

Double devaluations: Class, value and the rise of the right in the Global North

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Abstract

This article builds on the contributions of anthropologists of Europe in discovering, tracing and explaining the neo-nationalist ascendancy of the last 20 years. It picks up on earlier publications to make a succinct case for a decidedly anthropological class analysis of this worldwide and world-shaking phenomenon, with a view mainly on Europe and the United States. It suggests the usefulness of a notion of ‘double devaluation’ in understanding and explaining recent rightward shifts in popular politics in the Global North, encompassing both rural and urban spaces.

KEYWORDS

class analysis, devaluation/double devaluation, Eastern Europe, Global North, Illiberalism, Marxism, right wing populism

1 | INTRODUCTION

Franz Neumann (2009/1942), the German Marxist labour lawyer who narrowly escaped the Nazi camps and as a refugee in the United States produced the first comprehensive and still authoritative account of Nazism (2009/1942), wrote ‘(Racialized social imperialism) appeals to all those groups throughout the world who are in danger of proletarianization: peasants, retailers, artisans, teachers and other intellectuals; it appeals to the unemployed, to all those who in the process of monopolization have lost security but do not want to be called proletarians’ (pp. 217–218). ‘For them’, he writes, ‘this (racialized social imperialism) is an adequate expression of their longings and an adequate formulation of their claims for dignity and security ... For them, socialism is an untenable doctrine, since they hate the very basis on which the socialist doctrine rests: that is, the equality of men’ (p. 217).

German cultural Marxists in the 1930s and 1940s such as Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer (1998) formulated similar dynamic insights as Neumann into the political complexities, ambiguities and popular angst induced by the

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mass proletarianization of ‘imagined middle classes’ in interwar German capitalism for which national socialism in the 1930s became a violently contradictory outlet. In one reading, this underlines Jaume Franquesa's crucial observation in the recent debates on the peasantry and authoritarian populism that mobilizations on the Left and the Right are configured from roughly similar experiences in the face of overwhelming large-scale forces of dispossession and devaluation (Franquesa, 2019). Calls for ‘dignity’ in the face of such forces can always be twisted leftwards and rightwards, and Franquesa's Catalonian peasantries, which used to be firmly on the Left in the 2000s, are currently becoming vulnerable for a rightward twist, as in many other places. The French yellow vests with their hybrid protests that emerged in response to green-motivated petrol tax increases and that analysts find hard to classify on the Right--Left scale are equally claiming dignity, as do Polish and Hungarian working classes, peasants and peasant workers, small entrepreneurs and even bigger domestic capitalists in these post-socialist countries. ‘Dignity against injustice’ can be claimed within very different political vocabularies and embedded within deeply different political alliances, as Barrington Moore (1978) reminded us half a century ago and as Walden Bello has recently underlined for the current conjunctural shift from left-wing emancipatory mobilizations in the 1990s–2000s to repressive and authoritarian right-wing ones in the 2010s (2019).

But Neumann's formulation also highlights an often overlooked key issue in such recent mobilizations. Quantitative electoral data show that ‘the poor’ or roughly the lowest quintile of earners (in the global North, i.e. in the South, this tends to be a broader and far more numerous category) are often less responsive to right-wing political appeals than other ‘classes of labour’ (to use Henri Bernstein's phrase, e.g. 2020) above them. These ‘higher classes of labour’, which may or may not consider themselves middle classes, often have considerably more to lose from the forces of proletarianization than those who have long adjusted themselves and their expectations to living proletarian lives. This seems to be so in particular when such ‘higher classes of labour’ are not highly educated and inhabiting provincial spaces of neoliberal abandonment rather than dynamic metropolitan ones. Neumann suggests that egalitarianism as a practical structure of feeling is not randomly distributed. The rise of the authoritarian right is often driven by ‘deserving classes’ in the provinces who claim ‘rightful’ and ‘justified’ protection in the face of the ongoing devaluation by capitalist accumulation, as it has been in Europe in the 1890s (e.g. Volkov, 1978), the 1920s and 1930s and the 2010s. In German-speaking areas, such ‘deserving classes’ were historically often referred to as the ‘*Staatstragende Klassen*’ (‘state carrying classes’). In the United States, Du Bois (1994) pointed to similarly differentiating constructions as capital and local bourgeoisies historically sought to separate ‘white working classes’ from ‘black’ and ‘brown’. In a straightforward way, then, these are popular mobilizations against disenfranchisement and dispossession—dispossession of rights, expectations, recognitions, protections—just not necessarily mobilizations of the very and the always already dispossessed.

In her recent review of contemporary peasant studies, Susana Narotzky (2016) suggests that what have always been seen as the defining properties of the peasantry—somewhat autonomous in their daily labour and production, a certain command over some means of production and reproduction, but dependent on large-scale capitalist forces of state and market over which they have no control—are characteristics nowadays shared with many contemporary petty entrepreneurs, artisans, artists, gig workers, platform workers, designers, creative workers, educators, trainers, researchers, multiple professional groups, multitudes and workers in assorted small-scale services such as tourism, construction or transport and groups that are close to dominating both contemporary metropolitan and provincial economies. This fact points to one key limitation in the current debates about the new right and the peasantry: the slippage between ‘rural’ and ‘peasantry’. Although the rise of the right among peasantries is a legitimate and important issue in itself, it is also, certainly in the Global North where peasantries (and small farmers) amount to a small fraction of the population, insufficient for explaining any substantial rise of authoritarianism. The politics of peasantries cannot by themselves explain large-scale political shifts anymore, but must often be explained by them or in relation to them. The concept of the ‘rural’ remains a self-imposed limitation too, unless it includes provincial cities, market towns and peripheral industrial sites. Kristof Szombati, in his recent ethnography of a key case of illiberal right-wing transformation, Hungary, spoke therefore aptly about ‘the revolt of the provinces’ rather than about rural mobilizations (Szombati, 2018a). Marc Edelman, too, had to include steel towns, mining towns and other

provincial urban–industrial sites in his survey of capitalist abandonment and right-wing developments in the US ‘countryside’ (Edelman, 2019).

In both Europe, the United States and Russia, rather, it is spatial and social devaluation and abandonment that defines the enabling conditions for illiberal mobilizations. It is class, conceived in complex, spatial, relational, dynamic and indeed anthropological ways, including those things that a macro sociologist as Therborn (2020) refers to with his concept of ‘existential inequality’: biographic stagnation and decline, systematic though uneven and therefore empirically non-identical forms of devaluation of modes of being, driven by manifold and combined mechanisms of capital accumulation. Bernstein is right: This is class thinking that has to go beyond the tired vocabulary of ‘discursive’ versus ‘economic’ factors (Bernstein, 2020). That is why I propose that we think in terms of ‘double devaluation’. Double devaluation is the necessary processual condition that helps us to explain and understand popular shifts towards illiberalism: devaluations that are all-round, economic as well as discursive, cultural as well as material (and political, social, etc.), driven both by capital and its valorization and by state hegemonies and their selective biases and outright exclusions (see also Smith, 2014). They are about labour value, the value of places and the value of people. With an appropriate bow to E. P. Thompson, I have been calling this a ‘relational’ approach to class, in the full anthropological sense of the term (Kalb, 1997, 2015; see also Tilly, 2001).¹

Importantly, though this type of relational class analysis is the necessary basis for any understanding of current political shifts, it is not sufficient: We need a deep sense of processual structured contingency if we want to grasp how ‘double devaluations’ become aggregated and articulated in the new right-wing political alliances that both differ substantially among national political arenas but at the same time exhibit such uncanny resemblances with each other to make its liberal and left-wing enemies panic about a possible system-wide shift.

Marxism may be the key inspiration, but in order to make a relational class perspective work optimally within the present context of globalized capital and localized racial-nationalist and authoritarian mobilizations, we can certainly engage with other theoretical traditions. The illiberal right, as Szombati (2018a) convincingly shows for Hungary, emerges from Polanyi-type provincial countermovements for ‘protection’ against ‘disembedded markets’. Such mobilizations occur in the wake of a Left that has given up on such protections and rights. The rise of the Right is not a historical necessity but a complexly structured contingency. The necessary *explanans* is the crumbling of the Left and its trivialization for the social reproduction of broad popular groups, in particular in the provinces, but the potential space that emerges for right-wing mobilizations and subjectivities still needs to be filled and conquered within uneven and asynchronous national terrains by neo-nationalist cross-class mobilizations and alliances; and these alliances still need to become hegemonic over publics and states in order to consolidate their rule. A contingent undertaking. That left-wing decline of course is in a basic sense overdetermined: The globalization of capital accumulation has degraded the most robust political arena of modernity, the nation-state, into a narrowly competitive neoliberal unit circumscribed by its financial ‘credibility’ and ‘competitiveness’ in the eyes of globalized capital. Key to the politics of the new right is therefore the rise of neo-nationalism and the chimera of a ‘stolen’ sovereignty of the national-popular majority that has to be ‘returned’. Its rise is preordained, but its dominance or hegemony remains contingent.

Anthropologists of Europe, in conversation with sociologists and political economists, have had a good but little acknowledged track record in tracing the rise and dynamics of the new neo-nationalism in the last two decades. For some of them, this went together with a rediscovery and a redeployment of the class concept, not as a reductive condition or as essentialized groupism, but as a dynamic and uneven set of social and spatial relations of social reproduction under capitalism, involving dependency, autonomy, sociality, extraction, exploitation, valuation and valorization, relations anchored in but going beyond labour and property. For Marxist anthropologists, class, of course, could never appear as either economic or discursive or as something to be separated from ‘culture’. Embedded, emplaced, lived and embodied, class, for anthropologists (like E. P. Thompson), cannot be cut up along nominalist lines like it can be for the positivists in sociology or political science who rely mostly on national-level quantitative data rather than real and known people.

2 | NEO-NATIONALISM, SELF-ELEVATION AND HIERARCHY

March 2020. On the borders of EU Europe, with the Covid pandemic threatening human lives, sociality and welfare everywhere, Syrian refugees on the 'Balkan Route', bombed out of Idlib, are being beaten in the forests with wooden clubs by Romanian border guards before they are thrown back onto Serbian territory for further humiliations.² Romanian return migrants, fleeing the Italian and Spanish corona lockdowns, are being told over the social networks that they should never have come back, contagious as they are imagined to be and a danger for a woefully underfunded public health system for which they have not paid taxes. Further South, the Mediterranean is once again a heavily policed cemetery for migrants and refugees from the civil wars in the Middle East and North Africa—collateral damage of Western imperial delirium and hubris—as Greece is being hailed by the European President for being the 'shield' behind which Europe can feel safe from the supposedly associated criminality. Viktor Orbán, meanwhile, has secured his corrupt autocracy in Hungary for another indefinite stretch of years after the parliament gave him powers to single-handedly fight the Covid pandemic and its long-run economic after-effects in the name of the Magyars and in the face of never subsiding threats from the outside to the nation. Orbán will also continue, even more powerfully so now, to fight immigrants, gypsies, gays, feminists, cultural Marxists, NGOs, George Soros, population decline, population displacement, the EU and everything else that might be in his way. Critique from the EU is in Budapest rejected as 'motivated by politics'. Vladimir Putin, too, has just been asked by the Russian parliament to stay on indefinitely in his regal position, so as to safeguard Russia's uncertain national future. Erdogan of Turkey is sure to be inspired and will not renege from his ongoing and unprecedentedly brutal crackdown on domestic dissent and 'traitors to the nation' while his armies are in Syria, Azerbaijan and Libya. Turkish prisons will continue to overflow.

All these, and manifold other events not mentioned here, are part of processes in the European East that have been continuous (as in 'continuous history versus discontinuous history') for at least a decade, all with a surprisingly steadfast direction. They appear to be diverse, occasioned by ethnographically deeply variegated and therefore apparently contingent events. Anthropologists, professionally spellbound by local fieldwork, are easily swayed to describe them in their singularities. But that singular appearance is misleading. These and similar events are systemically rooted, interlinked, produced by an uneven bundle of global, scaled, social and historical forces (as in 'field of forces') that cascade into and become incorporated within a variegated terrain of national political theatres and human relationships that produce the paradox of singularly surprising outcomes with uncanny family resemblances. These forces can be summarily described as the gradual unfolding of the collapse of a global regime of embedded and multi-scalar solidarity arrangements anchored in national Fordism, developmentalism and the Cold War into an uncertain interregnum of neoliberalized Darwinian competition, financial speculation and rivalry on all scales, with a powerfully rising China lurking in the background and the end of the US empire foretold. Neo-nationalism appears from within this unfolding field of forces as a contradictory bind that seeks to restore, domestically and abroad, hierarchy and deservingness, including its necessary flip side, humiliation. That is one aspect of the argument I have been trying to make since the end of the 1990s (e.g. Kalb, 2000, 2002), when such forces began to stir in the sites that I was working on and living in: The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Hungary, Poland.

That universalizing argument is easily corroborated by events in the West, which paint a similarly cohesive though phenomenologically variegated picture.³ In March 2020, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini were still credibly threatening to democratically overthrow liberal globalist governments in France and Italy on behalf of the 'people' and 'the nation' and against the elites, the EU, immigrants, the Left and finance capital. Dutch politicians, in the face of the global corona calamity, still believed one cannot send money to Italy and the European South lest it will be spent on 'alcohol and women'. Until its impressive policy turnaround in April/May 2020 in the face of the Covid pandemic and fast escalating EU fragmentation amid a world of hostile and nationalist great powers, the German government did not disagree. It was Angela Merkel herself who set up the Dutch as the leaders of a newly conceived right-wing 'frugal' flank in the post-Brexit EU under the historical banner of the Hanseatic League to face down the federalist and redistributionist South. That Hanseatic banner suggested that penny-counting, competitive

mercantilism and austerity and its practical corollary, a hierarchy of export oriented 'merit', was of an old standing and must therefore also continue to hang eternally over Europe. Britain, meanwhile, had valiantly elected to leave the EU in order to 'take back control' on behalf of what Boris Johnson imagines as the 'brilliant British nation' (The Economist, 30/1/2020). It would like to refuse any further labour migrants from the mainland and seek a future in the global Anglosphere, beefed up by a revitalized British Commonwealth where hopefully, when it comes to ceremony, not juridical equality but imperial nostalgia and deference will rule (see Campanella & Dassu, 2019). In early 2021, Donald Trump was actively mobilizing his supporters of the 'MAGA tribe' in US governmental institutions and as armed bands on the streets around the Capitol to violently reverse the outcome of a democratic election, that he had just narrowly lost possibly due to his careless handling of the Covid pandemic and so continue 'to make America great again' (MAGA).

Anthropologists working on the European continent have done profoundly anticipatory work on the rise of neo-nationalism long before it broke the global liberal hold (Holmes, 2000, 2019; Gingrich & Banks, 2005; Gingrich, 2006; Kalb, 2009; Kalb & Halmaj, 2011; and a younger generation continues to build on that⁴). I single out neo-nationalism over and above currently competing terms such as authoritarian populism or illiberalism because it produces less confusion and covers more cases.⁵ Neo-nationalism, it is essential to emphasize, is not seen here as the sum of mere individual opinions. That is the baked in misconception of much political science and sociology research anchored in the methodological individualism of survey methodologies and poll outcomes.⁶ We should see it the other way around: Neo-nationalism is a public social and cultural context, a conjuncture if you like, generated within a structured and knowable field of social forces that undergirds it, produced by the globalization of capital accumulation and the concomitant localization and parochialization of politics within neoliberal and often mercantilist and indebted national states. Although Holmes, Gingrich, Banks, myself and others may have evinced an appropriate theoretical instinct 20 years ago, this is not because we were struck by clairvoyance. Anthropologists working in the centre of the continent were exposed early and in profound ways to these processes (also true for those working on India, see Blom Hansen, 1999, for example). The Italian Veneto, Austria, the Netherlands, Poland and Hungary were all avant-garde continental cases for the neo-nationalist ascendancy. It was from within these sites that we could see the potentially general properties, amid the obvious differences, of what was going on.

These processes were sped up by the political turmoil and austerity in the aftermath of the financial crises, but it was only in 2016, with the rise of Trump and the Brexit referendum, that our continental insights attained an aura of global or Northern universality and began to be noted among non-Europeanists. Anglo-Saxon media in the preceding years had routinely shrugged off the rise of neo-nationalist populisms in the EU with a reference to historical fascism and communism on the continent: Not such good liberal democrats, historically, those continentals, was the implicit or explicit suggestion. The truth was that the representative electoral systems on the continent made popular organic processes visible long before they could strike at the heart of the state. In contrast, the British and US systems, majoritarian winner-take-all two party systems, with stark oligarchic tendencies in the latter case, did not permit similar subterranean trends to crystallize out before they would become overwhelming. In Britain, it was only with the political *Fremdkörper* of a referendum that the hold of the party elites would be broken. In the United States, it required, not surprisingly, a maverick billionaire in real estate, gambling and show business—not finance, not technology, not the oil and defence-industrial complexes—coming from outside the political establishment to wrestle down the globalist hegemony within the Republican Party.

In both these cases, the switch of allegiance of 'socially conservative working classes' in the provinces (the Midwest, the North, the 'red wall', etc.), as Lind (2020) and others have simplifying called them, towards a populist Right was decisive, as it had been in Europe. This includes the refusal of white, black and Latino working classes to vote for Hillary Clinton. Electoral abstentions are an essential part of the process of hegemonic change we are talking about: There was an active refusal on the part of their former beneficiaries to defend the Left liberal elites because there seemed little left to be defended. This was not unlike what had happened in 1989 with the communists in Eastern Europe. We were now witnessing the culmination of a second 'de-communization'. This time as a slow motion crumbling of the social democrats and left liberals in the West. In the United Kingdom, anthropologists such

as Gillian Evans and Jeanette Edwards (Evans, 2012; Edwards et al., 2012) have described how working classes in Britain had been turning 'white' and ethnic, and abandoning the political orbit of labour, long before the Brexit breakthrough. Nothing exceptional here. Everywhere in the Global North, working classes, in particular the lowly educated, had over the last decades increasingly stopped voting (Mair, 2013).

Illusions of inherent Anglo-liberal exceptionalism as compared with a politically once again uncouth European continent, permitted by the political time bubble in the United States and the United Kingdom for as long as that bubble lasted, evaporated at once in 2016. The West as a whole now appeared illiberal and populist, and with a loud bang, a world historical epoch seemed to have come to a close. Anglophone anthropologists now realized that they had preferred to study people that they overtly liked and which they favoured politically and that they had shown little interest in the illiberal Right. They also became aware that they had generally ignored questions of class, and indeed 'the white working class'. This was the summary feeling, put too cryptically perhaps here, that came out of the *American Ethnologist* special issue dedicated to the populist Right in 2017 (see in particular Gusterson, 2017; Walley, 2017). The two issues are intimately connected.

I speak of neo-nationalism as what connects our cases. What we have seen emerging in the last three decades is obviously not the classic liberal civic nationalism of 19th century nation-state making that an earlier wave of writing on nationalism in anthropology and history focused on (Anderson, 1991; Eriksen, 1993; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992; Smith, 1995). These are ethnic (or ethno-religious) nationalisms, pervaded by national nostalgias of imagined golden times and greatness that are seen as unjustly broken or humiliated but will now be made to come back by the sheer force of national will and excellence. Such visions are often fed by a combination of historically objective as well as imaginary (self) victimization at the hand of imperial actors, EU bureaucrats, transnational capital, culturally liberal and cosmopolitan state elites betraying the nation and by immigrants or racial, ethnic or religious minorities who are unjustly protected by human rights regimes, civil rights and facilitated by open borders. Some of them, including the East European nationalisms and Trumpism, but also the Dutch and Italian, indulge variously in painting 'cultural Marxism', 'sexo-Marxism', gender theorists, antifascism, anarcho-communism, anti-racism and anti-imperialism as the more fundamental ideological enemy lurking in the background (see also Seymour, 2020). Franz Neumann would not be surprised.

These localized nostalgias, embedded in mythic national narratives but uncannily generalized as a form, are a complex politico-cultural aspect of the popular stagnation, the public decline, the rising inequalities and concomitant devaluations of populations and spaces. Brexit Britain, amid the greatest domestic inequality in half a century, replays its memories of victory in the Second World War and of its glorious forlorn empire in both cinematic, literary and political expressions. In the new Magyar constitution and the fast expanding historical museums in Budapest, Viktor Orbán's Hungary celebrates the officialized hierarchy of the Habsburg Empire, of which it imagines itself the brilliant historical co-owner. The Dutch, historically a nation of bourgeois bankers, still believe that debt is *Schuld*, although they are one of the most privately indebted societies in Europe and among the most unequal in their distribution of wealth. They are also back to fetishizing a mercantilist 'gold standard', imagined to be embodied in the Euro and in their fondly curated triple A rating, and have wilfully forgotten about the mass misery produced by sticking to it in the 1930s (until 1936). They also refuse to become aware of the free gift for the competitive pricing of their exports derived from sharing their euro with less competitive countries, which they like to punish for exactly that.⁷ Nostalgias are painfully distortive, but in the current context, they seemingly have to be lived and acted out everywhere (see also Campanella & Dassu, 2019).

Importantly, like in Neumann's 1930s, many, but not all, of these neo-nationalisms are, at least rhetorically, *Left-Right national socialisms strictu sensu* (see also Kalb, 2009, 2011), hence the confusion and danger on the Left, also noted keenly recently by Walden Bello (2019). Neo-nationalist political claims often demand social protection and recognition for majority national working classes and (small) entrepreneurs of national stock. Quite a few of them have an anti-neoliberal feel (with partial exceptions for the 'Hanseatic' cases and the German AFD, which I have unfortunately no space to elaborate on here). The historical context within and against which they act sums up what they are about: They are driven by the contradictions of the neoliberal globalizations of the last 40 years. But they

are not the resolution of these contradictions, and they therefore keep embodying and prolonging them in twisted ways. Contradictions not just in the abstract—although in a Marxian sense that too—but as concretely operating in, and transformative of, the daily lives of situated subjects, contradictions that often worked in dispossessive, devaluating and disenfranchising ways for many, sometimes violently so, producing pervasive feelings of devaluation and abandonment. Such abandonment was routinely being obscured and misrecognized by existing liberal technocratic vocabularies, including ‘trickle-down’ theory. Fake news, now a favourite object of anti-populist scorn for liberals, is nothing new and was almost ‘expertly’ scripted into neoliberal governance through abstract and biased forms of accounting, singularly centred on GDP growth, national accounts and abstract quantitative averages of everything as if these were reliable descriptions of biographies and life worlds. This basic relational and contextual insight into the nature of the current neo-nationalisms was the grist of the anthropological political economy approach I and my collaborators were promoting in ‘Headlines of Nation; Subtexts of Class’ (2011; see also Kalb, 2015, 2019). Parts of the same insight have since 2016 been repeated over and over again by journalists, commentators and liberal theorists who had little or no eye for all this before 2008 (in Europe, e.g. Goodhart, 2017; Krastev, 2017).

There were two further reasons for this anthropological vanguard role (which is hardly acknowledged elsewhere), an empirical and a theoretical one. There was a collaborative network of mostly junior researchers converging on Budapest and the Central European university and working on political and economic dynamics mainly in Central/East European urban settings. Budapest was obviously a rich intellectual and geographic focal point for the contradictions of neoliberal globalization in Europe, so much so that CEU would subsequently be expelled from a transformed Hungary gripped by a violently assertive neo-nationalist politics.⁸ We shared a critical attitude towards the neoliberal transformations that were working themselves out, piecemeal, incrementally, over a longer period of time, in the sites in Eastern and Western Europe that we were studying: Post-socialist Győr (Bartha, 2011), Cluj (Faje, 2011; Petrovici, 2011), Wrocław (Kalb, 2009) and Kikinda (Vetta, 2011) were simultaneously generating right-wing popular sensibilities and political articulations before our very eyes, embodied variously in neo-nationalist movements, right-wing labour unions or (proto-)party formations. The Marche shoe industrial district (Blim, 2011) and the industrious Alpine regions of northern Italy (Stacul, 2011) were not different.

The second further reason for continental anthropology's vanguard role lay in the enabling theoretical framework offered by Jonathan Friedman's anthropology of global systems, which was hardly read in Britain and the United States where anthropology had become all but averse to large-scale social and historical theorizing. Friedman's work from the late 1970s to the early 2000s had creatively assembled a notion of ‘double polarizations’ driven by the de-nationalization of capital as a consequence of overaccumulation in the old core, including the consequent demise of national welfare statism and the collapse of the class compromises behind it. For Friedman, these were not just class polarizations, as in much of the *Marxisant* literature of these years. They were double polarizations because they delivered both ‘vertical’ (class) and ‘horizontal’ (culture) fragmentations, leading to intra-class cultural rivalries. Friedman, it is also worth noting, had developed this vision earlier than Giovanni Arrighi (1994), and with a keener sense of the potential right-wing rather than left-wing political consequences (Friedman, 2003, 2015; Friedman & Friedman, 2008). Sadly, Friedman has now gone native.⁹ To focus on situated class trajectories and related relational dynamics in everyday lives and local political fields, as we were doing, was a powerful way to bring Friedman's anthropology of global systems back on the ground and make it run in responsible ways.

3 | CLASS AS ABSENT PRESENCE AND PRESENT ABSENCE

Class is the absent presence and the present absence behind the ascendancy of the neo-nationalist (and often populist and illiberal) Right.¹⁰ Let me clarify that claim, because this is logically not a mere empirical statement, neither *qua* absences, nor *qua* presences. In ‘Headlines of Nation; Subtexts of Class’, we claimed that the people being mobilized behind neo-nationalist banners were ‘broadly working class people’. Although this was somehow empirically

correct for the cases that we were studying in the book, this was not meant to be a covering law or an exclusivist claim. The prefix 'broadly' was supposed to do some serious but perhaps understated work in relation to class.

We were clearly not just talking about that classic 20th-century icon, the blue-collar industrial working classes, even though we were referring to them too. In my research on Wrocław, Poland (Kalb, 2009), I had shown how an organic Right-Left populist vision was emerging from workers' confrontations with 'intimate histories' of anti-communist resistance overlaid with post-socialist privatization, dispossession and neoliberal state accumulation. These visions were developed over time by blue-collar workers who had been self-organized in anti-communist *Solidarnosc* labour unions and who had been involved in the complex defensive politics of workers' self-management in the light metal industries of that west Polish city, a city seen in the press as a 'successful' post-socialist growth pole. Vetta's work on Kikinda in northern Serbia and Bartha's on Győr in western Hungary, two other 'successful' post-socialist urban exemplars, described similar industrial working-class politics, both among blue- and white-collar workers, male and female (Bartha, 2011; Vetta, 2011). These were illustrations of how anti-capitalist sentiments could be captured by illiberal and anti-cosmopolitan mobilizations against transnational capital and its alliance with neoliberalizing states, certainly after the local Left, transiting fast from communists to third way social democrats, had abandoned its local constituencies.

Our definition of 'broadly working class', however, programmatically allowed for the likelihood that many of these 'workers' could at any moment rather be precariats, entre-precariats, small entrepreneurs or any type of direct producers, such as Narotzky's present-day 'peasants'. But they could also include technical managers, engineers, lower clerical personnel, shopkeepers, even higher educated teachers, accountants and of course retired workers. Some could be deploying petty capital, often based on a house or apartment used as collateral for loans—like that transport entrepreneur whom we interviewed in Wrocław in 1999, who was then explaining to us how he had always in fact been an entrepreneur within a white goods factory. We talked to him again in 2007. After two heart attacks and a final bankruptcy, he now pondered somberly that he and his like might in the end be 'just workers'. We were assuming that the actual class 'positions' of our interlocutors amid the turbulent neoliberal transformations that were going on were often less than well defined, temporary and shifting rather than fix, well demarcated and solidly signified; their sense of exploitation, injustice and self-worth was often similarly fluid; their organic explanations inevitably fuzzy and rocky, assembled from a multi-tonal bricolage of media messages and discourses, which ranged from neoliberal hopeful to an emerging conservative populist nostalgia.

Nor was class intended to be just about 'work' or income, or 'just economic'. Biographies and whole lives, Marx's 'living labor', including their whole habitats, was what we were focusing on. We were referring in a good Marxian sense to the whole sphere of social reproduction of people and households who lacked access to substantial capital, high-value property or highly marketable 'human capital' and to spatial contexts that too were part of the polarizing logic of capital: The 'common people' in common places, with both people and places the object of ongoing devaluations in the double sense of the term being devalued in cultural and discursive ways as well as devalued in a visceral, tangible, material way, as capital was divested and directed to more promising assets, and was publicly supported by politics and 'civil societies' in doing so. The resultant discourses blamed the victims for a lack of modernity, adaptability, productivity, openness. A lack of value. In post-socialist Europe, public intellectuals loudly accused workers and peasants of a lack civilization, of being helpless and corrupt *homo sovieticus* types, and so on. In order to skip the perennial and fruitless discussion about discursive versus economic factors in Marxism and social science broadly (see also Bernstein, 2020), I propose that we can usefully call these processes of 'double devaluation', in analogy with Friedman's double polarization but more emphatically processual, contextual and political rather than macrostructural (which is what they are in Friedman).

The *sotto voce* theoretical twist of our 'broadly working class' notion was that although we were well aware that some or many of these people might have preferred to see themselves as middle classes, a powerful and shared aspiration and myth deeply inscribed into the historical capitalist machine (see also Weiss, 2019), the point was that those imagined middle classes, too, and perhaps especially, were feeling the inescapable and often degrading force of the law of value in many aspects of their lives, as in Franz Neumann's 1930s German context.¹¹

Recent research does offer lots of evidence for this ‘broadly working class’ picture, even though everywhere right-wing electoral mobilizations did rely too on classical conservative suburban middle classes with property and financial outlays, sometimes even mainly so. Importantly, we were talking about coalitions and alliances in which ‘broadly working class people’ were being mobilized electorally and in movements and alliances that would not become politically consequential without that broad working-class support. Such alliances were never ideologically ‘classist’, though they might well be a symbolic feast for ‘American workers’, ‘working class families’, ‘working middle class families’, ‘Magyar workers’, ‘the common people’, ‘*la France profonde*’, etc. This was everywhere a story of ‘class without class’, an echo of E. P. Thompson’s 18th-century pre-industrial folk rebellions (Kalb, 2019; Thompson, 1978).

Further, we had already a keen feeling that metropolitan working classes in dynamic labour markets, younger and higher educated, might be less susceptible to the neo-nationalist mobilizations than those in the disinvested provinces, the secondary cities, the suburbs, exurbs and countrysides that we were studying. Such metropolitan classes of labour were dealing with the fast growth of gig work and platform work and were facing accelerating rents and educational costs in gentrifying central cities, both in East, West and South. This allowed for a certain transparency of accumulation and consequent class inequalities, a transparency that mostly did not exist in the disinvested provinces, except in the rough and ready populist imagination of ‘the people versus the elite’ or ‘the provinces against the metropole’. The spatial divides of neoliberal capitalism, mostly reflected too in state policies of (dis) investment, (upward) redistribution and planned abandonment, are an essential part of the relational class story that is playing itself out. The Left–Right call for the ethno-nation poses the devalued provinces and the outer boroughs, their inhabitants and ‘their traditional ways of life’, including ‘the traditional family’, against the swinging and sexually libertarian metropolises. This sets up family politics and the defence of the patriarchal family with well-demarcated gender roles (in fact ‘the modern family’) versus the participants of the Pride Marches as an increasingly preferred figure in right-wing populist politics (in particular in Eastern and Southern Europe), again an interesting displacement from class. Finally, we never claimed that the actual political leaderships on any level should be necessarily of working-class origin. That would be an absurd empiricist reduction of what any political class account should stand for.

Our argument was simply that without substantial working-class support for the new neo-nationalisms, the latter would not break the liberal cosmopolitan hold. Workers, broadly conceived, would have to abandon the social democratic parties after these had abandoned them in order for the new Right to shift the scales and produce a potentially new hegemonic bloc. That mutual abandonment had been going on in many places for a long while. The new Right often had something for formerly Left working-class voters that the by now ‘third way’ Left did not offer anymore: an enemy, anger, a claim for cultural recognition, a call for ongoing social protection (pensions, health) and, hopefully, some economic redistribution or minimally a rhetorical punishment of ‘the elites’.¹² There was an offer made to the double devalued common people in the disinvested provinces for a new potential belonging, a belonging to an ethno-nationally defined conservative political identitarian world of recognition and renewed valorization, perhaps even productivity, the latter of inestimable relevance for one’s sense of dignity and security in a capitalist world. That offer was made in a populist style that spoke to their senses.¹³ A style that could at the very least elicit a protest vote. By 2010, big minorities of national electorates everywhere in the Global North (>25/30%) had long stopped voting—let alone actively belonging to political parties—and this quarter of the electorate was heavily biased towards lower educated working people of all ages and sexes. Ethno-nationalist political entrepreneurs with the right gusto could aim at pushing the electoral scales over in one good go, a trip to state power that would as a rule start in the provinces. The abandonment in the 1980s–2000s of a solitary politics and a language of class, the emergence of a politics of double devaluations, produced a language of ‘class without class’ within a counter politics of the white ethno-nation. At an early date, Slavoj Žižek (2008, p. 267) poignantly pointed out that this was the return of the repressed in characteristically tortuous and traumatic form.

There are interesting advantages in writing from the post-socialist world rather than from the West, as I have tendentially been doing here while claiming a certain universality for the perspective that then emerges. The first is

that the journalistic and political science obsession with the ups and downs of the politically manipulated ‘crises’ of immigration is put in its place: These manufactured moments of crisis act within a long-running context of double devaluations, sharpening the latter’s edges and amplifying the xenophobic and racist possibilities present within the neo-nationalist structures of public feeling that have emerged in response to those long-run neoliberal processes. Polish and Hungarian right-wing populisms leave no doubt because they emerged long before such immigration crises. Orbàn had been acquiring hegemony over the Hungarian state more than half a decade before the 2015 EU immigration crisis; there were hardly any immigrants in the country then. Indeed, he deployed that crisis as a further lever for his own popularity and very graphically magnified its political ramifications within the EU in order to bolster his own position in Brussels and forge alliances with the West European illiberal Right. Causalities thus run the other way around. The Polish story is different on details but not different in kind or sequence (see Kalb, 2017): here, too, a rise of the nationalist right in a context without any immigrants in the early 2000s, and long before the immigration crises gave new xenophobic ammunition. The stories in Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands or the United Kingdom are not fundamentally different: immigration (and assimilation) as just another powerful political lever within a longer run neoliberal process, but not its singular cause nor a separate factor. The Dutch turn to the right emerged in the mid-1990s in a context of austerity and welfare state retrenchment. It was a state-driven attack on Moroccan welfare scrounging, an issue signified in racist-culturalist ways and a projective displacement from the campaign to push Dutch workers on benefits back into labour markets within a set of neoliberal ‘participation policies’, nothing more than the ‘consensual’ Dutch version of workfare. And then both the Right and the ‘cultural assimilation issue’ never went away again: The Netherlands formally abolished its welfare state in 2014 and declared itself a ‘participation state’. Emergent Jobbik in Hungary received a massive boost in the early 2000s when the working poor of north-eastern Hungary began to rally against child benefits for large unemployed Roma families—which amounted to a monthly income perceived as equal to the average working Magyar—and against the re-integration of their rebellious children into underfunded Magyar schools, so ordered by ‘multicultural’ social democrats. In 2015, the new Hungarian constitution abolished Hungary as a welfare state and declared it ‘a workers’ state’. The almost synchronous rhetorical end of the Dutch and Hungarian welfare states: unexpected and uncanny east–west resemblances in kind.

Secondly, the European East, Hungary in particular, teaches us quite precisely that ‘broadly working class’ neo-nationalist mobilizations are a necessary condition of possibility for its electoral success, but not a sufficient one for state transformation. Ultimately, consolidation of right-wing nationalist rule requires a cross-class alliance with the domestic bourgeoisie. Orbàn responded to the angry Jobbik mobilizations in eastern and southern Hungary from 2003 to 2014 with a combination of Roma punishment (policing and mandatory integration into public works programmes in exchange for keeping their benefits) and typical ‘left’ populist measures for the Magyars, such as rejecting the further privatization of healthcare, re-socializing the pensions system and attacking the independence of the Central Bank (see for excellent in-depth treatments Scheiring, 2020; Szombati, 2018a). But Orbàn subsequently used state regulatory power as well as EU resources to transfer control over substantial chunks of capital in the media sector, the utilities and construction from international into domestic hands. He thus created a loyal faction of big domestic power brokers around him. He also continued to placate the newly acquired modern transnational export sector owned mainly by German and East Asian capital. These continued to enjoy broad privileges and subsidies, including the introduction of a ‘slave law’ (2019) that allowed them high flexibility of working hours while effectively disciplining a low-cost but mobile domestic working-class prone to labour turnover (Szombati, 2018b). The Polish PIS learnt from Orbàn’s tactical twists and has attempted to forge a similar cross-class alliance. The Polish Right however has remained much more genuinely populist and redistributive, owing to its roots in the *Solidarnosc* labour unions, pushing for higher wages in the export sector and setting up a hugely popular system of pro-poor family benefits (initially decried by the Left as ‘moral corruption’ and a risk for the Polish credit rating, until they realized they should have offered a Left liberal version of this long ago). The Polish family benefits have in their turn inspired Orbàn. Aware of the need for a new populist campaign after the Roma, the immigrants, Soros and the CEU had all gone, he has invested himself recently in the pro-conservative family and anti-gender/anti-LGBT issue. But

true to his project to resurrect a Habsburg type of bourgeois status hierarchy with a state-supported nobility at its apex, he has given such benefits a decidedly pro-middle-class character, focusing, for example, on cheap mortgages and car loans for family earners. Originating in a populist ‘Magyar worker’ campaign, his regime has over time transcended into an alliance between aspiring consumer-middle classes, domestic bourgeoisies and transnational capital (the latter often in open denial) against both Magyar and Roma workers while seemingly succeeding in eliciting an ongoing fragile consent from both. Not surprisingly, it has produced among the highest growth in inequality and poverty in Europe in the 2010s (Scheiring, 2020).

4 | WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Are we in a new period? Is the neoliberal imperial interlude coming to an end? Will austerity and automatized punishment of the poor be abandoned? Will the provinces receive a more egalitarian deal, both in the North and the South, East and West? Will the variously discussed Green Deals be supportive of jobs and equality, as they say they will; will they enrich provincial societies or deplete them further? Will they include the South and the East (within Europe and globally)? Göran Therborn (2020) is surely right to point to a remarkable shift among leading economists and liberal policymakers towards ‘enlightenment egalitarianism’, a shift noticeable since the financial crises and the broad money politics of key central banks, as well as in the recent recommendations of the OECD and even the IMF and the WB against wealth inequality and for higher wages. The shock of the illiberal has taught the liberal governing classes obviously a lesson.

The Covid pandemic has unleashed further massive domestic financial and social support both in the Global North and the South (Tooze, 2021). The accelerating climate crisis is necessitating new coordinated programmes of public, fiscal and financial activism on a scale never seen before. The ‘New Generation EU’ fund that was agreed in Brussels in the spring of 2020 in response to the Covid crisis, reacting to the acute risk of fragmentation, has tangibly shifted the power balances within the EU against the nationalists and the primordialists. From Salvini to Orbán, Le Pen, Rutte and Wilders, the tone has shifted, most decisively so perhaps in Germany and Italy. The systemic competition with China is teaching the West and in particular the United States that inequality and racism are going to be severe liabilities, above all for the West’s own political coherence. Xi’s ‘common prosperity’ is at the same time promising a more equal China and a perhaps a retreat from external imperialism. A new period in Western and global capitalism seems almost a possibility at this point, at least an official rhetorical one. If so, some of the fundamental forces of double devaluation that used to threaten various classes of labour might be somewhat mitigated, the structural space for the politics of neo-nationalist, xenophobic and patriarchal hierarchy of and for the deserving might shrink.

However, the green transition combined with the automation of knowledge work may very well overwhelm the capabilities of Western states. Ominously, in the present green plans (COP 26), the public learning of the 2010s and of the Covid pandemic about the possibilities and indeed necessities of ‘people’s quantitative easing’ and cheap public money for collective ends has been completely silenced. The potential operational space of that fundamental public financial knowledge remains aggressively restricted to the respective national spheres of the strong currencies, in particular the dollar, the euro, the renminbi and the yen. Any promise for substantial North–South redistribution of the costs of the green transition has until now run into bitter disappointments. If the green transition must be a business case for growth and an opportunity to keep up the returns on capital, the downward pressures of double devaluation will only increase, both in the North and in the South. Now that inflation seems finally to be re-emerging, political dilemmas and trade-offs will immediately be pushed to their breaking point. In the case that capital will demand substantial increases of the relevant interest rates, enlightenment egalitarianism will crumble very swiftly as national electorates will be made to pay not only for their private debts but also for the coming public debts their states must take up in order to pay up for the subsidies to capital required by the green transition (and pandemics). Trump may in any case well win the next election and stoke the authoritarian racist nationalist fires. Above all, capital

will no doubt insist that it has the 'fiduciary duty' to keep up its returns. Liberal capitalism gives its property holding classes a veritable constitutional right to do so, despite ESG talk and despite the surprising 2020 declaration of the American Business Roundtable against the rule of 'shareholder value', indeed despite 'enlightened egalitarian' talk.

The combined geo-political, geo-economic, technological, climate and social transitions, closely entangled with the fights between a severely weakened Left, a panicky liberal centre and the vindictive forces of a nostalgic authoritarian ethno-nationalism, all against the background of the social and spatial inequalities produced by 40 years of neoliberal narcissism in both the North and the South, inject into the current conjuncture a portion of contingency that should make all of us intellectually humble. My analysis here tells us that we will need to study, and act upon, the possibilities of 'broadly working class' alliances of a Left, enlightened, universalist and redistributive kind. Such alliances will have to pose the value of labour, humanity and the earth against the absolute liberal prerogatives of property. Such coalitions should not forget that much labour in the Global North as well as the South these days depends on small property owning too, and on access to tools, education, housing and a plethora of life entitlements—in that sense we are all worker-peasants now, with a wink to Narotzky: depending on our tools, skills, autonomies and 'village commons'. We will need a powerful and concerted expansion of the urban/village commons, and of the very right to commoning, in the face of the interlinked forces of capital and state authoritarianism—the complex and interlinked forces that are implied though rarely understood as being integral to 'the law of value'. All that cannot work without a stronger internationalism than we have seen for ages. Standing with 2 ft. on the combined historical experiences and insights of the internationalist Left must be our minimal maxim. There is much to be relearned, too, starting perhaps with Franz Neumann's work on Nazism and other Marxian discussions of the 1930s. Uncanny resemblances amid obvious contrasts. But we will need a lot of new learning too.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

N/A.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the JOAC for pointing out that my concept of double devaluation has close affinity with Jason Moore's concept of 'cheapening' (of labour and nature), in Moore (2017).
- ² This episode and the other ones related in the next three paragraphs are a selection from reports in the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *NRC Handelsblad* (the Netherlands) in the last week of March and the first days of April 2020. Thanks to Oana Mateescu for pointing out discussions on Romanian social networks.
- ³ Some parts of this article were written just before the Covid pandemic and the worldwide lockdowns and before a major shift in EU politics towards collective EU debts and the distribution of grants and cheap loans in particular to the financially most stretched nations on the periphery. This strategic (temporary?) shift in EU architecture is generating important changes in the national political landscapes (without definitely undoing the forces described in this article). In the wake of the assumption of the Italian premiership by Mario Draghi, the former President of the European Central Bank, the Salvini neo-nationalist Right in Italy has abandoned its anti-EU stance and is fragmenting. It also silenced Le Pen's critique on the EU and seems to disadvantage Hungary/Poland in their intricate nationalist bargaining for 'domestic authoritarianism' with Brussels and Western Europe. This sudden shift within EU governance was conditioned of course by the need for a collective EU response to the ongoing Covid crisis. But its condition of possibility was also based in Brexit (the United Kingdom would have vetoed it) and by the Trump attack on EU/NATO speeding up the fracturing of 'the Western alliance'. Together with the Covid experience, it also prefigured a shift towards a more Leftist and Green politics in most other EU countries, including in the key EU-naysayer, the Netherlands, a green egalitarianism often implemented by the Right though. With Black Lives Matter keeping pressure on Western social imaginations (often in highly culturalist ways I'm afraid), the narrow loss of Trump in the US elections and the unprecedented Biden stimulus coming in, the latter overwhelmingly supported among 'broadly working class populations' in the United States, the right-wing ascendancy seems to have been given at least a temporary blow. What can be concluded above all is that Western capitalist

governance has learnt from its failures in dealing with the financial crisis, as shown by recent IMF and OECD recommendations.

- ⁴ For example (without a claim to completeness, excuses to those omitted): Buzalka, 2008, 2018, 2020; Cammeli, 2017; Keskula, 2015; Koch, 2016, 2017; Makovicky, 2013; Pasieka, 2016, 2017; Shoshan, 2016; Stacul, 2014, 2018; Szombati, 2018a; Teitelbaum, 2017; Thorleifsson, 2017, 2019. See also Bangstad et al., 2019. As in all similar work in other disciplines, there is an alternating and overlapping use of terms and focus from 'far Right' to 'populism' to 'illiberalism' to 'neo-nationalism'.
- ⁵ Stuart Hall's notion of 'authoritarian populism' has become very popular. However, the present context is decidedly different from the early 1980s when that notion was coined to characterize the tactics behind the rise of Thatcher. Authoritarian populism conveniently suggests that there is a continuity with the Thatcher/Reagan conjuncture. It therefore might neglect the anti-cosmopolitan capital/anti-elites component of present right-wing mobilizations, which is just as essential for the present context as the xenophobia and racism. This is a crucial problem for the Left because this is where the Right takes over its clothes. Authoritarian populism thus allows us to ignore some of the deep contemporary trouble for the liberal Left. Finally, authoritarian populism confirms liberalism's happy embrace of populism as its preferred enemy (after communism/socialism was buried). Populism, however, is simply a general property of all democratic politics and not all right-wing projects that liberals denounce as populist these days are in fact populist – Orbàn's Hungary is a case in point, see below, also Bello (2019).
- ⁶ Hence also the tendency among political scientists to attribute the rise of the Right to immigration, xenophobia and 'white shift', rather than broader political economic transformations, see Mudde (2019) and Kaufman (2018). Their surveys simply repeat what people think they know about themselves at this moment in time, but what they know and do not know is an effect of hegemonic push and pull.
- ⁷ See Kalb (2018) for a more detailed comparative discussion of Hungary and the Netherlands, both avant-garde players within their own (opposite) category. In early 2021, the Dutch also became painfully aware that the decades' long campaign against benefit cheats and scroungers, which was accelerated after 2010 to the point of declaring that the Netherlands was no longer a welfare state but a 'participation society' (Orbàn's new constitution declared Hungary a 'worker state' interestingly), had led to the state all but gratuitously ruining tens of thousands of families on child benefits, many of them 'xenophobically profiled'. The government fell, and there is no new cabinet yet (September 2021). The greatest electoral win for the Right in post-war Dutch history (March 2021) has paradoxically to be made coherent with the greatest public shift towards egalitarian feelings since the 1980s. Such is the Dutch political mess.
- ⁸ This is a good moment to recall the energizing intellectual and professional atmosphere of the young (2003) Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology at CEU in the heart of Budapest, from which it has now been expelled. We should hope they can recreate a bit of that in their new Vienna campus.
- ⁹ With 'PC Worlds', Jonathan Friedman (2019) has arguably descended into the neo-nationalist right himself, an embarrassing slide from his earlier structural Marxism. The slide may have been intellectually enabled by his abstract structuralism, his conceptual privileging of the global/local dichotomy and his focus on national 'elites' rather than on capital and class. For a good critique, see Tremon (2020).
- ¹⁰ Edelman, Scoones, Borrás and others (Scoones et al., 2018) in the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative place the crisis not among workers but among peasantries, farmers and people in the disinvested countryside. I have a problem with 'peasants' here and sympathize with Tom Brass' (2015) critique and Bernstein's broader reading (...). 'Broadly working class' seems to represent their actual relationships of social reproduction in the Global North better.
- ¹¹ Whether there is in fact a degradation of the middle class going on in the Global North is of course a big discussion in sociology and economics. Therborn (2020) considers the question and gives a wealth of mostly quantitatively based references. Weiss (2019) gives a sharp argument about middle-class illusions and discusses the anthropological literature on the 'rising' middle class in Global South and North. See for further reflections also Kalb and Mollona (2018).
- ¹² Thomas Frank has presciently pointed at the substitution of economic redistribution by cultural recognition in the advance of the Right as the Democrats and European Social Democrats were cancelling the redistribution (Frank, 2004). This turned out to be a general insight.
- ¹³ See the set of studies offered in Kapferer and Theodossopoulos (2019). Moffit (2016) is among those inspired by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) who tend to reduce populism to style and miss out on the crucial issue of the class and value substance.

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