THE EUROPEAN RIGHT AND WORKING LIFE:
FROM ORDINARY MISERIES TO
POLITICAL DISASTERS

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INTRODUCTION

The scope and intensity of the recent political swing towards right-wing populism and authoritarianism in Europe has been rather frightening. Since 2000, xenophobic movements, some of which are hostile to representative democracy, have come into power and formed governments in Austria, Italy, Denmark and Portugal. In large parts of Europe right-wing extremism is on the rise. A frequently heard explanation of this phenomenon is that the populists have succeeded in winning over the ‘modernization losers’, i.e. those who have lost out in the process of socio-economic change. It is often assumed that people who have difficulty in coping with the dynamics of social change develop ‘fundamentalist’ reactions that make them more receptive to right-wing extremism or populism. However, the countries and regions where voting support for the extreme Right is particularly high are not among Europe’s backward or declining areas nor do they have particularly high rates of unemployment. On the contrary, some of them, such as Denmark, Austria, Flanders and Northern Italy, are particularly well off by international standards.

Understanding the reasons for the rise of the extreme right, and strengthening political resistance to it, is clearly going to be a major challenge in the years to come. Among the crucial questions that need to be answered are: How have people reacted to socio-economic change and especially to the neoliberal restructuring of the economy and society in recent decades? Under what conditions do changes in working life make people more receptive to right-wing populist
ideologies? And the answers are rather more complex than they might seem at first sight.

‘Flexibility and Security’ was a much quoted policy objective throughout the second half of the 1990s. Yet while ‘flexibility’ has come to be taken for granted, ‘security’ remains problematic. In addition, the debate generally focuses rather narrowly on the statistical evidence concerning the transformation of employment and the connection between changes in work organization and changes in social security provision. The subjective element of these changes – i.e. the importance working people themselves attach to the security or insecurity of their jobs, and the injuries and despair experienced by those affected, or threatened, by drastic structural change – has so far received much less attention.

In fact, disadvantaged groups experiencing high levels of insecurity do seem to be receptive to nationalism and racism. Those with low levels of education, for example, are the most vulnerable and at the same time seem to be more likely to vote for right-wing populists. But similar attitudes can also be found among the well-off. Research has shown that it is not only the ‘losers’ who contribute to the success of right-wing populist or extremist politicians, but also members of the middle and upper-middle classes who are either afraid of losing their economic status or who face severe competition – and even people who expect to gain from neoliberal policies. One explanation is that intensifying competition makes ideologies propagating exclusion along national or ethnic lines more attractive. A psychoanalytic explanation suggests that pressures for ever intensified performance and productivity are likely to lead to hostility towards groups perceived or construed as unproductive, lazy or free-riding.

The danger right-wing populism poses for democracy can be seen in different ways. Optimists regard the electoral successes of right-wing populist parties as temporary phenomena. According to them, the host of promises such parties make, which have little chance of being kept, will more or less automatically lead to dissatisfaction with the actual performance of populists once they have been elected. A more pessimistic approach not only points to the way right-wing parties can weaken people’s attachment to democratic principles through media influence and/or attacks on constitutional government; it also suggests that we could be confronted with self-prolonging radical right-wing populist rule, as the far right exploits growing dissatisfaction and anger provoked by the consequences of its own neoliberal policies to mobilize a xenophobic and anti-system vote.

There is a danger that far-right politicians may benefit from the aggravation of problems they actively contribute to.

We will try to clarify some of the conceptual and empirical questions involved. We will first consider that working life may play an important role, in addition to that of the political system itself, the media, etc. Secondly, we will approach the problem from the opposite angle and ask why right-wing populism and extremism gain from the consequences of changes in working life. Why do adverse changes of working and living conditions lead to authoritarian and exclusionist protest rather than solidaristic and democratic opposition? Finally, in the
conclusion, we will indicate some of the conditions that are particularly conducive to translating the negative effects of socio-economic change into support for the extreme right.

WHY WORKING LIFE?

Insecurity in working life is not a recent phenomenon nor can capitalist economies exist without it. Why should the conditions in working life have played a particularly important role in recent political changes? One line of argument points to the culmination of long-term trends often addressed as ‘individualization’. On this view, the erosion of the institutions of bourgeois society in late capitalism, together with the consequences of globalization, are responsible for the widespread insecurity experienced today. As Beck puts it, a number of old securities have slowly disappeared, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century: ‘[m]uch like the family, the job has lost much of its former security and protective functions. With their jobs, people are losing an inner backbone that has given shape to their lives since the industrial revolution…’.2

This process of individualization decreases traditional forms of dependency and gives individuals new scope to design their lives according to their own ideas and wishes. Thus the loss of security is only the flip side of greater freedom. What, then, turns the loss of security that accompanies greater freedom into a problem? It is argued that individualization may lead to isolation, insecurity of orientation and action, and to feelings of powerlessness – anomic conditions that can be targeted by right-wing extremist ideology.3

Another attempt to explain such ‘pathological’ developments argues that we have lost a social character trait that would be needed in order to use this newfound freedom independently. For Sennett, this is a problem of late-twentieth-century ‘flexible’ capitalism, with its dedication to the ‘short term’. Qualities such as trust and commitment are abandoned, which makes social relationships that rely on interdependence impossible, and in the end undermines self-respect. People begin to ‘drift’, characters corrode. The qualities of character and personality needed to ‘design’ one’s life can no longer develop.4

Given that we are mainly interested in a political development that has emerged mainly since the 1980s, it seems preferable to focus on the most recent stage of capitalist development, rather than on the long-term evolution of industrial society. In the era of post-war prosperity, labour-market regulation promised more security for employees; since the 1970s employment insecurity has been on the rise again, while the neoliberal restructuring of labour-market regulation has weakened the protection of workers. From this vantage point, the recent rapid changes in socio-economic structures and the triumph of neoliberalism are the major reasons for the drop in employment security. There are two main aspects of this development: first, the peripheral labour market, providing precarious and informal work, is expanding in the core capitalist countries; and, second, insecurity is becoming ubiquitous through far-reaching changes in standard employment relationships within the ‘core’ labour market.
Precariousness and the informalization of work

There is no denying that mass unemployment and the threat of losing one’s job remain crucial problems of contemporary societies. But overt unemployment has also been complemented by various forms of underemployment, which partially integrate unemployment into the employment system. It seems reasonable to assume that the resulting forms of insecure and precarious employment cause levels of subjective pressure no less high than those caused by unemployment.

Recent statistics do show a rise in non-standard employment, i.e. forms of employment, such as part-time work, that do not yield a living income, or which are not protected by labour or social law to the same extent as ‘regular’ jobs. The fact that part-time work accounts for a major part of ‘atypical’ employment reflects the fact that its growth has been at least partly due to the growing integration of women into the labour market, since in many countries women do not seek full-time employment. Moreover, atypical employment is increasing less in industries that rely on world markets than in the retail, health and catering industries, all of which rely heavily on women workers.5

The theory of the ‘informalization of work’6 offers an explanation for this phenomenon. If a country accepts the rules of international competitiveness, it will have to surrender country-specific forms of employment regulation and the social security provisions that go along with them. Its economy ‘cannot bear the restrictions or “practical constraints” imposed by world markets in its entirety. Economic coherence and aspirations to become or remain attractive to foreign investors can only be achieved by pushing surplus labour into unemployment, and into informal, precarious and atypical work (exclusion)’.7 The result is a ‘fragmentation’ of the economy and society brought about by companies or even entire business sectors which try to succeed by undercutting world-market labour standards.

According to this argument, globalization not only contributes to the spread of informal employment but also to ‘tertiarization’, i.e. the expansion of the service industry. In particular, in sectors based on labour-intensive personal services that cannot be relocated to low-wage countries one can witness an increase in jobs that fall below the standards of previously prevailing norms and laws:

A … small number of highly productive workers and competitive enterprises experience a strong increase in value, while other types of work – even if it is indispensable social reproduction work – are devalued, especially with respect to remuneration. As a consequence, there is an increase in the proportion of workers who are denied a complete and long-term integration into society – via household income, the stability of their working life and the working conditions they are subject to.8

This in turn widens the cleavages in society. ‘The “meritocratic” gap in
income, education and status between a “cosmopolitan elite” of the wealthy, who speculate on global markets, the highly-qualified specialists of the “information age”, the strata of skilled workers and middle management, who fear losing their economic security, and a growing “functional underclass”, is widening’. These realities are partly reflected, though in a distorted way, in public discourse and political propaganda about flexibility, mobility and ‘employability’. Insecurity is accepted as endemic: everyone for themselves!

But the assumption is maintained that in principle everyone can achieve a secure existence on the basis of wage labour. Gorz has shown, however, that a significant part of wage-based labour is being abolished by rationalization, leading to widespread insecurity among people, whose income, social affiliation and self-confidence nonetheless continue to depend on paid work. Conditions familiar in Third World contexts increasingly spread to the First World. The accumulation of capital is increasingly separated from production, but an individual’s right to a suitable income and to a wide range of civil rights is still tied to the obligation to work.

The fact that these outdated ideas about a work-based society still shape people’s hopes and expectations, and that these expectations must necessarily be disappointed, is clearly crucial for our enquiry into the connection between changes in working life and right-wing populism: as Gorz says, ‘[i]t is by reinforcing “public opinion” in its unrealistic expectations, in its adherence to outdated norms, in stereotyped interpretations wholly out of step with the realities they claim to decipher, that credence and sustenance are given to manichaean visions, scapegoat theories and proto-fascist ideologies and practices’.

But hasn’t public discourse since the 1980s abandoned promises of security, even if it still maintains the wage-based working society as a central element? Doesn’t it instead assert that former job and employment standards are outdated and that everyone will have to get used to disrupted careers, frequent job changes, lifelong learning – in other words, to general insecurity? For Bourdieu, ‘precariousness’ is part of a new form of hegemony based on ‘general insecurity that turned into a permanent state of affairs’. This insecurity is used as a strategy to ensure workers’ compliance and submission: ‘[i]n a way, the flexible enterprise deliberately takes advantage of a situation which is marked by insecurity and which it further aggravates’. Seen from this point of view, we are no longer talking about the side effects of socio-economic changes brought about and accelerated by globalization, which political attempts at ‘flexicurity’ seek to alleviate. If we see insecurity as a central element of capitalist hegemony, it becomes clear that corrective measures will not be achieved through social policy. Space for right-wing populism clearly exists here.

**The new standard employment**

Yet unemployment, the increase of precarious employment, and labour-market deregulation do not comprise the full extent of individual insecurity. Formal employment and long-term work contracts have also undergone
dramatic changes over the past decade or so. In many countries, privatization, the growing significance of ‘shareholder value’ and new forms of control have created radically different conditions for employees. This can also be observed from the changes that have taken place in standard employment contracts, which nowadays tend to include a number of new elements like performance-related pay and flexible time-arrangements. At the same time, values of mutual understanding and trust between management and staff are increasingly abandoned in favour of a reorientation towards short-term profit. Of course, in continental Europe companies still have plenty of reason to rely on their long-term staff to help them adapt to difficult times; similarly, they often avoid a straightforward hire-and-fire policy in order not to generate fear and distrust among their staff, especially if the company depends on its employees’ experience, cooperation and commitment. But even the well-known Volkswagen model offered employment security only in exchange for concessions on the part of the workers, including additional mobility, more flexible working hours and increased performance. Concession bargaining is more and more widespread, leading to ‘pacts’ whereby employers offer to keep employment levels in exchange for lower pay and increased flexibility.

Rising insecurity can thus be found at the heart of the social relations within a company. Long-term employees, temporary workers and freelancers increasingly work side by side. This puts pressure not only on those who hope to achieve better positions by working harder, but also on those whose social standing and security are at risk. In many enterprises, competition among employees is on the rise, and the risk of failure becomes ever-present. How rules of mutuality tend to be broken and expectations are disappointed can be seen from the decrease in the provision of ‘niche’ employment opportunities for older workers, or employees with health problems. The transformation of the social order within companies is felt especially dramatically in former state-owned industries or recently privatized institutions of the public sector: companies that used to operate on the basis of promises of long-term security are now listed on the stock exchange and rely on the creation of quasi-markets within the company. It is not hard to imagine how many implicit contracts have been broken and how many injuries employees have experienced. Social insecurity has returned to the core workforce and to the ranks of skilled workers, which is particularly distressing given expectations of continuously increasing living standards and reduced risk on the part of wage labour. This is particularly true for blue-collar workers, who are not only most affected by international competition but also suffer from cultural and symbolic devaluation.

Recent moves towards new forms of work organization do not mitigate such developments although, at first sight, demanding a high degree of independence and self-organization from workers might seem to upgrade them. In areas where bureaucratic rules and orders from superiors used to determine the direction of work and assure a consistent work process, today what counts is individual achievement. Expectations of increased responsibility on the part of individuals
or groups of workers are combined with tighter control of results. Such changes in working life make great demands on employees’ personalities, but at the same time limit the opportunities for the formation of identity. Workers find that new work structures do not yield the promised work autonomy. Conflicts about reorganization are widespread and aspirations keep exceeding realities.¹⁵

In summary, we can say that rising insecurity represents one of the foremost aspects of socio-economic change and the transformation of working life. This conclusion is widely shared and often voiced in combination with the suggestion that insecurity triggers fears which may in turn lead to a rise in nationalism and racism. In the words of the ‘Group of Lisbon’, ‘most people live with a permanent feeling of uncertainty. The promotion and defence of one’s own identity is linked to the rejection and destruction of other identities. Growing uncertainty produces additional insecurity, growing insecurity produces more violence. Many people are caught in a logic of war and struggle of all against all, in the interest of their own survival’.¹⁶

WHY RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM AND POPULISM?

It is often implicitly assumed that increased insecurity in working life makes people more or less automatically receptive to right-wing populism. In fact, of course, these changes can and do provoke quite diverse reactions. Authoritarian-exclusivist protest is only one possible form these reactions can take. Another is denial of adverse effects and a retreat into isolation. One might also expect solidaristic-democratic protests against worsening living and working conditions. Why then should these socio-economic changes lead to increased receptiveness to extreme right-wing ideologies? In other words: What is ‘on offer’ from the extreme right today that makes it attractive? How can analysis grasp the interrelation between increasing insecurities and threats in working life and the readiness to adopt scapegoat theories and exclusionist ideologies? The success of radical right-wing populists in rich European countries and regions with comparatively low and even declining rates of unemployment reminds us that it is not enough to look only for obvious and absolute distress and misery.

With Bourdieu, we assume that in order to answer this question we have to look at the problem from the vantage point of those most affected by recent changes. It is from this perspective that we can assess the ‘positional suffering’ resulting from an inferior position and relative decline within the social order.

This positional suffering, experienced from inside the microcosm, will appear, as the saying goes, ‘entirely relative’, meaning completely unreal, if we take the point of view of the macrocosm and compare it to the ‘real’ suffering of material poverty (la grande misère). This is invariably the point of reference for criticism (‘You really don’t have anything to complain about’), as for consolation (‘You could be worse off you know’). But using material poverty as the sole measure of all suffering keeps us from seeing and understanding a whole side of the suffering characteristic of a social order which, although it has undoubtedly reduced poverty overall
(though less than often claimed) has also multiplied the social spaces (specialized fields and subfields) and set up the conditions for an unprecedented development of all kinds of ordinary suffering (la petite misère).17

In their study, *The Weight of the World*, Bourdieu and his colleagues deal with people’s longing for social upward mobility, the investments they make to achieve it, and their sense of disappointment when these hopes are crushed by economic crisis or the hidden devaluation of what they have achieved. For many people, for instance, owning a house in a respectable area might be the object of such hopes. Seen from this point of view, conflicts with immigrant families and xenophobic reactions are much easier to understand:

These conflicts are all the more significant because they have almost no objective basis. They must therefore be understood as the last manifestations of resistance put up by this fraction of the population – which has acquired only very late in life the longed-for single family house as well as the (geographical and social) space associated with it, that is, the space on which it has projected all its aspirations and hopes for social promotion, in which it has invested and in which it is invested – to contest the process of decline, devaluation and disqualification in which it fears being caught.18

Learning from this approach we can put into perspective our question as to whether the effects of the socio-economic change of recent years have prepared the ground for the extreme right. First, changes in forms of employment as well as changes within enterprises have resulted in increasingly insecure conditions for employees. These changes must be seen in the context of people’s hopes and expectations if we want to understand individual strategies for coming to terms with potential disappointment and injury. Second, what matters most in this context is not the actual extent of negative effects on labour and employment conditions but the subjective perception of personal upward or downward mobility compared with other individuals or social groups whose position you aspire to, or want to leave behind. Third, the perceived changes and opportunities have to be seen in relation to the expectations and responsibilities produced and/or enhanced by the prevailing public discourse about work.

So what does the extreme right offer to people experiencing high levels of uncertainty? To answer this question let us first try to define more concretely what is meant by radical right-wing populism. The term populism goes back to the late nineteenth century, when North American farmers sought the government’s protection against the excessive prices asked by the railway companies and the exorbitant rates of interest charged by the banks. Their movement was characterized by romantic anti-capitalism and a distrust of professional politicians and lawyers. According to Dubiel, ‘… in Anglo-Saxon sociology “populist” social movements are primarily characterised by reaction, passivity and victimisation in the face of economic, political and cultural modernisation processes … Populist movements … cannot be defined by means of a certain set of interests they represent (e.g. economic class interests). The image of “us” they project rather
addresses ascriptive collective traits, such as regional or national affiliation, language community, gender, skin colour, ethnic origin, etc.’. Today the expression ‘right-wing populism’ refers to ‘neo-conservative strategies of symbolic integration’, seen as an alternative to integration into the welfare state. ‘A form of political mobilisation such as this always depends on the resentment, prejudice and fears automatically created by excluding the lower classes from power and education. The cultural features of class rule thus become the agents of their own prolongation’.20

Radical right-wing populism is further characterized by the perception of ‘the people’ as a passive political subject, a homogeneous collective opposed to the political elite. ‘The subject assumed and created by populist politics’, says Steinert, ‘is passive, without strong, clearly defined interests, driven by feelings of resentment; it can be mobilised from above and is prepared to follow; it is a “mass” which must be seduced and won over, perhaps organised, instructed and guided – which needs a “leader”’.21 The collective identity addressed by right-wing populists is usually defined in terms of ethnicity, race or nationality. Additional in-groups of, for instance, ‘honest and hard working people’ are often constructed through the exclusion of outcasts.

Coming back to the question as to what radical right-wing populism has to offer, we often find the following main aspects:

**Orientation**: In an increasingly complex world people have problems understanding the forces that impact on their lives. In face of contradictions and existential insecurities the adoption of certain strategies and interpretations, such as scapegoat theories or authoritarian views of society, can help individuals to create a subjective sense of consistency in their apprehension of social reality.22 Views and concepts based on ethnicity, anti–elite sentiments or in-group/out-group distinctions provide simple explanations for complex problems and thus provide people with an orientation.

**Supporting identity**: Political messages can promote a sense of belonging to an (imaginary) ethnic or national community, which may compensate for lost certainties and therefore help to stabilize the self. A ‘shadow identity’23 can easily be borrowed if one’s existing social identity is damaged. For Ottomayer, ‘xenophobia is an easy-to-get self-esteem drug’24, while Sennett speaks of the re-emergence of that ‘dangerous pronoun “we”’: ‘One of the unintended consequences of modern capitalism is that it has strengthened the value of place, aroused a longing for community. (...) All these conditions impel people to look for some other scene of attachment and depth. Today in the new regime of time, that usage of “we” has become an act of self-protection. The desire for community is defensive, often expressed as rejection of immigrants or other outsiders…’.25

**Displacement of problems**: Problems in working life, especially the exploitation, devaluation etc. of labour, lead to imbalances and tensions. If their causes cannot be legitimately addressed they may be ‘discharged’ in objectively unrelated areas.26 Thus xenophobic impulses may be a way of voicing frustration, even though the original problem has nothing to do with foreigners.
Projection: In psychoanalytical explanations aggressive exclusionist views stem from libidinous and aggressive impulses that are projected onto others. Those out-groups that allegedly realize one’s suppressed wishes become the targets of aggression. The more people are forced to surrender to rules of ever intensified performance and productivity the more likely are attacks on groups perceived as unproductive, lazy or free-riding. This is one of the reasons why people who are ‘winners’ from modernization may also be attracted to right-wing populist ideologies.

These concepts are valuable because they help us to understand how politicians succeed in seducing people without addressing the real sources of their problems – let alone offering viable solutions. It would be a mistake, however, to put the phenomenon as a whole down to ‘false consciousness’. Part of radical right-wing populism is actually ‘interest politics’, and some people’s support for it can be assumed to be quite rational – however difficult this is for some of us to accept. There are two aspects to this. First, there are real problems caused by immigration which are not being addressed by the established political forces. Second, it may be a rational strategy to use ethnicity, race or nationality in the struggle over the distribution of wealth.

In his explanation of right-wing extremism in Germany, Jaschke argues that people in disadvantaged suburbs who experience the seamy side of multicultural life are faced with an official ideology of an ethnically homogenous Germany. They do not feel represented by the main parties, nor does the public debate on immigration address their situation.

‘While cosmopolitan intellectuals and service workers despise the poorly-educated and narrow-minded mob, the conservatives, protecting their possessions, tend to make use of the urban losers from modernisation. Their problems are acknowledged as legitimate, but eventually taken advantage of to justify policies of isolating themselves off, and avoiding the need to share. Despised by both groups, [for the ‘mob’] it is only a small step to [fall into] political apathy or to [support] extreme right-wing parties’.28

Official ideologies of national ethnic homogeneity do not exist in all countries, yet even so members of the working class may still resort to ‘defensive nationalism’ if they feel their group interests are being violated or their social position and status threatened. They turn to exclusion on ethnic terms to protect what they have achieved and to keep their distance from the ‘underclass’. The internationalism of the workers’ movement conceals the fact that in many countries the working class and workers’ organizations are not opposed to nationalism. This can take the form of socialist nationalism, linked to the national welfare state and based on the integration of the working class into the nation-state, but it can also take the form of conservative nationalism when, for example, anti-immigrant resentments are stirred up. In fact, these distinctions are much less clear-cut in real life, as Erich Fromm showed long ago in his research
on blue- and white-collar workers at the advent of the Third Reich.\textsuperscript{31} Even then, the political orientations of large parts of the working population were highly ambiguous. Now, after the dissolution of solid political camps and social milieus, the boundaries between interest politics and identity politics, between socialist and conservative nationalism, and between solidarity and authoritarian protest are much more likely to be blurred.

We should, however, also avoid attributing the phenomenon exclusively to the protest vote of modernization ‘losers’. First of all, some nationalist reactions are in fact not opposed to, but rather well integrated into, the dominant ideology. Butterwegge, for example, calls the liberal and conservative view of national interests in a global capitalist world ‘Standortnationalismus’ (‘business location nationalism’). This form of nationalism is based on the idea that in the face of a hostile world of international markets the economic superiority of one’s own ethnic community can only be proven by ingenuity, hard work and the willingness to make sacrifices. This ideology can be easily adapted to the purposes of right-wing extremism. Because of its adoption of neoliberal ideologies, this is a strain of right-wing extremism that for the first time since 1945 offers a set of aims and objectives which ‘does not only tie in with that of mainstream society, but also corresponds with the interests of influential groups and the strategic concepts of elites in the economy and administration’.\textsuperscript{32}

Second, support for radical right-wing populism is not limited to particular disadvantaged groups in society. According to Kitschelt, the potential electorate of the extreme right is partly made up of the ‘petit bourgeois’, who support a free-market economy, ethnocentrism and the reduction of the welfare state – and probably count themselves among the ‘winners of modernization’; and only partly by ‘modernization losers’, who are drawn towards ‘welfare chauvinism’, with its aim of excluding some groups, especially immigrants, from the benefits of the welfare system.\textsuperscript{33} Research into social milieus and mentalities also shows that both authoritarian and democratic orientations can be found at all levels of society. All attempts to establish differences between ‘authoritarian and democratic mind-sets on the vertical axis (of social inequality) have failed completely’.\textsuperscript{34}

Even an increase in social insecurity can be dealt with in a democratic or authoritarian way, depending on mentality. Vester argues that authoritarianism and hostility towards immigrants do not depend on ‘the intensity of social frustration but on its interpretation inherent in some mentalities’.\textsuperscript{35} Researchers in Germany note that the socio-political camp of ‘disappointed-authoritarians’ accounts for 27\% of the population where modernization losers are concentrated (elderly workers, unskilled workers and workers with outdated qualifications, young workers without career prospects). In terms of milieus the right (authoritarian) and the lower social classes are over-represented: the petty-bourgeoisie, ‘traditionless’ workers, and to some extent also the traditional and performance-oriented working-class.\textsuperscript{36}

In Italy the right-wing populist party \textit{Lega Nord} is largely supported by entrepreneurs and workers in successful small and medium enterprises in the north.
Owing to this social base the party articulates the resentments of the ‘winners’ of modernization. Unfortunately available research findings do not allow for a clear judgement as to what extent the groups that are gaining most from current restructuring actually support right-wing populism. International comparative research shows that in general the unemployed, people with low levels of education and those perceiving deprivation are more likely to vote for the extreme right. But voting statistics also show that the right-wing vote is not made up only of the unemployed and the low-skilled. In Austria, for example, according to one estimate 47 per cent of the blue-collar workers, but also 33 per cent of the self-employed and 22 per cent of the white-collar workers, voted for the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in the 1999 general elections. This also holds true for France: in the first round of the 2002 French presidential elections 25 per cent of Front National voters were unemployed, but 13 per cent were middle managers and 18 per cent salaried employees. Of course, further research is needed to understand the motives of different groups of people to support the extreme right. But it seems to be quite clear that general, simple explanations do not take us very far.

CONCLUSIONS

There is some indication of a connection between socio-economic change and, in particular, recent transformations of working life and political developments, such as the rise of radical right-wing populism. Though the analysis of the exact nature of their relationship is a difficult undertaking, we can draw several conclusions from what has been said so far.

Neoliberal politics, globalization and rapid technological change have given rise to, or intensified, feelings of insecurity among the broad mass of the population. These changes may bring about existential fears and multiply feelings of injury. Owing to socialization, hegemonic ideologies and societal power relations the resulting ‘free-floating aggression’ is turned against other vulnerable groups, in particular those widely seen as scapegoats. ‘Also in this form aggression remains powerless but it may be expressed with impunity, and may even earn approval’. Similarly, in a methodological note Bourdieu describes hostility towards immigrants among farmers and owners of small businesses who have no direct contact with ‘foreigners’ as problem displacement:

One can only get beyond the appearance of denseness and absurdity which, by comparison with an understanding-based interpretation, seems to characterize that hostility, if we see that, by a form of displacement, it offers a solution to the contradictions specific to these small-time capitalists with proletarian incomes and to their experience of the governments which they see as responsible for an unacceptable redistribution of wealth. The real bases of the discontent and dissatisfaction expressed, in inappropriate forms, in this hostility can only be brought to consciousness – that is to explicit discourse – where an effort is made to bring to light these things buried deep within the people who experience them …
To some extent, right-wing populists and extremist politicians do take up factual problems. They primarily use them, however, to present ‘scapegoat’ theories and similar interpretations which are used to voice rage and discontent caused by experiences that are not actually related to ‘immigrants’, ‘foreigners’ or other constructions of ‘the other’.

Disappointments, fears and injuries may trigger different reactions; they do not automatically result in particular interpretations and political reactions. The dramatically different political developments in countries subject to similar socio-economic transformations, as well as different reactions within the same socio-economic classes, lead us to assume that there must be a number of additional influences. Among the conditions frequently leading to a strengthening of right-wing extremism or radical populism, the following seem to be of particular importance:

- The traditions and political culture of a country as well as the range of right-wing populist or extremist interpretations ‘on offer’ at a certain time contribute to determining how individuals cope with these changes. De Witte and Verbeeck are convinced that it is not ethnocentrism or racism in society itself that is on the increase (and yields better election results for the Vlaams Blok in Flanders) but that it is right-wing populist and extremist parties that are making ‘foreigners’ or ‘immigrants’ a burning socio-political issue. The success of such parties adds to their media presence as well as that of the ‘immigrants’ issue itself.42
- Depending on their social milieu and their position within the total ‘social space’, individuals process similar experiences and interpret similar events in entirely different ways. As mentioned above, Vester shows that, depending on mentality and milieu, similar experiences of socio-economic disintegration can produce either authoritarian or democratic reactions.43 In addition to the social milieu, the extent to which certain groups of the population are integrated into political organizations and traditions plays a significant role, as does the direction mobilization is currently taking.
- The release of ‘potentials of political subjectivity’ 44 which determine whether certain political attitudes are adopted or not seems to constitute a further important factor. Dubiel defines these potentials as ‘hardly tangible … aspirations for happiness and justice, the need for recognition in society and cultural identity’ 45. According to the theory of the ‘populist moment’, sudden phases of change and modernization release these potentials of political subjectivity, which are kept at bay in more stable times and in politically stable, culturally well-integrated societies. ‘In such [suddenly changing] moments in social history, the collective experiences of injury, fear of losing one’s status and thwarted hopes for happiness of some groups of the population are dropped, as it were, from established discourse and become “floating potentials”, at odds with the traditional spectrum of political orientation’.47
In conclusion, I would like to formulate the following hypothesis. Recent socio-economic changes have exacerbated ‘positional suffering’, experiences of injury, insecurities and fear in large sections of the population. The simultaneous neoliberal reorientation of politics and the prevalent unrealistic discourse concerning labour and employment have undermined the integration of potentials of political subjectivity. On the basis of respective cultural traditions, right-wing populist and extremist movements and politicians take advantage of the resulting ‘floating potentials’. The success of these movements in turn strengthens tendencies to transform latent discontent into racist, nationalist and authoritarian attitudes. To some commentators this is not so frightening after all, because populists do not pass the acid test of having to rule. Their empty promises and programmatic contradictions and ambiguities will ensure that they cannot stay in power very long.

But the injured ‘loser’ from modernization is not the whole explanation, nor is right-wing populism thriving on the protest vote alone. Three qualifications are needed. First, mainstream ideology, i.e. economic nationalism as part of globalization, addresses both losers and winners – and the well-off may have their own reasons to support right-wing populists. Second, an analysis of the problem should avoid the cosmopolitan prejudice that perceives anti-immigrant attitudes only as morally inappropriate and politically incorrect. Such attitudes are not all just triggered by identity politics but to some extent reflect economic interests and justified anxieties. Third, radical right-wing populism is not necessarily a temporary phenomenon: populists may well thrive on the problems they produce or exacerbate. Even if they do disappear from the political sphere here and there, not much is gained as long as mainstream parties continue to pursue the policies they adopted from the extreme right in order to contain its rise.

But what can the political and societal left learn from these experiences? Of course the complex and varied realities in the different countries do not allow sweeping generalizations or simple panaceas. But some points seem to be pertinent to most European countries or regions that have recently experienced a renaissance of the extreme and populist right. First and foremost, social problems such as precariousness, poverty, growing inequality and insecurity as well as worries caused by immigration need to be properly acknowledged and addressed. This seems to be a banality but it is sad enough that it is not. For instance, when we read in a Danish Association leaflet that ‘There are 30,000 homeless Danes. WHEN will there be built asylum shelters for them?’, we should recognize that what is really scandalous is not only how the weakest in society are played off against each other in this way, but also that one of the richest nations in the world does not provide housing for its desperate citizens. Ignoring factual problems and countering the ensuing protest with the demand for political correctness is all too easy and, at least on the basis of the experience in Austria, proves to be the best support for right-wing populists. Second, providing orientation through ideology and a vision of a just society are badly needed. Not for the first time, aggression that is caused by humiliations stemming from the capital-labour rela-
tionship, the repressive state or welfare bureaucracies is displaced to unrelated areas and utilized for scapegoating. Intellectuals and politicians accepting or even contributing to the factual taboo on social domination and economic exploitation should at least not be shocked about the victims that blame the immigrants for taking away jobs or welfare benefits. Finally, and related to the previous points, the blurring of social-democratic, conservative and liberal political positions and practice led to a situation where, in some European countries, protest against the consequences of neoliberal restructuring of society can only be voiced through support for the populist right. Growing insecurity and inequality need to be addressed directly and effectively instead of paying lip-service to abstract aims of an inclusive society. And those on the left who actually do that should not be reproached with being populist.

NOTES

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8 Ibid., p. 339.
9 Ibid., p. 357.


29 Dörre, ‘Modernisierung der Ökonomie’, p. 97.


35 Vester, ‘Wer sind heute die “gefährlichen Klassen”?’, p. 323


43 Vester, ‘Wer sind heute die “gefährlichen Klassen”?’. 
44 Dubiel, *Ungewissheit und Politik*.
46 Goodwynn, quoted in ibid.
47 Ibid., p. 203f.