


Class Politics and the Reactionary Electorate

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The recent election in Turkey resulted in a failure of left parties to unseat the ruling AKP, thought to be weak on the economy, as a result of its threat to personal freedom, and mired in corruption but it turned that campaign into one about security concerns to win an outright majority. While the Scottish National Party saw incredible gains in recent UK elections (at the expense of Labour in Scotland), overall the Conservatives increased their hold on Parliament, gaining a net 24 more seats. The Conservatives in Canada suffered a major defeat to the centrist Liberals, a result foreshadowed by the Conservative losses in Alberta months before. And in the USA, while everyone focuses on the upcoming presidential elections of 2016, conservative Republican candidates managed gains in local elections. At the same time, the leading candidates or strong challengers running for president in the USA are those politicians who appear to come from outside the political mainstream – candidates like Bernie Sanders for the Democrats and Donald Trump and Ben Carson among the Republicans. Each, in their own way, caters to a large and growing segment of dissatisfied voters. What is troubling is how the electorate seems not to take responsibility for those officials they elected to national office in the past, and how class politics is being set aside in favor of a populist right-wing rhetoric.

There are several well-rehearsed tropes that try to explain this growing reactionary tendency among white working-class Americans. The combination of increased immigration and the expectation that in the near future the population will be ‘majority minority’ has created a perverse sense of loss of status, and has given rise to cries like ‘take back our country’ to rally people whose only legitimate concern is a loss of perceived privilege (Dietrich, 2012). That is, there are no concrete ‘harms’ inflicted on these voters, but the patina of victimization is applied in a sort of perverse reversal. Victims of discrimination and exclusion are suddenly cast as the perpetrators of these same actions, with cries of ‘reverse discrimination’ and a general assault on efforts at multi-cultural and racial diversity in societies (Moore and Bell, 2011). Conservative political agendas like anti-abortion, anti-immigration, gun rights, and what is more generally combined under the rubric of the ‘Tea Party’ hold sway at rallies where the clearly articulated purpose is to respond to the way they perceive they are under assault, contending this country has lost its ‘core’ Christian values, complaining how ‘big’ government is interfering with their rights to live productive and happy lives (though many have noted the incongruity of posters and banners calling on the government to keep its hands off Medicare). Benefits that accrue to most working whites are seen as earned or deserved, yet social supports for those in need (ironically, a majority of those receiving aid are white but the perception is that this is a boondoggle for non-whites) earn the label of ‘entitlement’ and are thereby undeserved.

At the heart of this general array of conservative impulses is a focus on perceived loss of privilege (Maly et al., 2013), but we need to consider what is meant by privilege in the larger scheme of things. In effect, white privilege is an assembly of special rights not granted to all supported by an array of laws that protect private actions. Whites can, without thinking, exclusively arrange to spend time with other whites, expect that they can live where they want, have no limitations on their financial well-being, are not required to concern themselves with problems faced by people who are not white, do not recognize advantages they have in the workplace, and if they should confront racism expect not to have those concerns dismissed as self-interest (among a range of privileges outlined in McIntosh, 1986). In other words, being white in this country is not to have to think about the day-to-day accrual of preferences and rewards that are denied to people of color (see Demirtürk, 2012, for a review of works on 'whiteness'). And so, for more and more people in this country those assumptions are being challenged, though in reality their experiences are not altered in any real way. As Du Bois noted (2014), American society has basked in a religion of whiteness, one that has demonized and vilified people of other skin colors, people that did not have a Northern European ancestry. The consequences of perpetuating and defending persistent white privilege is clearly manifest in the assault on non-white bodies, on the institutional violence that seems readily accepted by society writ large even as voices cry out in opposition. Whether it reflects a long tradition of violence against African-Americans (Durr, 2015) or racism among forces of social control (Hayes, 2015), institutional racial violence can be seen everywhere (Hughey, 2015; Hamer and Lang, 2015). Whiteness, as a statement of social organization, helps us understand inequality (Beeman et al., 2011) and race-based gender outcomes (Rio, 2012).

What is perhaps telling is that these people do not, for the most part, partake in the privileges and benefits they so strenuously defend. One is reminded of Marx's discussion in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where he describes people rushing to the barricades to defend the bourgeois revolution, only to return home to see their rents increased. In a capitalist society it is property owners and the wealthy who benefit. And in a society built upon the backs of African-American slaves, those property owners and wealthy individuals are almost always white. In his major work on race and class, Du Bois (1998) juxtaposes the white worker against the black worker, and demonstrates that the latter is used to keep the former in line. Much as the owners of the Chicago meatpacking industries imported black workers to break the strikes of ethnic immigrant militant workers, race in America was a divide that labor solidarity did not cross for the most part. It is the aspirations of the white worker, and the belief that they would receive more if black workers received less, that still fuel working-class conservatism. Al Szymanski (1976) demonstrated that white workers do not gain from economic racism, arguing that racism, as a divisive force, actually prevents the working class from effectively struggling for better wages and working conditions. He concludes that the economic position of whites is worst for those parts of the country where racial discrimination is most apparent. Those conclusions would certainly hold up today.

The anxieties of stagnant wages for the past 40 years, the steady erosion of union jobs that offered security and built the middle class during the second half of the 20th century, the fear that society is changing in ways that they no longer can control, the frustration and distrust of the political process in the USA, and the increasing appeal of a fundamentalist Evangelical Christianity all contribute to the support of fringe candidates whose main claim is that they are outside the political mainstream, catering to all the worst fears and anxieties of a population under siege. The result is an ever more rightward leaning, conservative and mean-spirited electorate.

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