Catalyst

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CONTRIBUTORS

LOREN BALHORN
is a contributing editor
at *Jacobin*.

ARTHUR BORRIELLO
is a postdoctoral researcher of the
Fonds de la Recherche Scientifique
(F.R.S.–FNRS) affiliated with
the Université Libre de Bruxelles
(ULB Cevipol). His research focuses
on the political management of
the economic crisis within the Euro
area and on the upsurge and
transformations of populist move-
ments in Southern Europe.

DAVID BRODER
is a historian of French and
Italian communism and the
Europe editor of *Jacobin*.

VANESSA CHISHTI
teaches history at the O.P. Jindal
Global University in Delhi, India.
Her current research is on the
historical political economy of
modern Kashmir.

ANTON JÄGER
is a doctoral student at the
University of Cambridge, working
on the history of populism in
the United States. Together with
Daniel Zamora, he is currently
working on an intellectual history
of basic income.

GARY MONGIOVI
is a professor of economics at St
John's University in New York City,
specializing in the economics of
David Ricardo, Karl Marx, and Piero
Sraffa. From 1996 to 2013, he coed-
ited the *Review of Political Economy*.

Editorial

The collapse of mainstream parties around the world is the most significant political development in decades. In this issue of *Catalyst*, we examine the two key issues linked to this phenomenon — the growth of an insurgent populism within the electoral arena, and the efforts to rekindle a workers' movement outside of it.

Arthur Borriello and Anton Jäger offer a diagnosis of the conditions that gave rise to the populist turn in Europe, as well as an audit of what the parties attached to it are likely to achieve. They make a compelling argument that the new formations seeking to displace mainstream parties can offer only a partial break from the political culture that produced them, because they have neither the means nor a strategy for constructing an alternative economic model. On the other hand, there are signs that the rapid corrosion of their base is taking its toll on some of the traditional Left parties. In an update to his article on Germany cowritten with Oliver Nachtwey in our Winter 2019 issue, Loren Balhorn examines the recent party elections in the SPD, which seem to signal a turn to the left. The election of Saskia Esken and

Norbert Walter-Borjans to leadership is no doubt a rebuke by party members, but Balhorn cautions that the chances of any meaningful return to class politics are vanishingly small. The most likely outcome is a continuation of the party's rightward lurch, but with a patina of class rhetoric to appease the rank and file.

For many on the Left, the long decline of social democracy and the precarious future of left populism only amplify the need to build a base within the working class. David Broder offers a cautionary tale of an earlier attempt by progressives to imbricate themselves within the labor movement in order to revitalize a moribund left culture. He revisits the Italian left during the period leading up to the 1968 upheavals and after, focusing on the emergence of "workerism," or *operaismo*, a strategic view that elevated worker militancy and class mobilization.

Broder observes that, while the workerist trends within the Italian left were understandably frustrated by the conservatism of the Communist Party, their social distance from the class itself rapidly led to a political and strategic degeneration. Finding it increasingly difficult to drop an anchor within the labor movement, workerism split into ever-smaller sects and, as is often the case, tried to turn its weaknesses into a political principle. Within a few years, the earlier calls to undertake the long, hard road of class organizing were displaced by a blind faith in spontaneity, the iconography of violence, and, in the end, the elevation of intellectual activity itself as a substitute for class organizing. Broder ends his piece with a searing indictment of many of the current incarnations of workerism, which, if anything, are even more detached from labor, more immersed in language games, and more fixated on performance over organizing. Whatever the flaws of the traditional Left, they knew that the road to victory went through the working class, not around it.

Continuing with the question of strategy, Gary Mongiovi reviews *Keynes Against Capitalism*, the important recent book by James Crotty, which argues for the continuing relevance of the great economist

John Maynard Keynes for the socialist left. Keynes is most commonly presented as the economist who saved capitalism through his prescriptions for managing the economy so as to blunt the force of economic crises. But Crotty makes the case that Keynes was much more radical than this view makes him out to be, and, in fact, that he argued for a substantial socialization of private investment. Mongiovi puts this view to the test, and while he raises some doubts about Crotty's case for a socialist Keynes, he registers his agreement with Crotty that Keynes has much to offer for a radical economic strategy.

Finally, Vanessa Chishti presents a brief but compelling analytical history of the tragedy unfolding in Kashmir. One of the longest and most brutal military occupations in the world today, the Indian presence in Kashmir is also one of the least known in the Western world. With over half a million troops now permanently stationed in the state, sucking up a substantial part of Kashmir's resources, and denying basic freedoms on a daily basis, the occupation proceeds with barely a mention in the Western press. Chishti presents a synoptic view of the Kashmiri struggle, starting from the early twentieth century and continuing to recent months, highlighting Delhi's duplicity from Jawaharlal Nehru to Narendra Modi, as well as the vicissitudes of the struggle for autonomy. ⫻

The demise of old labor movement structures has posed the problem of subjectivity — and drawn attention to the *operaista* current active in 1960s and '70s Italy. Yet a focus on outbursts of militancy ultimately misled activists, taking them away from an understanding of the behavior of the working class as a whole. The rise and fall of Italian *operaismo* holds lessons for the labor left today.

THE AUTUMN AND FALL OF ITALIAN WORKERISM

DAVID BRODER

Across the West, the last four decades have been marked by the large-scale collapse of the labor movement. Not only have trade unions withered but so have, with few exceptions, the social-democratic and communist parties and their roots in working-class life. Neoliberalism has not only created new market structures, reduced welfare provision, and privatized industries, it has also pulverized the social basis of many old working-class institutions. Yet as crisis-struck neoliberalism continues to spark all manner of social revolt, many activists insist that the fall of the mass parties is not such a disaster. Their demise is either celebrated — a liberation from bureaucratic control, opening up space for more radical alternatives — or at least seen as self-inflicted, given these forces' inertia and conservatism. On this reading, the many failures of parliamentary socialism, from compromises to defeats and hierarchical organizing methods, just go to show that real direct resistance instead comes "in the streets" through strikes, occupations, and riots. These are held to be the site at which working-class people directly express their social power.

This reading can also be allied with a critique of the notion of class that structured the twentieth-century left. Not only have the forms of representation failed, but the subject who was previously represented has exited the stage, or, in any case, has become less central. An enormous body of writing is devoted to the notion that the socialist and communist parties were only interested in white, male, straight, married factory workers whose class identity was rooted in their employment in often polluting and dangerous industries. In many European countries, the decline of organized labor is closely connected to the political defeats of such workers, for instance the FIAT autoworkers' strike in Turin in 1980, or, yet more symbolically, Margaret Thatcher's crushing of the British miners in 1984–85. Such a trend was heralded already in 1978 by British communist historian Eric Hobsbawm, in his *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*[1] Here, he outlined the declining social weight of workers employed in manual labor, themselves ever more divided along sectional lines. In parallel to this, Greek political scientist Nicos Poulantzas discussed how the rise of white-collar employment was splitting the old battalions of labor.[2]

A heft of academic studies and activist-oriented literature has discussed this problem of class composition in more recent times, highlighting new types of relations to employment. Guy Standing's *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* argues that the old proletariat, cohered by stable employment and organizations, today exists in a merely residual form, no longer able to set general political dividing lines.[3] He contrasts this to the rise of a precariat — characterized by chronic insecurity and atomization — and what he calls proficians,

1 This 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture was published in *Marxism Today* (September 1978), then as part of the edited collection *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London: Verso, 1981).

2 His exchanges with the French Trotskyist group LCR on this point are discussed in Ludivine Bantigny, "The Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, Nicos Poulantzas, and the Reception and Discussion of His Theory," in *The End of the Democratic State: Nicos Poulantzas, a Marxism for the 21st Century* (London: Palgrave, 2018).

3 Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

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i.e., contractors, the self-employed, and sole traders.[4] The remainder of the historic proletariat is still drawing advantage from its twentieth-century gains, including nonwage benefits like welfare rights and, indeed, pension funds. But its position today is neither revolutionary nor representative of working people in general. For Standing, the mobile and insecure represent a new "dangerous class" struggling for self-consciousness. Other accounts of struggles in the gig economy — or various much-mediatized protests, from Occupy to the Indignados and uprisings in the Arab world, Senegal, and Hong Kong — insist that the subjectivities that emerged in "labor society" have been replaced by new mass actors.[5]

Such a focus on new forms of action often reflects on the loss of *any* strategic actor able to give cohesion to the rest. In particular, this means the end of the party-political containers that once sought to bring class consciousness through the factory gates. They are to be swept aside by the less mediated forms of struggle, carried forth by a new and more varied array of actors, themselves a creative "constituent power." This view of polyphonic insurgencies from below was especially popularized in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's 2000 book *Empire*, at the turn of the millennium a kind of bible of the alter-globalization movement. It posited the existence of a multicentered capitalist globalization and, correspondingly, myriad forms of resistance able to throw it into crisis. These latter are a "multitude," characterized by their lack of any single hegemonic figure or leadership. The multitude[6] instead loosely regroups actors with a common condition of existence: their potential to resist the logic of capital. From indigenous peasants under threat of eviction to climate

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4 Guy Standing, "The Precariat and Class Struggle," *RCCS Annual Review* 7, 2015.

5 "Labor society" is a term of the French economist Michel Aglietta; broadly analogous is the concept of "wage-earning society" delineated by Robert Castel, who in 1995 declared its demise.

6 Their critique of political actors who would represent the variety of singular subjects is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Penguin, 2005).

protesters or the "cognitive proletariat," they are deterritorialized, plural, global — and, for this, all the more powerful.

Negri, a philosophy professor active in the Italian left for six decades, often highlights the novelty of such figures — such as by presenting the 2011 Occupy movement and city square protests in Spain as harbingers of an unprecedented "networked subjectivity," as radical in its challenge to institutional power as in its anti-austerity message. The idea of the "movement of movements" during the early 2000s alter-globalization protests similarly reflected this notion, and it has in more recent times influenced, to differing degrees, outlets from *ROAR* magazine to Novara Media, and even works by former Trotskyists, like Paul Mason in his *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*.[7] Exemplary of the influence of these ideas was the C17 (Communism 2017) conference held in Rome upon the centenary of the Russian Revolution, which brought together prominent leftist academics like Negri, French philosophers Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière, the feminist scholar Silvia Federici, Jodi Dean, and, via video link, Slavoj Žižek. If the conference and a subsequently produced manifesto invoked the legacy of 1917, the central theme was the separation between communism and the old tryptic of state, party, and labor movement.

All this speaks to the influence and, in some circles, authority of the archipelago of scenes known as *postoperaismo*, of which Negri is one leading exponent. This trend of ideas, emerging in Italy in the late 1970s, is generally identified with its theoretical emphasis on subjectivity in the post-Fordist era. It is unsurprising that such a current is able to gain a hearing in a context marked by a collapse of many other traditions and assumptions. The question of subjectivity that it poses is, indeed, essential: aside from a few islands of residual workplace power, the political left across the West has been divested

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7   This vision of the transcendence of the old forms of employment, replaced by mutualism and parallel currencies, is outlined in Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).

of its historic social referents, or even openly turned to liberalism. Even back in 1978, Hobsbawm indicated the decline in the magnetic force of the labor movement, whose loss of social weight is clear every time that some historic red fortress turns Tory blue or Lega Nord green. Yet where Hobsbawm, and, in their own way, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, emphasized the need for a new popular front — a broader container to cohere more fragmented demands and identities — *postoperaismo* resists this, rejecting both the idea of a uniting "people" and the "alienated" mediations of institutional and representative politics.

We will go on to explain how this theoretical outlook developed, historically. For now, we shall note that it is deeply rooted in an apparently quite different ideological predecessor — the so-called *operaismo* (literally "workerism," though the translation is inadequate)[8] that developed in early 1960s Italy. A theoretical current rather than a political organization, the *operaisti* instead reflected on the subjectivity of the assembly-line worker at the moment of his first emergence, during Italy's postwar "economic miracle." This current first took form with a group of young sociologists around Mario Tronti and his then-ally Negri, each of whom were editors of Raniero Panzieri's journal *Quaderni Rossi* ("Red Notebooks") before they launched their own review, *Classe Operaia* ("Working Class"), in 1964. Their project centered on studying the new shape of the Italian working class, a research effort that sought to reject the managerial-disciplining aims of industrial sociology and instead help a rising class subject to recognize its own disruptive power. As the shop-floor revolt mounted, outside of or even in opposition to the established Communist Party, *operaismo* seemed to have hit on something.

Central to *operaismo*, in its first incarnation, was its insistence that workers' strategic power lay in their ability to shut down

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8   "*Operaio*" has a narrower meaning than "worker" (essentially being limited to manual workers using tools or machinery), and "*operaismo*" does not share the same connotations as the English "workerism" in terms of cultural valorization of working-class mores or, indeed, anti-intellectualism.

production — the power of sabotage and refusal on the shop floor — and decidedly not in democratic institutions or building broad "popular" alliances. In this view, what Tronti called a "rough pagan race"[9] — the southern migrant workers being drawn into factory employment — was not a class in pursuit of inclusion in or decision-making power over capitalist development, but rather an explosive, destabilizing force brought into the heart of capital. The factory alone was the site of conflict, which then imposed its relations on all society. The theoretical basis of this current was notably expounded in Tronti's 1966 work *Operai e capitale*, recently released in English translation by Verso as *Workers and Capital*. Tronti insisted that those at the high points of industrial development and concentration — namely assembly-line workers, with their mass of numbers on the shop floor — were the necessarily decisive force in the class struggle as a whole. This was a caricatural focus on one type of workplace and political action — apparently rather at odds with what Negri et al. claim today.

Yet behind the different conclusions that various exponents of *operaismo* and *postoperaismo* have arrived at since the 1960s, they share philosophical underpinnings that have resurfaced in contemporary discussions of class subjectivity. At its most rhetorical-propagandistic level, a celebration of new actors is combined with a focus on the creative power of struggle, whose own "constituent" force from below is contrasted with ossified and conservative labor movement apparatuses and attempts to change institutions from within. As *postoperaista* Franco "Bifo" Berardi emphasizes, *Workers and Capital* was a major shift in Italian Marxism because it placed decisive stress on the dimension of subjectivity — dovetailing with simultaneous developments like Michel Foucault's studies on disciplinary society.[10] In this reading, there was no need to lament the

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9   Mario Tronti, *Workers and Capital* (London: Verso, 2019), 328.

10   "'Reading it was a political and philosophical shock': Bifo on Tronti's *Workers and Capital*," Verso Books, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4416-reading-it-was-a-political-and-philosophical-shock-bifo-on-tronti-s-workers-and-capital*x*8.

fragmentation of former class subjects, for capitalism would invariably produce new contradictions — immanently revolutionary ones. Confident that bureaucratic forms of organization and the reformist popular fronts of the PCI (Italian Communist Party) were about to be swept away, Tronti polemically declared in 1964 that the shop-floor revolt shaking Italy was making "more revolutionary history than all the revolutions of all the colonised people put together."[11]

Needless to say, such a judgment was rather exaggerated, notwithstanding the enormous power of the strike wave peaking in 1969 with the so-called Hot Autumn. In fact, by 1968, Tronti had effectively dropped out of political activity, adopting a subdued role as a PCI member; by 1973, Negri and his comrades had turned their backs on "factoryism" in favor of a search for other signs of upheaval. Informing some of the extra-parliamentary left of this period, *operaismo* was more a form of theorizing these struggles than an organized force unto itself. Yet its mythical status as *the* idea behind the struggles of the 1960s, and indeed the challenge to the Communist Party, has granted it a lasting historiographical centrality. For instance, Michele Filippini argues that despite *operaismo*'s "political defeats," it could claim a series of "theoretical victories" — "a cache which may be drawn upon in the contemporary global context of social and political struggle."[12] This may sound like a rather miserly consolation, given the revolutionary promise of the time. But even when we look back to its heroic phase, we find that its approach instead offers many warnings, relevant still today.

THE FIRST WORKERISM

My aim here is not to examine the full and vast theoretical corpus of *operaismo* and its offshoots, but rather to examine how it developed

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11 Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, 71.

12 Michele Filippini and Emilio Macchia, *Leaping Forward: Mario Tronti and the History of Political Workerism*, (CRS, 2012), 7.

as a political force. In particular, it was built on a critique of the vision of class politics upheld by the communist (PCI) and socialist (PSI) parties that had emerged from World War II. The especially formidable opponent was the PCI, a mass party based on the political tradition of Palmiro Togliatti and, through him, Antonio Gramsci. Crushed under Fascism, Togliatti's PCI had been the largest organized part of the anti-Nazi Resistance and, from September 1943, played a central role in the National Liberation Committee (CLN) also embracing the PSI, the Christian Democrats (DC), the short-lived Action Party, and small liberal forces.[13] The PCI built an unprecedented base in the Northern factories through a series of demonstrative strikes, guaranteeing it a seat at the table in a pact with non-proletarian parties. In April 1944, it entered government for the first time as these parties joined the administration of Allied-liberated Italy, headed by former fascist general Pietro Badoglio, which opposed Benito Mussolini's loyalist regime in the German-occupied areas.

The PCI's integration into national politics — in government together with the DC and PSI until May 1947 — was an extraordinary reversal in its fortunes, in a land that had seen only ten years of male universal suffrage prior to the consolidation of Fascism. Created in 1921 as an attempt to bring Bolshevik experience to Italy, the party's membership never surpassed the tens of thousands before its crushing in 1926. Both the party's insurrectionary immediatism and the intense repression heralded by the advent of Fascism had condemned these Italian Bolsheviks to rapid isolation. In the aftermath of October 1917, the most politicized elements of the Italian workers' movement certainly were inspired by the Leninist example — Antonio Gramsci even wrote of the "Revolution Against 'Capital,'" referring to the refutation of Marxian historical stages by the bold gamble the

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13 As left-socialist Lelio Basso pointed out, this did not mean political leadership: "Notwithstanding the working-class movement's preponderance in the Resistance in terms of its leading organizational role, it was our opponents who managed to hegemonize it politically." Lelio Basso, "Il rapporto tra rivoluzione democratica e rivoluzione socialista nella Resistenza," *Critica Marxista* 3, no. 4 (1965), 19.

Bolsheviks had made in backward Russia. Yet the subsequent history of the Italian workers' movement, from the factory occupations of 1919–20 to defeat at the hands of Fascism, instead strongly indicated the need for allies, deeper-rooted organization, and institutions that could mold the collective intellect.

This was the basic motivation not only for Gramsci's prison writings, but also for Togliatti's presentation of a Gramscian tradition, notably in his 1948 abridged edition of the *Prison Notebooks*. Strongly colored by the "patriotic" anti-fascism that reigned in the Stalin-era Comintern, the PCI sought to unite a small industrial proletariat with wider layers of the population, from peasants to intellectuals, artisans, and small shopkeepers. It posited not only a common national interest — defeating German occupation, then postwar reconstruction — but also the need for a working-class-led alliance to solve the great unanswered problems of national life. It promised to lead a broad bloc in resolving the historical problems of the Italian state, from the backwardness of the state machine to the economic underdevelopment of the South and the masses' historic exclusion from political life. In contrast to the elite politics of even pre-Fascist, liberal Italy, the PCI's democratic-centralist structures mobilized millions in a highly centralized and disciplined form of activity. It sought to transcend Italy's tradition of *sovversivismo*, namely the kind of antagonistic social revolt expressed in riots or even banditry,[14] with an effort to bring the masses into the Republic.

The PCI thus rejected any purely insurrectionary path to socialism. Far-left critiques of the PCI's role in the Resistance thus often accuse it of "refusing" to seize power or acting as a counterrevolutionary brake on proletarian insurgency. This critique was also voiced by dissident forces at the time, for instance, the Bandiera Rossa movement, Rome's largest single Resistance force. Its strongholds lay in the *borgate* slums, populated by artisans, the underemployed, and draft resisters, who

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14 A theme addressed by Antonio Gramsci, and indeed by Eric Hobsbawm in his *Primitive Rebels* (London: Norton, 1965).

could easily swing between maximalist insurrectionism and passive resignation. Yet while such movements crumbled rapidly after 1945, failing to create any lasting political organization of their own, the PCI set off on its work of sinking deeper social roots. Indeed, even the PCI was much weaker among the general population than within the mobilized partisan forces; if perhaps 60 percent of all Resistance militants fought in Communist-led units, the party's score in the June 1946 Constituent Assembly election was a disappointing 19 percent; that same day, Italians voted to abolish the monarchy long complicit in Fascism, but only by 54 percent to 46.

The PCI nonetheless soon established itself as the main democratic representation of the Italian working class. Indeed, its leaders played an important institutional role in the immediate aftermath of World War II, including as coauthors of the new constitution. Aside from its totemic Article 1, which begins by terming Italy "a democratic Republic founded on labor," this document featured all manner of rhetorical ambitions. Even beyond its assertion of the values of "political, economic and social solidarity," its Article 3 insisted on the removal of "those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country." Yet for all the bold promises, the anti-fascist alliance that wrote these words soon fractured. In April 1947, DC premier Alcide De Gasperi visited Washington to negotiate Marshall Plan aid dollars, and, returning the following month, he kicked both the PCI and the Socialist PSI out of his government.

Togliatti's leadership, which ended only with his death in December 1964, was a continual bid to reassert the PCI's role within the Italian state. In the Resistance period, it had established itself as a mass force, but also one that accepted democratic institutions. Given its role in the postwar Constituent Assembly, it could boast of the "partisans' Constitution" and the "Republic born of the Resistance,"

whose promise remained to be fulfilled. But to this end, it had swallowed the constitutionalization of the Lateran Pacts, entrenching the Catholic Church's semi-established status as stipulated by Mussolini; as justice minister, Togliatti also authored an amnesty for wartime crimes in the name of social peace. Yet with the Cold-Warrior Christian Democrats (DC) in power alone from 1947, the PCI faced a rearguard battle to defend its democratic legitimacy. As well as seeking to avoid the fate of its counterparts in Greece — crushed by domestic monarchists allied to the British — the PCI faced a battle even to defend the most basic constitutional rights, for instance in the face of the mafioso violence unleashed against farmworker organizing in the South.

Among the Anglophone left — where the PCI's defenders are less visible than autonomists — the party is often imagined to be a repressive force that silenced workers. So it's worth remembering the atmosphere of repression the PCI itself faced. Most famous was the CIA funding for right-wing electoral causes, combined with vicious anti-communist propaganda; DC campaigns damned "baby-eating Communists," while the Church excommunicated the party and its supporters. This offensive was not limited to nasty words. Just days after the PCI-PSI bloc defeated the DC in the 1947 Sicilian regional elections, the May Day march in Portella della Ginestra was broken up by an armed gang hired by local business chiefs — and eleven people were murdered. In 1950, when the PCI-led CGIL union called a strike against mass layoffs at Modena's Fonderie Riunite, the police opened fire on the workers, killing six. A 1960 bid to form a government reliant on neofascist parliamentary support illustrated how much anti-communism rather than anti-fascism governed the early phases of the Cold War republic; the repression of the protests spreading from Genoa to Reggio Emilia saw an additional eleven people killed.

Comparable to earlier experiences, like Germany's pre–World War I Social Democratic Party, the PCI thus bore the contradiction of being both an "island" of organization in a country with a dominant Catholic-conservative political culture, and a force that sought to preserve

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its directly institutional legitimacy. Indicative was a July 1948 assassination attempt on general secretary Togliatti — or, rather, the party's response to it. The anti-communist terror attack prompted immediate mobilization, with armed ex-partisans taking to the streets. The PCI-led CGIL called a general strike, but party leaders had no intention of escalating the situation: a frontal clash with the state would be futile, and the strike instead served as a show of strength. Milan leader Agostino Novella's report in the following month's activist newsletter played down its military aspect,[15] emphasizing that "where the police maintained a correct attitude, there were no clashes and no notable incidents of concern"; a similar report on Turin described how "a quite large group of workers, in part ex-partisans," "bitterly opposed the call to go back to work, with clashes of some note." Togliatti survived, but thirty other activists were killed by the state.

This repressive atmosphere, the low level of strike activity — and the lack of prospect of an exchange of government — forced the PCI into a consistently defensive position, trying to carve out a space to organize. It was, indeed, far from clear that its "Italian Road to Socialism" had any chance of making its end point. Yet given the Cold War context, the party's achievements were doubtless impressive, as it worked to build autonomous popular institutions providing everything from consumer cooperatives to literacy classes. With more than 2 million members by the end of the 1940s, most of whom had probably not directly participated in the Resistance or associated collective mobilizations, the PCI was, in this period, an awesome vehicle for working-class politicization. This had, indeed, marked the party right from the start, and was visible even in its most prominent leaders. Giuseppe Di Vittorio, general secretary of the CGIL union, had begun full-time work as a farm laborer at age ten; Pietro Secchia abandoned school at age thirteen to work in a tannery but ultimately become editor of the PCI's daily, *L'Unità* (as did Celeste Negarville, a

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15 "Esperienze di un grande sciopero," *Quaderno dell'Attivista*, August 1948 (published as a book by Mazzotta in 1976).

son of poor peasants); of less humble origins, even Togliatti's father had only been a small-town clerk.

Yet all of this activity was also framed by an essentially gradualist perspective, not unlike the pre–World War I German Social Democrats. There was a Marxist underpinning for everything, and, indeed, the aspiration to create a socialist society, yet the day-to-day practice of the party centered on a slow building of working-class strength, in essence through the expansion of the PCI and its direct provision of services. The connection between this present-day activity and the "great day" of the future was rarely explored in depth: this helped leave space for sporadic insurrectionary impulses like those vaunted by some militants in 1948 in response to the assassination attempt against Togliatti. If not organized dissident currents, these were at least "souls" of the PCI base that pointed in a different direction to its real practice; they bore a crude Leninism drawn from the imaginary of "doing like in Russia" and provoking a sudden and total overhaul of capitalism. Such ideas would die hard, helping the party to maintain a specifically "communist" identity long after its incorporation into the republican mainstream.

THE ITALIAN MIRACLE

The consolidation of Christian-Democratic and Church power did not, however, mean that Italian society was stagnant — the growth levels of the 1950s, rivaling countries like West Germany and Japan, brought an "economic miracle," turning Italy into a modern industrialized economy. This had the effect of drawing millions of Southern migrants to the factories of the North — it is estimated that between 1955 and 1971, some 9 million Italians moved between regions, from a population of around 50 million. These Southerners, from regions where the Resistance had not or had barely taken place, were relatively less socialized in the PCI tradition than skilled Northern workers, also due to the historic weakness of industry in their own home regions.

In the 1950s, this was widely credited with the depression of labor militancy, as assembly-line production broke the power of skilled laborism even in historic centers of union strength. Marco Revelli cites a 1955 company report in which FIAT bosses "could declare the conflictual element within FIAT denitively defeated, those arriving the 'destroyers', and the situation in the factory pacified." [16]

The Christian-Democratic order that had emerged from the war was not all-dominant, and after losing 8 percent of its support in the 1953 general election, the DC was forced to seek parliamentary allies. After a failed bid to change the electoral law, then a series of short-lived centrist pacts, in March and April 1960, DC man Fernando Tambroni became prime minister of a government reliant on the external support of the neofascist MSI. This created an intense climate of polarization that initially looked bleak for the Communists. On May 21, a public meeting in Bologna by PCI man Giancarlo Pajetta was broken up by police. Just days later, when the MSI announced plans to hold its congress in anti-fascist Genoa, the PCI's *L'Unità* began a campaign for its cancellation. This was followed by a series of demonstrations and a one-day general strike on June 30, called by the unions' Camera del Lavoro, which ended in sharp clashes with police. On July 6, when PCI MPs led a march to lay wreaths at a plaque to the Resistance at Rome's Porta San Paolo,[17] they were charged by mounted police. The national head of the partisans' association ANPI had his home burned down by fascists; local PCI offices were also targeted.

This, however, marked a turning point in postwar Italian history, for it served to galvanize the forces of social revolt. Indeed, the scale of the mobilization helped drive a rupture in Christian-Democratic ranks — not only was the Genoa MSI congress called off, but, at the end of July, the Tambroni government was forced to resign. DC grandees were unwilling to accept the mounting social tension augured

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16   Marco Revelli, "Piazza Statuto, Torino 1962," *Doppiozero*, October 2, 2014.

17   This was the site of the first armed resistance to the German invasion on September 8, 1943, by disbanded army units and the civilian-political resistance.

by an even partial embrace of the MSI; thus, for the first time since 1945, the workers' movement was able to bring down an unpopular government. This struggle took place on the PCI's traditional ground of anti-fascism — yet it had also spread to parts of Italy where the Resistance had not taken root, or, in the case of Genoa, it involved southern migrant workers not socialized in the PCI's political culture. This upsurge in social struggle did not straightforwardly mark the victory of anti-fascism over the anti-communism of the 1950s — the Church hierarchy continued to excommunicate the Communists. But it did catalyze a wider recovery in labor movement activity, based on shop-floor militancy rather than the steady rise of the PCI.

This "qualitative leap in workers' struggles in Italy"[18] was heralded in the first issue of *Quaderni Rossi*, a journal that appeared for the first time in September 1961 and soon became a focus of attention among the cadres of the labor movement.[19] The review attributed this leap to a strike that had broken out at Alfa Romeo in spring 1960, but it also highlighted such cases as an all-out strike called by workers across twenty-five cement plants, against the advice of the builders' unions. In the air, here, was a new sense of the potential power of the shop floor. As writer Vittorio Foa insisted, the workers' recourse to an "extreme form of struggle" did not owe so much to disagreement with the wage demands put forward by the unions (to the order of 9,000 lire a year less than the workers' own, i.e., less than €10 a month in today's money). Rather, their revolt expressed "something that may seem confused and opaque, but is instead crystal clear: to finally be someone and not a passive object of the bosses' openness, to feel

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18   Vittorio Foa, "Lotte operaie nello sviluppo capitalistico," *Quaderni Rossi* 1, September-October 1961.

19   According to Steve Wright, "The first issue of Panzieri's journal appeared in the second half of 1961, making a big splash within the Italian labour movement. Exhausting its initial print run within a matter of weeks, *Quaderni Rossi* excited interest amongst politicians of the left, union officials, workplace activists and rank-and-file party members — even, if Alquati is to be believed, amongst younger members of the nation's managerial elite" (*Storming Heaven*, 32).

themselves as a class, to conquer some power — even if a generic one — faced with the boss and his system of power."[20]

This sense of a new and disruptive subjectivity was a rising impulse in both the main workers' parties of this period, but it was directed against their recent practice. In the PCI, the events of 1956 — Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalinism, followed by the Red Army invasion of Hungary — had sparked dissent among many intellectuals, undermining the unity and idealism of the communist movement, as did the mounting Chinese-Soviet split. This did not imply that dissent was limited to the Maoism that colored other parts of the New Left. Importantly for the future development of *operaismo*, there was also a libertarian wing of the Socialists that criticized the party's failure to confront the PCI's Stalinism, as well as the institutional practice of the PSI itself. These critiques gained ground around 1959 as leading figure Pietro Nenni turned toward an embrace with the Catholic center, a call for a "center-left" (DC plus PSI) government that was formally advanced at the party's congress in March 1961. The following year, the PSI abstained in a confidence vote rather than strike down the DC government, and by the end of 1963, it had joined the cabinet.

Several figures behind *Quaderni Rossi* came from the Socialist tradition. Particularly important was its founder Raniero Panzieri, who had been the author of studies on workers' control for PSI journal *Mondoperaio* before he was removed in 1959 as the party pitched toward a center-left coalition. PSI members in *Quaderni Rossi* included the essayist Franco Fortini and Antonio Negri, a professor at Padua University who brought a group of dissident Socialists from the Veneto region. Yet the group behind the review, largely made up of young sociologists, also included nonparty researchers, notably Romano Alquati and Alberto Asor Rosa, and PCI man Mario Tronti, each thirsting for direct engagement with the new class subject. The journal was not the expression of a distinct political force or party current: Tronti would

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20 Vittorio Foa, "Lotte operaie," 7.

never leave the PCI, Negri only left the PSI in 1963, and this period also saw the rise of the left-Socialist *Mondo Nuovo*, launched in 1959, and the *Quaderni Piacentini*, launched in 1962, including some of the same contributors. But even more than other New Left journals of this moment, *Quaderni Rossi* was centrally focused on the research of shop-floor experience, new episodes of struggle, and their role in the reconfiguration of a modern Italian capitalism.

This development of shop-floor struggles would lead these researchers to sharper critiques of the established workers' parties and the class alliances on which they were based. But they, too, were blown around by the course of the struggle. Epitomizing this was the excitement generated by the Turin FIAT strike of 1962 — an end to years of seeming passivity at a workplace of national symbolic importance. With the metalworkers' contract up for renewal, the CGIL called a two-day strike to put pressure on management. Yet rather than simply turn out for the union demonstrations, the largely migrant workforce mounted a kind of *jacquerie*,[21] with three days of protests in the city's Piazza Statuto resulting in pitched battles with the police. This large-scale rioting involved thousands of people: the UIL union, which signed a separate agreement with bosses, saw its offices besieged. Hundreds were arrested and eighty-eight workers fired. Faced with this escalation, the PCI's *L'Unità* was the only national paper not to focus on the violent episodes involved in the strike — indeed, when the government accused it of being at the center of events, it sought to disown the violence.[22] *L'Unità* reported the events in pacific terms, in the form of a worker addressing a *carabiniere* captain at a picket at the RIV ball bearings factory:

'You [police] agents have to understand', said the worker, 'that this strike will succeed' … 'To whoever wants to enter the factory we say this alone, and we have the right to say it' … The old worker

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21 Revelli, "Piazza Statuto."

22 This is interestingly recounted by a member of the *Quaderni Rossi* group, Dario Lanzardo (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), 43.

knew the whole Constitution by heart and quoted from it ever louder. Meanwhile outside the Mirafiori [FIAT plant] we found a different, festive atmosphere.[23]

The PCI paper thus narrated a conceit in which the workers had stood their ground and been respected by the police, with only a few "provocateurs" causing trouble. The problem it faced was that it stood culturally distant from this kind of clash, which had begun during a CGIL-called strike yet rapidly assumed wholly different dimensions. This at first disoriented the *Quaderni Rossi* group, which, like the PCI, put the confrontations down to "provocations." Indeed, though it is easy to paint the PCI as a conservative brake on the workers, and it did not embrace the actual forms the struggle took, it did provide legal support for those hauled before the courts. This was precisely what *Quaderni Rossi* criticized here as in many workplaces, as it painted the PCI as a well-organized force that limited itself to strictly "party" activity, building up its own base of membership. Typical in this sense was *L'Unità*'s framing of Piazza Statuto in terms of democratic-institutional concerns — e.g., emphasizing the worker who tells the policeman of the spirit of the Constitution — rather than the energy and conflictuality of the strike and protests themselves.

The PCI's inflexibility was, in part, a reflection of the social layers on which it had classically built its base of cadres — skilled workers, veterans of the struggles of the Resistance period. Yet it was also governed by its effort to build ties with the other republican parties — in essence, an attempt to build a social-democratic government that would modernize backward Italy. The growing tensions around this project were illustrated by a debate within the leadership, which came out into the open in a seminar at Rome's Gramsci Institute in 1962. The PCI's main right-wing leader, Giorgio Amendola, insisted that a multi-class government (or even a new party, merged with the PSI) was necessary in order to drive what he called "democratic

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23   Cited in ibid., 14.

programming" — not a planned economy, but something more like Gaullist dirigisme. Conversely, the Left's leader, Pietro Ingrao, sought a greater focus on material improvements for workers — in particular, the salary demands raised by the new strike movements. The result was a vehement clash, with Ingrao accused of heresy and ultra-leftism. The PCI was plural in its orientation to other parties but not very receptive to the recent social changes — or the impulses coming from below.

This clash between the organizational heritage of the labor movement and the new impulses of the 1960s provided the historical basis for the current known as *operaismo*. Seeking a "return to Marx" that could give the working class back its own "science," Tronti insisted that the shop floor was undergoing changes like those seen in the New Deal–era United States — and the PCI hadn't reacted. *Quaderni Rossi*'s concern was to research the internal composition of the new working class, seen as the necessary basis for its own consciousness of its strategic power. Where Panzieri remained at the level of research, Tronti and Negri instead called for a more Leninist political intervention, to "bring the party" — it was not yet clear which — "into the factory." This soon led to a split in the *Quaderni Rossi* group, and in January 1964, Tronti formed a new journal called *Classe Operaia* with Romano Alquati, Alberto Asor Rosa, Antonio Negri, and Rita Di Leo. This was the birth of *operaismo* proper. As Tronti's most famously titled essay, on the first page of the first issue, put it, the objective was "Lenin in England." In this perspective, the next revolutionary break would take place not in the weakest link, as in Russia, but at the highest point of capitalist development (i.e., "England"), the assembly lines of Northern Italy.

In this sense, Tronti's *operaismo* also mounted a theoretical innovation — a so-called Copernican Revolution. He held that the agent of capitalist modernization was not capital itself, but rather the working class, whose struggles forced capital into a series of new mediations. This extrapolated from recent events a poetic, if rather fantastical,

vision of working-class protagonism in history, ever on the brink of revolutionary victory. Capitalist innovation — and even the formation of the DC-PSI government — here represented a reactive response to the power of the shop floor.[24] For Tronti, in the absence of outright revolution, workers' demands would surely be used by capital as a spur to its own development, much as it would use the organizations created by workers as bureaucratic mediations of its own social power. In this sense, it was possible to fear that capital's "reformist operation" would come to integrate the PCI as well as the PSI. At the same time, Tronti highlighted forms of working-class subjectivity that clashed with the PCI's own veneration of labor. He emphasized workers' "refusal of work" — the subjectivity that sought to cast off the discipline of the assembly line, whether by absenteeism or sabotage.

This anti-work politics achieved particular expression in the enthusiasm surrounding the "Fragment on Machines" from Karl Marx's *Grundrisse*, of which *Classe Operaia* provided the first Italian translation. As against the PCI's celebration of industrial labor as the symbolic heart of the nation, and thus a source of pride and identity, Tronti and his fellow *operaisti* championed proletarians' revolt against the stultifying assembly-line regime.[25] The "Fragment on Machines" placed this in a grand historical narration, whereby automation, seen as a response to working-class revolt, would render labor-time worthless as a measure of value. As Marx had written, "Once adopted into the production process of capital, the means of labor passes through different metamorphoses, whose culmination is the … automatic system of machinery … As soon as labor in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labor time ceases and must cease

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24 Tronti wryly remarks in *Workers and Capital* (83) that this reformist operation had recruited, in the PSI, "the wrong party."

25 This received its most notable cultural expression in the 1971 film *The Working Class Goes to Heaven*, where the main character, Lulù — a Stakhanovite worker dismissive of the leftists leafleting outside his workplace — gradually becomes conscious of his own alienation from his social life and the ennui of his existence, before meeting another worker of a formerly similar disposition who has been driven to the asylum.

to be its measure. Capitalism thus works towards its own dissolution as the form dominating production."[26] Through its revolts, the working class would destroy value — and thus its own condition.

THE EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY LEFT

This opened up a division between two different sensibilities in *operaismo*, conditioned by the difficulties in turning an essentially theoretical project (a magazine run largely by a small group of academics) into a political intervention. Celebrating shop-floor subjectivity as the motor of all history, the *operaista* current was not itself the force "behind" strike movements — the figures most centrally involved largely lacked direct and personal experience of the labor movement. The contention between the *operaisti* and PCI cadres thus often looked like a conflict between, on the one hand, a group of professional intellectuals who emphasized the centrality of new working-class subjectivities and, on the other, activists who had enjoyed a social ascent thanks to their party membership and cadre formation, and thus fulfilled the PCI's idea of the "masses entering republican life," but who were not protagonists in these latest shop-floor struggles. From the *operaista* standpoint, these latter were seen as a potential force for the stabilization of capital, mediating labor's demands while diluting them in a broader "national-popular" alliance.

Classe Operaia claimed specific theoretical grounds to consider Italy the likely center of European revolution: namely, the understanding that the shop-floor movements that had begun in 1959–60 would allow a mass militancy to take form in the very moment that Italy developed a modern capitalism. This offered its working class a political "maturity without stabilization,"[27] since the overturning of relations in the factory would be able to spread across society, with no

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26 Karl Marx, "The Fragment on Machines," *Grundrisse* 13, http://thenewobjectivity.com/pdf/marx.pdf.

27 Tronti, *Workers and Capital,* 98.

intermediate social-democratic moment. Paradoxical, though, was the relation between such an analytical observation and the reality of an economic-political split, integrated into Tronti's narrative. Here, the danger to the shop-floor movement was the development of a social-democratic force able to include the PCI, as advocated by Amendola, that would "stabilize" Italian capitalism. The class thus had to block capital's "reformist operation" from integrating the PCI — and thus thwart the party's full "social democratization." Curiously, however, as shop-floor mobilization waned in 1964, this line of argument brought Tronti to the conclusion that the political terrain of class struggle lay in working-class pressure to turn the PCI into a battering ram against capital.[28]

Over the rest of the 1960s, Tronti moved toward a sharp revision of *operaismo*'s basic theoretical postulates, by introducing the concept of the "autonomy of the political." Here, he insisted that not only did the struggle in the factory shape the general social relations, but the relations within political organizations and the state would, in turn, intervene in the factory struggle. Such an innovation rather brings to mind the Italian expression "the discovery of hot water"; it was hardly much of a breakthrough to suggest that working-class power would rely on its presence within democratic politics, and the general class relations in the whole society, rather than fan out from shop-floor militancy alone. This shift soon led Tronti and his comrades to advocate an Italian "NEP" (New Economic Policy), what Cristina Corradi describes as "a management of the capitalist economy under working-class political guidance such as would use the state machine to overcome the backwardness of Italian society, promote the reform of

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28   This was first expressed hesitatingly, e.g., "the task today is not to use the PCI [Italian Communist Party] in a revolutionary way; the situation is far more backward than that. Rather, the task is to prevent the explicit social-democratisation of the Communist Party, in order to block the political stabilisation of capitalism in Italy" (Tronti, *Workers and Capital*). This December 1964 text was in fact the first reference Tronti had made to the PCI in *Classe Operaia*, rather than abstractly referring to "the party."

the state and set growth going again."[29] This was a classic affirmation of Togliatti's project, filtered through *operaista* language.

Yet, for others, the assertion of worker subjectivity against the labor movement and the state had a life of its own, with the *overall* composition of the class pushed into the background, in favor of a sole focus on its most militant vanguard. This was particularly the case with Negri, who was from a young age a member of Catholic Action and then the PSI. He pursued a harsh antagonism toward the PCI, as he would through the later developments of *autonomia* and *postoperaismo*. In 1967, he and some of his allies split away from Tronti to form Potere Operaio (PotOp), a Leninist group that upheld the factory revolt as evidence of an immanent revolutionary process blocked by the PCI. PotOp soon became a leading force on the post-1968 extra-parliamentary left alongside Adriano Sofri's Lotta Continua, and Avanguardia Operaia, more influenced by Maoism and Third Worldism. PotOp's main polemical target was the "immobilism" produced by the PCI/trade-unionist mediation of workers' will to struggle in the factories. It instead promoted unmediated forms of organization like base committees and assemblies of workers.

The emergence of these organizations can be seen as a more powerful expression of the resurgence of the Leninist far left on the other side of the Alps in the period of May 1968. In Italy, 1968 itself was much weaker as an expression of libertarian revolt. But as in France — home of the West's other big communist party — the Italian left faced a blocked institutional situation, with no exchange of power between a middle-class party and a labor-movement party, thus highlighting the weaknesses of communist gradualism. Fanned by the breakthroughs for those parties in the Third World that broke from the Soviet logic of peaceful coexistence with the West (notably in Cuba and Vietnam), the idea of a Leninist revolution had renewed luster, leaping over the contradictions that constrained the PCI in opposition. This was allied

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29 Cristina Corradi, "Panzieri, Tronti, Negri: le diverse eredità dell'*operaismo* italiano," https://www.sinistrainrete.info/marxismo/1448.

to a wider sense of newfound subjectivities. The strike movements driven mostly by young migrant workers were rejuvenating the labor movement; the PCI, in contrast, was a vast and bureaucratic force whose anti-fascist rhetoric appeared as ritualized patriotism rather than an urgent call to arms.

The flowering extra-parliamentary left thus aimed to overcome the political and cultural legacy of the PCI, mobilizing both social history and the struggles of the present. A typical if rather belated example, in the mid-1970s, was *Primo Maggio*, whose historians used oral testimony as a means of telling a history passed over by the "congress" history of parties. Others inspired by *operaismo* also issued "programmatic" works of fiction. Such was the case of PotOp member Nanni Balestrini's 1971 novel *Vogliamo Tutto* ("We Want Everything"), in which the protagonist, an assembly-line worker disdainful of politics and trade unions, becomes drawn into intense struggles against factory management and the unions alike. Notable, here, is the representation of politicization, built into the book's two-part structure: an individual experience of alienation that leads to identification with the extra-parliamentary left. This latter's language is then adopted wholesale in a second part written in didactic terms, and indeed in direct counterposition to the PCI — "we must fight so there is no more work … we must fight against the state built on labor."

Such a spirit was embodied by the extra-parliamentary left, which amounted to some tens of thousands of militants in this period, outside the ranks of the 2-million-strong PCI. Its growth was impressive in a country where other kinds of dissident Marxism such as Trotskyism were weakly rooted, and left communism limited to tiny numbers. This desire for new forms of organization owed in part to the lack of renewal in the PCI, dominated by cadres trained in the Resistance period or earlier. As Gian Mario Cazzaniga has highlighted, while many leading figures had been trained in the years of anti-fascism, prison, exile, and the hard battles of the immediate postwar years, the party's mass scale — and from 1970, control of regional governments — allowed it to

become a vehicle for careerism, even for those from non-proletarian backgrounds. Yet if it is easy to characterize the party as shut off to the 1968 movement, in reality, leaders such as Pietro Ingrao did push for engagement with student protesters, and in some towns, the party took the lead of university occupations;[30] as Tronti put it, in fact, the PCI was far more willing to listen to the students of 1968 than the workers of 1969, year of the "Hot Autumn" strike wave.[31]

New Left intellectuals also explored the deeper roots of PCI conservatism. This particularly centered on its "productivism," as expressed by its identification with the "republic founded on labor" and lionization of workers who had occupied the factories in 1944–45 in order to save them from German depredations. *Classe Operaia* cofounder Romolo Gobbi insisted the real class struggle was not the defense of industry or still less the patriotic Resistance, but the absenteeism of those who quit the factories; in his polemical view, the PCI had built a "myth of the Resistance" in order to displace this record of anti-work revolt.[32] Equally, writers like Lotta Continua's Adriano Sofri highlighted the limitations of the assumptions of class power that had emerged from the post–World War I era. He argued that the kind of skilled workers who had once been at the heart of workers' councils — craftsmen who mastered the whole work process and thus represented a class able to take charge of production — were historically obsolete. In this reading, the assembly-line workers in strikes like the "Hot Autumn" sought not to take command of production, but to stop it through their power of refusal.

While these groups maintained a subjective orientation to the workplace, they were often themselves unreceptive to other new

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30   Indeed, even leader Luigi Longo's stance was much less harsh than that of his French communist equivalents, issuing a call to "listen to why they are attacking us and try to understand." See "Il movimento studentesco nella lotta anticapitalista," *Rinascita*, 3 May 1968.

31   Mario Tronti, "Our *Operaismo*," in *Workers and Capital*, 337.

32   Romolo Gobbi, *Operai e Resistenza* (Turin: Musolini, 1973).

demands that arose in this period, in particular from feminists. Relatively marginal even in Italy's 1968, at the turn of the 1970s, socialist feminism became a more distinct current, emphasizing the role of unwaged women's labor in reproducing the factory working class and, thus, the overall reproduction of the capitalist economy. Efforts to channel this political impulse through the lenses of *operaismo*, however, exposed the limitations of its theoretical focus on the centrality of high points of capitalist innovation.[33] Here, the strategic power of women in revolt against unpaid labor was implicitly mediated by that of factory workers, to which it was logically subordinate; this led to an interminable debate on the limits of what really constituted "value-productive" labor. This strikingly illustrated the poverty of readings that reduce working-class agency and experience to its power to cause disruption at the point of production, rather than *starting from* the whole organization of society. Faced with the indifference of PotOp and Lotta Continua, feminist currents split away from the "old *operaismo*" — refusing to wait till the battle was won in the factory.

OUT OF THE FACTORIES!

With less than five thousand members, a force like PotOp was hardly an organizational rival to the PCI, a party whose membership stood close to 2 million. Yet it also had major contradictions of its own, aptly highlighted by one of its former leaders, Sergio Bologna, in his review of Steve Wright's history of *operaismo*.[34] He essentially portrays PotOp as a theoretical milieu that saw itself as "in service" of the working class, rather than an organization of workers per se; large by the standards of the Western anti-Stalinist far left, but far from a mass party. The ideas that first caught light among sociologists in

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33   Notably in Leopolda Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* [1981] (New York: Autonomedia, 1995).

34   Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto, 2002).

Panzieri's *Quaderni Rossi* group, bringing research into the factories and making workers co-participants, were echoed in the connections established at the end of the 1960s, where largely student and youth-based activist circles built bonds of solidarity and exchange with the workers stirred into action. Yet the fact that PotOp oriented to the shop floor on recently conceived theoretical grounds, rather than because of its militants' own collective experience, bore a contradiction. If the assembly-line struggles died down, on what basis should the organization remain centered in these same locations — focusing its efforts on these particular workers?

This was precisely the problem that reared its head around 1970, when the shop-floor militancy began to wane. Belatedly swinging behind wage demands, the PCI regained its hold over factory committees; the temporary assemblies formed by the extra-parliamentary left failed to outlast the spike of militancy. Indeed, the dying down of the movement left PotOp disoriented. The terrorist attack carried out by fascists at Milan's Piazza Fontana in December 1969 moreover marked an incipient radicalization of street violence, to become a dominant theme of the next decade. PotOp's search for high points of struggle — as it saw it, to be guided by the real movement of the class — meant that its militants veered erratically in search for signs of militancy and thus the political hope that would sustain an eschatology of revolution. This took them far beyond their Venetian and Roman hubs of activity. In Bologna's account, "The group of militants, now marginalised from factory struggles, wandered directionless, searching for new points of reference (the struggles of Afro-American Blacks, or of the Southern Italian unemployed). Failing to find them they accentuated the voluntarist and late-Leninist character of their militant actions."[35] Even in 1972, Sofri denounced the "madness" of their voluntarism.[36]

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35 "Review of Storming Heaven," https://libcom.org/library/review-storming-heaven-sergio-bologna.

36 Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven,* 140.

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While *operaismo* had, from the outset, focused on the most advanced points of factory organization — also causing it problems with such movements as Lotta Femminista — after 1970, both PotOp and Lotta Continua began to shift away from "factoryism," downgraded to a "hegemonic" and then only peripheral site of militancy. As one PotOp contributor put it in 1972, "a series of simplifications once useful for us, like the 'mass worker', no longer serve. We need something that is both more and less than this. We need a figure of a proletariat which experiences the crisis, the repressive cyclical nature of production as much as prices and inflation, and on the other hand we need the figure of a proletariat which suffers exploitation throughout the entire day."[37] As Negri later put it, this was a turn from the shop floor to the *operaio sociale* — the worker in society as a whole. Yet what this did not mean was a turn to reflect on the general conditions and consciousness of the Italian working class, or the bases of its political unity. Rather, this marked a search for some new subject of revolutionary activity — regardless of their representative character.

The *operaista* critique had come full circle. Where once Tronti had deduced the actuality of the revolution from the evidence of shop-floor militancy, the decline of this struggle was taken by PotOp not as a disproval of the theory, but as an indication that the hub of the inevitable revolution had moved somewhere else. What remained, especially in Negri, was a sharp polemical hostility to the PCI, hysterically cast as the main barrier to the revolution in Italy. The rise in the neofascist street presence moreover provided the grounds for PotOp to form internal structures for clandestine "dirty work," a tendency that radicalized over the 1970s as militants from across the extra-parliamentary milieu began to turn to the "underground." Yet the armed attacks conducted on industrialists, politicians, and policemen by groups of Marxist-Leninist background like Giangiacomo Feltrinelli's Gruppi d'Azione Partigiana and, later, the Brigate Rosse, became

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37   Cited in Wright, *Storming Heaven*, 141.

the tail that wagged the dog, fueling a hopeless process of violence and repression against the wider extra-parliamentary left. The militarization of the revolution — in the meantime adopting most of the assumptions of Third Worldism and militant anti-fascism — drove an intensified split with any real efforts at mass organization.

In this, we also see the curious faddism of a set of intellectual milieux who had, at best, loose personal connections to the particular workers whose militancy they venerated. In 1973, PotOp dissolved "into the movement," helping form a less organizationally coherent tendency called Autonomia Operaia (the so-called area of autonomy). The patchwork of local groups invariably claimed that they continued to be "working on class composition." Yet its labor of observation refused to see anything but revolutionary openings: what a founding conference in 1973 called restoring the "awareness of proletarian power which the traditional organizations have destroyed."[38] While Autonomia Operaia was adjacent to a wider array of social movements (such as over housing and feminism) Negri and his co-thinkers radicalized PotOp's notion of the "armed party," now popularized in the pistol hand signal that became commonplace on demonstrations. Unlike the PCI, which promised to gather the broad mass of the working population, the Negriite "service" of struggles was impatient with the masses' lethargy. It sought not to build bases of organization that could endure temporary setbacks — or, still less, representative structures for the class as a whole — but to draw sweeping lessons from bursts of militancy.

From a current that had built its ideology on the study of political and cultural shifts among the working population, Autonomia instead came to reflect a profound disillusionment with mass political organizations. As the extra-parliamentary left parties collapsed between 1973 and 1975 — with hundreds of militants joining an armed underground — the spirit of the times was captured in the slogan "enough

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38   Cited in Wright, *Storming Heaven*, 153.

speechifying groups — arm the workers!"[39] Professor Negri spun such sentiments into the language of overcoming sectional divides among the workers — an aim to be filled through a shared leap into the abyss. As he put it in 1974, "the armed struggle represents the only fundamental strategic moment — i.e. the only possibility of achieving a recomposition of the proletariat and a consolidation of the struggles, and destroying, along the way, capital's weapons of provocation, of repression and containment that are designed to isolate and newly compartmentalise the various class sectors."[40] While the actual class movement weakened, its vanguard forged ahead with the frontal confrontation with the Italian state, in a cycle of radicalization that continued until the mid-1980s.

As the most visible forms of struggle moved away from the shop floor, the intellectuals behind Autonomia Operaia followed them. Leafleting outside factory gates was no longer where the struggle was at: an impoverished view of the working class as men in blue overalls was thus flipped on its head, with the proclamation of the end of the Fordist era (and, by extension, the idea of a unifying historical subject). Yet when Negri later termed Autonomia Operaia an "Italian Solidarnosc, an instrument against the Communists' pretense of hegemony over the labor movement," what was also notable was the loss of the strategic horizon of socialism. Rather unlike Solidarnosc, the dominant trend in this mid-1970s period of Autonomia was a turn to less directly political notions of liberation, "a cultural break with the world of [our parents], the refusal of pro-work ideology (whether [the PCI's] or a microcapitalist one), the tendency to build communities, to build a new militancy that coincided with life choices, music, psychedelic experiments and sexual liberation — with the question of the legitimate use of (even armed) force now decisive."[41]

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39 "Basta coi gruppi parolai — diamo le armi in mano agli operai!"

40 Wright, 159.

41 As described by Giovanni Iozzoli, "Gli autonomi: L'*autonomia* operaia vicentina," review of Donato Tagliapietra, *Gli autonomi*. Volume V (DeriveApprodi, Rome,

This was epitomized by the movement of 1977, an existential revolt of youth — students and, in some measure, young proletarians — ever less channeled into collective demands. Here, the movement increasingly took on the form of a series of subcultures and the notion of "being together," though it assumed more political form in the hounding of CGIL leader Luciano Lama away from Sapienza University, and through the state repression of other demonstrations in Rome. In the words of *postoperaista* Paolo Virno, this moment saw "a raw material of behaviours, affects and desires that took on rebellious contours and became a productive force, a present state of things."[42] Yet it was also two-sided, in Virno's own account creating a new neoliberal subjectivity born of the anti-statist, individual rebellion, "the tracks on which power and conflict run today [four decades later]." In his reading, this tearing down of the old Left "respond[ed] to a fundamental phenomenon, and it has become the amniotic fluid in which European fascisms and populisms are growing. They are the horrible twins of the sparks of liberation, the malign version of things that belong to us."

As Bifo implies,[43] the other great development of the 1977 period was to indicate a particular kind of worker as an ever more central historical subject — the "cognitive proletariat," as counterposed to its manual forbears. For Negri, this new class's "living labor" augured a different kind of subject, unbound from collective discipline — "becoming cognitive, connecting in a network, [it] conquers a potent transversality." Yet this also corresponded to the focus on a particular type of "cognitive" worker — those within the universities. For where *operaismo* had begun promising to take the intellectuals into the factories to mount co-research with workers, the end point — also reached,

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2019), reproduced at https://www.infoaut.org/culture/gli-autonomi-l-autonomia-operaia-vicentina.

42 Paolo Virno, "L'Esordio del tempo nuovo," *Il Manifesto*, 1977, in English at https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3581-1977-the-debut-of-the-new-era-an-interview-with-paolo-virno

43 "'Reading it was a political and philosophical shock': Bifo on Tronti's *Workers and Capital*."

in a more self-critical way, by Bologna's *Primo Maggio* group — was to turn the focus back to the intellectuals' own social role. Where this was married with a measure of humility and critique of intellectuals' role in political organization, it was, naturally, a positive development. We would be hard-pressed to say something similar about Negri's own practice, as an old-school university baron who now told those gathered in his lecture halls that Fordism (and with it, the *classe operaia*) was over, that the 1970s heralded a cognitive revolution in the production process due to blow away the mass worker, and that they could now think of themselves as the force at the center of history.

Indeed, a constitutive trait of *postoperaismo*, developing from 1977 onward, is the narrowness of the notion of class it takes as its polemical foil, allowing it to present its own theoretical breakthroughs as novel. The factory workers having failed to meet their date with history, the notion of class that pivoted on them needed to be replaced through a new emphasis on the plural, the marginal, and the indeterminate. *Operaismo* had emerged from a critique of the Gramscian-Togliattian tradition, embracing the philosophical trend of Galvano Della Volpe: it asserted the "constituent" power of egalitarian social relations à la Rousseau, as opposed to the statist-bureaucratic codification of rights à la Kant. This perspective survives in the *postoperaista* milieu, but in radicalized form, as a crude and identitarian rejection of parties and the state as disciplinary structures. Hence its veneration of apolitical expressions of subaltern indiscipline — patronizingly identified with desperate acts of revolt or even criminality — which is then "politicized" from the outside through the theoretical discourse of others, rather than in political organization in which these figures are themselves the protagonists.

Such a perspective is furthermore apparent in the striking self-referentiality of the *postoperaista* milieu, from its showily "difficult" and "mytho-poetic" vocabulary to its focus on performative bids for visibility as a central terrain of political action. This branding exercise is apparent in the curious propagation, even beyond Italy, of terms like *autoriduzione* — the collective refusal to pay fares or bills — and

"proletarian shopping," widely held up as part of Autonomia Operaia's innovations. I will leave it up to the reader to decide how likely it is that shoplifting was invented in the 1970s, or even that discussion of the privatization and theft of common resources really entered Marxist discourse thanks to Autonomia.[44] This will to appropriate is also visible in other idiosyncratic terms used by this milieu: for instance, when modish horizontalism also demands a "vertical" organization, this is but a roundabout way at arriving at a classic Leninist theme in more opaque terms. But beyond this tendency toward rebranding, the constant veneration of novelty and creativity induces a curiously performative approach to political action, as if to advertise this milieu's existence within broader mobilizations.

For evidence of this, we need only look at the bizarre stunts and vocabulary that have emerged from even well-known activist scenes associated with Autonomia. In the 1977 movement, the Metropolitan Indians group wore Native American dress and face paint, while in more recent times the so-called Tute Bianche made their name by wearing white overalls. These latter are no marginal idiosyncrasy of *postoperaista* circles, but one of their leading contemporary expressions, a fixture on the alter-globalization protests in the early 2000s and since. A member of the Italian novelists' collective Wu Ming (Mandarin for "no name") breathlessly described this outfit as:

> an ironic reference to the specters of urban conflict, then an instrument, symbol and identity available to the movement. Anyone could wear a white overall so long as they respect a certain style. A typical phrase was "Let's wear the white overall so that others will. Let's wear the white overall so one day we can take it off." … the finger points to the moon, and when the multitudes look at the moon the finger will vanish.[45]

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44   Notably, Karl Marx's 1842 article "Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood," available at https://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-theft-wood-working-class-composition.

45   Wu Ming 1, "Tute Bianche, La prassi della Mitopoiesi in tempi di catastrofe," https://www.wumingfoundation.com/italiano/outtakes/monaco.html.

Such pompousness appears as a parody of the nineteenth-century *comité directrice*, the hand behind the Bakuninist uprising.

Vicious in their denunciation of the bureaucratic traditions of socialism and the mediation imposed by the cadres of the workers' movement, such circles boast of their enlightened refusal to recuperate the struggles of others. There are to be no leaders, no vanguard, no central strategy — a vision that fits well with the "movement of movements" that characterized the alter-globalization protests of the early 2000s. This lack of need for any central actor also matched a celebration of the power of each movement to act autonomously. Here, the perspective of "changing the world without taking power" promised neither to resist capitalist globalization at the national level (the allegedly utopian bid to assert the power of the nation state) nor to build an internationally coordinated counterpower (of a type with the old "world communist movement"), but rather simply to point to the simultaneous existence of the many kinds of revolt. These may be consciously organized or, in Negri-Hardt's case, expressions of disruption and tumult whose actors were not even aware that they were involved in political actions at all.

Take the description of the revolutionary subjectivity of migrants in the recent essay "*Empire*, Twenty Years On."[46] It doesn't matter if migrants conceive of their actions as political: their migration is an "internationalist insurrection" against a world of borders: "The vast majority of migrants may not be able to articulate the political nature of their flight, let alone understand their actions as part of an internationalist struggle; indeed, their journeys are highly individualized … You have to step back to make out the design of the mosaic, to appreciate the political significance of global migrations as an ongoing insurgency."[47] Not only does this render migrants curiously faceless and uniform, in the guise of "migrant bodies," but it chalks up a vast,

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46   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "*Empire*, Twenty Years On," *New Left Review* II/120, November-December 2019, 67–92.

47   Hardt and Negri, "Empire, Twenty Years On," 77.

variegated, and often unhappy phenomenon as one more victory for the coming insurrection, whatever the anarchy and desperation — or, indeed, other, much blander reasons — that set people on the move. My father and I are both migrants — are we, too, insurrectionaries? The subjectivity that Negri claims to celebrate is instead erased, as he junks the whole dimension of consciousness and deliberate action. At this level of dehumanization, we might as well say that climate change is a revolutionary phenomenon because it will upset existing social relations and institutions.

REJECTING REPRESENTATION IS JUST ELITISM

This leads us to the constitutive elitism of the *postoperaista* milieu, disdainful of reformist improvements and insisting that it is itself merely a "service" to the movements rather than another political sect. If one does not set oneself up as a leader of others, but is directly and unmediatedly one participant in a multitudinal struggle, then, indeed, one cannot be accountable in the same terms as an elected politician or trade union official. Yet this distinction poses particular problems in a milieu that so consistently blurs the lines between a "movement," in the sense of mass organization for some collective demand, and the self-promotion of an activist scene through its media or academic platform. If the "factoryism" of old celebrated the strategic power of the assembly-line workers at the point of production, doesn't the celebration of symbolic and performative "communicational" action end up venerating exactly the kind of people who have the most social power at these levels already? The workers who imposed retreats on capitals are substituted by professors proclaiming their own importance.

Indeed, this connects to a wider problem of any political project that venerates outbursts of militancy as the very embodiment of the new and dynamic forces in society (and, by contrast, the rest of the social majority as a conservative mass). It may be true that, for

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example, Deliveroo riders who have staged several recent, highly visible strikes represent a new kind of employment relation (or, at least, that their contracts based on bogus self-employment represent a fresh assault on employment rights). Doubtless, their fight involves tactical instruments such as exploiting their employer's public relations woes — a factor that any study of labor organizing in the service sector would surely reckon with. Yet it would be implausible in the extreme to suggest that such struggles are representative of the condition of the social majority in Italy — with the much wider pattern of recent decades instead marked by a steady rise in long-term unemployment in a land with close to zero economic growth. The *invisible* persistence of this latter condition is far more characteristic of our time than the bad practices of a famous gig economy employer.

One can work one's way around this problem, of course, with various rhetorical sleights — perhaps a condemnation of Eurocentrism, "pro-work ideology," "productivism," or any of the other many ills attributed to the politics that seeks to put working people in control of the state. The problem is, it's rather difficult to believe that such a condemnation springs from the subjective consciousness of the masses themselves. Here, "tearing down the old world" plays the same role as in older revolutionary fantasies, yet with the ever-vague "constituent" element never seen as important enough to specify. Interventions by Bifo Berardi, proclaiming in 2013 that he would vote for Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in order to "make the Italian province ungovernable,"[48] obey exactly this logic. If he later said this particular call was a mistake, we need only think how difficult it is to imagine him advocating a nationalized social care service, investment in public rail infrastructure, adult education funded through taxation, or, indeed, any of those many boring and unrevolutionary things that make working-class life tolerable.

Of course, not all emancipatory politics is about jobs or welfare. But even looking at the recent period of austerity in Europe, it is

48 "Perché ho votato Beppe Grillo," *MicroMega* blog, 26 February 2013.

obvious that the needs of the least socially powerful — those most likely to rely on interpersonal support networks — decisively demand institutional protections, guaranteeing rights even to those whose own circumstances (type of work, care burden, mental health, etc.) make them less able to mobilize politically. Italy in the 1970s, like many contemporary struggles, tells us that sometimes even workers with apparently little "voice" or social power can create dynamic movements, as can often silenced and humiliated groups like teenagers forced to resort to illegal abortions, undocumented cleaning workers, or majority-minority communities hit by the siting of waste incinerators next to their homes. Yet, in each case, their struggle is not solved simply by the fact of their revolt (or even direct mutual aid among themselves) but rather the generalization of their demands through solidarity action, legislation, and the bureaucracies tasked with ensuring legislation is respected even where, say, most of us do not want to be full-time health and safety inspectors.

Indeed, for all the hatred heaped on the "pro-work" ideology of the dinosaur left and the bureaucratic apparatuses created by the recuperation of all demands, the most important struggles over labor rights in recent Italian history (indeed, the only ones to make any impact at the level of national politics) were, perhaps unsurprisingly, battles fought in defense of the conquests of the old communist and socialist parties. Such was the case of the recent battle to defend Article 18 of the 1970 Workers' Statute, which offered workers strong guarantees against unjust firings. If *postoperaisti* did join such movements, they do so with an attitude wittily skewered by Mark Fisher's description of "neo-anarchists" defending Britain's National Health Service:

> Neo-anarchists will assert that "parliamentary politics never changed anything", or the "Labour Party was always useless" while attending protests about the NHS, or retweeting complaints about the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state. There's a strange implicit rule here: it's OK to protest against what

parliament has done, but it's not alright to enter into parliament or the mass media to attempt to engineer change from there. Mainstream media is to be disdained, but [the BBC's flagship debate program] Question Time is to be watched and moaned about on Twitter. Purism shades into fatalism; better not to be in any way tainted by the corruption of the mainstream, better to uselessly "resist" than to risk getting your hands dirty.

The only slight correction to this narrative is to emphasize that *autonomia* has not been entirely without influence on those engaging in parliamentary politics — this would, indeed, be to underestimate its significance. This is particularly visible in the trajectory of Tute Bianche and the connected current known as the *Disobbedienti*, which together were the central focus of Pablo Iglesias's doctoral dissertation. Published as a book with a foreword by leading Italian Tuta Bianca Luca Casarini, the future Podemos leader here celebrated how "through their effective means of communication," these forces had "demonstrated that it was possible to do politics on the global stage without being a party, and that it is possible to be at the center of the confrontation without being coopted by the representative system." When it did take form, the "nonparty" Podemos — rich on the contribution of Spain's very own autonomists, via the Indignados square protests that began in May 2011 — promised to give "verticality" to the "horizontal movements" without undermining their autonomy.[49]

What is most striking about this experience is how a dismissal of parties and, indeed, the "socialist" end goal — identified with bureaucratization and corruption — was so quickly replaced by a nonaggression pact between a series of scenes and self-appointed movement leaders. The supposed refusal to "obey" an institutional logic — with internal apparatuses and congresses considered

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49   See the editorial on Negriite page *EuroNomade*, based on a review of Iglesias's book, "Genealogie di governo nell'esperienza di Podemos," *EuroNomade*, 14 February 2015.

manifestations of bureaucratic encrustation — follows the rush toward the tyranny of structurelessness, in which informal leaderships impose themselves as another political caste, with no accountability to the activists "horizontally" organized in local circles. Anyone who has engaged in the circles created by Podemos or, for that matter, the self-described "gaseous" formation La France Insoumise — adopting from the 2000s alter-globalization movement the "horizontal" accoutrements of leaderlessness and unmediated self-representation — will not have failed to note that the hierarchy exists regardless, just as the same few '68er talking heads can be expected to surge to the forefront of any *postoperaista*-organized event in Italy.

Of radically different political origins, these movements are each in their own way expressions of, rather than responses to, the crisis in the structures of working-class political representation, as a hollow celebration of novelty and pluralism serves as the catchall answer to any doubts as to their democratic propriety. Where mass parties like the PCI obeyed a hierarchical but also "dense" organizational logic, with myriad local and professional posts serving as the bases for cadre formation, the common sense among the radical left of recent years has, instead, been based on a simplistic rejection of mediation — which always and everywhere lets it in again through the back door. Even in the absence of structures of accountability like democratic elections (and, indeed, mechanisms to allow those with less free time to impose control on the dictatorship of the always-available), leaders always emerge. Yet in the "tyranny of structurelessness" model, they come either from the social circles of the influential or on the basis of a privatized mediation of party-movement relationships, where positions and influence are bestowed as favors.

In this sense, the disdain for working-class institutions promoted by the adepts of Autonomia and *postoperaismo* serves as a warning. Negri and his acolytes have spent at least the last four decades building a series of self-referential scenes boasting of their own novelty, in sometimes frontal counterposition to the Left and the labor

movement. This, in particular, took the form of activist impatience with the real complexities of class organization, forever invoking dramatic examples of militancy and revolt in order to condemn the established labor movement as conservative, passé, and boring. Such a gadfly may well airily claim that "proletarian memory is only the memory of past estrangement … communist transition is the absence of memory."[50] Yet unless we believe the revolution is some sort of automatic, almost agency-less, response to capitalist crisis, then we also need to take seriously the foundations that working people have built already — the past successes that give us consciousness of both our strength and our platforms for future gains.

In his crusade against the socialist left, it seems Negri has learned nothing and forgotten nothing.[51] In his "*Empire*, Twenty Years On," he notes that "Sometimes … the theoretical work done in social movements teaches us more than that written in libraries."[52] Yet today, alas, we are enormously more likely to find the shelves in leftist bookshops heaving under volumes of Hardt-Negri and their acolytes than those from the social movements of this period, never mind the millions-strong PCI. Amid the revolutionary eschatology of the 1960s, it was perhaps easy to want to tear down the old world, to claim that the bureaucratic left was the main barrier to the coming insurrection. Continuing to promote this perspective through the years of armed struggle, Negri et al. helped to destroy not a few lives, while insisting on the futility of all political action outside of their own unaccountable milieu. Today, among the ruins of the twentieth-century left, we can see this veneration of militancy for what it is: a refusal to think seriously about how those without strategic power can ensure their material needs are met. ⟅

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50 Cited in Alex Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," *International Socialism* 2, no. 92, Autumn 2001, available at https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/callinicos/2001/xx/toninegri.htm

51 Joke at Negri's expense by Tobias Abse, http://www.whatnextjournal.org.uk/Pages/Back/Wnext22/Negri.html

52 Hardt and Negri, "*Empire*, Twenty Years On," 92.

This article places Europe's current populist explosion — in left, right, and nonpartisan versions — in context. Above all, it emphasizes populism's status as the political child of the thirty-year-long decline of party democracy. It offers a balance sheet for each populist variant, focusing in particular on the left populist experiments, and it closes with a proposal for a class-based socialist alternative.

MAKING SENSE
OF POPULISM

ANTON JÄGER & ARTHUR BORRIELLO

Few words offer a more tantalizing, but also a more frustratingly vague, indication of our contemporary era than "populism." The statistics speak for themselves: from 1970 to 2010, the number of Anglophone publications containing the term rose from 300 to more than 800, creeping to over a thousand in 2010. In English, over 500 academic publications have appeared on the topic in the past year, while newspapers are currently running special series on it. A journal exclusively dedicated to it was launched in 2017 — the bluntly titled *Populism*.

Such a sprawling literature, of course, only tracks a deeper trend. Globally, movements speaking on behalf of "the people" have won majorities, ousted incumbents, attacked courts, and locked up opponents. In this story, populism is both actor and symptom, the expression of a deep, structural crisis rolling across global democracies of which Europe is the epicenter. In the latter case, a wide range of actors is compressed for the occasion: Pablo Iglesias, Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, and Beppe Grillo are but some of the politicians who qualify for the label.

With this increasing popularity also comes an analytical challenge — is it possible to say anything new about the subject? Bookshelves bulging with populist "explosions," "menaces," and "threats" now increasingly suggest a bleak prospect: populism studies itself is in a crisis of originality. Cas Mudde, informal doyen of the profession, has himself spoken of the need to distinguish populism from adjacent concepts, such as nativism and nationalism, while veteran scholars have begun to call for an outright moratorium on it. At the same time, the Left's nominal populist experiments in Europe — Podemos, La France Insoumise, Más País, Corbynism — have hit a political wall, losing elections or becoming custodians for older social-democratic parties. Taken together, these trends call for a deeper reflection on Europe's recent populist experience.

This article places Europe's current "populist moment" in wider context. It begins by locating populism — left, right, and nonpartisan — within the broader crisis of mediation in European polities after the fall of party democracy, and it follows up with a balance sheet for each variant, focusing specifically on left-populist outfits. More than a reflexive dismissal or an endorsement, it offers a systemic analysis of populism's rise and draws out an equally systemic response.

DILEMMAS OF DEFINITION

Attempts at defining populism must contend with the fact that it is an "essentially contested concept." About twenty different definitions have been recorded over the last ten years, all launched from within different corners of the academe. Populism is hardly alone in its contestability, of course: terms such as "liberalism," "socialism," "ecologism," "republicanism," "fascism," and "conservatism" are equally subject to linguistic disputation. Yet there is something unique about populism. Liberalism, socialism, and republicanism have all been claimed by identifiable historical movements . Britain, France, and Germany still have their self-declared conservative parties, while

socialists continue to sit in many European parliaments. Populism barely has such real-life referents. Since its spread in the 1980s, the word has seen an almost exclusively external usage, deployed by journalists, academics, and politicians to either describe, or — more regularly — denigrate their opponents. The only movement that explicitly claimed the term was the American People's Party of 1892, founded to break a Democratic-Republican oligopoly and join workers and farmers in a "producerist" coalition (it was also the party that first introduced the term into the American lexicon).

For the majority of the twentieth century, the party remained the only known referent of the word. In the 1930s, translations began popping up in French; in the 1950s, the term first appeared in Spanish and German. Only in the 1970s and 1980s did a burgeoning field of far-right studies start using the term, which steadily gave populism traction in European debates. The last ten years have certainly made it easier to distinguish these polemics from scientific usages. Thanks to an academic gold rush, populism studies has grown into a rich research field where different definitions now vie for dominance. This has created a sense of confusion — who speaks for populism? — but also allows for useful differentiation. Scholarship on this subject can be sorted into four broad, interdependent categories: (i) strategic, (ii) ideological, (iii) discursive, and (iv) institutional definitions.

The first tradition is represented by writers such as Kenneth Roberts, Kurt Weyland, and other Latin Americanists. They see populism essentially as a political tactic deployed by leaders to rally a disorganized populace. Going back to work by Gino Germani and Torcuato Di Tella in the first waves of Latin-American modernization theory, its criterion for distinguishing populists from non-populists is whether or not the political strategy mobilizes a "people" against an elite and solidifies its grip on state power through patrimonial networks. Leader-centrism is an integral feature of this definition. "Under populism," one proponent summarizes, "the connection between leader and followers is based mostly on direct, quasi-personal contact, not on organizational

intermediation."[1] Other voices in this tradition claim that populists "mobilize mass support via anti-establishment appeals" by means of a "personalistic linkage to voters, circumventing parties and other forms of institutional mediation." Such a definition places populism both within and outside of the state, wielded by leaders seeking and consolidating power. This focus allows for both empirical testability and operationalization, but it rarely offers a full etiology of populism itself.

A second and more prominent tradition usually opts for a "thin ideological" approach. This is the route taken by the "ideational" school represented by writers as diverse as Cas Mudde, Jan-Werner Müller, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Stefan Rummens, Matthijs Rooduijn, and Sarah de Lange. None of these definitions are perfectly contiguous. Nonetheless, all see populism essentially as an *ideology*, here understood as the "decontestation" of a set of contested concepts. Kickstarted by Mudde's work in the early 2000s, this variant of populism is not necessarily institutionally articulated; it can occur in both consolidated and young democracies. As an ideology, populism divides a population into two opposing camps: the people and the elite, both taken as homogeneous by the populists, while state policy is supposed to enact "the will of the people." The tradition's casting of populism as a thin ideology implies that it points to no hard set of beliefs that all populists share. Rather, populism has to attach itself to a "host ideology" and can never operate in stand-alone form (strictly populist parties, therefore, are almost structurally impossible). Operationally, this spans variants such as a "populist nationalism" (National Rally), a "populist socialism" (Podemos), a "populist fascism" (Golden Dawn), or a "populist nativism" (Vlaams Belang). Since Mudde's first work on the topic in the early 2000s, this definition has also become the go-to tool for disciplinary outsiders.

A third strand of research heads in a discursive direction and contains a swath of sub-traditions. First launched by Ernesto Laclau

in 1977, this discursive current sees populism neither as ideology nor as strategy but rather as a "political logic" latently present in every political space. The definition is discursive insofar as it views populism as a rhetorical means of shaping popular subjects, creating a "people" out of diffuse groups and subjects. Its valence is also intrinsically linguistic: populist logics enter into effect when a certain social actor creates a "front of equivalences" between different unfulfilled demands in a given society against a "constitutive outside." Enemy formation is therefore a crucial feature of every populist movement, not simply a democratic danger. This offers a flexible and bite-size definition of populism. Discourse theorists are able to detect it in multiple contexts and make operationalization of the concept relatively easy. But it often comes at the expense of contextual specificity. As critics point out, everyone becomes a (potential) populist to discourse theorists, while no sociological and programmatic content is ever attributed to the movements themselves. Discourse theory also lacks a full account of the preconditions of a populist moment. Except for an overdetermined notion of crisis, it is not clear what distinguishes populist from non-populist politics. Instead, the latter now has a residual presence in every politics and can flare up at any moment. Historically, such a statement sidesteps any questions of causal drivers and simply insists on contingency as the basis for populist politics.

A fourth tradition corrects the same formalism and represents a more openly institutional strand. It is carried by writers such as Chris Bickerton, Peter Mair, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Carlo Invernizzi Accetti. Although indebted to the ideological definition of populism, it distinguishes itself by a stronger emphasis on the institutional preconditions for populist success. The decline of party democracy and its dwindling member base creates space for new political communication, driving demands for direct democracy capable of sidestepping classical party channels. This places populism in a complementary relation to technocracy, another dominant phenomenon of the age. Populism, like technocracy, negates the intrinsic pluralism and partisanship and is hostile to mediation. As a tradition, institutionalists

thus place populism in a specific historical context and examine the infrastructural conditions for its success.

All of these definitions have their own virtues and vices. "Strategists" offer a convincing account of populist mobilization, but they often lack focus on populist beliefs. "Ideologists," in turn, are attentive to these populist belief systems, but at the expense of more institutional stories. Discourse theorists grasp the linguistic logics of every populist moment and go beyond a narrow focus on ideology. They rightly insist on populism's intimate relationship to modern representative democracy. But they often do so at the expense of contextual specificity and are averse to causal accounts. When do populist moments end? How do they arise? What drives them? Institutionalists, in turn, offer the most satisfying story about the historical preconditions for a "populist explosion," but they are regularly at risk of reducing populism to its structural drivers. They might also neglect the contribution of political actors themselves.

Packed together, however, these traditions allow for a comprehensive conceptualization that can span linguistic, institutional, and strategic stories. In its current European context, contemporary populism presents *a specific political logic operative in an era of declining party mediation*. This means populism both *expresses* and *reshapes* the relationship between state and society in an era of neoliberalism. Rhetorically, appeals to a "homogeneous" people pan out precisely *because* previous social markers of class, religion, and status have been eroded and have made citizens more receptive to new categories. Movements can convincingly be typified as populist when they work in this context of declining party democracy and deploy a concept of "people" in antagonistic fashion, in both a thin (rhetorical) and thick (ideological) register. But populism remains a surface manifestation here. The underlying factor is a lack of intermediation: the disappearance of organs that previously stood between citizens and states and mediated citizens' relationships to those states. Such a definition still grants internal differentiation between different populist

variants — left, right, and nonpartisan — yet does not downplay its broader systemic nature. It also allows for cross-party variation and gradualist notions of populism. Two separate parties or politicians can both be populist to differing degrees and still find themselves in opposition. Today's populism comes in more and less inclusive and exclusive, pure and impure versions. Invariably, its expression depends on local contexts and is subject to the constraints of political economy and party systems. Populism overall, however, is an ideology of "disintermediation," both responding to and remolding citizens' relationship to their states.

Such a definition should caution us against facile comparisons with the 1930s or the late nineteenth century, often pinpointed as previous periods of populist success. Although aspects of fascist movements have reappeared in recent years, the organizational basis for them is completely absent. Europe faces a massively demobilized citizenry with little experience of combat, mass electoral mobilization, or state-driven violence. Fascism, in contrast, was a response to mass working-class agitation, recent suffrage extension, paramilitary activity, and an overbearing civil society. Today's populism arises in a completely different set of contexts: declining membership rates, falling electoral participation, asset-based growth, and a radically embedded form of neoliberalism. While these might carry their own contemporary dangers — perspective matters here — they cannot be compared to twentieth-century precedents. Both descriptively and normatively, the contours of today's populism are different.

POPULISM'S PRECONDITIONS

What explains populism's irresistible attraction? To start, it is important to distinguish between populism as *reality* and populism as *signifier*. The first refers to a complex cluster of phenomena ranging from party ideology and organization to statecraft, while the second includes the usage of a term in specific debates. As for the latter, it

is clear that academics and journalists have a specific incentive to label movements "populist" — journalists can avoid overheated references to the far right, accusing someone of demagoguery without openly saying the word, while academics draw grant money from an anti-populist consulting industry. In both a colloquial and specialist setting, it is then argued, the rise of populism speaks to the rise of a populism *industry* from which a set of interpreters profit, just as new diagnoses stimulate new medical industries.

There is a lot of truth to this accusation. Populism scholars have indeed played a significant role in stimulating the adoption of the word across the spectrum. But such Bourdieusian gambits are hardly sufficient as an explanation. Only in conspiratorial narratives can academia's role be this overwhelming, and many intervening factors come into play here. The current populism craze cannot be explained as an elaborate academic conspiracy. This would require an almost heroic effort of persuasion on behalf of a small generation of academics who supposedly smuggled the term into public discourse. Yet there is a reason why public discourse reacts so sensitively to the word and why it has met with such resounding success: for better or worse, populism captures a central dimension of the crisis of representation currently gripping European politics. It thus needs to be understood beyond academic market performance. Rather, the rise of the term as a signifier correlates closely with deep-rooted changes in European societies since the late 1970s and a radical realignment in voting patterns. Historically, this popularity thus needs to be situated in a (i) *macro*, (ii) *meso*, and (iii) *micro* setting, each with its own distinctive causal timelines.

MACRO FACTORS

The first macro factor is the long-term decline of party democracy in European countries since roughly 1973. To be sure, party democracy was never a stable formation. As a system, it has proven agonizingly

difficult to conceptualize given the variety of organizations and models grouped under the rubric. Yet there is room for generalization here. The postwar corporatist structures that first institutionalized party competition after the fascist experience took many forms dependent on democratic models. In the Low Countries, "pillarization" referred to the construction of separate civil spheres for socialist, liberal, and Christian-democratic parties, expressed in their own newspapers, hospitals, and even youth clubs. In Britain, both Labour and Conservatives relied on a large substructure of clubs and unions to mobilize their voting blocs. Although delayed democratization saw Spain, Greece, and Portugal building corporatist structures only later, they nonetheless operated with the same model. In Eastern Europe, in turn, Soviet satellite states maintained a one-party system but sponsored civil society initiatives that laid the claim for a dissident movement in the 1970s. From the left, the Hungarian writer G. M. Tamás has aptly described this "ordered modernity" as a world that saw

> the creation of a counter-power of working-class trade unions and parties, with their own savings banks, health and pension funds, newspapers, extramural popular academies, workingmen's clubs, libraries, choirs, brass bands, *engagé* intellectuals, songs, novels, philosophical treatises, learned journals, pamphlets, well-entrenched local governments, temperance societies — all with their own mores, manners and style.[2]

This civil society comes with its own cultural esprit de corps. In such a setting, Chris Bickerton claims, "a strong leader is of secondary importance, since the rank-and-file remains at the center of the party."[3]

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2   G. M. Tamás, "Telling the Truth About Class," *Socialist Register* 46 (2006), 1–41.

3   Sander Becker, "Sterke leider," *Trouw*. Original quote in Dutch: "Traditionele partijen komen van oorsprong voort uit een bepaalde laag van de bevolking: linkse partijen vertegenwoordigden de arbeiders, liberale partijen de werkgevers of de elite. In zo'n setting is een sterke leider niet zo belangrijk, want het draait om de achterban. Voor populistische partijen ligt dat anders. Zij komen uit het niets. Ze moeten zich

In the last thirty years, these pillars of party democracy have undergone a gradual erosion. Two phenomena are particularly exemplary for this trend. The first is falling membership rates for parties across the board, coupled with the increased seniority of their members. The German SPD went from 1 million members in 1986 to 660,000 in 2003; the Dutch Socialists from 90,000 to 57,000. The French Communist Party (PCF) tumbled from 632,000 in 1978 to 210,000 in 1998; its Italian sister party went from 1,753,323 to 621,670 in 1998, only to disappear in the Democratic Party after that. The UK Labour Party gathered 675,906 members in 1978, down to 200,000 in 2005 (it rebounded in 2016 under Corbyn, now stabilizing around 400,000). Although this trend has been more marked for socialist parties — who have always relied on mass rather than cadre models — it is no less striking for the Right. Parties such as the Flemish CD&V are now polling under 10 percent, the German Christian Democrats are hemorrhaging members, and the British Tories — the first mass party in European history — receive more donations from dead than living members. The second symptom of this "disintermediation" is a marked decline in participation rates. Across all European democracies, citizens vote less and attend fewer referenda than their predecessors. Although this has been offset by the supposed democratization of digital media, demobilization remains an abiding fact in developed capitalist democracies.

The results of this hollowing out of European party politics has aptly been described by the Irish political scientist Peter Mair as "ruling the void." An empty space now gapes between citizens and their states. This severely reconfigures how politicians relate to their voting publics. European politicians now have so little idea of what is at play in their populations that they *have* to speculate on what might constitute a successful program. Since parties themselves can no longer garner such information, other channels must be tapped, most of them situated in the growing PR industry. Hence the increasing

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invechten. Een aansprekende figuur is dan van levensbelang, zeker in de moderne mediacratie."

"mediatization" of politics: instead of listening to a base or obeying their party machines, politicians become ever more ensnared by an army of spin doctors. These provide periodic reports on the state of public opinion — a tactic pioneered by media gurus such as Peter Mandelson and Lynton Crosby in the 1980s.

There is a deeper, institutional side to this story. Since the 1990s, Western societies have experienced a rupture between two activities that were classically conjoined in the postwar era: politics and policy. We can think of the latter as the methods by which states order their societies and intervene in their economies, exemplified by the picking of winners and losers in industrial policy. The former comprises the process of what political theorists call "will-formation": competition between parties, campaign building, and the crafting of coalitions. The 1990s saw a drastic change in the way those two moments interacted. Policy became the domain of "unelected power" — organs like the Eurogroup, the European Commission, and the Bank of England. Politics, in turn, was relegated to a media sphere eternally addicted to novelty. Intellectually, both were cast as the emanation of the emancipated civil society of the 1990s, after the bloodless revolutions in Eastern Europe. Things turned out depressingly different, of course. Rather than creating more space, the destruction of collective institutions in the 1980s — Margaret Thatcher's crushing of the British union movement, Socialist president François Mitterrand's shelling of the French Communist Party, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, but also the aging memberships of conservative parties — laid the basis for more elusive forms of collectivity. While politicians were becoming trapped in technocratic management and ever more alienated from citizens, a new form of media seemed to offer a shortcut to popularity.

This hollowing-out process can be tracked into two earlier phases. The first comprises the rise of what German political scientist Otto Kirchheimer named "catch-all parties" in the 1960s. These shunned the emphasis on narrow interests that characterized mass parties before and operated in the name of a more diffuse general interest. Examples

were the German CDU and the rise of new "citizen parties" in the Netherlands. The second phase is often bookmarked as "cartelization." This started in the 1980s and 1990s and was fortified by the rise of the European Union. European parties now increasingly began plucking their personnel from a smaller pool of specialists and outsourced governance to technocratic bodies. In the meantime, they cut their ties with unions and other civil society organizations, preferring open primaries, focus groups, or polling data to mass membership. The Hungarian theorist Péter Csigó has aptly described this phase as leading to a "neo-popular bubble," in which the speculative feedback loops of the new financial economy were transferred to the field of political marketing. This has allowed parties to staff governments from a narrower pool of members, leading to a so-called diploma democracy in which union leaders were sidelined for bankers and university professors.

This disintermediation, of course, had deeper economic drivers. Since the slowdown of economic growth in the early 1970s as, European economies steadily drove toward overcapacity while their states acquired ever large public debt. The responses to this crisis were not uniform, and each was determined by local constellations of forces. Broadly speaking, however, states had two distinct options to deal with the crisis: tempering the demands of its waged classes to the benefit of capital or tempering the demands of capital to the benefit of its waged class. In the latter case, a problem of public management became apparent. Given the democratization of European states in the postwar period, parties usually relied on state funds to maintain their base. This created a strong inflationary impulse. In the 1970s, most parties kept up expectations by increased public borrowing. This situation provoked a fierce response on behalf of bond-holding capitalists still looking for higher profit margins, who worried about states' capacity to honor their credit obligations. The remedy was to uncouple parties from their base, who were said to hamper a return to economic normalcy. As James Heartfield describes this macro precondition,

To defeat the working class challenge of the seventies, the elite tore up the old institutions that bound the masses to the state. Class conflict was institutionalized under the old system, which not only contained working class opposition but also helped the ruling class to formulate a common outlook. What started as an offensive against working class solidarity in the eighties undermined the institutions that bound society together. Not just trade unions and socialist parties were undermined, but so too were right-wing political parties and their traditional support bases amongst church and farmers' groups. Middle class professional groups lost their privileged position.

MIDDLE-RANGE AND IMMEDIATE FACTORS

Although this crisis of party democracy is a necessary precondition for populist interventions, it is hardly sufficient. A whole swath of intervening factors come into play here, from party systems, political traditions, the intensity of austerity programs, the makeup of the national welfare state, and potential exogenous shocks. A first mid-range factor was the political fallout of the 2008 financial crisis. All new European populist movements arose in countries whose system of governance was severely reconfigured as a response to this debt crisis, from Spain to Italy. When financial capital appealed for liquidity injections from governments, they insisted on downsizing countries' public sectors to stimulate profitability. This downsizing increased the unemployment rate and hence put a downward pressure on wages. A further erosion of public goods followed, blurring the differences between traditional political families and deepening the representative void. In Southern Europe, this led to a search for other representative channels when citizens looked for avenues to voice their discontent.

Midrange factors are insufficient to grasp the particularity of every national, populist moment, however. First, party systems and their

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respective diversity play an equally important role. Majoritarian systems without firmly entrenched parties, for instance, make an open populist hijack more likely and render pivoting on the margins unnecessary; those without embedded parties usually force their populists into stealth mode, as was the case with UKIP. Consociational systems such as the Netherlands and Belgium, in turn, leave more space for smaller parties to grow and influence larger parties. In some cases, they could force a consensual ethic on contenders and temper their demands. The second issue concerns the different ordering of various European welfare states. As Philip Manow has noted, these can be divided into open and closed models, depending on the degree of access they grant to citizens and outsiders. The latter — exemplified by countries such as Spain, Portugal, and Italy — tend to produce left-wing populist responses, while the former show a higher likelihood for right-wing populist contenders.

A full etiology of populism operates on all three of these levels and combine both macro-, meso-, and microfactors. Although the decline of party democracy is a universal tendency for European democracies, its intensity is not equal. Southern Belgium, for instance, still has a large mass party in the Parti Socialiste, which maintains its dominance through classical systems of clientelism. Northern and Eastern Europe, in turn, have seen a much more rapid decline of classical party mediation, with accompanying right-populist symptoms. Bringing together these factors allows for a fuller populist story.

THRIVING POPULISMS

The past decade has been kind to populist parties. The Five Star Movement became Italy's third political force in 2013, receiving a quarter of the vote for both houses of parliament — and thereby reaching the best first-time results in a national election for any party in Europe since 1945. Five years later, it would become Italy's leading political force and form the national government in coalition with the Northern

League. Syriza was founded in 2004 and became a crucial party in the context of the Greek economic crisis, winning a quarter of the popular vote in 2012 and conquering the executive power in 2015 with 35 percent of the vote. Podemos, in Spain, first obtained encouraging results in the EU elections in 2014 (8 percent of the vote, five MEPs). It then grew in the subsequent local, regional, and national electoral contests and peaked in the 2016 legislative elections with seventy-one deputies (together with other forces), nearly surpassing the socialist party (PSOE). From then on, Podemos experienced a relative but steady electoral decline and stabilized itself as Spain's fourth political force. Already existing parties have had equally impressive tallies: La France Insoumise in the French presidential elections of 2017, the Front National (now National Rally) since 2008, or the Northern League (now simply Lega) under Matteo Salvini.

These successes have been correctly attributed to a new zeitgeist.[4] As mentioned, populism as a specific political form — regardless of its ideological and programmatic content — thrives in the contemporary political context of disintermediation, aiming to fill a gap that has been widening throughout almost all Western democracies over the past forty years. The hollowing out of party democracy has progressively eroded the mechanisms of representation characteristic of the postwar model: political parties, trade unions, churches, associations, and clubs progressively lost their role as mediating agents between citizens and the state.[5] From agents representing a social constituency, they became agents of the state, as their own interests were increasingly merged with those of public institutions.[6] This absorption into the state, accentuated by European integration, progressively created a void between the representatives and the

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4 Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39:4 (2004): 541–63.

5 Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracies* (London: Verso, 2013).

6 Richard Katz and Peter Mair, "Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy: The Emergence of the Cartel Party," *Party Politics* 1:1 (1995): 5–28.

represented.[7] This dynamic has been further catalyzed by the Great Recession and its management, which has only worsened European social democracy's decline

Populism's post-intermediary brand of politics cannot but blossom in this environment. First, their strategic, communicational, and organizational features make them particularly agile at adapting to these conditions, which often appear prohibitive to traditional class-based movements. Their ideological malleability enables them to have a particularly transversal electoral appeal. They go beyond the traditional boundaries of left and right constituencies, allowing them to be (at least potentially) catch-all political formations. Second, the strong emphasis put on the leader as a unifying figure for the movement — something that Laclau himself has theorized explicitly — matches the personalization of contemporary politics (itself related to the structure of television and social media) and allows these movements to bypass the costly construction of intermediary structures. Third, they are able to largely do without traditional communication channels and create the fiction of direct exchange with their supporters. Most of this is due to their remarkably innovative communication strategies (think of the Five Star Movement's meetups, the development of *La Tuerka* by Podemos, Jean-Luc Mélenchon's use of hologram technology during the presidential campaign, Donald Trump's Twitter use, and Salvini's Facebook strategy). Finally, they have managed to use their (real or fake) anti-establishment status to rearticulate demands frustrated by the economic crisis and the congestion of traditional parties.

Unlike the old mass party, however, this new left populism found itself spread out among a complicated mishmash of groups. On one side, there were older blue-collar workers, hit harder by the recession in Southern European countries and generally tied to national welfare states. Since the gutting of communist parties, they had either

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7   Chris Bickerton, *European Integration: From Nation-States to Member States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

ceased voting or been lured to new nationalist formations such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the National Rally, Vlaams Belang, and the new Lega (formerly the Lega Nord). Figures such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Pablo Iglesias were always open about their desire to herd these voters back to the Left. This was signaled by slogans such as Mélenchon's "fâchés mais pas fachos" ("angry but not fascist") or Íñigo Errejón and Iglesias's desire to "go beyond left and right." Populist theorists tended to take the lead here. Laclau's collaborator Chantal Mouffe, for instance, has always been stern about the need to recognize the "rational kernel" of right populists. Rather than dismissing these voters as sad subjects in need of therapy, she proposed a strategy of recuperation: if the Left failed to bring these voters back into the tent, it would not win.

Such a message was not always easy to sell. The primary skeptics were the other group of left-populist voters: younger professionals. Highly educated, networked, and web-savvy, most of them graduated straight from the university into the tight labor market of the 2010s. The majority ended up in service jobs. Combined with a new internet-enabled public sphere freed of its "old media" shackles, most of them were ready for radicalization. When Alexis Tsipras was elected in 2015, he counted no less than 30 percent of Greek youth among his supporters. But their cultural outlook did not always mesh with the older, working-class base targeted by left populists. This became visible in Corbyn's Labour Party, where a precarious coalition between blue-collar Northern workers and cosmopolitan Southern millennials dissolved over the Brexit vote. A similar split happened in much of continental Europe. There, as Adam Tooze notes, the European Union had given "voice and agency to a substantial cohort of educated middle-class and professional Europeans" and "their angry and disappointed younger siblings [and] cousins." A disconnect with many older working-class voters, coupled with a lack of party infrastructure, meant that assembling a majoritarian constituency was almost impossible.

It is no surprise, then, that the left populists who shortly managed to attain some kind of political viability have often done so within traditional Left parties or by hitching themselves to them. Corbyn's Labour, for instance, has relied on an internal populist dynamic to sideline the moderates and Blairites in his way. The same holds for the Belgian Workers' Party, which has evolved into something of a representative of working-class union politics in the country.

Left populists also made clear that they could never function as a panacea here. Syriza and Podemos were not supposed to magically reorder the political economy of an entire continent ("How many divisions does the Pope have?" Pablo Iglesias asked just after Tsipras's surrender). Still, a left populist presence has reshuffled the cards in their respective national contexts in a surprisingly short period of time. The extent to which they have been able to reorganize their party landscapes, however, varies from case to case — and needs to be carefully framed.

SHADES OF SUCCESS

Left populism's main achievement is to have electorally revived a moribund radical left, while swapping old leftist folklore for a new set of symbols. This has enabled those populists to seduce a new and heterogeneous electorate, composed of many different segments of the population, by speaking to the vulnerable sectors of the middle classes suddenly impoverished by the crisis who would have not opted for more radical options. In many cases, this has amounted to attracting a significant part of the social-democratic electorate, disappointed by the center left's involvement in austerity programs. Left-populist contenders have been popular in countries where social-democratic parties have suffered from their complicity in the imposition of austerity — having almost disappeared, as in Greece and France, or being in danger of doing so, as in the Spanish case. They have also performed well in regions with sizable ethnic minorities, as demonstrated by

Mélenchon's garnering 37 percent of the Muslim vote at the 2017 presidential election.[8] Last but not least, left populism has politicized a new generation of young voters who would have otherwise remained politically apathetic: a generation involved in the 15-M movement, the Aganaktismenoi, and Nuit debout but barely inclined to participate in conventional left organizations. A quick look at Podemos's ranks, for instance, is revealing in that regard: alongside former sympathizers of the Communist Party who suddenly became politically active thanks to the Morada formation, one finds a lot of young people (between twenty-five and thirty-five years old) who had their first political experience as Indignados and now occupy posts within the party.

This process has seen left populism infuse new content into old categories. For one, it has reframed the matter of social justice — long neglected in social democracy's march to the center. Rather than focusing on workers vs. capital owners — an opposition that left populists deemed out of date for the new, complex economy — left populists have relied instead on a sense of economic injustice by appealing to cross-class categories such as "the 99 percent," "the many," and "*la gente común*." This had the merit of performing the unity of extremely heterogeneous segments of the population — including classic blue-collar workers, members of the public sector, medium and small entrepreneurs, autonomous workers, and parts of the petty bourgeoisie — by drawing the attention to an increasingly tiny group benefiting from skyrocketing inequalities. Its sociological accuracy can be doubted, however, and left populists have often found it difficult to rhetorically reconcile conflicts of interest in its own camp.

One can lament that such slogans lack a systematic analysis of capitalist accumulation. Indeed, left populism's appeal rests mainly on a moral conception of the economy — pitting producers against parasites — rather than on a radical repudiation of capitalism itself. But it has nonetheless served as a valuable starting point to challenge

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8 Bernadette Sauvaget, "Les catholiques ont voté à droite, les musulmans largement à gauche," *Libération*, April 25, 2017, https://www.liberation.fr/politiques/2017/04/25/les-catholiques-ont-vote-a-droite-les-musulmans-largement-a-gauche_1565272.

neoliberal hegemony. It is more able than radicalism to seduce the moderate sectors of the population that neoliberalism has been striving (but ultimately failing) to co-opt as happy, free self-entrepreneurs — even more so as left populists have generally been successful at articulating those economic and environmental claims with new issues, such as feminism, into a cohesive new common sense (rather than merely summarizing them).

In some cases, this inclusionary drive went hand in hand with support for new civil society initiatives. Corbynism encouraged people to build unions in sectors of the "new economy" (such as Deliveroo) that remained rather disorganized until then.[9] By the same token, renters in Barcelona organized into tenants' unions under the benevolent eye of Ada Colau, then mayor of the city. More often, however, left populists gravely underestimated the importance of civil society revival. Across Europe, organizations that classically straightened the backbones of left-wing parties had atrophied or retreated into corporatist shelters. Left populists tried to leap over this pre-political stage and sought out a Gramscian "war of movement" that was understood almost exclusively in electoral terms. This stemmed from a peculiarly European reading of Laclau's oeuvre, which saw the construction of a "chain of equivalences" as an operation that pertained almost exclusively to electoral context — and it diverted valuable resources away from the intermediary bodies crucial to populism's counter-hegemonic strategy in the long run. Although it struck roots in some tenants' unions and new unions, Podemos's main focus was on digital outreach, allowing members to determine party policy, while Syriza focused heavily on electoral mobilization at the expense of class power.

Other populists have proven more agile at navigating this new terrain, which can be traced back to a mix of class strategy, culture war, and online confrontation. First, right populists have been able to

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9 Callum Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).

garner voters from both old center-right and left parties by departing from their former ultranationalist and neoliberal positions. These often confined them to minority sectors of the upper business class — as was the case for the National Front (FN) in the 1980s — and lessened their outreach with industrial workers. While Jean-Marie Le Pen celebrated the Thatcher and Reagan Revolution in the 1980s, the party began to reorient itself around a "right-Gramscian" core in the late 1990s and openly embraced welfarist themes. A similar welfare chauvinism was initiated by Geert Wilders, who started out as a Dutch Liberal Party politician but later moved on to found his own nonparty outfit. These ventures broadened right-wing populism's appeal by slightly tempering their positions on cultural issues (thus seducing conservative electorates) and by finessing their welfare chauvinist approach, rallying workers in deindustrialized areas.

Second, right-wing populists have reanchored debates. This holds acutely for immigration, which has acquired a centrality rivaled by few other themes in Europe. There is no need to be discursively determinist about this shift. Although European media played an evident role in putting the issue on the agenda, immigration has acquired saliency mainly due to its sensitive interaction with labor markets and urban geographies. For this, little discursive mediation was required. States have ceded many of their interventionist capacities and cater to capital to an irrational degree, so that the management of a labor supply now appears to be the only viable substitute for wage bargaining. But this hardly explains immigration's centrality today. The populist right has waged a patient "culture war" that has put pressure on competitors to the right and beyond. One can think here, for example, of Laurent Fabius's recognition of FN's ability to identify the "real problems" of French citizens and the rise of openly racist rhetoric on the French right. Dutch debates, in turn, offer a particularly stark example of right populists reorienting every issue around a pro- or anti-Islam axis. Even in countries where postwar bargaining structures have survived intact into the neoliberal era — such as France,

Belgium, and parts of German industry — immigration has become a powerful prism through which citizens conceive of a variety of social problems: housing, wages, cultural anomie. In the face of this, the old right has taken part in a race lost in advance. Most of them have tried to catch up with the far right's positions on immigration while only offering a pale copy of the original. While the CDU, Forza Italia, and Les Républicains hardened on immigration, they actively abetted and encouraged the growth of the Alternative für Deutschland, Lega, and the FN. Far-right challengers have also strongly benefited from the shift from austerity policies to the "migration crisis" as the main political issue of the European continent.

A final factor is digitalization. More than any other family of parties, populist parties have leaned on new communication strategies and lay claim to a high online presence (Trump's strategies neatly mirror those of Salvini's Facebook use). This tactic has had a double effect. First, it has allowed them to neutralize opposition within their camp by establishing a seemingly direct communication line with their supporters. But it also shielded the party from outside forces, rewiring politics around a digital arena rather than a classical public sphere. In the last Belgian election, Vlaams Belang outspent all other Flemish parties on digital campaigning, while the online followers of the Front and Lega far outnumber equivalents on the Left. They have thus combined the best of both worlds: drawing in loyal voters via a trained cadre and broadening their electoral prospects, combining resilience with ambition.

More nonpartisan populisms (such as the Italian Five Star Movement and the Dutch Democrats 66) share the same strengths, but for a rather different set of reasons. Most of them have registered an undetermined form of opposition to a party establishment; as a consequence, they can easily extend their electoral appeal to given social groups. Nonpartisan populists are thus the most catch-all of all contemporary political species, untainted by any clear sociological bias or clientelist loyalty. The Five Star Movement (M5S), for instance,

has avoided discussion on divisive subjects in its own ranks (immigration, most of all, which could provoke splits between right-wing and left-wing members) and focused exclusively on "transversal" issues. Of the latter, the so-called moral question stands out. More than any other party, M5S has emphasized Italian political elites' corruption, incompetence, and collusion with specialists. In doing so, M5S has propelled a new axis of competition around an opposition between "ordinary citizens" on one hand and national political elites on the other. The success of this tactic has been evident. In a context already marked by the decline of traditional cleavages (particularly in Italy, given the political implosions of the early 1990s), M5S has steadily established the elite-ordinary axis as the main dividing line in society.

A final distinction with right populists concerns mobilization tactics. As mentioned, the populist radical right has always combined new media with more traditional organizational forms. Nonpartisan populists, in turn, have concentrated their energies almost exclusively on the digital. This, in turn, has helped them to create fresh spaces of political participation, such as M5S and its online referenda on the Rousseau platform. These digital instruments operate as both a sword and a shield. On the one hand, it has enabled nonpartisan populists to propose alternative tools and practices to those of (delegitimized) traditional parties. On the other, the seemingly "horizontal" nature of those parties allows for an extremely tight internal control and decision structure, foreclosing the rise of intermediary layers. The Rousseau platform, for instance — a piece of software launched by an engineer — is now widely seen as open to manipulation, while the Brexit Party's Nigel Farage decided to push through a decision not to run in marginal Tory seats without consulting members. Hence the abiding paradox of the Five Star Movement: it is able to benefit both from the effects of online deliberation and consultation and from an extremely vertical structure within which the ultimate decision power lies in a few hands.

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PARADOXES OF THE VOID

The balance sheet of ten years of populism is admittedly impressive. Over the span of a single decade, it has radically redrawn the electoral map of several European countries and ended the dominance of classical party families, who barely went beyond an added 50 percent in the last European parliamentary elections. Despite this, however, many left and nonpartisan populist parties have run into a set of similar challenges — of an endogenous and exogenous nature, relating to pressures outside and inside their parties.

A careful examination of these challenges reveals an interesting paradox at the heart of the populist explosion. In short, populists both *suffer* and *profit* from disintermediation; or, what Peter Mair termed his "void" is either too empty or not empty enough for populists. For the first, an extremely volatile political context makes it difficult (and, in some cases, impossible) for populist actors to stabilize their voting bases and program. In the second, too much breathing space is left for traditional actors, reducing the leeway available to populist challengers. Between these two poles, new parties struggle to strike the correct (i) ideological or (ii) organizational balance.

Populists are thus torn between two desiderata. The first is the freedom to move through the void, while the second is protection from a black hole. Populists have taken note of the resilience of traditional cleavages and decided to relocate themselves more clearly. By doing so, however, they run the risk of being perceived as too partisan and losing their transversal appeal. If, on the other hand, they decide to downplay the importance of traditional cleavages, they become tempted to abandon any specific ideological or sociological bias, thereby missing out on electoral loyalty — the only guarantor of stability in an increasingly volatile context. Populists face a similar second dilemma at the organizational level. Either they "go vertical," gaining in short-term efficiency but bypassing the careful construction of intermediary structures so vital to long-term stability — or

they "normalize" and simply adopt the bureaucratic cartel structures of old parties, thus gaining in organizational strength but shedding their freedom to move freely in the void.

These dilemmas appear differently to each populist variant. To start, left populist parties can either be *too left* or *too populist*. In the first scenario, they remain unable to fully profit from the breakdown of the traditional social democracy and pluck the fruits of a catch-all approach. This means they retain an association with older social-democratic (or Marxist) approaches and have to tie themselves to existing civil society organizations (mostly unions and cooperatives) or smaller left outfits. Some movements combined both, such as the Belgian Workers' Party, which started out as a general anti-elite outfit and has now anchored itself in the country's remaining union sector. But this comes with inevitable costs. Parties such as M5S, for instance, were happy to leave behind references to a left-right cleavage and embrace an openly catch-all approach. This gave them considerable electoral clout. In contrast, Podemos, the Belgian Workers' Party, and Syriza constantly found themselves drawn back to their far-left background and castigated as "communist" by their opponents. And while Mélenchon's La France Insoumise shed its old left label in the Left Front alliance, it nonetheless harked back to an older Jacobin tradition and played on popular-front memories.

Although left populists can draw on these older traditions, it usually requires shedding their sense of exteriority to the existing party system. Such a strategy might well be useful to rebuild a loyal electorate on the Left and guarantee an electoral floor. But it also hampers any attempt at convincing new voters and ushers in the double dangers of sectarianism and clientelism. Podemos remains an acute example of this development. In a world of older cleavages (the left-right axis and Spain's regional question), the party has repositioned itself on the Left in alliance with Izquierda Unida. While this has enabled Podemos to strengthen territorial roots and even brought it into government, it has severely eroded its status as an outsider. As

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of 2019, its electoral appeal was confined to downwardly mobile professionals in large urban cities. These were the first arrivals in their coalition, only later joined by some less-educated workers. After 2015, however, many working-class voters returned to the PSOE. A retake of Podemos's high in December 2015 — in which it reached nearly a quarter of the vote — appears nigh impossible. Consequently, it has given up the last ambitions of becoming a majoritarian force and now operates as a pressure group left of the PSOE, shepherding them into a coalition government in 2020.

A second scenario sees left populism becoming *too populist*. In this case, leftists try to broaden their electoral appeal by thinning out their commitments to an older, supposedly compromised left-wing tradition and skipping over some key organizational questions. La France Insoumise, for instance, willfully cut ties with French unions and abjured classical membership models, instead focusing on mainly digital outreach. This led Mélenchon to boast that "no internal disagreement" occurred in the party due to its "heterodox setup." Podemos similarly focused on building a ruthless "electoral war machine" that could outflank the ailing PSOE. While this strategy brought clear short-term dividends, it quickly showed external and internal limits. Podemos peaked in 2015 but underwent a steady decline afterward, splitting into two separate parties in 2015. They admitted underestimating the inertia of European party systems and, conversely, overestimated the "latinamericanization" of Europe — a continent to which left populists had long looked for inspiration. In short, most left-wing voters have not been completely dissuaded from their old voting blocs, as the persistence of the PSOE vote shows, nor has the Right lost all of its loyalists.

A second, internal limit concerns matters of rhetorical strategy. Podemos was not alone among left populists in consciously seeking to reclaim signifiers traditionally monopolized by the Right (such as "nation," "motherland," and "security"). This was mirrored by Syriza's and Mélenchon's attempts to craft an "inclusive" nationalism

against the Right's increasing postindustrial base. Left populists, however, usually overstated the floating nature of those signifiers. Usage of tropes such as "nation" and "homeland" were seen more as PR maneuvers than concrete ideological commitments. Given Spain's regionalist legacy, a nationalist position was also difficult to maintain. Instead, Iglesias chose to emphasize Spain's "plurinational" setup — a Spanish nation made up of several sub-units — and hoped that this would calm his bases from Barcelona to Madrid. Rather than defusing tension, however, Podemos's participation in nationalist name-calling allowed for the emergence of a series of national questions. The most glaring of these was the Catalan independence movement, which drove a wedge into one of its main bases in Barcelona. Later, Podemos's acquiescence created space for the reemergence of the far-right party Vox, which forced PSOE into their current coalition.

Both these limits can be traced back to Laclau's original theory of populism, which focused heavily on electioneering, leaders, and rhetoric. First, left-populist actors have focused almost exclusively on the conquest of executive power. They have thereby neglected to initiate the long-term "war of position" (construction of its own organizations, development of a counter-society) that any successful class strategy requires. Second, an obsessional focus on short-term electoral gains encouraged the "verticalization" of these movements. Podemos and Syriza were both characterized by a dependence on leaders that hampered any patient organizational work. Last but not least, the movements suffered from an excessive formalism. They have almost exclusively seen their political project as a new form of constructing political *identities*, similar to the project of carving out a new electoral brand. This was compatible with the heightened importance of PR across the political spectrum since the 1990s, which has seen classical parties turn to spin doctors en masse. For left populists, however, this came to the detriment of normative and programmatic questions, which they usually borrowed from older traditions (ecologist, Keynesian, feminist, etc.) and then smuggled

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into their programs. Added to this are the brittle building blocks of the left-populist coalition, which straddles the overeducated children of professionals, younger students, and middle-aged care workers, some with assets. Corbynism stands as an ominous precedent here. Corbynists managed to infiltrate an already existing party and colonize it for their own purposes — but this colonization was never complete, and Blairite elements survived. It also failed to control its insistent pro-EU faction, mainly drawn from London professional circles. These entered into an alliance with older parliamentarians and pressured the party into a Remain position, thereby severely impacting its electoral chances in the North.

Right populism encounters a similar dilemma, remaining either *too right or too populist*. In the first case, it retains too strong an association with certain fascist or classical conservative tendencies and faces an electoral ceiling. Marine Le Pen's expulsion of her father from the party, for instance, should be seen in this light, while other parties have faced a similar dilemma on their naming (from Front National to National Rally, from Vlaams Blok to Vlaams Belang, and from Lega Nord to Lega).

In the second, less recurrent case, the party turns too populist and gives up on its ideological commitments. In doing so, it risks losing out on the potential of a solid base, particularly in the presence of a strong challenger on the right side of the political spectrum. The ideal solution for those parties is probably a hybrid party structure, situated somewhere between digital and cadre. Salvini's Lega remains the ideal type here, which was able to combine a solid and stable organizational model in the north of Italy (with a strong regionalist base) with an updated communication strategy based on a supposedly direct exchange between leader and citizen. As a result, Salvini now stands out as one of the most powerful politicians in Europe from a party that was always considered secondary. His move of genius was to combine a classical regionalist party structure built in the 1990s with a new digital battleship constructed in the 2000s.

Salvini's "digital party" is an impressive work of political engineering, and "Matteo" is an omnipresent Facebook personality. Much like Corbynism, Salvini hijacked an existing party structure and hitched it to his crusade rather than conjuring up a party out of thin air. The payoff for this tactic was considerable. It has allowed Salvini to rally core voters through mass mobilization as well as draw in a new, algorithmic set of "followers" in the formerly unattainable South. With a new unlikely PD-M5S government sworn in in Rome, Salvini retains his status as a tribune of popular resistance. He might have lost a battle last summer, but he has certainly not lost the war, as current Italian surveys indicate that Lega is now uncontestably Italy's first party, hovering more than ten points above members of the government.

Nonpartisan populists are in a league of their own. Probably the purest example of Laclau's populist logic — free of any specific content and able to extend its chain of equivalences *ad infinitum* — their gamble is also the riskiest. Age aside, the M5S perfectly epitomizes the difficult tradeoff between short-term gains and long-term solidity. For one, the organizational fluidity of the movement is an asset when building a majority political force. M5S quickly gathered steam online and monopolized public debate. However, this fluidity soon became the main obstacle to fastening the movement long-term. At the level of organization, M5S's "movementist" nature was a cumbersome feature. While practically none of the current Italian parties have the broad base of postwar mass parties, they have nonetheless built up relatively stable voting clienteles. M5S, however, has never had a faithful electoral base. This base is indispensable in times of setback, granting resilience to the movement at a regional, local, or national level. From that point of view, M5S displays a stark difference with the hybrid model of Salvini's Lega, which combined core voters, Northern activists, and new "algorithmic" followers in the South.

The movement's ideological flippancy also acted as a double-edged sword. Faced with Salvini's rhetoric, M5S now found itself forced to

take sides, abandoning its image as a pure outsider to the system. What were its compromises; what were its red lines? While the left-right logic has less of a grip on Italy than before, it still persists, and most political actors and policies continue to bear traces of this logic. The claim of M5S to be "neither right nor left" conflicts with its first concrete experience in power. Allying itself with the far right (Lega), the extreme center (the PD), or a tiny radical-left group (Potere al Popolo), and voting on tax reform or on a security and immigration bill, are not neutral maneuvers. Any contentious choice is likely to fracture the solidarity of the movement, after which part of the electorate defects and internal dissenters appear. On Salvini's immigration gambit, M5S's activists and voters are notoriously divided. Unsure of its identity, territory, and social base, M5S was unable to strike back in the area where its coalition partner was weakest: the regional question. This is now the object of an extremely fragile compromise between local bosses — guarantors of the regionalist identity of the League — and Salvini, who has opted for an openly national strategy.

The lessons of this are tentative. The M5S approach was particularly well suited to a rapid conquest of executive power via the ballot box after profound economic and political crisis. But it cruelly lacked consistency to promote a project capable of challenging neoliberal dogma. Increased volatility makes it difficult to establish a lasting strategy that could alter the terms of the new political deal without falling into an empty "politics of marketing" divorced from any stable party structure and ideological tradition. To avoid this pitfall, M5S would have had to patiently re-create a truly popular counterculture. This would include infrastructure, networks, and intellectual resources, on a terrain dramatically emptied by the decline of left organizations.

Instead, M5S did exactly the opposite and, in doing so, it contributed to the sharpening of a trend intrinsic to contemporary democracy: atomization of the electorate, disaffiliation from parties, decline of intermediary institutions, and a general personalization of politics.

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The party probably best epitomizes the paradox of Mair's void: the contemporary populist challengers can hardly be at the same time a symptom of degeneration and a necessary cure.

RIFTS ON THE RIGHT

Like the previous two populisms, right-wing populism both benefits *and* suffers from the structural evolutions outlined above. But they also display important programmatic and organizational limits. First, they are not *anti-systemic* at all, and might thus rapidly lose their aura of radical outsiders. Their main policy issues — anti-immigration, welfare chauvinism, anti-EU, and security — require little but cosmetic fixes to European debt ceilings and occasional cultural posturing on "Western values." When it comes to migration, Angela Merkel and Matteo Salvini, or Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, have little to disagree on except how to distribute its financial load. Even the alleged Euroscepticism of those parties is far less radical than it might seem. As soon as they enter into positions of power (like Salvini) or move closer to it (like Le Pen), they downplay their opposition to EU institutions in order to play up their acceptability. Left populists wanted much more than that. Podemos's and Syriza's plans implied a far-reaching overhaul of the Eurozone, a departure from austerity programs, and an ambitious expansion of social provision. To some, this required the perfectly timed rise of several left-populist movements in a domino-like act of coordination. Right-wing populists, by contrast, do not require cooperation in a transnational setting. This is not simply due to the notoriously paradoxical and difficult coordination at the EU level for anti-EU parties; it mostly stems from the modest nature of their political program, which can be implemented without disrupting existing institutional settings. While this incontestably proves a strength in the short term — compared to left populism, it is easier to keep promises — it can become a weakness in the long run.

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The far right's second limit is organizational. Most of all, its tactics remain highly dependent on volatility and stick to digital outreach, which, in turn, means its voting clientele is bound to remain ephemeral. In contrast to historical fascism, for example, right populists do not build right-wing unions or cooperatives, let alone paramilitary formations. Countries with a well-organized civil society (Belgium's Wallonia, for instance, where the unionization rate is around 55 percent), the far right has underperformed. Where left civil society is moribund, however (French workers have a unionization rate of 7 percent, despite their strategic location in the economy), the far right finds its easier to penetrate industrial constituencies, but often without nesting themselves in it. Even in the case of the gilets jaunes, far-right efforts to capture the movement failed, driven mainly by its refusal of representation. The left-populist takeaway is that a twofold effort of cultivating existing civil society institutions and carefully politicizing new social movements (without engaging in coarse incorporation) offers the best strategy to deprive the far right from developing deeper roots.

Overall, however, the populist left faces two unsatisfying options against a growing radical right: *recuperation* and *opposition*. In the first, leftists openly embrace right-wing rhetoric and strategy, especially its nationalist leanings. The potential benefits of this would be to reclaim lost "national" working-class voters instead of becoming the front of minorities and professionals. This might invert the trend provoked by the "terra nova" approach, which builds bridges between internationally minded classes in cities in an inter-classist fashion. This has created a so-called Brahmin Left, as Thomas Piketty termed it, disconnected from the country's popular sectors. The danger in these tactics, as always, is plagiarism: voters will prefer the original over the copy and see through the antics. Until now, there has been no convincing evidence that this strategy has enabled La France Insoumise, Die Linke, or Podemos to win back voters from the far right — at least not in a substantial proportion.

In the second scenario, left populists accept a coalition with liberals and join a broad anti-populist front in the name of a cordon sanitaire. Evidence shows this to be more deleterious than outflanking from the right, however. While it can halt slides into authoritarianism, this tactic usually renders left populists complicit in liberal denial, acting on symptoms while delaying structural reforms. Such a strategy offers no guarantee of actually halting authoritarian and xenophobic backsliding, especially in the many contexts where the center itself is already complicit (such as Merkel on immigration, or Macron's repressive anti-labor policies).

A careful look at the programmatic and organizational limits of the far right also points in a different direction. This would imply working on the pre-political terrain by facilitating new forms of association made impossible by neoliberalism. A disorganized society (the precondition for the reduction of oppositions to the populism-versus-technocracy dichotomy) might simply need an organizational stir from above. Before its election defeat in December, the British Labour Party had consistently hinted in this direction. Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell made clear that their primary goals are to make possible forms of organizing rendered inane by thirty years of neoliberal onslaught. Rather than falling into the traps of electioneering, verticalism, and formalism, left populists should concentrate their efforts on rebuilding the forms of social life to which the far right is fundamentally alien. This would make possible the reconstitution of a working-class public sphere now sidelined by online quarrels and media bubbles. It also appears as the only credible option for a return to mass politics, preventing populism and technocracy from becoming the only games in town. ⟨

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The election of Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans as cochairs of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) last December has been widely perceived as a turn to the left in German politics. This may be true at an institutional level, but rebuilding the party's traditional bases of social power will prove impossible as long as it remains wedded to the grand coalition with Angela Merkel.

DOES THE GERMAN
SPD HAVE A FUTURE?

LOREN BALHORN

Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) has found itself between a rock and a hard place for several decades now. Originally founded in 1863, the once-mighty organization appears caught in an ineluctable decline from the country's strongest political force — at least in terms of membership and often enough electorally — to a party that increasingly failed to muster more than 30 percent of the popular vote and now barely approaches 20.[1] Long reduced to a caste of professional functionaries at the top and an aging layer of true believers below, what was at one point the industrialized world's largest and proudest mass socialist party[2] now teeters on the edge of political oblivion.

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1 See Oliver Nachtwey, "The Merkel Effect," *Jacobin*, September 22, 2017; Ines Schwerdtner, "Social Democracy's Last Dance," *Jacobin*, March 3, 2018; Loren Balhorn, "Social Democracy at Death's Door," *Jacobin*, June 1, 2019.

2 A useful account of German Social Democracy's historic ascent and transformation can be found in Stefan Berger, *Social Democracy and the Working Class in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Since its initial turn toward a supply-side economic agenda in the early 2000s under Gerhard Schröder,[3] and particularly after inaugurating its long tenure as Angela Merkel's junior coalition partner in 2005, the SPD has hemorrhaged more than two hundred thousand members[4] and shuffled through seven different leaders. Practically all of the latter came into office promising to reinvigorate the party base and win back voter confidence, yet all of them left more or less in disgrace. Schröder's six-year tenure was succeeded by his minister of labor, Franz Müntefering, in 2004. He declined to run for reelection following internal wrangling and was succeeded in 2005 by the minister president of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck, who soon stepped down for health reasons to be replaced by a nominal left-winger from Rhineland-Palatinate, Kurt Beck, six months later. Beck resigned after another round of political intrigue in 2009 and was briefly replaced by Müntefering, who then cleared the stage for Sigmar Gabriel — the only leader since Schröder to hang on for more than a few years.

Though comparatively well-liked by the public, the former minister of the environment, economic affairs, foreign affairs, and even vice-chancellor gave up his post in early 2017 to the party's first "renewal" candidate, Martin Schulz.[5] The euphoria around Schulz was brief,[6] and another nominal left-winger, Andrea Nahles, stepped

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3   That economic agenda was the "Agenda 2010" passed by the SPD-Green government, a series of sweeping reforms to German labor law and the welfare state driving down benefits and pushing the long-term unemployed into work through negative incentives and penalties. See Pamela Camerra-Rowe, "Agenda 2010: Redefining German Social Democracy," *German Politics & Society* 22(1), 1–30; on the impact of Agenda 2010 on the SPD's electoral fortunes, see Jörg Michael Dostal, "The Crisis of German Social Democracy Revisited," *The Political Quarterly* 88(2), 230–39.

4   Oskar Niedermayer, "Parteimitglieder in Deutschland: Version 2019," *Arbeitshefte aus dem Otto-Stammer-Zentrum* 30, Freie Universität Berlin (2019), 6.

5   True to form, Gabriel was recently nominated to the supervisory board of Deutsche Bank; see Stephen Morris and Olaf Storbeck, "Deutsche Bank picks ex-foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel for board," *Financial Times*, January 24, 2020.

6   Matthew Karnitschnig, "'The Schulz' takes his leave," *Politico*, February 13, 2018; see also Loren Balhorn, "No Corbyn in Sight," *Jacobin*, January 27, 2018.

in after his humiliating performance in the 2017 general election. The party's first woman leader enjoyed a short tenure, resigning one year later in the wake of her own, equally catastrophic performance in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament.[7] The latest blow prompted an internal crisis of unprecedented proportions, resulting in the appointment of a three-person caretaker leadership and the promise of a membership-wide vote for a new, two-person executive in late 2019.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER?

The most fitting description of the SPD's trials and tribulations is that of a *Trauerspiel*, a German phrase meaning "tragic drama," in which one disastrous blunder merely anticipates the next with no perceivable end in sight. Unable to muster a parliamentary majority with the Greens and unwilling to tack left and govern with Die Linke, the SPD has instead spent more than a decade playing second fiddle to Angela Merkel in a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDU), allowing them to exact a number of painful compromises that demoralized the base and repelled voters.[8] Having routed the CDU with nearly 41 percent of the vote in the 1998 general election, today anything above 15 percent prompts a sigh of relief rather than further alarm.

It was thus mildly surprising when, only two weeks before Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party decisively lost the UK general election and left its supporters reeling, SPD members ended up handing victory not to finance minister Olaf Scholz and his little-known running mate Klara Geywitz, but instead to the moderately left-wing duo of Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans.[9] Handily defeating their estab-

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7 Ines Schwerdtner, "Can Anyone Save the SPD?", *Jacobin*, June 11, 2019.

8 For a more in-depth analysis of the German political landscape and the grand coalition's centrifugal effects, see Oliver Nachtwey and Loren Balhorn, "Berlin Is Not (Yet) Weimar," *Catalyst* 2 (2019), 40–79.

9 Tobias Buck, "Blow to Merkel as leftwingers win SPD leadership," *Financial Times*,

lishment opponents with 53 percent of the vote, the upset victory signals a rejection of the party's current orientation and a desire, however tepid, for a return to traditional social-democratic policies. Hysterical headlines about "class struggle returning to the SPD" are overblown, to say the least,[10] but there can be no doubt that the new cochairs represent a wing of the party apparatus keen to break with at least some elements of the current agenda.

Given the political gridlock in the European Union's most powerful member state and the Left's inability to make significant gains in the country,[11] any stirring of renewal in Germany's traditional party of the working class ought to at least be of interest to Marxists. After all, the SPD has thus far been unmoved by the sure but steady revival of the Left internationally, symbolically declining to invite Corbyn to its national congress in 2017. Though both Martin Schulz and the leader of the Young Socialists (Jusos), Kevin Kühnert, managed to inspire brief hopes of a political insurgency, on the whole, the moderates have remained firmly in control. In an act of collective political suicide once fittingly described as a Freudian "death drive,"[12] until now, both the party apparatus as well as a majority of the membership appeared content with appointing one careerist after another to march stoically into the next defeat. Electing a comparatively "left" leadership can thus, at the very least, do no harm.

Whether the new leadership will do any "good," however, is another matter. Walter-Borjans and Esken began their tenure by taking a bullish stance, stating that their goal was to win 30 percent in a general

November 30, 2019; see also Loren Balhorn, "The SPD Needs More Than Just New Leaders," *Jacobin*, December 3, 2019.

10   Similar headlines appeared following Schulz's election in 2017, saying as much about the politics of the German press as it did about what the SPD leadership actually had in mind.

11   Max Hammer, "The 9 Percent Trap: The German Left's Identity Crisis," *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies*, Johns Hopkins University, July 30, 2019.

12   Oliver Nachtwey, "Last Chance, SPD," *Jacobin*, August 15, 2018.

election.[13] They have also made noises about raising taxes on the rich and returning to the kinds of wealth-redistribution policies the SPD championed during the postwar boom years. Should they get their way, it would represent a sea change in SPD policy. It goes without saying, of course, that all of this will be practically impossible as long as the party remains in the grand coalition, set to expire after the general election next fall at the latest. On a more fundamental level, the emaciated skeleton that remains of Social Democracy lacks a credible alternative vision as well as a coherent mass base upon which to win back public trust and build political power. Without these two pillars, it is reduced to maneuvering in the electoral arena, robbing it of what were historically its most effective tools in political competition. The chances of any long-term revival without them looks accordingly bleak.

TALKING THE TALK — BUT SOFTLY

The SPD's new cochairs may come from outside the party establishment, but they are undeniably also products *of* it. A regional politician known for being tough on tax evasion, Norbert Walter-Borjans spent decades working on state finances in North Rhine-Westphalia, and he developed a reputation in the early 2010s for purchasing stolen CDs containing data on dubious Swiss bank accounts held by German citizens. He returned from semi-retirement to run for cochair after several years spent calling for higher corporate tax rates in talk shows and in the press, and he wrote a popular book on the subject.[14]

Saskia Esken has sat in parliament since 2013, but she was largely unknown before declaring her candidacy last year. Her background is comparatively modest for a politician, having worked as a computer

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13   Though they quickly walked this statement back, see "SPD rudert bei 30-Prozent-Ziel zurück," *ZEIT ONLINE*, January 4, 2020.

14   Norbert Walter-Borjans, *Steuern – Der große Bluff* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2018).

programmer in the 1990s before leaving the industry to care for her children full time. As a parent, she became involved in the local *Elternvertretung*, or "parents' representation," where she emerged as a respected voice on education policy in her state. She joined the SPD in the early 1990s and spent several decades as a local and regional functionary prior to her national career.

Walter-Borjans and Esken's circle within the party executive notably contains no sitting ministers, but it is still filled with plenty of longtime party hacks. In this sense, their status as the figureheads of a left turn says as much about the internal state of the SPD as it does about their own politics. Since taking over in early December, the duo appears eager to make peace with the right wing and emphasize unity. Politicians from both sides have echoed the appeal, and no one seems interested in snap elections. Even Kevin Kühnert, who made headlines two years ago by embarking on a nationwide "tour" against another round of the grand coalition, urged his supporters to exercise restraint.[15] The reasoning behind this calculated retreat is self-evident, as current polls suggest the Social Democrats would stand to lose even more should they risk elections anytime soon. Leaving the grand coalition — the prerequisite to any real change — is off the table for now. [16]

The fight for the SPD's soul is thus playing out not as a conflict between an insurgent membership and a stubborn, right-wing executive, but between several centers of institutional power within the party: the ministers and minister presidents who continue to govern federally and in seven states, the SPD's 152 members of parliament, and the new left-leaning leadership.[17] Their hands tied by the grand coalition, the cochairs have thus far waged their battles largely through

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15 "Kevin Kühnert: GroKo-Aussteig bedeutet Verlust an Kontrolle," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 4, 2019.

16 Albrecht von Lucke, "2020: Jahr des Übergangs, Jahr der Entscheidung," *Blätter für deutsche und Internationale Politik* 65(1), 2020, 6.

17 Martin Greive et al., "Die dreigeteilte Partei: Die neue SPD-Führung kämpft mit ungeklärten Machtfragen," *Handelsblatt*, January 9, 2020.

the press, with Esken's rhetorical concessions to the Left provoking criticism from elected party officials on several occasions. Perhaps as a nod to Bernie Sanders's explosive rise on the other side of the Atlantic, she recently described herself as a "democratic socialist" — before hastily adding that she merely meant a well-regulated capitalism with a strong welfare state.[18] Both of them have made their defeated opponent and sitting finance minister Olaf Scholz a target of particularly harsh criticismn, with Walter-Borjans publicly admonishing Scholz to pursue more "social-democratic" policies in the grand coalition shortly after his election.[19] His own background in the North Rhine-Westphalian Ministry of Finance opens up an excellent field on which to challenge his neoliberal interlocutor and distance himself from the grand coalition's fiscal policy.

Though the government appears stable for now, the party has promised more negotiations with the CDU over a number of social policies later in the year. Little has changed concretely, but the new SPD is at least trying to prove to voters that it is more than just Angela Merkel's lapdog.

Esken and Walter-Borjans appear to be betting that their pivot to the left will revive the party's electoral fortunes enough to recover some ground in 2021 or earlier, should snap elections take place after all. This also explains why both sides are keen to maintain some semblance of unity despite the oftentimes sharp rhetoric heard during the campaign. Though most party officials probably would have preferred to see Scholz and Geywitz take up the reins, the prospect of further defeat seems to have scared them into line for now.

Experiences like that of Jeremy Corbyn in Labour,[20] however, provide plenty of reason to assume that SPD officials will exploit their

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18 "'Demokratischer Sozialismus': SPD-Chefin weist Kritik zurück," *ZEIT ONLINE*, January 11, 2020.

19 "Scholz soll 'mehr davon umsetzen, was die Partei will,'" *Der Spiegel*, December 5, 2019.

20 See the chronicle of sedition under Corbyn's leadership in Branko Marcetic, "A History of Sabotaging Jeremy Corbyn," *Jacobin*, June 15, 2017.

institutional resources to deter substantial policy changes and keep the party firmly under their control. And how could they not? After all, Esken and Walter-Borjans have essentially no social or political base through which to reinforce their position. The most they can hope to do is outmaneuver the neoliberals in the party machine, while relying on the prestige garnered from winning elections to push through their policy platform.

TRAPPED IN THE MIDDLE

As one of the first and most powerful organizations to emerge from the classical socialist workers' movement, the highs and lows of German Social Democracy condition as well as reflect the trajectory of that movement more generally. Its fundamental dilemma is one shared by the Left around the world, as it struggles to adapt to the fragmentation of the labor movement and the transformation of the world of work. Postwar Social Democracy represented one strategic response to this challenge, which, as time went on, increasingly ran up against the limitations imposed by capital, the state, and its own institutional inertia. The SPD's political paralysis goes much deeper than the strategic blunders of the last two decades, and is instead rooted in its long-term transformation from a mass organization binding together a numerically dominant industrial proletariat to a domesticated, 15-percent party of "white-collar workers, pensioners, and the public sector."[21]

Though Social Democracy's integration into the capitalist state is often dated to its support for the German war effort in 1914, it was the postwar (West) German SPD that cemented an exclusive orientation toward government as the locus of its politics, with strikes and other forms of extra-parliamentary activity functioning as reinforcements

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21   Janis Ehling, "Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vor dem Untergang – zerrieben zwischen Kosmopolitismus und Kommunitarismus?", *PROKLA. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft* 196, (2019), 457.

at best.[22] The party shed what remained of its political stigmatization after World War II and began governing several federal states in the late 1940s. With the Communists out of parliament by 1953 and fully illegalized by 1956, Social Democracy became the sole political representative of the West German working class. Its influence grew over the 1950s and 1960s, and despite a number of political dalliances with the CDU, it ultimately benefited enormously from the student radicalization at the end of the decade. This process culminated in the election of the first SPD government under widely admired chancellor Willy Brandt in 1969, a veteran of the anti-Nazi resistance who led the party from 1964 to 1987.[23]

Exhibiting a degree of political foresight unimaginable today, the SPD responded to the fragmentation of the industrial workforce — until then its primary social base — early on, officially dropping the "workers' party" label in 1959 with the adoption of the Godesberg Program.[24] Godesberg abandoned any lingering socialist pretensions and firmly inscribed Social Democracy into the left-liberal wing of the West German establishment. In terms of the party's social composition, however, things were more complicated. The SPD pivoted toward the emerging middle classes and welcomed thousands of teachers, public-sector workers, and white-collar professionals into its ranks. By the mid-1970s, membership topped 1 million. Yet manual and skilled workers remained the largest, most active, and most loyal segment of the membership, and party strongholds in the country's industrial heartlands constituted core pillars of its political strength.[25] As late

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22   The SPD's postwar political trajectory mirrored, in large part, that of social democracy around Europe; see Marcel Liebman, "Reformism Yesterday and Social Democracy Today," *Socialist Register* (1985/86), 1–22.

23   William Graf, "Beyond Social Democracy in West Germany?", *Socialist Register* (1985/86), 97–100.

24   Diane L. Parness, *The SPD and the Challenge of Mass Politics: The Dilemma of the German Volkspartei* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 47–80.

25   Oliver Nachtwey, "In der Mitte gähnt der Abgrund: Die Krise der SPD," *Blätter für deutsche und Internationale Politik* 53(8), 2008, 60.

as 1965, more than half of new Social Democrats were workers. By the late 1970s, that figure had declined to one third.[26]

Whatever its limitations, the cross-class alliance proved politically fruitful for decades.[27] After accepting West Germany's place in the postwar geopolitical order and renouncing any aims to nationalize the commanding heights of the economy, the SPD was able to enter government coalitions and pass a number of significant social reforms — including a major expansion of higher education that allowed children of the working class to attend university in large numbers for the first time.[28] Rising standards of living and an explosion in social mobility provided Social Democracy with legitimacy in the eyes of millions and buoyed its political fortunes.

Over time, however, this process altered the class composition of the party base, as industrial workers declined in electoral significance and the membership became increasingly middle-class. At least initially, most new white-collar members had themselves risen up from the working class and shared a number of political aims with it (such as collective bargaining for higher wages and a strong welfare state). The alliance thus did not necessarily correlate with a turn to the right. The SPD went into opposition in the early 1980s, still led by Willy Brandt and backed up by the unions and a number of talented left-wingers. Figures like Oskar Lafontaine, the minister president of Saarland at the time, actively supported the peace movement and adapted to the rise of the Greens not by chasing them to the center, but by integrating environmentalist demands into an "eco-socialist" platform.[29]

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26   Peter Lösche and Franz Walter, *Die SPD: Klassenpartei – Volkspartei – Quotenpartei: Zur Entwicklung der Sozialdemokratie von Weimar bis zur deutschen Vereinigung* (Darmstadt: WBG, 1992), 148, 153.

27   As was the case for large parts of the industrialized world; see George Ross and Jane Jenson, "Post-War Class Struggle and the Crisis of Left Politics," *Socialist Register* (1985/86), 23–31.

28   Rainer Geißler, *Die Sozialstruktur Deutschlands: Die gesellschaftliche Entwicklung vor und nach der Vereinigung* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), 334–50.

29   Graf, "Beyond Social Democracy in West Germany?", 128.

The working class's disappearance from the ranks of Social Democracy was a gradual process, corresponding to the decline of the trade unions and their growing alienation from the party itself. As German industry modernized and relocated some aspects of production abroad, the industrial working class it had fostered and in which the SPD had thrived also declined.[30] In line with developments across Europe, as Social Democracy opened up to the "middle" of society, its leading functionaries increasingly consisted of professional politicians with limited ties to working-class milieus or labor movements. This dynamic eroded the unions' strong links to the party and cut off recruitment from their ranks. In its heyday, SPD parliamentarians were often upwardly mobile workers or trade-union bosses. Today, only a minority of the party's MPs even belong to a union, and not a single labor leader sits in parliament.

For over a century, German Social Democracy was a force to be reckoned with, capable of building powerful cross-class alliances with organized labor at their core. By spanning such a broad swath of the population, it integrated a diverse and talented corps of functionaries, not to mention tens of thousands of activists. That era has long past. Membership is now below 500,000 and falling fast. The percentage of SPD worker-members today has probably dipped below 10 percent,[31] and its standing among young people is equally grim. From over 300,000 members fifty years ago and a visible presence on practically every university campus, the Young Socialists are now reduced to 70,000 overwhelmingly passive supporters, whose activity more often than not consists of quixotic elections to powerless student governments.

In this sense, Schröder's neoliberal turn was both a cumulative result of the party's transformation and a catalyst exacerbating its

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30 An overview of this process can be found in Oliver Nachtwey, *Germany's Hidden Crisis: Social Decline in the Heart of Europe* (London: Verso, 2018), esp. 103–162.

31 In 2008, they were estimated at 12.1 percent; see Wolfgang Schroeder, "SPD und Gewerkschaften: Vom Wandel einer priviligierten Partnerschaft," *WSI-Mitteilungen* 5 (2008), 234.

further decline. With trade unionists and workers no longer constituting the essential pillars of the SPD's base, pressure to hold the line in government subsided accordingly and political power grew even more concentrated in the hands of an entrenched functionary caste. Regardless of their individual convictions, these functionaries inevitably seek to ensure their own institutional survival, often placing it before other strategic considerations. With the ranks deflated, that instinct for survival is increasingly the only modus operandi the SPD apparatus knows, perpetuating a vicious cycle of decline. Left to its own devices, the party will not disappear overnight, but extinction can no longer be ruled out entirely.

WORKERS' PARTIES WITHOUT WORKERS

The realignment in the SPD is thus a welcome reprieve, but probably little more. Over the medium term, superficial changes to the existing political arrangement will hardly be enough to revive its fortunes or somehow effect new left-wing majorities. For better or for worse, the last fifteen years have shown that the electoral inertia of the grand coalition will undermine the party regardless of what its new cochairs tell the media.

Even if the SPD enters the opposition and adopts a more aggressive stance, its long-term decline puts it at a fundamental disadvantage vis-à-vis the parties to its right, whose power never relied on mass mobilization but rather on patronage from the wealthy and shifting alliances between sections of the middle classes. As long as Social Democracy appeared to win meaningful improvements for working people and keep the employer class at bay, it occupied a functional role in the party system. Cut off from this function, it now vies for attention in the electoral sphere as one medium-size formation among six, drawing support from all strata in relatively equal measure.[32]

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32   Harold Schoen and Bernhard Weßels, "Die Bundestagswahl 2013 – eine Zäsur im Wahlverhalten und Parteiensystem?", *Wählen und Wähler: Analysen aus Anlass der*

Able to choose between the Greens, the CDU, the Free Democrats, and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) to its right, not to mention Die Linke to its left, many Germans simply no longer see a compelling reason to vote SPD.

Lurking behind the crisis of Social Democracy is a more general question for the Left in Germany and around the world, rooted in the decline of the organized working class as a political bloc: namely, what kind of coalition can carry forward social-democratic, let alone socialist, politics, and how can it be built? On this existential issue, the jury is still out. The fragile and limited nature of the current revival can be seen in Labour's recent defeat, but also in the highs and lows of other, new left-wing parties like Podemos in Spain or Die Linke. Prone to periodic electoral surges, none have proven able to cohere a stable base or consistent strategic alignment with the trade unions. For Saskia Esken and Norbert Walter-Borjans specifically, this means that even if they succeed in steering the SPD noticeably leftward, they will be unable to do more than propose better policies and hope voters take notice.

Lacking any plausible alternative, most noteworthy attempts at rekindling a mass base for the Left in recent years have tended to opt for the strategy of "left-populism" analyzed by Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello in this issue.[33] Products of their age, these movements are generally focused around a charismatic group of individuals whose influence is based largely on weak ties (such as social media) and flashes of electoral success, but who lack the stable foundations and durable alliances that have historically proven necessary to consolidate political power.[34] Thus far, "renewal" currents in the SPD

Bundestagswahl 2013, edited by Schoen and Weßels (Wiesbaden: SpringerVS, 2016), 59–65.

33 Anton Jäger and Arthur Borriello, "Making Sense of Populism," this issue, 49–81.

34 This strategy was attempted in 2018 by disaffected members of Die Linke and the SPD with the "Aufstehen" campaign. Though the initial surge in public interest arguably demonstrated the possibility of a broad base for left reformism in the country, it largely fizzled out after a number of conflicts among the leadership. See Adam Baltner, "Why

are largely oriented toward this model, and they sometimes seem almost as preoccupied with the medium as they are with the message. Debates are highly personalized and often superficial, while the recent upticks in membership have not translated into any meaningful organizational growth or revival of party life. To put it bluntly, rebuilding the SPD as a class party is the furthest thing from most Social Democrats' minds.

Whether or not such a class party could even be rebuilt in the first place remains to be seen. Germany's labor movement remains comparatively strong, with a number of industries experiencing rising strike activity over the last decade. Conditions for building a political party rooted in the organized working class thus appear relatively favorable compared to, say, the United States, where organized labor has been in a much more precarious state for two generations. Yet perhaps due in part to Germany's proportional representation system, the uptick in labor militancy has not correlated with the consolidation of a workers' party in any meaningful sense. Instead, the working class as a political and electoral bloc has continued to fray, first lured by Die Linke to the left and now increasingly by the AfD on the right. In some recent elections, the right-populist party has even captured a plurality of workers' votes.[35]

The other "workers' party" in the Federal Republic, Die Linke, does, to its credit, recognize the centrality of social struggles to its political project. The party has some small bases in the trade unions and a visible presence in social movements, but is nonetheless primarily a middle-class protest party united by ideological conviction and the infrastructure derived from its presence in parliament. Its aging base in former East Germany appears to be diminishing rapidly, leaving the future uncertain. Some sections of the party have sought to overcome this dilemma by embedding Die Linke in class struggles

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Aufstehen Failed," *Jacobin* 35, 154–9.

35   Annick Ehmann et al., "Männlich, Arbeiter, AfD-Wähler," *ZEIT ONLINE*, September 2, 2019.

and becoming what party leaders describe as a "connective party."[36] Despite scattered bright spots, recent developments — particularly (but not only) the party's veritable trouncing in the Brandenburg and Saxony elections last fall — suggest that this road is a very long and difficult one indeed.

In its first years of existence, Die Linke could rely on the momentum of the anti–Agenda 2010 movement and its stable eastern base to deliver it around 10 percent of the vote and, thus, the role of a minor but not insignificant player in German politics. Since then, however, it has struggled to move beyond this benchmark and, perhaps most remarkably, does not seem to have benefited from the SPD's decline in the slightest. The most visible expression of the party's current impasse is a strategy conference held in late February, which, though of a consultative nature, prompted hundreds of contributions and demonstrated the wide range of views among the membership.[37]

In the immediate term, the Left's trajectory will mostly depend on the state of play in parliament, with the recent surges for the Greens and the AfD siphoning off votes and throwing previous coalition arithmetic into disarray. Given current trends, a government between the post-Merkel CDU and the Greens appears likely, placing the SPD and Die Linke in the opposition alongside the right-populist AfD. Such a constellation could at least theoretically make it easier for Esken and Walter-Borjans to form an alliance to their left, but it is utterly unclear whether the two parties, alone or in tandem, could begin to rebuild the kind of base a social-democratic project would need to win — and hold — state power in the decades to come.

History never repeats itself, and there will be no return to the SPD of August Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg, or even Willy Brandt. That said, the party may still have a thing or two to teach the advocates of social-democratic "renewal" today. Organized labor and Social Democracy both cooperated and clashed throughout their shared

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36   Bernd Riexinger, "The Connective Party," *Jacobin*, August 5, 2017.

37   The (somewhat chaotic) debate can be followed at strategiedebatte.die-linke.de.

history, but they were nevertheless symbiotically linked through their social weight, shared origins, and general aims. Ties to the trade unions provided the party with strong negotiating partners and mobilizing machines that could convey its message to their millions of members, along with their families, friends, and neighbors. In critical situations, additional political pressure could be applied with strikes and popular mobilizations. Any social-democratic formation, right or left, that loses this historical base also loses its best tool for consolidating power in whatever form.

Not incidentally, the most promising attempts at reviving the Left internationally have made inroads into recovering and expanding precisely such a base. At the moment, neither the SPD nor Die Linke appear well positioned to accomplish that feat on their own. To even have a chance, however, the grand coalition must come to an end, and both parties must begin functioning as an effective political opposition, lest that role fall exclusively to the populist right. ⟰

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This paper offers a brief historical account of the emergence and development of the struggle for self-determination in the Kashmir Valley. It focuses in particular on the period following the emergence of an armed resistance to Indian rule in the 1990s and its suppression by a brutal counterinsurgency campaign.

KASHMIR:
THE LONG DESCENT

VANESSA CHISHTI

In April 2019, India's Hindu nationalist government banned civilian traffic on Kashmir's arterial highways for two days every week. In the months that followed, tens of thousands of security personnel were added to India's already overbearing military presence in the region — 80,000 in August and September alone.[1] On August 5, 2019, the government revoked Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, doing away with the autonomy accorded to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Simultaneously, the state was divided up into administrative divisions to be ruled directly by the central government. This marks the completion of a long-standing program of the Hindu far right, the full "integration" of Kashmir into India. Article 370 of the Indian Constitution had allowed Kashmir a special status, reflecting the very unusual conditions of its incorporation into the country at the time of independence in 1947. Kashmir was granted a great degree of autonomy, and the Indian government had limited powers over

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1 Praveen Donthi, "Modi's War: Dispatches from a seething Kashmir." *Caravan*, September 22, 2019. https://caravanmagazine.in/conflict/modi-war-dispatches-from-seething-kashmir.

the state when compared to its authority over other states in India's highly centralized federal structure.

Although Article 370 had been reduced to a dead letter by the 1960s, something that Kashmiris resisted fiercely at every step, its formal revocation is a signal that the de facto erosion of Kashmir's rights has now become de jure. Kashmir has since been subject to a near total communication blackout, punitive restrictions on mobility, the virtual cessation of essential services, frequent night raids, and mass arrests. The *entire* political leadership is under arrest, including BJP allies. Anyone who has shown a capacity for organizing, even in their neighborhoods, has been harassed or detained. This state of total siege is only a formalization of what has been Kashmir's reality for decades; It is held by force and maintained in a permanent state of emergency.

Although layered with complexity, the core issue from the point of view of most Kashmiris is a simple one: they have been denied the right to determine their political future. In 1947, the British partitioned their former empire on religious lines, creating the Muslim Pakistan and the ostensibly secular India. Of more than 550 princely states under the suzerainty of the Crown, each was expected to join either dominion, depending on the religion of the majority of their subjects. Jammu and Kashmir, with a Muslim majority population and a Hindu maharaja, was one of a few princely states where rulers and subjects professed different religions. Although, by the logic of partition, Jammu and Kashmir had "Pakistan potential," the unpopular maharaja acceded to the Indian Union. Military advances from both India and Pakistan resulted in the division of the state, with both countries claiming the entire territory as rightfully theirs. The state's accession to India has remained bitterly contested by Pakistan, and by a majority of Kashmiris. The Valley of Kashmir, currently under Indian control, has been struggling for self-determination ever since.

Since the beginning of a popular armed campaign to end Indian rule in the 1990s, Kashmir has been subject to a ferocious

counterinsurgency — an indiscriminate war on Kashmiris that admits no restraints, constitutional or moral. The evisceration of public institutions, heavy surveillance, and a quickness to fatal violence severely limit the scope of a peaceful political opposition, while security forces are guaranteed immunity from civil prosecution. For the 80,000 killed, the nameless thousands in mass graves, countless instances of torture and rape, and the thousands of enforced disappearances, there has been one instance of military prosecution, and the objections of but a handful of conscientious activists. In public discourse, a legacy of bitter religious antagonism left by the partition, and actively deepened by the Hindu right wing, dovetails neatly with the Islamophobia whipped up post-9/11. The Indian national consensus on Kashmir — that it is an "integral" part of India — encompasses the entire political spectrum. While liberals and the parliamentary left lament human rights abuses, they do not question the politics of India's presence in Kashmir, maintained by a force of more than 700,000 soldiers.

THE COLONIAL LEGACY

In the early nineteenth century, Kashmir, then a part of the Sikh kingdom, came to acquire an immense strategic significance for the British owing to its proximity to Central Asia, the frontier between Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Britain's empire in the Indian subcontinent. In 1846, the British wrested control of Kashmir and, unwilling to bear the risk and expense of governing directly, signed it over to their ally Gulab Singh, the ruler of Jammu and Ladakh. The British influenced frontier politics through the newly created state and, consequently, were keen to underwrite the power of the new regime, allowing it an unusual degree of latitude vis-à-vis its subjects. A predatory tax burden on agriculture, manufacture, trade, and professions severely damaged the productive base, contributing to the ruin of urban industry and the depopulation of the countryside.[2] Under no

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2 Vanessa Chishti, "Articulating Kashmir: Commodity Economy and the Politics of

compulsion to seek legitimacy from their overwhelmingly Muslim subjects, the rulers adopted an explicitly religious idiom of statehood and directed much of their patronage at Kashmiri and non-Kashmiri Hindus. The regime was anchored in the Valley by predominantly Hindu officials and landlords, while the artisans and peasants were almost entirely Muslim. Although the overlap between religion and class was not seamless, material entitlements were explicitly tied to religion.[3] A ban on political activity, a vast network of spies, and the loyalist bent of the Mirwaiz, the Valley's foremost Muslim spiritual leader, precluded sustained political challenges to the regime. This exercise of power without legitimacy or consequence continued virtually unchallenged until a mass revolt in 1931.

As the full force of the Great Depression hit the Kashmir Valley, export markets contracted, and agricultural commodity prices plummeted, causing widespread distress. In July 1931, news of deliberate insults to the Quran by the maharaja's troops catalyzed the simmering discontent among the urban poor into open rebellion against the regime and its collaborators. The reins of the agitation were quickly taken by an emergent petty-bourgeois leadership, which brokered an unpopular truce and brought the uprising to an end. Subsequently, when the ban on political parties was lifted, it allowed for the emergence of a nationalist organization, the All Jammu and Kashmir Muslim Conference (AJKMC). By the early 1900s, an aggressive program of enclosures and a policy of making large land grants to Hindu state officials led to the creation of a powerful landlord class and a large class of landless agricultural laborers. The AJKMC's sharp rhetoric against the former drew them an especially committed following in the countryside. Sheikh Abdullah, a young schoolteacher, emerged as its most popular leader. The newly formed Communist Party of India also won a small circle of adherents in the AJKMC, an association

Representation," (unpublished PhD dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2016).

3   Mridu Rai, *Hindu Rulers, Muslim Subjects: Islam, Rights and the History of Kashmir* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2004), 80–127.

that consecrated Abdullah's claim to being a champion of the people. These heady days of radicalism were, however, short-lived.

Following the revolt, the maharaja constituted a token legislative assembly, to be elected based on a very narrow property franchise. This naturally left most Muslims disenfranchised, since they comprised the bulk of the poor and laboring population. These poor and middling groups had become the social base for Sheikh Abdullah and the AJKMC. Seeking a rapprochement with the propertied classes, most of whom were not Muslim, he pushed for the party to be renamed the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (NC), ostensibly to secularize it. Although potentially a progressive move, championed by party leaders with credible secular and socialist commitments, this marked the beginning of a rightward shift in the NC's politics. It lost considerable support among Muslims who resented its overtures to the predominantly non-Muslim propertied sections, without gaining any among Hindus and Sikhs, most of whom saw their interests as tied to the maharaja's regime. The few who joined did so at the cost of isolation within their communities.[4] With his popular base slipping, Abdullah aligned himself with Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian National Congress, an umbrella party with a vocal Hindu right wing. This consolidated the disillusionment with the NC. Shortly after a large section of the NC broke away and constituted a new political party, the Muslim Conference (MC), which promptly aligned itself with Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Muslim League, the largest Muslim party in the subcontinent. The NC was virtually wiped out in the Jammu province, and its base in the Valley was significantly dented. The Muslim Conference base consisted largely of Muslim landlords, traders, and the prosperous middle classes. The NC had a sizable base among workers, artisans, and peasants, but an undemocratic organizational culture allowed them little say in the political direction of the party.

In the mid-1940s, the partition of the subcontinent on the basis of religion was an impending reality. While Abdullah and the NC

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4 Mona Bhan, "A 'Pakistani' Pandit?", *Raiot.in,* July 27, 2016. https://www.raiot.in-/a-pakistani-pandit/.

stressed a principled affinity with secular India, the Muslim Conference advocated for a merger with Pakistan, a homeland for Muslims. The Indian National Congress threw its considerable weight behind Abdullah and the maharaja, who had for some time been cooperating against the pro-Pakistan Muslim Conference. A popular revolt in what is today Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir triggered a military skirmish between the two newly formed states in 1947. Kashmir was integrated into the Indian Union in the midst of the fighting. The border established at that moment, after the cessation of hostilities with Pakistan, came to serve as the permanent border between Indian Kashmir and the Pakistani state.

In March 1948, Abdullah was appointed prime minister in the new administration, with the maharaja retaining wide powers. However, a growing constituency was critical of the accession. The large-scale massacre of Muslims by the maharaja's troops and RSS volunteers in Jammu had swung uncommitted opinion in Kashmir away from "Hindu" India. Formed initially to repel the Pakistan-backed irregulars who marched on Kashmir, and protect religious minorities from their depredations, the NC's "peace brigades" were turned to the task of silencing the growing pro-Pakistan constituency in the Valley: hundreds were incarcerated, attacked, and interned.[5] In these circumstances, Abdullah was able to press for the removal of the maharaja. Hoping to placate Kashmiris, Nehru agreed. As the linchpin of India's Kashmir policy, Abdullah enjoyed a wide latitude in internal matters until his dismissal and subsequent arrest in 1953. Thereafter, India's policy remained one of throwing their economic, political, and military weight behind "personalities," so long as they assured the finality of Kashmir's integration into India, while tolerating, if not actively encouraging, the suppression of organized political opposition or popular mobilization.

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5   Prem Nath Bazaz, *The History of the Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir* (New Delhi: Kashmir Publishing Co, 1954), 317–37.

THE BROKEN PACT

In 1947, immediately after Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India, Nehru had been outspoken in declaring the accession a conditional union, subject to popular ratification through a plebiscite.[6] In a public broadcast, Nehru said, "We have declared that the fate of Kashmir is ultimately to be decided by the people. That pledge we have given not only to the people of Kashmir but to the world. We will not and cannot back out of it."[7] Nehru referred the dispute to the UN Security Council. Not long after, however, India's own intelligence reported that public opinion was against the accession.[8] Abdullah and the NC were unlikely to be able to secure a verdict favorable to India. Indeed, it is improbable that Abdullah would have been able to withstand an organized opposition without the presence of the Indian Army, as well as the state's greatly expanded police and surveillance apparatus. He disavowed the need for a plebiscite, arguing that Kashmiris had announced their decision by refusing to cooperate with the Pakistan-sponsored incursion. As for the Kashmiris who objected, Nehru condoned the use of force against them. Abdullah, however, failed in his endeavor to conceal the popular mood from the UN commissioner, Josef Korbel: "The party which has the most serious reason to be fearful of the result of a plebiscite — the government in Srinagar — has been doing everything in its power to delay this day of reckoning."[9]

The legitimacy of the state's accession to India, already tenuous, was further diminished by the acute economic crisis precipitated by

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6 The practice of a plebiscite was hardly unique. A plebiscite in the state of Junagadh, with a Muslim ruler and a predominantly Hindu population, resulted in its accession to India.

7 Quoted in Tariq Ali, *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (London: Verso, 2011), 103.

8 Altaf Hussain Para, "Demystifying Sheikh Abdullah," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 29 (July 2013), 23–26.

9 Josef Korbel, *Danger in Kashmir* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 198. Korbel's red-baiting has led many writers to reject his indictment of the NC government. His claims are, however, consistent with the accounts of numerous left-wing and progressive contemporaries.

the division of the state between India and Pakistan in 1947. Kashmir lost its most vital trade links, and much of its forests, which were the most important source of state revenue. To cope with a staggering deficit, the government increased customs duties, which pushed up the cost of living. Cut off from markets and starved of investment, manufacturing suffered. Unemployment soared and wages fell. Forced procurement of grain by the state continued. Post-partition disturbances kept peasants from seasonal wage labor in the plains, depriving them of their main source of cash savings. The provision of essential commodities, suddenly in short supply, was controlled by the government and disbursed as political patronage. While members of the NC visibly enriched themselves, the popular mood was increasingly more favorable toward Pakistan, perhaps expressing a hope for the reunification of the state and the restoration of economic and social links.

Under the terms of the accession, the state of Jammu and Kashmir ceded control over defense, communications, and foreign policy. While Nehru expected a fuller integration, Abdullah resisted, apparently wanting to enjoy Indian protection but at a distance. Soon after taking power, Abdullah's government initiated the program of land reform and debt cancellation promised by the party. While Nehru hoped that addressing the two great woes of the restive peasantry would win their support for the accession, Abdullah hoped to recover lost support and strengthen his position vis-à-vis his patrons. Debt realization, repossession, and proceedings in revenue courts were stayed, and boards were set up to scale back or even cancel large debts. Simultaneously, land held in excess of a ceiling of 22.5 acres was seized without compensation, to be redistributed. Although not insignificant, these reforms were an "economic palliative," directed at consolidating a loyal class of beneficiaries to stabilize the regime politically. Much of the land seized was cornered by those in or close to the NC hierarchy. Petty tenants and landless laborers were allotted very small holdings of the worst lands, if anything at all. Debt cancellation froze agrarian credit; many new owners found themselves liable to pay revenue but

unable to secure credit to buy inputs.[10] Those officially allotted land were unable to secure possession without bribing revenue officials.

Unsurprisingly, the reforms provoked a vitriolic reaction from landlords and moneylenders, a majority of whom were Hindus. They joined with Hindu businessmen and former officials of the maharaja, smarting from the shift of power from a Jammu-based Hindu elite to a Kashmir-based Muslim elite, to form the Jammu *Praja Parishad* (Council of Subjects). Guided by right-wing Hindu organizations and bankrolled by the maharaja, they denounced the NC as anti-Hindu and campaigned for the full integration of the state into India. This reactionary agenda found unusually fertile ground among Hindus in Jammu who feared, legitimately, that Muslims — still a majority in the state despite the massacre and forced migration — would opt for Pakistan in a plebiscite. Poor representation and relatively lower budgetary allocations for the Jammu and Ladakh provinces did little to endear the NC to people in those areas. Resentment mounted as the fraudulent conduct of the Constituent Assembly elections by the NC cadre deprived the *Parishad* of likely victory on a majority of seats in Jammu. Although locked out of the assembly, the *Parishad* emerged as a significant force in Jammu and the only organized political opposition in the state.

Negotiations between Nehru and Abdullah on the question of further integration resulted in the Delhi Agreement. Concluded in 1952, this agreement conceded some control to New Delhi but stopped very well short of integration. This consolidated resentment against the new Kashmir-based Muslim political elite, and catalyzed sporadic protests in Jammu into a mass agitation. Led by the *Praja Parishad*, the agitation contributed significantly to the persistent conflation of religion and region that continues to frame political articulation in Jammu today. Abdullah's government responded with the usual baton charges and mass arrests, but where the Indian political leaders and the media had ignored or applauded the repression of thousands of

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10   Daniel Thorner, "The Kashmir Land Reforms: Some Personal Reflections," *Economic and Political Weekly* (September 12, 1953), 999–1102.

pro-Pakistan and pro-Independence dissidents, largely Muslims, the repression of Hindu *Parishad* activists provoked outrage. In Kashmir, the agitation raised the specter of the restoration of "Hindu Raj" and deepened anti-India sentiment.[11] Posturing to manage discontent, and evidently too assured of his indispensability to New Delhi, Abdullah publicly questioned the finality of Kashmir's integration into India — this after having strenuously argued for it, including at the UN. Nehru came under pressure to rein in Abdullah and the NC. In 1953, as Pakistan entered the US orbit, the USSR, keen on encouraging India's nonalignment, rescinded its support for Kashmir's self-determination. The USSR's consistent backing at the UN eased the pressure of international opinion against India and emboldened Nehru to officially backpedal on the promise of plebiscite. In August 1953, Abdullah was dismissed from office, charged with conspiracy, and imprisoned. Bakshi Ghulam Mohammad, an old NC hand with close ties to the Indian National Congress (INC), was made prime minister. The move was supported by a majority in the party, pro-India elements, party malcontents, and the left wing of the NC, no doubt influenced by the turnaround in the Soviet position.[12] A wave of angry protests against New Delhi's high-handedness was swiftly crushed by the Indian Army.

The Bakshi government (1953–1963) implemented an aggressive program of integration. The fraudulently constituted Constituent Assembly adopted a constitution declaring Kashmir an "integral" part of India, and allowed the extension of numerous provisions of the Indian constitution to the state. In the decade that followed, the authoritarian political culture coauthored by Abdullah and Bakshi, who had served Abdullah as an enforcer, turned more violent. Bakshi commanded the peace brigades, informal militia, and a vast network of informers, and he was notoriously unsparing in his personal use of violence. Under Bakshi, the state ranked higher than India's national

11   Balraj Puri, "Kashmir and Rest of India: First Emotional Rupture," *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, no. 49 (December 6–12, 2003), 5143–45.

12   Championing the Soviet position, the Communist Party of India had declared Abdullah a stooge of American imperialism.

average in per-capita expenditure on the police. Contrary to Abdullah's insistence on fiscal independence, Bakshi accepted substantial Indian aid. In addition to central expenditure, the state got higher grants-in-aid (as opposed to loans) than other states and had fewer liabilities. Until the 1970s, the state of Jammu and Kashmir had the highest subsidies and the lowest taxes in India. Bakshi was able to abolish customs duties, reduce taxes, raise wages and government salaries, and subsidize food grains without forcible procurement. Education was made free up to the university level. The regime was able to deliver these gains at the cost of burgeoning debt and dependence on India.

Bakshi's economic policy set many trends that created a moribund, dependent economy. Much of public spending was unproductive. The security apparatus and publicity departments consumed a substantial part of the budget. While public investment in industry was low, political uncertainty discouraged private investment. For instance, the First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956) allocated Rs 10.35 million to the army and Rs 3.561 million to industry. Rent-seeking was rife and certainly tolerated, if not encouraged, leading to the embourgeoisement of party notables. State industries accrued huge losses. The budget for cooperative societies functioned effectively as a slush fund. Given high levels of unemployment, government jobs were an especially coveted form of patronage. This led to the creation of a large bureaucracy with a huge wage bill. Productivity remained low in the countryside, owing to small holdings and low technical inputs.[13] Even with the construction of the Banihal Tunnel, markets for high-bulk, low-value commodities such as fruit, which now dominated Kashmir's exports, remained a problem. These economic difficulties were largely due to the Valley's separation from its traditional economic hinterland, and a direct consequence of the political situation.

Meanwhile, Abdullah's dismissal and incarceration gave him fresh political cachet. In 1955, Abdullah loyalists who had been forced out

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13   Siddhartha Prakash, "The Political Economy of Kashmir Since 1947," *Contemporary South Asia* 9, no. 3 (2000), 315–37.

of the NC formed the Plebiscite Front (PF). Led indirectly by Abdullah himself, it campaigned aggressively for self-determination, calling upon India to fulfill its promise of holding a plebiscite, the very thing that Abdullah, secure in his power, had disavowed. Its leaders were outspoken against the excesses of Bakshi's government, demanding the release of political prisoners, many of whom, ironically, had been imprisoned by Abdullah's regime. Abdullah's new organization was immensely popular, with estimates of membership between 75,000 and 200,000. Even at the lower limit, it was larger than any political organization in the state thus far. Over the next decade and a half, the Plebiscite Front was the vanguard of pro-self-determination politics in Kashmir. While the meaning of self-determination was left conveniently unspecified, the PF's leadership made clever pro-Pakistan insinuations. Mirza Afzal Beg, Abdullah's loyal lieutenant, would carry rock salt wrapped in a green handkerchief at PF rallies, a potent symbol given that rock salt was mined in Pakistan and quite scarce after the division of the state. Ultimately, Abdullah used these mobilizations as leverage in negotiations with New Delhi.

Throughout the 1950s, the question of Jammu and Kashmir was widely acknowledged as a dispute pending a just settlement. In the 1960s, the status quo began to stabilize. India's humiliating defeat in the Indo-China War in 1962 prompted Nehru to accept US military aid. Under US pressure, Nehru offered to convert the cease-fire line into a permanent border. In 1963, Pakistan willingly ceded a part of the erstwhile state to China. These developments threatened to foreclose the reunification of the state. India's difficulties were further compounded in the winter of 1963, when a holy relic was stolen from Hazratbal, Kashmir's most revered shrine. The outrage that followed swelled into a mass mobilization that took an explicitly political turn. Slogans like "*yeh mulk hamara hai, iska faisla hum karenge*" (this country is ours, we will decide its future) resounded in mass protest meetings.[14] After a decade of deteriorating economic conditions,

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14 Idrees Kanth, "The Social and Political Life of a Relic," *Himalaya* 38, no. 2 (December 2018), 61–75.

political repression worse even than the years under the maharaja, and two rigged legislative assembly elections (in 1957 and 1962), the resentment against Bakshi's regime was unsurprising. Nehru replaced Bakshi with Ghulam Mohammad Sadiq, the leader of the NC's left wing.[15] During his term, Delhi assumed the same power to dismiss state governments in an "emergency" that it had over other states, provoking another round of mass demonstrations. Hoping to take advantage of the upsurge, Pakistan sent several thousand armed men across the border. Kashmiris were largely indifferent. This was certainly not for a lack of animosity toward India though: there were mass student demonstrations and an attempt to assassinate Sadiq.

With the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the balance of power in the subcontinent shifted decisively in India's favor. Sensing his weakness, Abdullah changed tack, seeking a restoration of the state's autonomy within the constitutional framework of India, a significant climb down from the demand for a plebiscite with the option of independence that Abdullah had advocated for twenty-two years. Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter and successor, flatly refused. In 1975, after the Indira-Sheikh Accord, Abdullah was promptly released from jail and appointed chief minister. Article 370 was nominally retained, even though India's power already exceeded what it permitted. However, Abdullah's capitulation could not undo the PF's insistence that the accession was temporary, subject to either ratification or rejection by the people. Although the PF was merged into the NC once Abdullah was back in power, the questions it so forcefully raised could not be wished away. Many of those who led the struggle for self-determination in the 1980s and 1990s were the products of the Plebiscite Front's politics.[16]

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15 Sadiq was communist, one of the earliest labor organizers in Kashmir, and a man of some integrity. His complicity in India's unscrupulous maneuvers may have been motivated by the contortions of logic and morality demanded by adherence to the Stalinist line of the Communist Party of India.

16 Farrukh Faheem, "Interrogating the Ordinary: Everyday Politics and the Struggle for Azadi in Kashmir," in *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*, ed. Haley Duschinski (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 230–47.

The years between 1975 and 1986, often mistaken as a period of quiescence, were in fact a time of intense churning, as the question of self-determination found articulation in different political formations. This period was marked by a heightened regional antagonism with a distinct religious character. Indira Gandhi had returned to power, after being ousted by a motley coalition, by appealing to Hindu majoritarian sentiment. As a consequence, the INC emerged as a significant opposition in the 1983 state elections. Farooq Abdullah, Sheikh Abdullah's son and chief minister of the state, had invited Gandhi's wrath for efforts to build a non-Congress national opposition. He was dismissed. After attacks on Kashmiri Pandit homes and temples in 1986, engineered by a rival pro-India politician, the state was placed under the rule of Governor Jagmohan, who, appointed directly by New Delhi, became the de facto ruler. Jagmohan's hostility toward Kashmiri Muslims was evident in a number of instances, but none more widely resented than a sharp decrease in recruitment to government jobs. In these circumstances, confessional Muslim organizations such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Jammu and Kashmir (JIJK), hitherto politically marginal, began to find a wider audience.[17] Politically pro-Pakistan and ideologically pan-Islamist, JIJK spoke of resisting interference of the center, and a just settlement of Kashmir's political future — the very things that few political formations had addressed with integrity.[18]

In the run-up to the election of 1987, a robust, political opposition not controlled by or beholden to New Delhi announced itself in the form of the Muslim United Front (MUF), a coalition of eleven parties ranging from secular to confessional. The MUF call for responsible government, economic development, and the settling of the "political question" drew an enthusiastic response. The election saw a turnout of 80 percent, the highest ever recorded in Kashmir. The

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17   Balraj Puri, *Kashmir: Insurgency and After* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012), 36–7.

18   Yoginder Sikand, "The Emergence and Development of the Jama'at-i-Islami of Jammu and Kashmir (1940s–1990)," *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 3 (July 2002), 705–51.

NC-Congress alliance ought to have been routed. Instead, election administrators blatantly manipulated results, and the alliance "won" an overwhelming majority. Prior to this, institutions had been subverted by "local chicanery and national laissez-faire"[19]; this was direct interference by the center. Very rarely in politics can a watershed be pinpointed so precisely. Though efforts toward an armed resistance dated back to the 1960s, it is only after this election, when the bankruptcy of political institutions in the Valley was thoroughly exposed, that the armed insurgency emerged as the most dominant and credible mode of pursing the goal of self-determination. Yusuf Shah, one of the defrauded MUF candidates, known today as Syed Salahudeen, went on to become the commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen, the largest pro-Pakistan militant organization. Yasin Malik, a central figure in the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the pro-independence organization that launched the insurrection in the Valley in 1989, was Shah's campaign manager.[20] Malik was one of thousands of young Kashmiri men who, convinced of the futility of institutional politics, crossed the border into Azad Kashmir and Pakistan seeking arms and training. Armed militancy appeared to them to be the only way to unsettle the firm consensus between New Delhi and their clients in the Valley, from which a vast majority of Kashmiris were perforce excluded.

THE INSURGENCY EXPLODES

The 1987 election conclusively demonstrated that India would not allow the question of self-determination to be raised through political institutions, and that even an organized and popular political force was powerless to change that. In the mass demonstrations that followed,

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19   Šumit Ganguly, "Explaining the Kashmir Insurgency: Political Mobilization and Institutional Decay," *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996), 76–107.

20   Sumantra Bose, *Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 102–63.

millions rallied around slogans such as "no election, no selection, we want freedom!" In this context, the fall of Soviet-backed regimes in Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the defeat of the Soviet Union by the Afghan mujahideen had a profound effect. The impact of the latter development was more than just symbolic. US and Saudi patronage had transformed pan-Islamism from an inchoate idea into a well-resourced global network — "Jihad International, INC"[21] — and Pakistan was its chief staging ground. With the end of the Afghan war, this infrastructure — money, sophisticated weapons, men, and training camps — was directed toward Kashmir. Under President Zia-ul-Haq, a military general instrumental to the Islamization of Pakistani politics and society, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) funded numerous militant organizations in Kashmir in pursuit of its own strategic ends. The first group to cooperate with the ISI was the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front. Formed in 1965, the JKLF was formally committed to the creation of an independent, secular, democratic Jammu and Kashmir. It was a poor fit for the ISI's design, but the pro-Pakistan JIJK, unwilling to expose its organization to attack, had declined the ISI's overtures.[22]

The *tehreek* (armed resistance) announced itself in the summer of 1988 with bomb blasts targeting government buildings and the assassination of key figures in the establishment — pro-India politicians, administrators, and those suspected of being informers or intelligence agents. The JKLF actions found immense popular support, despite the fact that the organization did not have an overground political network nor any concerted program for mass mobilization. A call to boycott the 1989 parliamentary elections was a resounding success. That year, two-thirds of all working days were marked by strikes. The ruling coalition at the center depended on the support of the BJP,

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21   Eqbal Ahmad, "Jihad International INC." *Dissident Voice* (November 15, 2001). https://dissidentvoice.org/Articles/EqbalJihadINC.htm

22   Arif Jamal, *Shadow War: The Untold Story of Jihad in Kashmir* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2009) 105–78.

allowing them to push for an aggressive counterinsurgency policy.[23] In January 1990, Jagmohan returned to Kashmir as governor. The day after he was sworn in, Indian paramilitary forces shot and killed more than a hundred unarmed demonstrators and severely injured hundreds more. This massacre, the first of many to come, provoked massive outrage. In the following days, hundreds of unarmed demonstrators were killed by security forces, but the marches demanding freedom continued. In the early months of 1990, virtually the entire population was in revolt, undeterred by the fatal use of force. Although vastly outnumbered and outgunned, mass support allowed the JKLF to effectively paralyze the state apparatus. An Indian journalist reported the following conversation with Abdul Ghani Lone, a Kashmiri leader: "I told Lone that New Delhi might be willing to have a dialogue with 'the boys', and his view was that India should first *re-establish its authority* in Kashmir because *its writ did not run there*. What should Delhi do? I asked him. 'You will have to kill at least 20,000 people before you can establish your authority.'"[24] These proved to be fateful words.

When a few hundred dead failed to stem the tide, Governor Jagmohan dismissed the civilian government, called in troop reinforcements and enacted a battery of indemnifying laws to prepare for a more extensive use of force without the encumbrance of civil government or legal accountability. Extrajudicial executions of suspected militants were combined with the widest possible persecution of the population — murder, detention, sexual violence, torture, beatings, invasive searches, daily harassment and humiliation, destruction of property, and extended curfews — all without any possibility of redress. Militant attacks on army personnel became pretexts for retaliatory violence against civilians — the rape of more than thirty-one women in the villages of Kunan and Poshpora in a single night is just

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23   Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 147.

24   Kuldip Nayar, *Beyond the Lines: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Lotus Collection, 2012). Emphasis added.

one of several such instances.[25] This strategy, described by Jagmohan as the "collective punishment of a disloyal population" fueled further popular support for the *tehreek* and dramatically drove up the recruitment of fighters to the JKLF — so much so that the training camps in Pakistan could not keep up with the hundreds who showed up every month. Although it is disingenuous to suggest (and Indian intellectuals of various ideological persuasions often do) that the counterinsurgency created the disenchantment with India — the tradition of autonomist politics was already decades old — there is no doubt that it rendered the breach irrevocable.

The massive popularity of the JKLF, entirely unanticipated, was alarming for the ISI in Pakistan. Although they had set out with the comparatively modest aim of precipitating an international intervention, the JKLF found itself at the helm of a spirited mass uprising. The moment presented the pro-independence JKLF a bigger opportunity — and posed a much bigger threat — to the ISI's agenda than they had anticipated. In 1991, hoping to steer the mobilization in Kashmir in a pro-Pakistan direction, the ISI set about sabotaging the JKLF; it cut off funding to the JKLF and encouraged defections to pro-Pakistan groups. Simultaneously, the ISI extended lavish patronage to the Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), a pro-Pakistan militant group linked to the JIJK. Starting in 1993, the ISI also encouraged the proliferation of radical Islamist groups dominated by foreigners, a move calculated to undermine the HM, whose leadership, although by no means autonomous, had shown an inclination to act independently. The JKLF, which had suffered heavy losses from Indian forces, now faced relentless attacks from pro-Pakistan groups, especially the HM. Between 1992 and 1994, numerous pro-independence intellectuals critical of Pakistan's baleful influence on the struggle were killed. The JKLF's declaration of an indefinite cease-fire in 1994 did not stop Indian forces from continuing to kill their cadre. By the mid-1990s,

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25   Essar Batool et al., *Do you remember Kunan Poshpora? The Story of a Mass Rape* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2016).

the JKLF was decimated and the HM militarily ascendant. This did not, however, translate into support for their ideology. Nevertheless, the HM enjoyed a grudging support because it was the only countervailing force to a counterinsurgency operating entirely outside the law.

Starting in January 1990, a majority of Kashmiri Hindus left the Valley in a matter of weeks. Indian whataboutery invokes the suffering of Kashmiri Hindus to deflect questions about the denial of the right to self-determination, and the monstrous abuses inflicted on Kashmiri Muslims by the counterinsurgency. Kashmiri Muslims often respond by denying that Kashmiri Hindus left under duress, suggesting instead that their exit was instigated by the Indian government to project the resistance as Islamist and clear the field for the unrestrained massacre of Muslims. On the one hand, it is difficult to justify the claim that violence targeting Kashmir Hindus had a sectarian religious motivation. JKLF assassinations were motivated by an anti-establishment sentiment: a majority of the targets were pro-establishment Muslims.[26] On the other hand, it is disingenuous to deny that these killings frightened Kashmiri Hindus, especially in the context of a long-standing hostility that turned openly belligerent in the 1990s. Although there is no firm evidence, Governor Jagmohan reportedly discussed plans to evacuate Kashmiri Hindus with journalists in Jammu.[27] While the precise circumstances of the departure of Kashmiri Hindus from the Valley must await further research, it must be counted as a loss to Kashmir.[28] It is the denial of this that has allowed India to press the hardships faced by Kashmiri Hindus into service of a Hindu majoritarian narrative. It

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26   Bose, *Kashmir*, 96.

27   Anuradha Bhasin Jamwal, "A Moon of Many Shades," *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, no. 17 (April 27, 2013), 26–9.

28   See Najeeb Mubarki, "Kashmir Exiles & Ruptures: A 'No' Between Kashmiri Pandits and Kashmiri Muslims," *Economic Times*, April 15, 2015, https://economictimes. indiatimes.com/blogs/Ragtime/kashmir-exiles-ruptures-a-no-between-kashmiri-pandits-and-kashmiri-muslims/; Suvir Kaul, "Both Muslims and Kashmiri Pandits will have to find empathy, generosity to overcome their political differences," *Indian Express*, January 29, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-right-to-return-kashmiri-pandits-6240023/.

bears mentioning that Kashmir's record on sectarian violence compares very favorably to that of most parts of South Asia. Kashmir was peaceful in 1947 when parts of North India and the newly created Pakistan erupted in a paroxysm of violence, including Jammu and present-day Azad Kashmir. In 1963, the theft of the holy relic from Hazratbal Shrine in Kashmir (mentioned above) led to anti-Hindu violence in present-day Bangladesh, but no instances of violence were reported from Kashmir, despite mass outrage.[29]

In the late 1990s, Kashmiris started showing signs of weariness and disillusionment with the direction the armed struggle had taken. They were frustrated by the bewildering profusion of groups, internecine clashes, and a growing criminal element in the ranks of the militants. Renegade militants, who became an especially ruthless detachment of the counterinsurgency, further complicated a murky landscape of "unidentified gunmen." The high price borne by Kashmiris had brought no visible political gains. The possibility of a military victory over the Indian state, if ever plausible, was increasingly remote. In 1993, several pro-independence and pro-Pakistan political groups came together to form a coalition that called itself the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference. The Hurriyat attempted to shift the struggle from a military mode to a political one. The late 1990s saw a concerted push by radical Islamist groups into Kashmir and the border districts of the Jammu province. Composed largely of non-Kashmiri militants, their deliberately targeted attacks on Hindu civilians did incalculable damage to the cause of self-determination. This was grist for India's propaganda mill, which already caricatured the resistance as Pakistan-sponsored mischief, collapsing very real distinctions between the motivations and methods of different militant groups. Although the HM and the Hurriyat condemned their actions, these groups were not subject to political control. Politics was emphatically not in command of the gun,

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29   Maulana Masoodi, a widely respect cleric and senior NC leader, was instrumental in preventing the large and emotionally charged demonstrations from turning against Hindus. For precisely this reason, he was executed in 1990 by pro-Pakistan militants. See Bose, *Kashmir*, 79–80.

and the gun did not seem to be serving the political ends of self-determination. The frustration with the murk surrounding the militancy was not, however, a retreat from the demand for self-determination.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, India and Pakistan made noises about dialogue and a resolution of the Kashmir question. However, both have been singularly insincere in this respect. India consistently refused to negotiate on both self-determination and greater autonomy within the Indian union. There was no decrease in counterinsurgency operations. Quite the contrary — Indian forces killed many former militants and ideologues who had renounced armed struggle in favor of dialogue. When, in 2000, in deference to the popular mood, the HM announced a unilateral cease-fire and indicated a willingness to negotiate, Indian security forces *stepped up* attacks on them. India was and remains committed to a military solution. Likewise, Pakistan's unflagging lip service to the right of Kashmiris to self-determination is contradicted by its willingness to demobilize and attack popular forces it cannot control. Abdul Ghani Lone was a pro-independence Hurriyat leader who advocated talks with India, and he was an outspoken critic of Pakistan's opportunism vis-à-vis the Kashmir struggle. In an interview, he said, "Our freedom movement has been hijacked by the confrontation of these two countries. So we stand nowhere."[30] In May 2002, he was shot dead, very likely by pro-Pakistan militants. His murder was a turning point — the Hurriyat lost a crucial unifying figure and split into warring factions that have failed to unite since. The split owed as much to intimidation from Pakistan as it did to ideological and strategic differences among the Hurriyat's constituents. Pakistan forced the leader of the centrist faction to cease talks with New Delhi. It was subsequently announced that talks would resume when the Hurriyat had been reunified. The wait continues.

With the insurgency significantly weakened by the mid-1990s, India decided to hold state elections in 1996, the first since 1989.

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30 Lawrence Lifschultz, "Interview: Abdul Ghani Lone," *Newsline*, August 2002, https://newslinemagazine.com/magazine/interview-abdul-ghani-lone/.

Kashmir's nominal return to civil governance would serve as proof that people had rejected the militancy. India presented electoral participation as a proxy for a plebiscite. Mufti Mohammad Sayeed, a genuinely Machiavellian politician and longtime member of the Indian National Congress, was tasked with staging an election, complete with fake rallies, dummy candidates, promises of managed victories, and coerced voting amid violence and intimidation by security forces and renegades. Despite all this, the call for an election boycott issued by pro-freedom militant and political groups was successful. The NC, India's client of choice in Kashmir, stood thoroughly discredited, its political structure all but destroyed. Some of its cadre had been killed, and many resigned out of fear or disillusionment. Renegade militants became the regime's collaborators in Kashmir and were decisive in turning the military tide in India's favor. The elections were part of a move to create the space for a new set of unarmed collaborators, for "normalcy." This space was filled in 1999 by Sayeed's newly created Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), a truly Janus-faced organization. Formed with the support of the Indian security forces, the PDP chose the election symbol of the Muslim United Front, advocated talks with militants and pro-freedom politicians, insinuated that they had links with militants, and demanded a greater degree of autonomy within the Indian union. The PDP succeeded in creating a slim middle ground, albeit one viewed with deep skepticism by most Kashmiris. Despite the usual armed coercion and racketeering, calls to boycott assembly elections in 2002 and 2004 were successful, though to varying degrees. Although the low voter turnouts pointed to a smoldering resentment, Kashmir's capacity for active resistance appeared to have been exhausted. India proclaimed a return to "normalcy," and national newspapers carried articles about tourists returning to the picturesque valley.

In the summer of 2008, the image of normalcy was punctured by the most widespread and sustained protests in recent memory. The immediate provocation was the permanent transfer of a large piece of

land to a private body managing a Hindu pilgrimage site in Kashmir. This was in violation of the legal provision that only those domiciled in the state could own land. The pilgrimage also had some political significance. Radical Islamist militants had threatened to disrupt the pilgrimage in retaliation to the demolition of a historic mosque in India by Hindu militants in 1992. During a war with Pakistan, the Press Information Bureau of the government of India had promoted it as an act of solidarity with Indian soldiers![31] Protests in Kashmir led to the transfer being rescinded, which provoked mass protests in Hindu-dominated districts in Jammu. Led by the BJP, protestors blocked the single highway that connects Kashmir with North India, starving it of essential supplies and choking access to markets. Protests were savagely dispersed in Kashmir, while demonstrators in Jammu were treated with lenience. The grossly disparate treatment enraged Kashmiris, while the blockade was a humiliating reminder of Kashmir's dependent economic position. The Hurriyat leadership was incarcerated, but the surging crowds, led by a loose coordination committee, defied curfews and bullets, reclaiming the streets and public squares that had been closed to them for a decade and a half. The most numerous and assertive among protestors were the young, inevitably each with personal stories of grave losses and deep humiliations. Armed only with stones, organized groups of young men fought pitched battles with security forces. Though this was also a fight to reclaim space and dignity from the all-pervasive security grid, an unambiguous opposition to Indian rule was clearly expressed, and the response was ruthless. Shooting at peaceful demonstrations, security forces killed fifty-seven and injured 1,500.[32]

The summers of 2009 and 2010 were marked by a similar cycle of violent repression of protests leading to more protests and more

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31   Gautam Navlakha, "State Cultivation of the Amarnath Yatra," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 30 (July 26, 2008), 17–18.

32   Sanjay Kak, *Until My Freedom Has Come: The New Intifada in Kashmir* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).

repression. The immediate provocations for each year were specific and had their own intricate dynamics. In 2009, it was the rape and murder of two women, most likely by security forces, followed by a brazen cover-up, that galvanized people. In 2010, it was the murder of a seventeen-year-old boy by security forces. The immediate provocations aside, unrest was fueled by the fact that life in Kashmir had been saturated with gratuitous and unaccounted violence, with not even the barest shell of legal or constitutional recourse. Although the number of active combatants in Kashmir dropped from over 10,000 in 1990–1993 to a few hundred, the number of troops had only increased, as had security-related expenditures. Clearly, civilians were *intended* to be the targets of counterinsurgency operations. The huge cost of the counterinsurgency further crippled the virtually insolvent state government, already grappling with a staggeringly high debt-servicing burden. Social spending was low, and disbursement was heavily controlled by a rent-seeking elite loyal to India. Furthermore, there was resentment against the army occupying tens of thousands of acres of land,[33] much of it cultivable. In 2010, the unrest reached a crescendo, with protests larger, more assertive, and more sustained even than those of 2008. Stone-pelting was on the rise, drawing in men and women of all ages at various points. While a smattering of militants continued to engage security forces, the charge was being led by masses of unarmed people. This was Kashmir's new *intifada*.

Always on a simmer, discontent in Kashmir came to a boil once again in 2013. On February 13, an ex-militant named Afzal Guru was hanged for his alleged involvement in an attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. The trial, a caricature of due process violating every conceivable norm, became a major media event, and Guru became the object of a widespread jingoistic hatred. Guru was tortured and his brother detained by a notorious counterinsurgency

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33   Gautam Navlakha, "State of Jammu and Kashmir's Economy," *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 40 (October 6, 2007), 4034–8.

militia to coerce a confession that was televised before his trial. The judgment sentencing him to death said the following:

> As is the case with most of the conspiracies, there is and could be no direct evidence of the agreement amounting to criminal conspiracy … The incident, which resulted in heavy casualties, had shaken the entire nation and *the collective conscience of the society will only be satisfied if the capital punishment is awarded to the offender.*[34]

The Congress government, threatened by the ascendance of the BJP, was trying to look tough on terrorism. Like every surrendered militant, Guru's renunciation of the "gun solution" did not extricate him from the grip of the counterinsurgency grid. He was routinely detained, tortured, and blackmailed. Guru said in an interview that an official of the counterinsurgency militia had him accompany two of the would-be attackers to Delhi and help them buy a car that would later be used in the attack. Guru had no inkling of the plan. Nevertheless, he was arrested shortly after the attack. His request for phone records to be produced, since he claimed to have called the man who sent him, was refused. Guru was executed furtively; his family found out about it after the fact, denying them the right to appeal the rejection of a clemency petition. For Kashmiris, this was a glaring instance of the disposability of Kashmiri lives. Afzal Guru became emblematic of courage and quiet dignity in the face of an utterly immoral adversary. A monthlong curfew could not prevent mass protests. Guru's hanging was a turning point; it led to a resurgence in support for armed militancy and a steady uptick in local recruitment for the first time since 2001–2002.

The most influential figure in local recruitment to the HM was twenty-one-year-old Burhan Wani. After being beaten without

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34 Cited in *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*, 105. Emphasis added.

provocation by security personnel, Wani left home in 2010 at the age of fifteen. He became a commander in the HM, and through his very popular video and audio statements on social media, he was instrumental in rallying support for militancy. In South Kashmir, foreign militants had for years outnumbered local ones, but in the early 2010s, the ratio was reversed. When Wani was caught in a gun battle in July of 2016, thousands pelted the security forces with stones, trying to help him. His death provoked a wave of mass protests that surpassed those of 2008–2010. No part of Kashmir was untouched. Even without an official call by the Hurriyat, and despite a complete communications blackout, massive processions and shutdowns continued for months. Hundreds of stone-pelting incidents were reported; the young participated in large numbers. Security forces, as usual, were shooting to kill. Pellet guns, touted as a means of nonlethal crowd control, caused mass blinding, in addition to other severe injuries. Although hospitals and ambulances had been attacked by security forces before, in 2016, they were targeted with a vengeance. The toll was grievous: ninety were killed, 15,000 injured, over 1,000 blinded, and 16,000 arrested.[35]

This was a total uprising. People were confronting security forces. In one instance, a group of a hundred activists preparing for a freedom rally were attacked and injured by security forces. "But just as a deathly silence engulfed the area, tens of thousands of villagers from the neighbouring hamlets, armed with stones and sticks, stormed into the ground from all directions and filled it. The show was on. Speaker after speaker pledged not to give up until *Azadi* [freedom]. The crowds roared, returning the pledge."[36] In the years since, the small armed detachment of the HM, still active in the Valley, has seen a surge

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35   Dinesh Mohan et al., *Blood, Censored: When Kashmiris Become the 'Enemy'* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2018).

36   Parvaiz Bukhari, "The middle ground the PDP helped expand in Kashmir hasn't just shrunk — it has disappeared," *Scroll*, September 1, 2016, https://scroll.in/article/815296/the-middle-ground-the-pdp-helped-expand-in-kashmir-has-not-just-shrunk-it-has-disappeared.

in open support. Thousands attend the funerals of militants, and shutdowns are called when one is killed. In numerous instances, civilians have tried to interrupt gun battles between security forces and militants with huge protests and stone pelting. In some cases, they manage to help the militants escape, while in others, they demand the bodies of the fallen militants be handed to them. Security officials freely admit that the number of militants is small, but it is the crowds defending them that makes it difficult to assert control. In April 2017, a by-election in parts of Srinagar was disrupted by protestors, leading to the indefinite postponement of the by-election in another area.[37] The writ of the Indian state was under threat again, as in the 1990s, but with a much smaller armed element and a total insurgency by the civilian population. India had maintained its unwavering commitment to a military approach.

CONCLUSION

India's military presence has saturated virtually every aspect of individual and collective life in Kashmir for the last thirty years. It has made the conduct of everyday life all but impossible, robbing it of even the most mundane certainties. There is no recourse against the military. It functions without oversight by any civil institution, and it is sheltered by a canopy of indemnifying laws and deft perception management. India's war in Kashmir is dirty and conducted largely in secret. New Delhi has exercised near absolute control over political space since 1947. No political formation has ever been allowed to take executive power that is not loyal to or controlled directly by India.

The BJP government's approach, while fundamentally continuous with that of previous regimes, is also markedly more aggressive. Counterinsurgency operations have been especially ferocious and unrelenting; during the 2016 uprising, security forces frequently

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37 Shujaat Bukhari, *The Dirty War in Kashmir: Frontline Reports* (New Delhi: Left Word, 2018).

rampaged through hospitals, shooting the injured and the sick. *All* political leaders in Kashmir have been incarcerated since the lockdown began. India now appears to be cultivating a class of petty beneficiaries among local government representatives (panchayats), likely to be more pliable, and forming them into a political party. India will continue to rely primarily on armed strength to maintain its control. Meanwhile, India insists that Kashmir is an internal matter and refuses offers for mediation. A damning report by the UN from June 2018 on human rights abuses by security forces was simply dismissed as false and motivated.[38]

The BJP's brand of muscular Hindu nationalism is a key element that marks the current conjuncture in Kashmir as distinct. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, a key figure from the Hindu right wing, wrote in 1953, "If the Muslims of Kashmir do not want to remain with us, let them go away, but Kashmir must and will be ours. This is a vital matter for the security of India." So long as it is in power, the BJP will dig in their heels — they are ideologically committed to Kashmir's integration and pacification, at any cost. The notion of Kashmir as an integral and indispensable part of India has an astounding reach, owing in no small part to right-wing propaganda. On the entire political spectrum in India, no force exists that has a real chance of taking power, that could absorb the political cost of allowing territorial secession from the union. Moreover, the Indian state has the resources to continue escalating their expenditures, and to absorb much greater costs from the resistance. One reason for this is that the establishment making the policy decisions about Kashmir is not suffering. The BJP regime is inured to the human and material costs of the occupation of Kashmir.

The broad strategic directions that the resistance can take, and has taken, merit some careful rethinking. A successful military campaign

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38   Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Update of the Situation of Human Rights in Indian-Administered Kashmir and Pakistan-Administered Kashmir from May 2018 to April 2018" (8 July 2019), ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/IN/KashmirUpdateReport_8July2019.pdf.

against the Indian state is implausible, and it does not appear to have been the chief motivation of the armed resistance. The focus has been on drawing international attention to the dispute, driven by the overly sanguine hope that UN Security Council resolutions will bind the conduct of nations. India's economic and military clout has grown significantly since Nehru first took this Kashmir question to the UN in 1948. With the abrogation of Article 370 and the transformation of Kashmir into a centrally administered territory, India has achieved the ultimate success in converting Kashmir into an internal issue. No Western power has moved to intervene: India is a lifeline for their ailing economies and a counterweight to China. International attention has not meant international action. India has gotten away, yet again, with what it has done in Kashmir.

Though the mass resistance by Kashmiris has been uncompromisingly militant in its opposition to Indian rule, it suffers from a lack of credible, unified leadership. The political imaginary is built around notions of sacrifice, and political actions are often directed toward the defense of everyday life. What Kashmir needs is a politics that is devoted to the *long-term preservation of human life*. What form this might take is exceedingly difficult to say, not only because information about Kashmir is scarce at the moment, but also because the current situation is one of deep uncertainty. Irrespective of the precise direction that things take, there is little doubt that something momentous is developing. The central worry for those committed or sympathetic to the cause of self-determination is the simple fact that the Indian government appears willing to escalate costs, while continuing to absorb higher losses, indefinitely. ⟨

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In *Keynes Against Capitalism*, James Crotty describes John Maynard Keynes's powerful case for a form of democratic socialism in which most large-scale investment would be undertaken by the state. This essay argues that Crotty's interpretation of Keynes has a great deal of merit: Keynes's economics is indeed more radical than commonly thought, and it has considerable relevance for the Left today.

WAS KEYNES
A SOCIALIST?

GARY MONGIOVI

"The republic of my imagination lies on the extreme left of celestial space." — John Maynard Keynes[1]

"For my part I think that capitalism, wisely managed, can probably be made more efficient for attaining economic ends than any alternative system yet in sight, but that in itself is in many ways extremely objectionable. Our problem is to work out a social organisation which shall be as efficient as possible without offending our notions of a satisfactory way of life." — John Maynard Keynes[2]

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1 John Maynard Keynes, "Liberalism and Labour," in *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume IX: Essays in Persuasion*, Donald Moggridge (ed.) (London: Macmillan, 1978), 309.

2 John Maynard Keynes, "The End of Laissez-Faire," in *Essays in Persuasion*, 294.

SLAYING DRAGONS

An engraving of St George slaying a dragon graces the cover of James Crotty's monumental new book *Keynes Against Capitalism*.[3] The dragon is meant to symbolize capitalism, and the dragon slayer represents the great twentieth-century economist John Maynard Keynes. The premise depicted by this imagery will strike many as incongruous with the received understanding of Keynes's polemical aims. Keynes, the conventional story goes, sought not to dismantle capitalism but to reform it; he recognized that, contrary to the precepts of orthodox neoclassical economics, market forces are not reliable guarantors of full employment and robust growth. Capitalist economies, he argued, routinely deliver suboptimal levels of employment. Slumps that inflict severe distress on the working-class population are normal occurrences. According to the prevailing interpretation, Keynes, an enlightened but loyal member of the British establishment, foresaw that capitalism and the bourgeois values and institutions it underpinned would not be able to withstand another episode of economic turbulence on the scale of the Great Depression. Even smaller-scale downswings, if they occurred often enough and were severe enough, could destabilize the system both politically and economically. His purpose in writing his 1936 masterwork *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* was to understand why slumps occur, and to identify remedies to contain their destructive force. Once policymakers had gotten the problem of unemployment under control through the application of fiscal and monetary policy, market forces and profit-driven private enterprise could be left to regulate income distribution and to channel resources into their most efficient uses. Capitalism, according to Keynes, needed to be fixed, not abandoned — or so says the standard view of his project. Lawrence Klein, an early champion of Keynesian economics and a future Nobel laureate, put it nicely: "Marx analyzed

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3   James Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism: His Economic Case for Liberal Socialism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

the reasons why the capitalist system did not and could not function properly, while Keynes analyzed the reasons why the capitalist system did not but could function properly. Keynes wanted to apologize and preserve, while Marx wanted to criticize and destroy."[4]

In *Keynes Against Capitalism*, Crotty argues that the conventional view is all wrong. Far from wanting to rehabilitate capitalism, Keynes was building a case to replace it with a form of democratic socialism in which most large-scale capital investment spending would be undertaken by the state or by quasi-public entities. The Keynesian Revolution, in Crotty's interpretation, was considerably more revolutionary than we have been led to believe. It did not merely entail a recognition that the state must actively manage the level of aggregate demand to keep the economy operating on an even keel: what is needed is direct public control of the economy's capital expenditures. In a 1939 interview in the *New Statesman and Nation*, Keynes described the economic order he envisioned as "liberal socialism, by which [he meant] a system where we can act as an organised community for common purposes and to promote social and economic justice, whilst respecting and protecting the individual — his freedom of choice, his faith, his mind and its expression, his enterprise and his property."[5] What Keynes had in mind, Crotty contends, was a gradual transition, through a process of trial and error, to a planned economy.

This terrain has been explored before. Rod O'Donnell has already made a persuasive case that Keynes was a socialist in his philosophical outlook, his political orientation, and his economics. A favorite pastime of some libertarian intellectuals is to tar Keynes with the socialist label and then feather him with misleading insinuations that he approved of Stalinism, National Socialism, and Italian Fascism. Keynes's biographers, Roy Harrod, Robert Skidelsky, and Donald

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4   Lawrence Klein, *The Keynesian Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 131.

5   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 124. Crotty misattributes the passage to a 1932 article by Keynes in the *Political Quarterly* entitled "The Dilemma of Modern Socialism."

Moggridge, position him as a liberal with progressive sensibilities; Skidelsky in particular is skittish about identifying him as a socialist.[6]

Keynes surely was not a classical liberal in the mold of David Hume, Adam Smith, or John Stuart Mill — but to make that point is a bit like taking a battering ram to a door that is already ajar. Whether Keynes was a socialist, and precisely what sort of socialist he was if he was one, are trickier questions. Keynes had a notoriously restless intellect; he was an extreme case of Isaiah Berlin's fox who knows many things.[7] He whipped up more ideas before lunch than most of us have in a lifetime. His writing could be messy and imprecise. He liked to be provocative. Like many of us, he sometimes told people things that were closer to what he thought they wanted to hear than to what he really believed; and what he did believe could change from one day to the next according to the particular light in which he happened to be viewing a problem. He did not always take the trouble to reconcile the views he expressed in one context, while in a particular frame of mind, with the views he expressed in other contexts, while in a rather different mood. He is often characterized as a sort of intellectual magpie who made use of whatever intriguing idea crossed his path or sprang into his mind. I doubt that there is much to be gained by trying to pin a label like "liberal" or "socialist" onto Keynes — he was too exuberant a thinker to be put into a box. And inasmuch as these particular labels can mean vastly different things to different people, the exercise is doubly futile.

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6   See Rod O'Donnell, "Keynes's Socialism: Conception, Strategy, and Espousal," in Peter Kriesler & Claudio Sardoni (eds), *Keynes, Post-Keynesianism and Political Economy: Essays in Honour of Geoff Harcourt*, Vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 1999), 149–175; Roy F. Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes* (London: Macmillan, 1951); Donald E. Moggridge, *Maynard Keynes: An Economist's Biography* (London: Routledge, 1992); Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes, 1883–1946: Economist, Philosopher, Statesman* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Ralph Raico, "Was Keynes a Liberal?," *Independent Review* 13, no. 2 (2008), 165–188; and Murray Rothbard, "Keynes, the Man," in Mark Skousen (ed.), *Dissent on Keynes: A Critical Appraisal of Keynesian Economics* (New York: Praeger, 1992), 171–198.

7   See Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953).

THE END OF THE POSTWAR
GOLDEN AGE

I am prepared to entertain an affirmative answer to the question "Was Keynes a socialist?" But the significance of Crotty's book lies not so much in his affirmative conclusion as in the arguments that he marshals in support of it. For in developing his case, Crotty shows us how a penetrating, vigorous, and humane intellect tackled questions that have a crucial bearing on debates we are still having about what our socioeconomic institutions ought to do for us and what they ought to look like. The most fundamental of those questions is: How should we configure our economy so that it will foster human flourishing and well-being? A key takeaway from this book is that we need to think about Keynes in a radically different way. He was not mainly preoccupied with taming the business cycle: his ultimate objective was to bring about a radical transformation of our economic system. And, just as important, Keynes wanted to transform how we think about the relationship between the state and the economic organization of society; he believed that polities have the power to make a better world for themselves by shaping the institutions that mediate and organize economic activity. He wanted people to recognize that we don't have to settle for what the invisible hand bestows upon us, because we have considerably more latitude in guiding and constraining market forces than conventional economic wisdom alleges to be the case.

Keynesian economics was supposed to have put paid to socialism. By giving government a set of tools that could be used to make recessions shorter, less severe, and less frequent, mainstream Keynesianism effectively took socialism off the table. The state would perform a limited set of economic functions: using fiscal and monetary policy to keep employment reasonably high; providing an adequate safety net for those who found themselves in dire straits because of circumstances beyond their control; regulating businesses to ensure that the pursuit

of profit is not conducted by methods that put workers, consumers, or the natural environment at undue risk; and providing public goods like education, policing, and national security. Private enterprise could then be left to chug along as it saw fit, generating prosperity far and wide. There was no need to expropriate capital or micromanage the allocation of resources. This approach seemed to work reasonably well for two or three decades after the end of World War II.

The greatest ideological triumph of neoliberalism was convincing the vast majority of ordinary people that the way capitalism worked in the United States in the postwar period is the way it normally works. During that so-called postwar Golden Age, unemployment was low, productivity growth and profitability were high, and real wages grew in step with productivity; business investment was robust, and the economy grew at a healthy clip.

But the Golden Age was an isolated episode. And it was, moreover, the result of massive targeted infusions of demand into the global economy by the government of the United States. The GI Bill enabled returning veterans to buy homes and to get college degrees that enhanced both their earning power and the productivity of the US economy. Military Keynesianism kept industrial demand high, not only in the arms sector, but also in the subsidiary industries that supplied that sector with materials and parts. The Marshall Plan stimulated demand in Europe and Asia, with much of the assistance being used to purchase consumer goods and capital goods produced by US manufacturers. Higher education was a beneficiary of the Cold War, as the US government subsidized students, both undergraduates and graduate students, who specialized in sociology, anthropology, political science, and other disciplines that could be useful for the projection of imperial influence across the globe; federally supported cultural programs were meant to project soft power. NASA, which began as a Cold War program, involved an enormous mobilization of physical and intellectual resources; research related to the space program led to technological innovations, particularly in computing

and information science, that generated large spillover benefits in practically every part of the private sector. All the while, organized labor was strong enough to ensure that workers shared in the benefits of growth.

In the early 1970s, the Golden Age (which, let us note, conferred most of its blessings on white males and their families) was subjected to a variety of structural and political pressures that gradually eroded its viability. The manufacturing sectors of Europe and North America now faced competition from industrializing low-wage countries; this led to heightened tensions between labor and capital, undermining the compromise that had kept wage increases in line with productivity growth. The collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement made exchange-rate uncertainty and balance-of-payments crises once again potent sources of economic instability. The decision of OPEC (the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) to raise oil prices triggered both a deep recession and an inflationary spiral; the extended episode of stagflation put mainstream Keynesianism on the defensive. By the early 1980s, the Golden Age social contract had been displaced by a neoliberal outlook that reified the market. According to this view, the most effective thing the state can do to promote economic well-being is to get out of the way of the great wealth-creating engine of private enterprise. Markets know best, hence anything that interferes with their operation is inimical to economic efficiency. Regulation of all kinds (but especially regulation of financial markets), minimum-wage laws, labor unions, the social safety net, Keynesian demand-management policies — all of these once-routine features of postwar capitalism have been the targets of sustained ideological attack. Not surprisingly, workers and consumers have not fared well over the past four decades; their real incomes have stagnated, and their economic lives have become alarmingly insecure, while capital has seen its share of national income grow and its tax burden decline.

KEYNES AS A THEORIST OF
STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Crotty's book suggests that turning this situation around must begin with the rediscovery of Keynes's vision — his actual analytical vision, not the parody of it that has been handed down to us by the guardians of orthodoxy. Society, Keynes believed, could and must take "intelligent control of its own affairs," and this requires a reconfiguration of our economic institutions in the light of capitalism's structural evolution since the nineteenth century. [8] Crotty lays out that vision in rich and comprehensive detail. A number of important themes emerge in the telling. One misconception that Crotty convincingly obliterates is the idea that Keynes was mainly concerned with the short run, a view reflected in the mainstream depiction of his theory of effective demand as an account of, and remedy for, temporary deviations from long-run full-employment equilibrium. Keynes's often-quoted observation that "in the long run we are all dead" is almost always read out of context to imply that Keynes was entirely focused on the resolution of short-run monetary and macroeconomic glitches.[9] In fact, Keynes was deeply interested in the long run; not, however, in static long-run equilibrium, but in the long-run secular trajectory of late capitalism.

That is to say, Keynes from the start understood capitalism to be a system that undergoes structural change over time and operates differently in different phases of its history. This is evident in his first important book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919); there Keynes draws a striking contrast between British nineteenth-century capitalism, which witnessed astonishing improvements in living standards, largely through the adoption of transformative technologies such as steam power and rail transport, and the dispiriting mix of industrial distress and financial turbulence that marked the

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8 Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 86.

9 John Maynard Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1923), 65.

British economy in the aftermath of the Great War. (Keynes glosses over the fact that those improvements in living standards were hard-won through disruptive activism by Chartists, trade unionists, and numerous social reformers.) "England is in a state of transition," he wrote, "and her economic problems are serious. We may be on the eve of great changes in her social and industrial structure … The most serious problems for England have been brought to a head by the war, but are in their origins more fundamental. *The forces of the nineteenth century have run their course and are exhausted*" [emphasis added]. [10]

Keynes's writings are shot through with evidence of his engagement with capitalism as a dynamic, evolving system, one that had, by the early decades of the twentieth century, arrived at an existential crossroad. Britain's nineteenth-century economy drew its vigor from new inventions and their adaptation to profitable purposes, from population growth, and from the opening of global markets. As the working classes fought for and got higher wages, their rising consumption spending fueled further expansion. Those drivers of progress were largely spent by 1900.[11] The market system could no longer be expected to generate broad-based improvements in prosperity.

We may detect, in all of this, tropes that have become part of the discourse on the crisis of capitalism. Joseph Schumpeter argued that epoch-making innovations — steam power, the railroads, the internal combustion engine, electrical power — could spur long booms. Such innovations open up new areas of investment and lay the groundwork for the discovery of additional applications that in turn create yet more opportunities for innovation and investment. The exploitation of these opportunities involves what Schumpeter famously termed "creative destruction" — the wastage of obsolete resources, both human and inanimate, as the economy absorbs and diffuses the

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10   John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 237–238.

11   See for example, John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 307–309.

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innovation and its offshoots. When the investment potential of the original innovation has been fully exploited, the boom peters out, and the economy slides into a long slump that lasts until the discovery of the next epoch-making innovation. More recently, Northwestern University economist Robert J. Gordon has argued that the pace of innovation is slowing and that there are no transformative "Great Inventions" left to be discovered that might sustain robust employment for decades and substantially raise labor productivity, the two essential conditions for permanent across-the-board improvements in living standards.[12] Keynes anticipated these arguments: "there seems at the moment a lull in new inventions," he observed in 1931.[13] He didn't think the problem could be left alone for the market to rectify; for the market will not, as a matter of course, spontaneously generate a cluster of epoch-making innovations that will keep the economy running at a healthy clip for two or more generations. The market is not built to do that.

In the absence of transformative innovations that create new markets and call forth high levels of investment, including infrastructure investment, over long stretches of time, capitalism will lapse into a condition that economists call secular stagnation. The American Keynesian Alvin Hansen is usually credited with originating the idea in the late 1930s; former Clinton administration Treasury secretary Lawrence Summers has resuscitated it to explain the sluggish growth that has plagued the advanced capitalist economies since the financial crisis of 2007–2008.[14] Summers's argument is that the rate of interest that would generate enough private-sector investment demand to

12   See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934); Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942); and Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

13   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 147.

14   See Alvin Hansen, "Economic Progress and Declining Population Growth," *American Economic Review* 29, no. 1 (1939), 1–15; and Lawrence H. Summers, "Demand Side Secular Stagnation," *American Economic Review* 105, no. 5 (2015), 60–65.

counterbalance saving at a full-employment level of GDP is, at the present historical juncture, negative. Monetary policy, even highly aggressive monetary stimulus, will therefore be powerless to jump-start growth: public investment on a large scale is needed. Crotty demonstrates that Keynes was a secular stagnation theorist avant la lettre. Nearly a decade before the publication of *The General Theory*, Keynes observed that:

> The optimistic Zeitgeist of the nineteenth century has given way to a pessimistic Zeitgeist … We used to think that private ambition and compound interest would between them carry us on to paradise. Our material conditions seemed to be steadily on the upgrade [in the nineteenth century]. Now we are fully content if we can prevent them from deteriorating; which means the working classes no longer have sufficient hopes in the general trend of things to divert their attention from other grievances. We no longer have sufficient confidence in the future to be satisfied with the present.[15]

This, of course, will sound familiar to anyone paying attention to political and economic affairs in the Western Hemisphere in 2020.

Keynes's outlook also anticipates elements of the Social Structures of Accumulation approach, a body of macroeconomic analysis grounded in Marxian theory. According to that framework, capitalism passes through various institutionally distinct phases, roughly a quarter of a century long, in each of which capital accumulation is driven by a particular mechanism.[16] In the earliest stage of capitalism, for example, profits and growth were driven by the expansion of commerce. As the drive for mercantile profits ran up against limits imposed

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15 Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 85.

16 See David M. Kotz, Terrence McDonough, and Michael Reich (eds), *Social Structures of Accumulation: The Political Economy of Growth and Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

by the productive capabilities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century economic conditions, tensions — or, in Marxian terminology, contradictions — arose that led to industrialization, with manufacturing now the main source of profits and driver of accumulation. The "contradictions" associated with the industrial phase, in particular the need to find new markets for goods produced by ever more productive methods, and the need to secure access to raw materials, led to the imperialist phase.[17] Keynes, too, saw capitalism as a system that moves through various historical phases. In the early twentieth century, he believed, it had entered a phase in which private enterprise could no longer reliably generate full employment, rising living standards, or socially useful investment.

Keynes was aware of how market-driven structural change can disrupt a community's social bonds. Because the skills and physical facilities necessary to a particular line of production tend to concentrate in a particular geographical region — a phenomenon that generates substantial efficiency gains for all of the linked enterprises — the contraction of an industry or the closing of a large plant means that a lot of resources become redundant, and those resources are not easily transferable to other lines of productive activity. He noted that "men drop into occupations with no knowledge, by mere accident of circumstances and parentage and locality, often finding themselves in the wrong market, trained for something for which there is no demand, or not trained at all. There is no remedy for that by unregulated private action."[18] The traumatizing impact of structural change on the people caught up in it could be avoided only through some plan of centralized coordination. Ultimately, Keynes

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17   In the postwar Social Structure of Accumulation, the process of capital accumulation was sustained by Keynesian demand-management policies, military Keynesianism, and an accommodation between business and organized labor to keep wages more or less in line with productivity growth. In the 1970s through the 1990s, wages stagnated, but debt-financed household consumption and asset inflation kept profits growing.

18   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 87.

was trying to figure out a humane and fair way to achieve a flexible economic dynamism.

Crotty shows that Keynes saw the economic distress of his time as structural in origin. As aggregate income increases, society tends to save a larger proportion of its income. The gap between the economy's output and the level of spending on that output by households expands. Higher levels of output can be sustained only if other sources of spending emerge to fill the gap, i.e., to absorb the economy's higher level of savings. If we want to rely on the private sector to do the job, investment will have to increase. But investment spending depends on business expectations of future consumption demand; if the share of consumption spending in aggregate income is shrinking, private-sector enterprises are unlikely to anticipate levels of future demand adequate to stimulate a sufficiently high level of investment. I detect in this argument a trace of the dialectical method: the logic of the system generates tendencies that undermine its structural scaffolding. We also find in Keynes's argument faint echoes of an element of Karl Marx's falling-rate-of-profit hypothesis. The difficulty Keynes describes is the perceived lack of profitable investment opportunities; capitalist enterprise has the capacity to produce an enormous volume of output, but it cannot ensure the volume of demand required to realize the profit potential embedded in that productive capacity. As the economy's capital stock increases, opportunities for profitable investment become scarcer, and profitability declines.

Keynes was highly antipathetic toward Marx. He characterized *Das Kapital* as "an obsolete economic textbook which [is] not only scientifically erroneous but without interest or application for the modern world."[19] To George Bernard Shaw he wrote in 1934: "My feelings about Das Kapital are the same as my feelings about the Koran. I know that it is historically important and I know that many people, not all of whom are idiots, find it a sort of Rock of Ages and

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19   See John Maynard Keynes, "A Short View of Russia," in *Essays in Persuasion*, 300.

containing inspiration. Yet when I look into it, it is to me inexplicable that it can have this effect. Its dreary, out-of-date, academic contro-versialising seems so extraordinarily unsuitable as material for the purpose."[20] In a 1933 draft of *The General Theory*, he acknowledged that Marx usefully called attention to the fact that if firms are unable to realize their profits by selling what they have produced, the circuit of production will be interrupted. The acknowledgment is grudging, however: "the subsequent use to which [Marx] put this observation was highly illogical."[21] Keynes was never quite willing to give Marx his due on the matter of aggregate demand. His distaste for Marx appears to have been an aesthetic reaction rather than ideological or scientific in nature; I suspect that Keynes was allergic to Marx's dense Teutonic prose. Be that as it may, Crotty, without explicitly making the point, enables us to see that Keynes was an instinctive dialectician.

Since the effective demand problem was fundamentally structural, Keynes advocated a structural solution: a permanent expansion of the state. The idea was that a mechanism needed to be put in place to provide a permanent stimulus to the economy. Crotty describes at considerable length Keynes's proposal to expand public control over investment. The central institution Keynes envisioned for this func-tion was a Board of National Investment, an idea he first put forward in the late 1920s when he helped to draft a Liberal Party report on Britain's Industrial Future. He pushed for such a board again in the early 1930s when he served on the famous Macmillan Committee to formulate a response to the problems confronting the British economy. Crotty describes the proposed role of the board as "very ambitious indeed — *to help recreate long-term boom conditions similar in vigor*

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20 John Maynard Keynes, *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume XXVIII: Social, Political and Literary Writings*, Donald Moggridge (ed.) (London: Mac-millan, 1982), 38.

21 John Maynard Keynes, *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume XXIX: The General Theory and After — A Supplement*, Donald Moggridge (ed.) (Lon-don: Macmillan, 1979), 81. Keynes neglected to explain precisely how Marx's analysis was illogical.

to those of the nineteenth century through public investment planning. This definitely was not a short-term government stimulus program designed to 'kick-start' a temporarily sluggish economy and then let free enterprise take over."[22] One significant achievement of Crotty's book is its demonstration beyond a doubt that Keynes's overarching objective was to make a case for a program of national economic planning. Crotty marshals all of the available evidence and sets it out in an exceedingly clear way.

ENTERPRISE, UNCERTAINTY, AND THE SOCIALIZATION OF INVESTMENT

Keynes was not himself an expert on economic planning. He outlined the general scheme rather than a precise program. In a famous passage from *The General Theory*, he affects a cautious stance:

> a somewhat comprehensive socialisation of investment will prove the only means of securing an approximation to full employment; though this need not exclude all manner of compromises and of devices by which public authority will co-operate with private investment. But beyond this no obvious case is made out for a system of State Socialism which would embrace most of the economic life of the community. It is not the ownership of the instruments of means of production which it is important for the State to assume. If the State is able to determine the aggregate amount of resources devoted to augmenting the instruments and the basic reward of those who own them, it will have accomplished all that is necessary.[23]

But a program that proposes to regulate the *level* of investment on a large scale cannot help but also influence the *direction* of investment.

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22 Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 109.

23 Keynes, *The General Theory*, 378.

Keynes was not advocating half measures. It must be acknowledged that he had a lot of confidence in the judgment of technocrats: "It is for the technicians of building, engineering, and transport to tell us in what direction the most fruitful new improvements are awaiting us."[24]

Keynes may have contemplated the death of the rentier with equanimity, but he was probably not rooting for the death of the entrepreneur. He had a healthy respect for enterprise, and he appears to have seen risk-taking as a driver of progress. In *The General Theory*, Keynes famously observed that investment decisions largely

> depend on spontaneous optimism rather than on a mathematical expectation … Most, probably, of our decisions to do something positive, the full consequences of which will be drawn out over many days to come, can only be taken as a result of animal spirits — of a spontaneous urge to action rather than inaction, and not as the outcome of a weighted average of quantitative benefits multiplied by quantitative probabilities … Thus if the animal spirits are dimmed and the spontaneous optimism falters … enterprise will fade and die.[25]

Crotty devotes a good deal of attention to the idea that fundamental uncertainty about the future weakens the motive of private-sector managers to incur the risks associated with expanding their enterprises and with venturing into new spheres of activity. It is precisely because of the devitalizing effect of uncertainty upon investment spending that Keynes looked to public investment as a way to preserve the economy's dynamism.

A common argument adduced against socialism is that the removal of the profit motive blunts the incentive to take the kinds of risks that lead to innovation and growth. Keynes saw that the profit motive could just as readily suppress risk-taking as encourage it. He saw also that

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24   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 51.

25   Keynes, *The General Theory*, 161–162.

the pursuit of economic gain could fuel financial speculation that has no beneficial effect on employment, socially useful innovation, or real economic growth. On the contrary, such speculation raises the share of debt on the balance sheets of firms and households, creating a system-level situation of financial fragility in which a relatively minor interruption in the flow of credit can trigger a wave of defaults, with disastrous consequences for the real economy.[26] The solutions to these dysfunctions, Keynes argued, were financial regulation and large-scale government mobilization of resources for social investment. He was a strong advocate of capital controls to prevent finance capital from fleeing a country in pursuit of higher returns when the monetary authorities push interest rates down. He also believed that the most effective way to ensure a steady flow of socially useful investment sufficient to keep the economy operating at full employment is to assign authority over a good deal of investment spending to the state.

Against the criticism that placing investment spending under the control of the state will cripple an economy's capacity to innovate, we may call attention to the groundbreaking work of Mariana Mazzucato, which shows that since the end of World War II, government has been a major source of innovation in numerous fields, and, indeed, that without the direct and indirect involvement of the state, many key innovations of the past half century — the internet, personal computers and the software they use, information technology and communications, solar and wind power, countless medical advances — would never have materialized or would have been delayed for decades.[27] Keynes, as we have noted, had a great deal of confidence in the ability of technocrats to manage "the socialisation of

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26   This aspect of Keynes's theoretical framework was developed by Hyman Minsky in *Stabilizing an Unstable Economy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). Minsky's Financial Instability Hypothesis has become a cornerstone of Post-Keynesian economics.

27   See Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths* (London: Anthem Press, 2013).

investment," but he says little about innovation, or about how it might be fostered through his proposed Board of National Investment. He rightly notes, however, that profit-seeking is not the sole motive of human action, and that many of the dysfunctions of the modern age are the results of a policy framework that not only presumes it to be so, but presumes also that profit-seeking behavior can reliably produce socially beneficial outcomes. Some might think that he was overly optimistic in supposing that the professionalism of the technocratic class, its commitment to public service, and a bureaucratic ethos that fosters creativity and experimentation would do the trick. But those attitudes and conditions are what cause innovation to occur, when it does occur, in the private sector, and, as Mazzucato's research indicates, there is no reason they cannot produce similar results in other contexts.

Keynes laid out no detailed institutional blueprint for the arrangement he was advocating. He took it for granted that finding the right model would involve a good deal of experimentation. He understood, sensibly, that muddling through is an unavoidable aspect of all human activity. To effect meaningful social change, we need to be open to every thoughtful perspective. His outlook was emphatically anti-authoritarian: "the new economic modes, towards which we are blundering," he wrote in 1933, "are, in the essence of their nature, experiments. We have no clear idea laid up in our minds beforehand of exactly what we want. We shall discover it as we move along and we shall have to mould our material in accordance with our experience." Openness to criticism is indispensable, he continues: "for this process bold, free and remorseless criticism is a sine qua non of ultimate success. We need the collaboration of all the bright spirits of the age. Stalin has eliminated every independent, critical mind, even when it is sympathetic in general outlook … Let Stalin be a terrifying example to all who seek to make experiments."[28] In assigning

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28 Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 158.

an entrepreneurial role to the state, Keynes also acknowledged the likelihood that "some [public investment] schemes may turn out to be failures" — as, of course, is the case with many, and perhaps most, private investment projects.[29]

Keynes was, first and foremost, a practical-minded economist: his feet were firmly planted on the ground of reality. He was critical of the sloppy application of orthodox ideas to complex real-world circumstances, but he was no renegade. He rejected Soviet-style central planning; he recognized that markets are useful and that decentralization of control is desirable. "[T]here is," he noted, "an enormous field of private enterprise which no one but a lunatic would seek to nationalize."[30] He was not opposed to large-scale enterprises — he knew, as any competent economist does, that economies of scale confer benefits on society, and that large enterprises are here to stay; but they need to be intelligently controlled, managed, and regulated. Keynes was averse to class conflict: he was no class warrior; his aim was to diffuse class tensions. The system of planning that he had in mind would not, and indeed must not, hobble "the constructive energy of the individual mind, [or hamper] the liberty and independence of the private person."[31]

CONCLUSION

Crotty gives the impression, perhaps inadvertently, that Keynes was an isolated voice. To be sure, Keynes was a uniquely eloquent advocate of a thoroughgoing progressive transformation of the economic landscape, and the most prominent and authoritative proponent of change on such an ambitious scale. But many of his contemporaries were using orthodox neoclassical tools to make the case for economic

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29   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 54.

30   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 95.

31   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 127.

planning.[32] Other less radically minded colleagues understood that regulation and countercyclical fiscal and monetary policy were important tools for improving the operation of the market system.[33] In Germany and Austria, an innovative group of progressive economists were advocating, and to some degree implementing, policies that had much in common with what Keynes was suggesting, policies that were motivated by similarly humane concerns.[34]

Crotty might have subjected Keynes's arguments to some critical scrutiny. While Keynes was always a friend to the working class, a staunch supporter of trade unions, he had little to say about the alienating conditions of the wage relation. Crotty, as thorough as he is, doesn't have much to say on the topic either. Crotty reports, and appears to embrace, Keynes's case for economic self-sufficiency, a strategy that would entail a serious curtailment of international trade. While unfettered trade undoubtedly inflicts considerable harm on large numbers of workers, protectionism and economic insularity also have undesirable consequences that Crotty ought to have addressed. Managed trade, rather than protectionism, would be a more effective strategy.

Socialism has made a remarkable comeback in the political discourse of North America, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe.

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32   See, for example, Evan F. M. Durbin, *The Problem of Democratic Socialism: An Essay on Social Policy* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1940); Oskar Lange, "On the Economic Theory of Socialism, Part One," *Review of Economic Studies* 4, no. 1 (1936),53–71; Oskar Lange, "On the Economic Theory of Socialism, Part Two," *Review of Economic Studies* 4, no. 2 (1937), 123–142; Abba Lerner, *The Economics of Control: Principles of Welfare Economics* (New York: Macmillan, 1944); Maurice Dobb, "Economic Theory and the Problems of a Socialist Economy," *Economic Journal* 43, no. 172 (1933), 588–598.

33   For an overview, see David Laidler, *Fabricating the Keynesian Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Laidler argues that Keynes's ideas were not particularly revolutionary; Crotty's book is a persuasive antidote to that claim.

34   Many of these outstanding German-speaking economists were forced to emigrate when Hitler came to power; they went on to form the backbone of the New School's University in Exile. See Gary Mongiovi, "Émigré Economists and American Neoclassical Economics, 1933–45," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 27, no. 4 (2005), 427–437.

Opinion polls indicate rising dissatisfaction with capitalism and growing awareness of its many dysfunctions. Younger people in particular are increasingly likely to view "socialism" as a viable and appealing alternative to the profit-driven market system that dominates our economic, political, and social institutions. Whether the program that Keynes describes properly falls under the heading of socialism is a quibbling matter. His vision of a democratically guided economy that serves the needs of people rather than those of capital is as relevant now as it was in the first half of the last century. "The political problem of mankind," he wrote, "is to combine three things: efficiency, social justice, and individual liberty."[35] Modern society is deficient in all three respects. The looming dire threat of climate change has prompted calls for a Green New Deal.[36] The realization of such a project would require the adoption of an ambitious and optimistic political vision like the one Keynes put forward. By resurrecting that vision, James Crotty has performed a valuable service. ⫤

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35   Quoted in Crotty, *Keynes Against Capitalism*, 80.

36   See Robert Pollin, *Global Green Growth for Human Development* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2016).

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