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CLASS BASED CONTESTATIONS IN NEOLIBERAL FRANCE

BY

SAM GOODSON

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science as partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Class Based Contestations in Neoliberal France

By

Sam Goodson

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This thesis documents the patterns of resistance taken up by the far left in France from the late 1980s through the early 2000s. Responding directly to the neoliberal reshaping of the French economy the groups that composed the far left diverged on terms of strategy, some holding fast to the class based contention of the previous decades, some jettisoning the language of class for one of identity and democratic inclusion. This project documents these changes and takes up the theoretical debates surrounding them, primarily the debates surrounding “post-Marxism.” It is an intervention on the enduring necessity of class struggle for understanding contentious politics.

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Introduction

The 1969 French presidential election saw the Communist Party (PCF) score above twenty percent, as it had perennially done since the Second World War. The party claimed well over half a million members, dominated the country's largest trade union, the CGT, and controlled the municipal governments of many working-class regions. The '69 election also featured a unified socialist party, scoring in the low single digits, behind the unified Trotskyist membership of the Fourth International. Little more than a decade later, the PCF would be fighting for governmental inclusion at the margins of the socialist party's two-term president, barely able to draw respectable election results on its own. A decade after that it would be lucky to get in votes what it used to claim in membership. Ideologically split in three, waning constantly in the ballot box, internationally isolated after the fall of the Soviet Union, the former hegemon of the formidable French far-left limped towards the new millennium in shambles.

Into its place stepped no one party but a heterogeneous set of self-styled alternatives. Some, like the two principal parties of the Trotskyist opposition, had long been waiting for the collapse of what they saw to be a reified, bureaucratic appendage of a degenerate Soviet empire, long divorced from the actual needs of the working-class. Others, such as various single-issue protest movements, as well as the movement around the anti-globalization struggles of the era, were radically new and eager to be perceived as such. They too saw the PCF as an artifact but saw in the party structure and Marxist orientation of the communist alternatives the same aged, dogmatic modes of thinking that had plagued the PCF.

The socialists, for their part, had been launched by their victories of the 1980s into actual governance, holding the presidency for fourteen years. This step into power had come with all the contradiction inherent in socialist governance of a capitalist state, and their president, Francois Mitterrand, had been forced to make major concessions to French capital in a manner that estranged the party from much of the left. In 1993 they were routed in the parliamentary elections, losing several hundred seats to both an ascendant center-right and rejuvenated far-right, calling their legitimacy into question. They struggled to find a charismatic leader to fill Mitterrand's shoes and they struggled to find ideological coherence to follow his presidency. Having styled themselves as a left party capable of winning and governing, they would not win the presidential election again for twenty-four years.

This seismic shakeup of the forces of the French left did not, of course, occur in isolation. The political and economic orthodoxies that had emerged after the Second World War were being questioned the world-over. Though the word "neoliberal" has lost much of its pungency due to over and misuse, it is nonetheless the central definitional feature of this era, and we should not shy away from invoking it for definitional haze or fatigue. Whether we begin the neoliberal era with the end of Bretton-Woods, with the Volker Shock, with the election of Reagan or Thatcher, or with any other temporal marker, the period that followed is characterized by a political and economic coherence in the form of the reassertion of the forces of capital after a decades-long Keynesian compromise.

Though separate regions, countries, parties, and peoples all experienced this period differently, this thesis will contend that neoliberal reorganization was the defining economic and political feature of this period, and that it, therefore, constitutes a new a stage in the development of capitalism—one that must be dealt with on its own terms. Chapter 1 deals with some of the

economic and political literature on the neoliberal period and links those insights to the related national political developments occurring in France, setting the historical stage for the investigation that follows.

In Chapter 2, I identify and explore several patterns of resistance that emerged in France from 1988 to 2000. These patterns help to explain how and why the various factions of the Left sought to wage an anti-capitalist struggle in the neoliberal, post-Soviet era. The primary objects of study are the PCF, the two dominant Trotskyist parties—Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR)—and the various factions that remained unaffiliated with a party but became prominent political players surrounding anti-globalization protests and single-issue campaigns. Taken together, these parties and movements composed hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of members who frequently found themselves at political odds with each other, pushing party fissures, reorganizations, and forging constant reevaluations of power, program, and strategy. Therefore, instead of attempting to distill the complex goings-on of the twelve years under consideration into a formulaic (or chronological) typology, that history will be treated to better illuminate the ever-present theoretical questions that undergirded political practice.

Central among these contentions for those parties of the far-left was the concept of the “grand soir,” the moment of socialist victory when the hierarchies of capitalist production would be torn down and a victorious working-class would begin the path towards communism. Central to a classical reading of Marx, faith in this singular moment began to wane even among those who still considered themselves Marxists. With the slippage of this dogma came rethinking of strategy and temporality. If the ultimate revolutionary victory of a working-class party in the style of the Russian Revolution was no longer the primary objective, then perhaps notions of victory could be temporally stretched, socialist victory could be seen as a more gradual process. For some groups,

striving to make concrete gains inside the confines of the capitalist, parliamentary state became more and more appetizing. We will see splits, both inter and intra parties, about the viability of abandoning the “ghetto of protest” as David Hanley derisively called it, to enter the workings of government.

Lurking behind this question of practice is one of theory. If a significant portion of the anti-capitalist left is ready to bid adieu to revolutionary victory, where might that leave anti-capitalism in relation to Marxism? Are these still groups parties that can correctly be called communist or socialists, or is the negative term—anti-capitalist—as close as we can come analytically? This questions is of particular urgency, we will see, since the opponents of a Marxist reading of politics and history are not seeking to adapt Marx to their age, as Lenin and Gramsci famously did, but are rather trying to excoriate a flawed method of political reasoning from its root. The third chapter and conclusion will take up this core theoretical struggle.

Perhaps the most important theory of post-Marxist anti-capitalist movements comes from the (individual and collective) work of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau—but especially from their 1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. While a vital intervention on the part of the autonomy of the political in Marxist theorizing, I will argue that Laclau and Mouffe, by severing their ties with Marxism, remove their analysis from the only theoretical field capable of actually grounding it in a firm historical struggle. The point is neither to redeploy the antiquated base-superstructure formula that has rightfully been put out to pasture against them, nor to assert some neo-Stalinist class reductionism in its place. It is rather to insist that, for all its admitted failures, a Marxist understanding is still the only plausible theoretical grounds for the empirical study and understanding of anti-capitalist movements—and that the further we shy away from it for the promise of a novel theoretical apparatus, the more impotent we are to actually challenge the basis

of capitalist exploitation. After responding to the account offered by Laclau and Mouffe, I will reinterpret and develop more recent scholarship by Marxist scholars on contemporary social movements to argue that this work evidences the enduring viability of Marxism as an analytical framework. This investigation will steer away from the language of the “grand soir,” but nonetheless the question of the terms and temporality of socialist victory are ever present.

The goal of these three chapters in unison is to evidence the enduring necessity of class and class struggle, not as one from of identity and contention amongst others, but as the privileged subject of politics. This assertion is not intended to flatten or cheapen the many other ways humans experience oppression and the many ways they have found to rebel against it. Racism, xenophobia, homophobia and misogyny can all exist independently of capitalism, and it would be a regurgitation of the worst blunders of Marxist history to assert otherwise. It is rather to argue that both the most analytically cogent and politically viable manner to understand the various oppressions inflicted on humans is to index them against the central oppression of capitalist production, in which men and women sell their bodies and time at a market rate to survive. An accounting must be made of these various oppressions, exploitation, and exclusions together, in unison. As appealing as an analytically open or “un-sutured” system might be theoretically, it is politically limp. It is my contention that, despite its age and wear, the Marxist accounting is still fundamentally the most viable.

Critical Absences

It is also worth noting that this project is not what I hope it will one day be. Perhaps most critically, this project only features brief mention of the changes occurring on the far-right during the same period. The ways in which the far-right has reinvented itself—most notably in the Front National (FN) party—are equally as radical as the groups and movements I treat below and are of

enormous consequence. The theoretical work around Alain de Benoist and the Nouvelle Droite laid a foundation for far-right anti-capitalism that has been embraced from Budapest to Washington, D.C. It is an opposition to liberal capitalism that mirrors that of the left, but rather than opposing the liberal order in hope of equality and inclusion, it opposes it in hope of a return to mythical, white, European past that leaves the victims of colonialism and global capital to pay for sins that are not their own. These two refoundations must be understood in tandem, and it is my ambition to add a substantive section on the far-right in future iterations of this study.

This project is also currently limited to France, for reasons that are practical rather than theoretical. I think the phenomena at work in France during this period are visible throughout the democratic capitalist world, but linguistic limitations, the potential generalizability of the project, and a limited understanding of the political and historical context of other countries has limited my considerations to France. I hope to use this work as the basis of a broader comparative study incorporating other countries.

Chapter 1

The term neoliberal is fraught with overuse and misunderstanding, standing now for every perceived injustice of the modern economy, contemporary or otherwise. Nonetheless, the term is not worth discarding. Whether we choose to begin the period with the Volker shock, the end of the Bretton-Woods agreement, or the elections of Reagan or Thatcher, there is a unique period of capitalist production that began in the late 1970s and continues today that must be studied and understood on its own terms. Economists Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy characterize the neoliberal period as “fundamentally a new social order in which the power and income of the upper fractions of the ruling classes – the wealthiest persons – was re-established in the wake of a setback” (Duménil and Lévy 2005, 9). While it contained various national particularities, this re-establishment would entail the retrenchment of the welfare state, destruction of labor union power, “flexibilization” of the labor market, the deregulation of banking, and with that, the liberalization of the flow of international capital. It would do so by, piece by piece, removing most arenas of economic activity from democratic control, subjecting them to a Hayekian ideal of the market.

Though the phenomenon of neoliberal reorganization was global, its effects were particular to nation and region. Local histories of political struggle and legacies of victories and loss shaped the manner in which various populations felt neoliberalism’s effects. In continental Europe, the two most important factors in the distribution of these effects were the process of European consolidation and the tradition of a “Bismarckian” social welfare system. European integration in the 1980s and 1990s came to mean a lack of national economic sovereignty for its member states. The liberalization of capital flows in the common market was the central economic priority of the union, limiting the resources of member states in combatting local economic woes and pinning national governments between the ire of Brussels and the wrath of their people. The legacy of the

“Bismarckian” welfare state meant that there were either no or very limited universal welfare programs available for the newly precarious victims of liberalization. The combined processes limited spending into an already limited social welfare system.

Understanding the neoliberal period, both in its global emergence and its national particularities, is vital to understanding the behavior of the French far left in the 1990s. It produced the various excluded groups – the undocumented, the unemployed, the homeless – that would become the political subjects of new movements of contestation. In further immiserating these groups, seemingly on the basis of identity rather than class, it centered “exclusion” rather than “exploitation” as the chief enemy of a liberatory politics. In terms of class, it shifted its definition by destroying the bastions of traditional manual labor, decimating the ranks of the “traditional” working class, and growing those of unskilled manual laborers and service workers. Perhaps most importantly it made globalization and the free flow of international capital the primary target of various leftwing movements. Several groups then centered liberalization at the behest of international organizations, primarily the EU, as the primary driver of economic immiseration, leading to the fight against capitalism as such being replaced by the fight against the particularities of neoliberal globalized capitalism. As the state was the only viable brake on this rapid liberalization, it also lent credence to the state and entrance into state governance to many on the far left who for generations had seen state governance as a bourgeois trap.

As noted above, the neoliberal period is fundamentally the reassertion of the power of the capitalist class “in the wake of a setback.” The setback in question was the postwar economic compromise between capital and labor, and it was one that capital was no longer willing to endure. As sociologist Wolfgang Streeck wrote, the neoliberal restructuring was “a successful resistance on the part of those who own and dispose of capital – the ‘profit-dependent’ class – against the

multiple constraints that post-1945 capitalism had had to endure in order to become politically acceptable again under the condition of system competition” (Streeck 2017, 4). Growth rates after the Second World War had produced the *trente glorieuses*¹, a period in which capital, at least in the United States, the UK, and Western Europe, could enter into a corporatist association with labor and the state which provided close to full employment, increasing wages and increased investment. Capital, especially in Western Europe, was politically forced to oblige.

Though it produced relative financial wellbeing, the compromise was never a happy marriage. To socialists and communists, this compromise was untenable, there was no way capitalist production could peacefully coexist with increasing living standards for labor as well as increasing productive investment. To many on the left, especially those made newly optimistic by the events of 1968, this unhappy coupling would provoke in labor the organizational coherence to exit the compromise. As it happened, though, it was capital that exited. Frightened by the political revolts of 1968 and the energy crisis of 1972, amongst other things, it became clear they could no longer provide the conditions of the compromise they had entered in a way that would be digestible to their shareholders and the bottom line. “To forgo profits in order to ensure full employment, or to organize with great costs production and product-lines in such a way that they provided secure jobs with high wages and low differential, would have required from firms and those dependent on their profits a degree of sacrifice that seemed increasingly unacceptable” (Streeck 2017, 27). The unhappy capitalists could not easily turn to the state for recourse, as the state was under relative democratic control and would not easily tolerate upward redistribution. What was necessary was a strategic withdrawal, one that force the goings on of large sections of the economy under the

¹The idea of thirty idyllic years without labor disputes or crisis is of course fanciful, if such a period truly existed in such a way it was reserved exclusively for white workers. The point is less about a supposed halcyon harmony and more regarding the ability of capital, labor, and the state to cooperate in a manner unmatched before or after.

control of a neoliberal idealization of the market, and in doing so reassert control over the apparatuses of the state that would oppose it.

The result was the neoliberal revolt, the freeing of the economy from democratic control, the deregulation of the labor market, the liberalization of capital flows, the retrenchment of the welfare state, the complete exit of capital from the post-war compromise. The profit-dependent launched what we can call, following Cox and Nielsen a “social movement from above,” striking at the ‘wage-dependent’ and the compromise that held them together. Cox and Nielsen define a social movement from above as “the development of a collective project by dominant groups, consisting of skilled activities centered on a rationality that seeks to maintain or modify a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities, in ways that aim to reproduce and/or extend the hegemonic position of dominant groups within a given social formation” (Cox and Nilsen 2014, 66). The authors go on to explain that these movements become necessary to both reaffirm existing modes of exploitation and to create new ones to increase the amount of surplus labor extracted from the producer, an analysis that fits well with Wolfgang Streeck’s analysis offered above (Cox and Nilsen 2014, 67-68).

It is useful to write this period in terms of social movements from above and below because it gives us a model of change that is one of constant struggle and flux. Rather than seeing one group, or one fraction of a group, as having won the ultimate hegemonic position of a certain period, we can dissect the real war of position constantly at play in every victory and loss. Thus, no moment is ever fully defined by the will or interest of the victor, whether they be “above” or “below,” but rather seen as the temporary meeting points of two or more camps in conflict. This will be important in Chapter 3, when we will see that it is precisely this depth of analysis that critics of Marxism would argue it is not capable of.

Once capital had been freed from the constraints of the corporatist arrangement, it turned profit towards enrichment and away from investment and production. In France, the rate of growth in capital stock was reduced from 8% in the 1960s to 2% by the 1990s. Business reduced debt, streamlined, and offshored (Duménil and Lévy 2004, 15). Correspondingly growth rates dropped from near 6% in the 1960s to below 2% in the 1990s (Duménil and Lévy 2004, 16). As reinvestment and growth decreased unemployment increased, going from near 5% in 1980 to spending most of the 1990s between 10 and 12% (INSEE 2014). This unemployment was located disproportionately amongst immigrants, low-skill manual workers, and service workers. Unemployment amongst intellectual, skilled upper-class professions rose from 2.5 to 4.9%, amongst the salaried, it rose from 8.9-13.9%, amongst the “skilled” working-class it rose from 6.2 to 10.2%, and amongst the “unskilled” working-class it rose from 12.3 to 21.5% (Kouvélakis 2007, 52). Amongst low-skilled manual laborers and service workers it spent most of the 1990s above 20% (Sperber 2010). Consequently, it was also concentrated heavily in formerly industrial districts, being routinely 4-5% higher in Nord-Pas-de-Calais and the departments of the “ceinture rouge”² (INSEE 2014).

With capital setting its own rules only the state remained to answer the demands of further immiserated labor. Streeck argues in *Buying Time* that this led states to first let inflation run rampant to give labor an artificially large money supply, then to take on huge national debts to finance programs to keep labor afloat, then finally allowing for the ballooning of private debt, what has been termed “private Keynesianism” (Streeck 2017, 38). These measures, as the book’s title, suggests, allowed states to literally “buy time,” by turning out whatever fiscal and monetary resources they had available to stave off ‘wage-dependent’ revolt after ‘profit-dependent’ exit.

² “Red Belt,” circle of working-class, traditionally communist, suburbs of Paris.

These measures were all predicated, however, on the relative autonomy of national governments to conduct their own economic business, an autonomy that would be stripped away from European states in fits and starts throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

The restrictions on national economic sovereignty began in earnest with the signing of the “Maastricht Criteria” in 1992. Set to lay the groundwork for a single currency, the treaty limited inflation and capped public deficits at 3% of GDP and government debt at 60% of GDP (Communities 1993, 27). This hindered individual nations’ ability to respond to capital strike in the manners outlined above and therefore has remained a continually difficult goal for all EU nations to meet (Milios 2004, 210). Nonetheless, the goal has been maintained and further neoliberal restrictions have been added.

This put European nations in an intractable bind. They had, for the first time since the war, a ballooning population of working-age citizens who could not provide for themselves by turning to activity in the market. Like most of continental Western Europe, they had never built a universal social welfare system, relying instead on the “Bismarckian” formula of a collection of social insurance agencies in which benefits were tethered to hours worked and former income, a system that inherently reproduced and exacerbated the inequalities it was fed (Palier 2010, 6). The member states were further bound by the limits on their national spending; even if they did have a more universalistic welfare system they would not have been able to pump the necessary funds into it. Thus, the 1990s, the moment in which need was the greatest, were “characterized in the countries of continental Europe by a series of decisions aimed at stabilizing if not retrenching social expenditure” (Palier 2010, 10).

The French case was further exacerbated by the end of *dirigisme*, the tradition of state leadership in planning. The French government had long taken a central role in the industrial

production of the state, incentivizing the industries they wished to see prosper with tariffs, low-interest credit, exemptions from regulations, and other economic tools. Such a statist policy towards the economy, however, did not function with the new orthodoxy in Brussels. Streeck has written that the pattern of European integration is one of transition from Keynesianism, which was favorable to *dirigisme*, to “Hayekianism,” one based on Friederich von Hayek’s 1939 article “The Economic Conditions of Interstate Federalism” (Streeck 2017, 97). In Hayek’s vision, all member states in an Interstate Federation would be deprived of their control over the economy, forsaking all economic decisions to a central interstate authority. This, Streeck contends, is the vision of the European Union in the last third of the twentieth century, and it is one that is quite hostile to *dirigisme*.

This hostility to state-led enterprise initially manifested itself early in Mitterrand’s first term. Socialist Francois Mitterrand had run a left campaign with second-round communist support and had promised to increase the *dirigiste* capacity of the state. Only three years in, in 1983, confronted with rising inflation, a plummeting Franc, trade and budget deficits, and pressure from Europe, he dismantled the very program he campaigned on increasing (Levy 2005, 104). By introducing the *Franc Fort* program, the socialists tied the Franc informally to the Deutschmark, reducing state leeway with monetary policy and leading to austere deflationary policies. The socialists also reversed a wide-ranging course of nationalizations they had taken up only the year before. While they did not immediately privatize the recently nationalized corporations, they did redirect them from job creation to profitability, leading the way for privatizations in the years to come. Regarding private corporations, they dramatically reduced subsidies and loans, but with the caveat that they also reduced regulation, leading to the 1985 deregulation of finance. Finally, they deregulated the labor market, making layoffs easier and weakening the bargaining power of

unions. (Levy 2005, 106). The deregulation also led to an increased reliance on subcontracted labor, meaning fewer and fewer stable long-term contracts. 21% of French industrial output was subcontracted by the early 1990s (Hannoun and Guerrier 1996). These efforts combined to make the 1980s a period quite profitable for capital at the direct expense of the profits of labor (Levy 2005, 107).

Deregulation, welfare retrenchment, and the forgoing of national economic sovereignty would continue to characterize the decade to come, at the hands of both socialists and conservatives. In 1985 French banks were deregulated in a reform package that “drastically reduced government interventions in banks' lending decisions, virtually abolished subsidized bank loans, and allowed French banks to compete more freely in the credit market” as well as privatizing many previously public banks (Bertrand, Schoar and Thesmar 2007, 598), a large step in the government abdicating its role in the economy. In 1992, private sector pension reforms increased the working hours necessary to draw a pension, and effectively lowered the salary of that pension for many workers (Lavigne 2003, 727). In 1993, France signed the Maastricht Agreement, mentioned above. In 1995, the Prime Minister attempted to apply the private sector pension reforms to public sector workers. The initial attempt failed due to an enormous strike wave in the December of that year, but eventually, through a piecemeal application, the reforms took place.

The tensions produced by these reforms and deregulations shaped the political life of the far-left and the far-right in this period. For decades the far-left had been standing upon the concessions made by capital after the war, strategically seeking the route by which it might deal to capitalism its final blow. The PCF, the Trotskyist parties, various Maoist groups, and other revolutionary formations had all sought, in different ways, to finish the job, to be done with reforms and bring about a new system. Few envisioned that it would, in fact, be capital that would be the

first to act and the most capable acting in unison. The victories of the *trente glorieuse* were erased and the stability of the post-war compromise ended, the parties of the far left lost the footing on which they had for decades stood.

Further, the lives of the traditional constituents of the far-left had been dramatically altered. The number of skilled manual labors was being reduced, the factories, traditional scenes of struggles were disappearing, and those who remained in manual factory work were put on flimsy contracts that seriously impeded their ability to struggle. Membership in the CGT, the once dominant communist lead labor union plummeted to 10% of the workforce, and only 5% of the private sector. By the mid-1990s days lost to strikes were 1/10th of what they had been in the 1950s (Sperber 2010). This all occurred, it is important to note, while many were eulogizing class as an analytical category and a subject of struggle. It is certainly true that the way class presented itself was dramatically altered after neoliberal restructuring, the factories were leaving, the union was in shambles, and the communist party, as we will see in Chapter 2, was in a nosedive. Nonetheless, French workers were in pain, and the political actors that ignored that pain paid a price.

Chapter 2

The period of neoliberal reorganization saw an equally radical reorganization in the terrain of left organizing. The French Communist Party (PCF), which had dominated the far left since the Second World War, hemorrhaged members and lost its capacity to win vote totals above the single digits. This rapid failure provoked a strategic reorganization, shifting the party from stalwart defender of Leninist doctrine to a Eurocommunist socialist party. While the party had run candidates for almost all of its history, in the 1980s a large section of the party began to see its central role as entrance into the state and governance. Into the radical-left void stepped the two parties of the longtime Trotskyist opposition, Lutte Ouvrière (LO) and the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR).³ The two parties rode their newfound position as sole guardians of the communist tradition to new electoral and organizational success. Perhaps the most important change on the far left came from groups that were not formally parties, from the various new social movements. These disparate groups of heterogeneous interests, intentionally organized outside the structure of traditional parties, represented for some a bold new front in anti-capitalist resistance, while for others they spelled the end of a socialist project as such.

This chapter will look at the various groups involved in this reshuffling. It will outline their historical development, describe their attitudes towards parties, governance, Marxism, communism, and each other. We will begin with an outline of the social movements, as they provide the critical context for this period of new left political thought. We will then move on to the PCF to track the developments of the former hegemon of the French left, then finally we will look at the two Trotskyist alternatives that positioned themselves as the only remaining radical

³ Other small leftist parties enjoyed small blips of success, but as these two were the largest and enjoyed the most sustained success, they will be the focus.

alternatives. Finally, we will pause on the election of 2002, a shock to many in the political establishment as it saw the Trotskyist parties receive their highest combined score as well as seeing the far-right Front National advance to the second round, and look at what reflections it may offer on the decade and a half of political struggle that preceded it.

New Social Movements

Social movements did not begin with the various movements of the 1990s, which lends an air of mystery to the usage of the term “new.” How do these new movements differ from their predecessors in any meaningful way? Are they something radically new, or just a continuation of the same ever-evolving pattern of resistance? The distinction is more important than a mere semantic squabble—it gets to the heart of disagreement at the center of patterns of struggle in this period. One side of the argument holds that they constitute a continuation of liberatory struggle, fighting for the same normative goals as militants of previous generations, communists included—but in terms updated for post-material world.⁴ The other side would hold that they are a radical break with socialist tradition, deforming socialist or communist politics into a mere critique of exclusion, succumbing to the very neoliberal logic they claimed to oppose. To examine this dispute further it is helpful to briefly survey the origins of the “new” moniker, and how these movements emerged in France.

A key definitional feature of these new movements will be their rejection of Marxist orthodoxy, at least in its two most celebrated clichés, a fatalistic belief in a teleological history pointed towards an ultimate abolition of capitalist production, and the working-class as the sole

⁴ The idea that the affluent democracies of the west had moved beyond the contesting of the distribution of material resources and had taken up instead the contesting of identity and inclusion. It will be taken up further below via the work of Alain Touraine, but see most famously Ronald Inglehart’s 1977 *The Silent Revolution*, Princeton University Press.

historical subject whose collective interest naturally steer this teleological historical progress. Sarah Waters, scholar of French movements, notes that the movements that are referred to as new (though she will debate that categorization) emerge when “the grand ideologies that once oriented political action have lost their capacity to mobilize popular energies, and passions and structures of the left fail to attract new supporters” (2003, 12). Unlike the workers’ movement, the perennial implied comparison with the new movements, these movements “did not seem to offer a ‘project for society,’ a vision of a future alternative system. These were movements ‘without utopia’ having divested themselves of all mythology.” (2003, 38). The “mythology” that has lost its capacity to mobilize and of which they were riding themselves is clearly Marxism.

Hence, Waters writes, “the term ‘new social movements’ thus refers to a diverse array of collective actions that have presumably replaced the old social movement of proletarian revolution associated with classical Marxism” (2003, 38). Critically, this abandonment of classical Marxism does not imply an abandonment of contesting capitalism. Many of these movements took up a struggle that directly attacked various symptoms of capitalist production. Rather than an abandonment of anti-capitalist critique, it was in many cases a rethinking of the possibility of an alternative future and the possible routes towards its establishment. “Socialism” and certainly “communism” were often struck from the collective vocabulary. Issues of “exploitation” were replaced with issues of “exclusion,” a semantic reformulation that posits an interior and exterior with the implied possibility of entrance and exit. One of the primary theoretical vehicles for this “post-Marxist” method of theorizing social unrest is the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantalle Mouffe, taken up in the next chapter.

For Waters, however, this break with Marxism is insufficient to qualify the movements as “new.” Certainly, the movements are different than their explicitly socialist predecessors, but they

are not different in that they are positing a radical alternative that would equally seek to remake the world but on different terms. Rather, the movements style themselves as old, reaching further back to the tradition of rights-based democratic contestation that dates from the French Revolution of 1789. In the tradition of the French revolutionaries contesting the rights of the third estate, the passive citizen, etc. the new movements are seeking to contest the rights of other excluded populations, the sans-papiers, the sans-abri, etc. (Waters 2003, 41). This fealty to the possibility of democratic inclusion, while old in a certain sense, is new to far-left political activism. It is a departure from a traditional Marxist stance that holds the democratic-capitalist state to be merely an appendage of the process of capitalist production.⁵ These movements certainly viewed the state with a cautious, if not hostile, eye, seeking perhaps its radical political reformation, but the democratic possibility of inclusion into governance, even while retaining private ownership, became a possibility not considered by a previous generation of leftwing activists.⁶

Democratic incorporation was such a vital aspect of movement doctrine because, as was mentioned above, “exclusion,” for many movements, took the place of “exploitation.” Political theorist Stathis Kouvélakis attributes this change to a larger ideological shift seeking to decouple the discussion of social conflict from the discussion of class conflict, a movement he attributes to Alain Touraine, “the official sociologist of Mitterrand’s France” (Kouvélakis 2007, 45). For Touraine, the transition to new forms of social movements was predicated on the transition from Industrial Society to a post-Industrial Programmed society. In his 1977 text *The Voice and the Eye*, he lays out a seven-step progression from the old workers’ movement to the new forms of

⁵ Among Marxists there is a vibrant debate about the relationship between the capitalist class and the democratic state, see for example the Miliband-Poulantzas debate, but even among the Marxist authors who grant the state the most “autonomy” from capital there is a consensus on a certain economic determination of state activity, even if it should only be “in the last instance.”

⁶ This changed, regarding the PCF, with the gradual adoption of a more Italian style “Eurocommunism,” which will be addressed in the section below.

movement, in which old forms of struggle are seen as fundamentally incompatible with the new post-industrial society and new forms of struggle are therefore born. The penultimate stage of this cycle, 6 (“populist”) sees the emergence of threatened categories particular to the new era and 7 (“new social movements”) sees new movements crystalize around the defense of these new categories Touraine 1977, 10-11).⁷ As to how this general shift towards a post-Industrial society affects the class/exploitation; social movement/exclusion distinction, Touraine writes, in 1991,

we are living through the passage from a vertical society, that we have become accustomed to calling a class society, with people on top and people on bottom, to a horizontal society, where what is important is to know if one is in the center or the periphery . . . the question today is no longer being up or down, but in or out: those who are not in want to be, otherwise they live in a social void (Touraine 1991, as cited in Kouvélakis 2007, 45).

This type of post-class, or post-material ordering, is emblematic of many of the new movements that sprung up in France in the 1990s. We will further address this theoretical stance in the next chapter, but it is important to note at this juncture that this manner of interpreting struggle was born of the type movements being described here. It was expressed most fully by the movements leading intellectuals, most notably sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.

In an editorial in *Le Monde* from April of 1998, Bourdieu gave voice to sentiment felt by much of the intellectual leadership of the new social movements. In one line he takes to task both the “plural” left of the dilapidated PCF and the minute parties of the extreme left, that is, LO and LCR “The make-believers of the ‘plural’ left deceive leftist voters, demobilize leftist militants, and send them toward an exasperated extreme-left ” (Bourdieu, 1998).⁸ Solutions to this situation

⁷ This emergence of a “populist” stage that takes up the struggle of whatever particular excluded group is both the most excluded and the most capable of fighting back will have particular resonance with the theorizing of Laclau and Mouffe in Chapter 3.

⁸ All translations are my own unless otherwise noted: “Les faux-semblants de la gauche ‘plurielle’ déçoivent les électeurs de gauche, démobilisent les militants, renvoient vers l’extrême gauche les plus exaspérés. »

“cannot come from anywhere but the social movements that have developed since 1995. On the condition that we know how to listen to them.” (Bourdieu, 1998).⁹ Bourdieu here separates the NSMs both from the parties of the traditional left and from any movements that date from before 1995. The article ends with a call for the internationalization of the recent social movements, for them to become the primary force of combat against international capital. Specifically, he mentions the *sans-papier* movement, (the “without-papers” movement for the rights of undocumented immigrants) and the movement against the free circulation of international capital, or L’ATTAC, as possible foundations of an international left-wing movement.

In a follow-up piece also in *Le Monde*, journalist Ariane Chemin noted the extent to which Bourdieu and the ideas he expressed had become the touchstones of the new movements. She cites a group of militants involved in the movements who refer to themselves as “*La gauche bourdieusienne*” (Chemin 1998). She recaps his argument, his association with leftist movements since 1968, and his various political interventions in academic circles. Conspicuously absent from both his original piece and her summation are discussions of socialism, communism, class, or Marx. There is no rupture, no end of capitalist production, no socialist creation. Perhaps this is unsurprising in op-eds in a national paper, in a liberal capitalist democracy, written by an intellectual, in the decade after the fall of the USSR. It does seem to be worth noting, however, as he is making a marked intervention in the discourse of a national left that for so long had been characterized by explicitly Marxist struggle, and which had enjoyed a relationship for decades with communist public intellectuals.

The absence of Marxism, however, does not mean an absence of ideology. Marxist framing, at least in its narrow economic sense, would be replaced in this period by the economic

⁹ “ne peuvent venir que des mouvements sociaux qui se développent depuis 1995. A condition que l'on sache les entendre”

literature surrounding L'ATTAC, or "L'Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne."¹⁰ Founded in 1998, its origins are in an op-ed by academic Ignacio Ramonet in the *Le Monde Diplomatique*, advocating for a "Tobin Tax," or a new tax on international financial transactions (Ramonet 1998). It framed these international transactions as one of the more pernicious drivers of capitalist globalization, and in doing so made advocacy for the tax a focal point of the anti-globalization movement.

L'ATTAC was emblematic of many of the national non-Marxist yet anti-capitalist movements, as it framed the specific patterns of neoliberal finance capital as the enemy, rather than capitalist production writ large. This theoretical framing gained traction in movements well beyond those specifically associated with taxing finance capital, as it was able to effectively posit finance capital as the driver behind many of the social ills other movements were contesting. As Waters writes, citing Benford and Snow's seminal work on framing and social movements "For ATTAC, globalization serves as a 'master frame', and is treated as the dominant conceptual framework for situating leftist opposition and articulating social grievances in France today" (Waters 2006, 146). This framing was effective, by 2003 L'ATTAC was composed of 30,000 members with well over 150 local action committees (Waters 2006, 151).

While not earth-shattering numbers, for a five-year-old organization based on tax policy they are quite impressive. In addition to the raw numbers, the organization is impressive because of who it was able to attract. *Le Monde* wrote an article in the Fall of 1998, not long after the founding, highlighting the movement of militants from traditional left parties to the social groupings around L'ATTAC. (*Le Monde*, 1998) They explicitly cite the framing capacity of

¹⁰"The Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and for Citizen Action."

L'ATTAC to attract these militants, writing that they had found in the movement an entire “new form of engagement in economic expertise.” (Le Monde, 1998).¹¹

This period of capitalist accumulation did indeed have particular features that contributed uniquely to the immiseration of the population. The free flow of international capital and the deregulation of national banking, amplifying the effects of the former, were perhaps chiefly visible among them. It is understandable, then, that this free flow of capital would be attacked in a way that both potentially halts the harm being done as well as adding to national revenue, which was deeply needed in an era of strained welfare systems and limited national debt. What is curious is not the rise of ATTAC as such, but the way in which it was framed as the theoretical north star for other movements of the era, and the way in which, as cited above, it was the movement's particular economic bona fides that lent it this credibility. As noted in Chapter 1, the separation of the economic from the political, and the insistence on the expert control of the economic, were definitional aspects of the neoliberal era. ATTAC, then, was seeking to break the tide of neoliberalism on its own terms, by building credentials in the sphere of economic organization. That is to say by positing, not the elimination of the capitalist form of economic production as such, but that the capitalist economy could be run without the exploitation central to capitalist production. Thus, even though this intervention was explicitly in terms of the economic, it functions well with the conception of exclusion from a horizontal society. What is needed is the proper managing of that society for maximum inclusion.

This notion of ATTAC's credibility coming from its intellectual credentials was also reflected in the membership. In 2004 French Political Scientist Elise Cruzel did a series of

¹¹ “nouvelle forme d'engagement dans l'expertise économique”

interviews with ATTAC militants to see what motivated them to work with their local ATTAC chapters. One aspect that came up multiple times was the organization's air of "middle-class intellectuals" (Cruzel 2004). The importance of middle-class intellectuals is interesting, not only because they are here forming in a way a substitute for the working-class subject of orthodox Marxism, but because the importance of their expertise is implying the possibility of success via correct management. For Marxist militants, the question was not the correct management of the capitalist economy or the correct handling of the divide with the property-owning class, it was rather their destruction. The possibility of management implies the possibility of victory within the capitalist framework.

L'ATTAC, as an overarching frame of struggle against finance capital, offered the theoretical justifications for struggle against the particularity of neoliberal capitalism. The particular struggles themselves were, by definition, heterogeneous and hard to describe in broad summary. Perhaps the best articulation of these struggles was the "sans" or "without" movements. The "without" was any need that people were deprived of due to the ravages of neoliberal capital: food, work, housing, schools, citizenship. The movements were composed directly of people without jobs, citizenship, homes, or ample food coalesced to form protest groups centering these demands. These groups joined together in December of 1995, amid a wave of mass strikes, to occupy the Pompidou Center and launch the "appel des sans," a call for the broad protection of civil rights for all members of society. In centering the "sans" they "affirmed a collective identity as sans, . . . all of whom were denied the rights available to other members of society and were thereby excluded in practice from citizenship" (Drugan et al. 2004, 4). They were calling for a collective identity, but a collective identity composed of their particular struggle.

If L'ATTAC was able to effectively reframe left political struggle, at least briefly, by centering financial capital as the primary opponent of the dispossessed, then the distinction is certainly not between older, ideological Marxist movements, and newer, pragmatic, ideology-free issue movements. It is rather between two sets of anti-oppressive, even anti-capitalist movements guided by two competing ideologies, on that saw the end goal of the struggle in anti-globalization measures and the regulation of neoliberal finance capital and another, one more rooted in an orthodox Marxism, that still set the measure of victory. To the extent that they are both anti-capitalist struggles perhaps the most defining difference is the location of class. The new movements, as well as some prominent left party members, relegated class to become an excluded identity among others, no more or less privileged than any other basis on which one might be excluded from society's center. As it turned out, that relegation was premature. Class was, as it has always been, reformed and redefined, but as neoliberalism remains a period in a long history of capitalist production, so the various forms of exclusion and exploitation of the 1990s remained moments in a long history of class struggle.

The Aging PCF and the New Movements

The PCF had emerged from the Second World War as part of a governing tripartite formation, along with the Socialists and Christian Democrats. They commanded the largest vote share and came very close to winning complete control of the government. They retained their popularity for more than a decade, continuing to win roughly a quarter of the vote through most of the 1950s (Nohlen 2010, 693). Despite this popularity, they were prevented from welding much power inside the government, as they maintained their orthodox revolutionary vocabulary and refused to make coalitions with the socialists (Bell 2003, 32).

Following Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 direction to follow a parliamentary road in the West, the PCF sought to form electoral coalitions that it could easily control. Though they maintained their relationship to Moscow, their defense of Marxism-Leninism, and formally their revolutionary stance, in seeking to form coalitions throughout the 1960s and '70s, "the PCF's revolutionary ardor was muted and they bargained with the main representative of the non-communist left whom they helped to build up as a viable interlocutor" (Bell 2003, 32).

This effort culminated in the 1973 *Programme Commun*, a strategic unity ticket between the PCF and PS. On paper, this period led to electoral success, the combined ticket made a left powerhouse, but in the long term, the strategy backfired on the Communists. The Socialists emerged from the common program the dominant party of the left, a position they would not cede until 2017 (and not to the Communists.) In 1980 the PCF ran its secretary Georges Marchais in the presidential election in which they were beaten soundly by Francois Mitterrand. Crucially Mitterrand not only beat the PCF on the national stage, but he also did so in formerly perennial communist regions Picardy and Pas-de-Calais, as well as Seine-Saint-Denis, the center of the famed "ceinture rouge" and the location of PCF headquarters (CDSP 2009). Marchais endorsed Mitterrand in the second round, and after his victory Mitterrand brought several communist ministers into his cabinet. This meant there were several communists in prominent offices during the policy reversals of 1983, described in Chapter 1. A generation of voters saw a party move from refusing to condemn the invasion of Hungary while holding firm to the banner of Marxism-Leninism, to participation in the government that effectively began the neoliberal period in France.

This led to a period of political waffling for the PCF, periodically reverting to hardline revolutionary rhetoric, then swinging back into parliamentary contention (Bell 2003, 34). The strategy was not successful. In the 1988 presidential first round the Communists received 6.7% of

the vote. In the 1989 European elections they received 7%, four points behind the FN. 1989 also saw a large loss in municipal control. In 1995, amid a strike wave and a general uptick in protest, they received 8.6%, barely ahead of LO's Arlette Laguillier, and a little over half of the avowedly racist, anti-Semitic Jean-Marie Le Pen (Conseil Constitutionnel, décision n 95-79).

The PCF of the 1990s was weak, ineffectual, and deeply divided. They had in a matter of two decades gone from the most powerful force on the French left to an almost inconsequential fringe party, covered in the press primarily because of their historical weight. By 2002 they would receive roughly as many votes as they used to have members (Wolfreys 2003, 95), and much of that vote total may be tied simply to long-term partisan loyalty rather than any admiration of the PCF's program.

During this period of steep decline the party was effectively internally split into three factions: "hardliners," based in former industrial bastions, who scorned the new movements and remained loyal to their Marxist-Leninist roots; the "alternative strategy," which saw the movements rejuvenating, and wanted the party to act as a guiding vehicle of collective action for them; and the "middle-way," led by party leader Robert Hue, who wanted the party to distance itself from its Soviet adjacent past and have a relationship with the social movements, but was not ready to entirely turn the keys over to the new actors (Bell 2003, 37-39).

In 1994, at the 28th party congress, the reigns were officially handed to Robert Hue, and while contention inside the ranks continued to grow, it was his approach that dominated party strategy and identity for the decade. Along with the official shift in party control, the 1994 congress also formalized the move towards an Italian style Eurocommunism, formally removing "democratic centralism" from party doctrine, as well as changing many of the names of party positions away from titles borrowed from the Bolshevik party to ones more characteristic of any

other major political party. By 1994 these changes were largely semantic, the party was already undergoing a transformation pushing it away from its Leninist roots, but nonetheless the transformation was significant. For decades the party had tried to toe the line between revolutionary Marxist-Leninist party and national political party, and as of 1994, it seemed they had officially settled on the latter.

This is confirmed by a reading of Robert Hue's *Communisme: La Mutation*, a book-length meditation on the party and the French political scene more broadly. The text begins with a justification both of itself and the party. He immediately forsakes the Soviet model, emphasizes the uniquely French roots of the communist idea, and associates the communist hypothesis with a moral bent towards justice rather than a structural reformation. "Communism: it was here, in France, that this word was born to describe the aspiration towards a society more humane, more honest, more just, freer. The fact that a caricature was made of it elsewhere – monstrous, and often criminal – can't lead us to reject it"¹² (Hue 1995, 11). This is, from the very beginning of the book, a strategic redeployment of the word communist. In distancing himself from the party's past Soviet alliance (if not subjection) he is creating a new definition around the term to salvage it, making it one of moral conviction.

To justify this reformulation he writes his own independent history of communism, one he traces most notably to the French revolution, and more specifically to Babeuf, the revolutionary executed in 1797 for his attempt to overthrow the Directory and restore Jacobin governance (Hue 1995, 54). Significantly, he places the idea of communism as fully formed, in the 18th century, associated with a movement Marx would have surely penned as utopian. Ellen Meiksins Wood

¹² "Communisme : c'est ici, en France, que ce mot est né pour dire l'aspiration à une société plus humain, plus honnête, plus juste, plus libre. Le fait qu'une caricature en ait été faite ailleurs – monstrueuse, et souvent ciminelle – ne peut nous conduire à la renier."

has identified this taking up of pre-Marxist utopian socialists as definitional for the post-Marxists, as it allows them to posit the coming of socialism on purely normative grounds, eschewing class conflict (Meiksins Wood 1986). It is another shift in the text away from any definition of communism compatible with Marxism (betrayed as well by the almost complete absence of Marx from the book.) He goes on, in one of his more surprising moves, to link communism with the teachings of Christ, and then link the development of communism to a group of thinkers as diverse as Descartes, Spinoza, Voltaire, Diderot, Rabelais, Louis Blanc, Proudhon, Blanqui, and Emile Durkheim (Hue 1995, 56).

Regarding the party itself, he sees one possible future: one in which it uses its organizational capacity to intervene in the government and society to improve the everyday lives of French people, fundamentally in injecting non-capitalist elements into capitalist society (Hue 1995, 14-15). This steers him into a bizarre meditation on reformism, in which he confirms the vote of the communists at Tours¹³, but argues for a more sympathetic treatment of Leon Blum. He writes that is only natural that on the left there should be “two large trends: one that expects nothing from the system as it is and aspires to radical change, and another that certainly considers the system to be bad but also unsurpassable, and therefore limits its ambition to obtaining more or less important developments”¹⁴ (Hue 1995, 167-168). He certainly considers the PS to be amongst the latter, chastising them for the Mitterrand government, specifically for his action in 1983, decrying the “Franc Fort” program and the financialization of the economy (conveniently omitting PCF involvement) (Hue 1995, 167). It is not clear, however, here or elsewhere, how he envisions an

¹³ The communists officially split from the socialists, led by Leon Blum, at a congress in Tours, joining the Third International. It was, in a sense, a referendum on “reform versus revolution.”

¹⁴ “deux grands courants: celui qui n’attend rien du système actuel et aspire à des changements radicaux, et celui qui le considère certes comme mauvais mais indépassable, et limite donc son ambition à en obtenir des aménagements plus ou moins importants.”

alternative to this socialist capitulation, as he adds just pages later that “it has now been quite some time since we have seen the revolution as a “grand soir”¹⁵ in which society would be brusquely transformed (Hue 1995, 169). Instead, he cites the manifesto from the 1994 congress in saying that destroying capitalism isn’t enough to overcome it, but rather that the seeds of a future socialist society must be built slowly in the foundations of the world that already exists. But here we obviously loop back to the reform or revolution debate—what distinguishes the sowing of the seeds of a future society from reformism? His attempts at clarification are not analytically helpful. Despite the failure of Mitterrand reforms, “we communists fight good and well for reforms. We are available to take our part in a political agenda in implementing these [anti-capitalist] reforms, and to do it as soon as possible without waiting on any mythical “grand soir.” But these will certainly be other reforms [than those of Mitterrand], reforms that don’t better fold sold society to the will of ‘king-money,’ but rather find solutions to the problems posed today to our society precisely because ‘king-money’ reigns supreme”¹⁶ (Hue 1995, 173).

Whatever this does mean, it does not meaningfully solve the reform or revolution distinction he himself introduced. This is not a feature of the particular intellectual weakness of Hue’s argument. It is a feature of the left searching for a theoretical foothold in a post-Marxist world more generally. Without the apparatus historical materialism supplies—as caricatured as it may have been—there was no way for Hue or other left leaders to effectively solder a larger theoretical model to the particular struggles of French society. Their only approach would be this

¹⁵ “Cela fait maintenant longtemps que nous ne voyons plus la ‘revoution’ comme le ‘grand soir.’”

¹⁶ “Mais nous, communistes, luttons bel et bien pour des réformes. Nous sommes disponibles pour prendre notre part à la mise en oeuvre d’une politique impulsant ces réformes – et cela le plus tôt possible; sans attendre un mytique “grand soir.” Mais c’est évidemment d’autres réformes qu’il s’agit: des réformes ayant pour but non de mieux ‘plier’ la société aux exigences de ‘l’argent roi,’ mais de trouver des solutions aux problèmes posés aujourd’hui à notre société précisément parce que “l’argent-roi” y fait régner sa loi.”

meager and often incoherent reformism, that, in defining itself negatively against a straw man of revolutionary strategy, made itself all the more politically ineffectual.

Later in the 1990s, still the head of the PCF and with another presidential election as its candidate still ahead of him, Hue indicated in an interview entitled “Social, I said Social!”¹⁷ that he, like Waters indicated above, saw social movements as a primary framing device for the left. Asked if he agreed with Pierre Bourdieu that it was necessary to expand the notion of the social movement, he replied “indeed, social movements always go further than their immediate demands, regardless of the awareness they themselves have of the relationship between demands and perspectives. They pose society’s problems”¹⁸ going on to clarify that the social movement cannot be reduced to union or simply working-class struggles, that there is always more in them than struggles over the economy (Frederick and Hue 1999).

Hue’s line eventually became too much for the hardline faction inside the party, who split and formed the group “coordination communiste.” They discussed the anti-globalization movement, as well as the other social movements, in their party publication “Chantiers” or “workplaces.” They made it clear that communists could not ignore these movements, as their grievances were real and valid, and they spoke truth to contemporary capitalist exploitation, but also that it would be a mistake for the communists to use the stated goals of these movements as their own terms of victory. For the hardliners, the demands of the movements were born of legitimate grievances with capitalism, but had to then be incorporated into a project explicitly set on ending capitalist production. In a particularly blistering op-ed, in response to the European Social Forum, which we will see was of particular import for the LCR, they attacked the strain of

¹⁷ “Social, j’ai dit Social !”

¹⁸ Effectivement, les mouvements sociaux portent toujours plus loin que leurs revendications immédiates, quelle que soit la conscience qu’ils ont eux-mêmes du rapport entre revendications et perspectives. Ils posent des problèmes de société.

movements led by L'ATTAC for being reformists dressed up as revolutionaries. They critique them for using terms for their adversaries like “ultraliberal” rather than calling them capitalists, distracting the movement from its real goals. They finish the op-ed in bold font, exclaiming “Capitalism is not reformable, it is to be torn down! Another world is not just possible but necessary!”¹⁹ (Chantiers, 2004).

This faction was clearly reacting to the direction of the party and of left-wing struggle more generally, and they were representing at least a sizeable chunk of the country's working class in doing so. In Pas-de-Calais, a northern mining and industrial region formerly synonymous with the French working class and the region in which Coordination Communiste was based, this period of post-Marxist reinvention saw an almost constant decline in PCF support. In the first round of the 1981, presidential election, running against the very popular socialist Mitterrand, they received 25% of the vote. In 1988, after communist participation in the Mitterrand reforms, 13%, and in 1995, with Hue at the helm, 6%, below the national average (CDSP 2009). This phenomenon was mirrored in Seine-Saint-Denis, the location of PCF headquarters mentioned above.

Not only did the PCF lose its stronghold on working-class districts, but it also forfeited them to the far-right. As the PCF was declining in Pas-de-Calais and Seine-Saint-Denis, the Front National was constantly on the rise. In Pas-de-Calais it hit 16.5% in 1995, up 4 points from 1988, 10 points above the PCF, and 1.5% above the national average (CDSP 2009). There has been much work on the manner in which the Front National was able to capitalize on working-class issues to much success.²⁰ Further research documenting the voter by voter shift to the FN in these regions

¹⁹ “le capitalisme n'est pas réformable, il est à abattre ! Un autre monde est non seulement possible mais nécessaire !”

²⁰ (Dutozia and Ivaldi 2018) demonstrate that while the FN continued to appeal to middle-class anti-immigrant sentiments in the south, they took up an economic populist line in the North. (Zaslove 2008) examines the way the far-right across Europe was able to successfully exploit pain caused by neoliberal reforms, often implemented in France by the left, to electoral success. (Gougou 2015) has looked at the manner in which the Front National has managed to become a working-class party via the exploitation of neoliberal pain.

is necessary, but for the time being it certainly appears as if the FN was able to pick up sections of the working-class the PCF dropped, spurring its newfound success.

The French working class was hit hard by the neoliberal reforms of the Mitterrand era. As unemployment rose, especially in working-class areas, access to social welfare provisions was reduced. It was at this moment that the PCF decided to move away from the working class, and electorally it was punished. The FN came in and took up the cause, no matter how disingenuously, and for the past two decades, they have electorally been able to claim the title of the party of the French working class.

The FN was not the only party to speak the language of class struggle, however. In the next section, we will turn the ways in which the Trotskyist left navigated the political landscape of the 1990s.

“The enemy sisters of Trotskyism.”²¹

Such was the title of a March 1998 article in *Le Monde*, which sought to profile France’s leading two far-left parties, LO and the LCR (Chemin, 18 March 1998). The short article sought to highlight the most prominent differences between the two groups, differences that were by then common knowledge to any close observer of the two parties. They characterized LO as sectarian hardliners, still bent on achieving a nostalgic vision of October 1917. LCR came off as revolutionaries in flux, still committed to an ultimate rupture with the capitalist state and the construction of socialism, but open to different strategies and the construction of bases outside the working class. While the article doesn’t say so explicitly, at the center of this debate are new social movements and new forms of contestation. While LO remained hard set against a transition away

²¹ “Les Soeurs Ennemies du Trotskisme.”

from their vision of Leninism, the LCR became more and more open to these new movements and the new militants and strategy they would bring. To better understand this split, it will be useful to briefly survey the two parties' history, as in both cases their attitudes towards the politics of the 1990s were prefigured by the various other struggles of the twentieth century, most notably May of 1968.

Lutte Ouvrière

Like most far-left parties that have survived to the present, the history of LO is filled with splits, mergers, and name changes. It begins with a Romanian Jewish Trotskyist named David Korner who was living in Paris during the 1930s. In the winter of 1939 Korner began the publication of a newspaper titled *l'Ouvrier* with a loose association of fellow Trotskyists. The group chose to remain anonymous and loosely formed, to guard against threats from both the Stalinist left and the Nazi occupiers, (Bourseiller 2003, 10). Bourseiller, author of a history of the group, notes that a set of orthodoxies that would endure until the present were born in this foundational period.²² While the group was insistent on a revolutionary rupture, they were less optimistic than their revolutionary brethren that the time was near. They did not believe themselves to be living in a particularly pre-revolutionary moment, and even if they had been it was not clear to the leaders that a revolution would put the forces of the left in charge. This cautious pessimism shaped their strategy. The work would be slow, and the horizon would be long. Careful work had to be done in the workplace, and uniquely the workplace. There would be no grand revolutionary gestures until the preliminary work had been completed (Bourseiller 2003, 10-11).

²² While not a member of LO, Bourseiller was openly sympathetic with their cause. This history comes from an introduction he wrote to a series of interviews with the group's founder, Robert Barcia. Journalistic accounts such as this one form most of the source material for the history of the group, as little academic attention has been paid to it.

The afterwar period included slow growth, including the recruitment of a young militant named Robert Barcia, and then a split, with a faction led in part by Barcia (who was better known in militant circles by his nom de guerre, Harvey). The split centered around a strike wave in 1947. The Renault factory in Billancourt had become a center point for the non-Stalinist left, in which Trotskyists, as well as other leftists not necessarily affiliated with the Leninist left had much greater influence there than in other factories controlled by the PCF. The faction led by Barcia favored factory floor intervention here as a base to grow and spread to other plants. The other faction was wary of this strategy and split (Bourseiller 2003, 12). The strike wave in 1947 was enormous, with Renault-Billancourt as one of its bases, the strategy of Barcia seemed to have been confirmed. This episode again confirmed the then-embryonic party's commitment to slow work on the factory floor, targeting the working-class exclusively, and industrial workers above all others.

Approaching May '68 the party went by the name Voix Ouvrière, the immediate predecessor of LO. Party is the correct term only by lack of a better word to describe the loose conglomeration of activists who worked under the same moniker. The party was intentionally vague, their work was in daily interactions with workers which did not necessarily require a formal party apparatus. When the government began to ban parties of the left in 1968 this worked to their advantage. Their name was banned, but it was difficult to ban anything else. Twenty-four hours after Voix Ouvrière was banned, publications under the name Lutte Ouvrière appeared on the factory floors.

1968 put VO then LO in a unique position. Unlike the PCF²³ they declared support for the student revolt from the beginning, but unlike many of their Trotskyist and Maoist compatriots,

²³ Discussions and debates around the presence or absence of PCF support for the movement are numerous and outside the bounds of the discussion here. A good primer on the debate is Mitchell Abidor's, "When the Communist Party Stopped a French Revolution." *New York Review of Books*. New York, April 19, 2018.

they were not willing to throw themselves part and parcel in with the revolts without the support of the working class. While other parties reshaped their strategy and makeup after the seminal events of '68, LO did not. They took in a generation of young activists and they welcomed the rise in anti-government action, but their goal and their strategy remained the same. They were focused on building a revolutionary working-class party and the only way to get there was slow growth via workplace recruitment and militancy.

This strategy appeared to pay off with the electoral collapse of the PCF. LO could now bill itself as the exclusive communist party, the only group dedicated to the Leninist vision. In the 1995 presidential election they won 5% of the vote, the highest all-time number for a Trotskyist party (Conseil Constitutionnel, décision n 95-79.) In the same working-class districts mentioned above in which the PCF dipped for the first time below the national average, LO rose above the national average (CDSP 2009). The strike wave in 1995 seemed to vindicate an enduring vision of worker-centered struggle. They again posted record numbers in the next presidential election in 2002 (Conseil Constitutionnel, décision n 2002-109). Decades of commitment the slow, careful attention paid to growing a working-class base finally paid electoral dividends, as we will see more clearly in the discussion of the 2002 election below.

This is where we find them in the last decade of the twentieth century: riding a wave of relative success and with the revolts of 1968 still present in the imagination of most of the militants. Denis Pingaud, in his 2000 *La Gauche de la Gauche*, described the LO of the 1990s as “the only organization of the radical left, that, by patient, methodological work, succeeded in forming hundreds of working-class political leaders; at the same time, this strategy came into conflict with

the irreversible decline of large industrial bastions, irremediably condemned by the new era of financial capital”²⁴ (Pingaud 2000).

To understand exactly how the party approached this changing political landscape we can turn to a few of their publications from the period in the question. In the Spring of 1993, in their bi-monthly publication *Lutte de Classes*, they took aim at the ecologists, tying their emergence directly to petit-bourgeois elements of 1968. They acknowledge that the revolts of '68 had turned many youth towards the revolutionary left, but nonetheless

“There are even more, and more and more the further we get from the time of the barricades, who turn toward certain ideas that, though they bear witness to a hope of a better world, do not question the structure of the economy or of politics, and that do not cross the horizon of the petit bourgeoisie intellectual of the industrialized world.” (*Lutte de Classe*, Mai/Avril 1993).²⁵

The NSMs were for them not much more than a contemporary reincarnation of the more petit-bourgeois reactionary elements of 1968. They compare those who would find something new in the green movement to those who would pretend that contemporary liberal feminism had something original to say to the work of Marx and Engels (*Lutte de Classe*, Mai/Avril 1993).

In 1995 they dedicated a meeting of the Leon Trotsky Circle to the subject of feminism, in a session entitled “Où en est la cause des femmes ?” In the piece the speaker lays out an overview of feminist struggles around the world, of the history of the struggle in France during the revolution then the Napoleonic era, the debates in the Bolshevik party around the role of women, and the

²⁴ “la seule organisation de la gauche radicale qui, par un travail patient et méthodique, a réussi à former plusieurs centaines de responsables politiques issus des milieu ouvriers ; en même temps, cette stratégie d’implantation se heurte au déclin inéluctable des grands bastions industriels, irrémédiablement condamnés par la nouvelle ère du capitalisme financier et nomade.”

²⁵ Il y en eut encore bien plus, et de plus en plus nombreux au fur et à mesure que l'on s'éloignait du temps des barricades, à se tourner vers des idées qui, tout en témoignant d'une aspiration à un autre mode de vie, ne remettaient en cause ni les structures économiques, ni les structures politiques de la société, et qui ne dépassaient pas, justement, l'horizon de la petite bourgeoisie intellectuelle des pays industrialisés

feminist struggles in the 1970s and 1980s. The reading is decidedly Marxist, but it pays dues to the movements it describes. Even the explicitly non-Marxist feminist movements are given credence, even if the speaker is obviously somewhat dismissive. The conclusion, perhaps predictably, is that there will be no feminist liberation without worker's liberation. Women are not fundamentally a class, and "This is why feminism, when it limits itself exclusively to feminism, is not sufficient, even in the limited terrain of emancipating women."²⁶ Therefore "It is the working-class, and only the working class which, in transforming the society from the bottom up and in tearing down exploitation, open the door to a world in which all oppression will have disappeared."²⁷ (CLT, 1995).

This diagnosis can be transferred to other notable movements of the time. In a retrospective piece from a 1999 Leon Trotsky circle, the speaker strongly associates the decline of the Western European communist parties with their adherence to new movements not directly tied to class struggle. In a section specifically attacking the Spanish left, they decry that they have forsaken the class struggle for "agitating around certain themes that are currently fashionable on the left, such as ecology, feminism, nationalism, anti-NATO struggles, all in invoking 'an alternative to neoliberalism.' The working class is no longer invoked"²⁸ (CLT, 1999).

Regarding ATTAC, they published an op-ed in the party paper in 2003 entitled "How to be on the ATTAC Without Doing Politics,"²⁹ in which they scorn ATTAC for being a party of

²⁶ "C'est la raison pour laquelle le féminisme, quand il se limite justement au féminisme, ne peut pas aller jusqu'au bout, y compris sur le seul terrain de l'émancipation des femmes."

²⁷ "c'est la classe ouvrière unie et elle seule qui, en transformant la société de fond en comble et en jetant bas l'exploitation, ouvrira la porte à un monde d'où toutes les oppressions auront disparu"

²⁸ "agitant certains thèmes à la mode dans les milieux de gauche comme l'écologie, le féminisme, le pacifisme, le nationalisme anti-OTAN, voire en parlant d'élaborer 'une alternative au néo-libéralisme.' La classe ouvrière n'était même plus évoquée"

²⁹ "Comment être d'Attac sans faire de politique."

reformers with a more or less incoherent message. “Regarding their ideology, all we can tell is that they’d like to change things, for the better they say, without attacking the bourgeoisie, monopolies, trusts, in a word, capitalism. They would be more content with a less brutal capitalism”³⁰ (Comment être d'Attac sans faire de politique 2003). Like the ecologists above, they are generally well intentioned and striving for a better society, but they are rendered politically incoherent because they will not attack capitalism itself.

The stance of the party on the new movements was not unnuanced but neither was it unclear: the various legitimate struggles of oppressed populations were valid, but in the last instance they must be subjected to the class struggle. The feminist movement, the ecologists, ATTAC, they were all correct in attacking the various forms of societal oppressions, but in the end none of those oppressions would go away without the ultimate overthrow of capitalist society via a revolutionary working class.

As for the form the revolution would take, they saw the term “grand soir” itself as a caricature, used only to punch left against the parties still working on the terrain of class struggle. “To caricature our ideas,” Laguiller said in a 1999 speech, “they criticize us as preparing who knows what kind of ‘grand soir.’ But what we want, for the immediate future, is for the working class to once again become a political force able to influence political life for its own interests, which are those of all the oppressed classes”³¹ (LO, Texte du discours d'Arlette Laguiller, au Zénith, à Paris, le 6 juin 1999 1999). Rejecting the simplified language of “grand soir” she

³⁰ “de leur idéologie, la seule chose qu'on peut retenir, c'est qu'ils voudraient changer les choses, en mieux disent-ils, sans s'attaquer à la bourgeoisie, aux trusts, aux monopoles, en un mot au capitalisme. Ils se contenteraient d'une économie capitaliste moins brutale.”

³¹ “Pour caricaturer nos idées, on nous reproche de préparer on ne sait quel grand soir. Mais ce que nous voulons pour l'immédiat, c'est que la classe ouvrière redevienne une force politique pour pouvoir peser sur la vie politique en fonction de ses intérêts qui sont ceux de toutes les classes populaires.” I have chosen to translate “classes populaires” as “oppressed classes” as she is clearly drawing a distinction with the working-class proper, as she uses the phrase “classe ouvrière” earlier in the paragraph.

reiterates that the struggles of all the oppressed are fundamentally the struggle of the working class. In another speech, from 1998, on the notion of raising class consciousness in the workplace Laguiller said “it surely won’t happen in a day. There may not necessarily be a ‘grand soir’ in which all the working class goes on strike together like one man” but, she continues, the workers must see that “all the problems of the working-class are the same across workplaces and categories . . . and that all workers are part of the same proletarian army. And together, that that army is invincible!”³² (LO 1998). While the term “grand soir” is rejected as caricature, the emphasis is clearly on working-class revolutionary power, in a way that Robert Hue and the PCF leadership would no longer endorse.

LCR

The LCR is also a product of a complex series of splits, mergers, and re-namings. Their immediate predecessor was La Ligue Communiste, created in 1969 by the former member of Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire, which had been banned in 1968 (Le Monde, 14 April 1969). The conviction of the founders was that what had led to the failure of the movement in 1968 was the lack an organized, revolutionary party that could have set the various revolting parts in unison—so they set to create one. This party, however, was also banned, and from that reinvention emerged the LCR.

³² Full quote “Cela ne se fera pas en un jour, bien sûr. Il n'y aura pas nécessairement un grand soir où toute la classe ouvrière partira en grève comme un seul homme. Mais il faut que ceux qui ont repris confiance l'insufflent collectivement aux autres ; il faut que, progressivement, tous les travailleurs, même et surtout ceux qui sont dans des entreprises où le rapport des forces apparaît le plus défavorable, sentent que ce qui compte ce n'est pas seulement ce qui se passe dans leur entreprise. Il faut qu'ils voient que les problèmes des travailleurs sont les mêmes par delà les entreprises ou les catégories, les revendications vitales aussi et que tous les travailleurs font partie d'une même armée des prolétaires. Et ensemble, cette armée est invincible !

Sociologist Florence Johsua, historian of the party, has noted that as it emerged from 1968 it was characterized by its perceived political acumen. It had emerged from the movement as primarily a youth organization, but its number had quickly swelled with workers. The perception amongst activists and observers was that this was due to an ability to accurately read the situation on the ground and match it to their frame of Trotskyist analysis (Johsua 2015, 1130³³). This sense of political acumen was accompanied by a faith that the revolution was always on the near horizon (Johsua 2015, 1050). This is quite distinct from LO, who in this period maintained their characteristic skepticism about impending rupture.

The revolution, however, did not come. By the 1980s, after more than a decade of work, a crisis of faith emerged in the ranks. The party started to reevaluate its time horizon for revolutionary activity. Many thought it was time to part with the idea of the “grand soir” altogether (Johsua 2015, 1146). Without absolute faith in an impending revolution, day-to-day action started to change. This pessimistic reevaluation of revolutionary activity opened the door at the perfect moment to the new social movements.

The party of the 1990s, therefore, was far more hospitable to the NSMs than was LO. While they shared LO’s Marxist-Leninist-Trotskyist roots, a new wave of recruits had engendered a transition in the composition of the party. This period of deep party transition and reconfiguration was documented by Johsua, who in writing a history of the group conducted an enormous number of interviews with active militants as well as analyzing volumes of party publications. What Johsua documents, in part, is a party using the NSMs and the youth they brought with them to reinvigorate itself after a period of leftward decline. She discusses one militant’s take, Paul Cravet, on the

³³ The version accessed was digital, and due to publisher regulations had only “location” numbers used in Kindle format rather than proper page numbers. These are used in lieu of page numbers in all citations.

subject. According to him, “certain union and associative structures like SUD, Attac or Ras l’Front formed, in the 1990s, networks which maintained these ideas carried by the extreme left, and probably gave them a vitality because it was at a much wider level of diffusion than the simple potential that the far left had at that time.” (Johsua 3777).³⁴ Far from being distractions from the proper work of the far left, then, these movements were what kept the far-left alive in a period that was otherwise fairly bleak. These movements that kept them alive, however, made their mark. Johsua cites political scientist Jean-Gabriel Contamin’s work, in which he describes how entry into anti-globalization movements stripped militants of much of their “partisan and extremist character, in particular removing its explicitly Marxist dimension.” (Johsua 3808).³⁵

This dynamic is again evident in discussion of LCR militant involvement in the European social forum of 2003, mentioned above in connection to Coordination Comuniste. Johsua argues that involvement in this forum allows for effective analysis into the changing party dynamics of the period, as participation in this sort of activity was directly tied to how the militants conceived of their political role and the role of their party (Johsua 3823). Similar to Paul Cravet, Gabrielle Neal, who wrote for the party newspaper, felt that involvement in these movements constituted a sort of re-politicization for the weary members of the LCR. She saw the role of the LCR in these struggles as suggesting the existence of political alternatives, not necessarily explicitly revolutionary ones, just the mere existence of an alternative to neoliberal capital.

³⁴ “Selon lui, certaines structures syndicales et associatives comme SUD, Attac ou Ras l’Front ont constitué, dans les années 1990, des réseaux qui ont maintenu ces idées portées par l’extrême gauche, et probablement leur ont redonné une vitalité parce que c’était à un niveau de diffusion beaucoup plus large que la simple potentialité qu’avait l’extrême gauche à ce moment-là”

³⁵ “caractère partisan et extrémiste, lui retirant notamment sa dimension explicitement marxiste”

This is Neal's opinion, not the party line, but it is nonetheless instructive—for it constitutes a remarkably different political understanding than the line pushed by LO. That difference emerges even more visibly as she discusses L'ATTAC explicitly, and its role in political work. “Investments in anti-globalization events, such as in ATTAC, are fully integrated, according to her, in her approach. Within the framework of an association like ATTAC, this politicization work has high stakes for the pronouncement of principles of vision and division of the social world. It aims to discuss and disseminate a frame of analysis of the events that is highly politically structured”³⁶ (Johsua 2015, 3839). This stands in stark contrast to the LO article on ATTAC quoted above.

In summary of the LCR's involvement with the anti-globalization movements “Investing in the anti-globalization movement was effectively experienced by these activists as a new form of internationalism, perceived as a consubstantial part of the identity of the organization.” (Johsua 3854)³⁷. For at least the younger militants in the group, the ones that would push the party towards becoming the NPA, these movements constituted a substantial part of the group's identity. In a manner consistent with the strategy of the new movements, these movements had replaced revolutionary Marxism as the guiding principle of the party's activity, at least for a significant portion of militants. Involvement in these movements had “thus been experienced by the militants

³⁶ “Les investissements dans les événements altermondialistes, ainsi que dans Attac, s'intègrent pleinement, selon elle, dans cette démarche. Dans le cadre d'une association comme Attac, ce travail de politisation a pour enjeu majeur l'énonciation de principes de vision et de division du monde social. Il vise à faire discuter et à diffuser une grille de lecture des événements fortement structurée politiquement

³⁷ “L'investissement dans le mouvement altermondialiste a effectivement été vécu par ces militants comme une nouvelle forme d'internationalisme, perçu comme consubstantiel de l'identité de l'organisation”

of the LCR like a means to learn, to renew [the] theoretical apparatus, [the] modes of intervention.”
(Johsua 3882).³⁸

Johsua explicitly ties the involvement with the anti-globalization movement to “l’adieu au Grand Soir,” the abandonment of the dream of a final rupture with capitalist society (Johsua 3391). She notes that there was certainly still a faction committed to revolutionary organization inside the party, but it remained in tension with the new ethos of the group as a whole, which had left revolution behind. The struggle was daily and local, guided by the new movements, and steered theoretically by the anti-globalization movement.

This tension at the heart of the party is readily visible in a 2000 interview with Alvin Krivine, perennial party leader since 1968:

What is the revolution? It is basically the idea of a radical change of society. In what form? Certainly not that of the Russian Revolution, but rather that of an immense popular mobilization, of a May 68 that succeeded for example. . . . Contrary to what the reformists think. . . while I believe that an accumulation of social struggles can impose reforms, a political rupture is essential at some point to ensure their sustainability. Nowhere will the bourgeoisie and the employers, confronted with a great mass movement, resign themselves to say: ‘we’ll pass you the keys and get out of here!’ (Pingaud 2000, 123).³⁹

Krivine’s argument encapsulates the predicament the LCR found itself in at the end of the century: unlike LO, they were ready to break with the legacy of the Russian Revolution, but not with a revolutionary break with capital altogether. The question for the new millennium would be how to

³⁸ “ainsi été vécu par les militants de la LCR comme un moyen d’apprendre, de renouveler [l’] appareil théorique, [les] modes d’intervention”

³⁹ “C’est quoi la révolution ? C’est fondamentalement l’idée d’un changement radical de société. Sous quelle forme ? Certainement pas celle de la Révolution russe, mais plutôt celle d’une immense mobilisation populaire, d’un Mai 68 qui réussit par exemple A l’inverse de ce que pensent les réformistes, ajoute-t-il, je rois qu’une accumulation de lutes sociales peut imposer des réformes, mais qu’une rupture politique es indispensable à un moment donné pour assurer leur pérennité. Jamais nulle part, la bourgeoisie et le patronat, confrontés à un grand mouvement de mass, ne sont résignés à dire : ‘on vous file les clefs et on s’en va !’”

theorize this revolutionary break without falling into dated orthodoxy on one side and social democracy on the other. Though the outcome was different, it is reminiscent of Robert Hue's efforts mentioned above—an attempt to find a new theoretical path between two impossible alternatives.

The tension in the LCR could not hold. On the 5th of February, 2009, the group officially voted to disband and reform under the name of the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA). The party would officially no longer be a revolutionary Trotskyist party, but would instead be committed to myriad anti-capitalist struggle (Le Monde, 5 February 2009). The party still contained revolutionaries, but theirs was no longer the dominant party program.

2002

In the Spring of 2002, the French presidential election shocked observers for two reasons: 1) the FN's Jean Marie le Pen had passed to the second round of voting, and 2) LO and LCR had received a combined 10%, or 3 million votes. At a time when the PCF was scrounging for votes, and class politics were meant to have breathed their last, two formerly fringe Trotskyist parties receiving several million votes understandably came as a shock. Many wrote them off as a protest vote, though that explanation lacks much explanatory power, as voters wishing to cast a protest ballot had the option to a) not vote, b) turn in a blank ballot (common in France), or c) vote for the FN as many of them did. Who, then, were the 3 million voters who chose to specifically cast their ballots for the two parties still using the language of class war and revolution?

Political Scientist Nathan Sperber sought to answer that question by digging into waves of voter panels conducted around the election. He found a few definitional characteristics of the

Trotskyist voters, they were overwhelmingly working-class, primarily working in manual labor or the service industry, they were young, having spent most of their working life after the neoliberal reforms, and they were primarily concerned with economic issues (Sperber 2010). They were *exactly* the working-class produced by neoliberalism. They were also quite socially liberal, expressing views that were pro-immigrant, pro-ecology, and pro-feminist, highlighting that they were not voting on their class identity *instead* of social issues but in conjunction with them. LO, having outscored the LCR by a little more than a percentage point nationally, won amongst manual laborers, technicians, and service workers, tying LCR amongst the self-employed and salaried professionals (Sperber 2010). The PCF won a little over 3%, largely amongst older, manual workers.

Class had far from disappeared in the neoliberal era, it had changed in character, as it had many times before. All the many movements broadly comprising the left reacted to this transformation in various ways, some leaving the language of class struggle behind, some sticking to orthodoxy, some trying to artfully combine the two. While electoral data should always be taken with a grain of salt when discussing the far left, the election in 2002 seemed to show there was still a hunger for class politics, especially among those who militantly maintained not just anti-capitalist but pro-communist agitating.

Chapter 3

The debates taken up by the left-wing activists in the 1980s and '90s—debates over the centrality of the working class to liberatory politics, the legacy of a Marxist reading of political economy, and the necessity of a new economic order—were mirrored in theoretical discussions of “post-Marxism.” For the most prominent “post-Marxists,” Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, the liberatory impulse contained in Marxism was worth keeping but was constantly being theoretically encumbered by an “essentialist” insistence on economic determinism. For these authors, the complexity and contingency of the political world was reduced to shadows of the economic via a bankrupt base/superstructure metaphor that they saw as intrinsic to Marxist analysis. What was necessary, then, was to liberate the political from the economic and to understand it in its full complexity and heterogeneity. Once this complexity was contended with, the only viable political project would be a radical democratic one, one that takes as its origin 1789 rather than 1871 or 1917.

This is far from a purely theoretical excursion. As we have seen, the need to analyze the autonomy of the political, the need for explorations of political identity not entirely reduced to class, as well as the shift to a language of “democracy” and “inclusion,” were all issues of the highest importance to activists during this period. This is not to say that Robert Hue, PCF militants, or regional leaders of ATTAC were studiously reading Laclau and Mouffe so as to chart the way forward, but that Laclau and Mouffe presciently had their finger on some of the most salient questions being surfaced and negotiated, however unwittingly, amid the factional conflicts and organizational work of numerous left-wing activists. Their theorization of this period is one that accurately delineates many of the concerns of activists on the ground, and one that must be dealt with seriously as such.

To do this we will first examine their most prominent work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, its intervention into Marxist thought, and that intervention's symmetry with the movements taking place on the ground. We will see strong parallel currents between the work in question and many of the strategic direction taken by political actors in the 1990s. Then we will enter into the retorts made by Marxist scholars, most prominently Norman Geras and Ellen Mieskins-Wood. We will see in this analysis that, while Laclau and Mouffe certainly took up very real concerns with the state of Marxism, their caricatures of Marxists are often divorced from those doing the careful work of Marxist scholarship, and therefore handicaps itself in its attempt to provide any meaningful political alternative. Their own political alternatives, in fact, have imbibed neoliberal logic so fully that they obediently divide the political from any economic concerns, forsaking any manner to meaningfully challenge capitalism. Finally, we will turn to scholars who are producing Marxist accounts of contemporary social movements, but who do not fall into the categorizations of reified orthodox Marxism that plague Laclau and Mouffe—specifically Colin Barker, David McNally, and John Krinsky.

Hegemony and Socialist Strategy

Laclau and Mouffe situate *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as an intervention into the Marxist discourse, but with the critical caveat that there is not “*one* discourse and *one* system of categories through which the real might speak without meditations.” “Just as the era of normative epistemologies has come to an end,” they write, “so too has the era of universal discourses. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 3)” They have then chosen to situate their text in the Marxist tradition but in doing so immediately take exception to some theoretical tendencies undergirding the Marxist tradition. For Laclau and Mouffe there will be no one universal path along which human history, steered by a universal subject, will progress. Similarly, there will be no single totality of society

which can be mastered or even understood via a privileged class position, or via any subject position. They will instead be dealing with the political consequences that have issued from this theoretical reality, what they term the “dissolution of that Jacobin imaginary.”⁴⁰ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2).

Chronologically, they begin their intervention with the theoretical debates of the Second International, specifically by working through the thought of Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg, for the authors, has gone the greatest distance of all the thinkers in her generation in grasping how the working class might form a revolutionary subject. The more orthodox thinkers of the period were happy to relegate the task to naked economics. They believed the material development of the productive forces would naturally cast the worker into her role as the revolutionary agent of history, absent any further political considerations. Luxemburg, however, saw a dispersed and heterogeneous European working class that she did not think would automatically form into a revolutionary subject without further political intervention.

The answer that she offers for the formation of this political subjectivity is spontaneity. As a revolutionary situation, such as a general strike, rises in temperature, the various grievances and struggles of the different pockets of the working class are all stoked at the same time. They become more revolutionary in unison and begin to bleed into and determine each other. The various particular struggles, the revolutionary signifiers, are overflowed by the signified. In this flood of revolutionary activity is born the symbolic unity of the working class for revolutionary struggle. Laclau and Mouffe deem this discussion of symbolic unity to be “the highest point in Luxemburg’s

⁴⁰ That Laclau and Mouffe deride this determinism as the “Jacobin imaginary” yet constantly reach to the French revolution as the font of democratic liberties is an issue for another project.

analysis ...one which establishes the maximum distance from the orthodox thinkers of the second international” (11).

Nonetheless, they have a critical reservation “if the unity *is* this process of overdetermination, an independent explanation has to be offered as to why there should be a necessary overlap between political subjectivity and class positions. (12)” Why should this revolutionary political subjectivity necessarily assume the form of political subjectivity based on class? Why would this revolutionary political subject take up the aspirations of the working class and therefore of the construction of socialist society, rather than any number of other revolutionary demands that may have been latent in the ferment from which the revolutionary impulse was constructed? Laclau and Mouffe’s answer will be that it is because her analysis was from the beginning stained with orthodox Marxist logic, that the economic reductionism of orthodox Marxism was always predetermining her logic of the construction of the political subject, and therefore despite her brilliant insights she was always already destined to find class as the ultimate determiner of the political subject. For the authors this is the fundamental reality of both orthodox and revisionist Marxism, they either depend upon a “logic of necessity,” the economic formulation of the revolutionary worker, or upon a “logic of contingency,” an outside political intervention that would form the working class into the revolutionary subject, but which “by not determining its specificity, was incapable of theorizing itself” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 25).

The authors believe that another of Luxemburg's contemporaries, Eduard Bernstein, similarly extends beyond the limits of his time. The forward-thinking impulse in Bernstein's work is to grant autonomy to the political sphere. Bernstein, like his rival Luxemburg, recognized the need for some manner of political intervention to shape the political subject. Rather than delineating how some sort of contingent political intervention will carry out his process, however,

Bernstein breaks with the determinism of necessity. Socialism, in his work, is no longer the necessary outcome of capitalist development and the worker is no longer the sole agent of its arrival. Socialism is a normative goal that requires the political interventions of an ethical subject to bring about. This ethical subject, for the authors, is Bernstein's most important contribution and the basis of his break with orthodox determinism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 34). It would certainly be a stretch to refer to the theoreticians of the New Social movements, as well as the PCF Eurocommunists as neo-Bernsteinian, but Bernstein's project of decoupling socialist progression from economic progress and tying it instead to universal ethical considerations bears a strong resemblance to the thinkers of the new moments. For Laclau and Mouffe, despite his theoretical progress, Bernstein's thought also remains limited by a restricting concept of the laws of progress, which while perhaps not as dogmatic as the economic laws of orthodox thought, still form a structuring totality which "fix a priori the meaning of every event". (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 34)"

As the authors move on to the birth of Leninism and the rise of the Third International we come closer to the problems that plague the parties that trace their lineage to this moment, such as the PCF. The issue they will take up at this juncture is one of a class alliance in the Leninist terms. If the working class in a given situation, such as pre-revolutionary Russia, is not capable of seizing power on its own it must work with other classes to achieve its goals. This coalition poses a vital dilemma for the parties involved. To enter into it they must, of course, set goals that are not organically their own. Does this coalition and taking up of foreign class goals necessarily change the character of the classes involved? Put more concretely, does the working class give up the political nature of its class in order to secure the political support necessary for victory? If so, why then does the working class enjoy a special privilege or retain any individual goals distinct from those of the coalition it has entered? The Leninist response is that it is indeed necessary to guard

the exclusive goals of the working class. While the workers may form into a coalition with the masses to strive for victory, the workers and their particular agenda form the vanguard of the movement. It is important to note that for Lenin workers do not hold this prized position because they have some special brilliance not shared with other classes, or that they are oppressed in a manner more brutal than others, rather it is their location in the center of capitalist production and their unique ability to bring the process to a halt. Because of the primacy of the worker, while the movement may be striving for some form of democracy, the relationship between the factions involved becomes increasingly authoritarian. “While democratization of the mass struggle depends upon a proliferation of points of rupture which overflow class boundaries, political authoritarianism emerges at the moment when, in order to ground the necessity of *class* hegemony, a distinction is established between leaders and led within a mass movement” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 56).

Here we arrive at a vital concept for Laclau and Mouffe, hegemony. In this pre-Gramscian connotation, the working class is exerting hegemony in a purely situational and pragmatic sense. It does not have the capacity to win on its own, so it must form a coalition in which, to achieve its goals, it must be the hegemon, “but insofar as the dislocation of stages compels the working class to act on a *mass* terrain, it must abandon its class ghetto and transform itself into the articulator of a multiplicity of demands (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 58). It is, then, necessarily transformative to the working class, even if it remains the hegemon. In articulating the demands of other classes it necessarily changes its political character, problematizing its own self-definition. As we have already seen, the authors wish to escape the narrow equation of class position and political subjectivity. We have, then, a free-floating political ambition to hegemonize that escapes the narrow bounds of the class that created it.

The authors find the fullest expression of the more radical concept of hegemony in the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci writes about the formation of class coalitions as well, but in doing so he employs a sense of hegemony that is not simply tied to class pragmatism. Whatever subject group seeks to take on the hegemonic role in a coalition must do so by exhibiting moral and intellectual leadership. They must articulate positions that find resonance within a diverse coalition across class boundaries. They exhibit in doing so that “certain subject positions traverse a number of class sectors. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 67)” Ideology, then, is liberated from its merely superstructural position, in which it is a determinate byproduct to class, and asked to play a more vital role in shaping political subjectivity. For Gramsci, “political subjects are not . . . classes, but complex ‘collective wills;’ similarly the ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class do not have a necessary class belonging. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 67)” The authors find in Gramsci the fullest exploration of the political subject in the Marxist canon, one that they will use as a springboard to express their own political project.

For Laclau and Mouffe, as we have seen, socialist politics must forsake for good the concept of the privileged political subject. There is no way of being in the world reducible to a constant definition that would enable a group of people to fulfill a sort of historical destiny. Similarly, there is no historical or societal totality that would allow for the relations between events and subjects to be codified into an ultimate historical meaning. The idea that history could be understood in these definite and determined terms, in which there would be an ultimate rupture produced by certain actors acting on their particular historical necessity is what the authors believe to be the seeds of Jacobinism remaining in Marxism. They offer an alternative political formation “the acceptance, on the contrary, of the plurality and indeterminacy of the social, seem to us the

two fundamental bases from which a new political imaginary can be constructed. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 152)” What, then, is the political project of indeterminacy and contingency?

In the absence of a dominant set of subjects, actors, and grievances we are left with an assemblage of difference. In the absence of a central claim or struggle, we have no ability to index the myriad others. All political claims are different and independent in a certain sense, they all concern themselves with various heterogeneous struggles and movements, but they are also intimately related. Each shares certain goals, settings, or actors with the others and therefore full autonomy is impossible. One can be in the ecology movement and be a conservative-ecologist, a feminist-ecologist, a socialist-ecologist, or any other blend of political determinants that supplement but do not preclude ecologism. What this grand assortment of free-floating political signifiers needs to be politically effective is an overarching structure to lend them meaning and power. What will give them this structure and political coherence is the temporal articulation of one of the elements of the set, which will, for a moment, freeze the various claims and struggles into a structure of deployable political coherence. From one of the particularities of a set of grievances, an articulable political totality will be formed. Slavoj Žižek offers a concise summary of the process in his discussion of the text:

Ideological space is made up of non-bound, non-tied elements, ‘floating-signifiers,’ whose very identity is ‘open,’ overdetermined by their articulation in a chain with other elements . . . The ‘quilting’ performs the totalization by means of which this free-floating of ideological elements is halted, fixed - that is to say, by means of which they become part of the structured network of meaning. (Žižek 1989, 95-96)

Laclau and Mouffe posit that in order for this totalizing process to take place, there must be an outside perspective, a normative bedrock on which the various claims can formulate into coherent political demands. This outside perspective can certainly not be the economy, class structure, or

any other formulation of capitalist accumulation, for those concepts for the authors necessarily imply a false totality of the economic and the political, one that cannot help but be deterministic and essentialist. They will posit, instead, that this outside referential space is democracy in its most radical conception. Since 1789, they argue, the promise of radical equality and liberty have animated various political struggles the world over. The French revolution, as “the first to found itself on no other legitimacy than the people,” offered the “profound subversive power of the democratic discourse, which would allow the spread of equality and liberty into increasingly wider domains and therefore act as a fermenting agent upon the different forms of struggle against subordination. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 155)”⁴¹ It set the symbolic universe in which the various struggles of the ensuing centuries operated, and therefore either implicitly or explicitly determined the language in which those demands will be articulated.

The parallel with New Social Movements and the reformists in the PCF is clear. The struggle here has been articulated on Touraine’s horizontal platform of exclusion and inclusion, and the democratic apparatus, at least in an ideal sense, will always allow for the incorporating of the excluded groups. This is not to say that all the actors involved in this democratic reformulation had faith in the possibility of inclusion into the actually existing French state. Certainly, for many, the “democracy” in practice was a far sight from the radical democratic possibility described above. Nonetheless, the project is ultimately political, in the sense that it takes no account of economic barriers to inclusion. One’s position in the material reproduction of society is ultimately not a barrier to one’s incorporation and equality if only the democratic project is radical enough, as, in Laclau and Mouffe’s imagination, the one of 1789 was.

⁴¹ That they largely ignore the many economic stimuli for the French revolution, or the enormous impact of 18th century class structure on the unfolding of the revolution is, again, for another project.

The argument Laclau and Mouffe lay out in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, as well as in other works, convincingly attacks some of the first principles of what they deem to be Marxism. Their dismissal of the stale base/superstructure formulation is well taken, and their attack on thoughtless economic determinism is understandable after the theoretical nadir of the Stalinist era and the vacuous arguments of its defenders. Their attack then raises two questions: is what they are attacking a fair portrait of Marxist scholarship as it actually exists, and does their political solution manage to rise above what they find objectionable in Marxism?

Their handling of prominent Marxist scholars is formulaic. The thinker in question begins with Marxist orthodoxy. Their historical circumstances then force them to innovate beyond the bounds of Marxist orthodoxy, altering doctrine in some important way. In the end, however, they are still handicapped by the original sin of economic determinism which relegates their innovation to minor improvements in an overall failed ideology. Rosa Luxembour, as we saw above, is able to shed the orthodoxy of the second international due to her honest appraisal of the political situation in Germany and Russia, but in the end is still bound by her faith that the economy generally and class specifically are the ultimate causal drivers of any political situation. This is an odd critique from authors who demand complexity and multiplicity. It is unclear how far Luxembour would have needed to separate the political from the economic in order to make her argument palatable to them. The authors are demanding that Marxists abandon their “sutured” system of reasoning, in which all of X determines all of Y. Then, when an author such as Luxembour does so, by introducing the complexity and contingency of the political, and by offering a complex and nuanced system in which the political and the economy are co-constitutive, it is *still* not enough, because X, the workings of the capitalist system of production, still in some manner determine Y. If even the complex relationships between the economy and the political that

Luxembourg and Gramsci have offered us are examples of, in the last determination, an economic determinism, it would appear that the only argument with which they would seemingly be pleased is one in which X and Y are completely discrete entities, the economy has no causal impact on the political whatsoever, even in the last instance, and is merely a coexistent sphere of activity.

Their critique then would not stop at Marxism, for there are obviously many other groups besides Marxists that posit causal relationships. As Norman Geras wrote in his critique of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, with its critical apparatus “virtually *any* framework of historical explanation, any principle of sociological *intelligibility*, can be condemned in the name of ‘the openness and indeterminacy of the social’” (Geras 1987, 47). If any causal pathway between the economic and social is enough to condemn Marxism to a philosophy of closure, then any causal explanation at all is.

This discussion of the autonomy of the political from the economic necessarily leads to a discussion of class. As mentioned above, Laclau and Mouffe find fanciful any idea that “class” could be a privileged unifier, that it could overcome the many other ways in which the working class could be divided. They therefore also doubt any possible unity of working-class interests, for how could such a heterogenous group of people, bound only by some sociological categorization, find common cause in anything, except by the logic they have already dismissed of economic determinism? The stakes here are high—this is a rebuttal of any possibility of collective action based on shared economic experience. This is again quite a bizarre argument from writers who prize complexity and openness. Why must *any* association of common class background taint the analysis? As Geras notes, “notwithstanding the wide diversity [of the working-class], a common structural situation, of exploitation, and some common features, like lack of autonomy or interest at work, not to speak of sheer unpleasantness and drudgery, and some pervasive economic

tendencies, proletarianizing ones amongst them, and such also as create widespread insecurity of employment; all of this providing a solid, objective *basis*—no more, but equally no less—for a unifying socialist politics?” (Geras 1987, 50). Geras’ critique strikes directly at Hegemony and Socialist Strategy’s most critical flaw. They consign the entire history of Marxist analysis and struggle to an antiquated and reified version of Marxism, then *any improvement whatsoever*, even in a direction they would approve of, is always already doomed to fall into this caricature of Marxism.

This failure becomes increasingly evident as we try to explore what their alternative looks like. In her exploration of the “new ‘true’ socialism” (which includes Laclau and Mouffe), Meiksins Wood writes that in these movements “socialism can be conceived as a plurality of ‘democratic struggles, bringing together a variety of resistances to many forms of inequality and oppression. In fact, it may even be possible to replace the concept of socialism with the notion of ‘radical democracy’” (Meiksins Wood 1986, 4). The notion of replacing the socialist project with a “radical democratic” one should now be quite familiar. What Meiksins Woods draws out is this notion of “radical democracy,” when employed by the “true socialists” is always tethered to a specific sphere of democratic ideals born of the Atlantic revolutions of the late 18th century. While perhaps radical in a certain sense, the democratic project born of this period stripped of a necessary relationship to class, a definitional feature of democracy as the concept existed in antiquity. “By defining democracy in formal terms not related to the substance of class power, it had the effect precisely of *obscuring* the very oppressions which the old meaning starkly revealed” (Meiksins Wood 1986, 68). It was precisely by obscuring the class relations that had been central to the

Greek⁴² notion of democracy that the modern notion of democracy made itself palatable to capital. It threatened to question every relation of power except one – the most central – and it is therefore prime for the logic of horizontal exclusion, allowing those on the margins political recourse to gain inclusion, without allowing those on the bottom even the privilege of acknowledging their position.

Meiksins Wood continues “the definition of democracy in purely formal terms, and the dissociation from popular power which has made it an ideal acceptable to the dominant classes, were made possible by the formal separating between economic and political power” (Meiksins Wood 1986, 69). This definition of democracy is therefore not only not hostile to the neoliberal mode of exploitation, it is *ideal* for it. It allows for movements of contestation to orient themselves entirely towards the political, the winning of formal rights of inclusion for marginalized groups, without striking at the central machine of exploitation, capitalist production. Victory was no longer an option.

Just as these attempts at a post-Marxist articulation of contestation are unsatisfying, so too would the simplistic reassertion of the orthodoxies of the COMINTERN, or any other period perceived as being analytically more coherent. The theorists were correct in perceiving a novel economic and political situation that required a response, it was the response that was flawed. So, what is to be done? A formidable solution comes, unsurprisingly, from the Marxists who study social movements. Here we will take a survey of a few of these scholarly works that manage to both take the work of Marxist analysis seriously while not falling into the caricatures and clichés awaiting any attempt at Marxist analysis, specifically from Barker, Cox, Krinsky, and Nilsen’s

⁴² It is precisely the notion of class that defines democracy in its Aristotelian iteration, he objects in the *Politics* that we should not define democracy by the number of people in charge, which would lead to a definition as mass rule, but rather we should define it as rule by the poor. This is not to obscure either he or Plato’s distaste for the concept as a form of rule, but rather to reiterate the centrality of class to Greek definitions of the term.

Marxism and Social Movements. What will be necessary is to theorize the relationship between the economic and the political without falling into simplistic reductions, as well as understanding the central role of class without allowing to dominate all the other vital aspects of identity.

In his Chapter in *Marxism and Social Movements*, John Krinsky offers a reading of Marxism and social movements highlighting five key aspects of a Gramscian reading of Marx, dialectical totality, contradiction, immanence, coherence, and practice (Krinsky 2014, 104). The concept of totality, in particular, will help us better understand the relationship between the political and the economic without reducing either to the effect of the other. Marxists do not see different aspects of struggle as bounded and separate, but rather parts of a larger totality “always defined by their *internal relations to the whole*” (Krinsky 2014, 108). Taking the Tahir Square protest as an example, there is no clear boundary in practice between the political and economic motivations to take to the streets. “The question is rather, how we understand the relationship between neoliberal policies, mass impoverishment, the way in which the régime lost even the veneer of popular legitimacy over the course of a decade of protest, and why the protest coalesced *as it did when it did*” (Krinsky 2014, 109). None of the plurality of motivations for struggle can be taken singularly, and a Marxist analysis insists on taking them into account only in relation to each other, a far cry from Laclau and Mouffe’s portrait of essentialism and one-way causality.

Later, Krinsky elaborates on the permanence of the economic in a manner which regards the complexity of the political. He writes that because humans

have a history by which we make our own world according to plans, that we materialize our thought in and through social relations, and that we think within the broad limits set by our material and social relations the ‘economic’ is always present in our analyses of social situations, though reducing the production of our world to economic relations does it a disservice. Not every effort to organize political and social life from below – or from above – has an *immediate* economic referent, nor are all particular dilemmas or contradictions

caused by economic tensions. This would be a laughable proposition. But *neglecting* the economic moment in the ways we produce our world and the inequities that consign the majority of humanity to poverty, precariousness, and powerlessness is *not* a laughing matter. (Krinsky 2014, 119)

This statement of the political shares the sentiment with which Geras critiques Laclau and Mouffe. The positing of a complex relationship between the activity of human reproduction and our political organizations does not imply the continual determination of the political by the economic. Rather, it simply acknowledges that whatever other multitude of factors combine to color political life, they are always bound up within the horizons of material reproduction. This is not the reassertion of the simplistic base/superstructure metaphor that has plagued Marxist thought since its inception, and which the post-Marxists are right to interrogate—it is rather the assertion of a necessary corollary between the economic and the political, *especially* in a neoliberal period that has insisted by definition on their artificial separation.

The insistence on the economic necessarily invites the insistence on class. The post-Marxists, as well as many of the NSMs and even the PCF, have relegated the analytical concept of class to the dustbin of history, placing in its stead what they see as more analytically flexible categories which would more accurately portray the experience of activists. As Meiksins Wood writes “the typical subject of the NTS [“new true socialism”] project, then, appears to be a broadly conceived and loose collectivity, a popular alliance, with no discernible identity except that which it derives from an autonomous ideology, an ideology whose own origins are obscure” (Meiksins Wood 1986, 5). A Marxist analysis must insist, in contrast, on the continued salience of class analysis, but not in manner that is brittle or uncritical.

Colin Barker takes up the analytical issues of class struggle in his contribution to *Marxism and Social Movements*. Barker follows the seminal work of EP Thompson in seeing class, rather

than as a preordained category of humans, as a developmental process of becoming. The working class was not dropped fully formed onto the earth, needing only to be awakened to fulfill its historical mission, but rather was awakened in the process of struggle. Citing Thompson, Barker writes that “the practice of class struggle, one might say, led workers to form themselves into a consciously developing ‘class’, and it was in this sense that ‘the working class was present at its own making’” (Barker 2015, 43). Class “is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure. The finest meshed sociological net could not give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context” (Thompson 1963, 9).

Not only is class a fluid category, present at its own creation, it is also a category at a very high level of abstraction. We may only see the class aspect of struggle if we zoom out enough to see the struggle in its totality. For Barker, this means we must purposively move down the latter of abstraction to find real living people immersed in struggle, for “it is at this more immediate level, of more ‘concrete’ socio-cultural formations, that ‘social movements’ emerge, as specific forms of social and political activity. Movements are *mediated* expressions of class struggle” (Barker 2015, 47).

This may lead us to question why the scaffolding of class and class struggle is necessary at all. If it is merely a way of viewing struggle from a highly abstract standpoint, why guard or seek to reclaim and retool the language of class struggle at all? We get an answer as Barker goes on to explore reformism and revisionism. Although not in direct dialogue with post-Marxism, many of the themes he takes up in this context overlap with ones taken up by Laclau and Mouffe, and the point is worth underscoring.

As a working-class growing in size and strength won more goals for itself, he writes, the capitalist state found measures of incorporation that would allow for added rights for workers “within paths conducive to continuing capitalist reproduction” (Barker 2015, 55). This ballooning of political rights on the condition of the sacrifice of economic contestation sounds a good deal like what Laclau and Mouffe praised in Bernstein’s work, as well as the direction they had wished Luxembourg would have gone. They prescribe precisely the rights-based political contestation of exclusion that Barker is here criticizing, and not only as insufficient, but as an intentional *rerouting* of class-based contestation. This is not to say Barker offers a knee-jerk rejection of the benefits of reformism. It functions, he writes,

on one side, as a protean mechanism of movement containment and limitation, it also embodies and expresses impulses to resistance and popular struggle—the very condition for its widespread influence. Reformism, deeply implanted within popular movements in upturns as well as downturns, set up significant strategic dilemmas for Marxists, committed to a vision of revolution in which real popular majorities become the conscious agents of transformation (Barker 2015, 55).

Barker also takes up Luxembourg’s writing on the mass strike, but rather than seeing the novelty of political thought in work as straining to escape the shackles of economic determinism, he celebrates the innovative way the work fuses formerly disparate portions of economic and political thought. In Luxembourg’s Germany “‘political’ issues were the business only of the parliamentary party, while trade-unions stuck to strictly ‘economic’ questions; on both sides, leadership apparatuses monopolized direction. Mass strikes involved struggles, simultaneously economic and political, in which the masses *directed themselves*, and in so doing advanced their own cultural and organizational capacities” (Barker 2015, 56). This reading of Luxembourg takes her on her own terms, allowing us to see the central innovation of her work, rather than indexing the quality of her thought on a 21st century post-Marxist measure defined by a reductive caricature.

In this reading of Luxembourge we see a rich potential for Marxist analysis. Unbounded by reductive theory or dead metaphor, it takes the liberatory project of politics and its analysis seriously.

If it is indeed worth keeping the economic tied to the political, as well as keeping class-struggle centered in our analysis—even at a high level of abstraction—how can we functionalize that approach to understand contemporary movements without falling prey to the genuinely antiquated aspects of Marxist orthodoxy? David McNally offers some solutions in his reading of several contemporary social movements. He begins with a central paradox: class is at once everywhere— “because for three decades, neoliberalism has brazenly assisted the reconstitution and extension of capitalist power”—and nowhere; it has been “largely purged from the corporate media, the concept has simultaneously fallen into disrepute in intellectual circles, supplanted by linguistically driven theories of identity and grand gestures to multitudes” (McNally 2014, 401). The remedy is neither to abandon class nor to reduce every struggle down to it, but rather “to meaningfully theorize the emergent class formations and modes of struggle that define our age” (McNally 2014, 402).

McNally offers a few empirical examples of this, but we need only focus on his first case: Cochabamba, Bolivia—“one of the first great blows against neoliberalism,” and a model of class-based resistance in the neoliberal era (McNally 2014, 403). He shows that though mining, the traditional basis of class activism during this period, was destroyed, it did not signal the end of class-based activism as such. Rather, in a struggle against the privatization of water, Bolivians were able to “articulate a working-class politics appropriate to the neoliberal era” (McNally 2014, 404). Bolivian activists were able to blend more traditional Marxism represented by the *fabrilles*, or factory workers, with forms of indigenous communitarianism, as well as their efforts brought

together the traditional working-class with the less traditional (but equally commodified and immiserated) workers of the countryside, to produce a robust new class formation. “In short, new forms of working class insurgency, linked to novel modes of union and indigenous organizing, shaped new practices of popular resistance” (McNally 2014, 405). The movement managed to adapt to new types of workers existing in new forms of capitalist production without sacrificing the class-struggle as such.

Not only did these militants form coalitions equipped to meaningfully resist neoliberalism, but like many of their most successful revolutionary predecessors, “the movement threw up new forms of plebeian self-government, or modes of dual power” (McNally 2014, 406). They were not content, in other words, to simply petition the state for change, or try and gain leverage inside the state to legislate on behalf of their interests. McNally quotes movement leader Oscar Olivera “For one week the state had been demolished. In its place stood the self-government of the poor based on their local and regional organizational structures” (McNally 2014, 406).

Understanding Bolivia’s success at forging an anti-neoliberal class coalition requires a notion of class reminiscent of the one discussed above. “This is why, rather than rigidly defining workers as those who work for a wage, we need to retain the notion of the working class as a distinctive social relation, in this case a relation to capital (itself a class relation to workers)” (McNally 2014, 407). This is admittedly a tricky operation in practice, for if the definition of class is stretched too thinly it becomes analytically indistinct from the “linguistically driven theories of identity and grand gestures to multitudes,” and likewise, if the term is not stretched far enough, it renders itself obsolete. It is further complicated by the fact that there remains no universal formula for analyzing class relations in a given struggle; to try and build one theory of class struggle in the neoliberal era would be to succumb to the very compartmentalization and reification it proscribes.

So where does this leave us theoretically regarding the cases examined in Chapter 2? It would be too simple, and altogether incorrect, to say we saw two camps, one orthodox one revisionist, both wrong in part, and have now seen a middle way they should have traversed for different reasons. It would be the peak of naïve idealism to condemn the militants on the ground because of the products of a theoretical investigation of academics meant to represent them. Nonetheless, the themes in this chapter reflect the themes in Chapter 2. The enduring necessity of a class analysis, albeit a nuanced and complex one. The centrality of capitalist production, even in its neoliberal outfit, to the study of struggle. And the grounding of contemporary analysis in the lessons of the past, no matter how arcane they seem, or to give the last word to Marx and McNally “rather than ‘confront the world with new doctrinaire principles’, as the young Marx put it, our task is the more challenging one of developing ‘for the world new principles from the existing principles of the world’ (McNally 2014, 402).

Conclusion

Central to the neoliberal project is the artificial separation of the economic from the political. No longer able, or willing, to keep the terms of the postwar compromise, the forces of capital revolted, putting all economic considerations under the rule of the market. This led directly to the fracturing of the power of organized labor, to the retrenchment of the welfare state, and to the financialization of every area of national economic life. In the first chapter we surveyed the particular effects of neoliberal reorganization in France. We saw how the machinations of the neoliberal moment reformulated class composition, destroyed the traditional bastions of working-class power, and produced, then swelled, new categories of precarious individuals, living outside the protections promised by modern capitalist democracies.

In Chapter 2 we saw how this shift in position played out amongst the ranks of the French far left. Some saw this reformulation as a chance to jettison the political logic of an older generation and reformulate anew the terms of a liberatory politics, taking as their subject the heterogeneous groups of disenfranchised, and as their standard their civic inclusion. Others clung to the orthodoxies of the past, insisting on the creation of a worker's state or nothing else. Many, many, more existed inside the bounds of these two extremes. While no one true path emerged, and no one group could claim absolute victory, what was evidenced was the enduring relevance of class struggle to any liberatory movement. The neoliberal reformulation of class did not erase it, and in many cases, it heightened its salience by further degrading the living conditions of a broad array of workers. The parties that ignored class paid a price electorally, and the parties that did not enjoyed newfound electoral success. LO and the NPA, though they have not matched the success they saw in 2002, have remained the dominant parties of the far left. They have been prominent members of recent radical action, discussed below. The PCF has most recently cast

itself into the campaign for Jean-Luc Mélenchon, social democrat, who forbid them flying their red flags at rallies and from singing l'Internationale, replacing it with La Marseillaise. Robert Hue, having already abandoned the party, endorsed Macron. The PCF, on terms that would have been familiar to the militants of its heyday, no longer exists.

In Chapter 3 we critically took up the theory surrounding this period of left struggle. We went through *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and found it lacking in a meaningful alternative to the Marxism is unfairly caricatured. We then took up several Marxist scholars of social movements and found in them a complex Marxism operationalized to study the movements that animate our current political climate without reducing them mere super-structural products of the economy. Laclau and Mouffe have gone on to publish much more since HSS, both together and separately, and while advancing their theories in many critical ways have but double downed on the key tenets taken up here. The political is still divorced from the economic, 1789 is still the keystone of political analysis, and class remains one identity among others, strewn about the political world seemingly without rhyme or reason.

Though the timeline of this particular project ended almost two decades ago, the questions it asks are as salient as ever. In the last year the “Gilets Jaunes” have taken to the streets in force to protest the economic immiseration of rural life, inspired by the inegalitarian consequence of a tax on gasoline. This movement provoked anew many of the s raised in this thesis: Are these protestors to be understood as motivated by their class position, made more and more precarious by the ongoing neoliberal project? Or are they a novel symptom of an increasing urban/rural divide? Should they be joined wholesale by left parties even though they don't *explicitly* articulate a class based political program, or should they be approached from a critical distance, encouraging them to target capitalist production as such rather than the narrower target

of the Macron administration?⁴³ Even more recently large-scale strikes have taken place in town and country all over France against pension reform, choking national transportation, taking hundreds of thousands away from their jobs, and continuing for months, constituting the largest strike wave since 1995, itself the largest since 1968. And finally, at the time of writing, a global pandemic is shining perhaps the brightest and most ghastly light on class tension and the failures of capitalist production in a generation. The financialized health system, a product of neoliberalism, has failed. The lowest paid workers are being forced, at risk of death, into stores, gas stations, trains, buses, and factories because of their class position.⁴⁴ The central contention of this thesis has been the enduring salience of class struggle, both to liberatory movements and to analysts of politics, and today it is as clear as it was in 2002, as it was in 1995, as it was in 1917.

So why take up these issues in 2020? If class analysis has returned in some way, to France and the world, why dwell on its momentary disappearance? We can turn, once again, to Ellen Meiksins Wood, who in justifying her 1998 taking up of post-Marxism wrote “it may be helpful to trace the present impasse in post-left political thinking back to that critical turning point. At least then the debate was still about class politics, before the turn that took class out of our line of vision altogether, along with socialism” (Meiksins Wood 1986, XV). Though class may be “back,” then answer remains the same. It is critical to this moment to rejuvenated class activism to understand what lay dormant these years, where it went, and why it went there. Marxists will again face many of the critiques that seemed to have defeated them in the past, indeed even the relatively mild campaigns of Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, and Jean-Luc

⁴³ This debate is active between LO and the NPA, with the NPA having joined in the protests and LO having maintained distance, encouraging the protesters to move the protest from weekends to weekdays, effectively making them strikes.

⁴⁴ Production of airplane engines has continued in factories in the Parisian periphery.

Mélenchon, have stirred up a little red scare. Further, it would be entirely self-defeating to act as if class and Marxism more generally disappeared solely because of a few poor theoretical lines, or the pure malevolence of our enemy. Fordism is indeed over. Factory labor no longer describes much of working-class life. The working-class of today does indeed look much different than it did in the heyday of the PCF. A Marxist left unable to meaningfully work through these modern differences is doomed to fail.

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