

S-1: Göran Therborn

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“Class, Race and Nation in the World of Migration”

The relationships of class and nation were a central preoccupation of early twentieth century Marxism, then mainly driven by strategic political issues of the labour movement in multinational dynastic empires, like the Romanov and the Habsburg, and manifested, above all in works by Lenin and Otto Bauer. Later in the century it became an important issue in the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in Asia and Africa, theoretically most articulated by Mao, but clearly much on the minds of all radical anti-colonialist leaders.

The problematic has now, in the early twenty-first century, unexpectedly returned with a vengeance to Europe, most sharply in Western Europe, where class was more articulated than in the post-Communist East. It was hammered in, beneath the hype of globalization and cosmopolitanism, and after the financial crash of capitalism in 2008, which brought inequality into a topic of polite mainstream conversation and rhetoric. The political effects of the crisis have been varied. But two stand out, nowhere has any attempt to tackle inequality been made, and the strengthening of xenophobic nationalism has been more widespread and more influential than egalitarian, class-conscious movements.

This outcome, so unexpected by Occupy movements as well as by the classical left, and by their respective “organic intellectuals” calls for new reflections on class and nation as categories of identity.

Among anti-xenophobic people “racism” and “racist” are generously provided insults, which unintendedly tends to muddle waters of analysis. While xenophobia, hatred, fear and/or contempt for foreigners is an almost universal propensity, racism is an ideology of biological superiority. It is a product of European overseas colonialism, imported into Europe itself in the heyday of European imperialism and by the Nazis grafted onto the old tradition of xenophobic Anti-Semitism. The settler states of the Americas, Oceania, and South Africa were all constituted on a racist basis. Racism was also a constituent of settler class movements. “Keep Australia White”, was the first plank of the Labour program until the 1970s.

Current Islamophobia is related to but not part a persistence of religion in the modern world. It is rather a cultural mutation of Euro-American colonial racism, often using the same epithets about the people of contempt and hatred, “backward”, “barbarian”, “savage”.

Class, nation, and race are competing categories of collective identity, and their field of competition has been widely enlarged by the new mass wave of global migration. Gender is another major collective identity, but rarely superseding the three others mentioned.

Trans-continental and transnational migration are re-shuffling the political as well as the cultural landscape of the rich world. Migration is challenging and changing a world of hegemonic complacency. One important way of understanding its effects is through the lenses of class, nation and race, and through the entanglements and competition of collective identities.

With introduction by René León Rosales.