

The stakes of popular classes' political subjectivity in today's Europe

Introduction

The aim of this study is to understand the new forms of political subjectivity of popular classes according to the consequences of the reorganization of capitalism at the European and global scale. The relocation of production towards the eastern part of Europe and the failure of the collective bargaining had particularly drastic effects on the political subjectivity of blue collar workers. On the other hand, the global offensive of neoliberalism against the protected form of employment combined with heavy austerity measures in public services and welfare systems led to the apparition of new relationship with labour, occupational identity and precariousness of life and social integration (housing, sustainability of the revenue, access to private property,...). The study aims to analyse popular political subjectivity through its polarisation in order to counter the mainstream discourse that focuses on one side (the reactionary one) and accuse popular classes to be responsible of the populist far right's growth.

Escaping the pro/anti Europe trap

The liberals are trying to propose a unique narrative about Europe. Simplistic and false it consists in assigning all popular class to a unique reactionary bloc that refuses Europe. Therefore they allow themselves to appropriate the legitimacy of the European project and try to own the political monopole of its construction. They proceed to a moral blackmail : supporting their neoliberal project or being a reactionary nationalist. In order to refuse this pro/anti Europe trap, we need to propose a new analysis that is not one sided. Refusing the different simplistic analyses that opposes winner/loser of globalisation, urban/rural areas is demonstrating that there is an existing social base that can convey our project of democratic and social Europe.

A second part of the study aims also at analysing the hegemonical domains and thematics of the European Union in the "European public opinion" through the Eurobarometers. Such an attempt aims at understanding and proposing hypotheses to determine why certain domains are considered supranational while others are seen as nation-state prerogatives. It will allow us to get a better understanding of positive and negative judgments of the European achievements by popular classes.

The case of populist far right

The aim was to try to identify the three main segments of popular classes that are constituting a social base for the far right electorate and proposing hypotheses to why those groups are more likely to support the populist far right.

The little independants

In the West : mainly artisans, little business owners, shopkeepers and merchants. Those populations are independent in the sense that they do no benefit from protected forms of employment. They usually stand for less state intervention and less regulation of labour. They are partly an historical electorate of the far populist right in the west, especially since those parties were historically more neoliberal (Front National in 1981, FPÖ, AfD at its foundation, Lega,...).

In the south: numerous workers are working as employees but are attached to independent pensions system or lack of social protections relating to their labour status. Some can be supporting of populist discourse such as in Italy with the M5S.

In the East: mainly little farmers and agricultural workers. An electorate that supports populist right through its traditional values. They represent a high percentage of the populations in central and eastern Europe.

The blue collar workers

The blue collar workers were a symbolic group that conveyed the interest of all popular classes in the past through the publicization of their situation by communist and socialist parties as well as trade unions. If they represented the working class in the past, in today's Europe, the west has known a relocation of its industry toward eastern Europe, northern Africa or Asia. The number of blue collar workers is decreasing in western Europe while most of them are concentrated in Germany and neighboring countries of the east as well as Austria and northern Italy.

In the West : the failure of collective bargaining in allowing workers to have control over their fate has transformed the political subjectivity of the group, notably towards abstention. The relocation of production in other european regions as well as outside of Europe led part of this group towards the populist right discourse that opposes globalisation and designates Europe as the trojan horse of the neoliberal globalisation in their lives. Powerless in changing their concrete conditions of work and living, betrayed by social-democrat and conservative governments, important groups of workers felt into pessimism and were seduced by the nationalist inward-looking f far right populist. This group is often a supporter of the AfD, Front National, FPÖ, Lega/M5S and the PVV.

In the East: Blue collar workers in the east are actually benefiting from the relocation of production in their employment area. However, the expected benefits from the European integration are late to arrive. The labour conditions are socially hard in order to maintain a high of competitiveness and the level of revenues are rising too slow to have great consequences on standard of living. To that extend Czech Republic is a good example. One of the hypothesis of the difficulty to convey a progressive

discourse including social high demands is the ongoing negative affect that represents the soviet period. The blue collar workers have therefore a tendency to vote according to their traditional values as for example in Poland.

The nebula of precarious workers

In the West: The west witnessed these last thirty years the meticulous deconstruction of labour society. Since the crisis, the dismantling process of social protection of labour has drastically increase. Precariousness is not anymore only a characterisation of the different forms of new contracts and labour. It has become a socio-economical position inside the global economic infrastructure. From unemployed workers to short-term contracts, forced part-time job, more and more people are caught in a trap of precariousness. Those precarious workers have very different profiles in terms of capital (economical, cultural, social) to mobilise and personal situation. The most pessimistic individuals of this group are likely to support populist far right that scores high in unemployed workers and working poor.

Summary

In these different groups, the common characteristic is pessimism in the West as well as “identity stress” for both the eastern and western part of Europe. The populist far right is achieving perfectly the strategy of populism : it successes in gathering different groups with heterogeneous social demands by creating an equivalence chain that connects them. This equivalence is made through the nationalist and xenophobic discourse. The identity based proposals are covering the contradiction between the social demands while proposing a reactionary version of Polanyi’s concept of “social protectionnisme”.

This electorate is mainly a captive electorate. However we believe the main problem it encounters are socio-economic related, this electorate list as high priorities mainly problems of security, migration, terrorism and islam or national pride. If the different voting system have different effects on the possibilities of electorate transfer, the potential this electorate represents for the radical left is low on the short term. The case of France is very interesting to this regard, from 2012 to 2018, 150 000 votes (1,2%) have shifted from the National Front to La France Insoumise, a very low amount in comparison to the 3 millions (32%) that went from the Social Party (social-democrat) to La France Insoumise. We could also see in Germany 2017 elections¹, that the biggest gain in Die Linke electorates comes from the SPD (430 000 votes) the non voters (270 000) and the Greens (130 000).

¹<https://www.shz.de/deutschland-welt/bundestagswahl/waehlerwanderung-wie-sich-die-parteien-gegenseitig-die-stimmen-abluchsten-id17921181.html>

Nothing indicates that the tendency to win back the electorate lost to the AfD is a strategic short term potential² on the contrary there is a high potential in the left (SPD, Grünen) and non voters (either new voters or past non voters).

This should help us see that that “populist left” strategies to conquer the far right’s electorate are not going to successfully steal it. It reinforces our believe that we shall never lower down our publics expressions on questions relative to our values, especially on subjects such as migration.

The case of radical left

The leftist electorate is one of the most heterogeneous of all. It spreads through the whole social hierarchy. This study is an attempt to outline some significant characteristics and detail specific groups from popular classes that are likely to be a social base for the radical left.

Neo-voters and the youth

The battle on neo-voters is essential as they are central in the overall renewal of the electoral body. The generation that was between 18 and 30 years old in 2008 was particularly affected by the consequences of the crisis. The youth, starting from this generation is a interesting variable to observe. Not as a generational variable but as a socio-economical one. Indeed, particularly subjected to precariousness, new forms of labour, and difficulties to socially integrate (ability to find a professional identity and project, access to housings and property, more subjected to unemployment,...). Therefore, the youth is more likely to have high social demands and support the radical left program. The powerpoint gives examples in France, Spain, Greece.

“The left hand of the State” in the West and the South

The left hand of the state related to a concept of Pierre Bourdieu : “*all those who are called ‘social workers’: family counsellors, youth leaders, rank-and-file magistrates, and also, increasingly, secondary and primary teachers. They constitute what I call the left hand of the state, the set of agents of the so-called spending ministries which are the trace, within the state, of the social struggles of the past.*”³ They are civil servants, social workers (notably in the “care” sector), employees and workers from State-owned firms or previous publics firms privatized in the recent years. They are the one conveying what is left of the social functions of the State. This group is likely to vote for the radical left for at least two reasons. First, their personal relation to labour is shaped by the adherence to high

²<http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/wahlergebnisse-volksparteien-laufen-waehler-weg-afd-und-fdp-profitieren-a-1169611.html>

³ <https://liamchingliu.wordpress.com/2011/04/27/pierre-bourdieu-on-the-left-hand-and-the-right-hand-of-the-government/>

social propositions. Secondly, their personal status is usually characterized by high level of social and labour protection allowing them to be one of the most optimistic electorate. However through austerity their working conditions dramatically deteriorated. They are also usually well unionised. They are likely to support a project that aims at investing heavily in public services, social work and their optimism and status protect them partially against identity stress and nationalist inward-looking preoccupations.

In France, it is particularly true for those that are the less paid in comparison to their level of education. It would be interesting to try to identify such a tendency in other countries.

Ethnic minorities

The ethnic minorities are discriminated both socially and racially, especially the ones coming from ex-colonies background, assigned rightfully or wrongfully to islam. These minorities are massively part of the precariat. Indeed, their race and their late integration to the countries usually led them to occupy low-paid positions, short-term contracts and unemployment. They are more inclined to support the call for equality, tolerance and multinational values that the radical left supports.

It is however necessary to use datas in order to precise how the different countries of origin can also play a role in the political subjectivity. For example, in France, people with an eastern background are a counter example and are inclined to vote for the far right. In Germany, the turkish diaspora has a tendency to vote for SPD or the Greens but associate Die Linke to the Kurdish leftist associations that support the party, which could limitate its ability. In France, arab minorities are more inclined to support radical left.

Summary

The radical left electorate is characterized both by its heterogeneity and its optimism. Its electorate is based on a social alliance between parts of popular classes and parts of precarized “middle classes” (especially the ones with low revenues but high cultural capital). Its optimism protects it against nationalism and intolerant xenophobic discourse.

The main electorate transfer that has vivified the radical left are coming from the failure of social-democrats organisation such as in Greece, France and in another extend Spain, Portugal, Germany. The late gain in terms of electorate also comports neo-voters or non voters who started voting again.

European domains of hegemony

It is important to determine what are the domains and thematics that have fully reached a supranational level in the eyes of the “European public opinion” and the reasons behind such a reality. Indeed, it will allow us to understand how to carry out a transnational political discourse, how to

achieve hegemony in different domains that are nowadays strictly reserved to national-state prerogative and allow us to avoid the trap of thinking and restricting our left agenda in the national scale.

A few observations with the beginning of our analysis on European domains of hegemony:

- 1) There is a correlation between the thematics Europeans seen as successes of the EU and their ability to be seen as a necessary supranational scale.
- 2) The social and cultural(from education to healthcare, pensions,...) thematics are the first priorities evoked at the national level but most Europeans do not judge positively the way the EU is acting in this domain and do not want to see the EU in charge of their welfare and care systems. It is a positive sign that they do not trust the neoliberals with such responsibilities, it is a potential for the left.
- 3) The European domains of hegemony are concentrated for the moment on intrinsic supranational political subject (environment, economy,transport, peace...).
- 4) The european priorities according to European's perspective are dramatically concentrated on identitarian issues (terrorism, migration, islam, security,...).

General conclusions

There are a few axis of research that the discussion allowed us to debate. Consequently we believe that there should be integrated in our overall reflection. The main three questions that we believed should be integrated as a common base of exchanges and debate in order to propose more precise answers are the following:

1. The question of overall electoral transferts. In order to propose a genuine political proposition to where potential lies for the radical left, we should have a more profound look at electoral transfers between the populist right and the far left, inside the left, inside the right. If no electorate is to be abandoned, it might precise strategic targets and priorities.
2. The question of neo-voters. There are two categories of new voters that are to be monitored with our best attention. The first one is the new voters that are entering for the first time the electoral body. They are more likely to be youth and newly naturalized. They constitute the core of the new battle for hegemony over the political landscape. The second are abstentionist and people who stopped their participation to the electoral system. They represent a high

potential, it is especially common in popular classes. We need to integrate the dynamics of ex non-voters in the potentiel for our electoral social base.

3. The question of origins and multiple identity. We believe that we will shall precise the role identity and ethnicity play in political subjectivity and particularly with its relation to transnational and cosmopolitan values.