» for black women was never a convincing feminist narrative, not least due to the devastating and blatant differences *between* women (1984). A debate on feminist class politics can learn much from this notion, as it also reflects the experience of many women here: »These debates have nothing to do with my life.« They construe a collective woman, which possesses no

meaning nor action-enabling form as a realm of experience. If feminism is largely associated with quotas in corporate boards and haughty-sounding language rules, but not with struggles against precarised work or for expanded social benefits for single parents, then it should come as no surprise when feminism appears as an elite project.

The critique of aspects of feminist struggles can, against this backdrop, be formulated somewhat differently. Rather than arguing: the feminists failed to account for this and that, we should ask: which everyday experiences of women (non-white, socially marginalised, transwomen, etc.) are not represented? And most importantly, through which praxes, changed spaces of discussion and coalitions can this be altered?

## WHO IS THE WORKING CLASS? INTERSECTIONAL CLASS ANALYSIS

Adopting this perspective, it becomes clear that the widespread notion in the current debate of a contradiction between identity politics on one side and social or class politics on the other is an analytical dead-end, not to mention incorrect in a double sense. These are not two different problems to be addressed separately, with the concerns of socially marginalised people over here, and those of women/LBTIQ/migrants over there. This alleged opposition is, instead, itself an expression of the problem of both a reductive class analysis and well as an oversimplified analysis of gender relations



(and racism). In terms of what constitutes »class relations«, the dominant conception suggests that »class« emerges strictly in a narrowly-defined sphere of production. Often, this perspective is limited to wage labour. At the same time, the language of class analysis lacks the necessary terms with which to formulate the experiences of discrimination which do not emerge (solely) from one's position in the totality of the relations of production, i.e. everyday racist degradation and sexist debasement.

If we understand heteronormativity and gender relations as »relations of production« and »fundamental regulating

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relations« (Haug) in all spheres of life from the outset, it becomes clear that gender is not an *additional*, albeit *equally significant* relation of oppression – as many debates around race, class, and gender tend to imply – but rather a moment of class relations itself, an arrangement with which to organise the social division of labour and thus social rule. This always includes the internal *division* of the class, for which the ordering of gender plays a central role. Division into, for instance, those who perform unpaid care work and those for whom

this is generally taken care of for, or those who pursue a skilled occupation and those who – for half the money – work in social services, and accordingly into those who can continue to live well even after their retirement and those who will not receive an adequate pension. These are all questions of gender relations and thus not forms of domination outside of class relations to be incorporated into our analysis, but rather an intrinsic component thereof.

Similar is true of racism, which Stuart Hall once described as »one of the dominant means of ideological representation through which the white fractions of the class come to ›live‹ their relations to other fractions, and through them to capital itself« (1980, 341). He analyses racism as a form with which white workers are integrated into the ruling project and their support for this project is organised. In this arrangement, incorporation or rather support is exchanged for privileges, freedoms, and certain life opportunities denied to others – thereby pitting the »incorporated« in opposition to other parts of the class.

This stratification of class relations through incorporation and division along categories of skin colour or gender sets the bar for solidary action quite high indeed. Yet this is precisely what the goal of a feminist or intersectional class politics must be: asking what kinds of politics enable the overcoming of these relations, meaning »all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence« (Marx), without empowering some parts

of the class at the expense of others along the way.

## BECOMING A CLASS? ADDRESSING THE CONTRADICTION STRATEGICALLY

A precise and up-to-date class analysis is central to such an undertaking, but still only half the battle. It is not only decisive how the class changes and differentiates in the face of high-tech capitalism, precarisation and flexploitation, but also how class formation occurs (albeit through changed forms of incorporation) under these changed relations. In reference to Gramsci, Hall emphasises that »so-called ›class unity‹ is never *assumed*, *a priori*.« Rather, »classes, while sharing certain common conditions of existence, are also crosscut by conflicting interests, historically segmented and fragmented in this actual course of historical formation. Thus the ›unity‹ of classes is necessarily complex and has to be *produced*« (1996, 423).

The question of this »making of class« (E.P. Thompson) expands our perspective for today's debates: if this class struggle necessarily presupposes the class, how can we ensure that it actually comes together in struggles, in order to end oppression and thus became a »class for itself« (Marx)? Which praxes and politics are capable of this? How must they be constituted, particularly under conditions in which the subaltern lacks both a common language and often understanding of common interests, and in which everyday life provides practically no spaces of encounter, of shared ways of life in which to

experience and develop shared concerns? What could be a point of reference for collective action in such a situation?

Politics or praxes into which all relations of domination are condensed and can be resolved in one swift blow do not exist. It remains to be seen what the shared, activity-guiding issue will be in any given situation, how it can be formulated collectively and in a way that produces not exclusive solidarity, but rather unity in difference.

The question of how common interests can be produced in differing contexts in a way that facilitates collective action was always a central question for the labour movement, reformulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as »strategic essentialism« in the 1980s from a feminist/post-colonial perspective, as part of her critique of class reductionism and Western feminism. Spivak proceeded from the dilemma that political (self-)representation without the formulation of collective subjects will not succeed, as unity »in action« is necessary in order to challenge existing relations of power. Such collective subjects, in turn, are linked to essentialisation. The extent to which commonalities are created along certain experiences also increases the danger that other experiences, particularly differences within a group, will be ignored, thereby creating potential (new) exclusions. This applies to both »the class« as well as »the women«. In order to become capable of action in the first place, however, we cannot circumvent the

need for a temporary – that is, strategic – essentialisation (Spivak 1990, see also Bringmann 2017).

### **CONNECTIVE PERSPECTIVES, POPULAR PRACTICES AND THE UNLEARNING OF PRIVILEGE**

Developing a feminist class politics must confront this double bind. For our debates, that has to first mean sharpening our eye for internal differences. In this regard, both Marxist class-analysis as well as large parts of feminism exhibit major lacunae. This also means becoming aware of one's own internalised privileges and perspective »unlearning« (Spivak) them through a painful process, in order to truly become connected. This entails taking the debates of post-colonial feminism into account in a fundamental way (see Becker 2017). At the same time, the various dimensions of the production and reproduction of domination are never to be addressed »totally«. On the contrary – the goal formulated above of understanding and addressing domination in an intersectional manner so as to avoid producing new exclusions runs the risk of being politically debilitating, as no political praxis can fulfil this aspiration entirely. Popular politics can hardly be developed in this way.

So how could it work? Strategies of transformation cannot be developed in a vacuum, but rather must relate to and intervene in existing struggles, controversies and movements. Various already-existing feminist practices and demands



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must be investigated to determine which concerns are already contained therein and where they could be »enriched« with a class perspective, but also how to avoid systematic marginalisation or exclusion. The totality of different experiences does not necessarily have to be reflected in all demands and politics at all times, but rather must be incorporated into the horizon of collective action, in the social conditions to be created by a democratic commonality (see Demirovic 2017). To the extent that such a perspective exists today, it does so

only rudimentarily. Our job is to develop it concretely in a common struggle for space to satisfy a wide variety of wants and needs.

This direction has emerged in debates around perspectives for feminist organising in care struggles over recent years. For example, the demand for cost-free and democratically organised social infrastructure in all spheres of care has been established and developed as a common perspective (see Winker 2015, Fried and Schurian 2016, and many more). Here, incipient traces of a feminist class politics can be found, albeit generally discussed with different terminology. In discussions and politics emerging



from the Care Revolution network, the decision was made to prioritise feminist organising in a field whose struggles in home and care work constitute a central field of feminist movements. Moreover, privatisation and market pressure become experienceable in everyday life here, where racist division and discrimination play a central role in the face of the international division of labour and »global care chains« (Hochschild). Finally, it has also constituted a centre of trade union struggles in recent years. These strategic reflections shared the goal of developing a popular feminist politics that incorporates everyday concerns and struggles for concrete improvements while simultaneously pursuing a fundamental re-ordering of gender arrangements and modes of production and life. Such concrete, connective politics are very challenging indeed, but several obstacles have already been tackled (see UmCare 2016 and Fried and Schurian 2016, 2017).

How such a popular class-oriented (and post-colonial/anti-racist) feminism could look has been further developed by an ongoing debate in the United States for several years. The movement for »reproductive justice« criticises contemporary feminist practices around the topic of sexual self-determination – a central field of feminist struggle – as reductive. From the perspective of non-white women, they formulate, among other things, the necessity and possibility of focusing on more than unrestricted access to abortion. Due to racism and eugenics policies, the right to bear children is equally



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as precarious as the right to end unwanted pregnancies for many women, particularly indigenous and black (see Hentschel 2017). Accordingly, reproductive justice must also incorporate the right to children.

In the spirit of a feminist class politics, we must take up this thought and add another perspective: here and there, struggles for sexual self-determination for both indigenous and black as well as many socially marginalised »white« women must include fighting for conditions under which it is truly possible for everyone to have children if and how they choose. This means not only birth, but also securing childrearing socially, which means that adequate labour relations as well as modes of living, de-precarisation, guidance, child care, education opportunities and much more must be incorporated into the political horizon of feminist struggles for sexual self-determination. Only if these

prospects are available to everyone can we really speak of freedom of choice when it comes to abortion or raising children.<sup>1</sup>

### **IN SPITE OF IT ALL: CLASS AS A STRATEGIC POINT OF CRYSTALLISATION**

In both these and other feminist struggles, then, we must explicitly incorporate or work out a class perspective without it becoming dominant or understanding class questions as a priori in a traditionalist sense – an understandably common concern in debates around feminist class politics. The task of a class feminism (or a Left seeking to develop such a feminism) must thus be to investigate existing struggles and demands to determine where implicit or explicit exclusions are produced, or rather at which points feminism's class perspectives can be strengthened.

This includes the important question of how different parts of the class which should be involved in these struggles can be won over – particularly those that are not used to interpreting their problems as class problems due to previous feminist and other political debates, as well as those who in light of previous debates around social questions are not used to thinking of their problems as questions of given gender relations. We must develop forms with which different concerns can be taken up *and* reformulated as questions of class, gender and, in this sense, as shared identity.

Instead of class *or* identity politics, we need class *as* identity politics – a politics in which the overcoming of class relations in a non-reductionist sense becomes a

common point of reference addressed differently in different places and in different fields, but with the common goal of shaping our conditions and ways of life collectively and democratically for all – and with a clear sense of antagonism vis-à-vis ruling politics and attempts to divide and conquer (see Demirovic 2017).

In this way, various movements beyond feminism can be cohered together into a new class politics, in order to form a »connective antagonism« (Candeias 2017) to neoliberalism, which also contests the Right's position. In the current social situation, an inclusive feminism or a feminist class politics appears as a compelling counter-pole not only to an aggressive anti-feminism, but also to an authoritarian project »from above« and »from the right« as a whole. The fact that a movement opposing both the liberal feminism of a Hillary Clinton and the government of Donald Trump was the most visible thus expression of such discontent thus far. In the spirit of the early theoreticians of intersectionality, we must renew our push for a perspective of »feminism is for everyone« here, as well.

*Translated by Loren Balhorn*

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1 Perspectives for disability politics can also be extended in a similar sense: the existing social pressure to abort fetuses with foreseeable genetic »anomalies« or other disabilities can only be effectively countered when the necessary social conditions for living with disabled children and people as such are secured. Only then can we speak of real freedom of choice in this context.



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*This text was inspired by many discussions surrounding the founding of the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung feminist discussion group with, among others, Lia Becker, Alex Wischniewski, Kerstin Wolter, Mario Candeias, Katharina Pühl, Silke Veth, Melanie Stitz, Hannah Schurian and Susanne Hentschel.*

# »ASYS<sup>1</sup> GO HOME!«

## DOOR-TO-DOOR VISITS AS A STRATEGY AGAINST DIVISION

BY ANNE STECKNER

In this conflict situation, some seek out culprits who are apparently taken care of without having to make the same effort: »the immigrants«, »the refugees« or »economic refugees«, »asys«, »welfare spongers«, »bums« – sometimes also »bosses«, »bankers«, and »politicians«. What does that mean for the project of an immigration society based upon solidarity, that seeks to – and must – include everyone who is marginalized, or at least feels marginalized?

Engaging in personal conversation *with* people that one does not otherwise encounter, instead of just talking *about* them, can bring to light important questions and insights. DIE LINKE was on the move in twelve cities nationwide during the autumn of 2016. On doorsteps, members spoke with people primarily from low-income neighborhoods to discuss burning issues, and which problems could be tackled

together. With trained lay-interviewers, we went door-to-door and conducted 379 conversations. The documentation of these conversations provides insights into everyday thinking about politics, neighborhoods and living conditions at the lower margins of society – a kaleidoscope of »the state of affairs in Germany«<sup>2</sup>. Time and again, we encountered racist resentments and linguistic violence, even on the part of open-minded people. But it was seldom a case of solidified attitudes or closed worldviews. Frequently, they were spontaneous truncations or displacements present everywhere within societal discourse. At the same time, prejudices fractured against real experiences, truths and falsehoods stood closely alongside each other, contradictions became visible. Antonio Gramsci called this »bizarre everyday consciousness.« »Challenging others precisely as far as possible without

rupturing the relationship« (Schrupp 2011) is a question of practice. The left, which often bears the stamp of academia, can learn a few things here.

## LEARNING PROCESSES ON BOTH SIDES

Despite racist prejudices that arose in conversations, there was, for example, knowledge about the causes of flight and the role played by German policies. It's possible to start there.

*A retired woman from Leipzig-Gohlis brings up the supposed lack of work ethic on the part of refugees and the arms exports of German companies, all in the same breath. Her neighbor thinks that refugees should either »go home« or »integrate«, but had »never had a problem myself with foreigners.« She also saw arms sales in civil war countries as responsible for current developments. A ticket inspector from Essen-Frohnhausen believes refugees are criminal, and demands at the same time that wars must stop.*

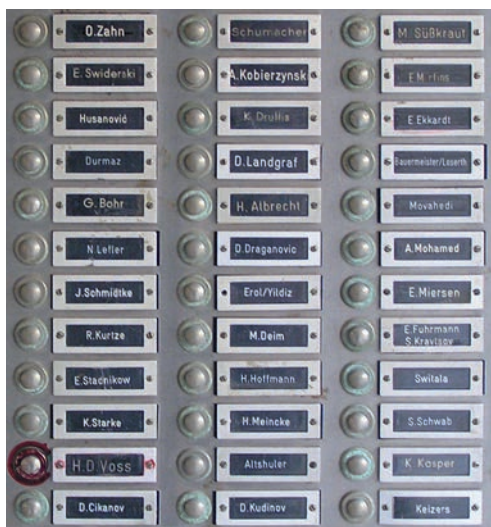
Analyses of the right's increasing strength point out disconcerting shifts in the field of the doable and thinkable. But some debates about everyday racism tend to take statements by people with little practice in sophisticated argumentation too literally, instead of taking them seriously. Racism is not a question of education; one's mode of expression is.

Understanding the »sense« that a racist, sexist, tough-guy statement creates in another person might take some getting used to. But, by means of attentive inquiry and trenchant objection, one can find out

the importance the statement has in their thinking, how entrenched the worldview is, and whether there are durable starting points for common activity. Some people mean exactly what they say. Whether or not that's the case, however, can only be clarified by direct conversation, since people from low-income neighborhoods rarely publish articles and usually aren't invited onto talk shows.

*A convinced AfD<sup>3</sup> voter from Dresden-Prohlis does not allow himself to be diverted from his view of the world: »Deport them. Dump them into the ocean, or shoot them. German bums, too. Women who sleep with three bums.« If misogynistic-racist statements are stated with such clarity, it's easy to draw a line. We end the conversation, there's lots of other doors waiting.*

Sounding out commonalities or drawing a line? That's a learning process. One therefore has to step out of one's comfort zone. Leaving the personal echo chamber, the Facebook bubble, the intellectual »regular's table« occasionally, is an opportunity that cannot be underestimated to examine one's own language, political praxis, and fondly held certainties. Knowing how things look »down there«, and which coping strategies there are, can help in developing a feel for the facets of a damaged life. The precarity of academics with an abundance of social capital (and sometimes parental wealth) looks different than the poverty of the disenfranchised or the fears of social descent on the part of the row house middle class.



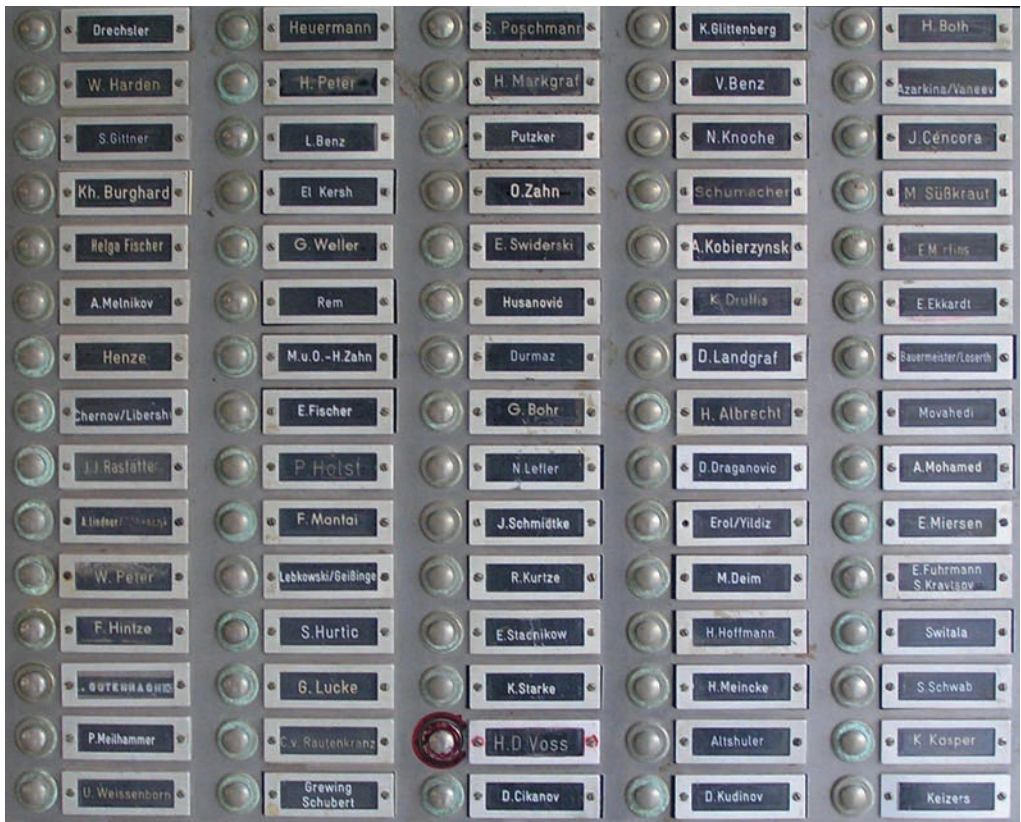
Furthermore, in these encounters, the topics discussed were sometimes of secondary concern. The interest in a common conversation was decisive. Contact trumps content? That forces leftists to expand their established terrain: the force of argument, the sober reference to facts. It's challenging to build personal contact with strangers in a short period of time – sustained by empathy, if possible – while at the same time not losing sight of the political goal, and trusting in the fact that people will engage with one if they are met with sincere interest.

## OFFERING INTERPRETATIONS AND SHIFTING DISCOURSES

A 50-year-old gardener from Bremen-Gröpelingen, who works as a foreman in a correctional facility, initially encounters us with reservation. He is convinced that *DIE LINKE* will »never be in a position« to change anything anyway. Besides, »you leftists take on too many refugees,

*we can't pay for that!*« Spoken to concerning his work situation, he answers that he can't complain, his wage is sufficient, we're talking to the wrong person. But then he lets the following slip: »The temp workers earn much less than I do, barely the minimum wage. But they do the same work. They should get equal pay, they deserve it.« We agree with him, and ask questions about pay gaps and the relation between him, as a foreman, and »the team« for which he's responsible. From this moment on, the situation becomes more relaxed. He answers »yes« to our question of whether there are people on his team that haven't been living in Germany for very long, as well as to our follow-up question of whether he gets along well with them. Now we have a common denominator: the notion that all who do the same work should get equal pay – regardless of their background or passport. At least during the conversation, »this refugee thing« takes another twist and decreases in significance.

The point is not remaining silent about racism, but rather to decode it in a manner close to everyday life, and to offer other interpretations. The sociologist Didier Eribon delineates this sometimes arduous work: the French working class had already been racist and homophobic in the past. But the Communist Party succeeded in making it a political offer that placed class identity at the center of concern. It channeled the anger of the exploited into a common struggle for better working conditions, and did not provide the space for right-wing slogans, even if workers' parties are not free of racism and sexism.



»My little daughter only has Turkish friends. Parents in the daycare center distance themselves when they hear that I'm a Muslim«, complains a Turkish woman (without a hijab) from Essen-Frohnhausen. At the same time, she demands a tougher course against »welfare benefit freeloaders«.

It's actually banal: there are no homogeneous groups, neither among ethnic Germans nor among immigrants. People affected by racism can themselves be racist, exhibit chauvinism of affluence or be hostile toward the disabled. Disabled people can be misogynistic. Women can be blind to class. That makes the question

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cutting across all this so important: along which interests can commonalities be discovered and articulated, without denying individual differences? Because money problems, fears about the future or of social descent, performance pressure, planning uncertainty, and sexist comments affect people with or without a German passport. But the knowledge or the experience of belonging to the working class is repressed in the interpellation as a German or Turk.

*Before us stands a retired couple from Dresden-Prohlis with classic »East German*



biographies«. Both were working in the GDR, the fall of the Berlin Wall came in the middle of their lives. After the »Wende«, she went through various jobs and employment schemes, interrupted by phases of unemployment. He suffered an on-the-job injury. Now their pensions aren't enough, they have to work for supplementary income. Recently, their rent was increased. They initially reacted to us with hostility: »one gets called a Nazi for marching with PEGIDA<sup>4</sup>. We aren't Nazis. But all the refugees, they get everything, whereas people like us...« – a very familiar argument. »Well, to my knowledge most refugees here live at the poverty line«, is our point. There is still no connection. How can one recognize the frustration, but frame what's said in a different way and give the discontent a different thrust? »We hear that a lot, that rents increase faster than pensions. Assuming you're right and one wouldn't give refugees anything anymore, would the problems you mention go away?« The question brings a moment of reflection into the conversation.

As a variation of this question, we ask on other doorsteps: »When you think back to the time before lots of refugees came. Were things better for you?« Or, »who profits from it, when we allow ourselves to be played against each other?« Even though such questions don't overturn worldviews, they often create a rupture in apparently seamless convictions.

The experience of deprivation is real; it's just the explanation that's false. Immigration has, according to the British-Indian

journalist Kenan Malik, »come to be the means« through which many people perceive social problems. »The trouble is, so long as we continue to scapegoat migrants for such problems, we will continue to ignore the underlying reasons for [...] many people's sense of being politically abandoned and marginalized.« (Malik 2017) Clearly and comprehensibly naming the causes, without disputing the experience of our counterparts – that's the challenge. But reactions on the doorsteps demonstrate: changing the definition of the problem, and thus shifting the discourse around the »refugee crisis«, is possible at least in small steps. Conversely, people with small pocketbooks also spoke out directly for more support for refugees. Openness or reservations towards non-Germans are thus not questions of income.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FACE OF DIVISION AND POWERLESSNESS**

The experience of not having control over one's own life, of having no power to shape things, was shared by many of our conversation partners. There are different ways of dealing with this: »I won't take part anymore« (withdrawal, electoral abstention) or »I'm voting AfD« are two of them. Making tangible the capacity to act in concert with others is therefore a strategic starting point for organizing from within everyday life. This »struggle for sovereignty« (Pieschke 2016) could be a common denominator independent of background or nationality.

Suffering and affliction alone offer no way out of isolation and passivity. Especially since the intuition isn't wrong: every attempt at standing up and resisting contains the risk of failure.

*Due to his foreign surname, a 36-year-old unemployed man from Kassel has never worked in a regular employment situation, only as a temp worker. His repeated experience that »you can't do anything anyway, that won't change« has solidified into a personal conviction that can't be shaken up in conversation. Examples of successful struggles that demonstrate the opposite hardly convince him.*

How can one convey to people with feelings of powerlessness that nothing has to remain as it is, that people can achieve something together, while the promise that »everyone can do it, that's why everyone is exactly where they belong« roars from every loudspeaker? Patience and sensitivity are necessary for fomenting new relationships and pointing out perspectives within fragmented everyday life. Entering into conversation with others at all can be a first step, especially since if one looks closely, one finds stubborn forms in which poor people in precarious life circumstances provide mutual support, indeed organize informally.

That raises urgent questions: how can the left absorb the loss of spaces of solidarity and zones of security outside of the nuclear family? How can the need for community, security – indeed, for home – be taken up and fulfilled in an emancipa-

tory way? Can the left develop more of a sense for pathos and emotion? Must it? And how are things with regard to places of encounter that transcend class and social milieu? Given the self-perceptions of distinction shared by the middle class, forging the often-invoked alliance of the middle and lower classes is not easy. The heterogeneous class situations within the precariat yield experiences of oppression that are widely divergent. Already-existing divisions are further exacerbated by the political elite.

### **POLITICAL EFFICACY FROM THE LEFT**

The strategy of »first speaking to the various dissident milieus that – on their own! – articulate themselves in a politically leftist way« (Seibert 2016) runs the risk that children of the bourgeoisie remain among themselves. Social engagement is dependent upon education, income, and living environment – a question of class. Academics, as studies demonstrate, are overrepresented in all political organizations. Not coincidentally, one finds among those engaged in refugee aid – alongside women and people with an immigrant biography – disproportionately many highly qualified and financially secure people. Political consciousness is also a question of socialization. In any case, very few people simply articulate themselves in a leftist way »on their own«, especially not when the social mood threatens to tip to the right. And if social conflicts are supposed to touch upon property relations



one fine day: how should that be possible without the majority of those who possess nothing other than their labor power? It not only concerns the poor white male, but also involves the female, immigrant and educated proletariat. It's a question of political efficacy for impulses from the left capable of effecting change.

If the left wants to be more than a cliquish lot, it has to win people that don't participate on their own initiative – but who can be reached. The fact that precisely those whose interests must be of importance to the left are increasingly withdrawing from politics and society has a lot to do with precarious life. Within DIE LINKE, a discussion has been going on for some time about how the party can root itself in low-income neighborhoods and accompany and strengthen their residents around conflicts relevant to everyday life. Outreach conversations are a central component of that. That has nothing to do with social romanticism or a mystified view of the supposedly vanished working class, but rather with the certainty that an emancipatory project isn't one when proletarians aren't part of it.

*»The Asys [asylum seekers] have to get out, they should disappear!« is the first thing to occur to a young single mother in response to the question as to what's of burning importance to her. She lives with an infant and a young child in a two-room apartment in a run-down prefab high-rise estate in Bernau-Süd, near Berlin. While she stirs hair dye in a plastic bowl at the doorstep, we inquire*

*about the things that make her life hard: harassment at the unemployment office, a lack of child care, an apartment that's too small. We encourage her in the conviction that these are real problems – while pointing out that all this existed before the increase in the number of refugees. In response to the later question of whether she'll vote in the national elections, she becomes monosyllabic. We venture to ask directly whether she's ever considered voting for the AfD. Like a pistol shot, she answers, »well, nah. I already know that won't do anything!« We agree. We put her anger at the »asys«, which she does not further explicate, on the back burner – for the moment – and invite her to come take a look at a meeting in the neighborhood. She gives us her telephone number. A thin band that could become a link.*

In many low-income areas, DIE LINKE achieves above-average voting results – side-by-side with sympathy for right-wing slogans. But most residents don't vote at all<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, as is known, left positions have little chance in the media crossfire. Personal contact, however, lies in the left's own hands.

Talking to people is necessary, but not sufficient. It can't replace organization. A »short-term flirt« isn't enough, »long and laborious relationship work is required for a stable base to emerge.« (Pieschke 2016) With the door-to-door conversations, the real work has just begun. Now we have to not only identify potential »neighborhood leaders« (Hoeft et al. 2014), but target them for training, so that they can agree upon collective forms of leadership in

which everyone can find their manner of participating.

And therein lies the crux. In many places, DIE LINKE has to struggle with structural problems: exhausted volunteers, few activists in rural and small town areas, crippling »committee socialism«, a concentration of resources for parliamentary work. DIE LINKE is confronted with the challenge of sustainably integrating the newly addressed, of how to divert resources for this, and of how the party must change in order to become attractive to more people than the usual suspects.

»And not least, there needs to be a cultural transformation within the party, until the insight that parliamentary motions and talk shows are just one part of politics is recognized, and that democracy presupposes a dialogue with the people whose interests one wishes to represent. But you have to start sometime. Furthermore, DIE LINKE can build upon valuable experience in this area from its history as a party that knows what it means to take care.« (Schlemermeyer 2017, p. 17)

*Translated by Alexander Locascio*

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1 Translator's Note: »Asys« is a derogatory term for asylum seekers in Germany, derived from the word »Asyl« (*asylum*). There is no equivalent generally used term in English.

2 For contributing accounts of such dialogs I'd like to thank Barbara Fried, Katja Kipping, and Miriam Pieschke.

3 Translator's Note: AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany): far-right political party focused upon anti-immigration sentiment and providing a broad electoral regroupment of the far-right.

4 Translator's note: acronym that stands (in German) for »Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamification of the Occident«, a series of anti-immigrant demonstrations occurring in Germany since the autumn of 2014.

5 Contrary to sweeping assumptions, the »underclass« doesn't vote with above average frequency for right-wing parties. It's also not primarily the poor and disenfranchised who vote for the »Alternative for Germany« (AfD), but rather »far above the average men, first of all, and second of all voters with an intermediate-level school certificate, that is to say, the tenth grade and *Abitur* [translator's note: the *Abitur* is a secondary school qualification preparatory to a university education]. Those with a *Hauptschulabschluss* [translator's note: the lowest-level secondary school diploma] vote at a slightly below-average level for the AfD, and those with (half-)academic professional qualifications vote at a level far below average for the party. [...] Members of the underclass without a perspective for escaping their own class situation – primarily the new service sector proletariat – don't vote at all, as has already been the case for twenty years.« (Kahrs 2016)

# THE IMPOSITIONS OF CLASS

## MANIFOLD IDENTITIES AND SOCIALIST CLASS POLITICS

BY ALEX DEMIROVIĆ

The recent success of authoritarian-populist politicians and the critique of globalisation, unemployment and social insecurity they advocate has prompted renewed attention to the question of class. In Germany, this debate has been accompanied by discussions surrounding the publication of Didier Eribon's recent book, *Returning to Reims*. From afar, these debates could leave one with the impression that the left had abandoned the social question in recent years in favour of an exclusive focus on questions of social recognition and »identity«, e.g. questions of gender and sexual emancipation, or the struggle against racism and nationalism. This line of argument also tends to imply that these concerns are the domain of the urban, well-educated petite bourgeoisie, open to new communicative and cultural practices while consuming expensive, fair-trade organic products, yet blinded to

the living conditions of the overwhelming majority by their own bourgeois lifestyle.

Such segments of the petite bourgeoisie most certainly exist, however they do so alongside many others who participated in the World Social Forums, support the transition to a sustainable post-growth society, or are involved in the refugee movement. Perhaps the problem is more that the left tends to fall into two camps: those who are generally more concerned with questions of distribution, poverty, unemployment, wages and trade unions, and those more interested in climate change, food consumption patterns, emancipation from heterosexual normativity and racism, or democratic rights.

The left does itself no favours by construing a dichotomy between class and identity politics rather than exploring their intrinsic interconnection. In fact, many of the »identity questions« allegedly

unrelated to distribution also have material implications: sexism, for example, leads to the discrimination of women at the workplace and in partnerships, relegated to allegedly female roles, paid less, and often trapped in precarious employment. Additionally, women workers are often subject to sexual harassment. Whether health insurance pays for abortions and whether these are performed in local hospitals can be crucial, even existential questions – particularly for poorer women. Racism serves as the foundation for the destruction of entire regions and the hyper-exploitation of large segments of humanity. The ecological question – healthy food, access to clean water, sustainable energy production or mobility – carries implications for more than just an allegedly saturated petite bourgeoisie obsessed with their own physical fitness and appearance. Workers are also affected when it comes to safe and healthy workplaces, air and sound pollution, medical care or food quality. Workers also suffer under conventional family structures and gender identities, as men and women with all of the social expectations these identities entail. Many workers are also gay, lesbian or trans people subject to harassment, state repression or (medical) violence because of their sexual orientation. It would be a mistake to view these moments of the life context of various groups of wage earners in isolation from one another, as such a move risks narrowing our understanding of class and construing false lines of division.

It would be similarly false to present the working class as a unified entity, though it is true that all members of the working class belong to society's »collective worker« (as Marx calls it in *Capital*). Although this fact represents a potential point of commonality and unity, shared identities and practical perspectives do not emerge from the relations of production automatically. The individuals and groups making up the collective worker exhibit a wide variety of orientations in terms of their lifestyles and worldviews – for occupational or workplace-related reasons, due to gender and familial divisions of labour, national background, age, education, formal employment status and job prospects, qualifications, concrete job and income, workplace size and position in the hierarchy, religious ties, organisational experiences and militant traditions, or membership in organisations like trade unions and political parties.

The collective worker comprises a wide variety of people scattered across the globe who collectively participate in the material production of life. Nevertheless, this commonality remains cut off from them under conditions of a privately-owned economy. The left does not exist by chance, but rather anticipates a humanity conscious of precisely such a commonality. The various currents and concrete forms of the labour movement and social movements are products of this contradictory process of the organisation of the collective worker. They emerge

organically from the historical necessities put forward by a multiplicity of deeply heterogeneous individuals with divergent social functions, modes of living and attitudes, who seek to win their freedom by forming a collective capable of acting and reaching collective decisions about the shape of our shared co-existence. Large sections of the historical left, however, have restricted themselves to particular forms of industrial labour, namely heavy industry and materials processing, which led to a specific, naturalistic understanding of the material production of wealth in which toilsome physical labour occupied a central role. Trade unions and workers' parties made this the central focus of their organisational and political activities for many years. Other forms of work (largely performed by women) such as housework, childrearing, caring for the elderly, and other forms of social reproduction were largely marginalised.

The left neglected to devote sufficient attention to how the working class itself is rife with and structured by relations of power and domination. Marx addresses this very clearly in *Capital*, describing how men sell the labour of their wives and children almost as if they were slaves – yet Marx himself still failed to take gender relations, generational reproduction and thus the entire spectrum of bourgeois influences on the working class through moralisation of the family and sexuality into account. Historically, however, the working class was hardly ever »nation-

ally« composed, due to the key function regularly occupied by migrant labour. By granting a segment of the »native« and urban working class a supervisory function, a degree of command over the work of others, better pay, better living conditions and social mobility for their children, the working class was hierarchized and divided. That said, experiences of the many forms of difference, identity and modes of living prevalent within the working class can also facilitate an enriching expansion of perspective which, in turn, moves towards a new form of class politics. This kind of class politics would be less about a reduction to one group of wage earners – industrial workers, the precariously employed – or the establishment of a common class identity, so much as a perspective of a new mode of production and life, of the complex interconnection between different forms of participating in the total labour of society. Here, three aspects are important:

**A |** In the history of the left, the mistake was often made of seeking a common denominator to cohere different interests – so-called »objective interests«. Yet these interests can be very heterogeneous indeed: job security, wage levels, equal pay for equal work, shorter working hours, breaks, overtime or vacation rules, qualifications and prospects for advancement, less pressure from management, a regulated normal working day and a degree of self-determination at



the workplace, tax levels, children's job prospects, dependents in need of care, private relationships, urban and regional development, and many others. Not all of these goals can be brought together in every phase of the class struggle. The left, for its part, cannot afford to concentrate on one aspect which it identifies as the common interest of all wage earners in advance, as no such common denominator exists, nor could such interests be objectively determined given the constant shifts in the dominant contradictions and struggles in the circulation of all relations of dominance and exploitation. This does

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not entail doubting the objective nature of classes and class interests, but rather developing a different understanding of material objectivity. Objectivity consists not only of one's position within the relations of production and access to means of production; objectivity cannot be reduced to economic interests and market positions. Instead, classes are determined by the totality of economic, political, and cultural relations and by their relation to one another. This relation is, in its totality, a relation of class struggle. In this sense,



classes always encompass a wide range of class practices, which are the result of previous struggles and compromises between classes. These also include state practices of dominance (from legal framing of the right to strike, social policy, and the repression of left-wing organisations) and ongoing discussions in political parties or the media, as well as conflicts around the socialisation of individuals, their modes of living, or their eating habits.

As the modes of living and interests within classes vary significantly and are subject to continuous change in line with the capitalist dynamic, »class politics« is confronted with the challenge of taking not only labour, but rather all aspects of life and the class-specific practices of various groups of wage earners into account. Otherwise, the possibility arises that the interests of only one specific group will be asserted and generalised. The danger of this leading to exclusion and political inflexibility is obvious.

Of crucial importance, then, is which aspect(s) of life can summarise and represents workers' problems – in which symbols, questions, and topics do they see themselves and their problems and perspectives reflected? It is thus not a question of finding the smallest common denominator, but rather of which topics, conflicts, and developments come to symbolise the many problems of crisis-ridden social misdevelopment, as well as one's own exploited and dominated living situation. Such symbols can be taxation,

general political incompetence, ecology, education, the family and gender relations – but also the nation or »foreigners«.

**B |** The left must take all of these aspects into consideration and critically address them as products of the capitalist mode of production. It must demonstrate its willingness to support adequate solutions to individual problems, while continuing to emphasise the overall tendency of social development and the need for solutions to several larger problems: problems like environmental destruction, racism, sexism, the accumulation of wealth by a select few, and the burden of toilsome labour for the many despite civilizational progress, which have continued to grow and multiply over the last 400 years. The only real solution is to change the organisation of the entire ensemble of social relations in such a way that allows for everyone to fully participate in the social decision-making process. In turn, class politics cannot be based on a flawed reduction to the problems of a particular social group or class, but rather must enrich itself with the knowledge and awareness of dominance, degradation, and destruction in all areas of life.

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci describes this social constellation as an historical bloc, an alliance of different subaltern groups with their specific modes of living based on various formulas. It is less a matter of radicalising and expanding spontaneous workplace struggles or waiting for new and bigger demonstra-



tions or electorates and party coalitions; rather, such a bloc emerges from a shared understanding of reality and the formation of a common will to change the totality of social relations. As far as perspectives for the left are concerned, this means advocating for the notion that desperately-needed social changes (overcoming exploitation, ecological crisis, racism, sexual violence) are impossible as long as the capitalist mode of production remains in place. As long as social labour is determined by the market's anarchic processes of supply and demand, the possibilities for solving major social problems remain severely constricted. Too many powerful interests have a stake in preventing such solutions.

**C |** Many people reject being labelled or labelling themselves into a specific class. Unlike in the case of gender or national identity – which humanity absorbs in the form of centuries-old traditions and practices of domination renewed daily and positively occupied by the rulers themselves – many treat class ascriptions as a kind of imposition, anticipating on an individual and private level that which can only be achieved collectively and as a social relation, namely the overcoming of classes altogether. This is the historical goal of the socialist movement: »the abolition of the classes« (Marx). The difficult part of class belonging is that it is a coercive relation, entailing material dependency on others and demonstrating that individuals, despite all intellectual competencies,

despite freedom and equality, despite democracy, are subjected to an all-powerful totality against which they are powerless, which they do not control, and which de-solidarizes them from others in society. It is thus paradoxical: the left is confronted with the challenge of arguing for the notion that people belong to a class while simultaneously advocating for the abolition of all classes as a defining relation between humans – in the same way that it fights for the abolition of oppressive forms of identity like »race«, »nation«, or »gender«.

But that, precisely, is the challenge: developing a critical rather than heroic understanding of »class« informed by the various existing forms of domination, in order to create moments in which the possibility of freely shaping social relations emerges through the interconnection of other emancipatory tendencies. This sort of orientation towards hegemony obliges the left to address the various emancipatory perspectives emphatically and over the long term, rather than instrumentally or tactically, in order to work towards an all-encompassing project of social emancipation. The left should work towards making an expanded conception of »class« and the free, self-determined, and cooperative shaping and steering of social labour into a political-cultural, hegemonic symbol, in which people recognise the possibility of resolving the many urgent social problems and challenges described above.

*Translated by Loren Balhorn*

# FOR A QUEER FEMINIST CLASS POLITICS OF SHAME

VOLKER WOLTERSdorff

It's rather curious. A book in which the author, Didier Eribon (2013a), vehemently demonstrates that we always also experience class relations sexually, and that there is a class dimension inherent to every form of sexuality – indeed, that without this interrelation, one is not able to consider one thing nor the other – unexpectedly becomes a bestseller. The enthusiastic German reviews – with the exception of that by Dirck Linck (2016) in *Merkur* – overwhelmingly act once again as if one can be separated from the other. Often enough, they degrade the author's homosexuality to the status of a footnote to a class analysis untouched by it. Yet the author himself asserts that shame is the mode of functioning of both sexual and class-specific stigmatization.<sup>1</sup> Why does that not lead to sounding out the sexual dimension of shaming in the countless professions of class-specific shaming following the publication of the book? Why

are, initiated by Mark Lilla's (2016) intervention, the »social question« and »identity politics« once again treated as two separate political issues that are either regarded as equally valid, or subordinated one to the other, according to the assessment of each respective review? Whose identity politics are being understood here as a legitimate social and economic interest, and whose social and economic needs are considered special wishes for a particular lifestyle? To put it another way: shouldn't it have long been made clear that the point cannot be struggling for either bread or roses, but rather that we want bread and roses?

Historically, the mutual disinterest between sexual and gender emancipation struggles and class politics was not as pronounced as it is today. »Bread and roses« was the demand raised during a strike by textile workers from various immigrant communities at the beginning of the last

century in the USA. It was later set to music as a protest song, whereby the roses stood for all those needs that weren't limited to securing material survival, including the desire for dignity, recognition, and (*joie de vivre*) lust for life. That's why this song is sung in a scene of the film *Pride* (GB 2014), which commemorates the common struggles of striking mine workers and gays and lesbians in Great Britain during the Thatcher era of the 1980s.

»Brüder & Schwestern warm oder nicht, Kapitalismus bekämpfen ist unsere Pflicht!« – »Brothers and sisters, queer or not, fighting capitalism is our obligation!« This slogan was emblazoned on a cardboard sign held by the sexologist and pioneer of the gay movement, Martin Dannecker, at the first nationwide demonstration by homosexuals in Münster on April 29th, 1972. The then-emerging second (West) German gay movement engaged in many discussions concerning the correct interpretation of Marxism with regard to the homosexual question, but remained stewing in its own, rather student-influenced, bourgeois juices. It's therefore hardly surprising that it lost sight of the class question when the spirit of the times no longer hit it over the head with it. At most, proletarians remained present as icons of gay desire, and as such became increasingly distant from the reality of class relations, because their being fetishized in the sexuality of bourgeois gays is often enough not only an expression of fascination, but also of contempt, similar to the fetishization of racist clichés.

## COMING TOGETHER IN A DIFFERENT WAY: CROSSOVER – CLASSOVER?

Of course there were always people who brought their own class experiences into the movements for sexual emancipation, such as the »Homosexuelle Arbeiteraktion Westberlin«, HAAW (»Homosexual Workers' Action, West Berlin), in the 1970s, the self-assertion of »Prolo-Lesbos« in the FRG of the 1980s, or the group »Queers for Economic Justice« in the USA of the 2010s. Their marginal position within the movement as a whole shows, however, that even there, the reigning class relations were those of society as a whole.

But at least subcultures of sexual and gender non-conformists, which used to be much less differentiated, allowed people to encounter each other beyond the limits of class much more than is the case today. I also probably wouldn't have stepped out of my own educated middle-class bubble if I hadn't one day perforce set foot in the gay subculture, just as Eribon in turn describes how this subculture paved his way into the bourgeoisie. But in contrast to Eribon, for me it took quite a while until I was able to interpret this experience of social differences as the expression of a structural relation of domination. My erotic desire was not a hindrance in that regard. The difficulties began elsewhere, for example, in trying to find a common language. I had to learn that my language, my being-in-the-world, had something intimidating, something alien, that caused our distance to increase. I had to learn to call my standards and ex-

pectations into question and to accept that class is a structural category that cannot be dissolved or transcended individually.

If the gay subculture contained for me and others a special possibility of experiencing class antagonisms, that doesn't mean that sexuality otherwise plays no role in the experience of class. One need only think of the close connection between labor union struggles and working class masculinity and therefore also of the interests of those who best embody the latter. Or the link between notions of femininity and the role of the bourgeois housewife. But family and kinship are also magnitudes that do not remain untouched by class domination in capitalism. Friedrich Engels, as the heir of a factory who lived in a love triangle with two female workers, had already asserted this in his treatise on the family and private property, and this estimation has been refined ever since in many feminist analyses. Struggles for the equality of unmarried with married relationships have also always been struggles around inheritance and wealth, not just for recognition.

## **SEXUAL AND GENDER DIVERSITY IN NEOLIBERALISM**

Whereas class antagonisms have multiplied and intensified under neoliberal capitalism, during the same period policies for sexual and gender emancipation have had considerable success. This has led to a further widening of the rift between sexual and class politics. After initial difficulties, it has started to look like sexual and gender

diversity were well-served within capitalism after 1968. Their emancipation was the result of struggle, not merely given, but they found forms that were able to be well-integrated into the »new spirit of capitalism« (Boltanski/Chiapello 2005) and presumably for that reason were so successful. The neoliberal transformation of society promoted namely »more risky« lifestyles, which were pushed to the margins in the Fordist welfare state, with its rigid gender and sexual order, and which could now be instrumentalized as models of individual private risk management. Those who could afford it profited from the flexibilization and precarization of conditions of work and life, and could implement more idiosyncratic lifestyles. In contrast, the rigidity of heteronormative identities can guarantee an alleged security for some, if they experience their flexibilization exclusively as insecurity and the loss of privileges. Thus Christine Wimbauer, Mona Motakef, and Julia Teschlade (2015) have observed that precisely those adversely affected or threatened by precarization nurture a strong affinity for hostile attitudes toward equal opportunities. This constellation favors a perception in broad swathes of the population that tolerance of sexual and gender diversity is a project of neoliberal elites.

So under neoliberalism, inequality and insecurity co-opt diversity, which means that differences legitimize and naturalize unequal treatment. This is demonstrated in an exemplary manner by so-called diversity management. Under this

label, many large international corporations have among other things made the agenda of sexual diversity their own. There is nothing objectionable about the recognition of diversity among co-workers and customers, but this pluralism of identities does not occur in a space empty of power relations. Diversity management becomes problematic when difference legitimizes inequality, an inequality shown when difference is reified, misused, and exploited. Usually that amounts to the reproduction of clichés that are praised when they pay off.

That these victories of the LGBTIQ movement were victories poisoned by neoliberalism is demonstrated precisely now, when within the queer community and feminism new lines of conflicts have broken out concerning social privileges around the status of racialization, gender conformity, citizenship, or cultural belonging. The beneficiaries of the politics of emancipation of the last few decades have primarily been those who were already privileged. New Right discourses attempt to defend this inequality by deploying the (supposed) tolerance of homosexuals as a defense against attacks upon the privileges of the majority society. In conflicts over privileges, however, class privileges are hardly focused upon. Correspondingly, class as a category is not even present in neoliberal human resource management concepts of »managing diversity«. This social difference can namely only be valorized through exploitation, not recognition. In the future, our concern

should therefore be clearly naming and, where appropriate, intensifying class conflicts within equality policies, movements for emancipation, and minorities such as the queer community. Although the critique of power inequalities is currently being denounced as an attack upon the unity of the community in increasingly difficult times, urgent questions must be posed: which material and social inequalities are being normalized in the predominant sexual and gender politics of emancipation, if private property and educational privileges drive access to new emancipatory achievements? Why are only neoliberal success stories of media interest when reporting on gays, lesbians, and trans\*? The questions directed at the predominant strategies of social struggles should not be any less uncomfortable: how much is sexual and gender idiosyncrasy regarded as a (decadent) luxury that should not play any role in these struggles? Which relations of domination remain unconsidered in the nostalgic desire for a return to an earlier welfare state?

### **SEEING DIFFERENTLY: MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS**

In order to avoid these mutual omissions, queer-feminist scholars and activists have developed various perspectives on gender and sexuality with which relations of class, labor, and exploitation can be recognized and described as belonging together. With the concepts of »emotional«, »sexual«, or »gender« labor, they've expanded the view of the demands of labor and the spectrum

of exploitation. Although the sphere of labor is regarded as de-emotionalized and sober, we are nonetheless involved in labor with our entire personality, and that includes intimacy and sexuality and our feelings. For example, Arlie Hochschild (1983) and Rosemary Pringle (1989) have shown how flight attendants and secretaries are expected to bring a certain notion of heterosexual femininity to their labor, the surplus value of which can be siphoned off: the willingness to engage in discreet flirtation, emotional sensitivity and endurance, and all of this together with a splendid appearance. But less traditional sexual and gender identities can also be part of a more or less openly stated assignment profile, precisely where workers are expected to involve themselves with their entire personality. Brigitta Kuster and Renate Lorenz (2007) therefore speak of »sexual labor« in order to mark this particular labor expenditure, which is otherwise invisible as a personal contribution, since it's regarded as a »private matter« which supposedly has nothing to do with the world of work.

The keyword »precarization« has been tossed into the discussion about new phenomena in class relations by various political and intellectual movements. In its intersectional usage, this term describes the unequal distribution of insecurity and vulnerability, which can have very different reasons and dimensions, whether those are, for example, employment contracts, living conditions, or residency status. This

multi-dimensionality opens up many points of access and could and can therefore – in the past and in the future – spur broad social alliances. An understanding of class politics complicated in this way is in my view appropriate in order to react to the contemporary situation of class relations, in which it is increasingly difficult and politically decreasingly desirable to establish the »unity« of the working class, since this unity would distort the underlying diversity. Not least against the background of the global division of labor and labor migration, Western states exhibit a contradictory simultaneity of privileging and de-privileging.

Most intersectional approaches repeat the mantra of »race, class, gender«, but the examination of class in most analyses remains rather thin. That's all the more astonishing given that racist and sexist relations go hand-in-hand with the exploitation and reproduction of subalternity and social downgrading. So what could a class politics look like in which other struggles against domination are concurrent and coequal?

### **STRUGGLING ANOTHER WAY: FOR A QUEER-FEMINIST CLASS POLITICS OF SHAME**

Alongside fear and anger, which currently motivate political protest across the political spectrum, shame could be a driving force for an intersectional class politics, a class politics that describes class not just abstractly, but as the concrete experience of sexualized, gendered, racialized, handicapped, stigmatized, used, discarded, or

even still abled beings. The reason being, shame is the feeling with which individuals react to the experience of social exclusion and devaluation, with which they are all too often left alone. Transforming shame into anger and pride was the goal of various movements of emancipation – from the women’s movement to the Black movement as well as the gay and disabled movements, including the labor movement. Shame is the reaction to poverty as well as the experience of not meeting expectations, and is therefore the lived reality of many people affected by discrimination. Shame cuts so much to the quick that it inevitably touches upon sexuality, even if its occasion perhaps has nothing to do with sexuality. We have to approach this shame, since it prevents us from changing conditions. Shame robs us of the language with which we can name and judge the violence of these conditions. That’s why the feeling of shame makes a political reaction so difficult, because shame leads to breaking off social contacts, whereas on the contrary, it’s precisely a new commonality that’s needed in order to organize a counter-power. A class politics of shame must therefore first of all enable speaking about shame, creating inviting conditions that don’t, as is usually the case, make a repetition of shaming probable, or which seek to prematurely abandon shame in favor of anger and pride, as often occurred in traditional class struggles. Part of this is the readiness to recognize our own shaming in the shame of others, or at least recognizing the latter and allowing

ourselves to be infected by it. Otherwise, we risk dividing possible commonalities once again along the lines of imposed domination, just like Eribon’s gay shame and class shame were separated.

*Translated by Alexander Locascio*

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1 In his two volumes of essay following *Returning to Reims*, not yet published in English or German, Eribon further develops this analysis (see Eribon 2013b, pp.15–92).





Protest against brown coal mining in Germany,  
Ende Gelände – Tim Wagner ⓘ ⓘ



# ECOLOGICAL CLASS POLITICS

BY BERND RÖTTGER AND MARKUS WISSEN

## THE HISTORICAL CONTRADICTION BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND EMANCIPATION<sup>1</sup>

Ecology and the emancipation of the working class are, considered in a historical sense, a contradiction. Or at least, that's the case for the Global North. Local struggles for social and political rights, as Timothy Mitchell (2011) demonstrates in his book *Carbon Democracy*, considerably profited from the fact that in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, coal as an energy source began to play a prominent role economically. Coal was extracted from central deposits and transported to its place of destination through infrastructure such as railways and canals. Both the deposits as well as the infrastructure were highly vulnerable to labor struggles. Strikes in large workplaces by workers who were crammed together and thus easily able to organize, could paralyze an entire energy system. The energy source coal – the burning of

which, as we now know, is significantly responsible for climate change – constituted at the same time the material basis for increasing the organizational and structural power of the working class.

Workers used their increased power in order to fight for political and social rights to an unprecedented extent. The historical compromise between labor and capital in the Global North – the acceptance in principle of the capitalist mode of production by the working class under the precondition of being able to share in the increased prosperity (or »social wealth«, as Marx called it) made possible by this mode of production and, within the framework of liberal democracy, being able to participate more strongly in politics – has to that extent a social-ecological downside: it is based upon the destruction of nature as well as the externalization of the consequences of this destruction in space and

time: in space, because the carbon sinks that absorb the CO<sub>2</sub> released in the Global North by burning fossil fuels are primarily located in the Global South (for example, in the form of large rain forests); in time, because CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, due to their sheer magnitude, overload the absorption capacity of earth's carbon sinks, so these emissions concentrate in the atmosphere and cause the climate change noticeable today and in the future.

With the increased importance of petroleum to advanced capitalist accumulation, the close connection between fossil fuels and social and political rights was weakened on the one hand, since the extraction and transport of oil is more capital-intensive than in the case of coal, and furthermore takes place via a network of locations, pipelines, and tanker fleets that is far less susceptible to targeted labor struggles than the centralized infrastructure of coal extraction and distribution. On the other hand, in many states of the Global North, the automobile industry ascended to the status of a key economic sector. The oil-fueled automobile went from being a luxury product to a mass product. It revolutionized the way of life for wage laborers, became *the* symbol of prosperity, constituted (male) identities and granted the working class new resources of power in initially strongly vertically integrated manufacturing. The ecological problem essentially remained the same. Fossil automobility is, similar to the coal-based generation of power and warmth,

a significant driver of climate change. The structural and organizational power of the working class, which arose out of the automobilization of developed society under Fordism, was based upon ecological destruction as well as the oppression of democratic movements (in oil-producing countries for example by an alliance between political Islam and US imperialism).

In large parts of the Global North, coal mining is less important today, the infrastructure tailor-made for it is partially devalued. At the moment, the automobile industry is sliding further into crisis. However, notions of an attractive life connected to coal and later petroleum and the automobile, and the social compromises necessary to their realization, continue to have an effect. They are deeply rooted in everyday perceptions and practices, the social balance of forces, as well as state institutions and apparatuses. That is demonstrated in Germany not least by the manner in which the labor union IG Bergbau, Chemie, Energie – in close cooperation with the ministry of economics of participating German states – defends still-existing lignite opencast mines against closing them for urgent social-ecological reasons. And it is also demonstrated by the current crisis of the automobile industry, in which corporations, the state, and to some extent labor unions combat the fundamental transformation of an ultimately imperial – because based upon the disproportional appropriation of nature and labor-power

(elsewhere) – form of mobility, albeit one that in the meantime is being increasingly converted to electric power.

So the connection between the ecological question and the question of class appears to take shape in a way that one can only be solved at the cost of the other. And, considered historically, it was ecology that was trampled underfoot, to the extent that the social and political emancipation of the working class was consummated and also mediated by an intensified domination of nature: an increased use of resources and an overstraining of carbon sinks. Today, however, both are threatened with being trampled underfoot. Capital production sets out, as Marx notes in *Capital*, to undermine »the original sources of all wealth – the soil and the worker.« (*Capital I*, p. 638)

The *historical* contradiction between ecology and the emancipation of subalterns thus does not necessarily rest upon a *systematic* one. The situation in many parts of the Global South has always presented itself differently. There, ecological destruction often does not serve social and political emancipation, but rather prevents it and intensifies asymmetries of class and gender relations. Conversely, social rights, which shape access to and control over land and resources in a more egalitarian way, not only constitute emancipatory end in themselves, but are also the key to a more reflexive handling of nature. Ecology and emancipation can therefore indeed stand in a co-constitutive relation to each other, rather than a contradictory one.

From a left perspective, in light of the destructive consequences of an »imperial mode of living« (Brand/Wissen 2017, 2018), it's indispensable to identify the points of contact between ecology and emancipation and closely determine the contours of an *ecological class politics* (which we understand to be a constitutive component of a »new class politics«; see Brie/Candeias 2016). This presupposes disentangling the class question from its social democratic restriction to the participation by wage laborers in the fruits of economic growth, without therefore giving up the level of social and political rights already achieved in the Global North.

### ON THE »FAMILY RESEMBLANCE« BETWEEN SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL MOVEMENTS

The social preconditions for this appear to be given to the extent that what Alain Lipietz (1998) diagnosed as the »family resemblance« between social and ecological movements has increasingly come to the fore these days.<sup>2</sup> The reproduction of the working class in the Global North still profits from dominant access to cheap nature and labor-power worldwide. And the socially and ecologically destructive promises of the imperial mode of living still display a strong appeal. However, their redeemability has become increasingly questionable for many.

That is the difference between the Fordist social constellation and the current one, which some attempt to grasp with

concepts such as »the society of downward mobility« (Nachtwey 2016): not only the expectation of growing prosperity and the expansion of participatory rights proves to be increasingly deceptive; even the *maintenance* of the given level of prosperity and participation is anything but guaranteed. The more countries such as China or India develop economically, the more they compete – socially and ecologically as well – with the early industrialized countries of the Global North for resources, labor-power, and carbon sinks, the use and exploitation of which first makes prosperity possible; and this at a time, in which the natural preconditions of this prosperity are eroding to a hitherto unprecedented extent. Moreover, the more the imperial mode of living destroys the conditions for life in large parts of the Global South, all the more strongly does the readiness increase to escape them by fleeing, in order to personally participate in the blessings of patterns of consumption and production, the costs of which have primarily been borne by those in the Global South.

The current popularity of right-wing parties and movements in the Global North, the expansion of security and military apparatuses and the permanent attacks on central institutions of liberal democracy can be understood as political phenomena of this changed constellation. The »society of externalization« (Lessenich 2016) threatens to lose its outside, and with it, an important foundation for processing its internal contradictions. The

predominant reaction to this consists in defending or restoring this threatened outside – and with it, the exclusivity indispensable to the imperial way of life – in an authoritarian manner: through policies of sealing nations off from refugees and the endeavor of keeping geopolitical and economic climbers down through trade policy or even militarily. This politics of authoritarian stabilization finds its societal counterpart in strategies of adjustment on the part of the upper middle and upper classes, in which the automobile and automobility policies play a central role. Hence the SUV boom – between 2008 and 2015, the share of these cars in the total of German passenger vehicles more than doubled (BMVI 2015, pp. 135ff) – can be understood as a symbolic expression of the endeavor to steel oneself against increasing social and ecological adversity. With the SUV, I can reassure myself of my social position; I stand – or rather, sit – in the truest sense of the word above all others (as long as they aren't driving an even bigger specimen). Driving an SUV is a gesture of superiority. It reinforces the claim of being able to take hold of nature and labor-power in a disproportional way at a global level. Already the tank-like form of the automobile underscores the will of its owner (or the social class to which he belongs) to defend the exclusivity of the imperial mode of living by any means necessary.

What's paradoxical about that is that the phenomena whose consequences



one tries to adapt to as best as possible – ecological crisis, increasing societal competition, and exacerbated international tensions – are first generated and strengthened by the form of adaptation itself. The automobile industry can be understood as a thoroughly »paradoxical industry« (Nieuwenhuis/Wells 2003, p. 15) in the first place: on one hand, it is characterized by the almost permanent revolutionizing of management concepts, production models, and product ranges; on the other hand, its dominant position in the economic development models of the Global North is as stable as the systems of industrial relations (and thus worker participation) developed by it appear to be resistant to change.

The SUV boom, which in 2009 elevated the automobile industry out of its deep economic crisis, since SUV sales commanded above average profits, is to that extent emblematic of the simultaneity of crisis and persistence in the imperial mode of living. Moreover, it stands for a constellation in which the class character of this mode of living once again comes to light precisely due to the attempts to stabilize it in an authoritarian-exclusive manner. These days, the disproportional access to resources, carbon sinks, and labor-power worldwide only conditionally serves the processing of the class antagonism in the Global North. Despite all statements by right-wing, conservative, neoliberal, and fossil-fuel oriented social democratic re-discoverers of »social imbalances« and

questions of justice, the defense of »our way of life« has become a class project. In terms of perspectives, it not only intensifies the ecological crisis and imperialist competition, but also social and political inequality in the Global North itself, in that it creates the possibility for a few to adapt to the increasingly rough climate at the cost of many. The objectified ruthlessness of the SUV, with which the class conflict on the roads is once again being heated up after decades of mass automobilization, is an expression of this constellation. It demonstrates that the prosperity and rights of many no longer depend upon the perpetuation, but rather upon overcoming the imperial mode of production and living and its socially and ecologically destructive consequences.

Since the 1990s, the class compromise in the automobile industry has lost its driving role in terms of comprehensive collective bargaining agreements. Agreements on employment and site protection no longer set trends for gradualist progress and the constant expansion of class compromises, but rather offered a signal to other branches for the imposition of interest-driven regression. »That things are ›status quo‹ is the catastrophe« noted Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* (p. 473). The catastrophe is a standstill, the »continuity of history«, the apparent stability of existing compromises between social classes, of which only the shell still exists, and which in terms of their content were honed by capital's interests in valorization.

With Marx, we must understand cyclical economic crises to be the necessary expression of the contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, which constantly push it toward dead ends. Also with Marx, however, we must proceed from the insight that »capitalist production constantly strives to overcome these immanent barriers, but it overcomes them only by means that set up the barriers afresh and on a more powerful scale.« (*Capital III*, p. 358) What is new is that the barriers of capital have linked up with the barriers of nature to constitute a new barricade which can no longer be overcome by any solution that »carries on« as usual. That's why it's true that »Red is only possible with Green, justice only with ecology« (Thie 2013, p. 12). This is the historical-social context in which ecological class politics becomes both urgent and possible at the same time, and the historical contradiction between ecology and emancipation can be superseded.

## STARTING POINTS FOR ECOLOGICAL CLASS POLITICS

Nonetheless, ecological class politics is not at all automatic. It still seems more obvious, and moreover linked to less uncertainties, to defend the current state of affairs. That doing so only more rapidly erodes its preconditions and that these ultimately only become available to a well-off minority who can steel themselves against – or extricate themselves from – the forthcoming social-ecological

upheavals is an insight that only dawns very slowly upon people's consciousness. In the current situation, ecological class politics is therefore primarily a *strategic challenge* confronting the social and political left in social movements, labor unions, and parties, in order to overcome the »robust chain of fortresses and casements« (Gramsci) around the dominant model of development.

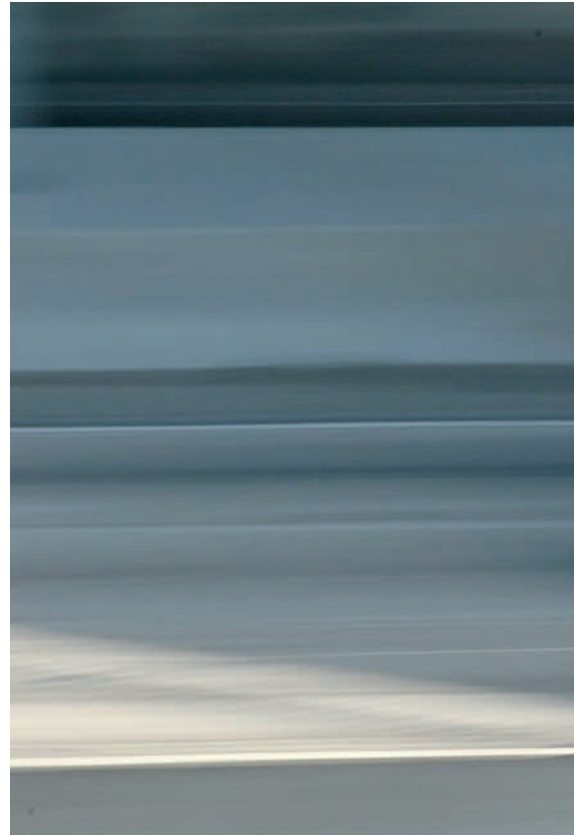
Marx had already identified in principle such strategic challenges for socialist class politics. In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* he notes that »men make their own history« but at the same time asserts that »they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.« (MECW 11, p. 103) That means that the path to a better future has to »fight its way out«. (Abendroth 1982, p. 28) It is not itself the overcoming of the reigning mode of production and living, but levels its terrain. The point is to start with experiences of inequality and politicize them, so that both concrete improvements in the working and living situations of people as well as structural changes and breaks are made possible. In this sense, one can speak of a »double transformation« (Klein 2013) or of an »offensive double strategy« (Brie/Candeias 2016).

We see two reasons why this challenge is acceptable in the current historical configuration, why it does not constitute an »individual quirk« (Gramsci),

but is rooted in the »mines« laid by the old society, without which – according to Marx – no emancipatory perspective is able to detonate: »if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic.« (*Grundrisse*, p. 159) That's also the case for transcending the historical antagonism between ecology and emancipation.

**1 | »Upheavals take place in dead end streets«**

(Brecht) – according to the theory of the Regulationist school, a distinction can be made between a crisis *within* a socio-economic mode of development and a crisis *of* a mode of development, which cannot be overcome with ingrained practices. The latter expresses itself in the crisis of the automobile industry. The strategies for overcoming the crisis that revolve around E-mobility are merely maneuvering towards another dead end, and furthermore overturn the last remnants of class compromises that were still enshrined in the Global North. The initiated *capital-immanent conversion* from the internal combustion engine to an electric motor will cause a dramatic shift in the existing structures of hierarchy and linkages of the automobile value chain. With the successive conversion of propulsion technology, central fields of competence not only of final manufacturers, but also of central suppliers are becoming to some



extent irrelevant: no transmissions, no valves, no crankshafts, no alternators, no turbochargers, etc. The de-materialization of production in the Global North linked to E-Mobility is already threatening the facilities of suppliers of internal combustion engines. At the same time, new strategic actors are arising within the »industrial complex«, and its structures of compromise, that has up to now been concentrated around the companies of the automobile industry: new providers/competitors and new suppliers, primarily of storage and digital technology, with considerably different capital-labor



relationships and working conditions. The interest politics of final manufacturers is also reaching its limits: the *Future Pact 2025* at Volkswagen foresees specific *Centers of Excellence* for the new propulsion technologies at individual facilities; however, paired with a planned increase in productivity of 25 percent, 14,000 jobs in Germany are to be eliminated already by 2020 (see: MITBESTIMMEN! Zeitung des Volkswagen Betriebsrates, November 2016). Even saving jobs no longer appears possible within the ingrained practices of workplace class and interest politics. Of course, the existing power of works

Dave/flickr ① ② ③

councils and labor union structures can be used to try to shape the looming radical structural transformation of final manufacturers in the same corporatist manner that has been deployed up to now, bringing in one's own suggestions – but only at the price of submitting to the goals of the business, which cannot be called into question from the subaltern position of »junior partnership as a backseat passenger, far from the steering wheel.« (Streeck 2016, p. 58) Experience shows that increasingly rigorous concessions

wrested from workforces can no longer be averted in the usual (workplace) capitalist way. It's also possible, however, that the looming constriction of the space for workplace compromise will be used to breath new life into the concept of a *democratic conversion*. In this way, ecological class politics can generate new forms of class solidarity beyond a tendency toward »fractal« labor union politics, oriented towards protecting jobs and facilities that is hardly successful anymore (Dörre 2011) and tap into resources of power that were increasingly spilled away in the old development model. »Unions need to reinvent themselves as social movements, not only responsible for the working conditions of their members, but for their general living conditions as well.« (Räthzel/Uzzel 2011: p. 1221)

**2 | »The true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself.«** (*Capital Volume III*, p. 358) Interests of valorization and profit in automobility are today ending up in extreme contradiction to the material and ecological interests of human beings. Marx spoke of the »double character« of labor as concrete labor producing use-values and abstract labor producing exchange value, where in the capitalistically form-determined mode of production, the concrete usefulness of products is merely a necessary appendage of its surplus-value producing component. Today, a use-value orientation of expended living labor appears more urgent than ever. This orien-

tation entered into class-political conflicts for the first time in the 1970s and 1980s. When redundancy plans became known in the British company *Lucas Aerospace*, highly dependent upon defense contracts, the (various) labor unions at the company constituted a common »shop stewards combine committee«, which in 1976 developed a plan to reorganize production – the *corporate plan* (thermal pumps, ultrasound devices, hybrid motors). It was understood to be an element in the struggle for »the right to work on products which actually help to solve human problems rather than create them.« For the first time, a labor union struggle to save jobs was linked to a struggle to develop a new product range. During the crisis in the West German shipbuilding industry, the first *Arbeitskreis Alternative Produktion* (Working Group on Alternative Production) was founded in Autumn 1981 at *Blohm und Voss AG* in Hamburg. Until the mid-1980s, over 40 such workplace working groups were founded in West Germany – not only in Bremen, Hamburg, Emden, or Kiel, but also in Nuremberg at AEG. They followed the pattern of British praxis: shop stewards and works councils activated all sections of the workforces and then worked together to come up with alternative production concepts. All working groups ran up against a structural barrier: the right of disposition by owners of capital in the means of production, resulting from existing property relations. The owners of capital did not want sover-

eignty over production concepts taken out of their hands. An ecological class politics must also raise anew the question of democratic control over production policy. It can give the signal for (once again) linking struggles for improvements in the conditions of wage labor with strategies for overcoming labor determined from outside by capital. And it can pave the way for a change of direction not only in automobile policy, but also blaze the trail leading to another mode of production and living.

*Translated by Alexander Locascio*

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2 In the 19th and early 20th century, the ecological question was already a class question, to the extent that workers felt the ecological and health consequences of industrialization in their workplaces and neighborhoods more strongly than members of the middle and upper classes.



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THE IMPOSITIONS OF CLASS  
CANVASSING AGAINST DIVIDING POLITICS  
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