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Populism as Adaptation: Critical Notes on Ernesto Laclau's Interpretation of the Northern League (Italy)

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Abstract:

In On Populist Reason (2005), Ernesto Laclau revisits in a profoundly original way the philosophical meaning of the notion of populism. The root of Laclau's formulation is the following: an idea of people as a contingent yet formally repetitive political construction. Against every temptation of sociological descriptivism, populism represents a performative act of nomination which is at the very same time necessary and yet unable to fully saturate the ontological split that marks the social field. Thus, in Laclau's view the notion of populism perfectly overlaps the political field: there is no politics other than populist politics. The present paper critically reviews Laclau's discussion of Italian populist formations presented in Chapter 7 of his work, in particular his thesis about the deep continuity between the "national task" claimed by the Italian Communist Party under Italy's First Republic and the creation of a fictitious country ("Padania") by the Northern League in the 1990s. The main argument is the following: although such a philosophical continuity might help in analysing certain aspects of the Northern League, it is very problematic in historical terms and ultimately fails to assess the crucial link between processes of local governance in Northern Italy and transnational circuits of valorization as fostered by global neoliberal networks.

Key words: Ernesto Laclau, populism, Italy, Italian Communist Party, Northern League, neo-liberalism, globalisation, governance

Introduction – The Northern League in Laclau's General Framework

In an important book published in 2005 and titled *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau revisits in a profoundly original way the philosophical meaning of the notion of populism. He approaches the issue of Italian populist formations after WWII in the seventh chapter of the volume, "The Saga of Populism". The objective of his historical discussion is to give empirical consistency to an elastic and adaptable concept of populism conceived of as a "set of discursive resources", as "an area of variations within which a plurality of phenomena could be inscribed". In other words, the analysis aims at "determining internal rules which makes those variations intelligible" [Laclau 2005: 175-176]. Such operation establishes a logical continuity, which is able to disclose a sufficiently structured area of comparability between irreducibly different phenomena. Thus, populism names the logical, formal continuity, which is able to establish a plane of commensurability amongst diverse historical events. The root of Laclau's formulation is the following: an idea of people as a contingent, yet formally repetitive political construction. Against every temptation of sociological descriptivism, populism represents a performative act of nomination, which is at the very

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same time necessary and yet unable to fully saturate the ontological split that marks the social field. Thus, in Laclau's view the notion of populism perfectly overlaps the political field: there is no politics other than *populist* politics.

The analysis of Italian populism, identified in the Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano* – PCI) from the post-WWII restructuring to the fall of the Berlin Wall and in the Northern League from the collapse of the First Republic onwards,² follows a brief description of Boulangism in France³ and precedes a compelling discussion about the relationships between populist strategies and the State-form.⁴ With regard to the PCI, Laclau advances the hypothesis according to which it represented the only authentically populist political formation in the post-war period. In fact, the PCI was mainly concerned with the production of a national consciousness or, to borrow Palmiro Togliatti's words, with “*the working class' national tasks*” [Togliatti 2001: 44]. According to the Argentine philosopher, this was a socially ambitious as well as politically appropriate strategy: its success would have transformed the sectorial concept of *class* into the common name of *the people*, hence leading Italy from the diffused and corrupted nepotism perpetrated by the ruling Christian Democrats (*Democrazia Cristiana* – DC) to an accomplished form of national democracy. As is well known, however, such a strategy failed. Laclau's explanation of this failure is twofold. On the one hand, it was due to the Comintern's obstinate anti-populism, which privileged the universal purity of the Communist task over the pursuit of national programs of progressive democratization. On the other hand, the defeat found its root in the limited political agency imposed on the PCI by the Cold War.

Laclau's analysis continues by emphasizing how, in the aftermath of *Tangentopoli* and the collapse of the First Republic, the geography of Italian populism underwent a profound modification. The populist flag, too hastily abandoned by the Left, which proved incapable to deal with its own past, was eventually picked up by the Northern League (*Lega Nord* – LN). This party proposed an ethno-regionalist re-interpretation of populism and transposed the political frontier from national class struggle to the North-South axis. Once the imaginary nation of Padania was fictitiously created in 1996, the political goal of the *Carroccio* (as the Northern League is frequently nicknamed) seemed to be within reaching distance. However, the persistence of Italian national borders posed to the party two inter-related – and finally unsurpassable – obstacles. Firstly, its hard anti-Southerner rhetoric disempowered its ideological appeal towards people from the South (especially those living and working in the North). Secondly, the political competition performed by other Centre-Right parties (such as Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* or Gianfranco Fini's National Alliance – *Alleanza Nazionale*) made the LN hegemony uncertain, even in the territories where it originally emerged. Such a double problematicity has unmistakably shown a short-circuit within

² This period of Italian history is often referred to as *Tangentopoli*. The term intends to describe the pervasive corruption of the Italian political system, which was exposed in 1992-1996 by the “Clean Hands” (*Mani Pulite*) investigations. The term also concerns the resulting scandal, which led to the collapse of the hitherto dominant Christian Democrats and their allies.

³ Boulangism was a French movement which opposed the parliamentary regime of the Second Republic. It formed around General Boulanger between 1886 and 1889, and gathered nationalists, bonapartists, and monarchists – as well as large sections of the proletariat. These subjects were organized in the *Ligue des patriotes*, which registered a significant success in the 1889 elections, but was eventually destroyed by the internal divisions which arose after Boulanger's suicide in 1891.

⁴ In particular, Laclau refers to the difference between South America populist movements (called “State populism”) and Eastern European populist movements (called “Ethnic movements”).

the context of which the necessity to rely on the friend/enemy dichotomy in order to set in motion the populist dynamic was satisfied in a sclerotic way by confusedly multiplying the issues of concern. As a consequence, the LN ended up vociferously denouncing an endless plurality of polemical objects: the party system, Southern parasitism, “savage” immigration, hostile press, anti-social behaviour, judiciary powers,... As Laclau’s concludes:

“the abandonment of territorial attachments took place in terms of a right-wing discourse whose lack of concrete reference meant that it was definitely more universal, but this was a vacuous universality [...] in which uncertainty concerning the anchoring points generated an indeterminacy which was anything but hegemonic”. As a consequence, “the League’s failure to transform itself into a national force is at the root of its lack of success in becoming a truly populist party.” [Laclau 2005: 189]

It should be underlined that Laclau’s analysis of the LN seems to ignore the 21st century evolutions of the Italian political landscape. It appears that the Argentine thinker regards the LN crisis of 1997-1999 (the secessionist phase marked by an abrupt electoral decline) as definitive. Consequently, its characteristically populist style would present itself in the form of a self-evident breakdown. However, the *Carroccio* has heavily influenced Italian politics also in the last decade: especially the “third wave” of widespread consensus (materialized in the electoral peaks of 2008-2010)⁵, makes it at the very least problematic to define the party trajectory exclusively in terms of failure. Such a consideration – amongst others we shall discuss later on – suggests to critically analyze Laclau’s arguments in order to develop an hypothesis which is potentially able to frame the LN phenomenon in its historico-political specificities. It is our conviction, in fact, that although a *philosophical* continuity of Italian populism – as suggested by Laclau – might help in better understanding certain aspects of the LN (most notably its ideological penetration in traditionally “red” areas, such as Emilia-Romagna), such a continuity presents significant aporias in *historical terms*, and ultimately fails to assess the crucial link between processes of local governance in Northern Italy and transnational circuits of valorization as fostered by global neoliberal networks.

Laclau’s Insights – The Northern League’s Affirmation in the “Red” Emilia-Romagna

It seems fairly evident that Laclau’s analysis advances original and compelling elements which allow significant enhancements in interpreting the LN as a socio-political phenomenon. Firstly, his conceptual toolbox situates us at safe distance from the two readings of the party’s parable which are commonly followed. On the one hand, the ontologically weak conception of populism, according to which, by means of a problematic reference to Max Weber’s axiological neutrality [*Wertfreiheit*], the LN should be assessed on the same

⁵ After having collected a meagre 3.9% in the 2001 General Elections, the LN registered an impressive 8.3% in 2008, further improved in the 2009 European Elections (10.2%). However, the apex of the LN electoral parable is reached in the 2010 Regional Elections, where the party candidates won two Northern regions: Piedmont and Veneto.

analytical level of all the movements that multifariously make use of the idea of “people” [Tarchi 2003]. On the other hand, Laclau’s solidly ontological populism disarticulates the hermeneutic circle that sees in the LN a pure and simple reactivation of discriminating dynamics whose paradigm would be racist ideology as expressed by Nazism [Ravera 2010]. Although often well-informed and empirically accurate, such interpretations seem to force the LN within a-historic and highly formal ideal-types rather than to highlight those specific procedures, original aspects, and unprecedented bottlenecks which frame this party-movement as a *unicum* in the Italian political scenario.

Moreover, Laclau’s historical *excursus* provides extremely relevant elements for the understanding the LN’s recent growth of consensus – both in terms of electoral turnout and territorial recognition – in traditionally “red” areas, and most notably in the region of Emilia-Romagna.⁶ In this context, the application of Laclau’s categories opens up deeply promising interpretative paths. In a remarkable documentary released in 2011 by Stefano Aurighi, Davide Lombardi, and Paolo Tomassone – titled “Occupy Emilia” (*Occupiamo l’Emilia*)⁷ – the LN’s affirmation in the ancient strongholds of the Italian Communist Party is analyzed from a quantitative as well as subjective point of view. As for the former, the LN’s electoral percentages in 2010 speak for themselves: in the province of Modena, the *Carroccio* gathered 15.5% of votes (3.6% in 1995); similarly, in the province of Reggio Emilia the 3.7% of 1995 turned into an astounding – and uncanny – 14.6% in 2010 [Aurighi, Lombardi, Tomassone 2011]. Even more impressive than numerical data, however, is the transformation of the regional political subjectivity: the large majority of interviewees repeatedly emphasize political as well as behavioural affinities between PCI militants and LN activists. Usually, common traits are recognized in the genuineness of political passion, in the sincere disinterestedness for career advancements and administrative positions, and finally in a high degree of institutional pragmatism. As Mauro Manfredini⁸ – founder of *Comunisti Padani* (Communists from/for Padania) and currently leader of the LN in the Emilia-Romagna Regional Council – significantly summarizes:

“At the end of the day, we are just like old Communists: always taking the streets and clever, capable of solving problems. In Sassuolo [a small town in Emilia where the Mayor is a member of the LN] our war on drugs proved successful in a mere few months: huge confiscations of hashish and cocaine. We hit the root-cause, not the little pusher who sells a couple of doses and is released by the judge after two-three days from the arrest. Also, we stopped wasting money for lunches and transportation: Sassuolo’s Mayor sold the car he had the possibility of using to have some more money for anti-crisis programs. The same can be said about violence against women: we did not waste time indulging in nice and useless discourses, as the Left currently does. On December 3rd, 2009, at

⁶ To exemplify the influence of the PCI in Emilia-Romagna, it is sufficient to say that it has been the leading regional party until its collapse. Even later, however, the Regional Council has invariably been led by Centre-Left coalitions.

⁷ No relation whatsoever should be drawn between this title and the experience of the Occupy movement.

⁸ Mauro Manfredini is the founder of Communists from/for Padania (*Comunisti Padani*), as well as the current LN leader in the Emilia-Romagna Regional Council.

the ‘political’ price of 20 euros, self-defence courses for our ladies officially started.” [Manfredini in Stefanini 2010: 153]

It is crystal-clear how the *modus operandi* continuity between PCI and LN – but such a continuity can also be detected at the level of subjective feeling – can help us in situating the extraordinary performance of the *Carroccio* in Emilia-Romagna within an analytically sharp grid of intelligibility. This aspect, however, does not represent the only analogy between these apparently very distant political worlds. One of the peculiarities of Laclau’s populism, in fact, is its necessity to proclaim itself as anti-systemic, as irreducible to the practices of recuperation set in motion by the establishment. From this perspective, PCI and LN share what sociologist Roberto Biorcio has defined as “tribunical function” (*funzione tribunizia*). It indicates the LN tendency to act as a territorial union, as a social representative of people’s claims conceived of in explicitly anti-classist terms: “*Nowadays, the Carroccio expresses people’s protest and resentment as in the past PCI in Italy and PCF in France were able to do. The political representation articulated by the LN is mainly based on the sense of belonging to local communities in order to overcome, often openly, the differences between Right and Left, between entrepreneurs and workers.*” [Biorcio 2010: 77]

Laclau’s Limits – The Adaptability of the Northern League’s Populism in the Neoliberal “Revolution”

As previously anticipated, Laclau’s analysis presents, beside the undeniable insights we have tried to highlight, also a set of limits which undermine its full applicability, or – at the very least – show the necessity to integrate it with further elements. From a theoretical perspective, it has been acutely noted and aptly criticized for the presence of a sort of Kantian formalism, whose effect is the conflation of material, historical contingencies onto the ceaseless repetition of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic articulations. In other words, the successive linearity of different phases cannot be assumed as an indisputable postulate [Amendola 2008; Bazzicalupo 2010]. Moreover, by descending a little along the ladder of abstraction – namely, situating our gaze at the level of Laclau’s analysis of the LN – we find other significant incongruences. Firstly, the vicissitudes of Italian populism seem to be closely linked to the primacy of the Nation-State as an unquestioned presupposition. As a consequence, such a reading incurs in the epistemological bias that Ulrich Beck – amongst others – has aptly called *methodological nationalism* [Beck 2009]. In fact, Laclau inscribes the line of continuity between PCI and LN in the putative persistence of those “national tasks” which both parties – although for very different reasons – would eventually fail to accomplish. The problem here emerges insofar as the national presupposition is surely justified in the case of PCI – which has actually faced the impossibility to reconcile the universal line pursued by the Comintern and the particular materiality experienced by a country belonging to the Western Bloc and in the midst of a vertiginous economic boom – whereas it presents itself as highly debatable in the case of the LN. Even though it is sensible to be cautious towards the rhetoric of the total eclipse of the nation-state as an outcome of globalization processes, it is nonetheless important to emphasize that the function of the state has undergone epochal modifications in the few years which precede the collapse of the Soviet Union (and, with it, of Western Communist Parties) and the emergence of LN. From

this perspective, sociologist Saskia Sassen has proposed the concept of *de-nationalization* to indicate not so much an undifferentiated roll-back of the state, but rather a redefinition of its role [Sassen 2003]. Simplifying a little, we might say that from a centralized agent (tendentially) concerned with wealth redistribution, the state progressively – starting from the 1970s – turns into a multilevel agent (tendentially) concerned with the predisposition of optimal conditions for capitalist wealth creation. In other words, today's highly neoliberalized state is chiefly involved in the creation of profitable environments for capital investments.

A further and significant lack in Laclau's formulation is represented by the absence of a detailed analysis regarding the transformations of the social composition of labour. In fact, it is against the background of the crisis of the factory system and its crucial inhabitant, the mass-worker, that the productive figures which give consistency to the LN propaganda regarding the so-called "Northern Issue" (*questione settentrionale*) emerge and develop.⁹ Here, we are making a reference to that fundamental transformation of the capitalist mode of production which has been defined as the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism [Boyer, Durand 1997]. It seems to us that the continuities on which Laclau masterfully shed light would acquire a thicker cogency if they could take into account the different social and productive *milieux*, upon which they are deployed.

To synthesize in a unitary concept the two limits we have discussed so far, we might advance the hypothesis that Laclau's analysis of Italian populism does not consider in all its relevance the crucial issue of *neoliberalism*. This concept is usually meant to circumscribe a process of transformation which, starting in the course of the 1970s, intersects three different but strongly related dynamics. The *ideological* one, which shows the accomplished colonization by economic reasoning – since it is based on the market as the ultimate source of "truth" – of social life as a whole. The *economic* one, which enlarges the spheres subjected to commodification by expanding market-led logics both at the level of geographical extension and at the level of temporal intensity. Finally, the *politico-institutional* one, which assumes that the capitalist responsabilisation of social actors (e.g. workers being conceived of as self-entrepreneurs) is to be regarded as the essential mission of public administrations, whose role becomes that of managing the *res publica* not *because of* (cyclical failures of) the market – as it was the case in the Fordist era – but rather *for* the market itself (Rossi and Vanolo 2010). For our purposes, the concept of neoliberalism is particularly interesting inasmuch as it simultaneously conveys – although not without frictions – Marxist arguments underlining the implementation of class-oriented, *top down* policies [Harvey 2005], and Foucauldian reflections aimed at emphasizing the *bottom up* innovations of governmental processes [Rose 2006].¹⁰

Through the assumption of the notion of neoliberalism as privileged analytical grid, the hypothesis we would like to suggest is that the LN does not solely represent a traditionalist reaction to threats of insecurity posed to Northern Italy by capitalist globalization. Rather, the LN constitutes a profoundly complex response – at times functional, at times not – to the political as well as economic necessity of governing the new interaction between global flows of capital and regional productive districts. It must be noted,

⁹ Sociologist Aldo Bonomi has individuated three of these productive figures: the *displaced* by globalization, the *stressed* by molecular capitalism, and the *shipwrecked* of Fordism, namely the victims of deindustrialization [Bonomi 2008].

¹⁰ On the convergence between Marxist and Foucauldian perspectives on neoliberalism, see the noteworthy Sparke 2009.

moreover, that such a new interaction has been imposed on a planetary scale exactly by the development of that unprecedented governmental regime which is neoliberalism [Marzocca 2010]. It seems to us that such an hypothesis allows for a few steps forward with regard to the previously encountered limits of Laclau's elaboration.

As for the issue of de-nationalization, it must be recalled that a single North (or even a single Padania), quite simply does not exist. Rather, behind the signifier "North" we find a regional plurality of productive systems and collective identities [Bonomi 1997]. Thus, the sclerotization of the friend/enemy dichotomy as performed by the LN, which Laclau sees as the ultimate proof of its failure, can perhaps be interpreted differently, namely as capability to adapt to contexts which are irreducible to one another but similarly affected by globalization processes and, in most cases, by de-industrialization. Although the identitarian closure within the rhetorical walls of "small homelands" (*piccole patrie*), and the racist criminalization of migrants are constant features of the LN discursive *repertoire*, the remaining of its political toolbox has shown an extraordinary versatility in attuning itself to the various contexts in which it has been put to use. As we have reported, in Emilia-Romagna and in other traditionally left-wing regions the LN has attempted to incorporate (by manipulating) the Communist heritage. Through very different mechanisms, in Lombardy the discursive resources of a widespread Catholicism have been constantly and successfully mobilized [Dematteo 2011]. Again in a different fashion, in Veneto close attention has been paid to classically populist issues, such as fiscal strikes or protests against the centralised state [Canetta, Milanese 2010]. The list could continue for long (for example, in some areas the relationships between LN members and the extreme Right are very tight), but we believe that the crucial point we want to make is now sufficiently clear: the political flexibility which marks the LN represents not only a limit or the root-cause of a necessitated failure. Rather, it configures itself as the fundamental feature of what we might define as *populism as adaptation*. The incapability to structure the social field along a single axis, that is to say the inability to draw a sharp line beyond which lives a perfectly recognizable enemy, has been one of the main strengths of the *Carroccio*, a foundational character which has allowed it to pervasively penetrate in different contexts, modulating its political style while maintaining a stable core ultimately linked to the conceptual couple identitarian closure/criminalization of migrants. However, it must be stressed that such an adaptation is neither passive nor automatic. To the contrary, the LN ability lies precisely in the act of creative interpretation of different political frames as performed without incurring in the double trap represented, on the one hand, by the risk of losing its identity and, on the other hand, by the spectre of paralyzing ossification. It is this *politico-subjective malleability* which – it seems to us – can be considered as the crucial character of the LN.

As for the issue of Post-Fordism, what must be firmly underlined is that – regardless of the tedious anti-finance and anti-banks rhetoric often mobilized by LN grassroots activists – the relationship between the party and the global flows of capital is all but oppositional. It can be configured as complex and at times contradictory, but surely not as inherently confrontational. In general, it might be useful to read the development of the LN as a multilayered response to the capitalist and neoliberal transformation which has invested the Italian Northern territories. In this regard it is important to make explicit reference to a crucial contribution – still very topical notwithstanding its original publication in 1993 –

by left-wing intellectual Primo Moroni.¹¹ In an article titled “Between Post-Fordism and the New Social Right” (*Tra Post-fordismo e nuova destra sociale*), Moroni writes about the LN:

“The processes of productive transformation and the crisis of the system of political parties have produced a new political formation which, unified by a nebulous but effective federalist idea, manages to keep together protest-votes and the interests of an enlarged social class composed by entrepreneurs and autonomous workers. Such a formation is constitutively socialized to entrepreneurial risks, to market categories, and to international competition. In all its ambivalence and potentially reactionary style, the LN is attempting to find new rules for the political system, whereas traditional parties maintain forms of social representation which grow every day more anachronistic.” [Moroni 1993: 45-46]

Although it referred to a LN which no longer exists, Moroni’s analysis is of particular relevance for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it clearly shows how the social composition of the LN electorate expresses the shattering of the Fordist working class, of its indefinite extension and profound disjointness. On the other hand, what is unmistakably highlighted is the proximity of the *Carroccio* with “market categories” and “international competition”. In other words, neoliberal governmentality – in this case through a vaguely federalist party such as the LN – penetrated the substance of the traditional working class in order to manage its reproduction by orienting it towards the core-mechanisms of the competitive logic. In the context of a job market in which (rhetorically) there are no longer workers, but rather self-entrepreneurs (mostly impoverished and deskilled), the dynamics of political representation are re-codified in the grammar of territorial communities which organize themselves in order to face various threats posed by globalization. For example, due to the national relevance of the LN, until 2010 many Northern municipalities have enjoyed a disproportionate quota of the national welfare network [Boeri 2010]. On a different level, the Credierunord case represented the (eventually failed) attempt by the LN to take part in the world of global finance [Bianchini 2010].

It is therefore in the magma of interrelations between the dynamics of capitalist development and the implementation of governmental *dispositifs* that the multiple causes as well as the persistence of the LN success should be looked for. In the same workshop, moreover, should be forged the analytical tools to elaborate its concrete and incisive critique.

Provisional Conclusions

Beyond the critical remarks we have addressed to Laclau’s interpretation of the LN, his counter-hegemonic inspiration should doubtlessly be maintained. In fact, situating the LN origins and developments in their proper context (i.e. neoliberalism) merely represents

¹¹ Primo Moroni was a crucial figure in Italian antagonism during the 1960s and 1970s. Amongst many other projects, he took part in the militant research journal ‘Primo Maggio’. The interested anglophone reader can refer to the excellent Lucarelli [2013].

the designation of a battlefield: what forces traverse it, which emancipatory horizons and nefarious ghosts clash on it, how struggles are fought – all this is still to be determined.

The scandals that hit LN's founding father and charismatic figure Umberto Bossi (in particular his family) in 2011 had profound repercussions on the party electoral performance: if in 2008 the LN gathered an astounding nation-wide 8.3%, in 2013 the consensus collapsed to 4.1%. Simultaneously, however, the alliance with Berlusconi's People's Freedom Party (*Popolo della libertà*) allowed Roberto Maroni – current leader of the LN – to win Lombardy's Regional elections. Therefore, today the LN leads the three most important Regional Councils in Northern Italy (Maroni in Lombardy, Luca Zaia in Veneto, and Roberto Cota in Piedmont). This is why Aldo Bonomi has defined the LN contemporary tendency of political development as *victorious decline* [Bonomi 2013].

In this context, it seems to us that the LN's *populism as adaptation* will be tested on at least two different terrains in the near future. Firstly, the nefarious persistence of the global crisis has produced a shift of emphasis from issues related social integration/legitimation, in particular the issue of irregular immigration, to immediately economic issues – most notably unemployment and growth-oriented policies. How will the LN deal with the re-declination of one of its core messages? Secondly, the abrupt emergence of a vaguely populist formation such as the Five Stars Movement (*Movimento 5 stelle*) led by comedian Beppe Grillo (25.5% in the last election) has significantly eroded the LN consensus by weakening its access to the tribunicial function. Which counter-strategy will the LN set up to face this unexpected competitor?

Let us conclude by suggesting that both the emergence and the persistence of the LN indicate a crisis of the political Left in Italy, which needs to be interrogated anew. The incapability to offer innovative forms of political representation to the new figures of living labour (precarious workers, advanced tertiary sector, unskilled mini-jobs, care and service industries, autonomous workers, etc.) is today – as it was in the 1990s – the main obstacle for those parties and movements, which still consider themselves as belonging to various shades of the Left. The issue is complex and surely difficult to properly understand – let alone to solve. However, it is our conviction that social inquiry on the class composition of Post-Fordist labour would be a promising starting point to inaugurate a new path of political research.

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