

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article4827>



Racism

The sigh of the oppressed creature?

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV504 - January 2017 -

Publication date: Wednesday 11 January 2017

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There is a spectre haunting Europe and the United States of America. It is the spectre of racism, xenophobia, nationalism and even fascism. Gallons of ink have been devoted to try and understand the triumph of Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump. Most commentators were astonished, as was I. But what lies ahead may be even more frightening. Far-right, anti-migrant, anti-Islam and sometimes outright fascist parties have been emerging across Europe and have made a serious impact notably in Germany, Austria, Italy and a clutch of Eastern European and Balkan states. It is suddenly more credible that the likes of Marine Le Pen and her Front National could be the next President of France. This is a fascist party led by her father for decades before she took the reins and decided to 'sanitise' the party, clearing it of most of its transparent pro-Nazi connections. But fierce hostility to migrants and to Islam remains at the heart of the FN and most French people know its history and what it really is.

Of course a party does not have to be fascist to be hostile to migrants and be Islamophobic. This is what unites all of these breakthroughs but is also shared by the mainstream parties, which are coming under enormous pressure to become more like their far-right cousins day by day, fearful of losing votes to them and perhaps always having some of those attitudes themselves which they now feel happy to declare.

So why and how did this happen? Before attempting to answer this question it is important to acknowledge differences in what has taken place.

Brexit

It would be grave mistake to think that all who voted Leave are racists and xenophobes. There are lots of good reasons for opposing the EU. It is a capitalist institution. Much of what it does is wholly indefensible. Despite all the talk about freedom of movement, the EU is an anti-migrant anti-refugee state as we have seen by the treatment of refugees at the borders. It has seen the freedom of movement as being something primarily for European migrants for the benefit of employers. It has viciously put pressure on economically weaker states, in particular Greece, to wipe out its social programmes and implement austerity. Indeed it is a bulwark of the policies of austerity across the continent including in Britain. Yes it does have important regulations which defend workers rights, health and safety and so on. But so does the British State – they were concessions to the working class when the class was stronger and more organised.

Nevertheless the success of Brexit was a triumph for racism and xenophobia. Why? Because the two main Leave campaigns – the Johnson and the UKIP – made it into a referendum about freedom of movement. Immigration was the only comprehensible content to the debate. The rest consisted of each side throwing bogus figures about, and coming up with quotes and counter-quotes about the economy which made little sense to anybody. You did not see much of the kind of issues I just made above. Migration was the visible issue, writ large after Farage launched his disgraceful poster.

Whilst leaving the EU is not an intrinsically racist there is a pre-history. In the last general election, UKIP did not win any seats but it did garner 14% of the vote. UKIP did win the most seats to the European Parliament. I think we can say that UKIP is a racist party and that whilst most of its members probably don't regard themselves as racists, they enthusiastically cheer a leader whose political hero is Enoch Powell because of his rivers of blood speech. If you look

at Farage's speeches about immigration you will see that they are largely variations on that infamous speech of Powell.

Immigration

A conjunction of crises has put migration at the top of the political agenda globally. Wars, climate change, famine and poverty, environmental degradation by multi-nationals, enormous inequalities – all these coming to the fore. Within Europe an economic crisis, which on the one hand encourages people to move for work and getting a decent life and on the other hand is generating cuts, unemployment, homelessness etc in all the other countries.

It is easy to see in this context that opposing migrants and refugees is a popular notion. It is the common sense response. If there are not enough jobs, social, health and education under strain, not enough housing etc this answer seems natural. Much easier than trying to understand the dynamics of these various crises. Sometimes this will be self-consciously racist but for many the racism is concealed from themselves.

Immigration controls are indeed racist. Any laws which criminalise people because of where they are born, where their parents are born, what language they speak, the colour of their skin – must be racists. But that argument needs to be spelled out again and again.

Arguing that migrants boost the economy is lost on people who have been experiencing economic decline and its effects. We need to point the facts out when the Mail, the Sun and the Express claim that migrants are a drain on the system, to break the myth. But it is not the principal argument and anyway it is contingent. Under other circumstances it will indeed be a strain on the system. Opening the doors to adult Jews, Roma, Gays, communists...from Nazi occupied Europe would have been a massive strain on the services in Britain, but it would have been the right thing to do, rather than letting them perish in the death camps. It may be unpopular but only by pushing these arguments of principle can we hope to win people over in the long term.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia is not new just as anti-Semitism goes back a long way. But from 11 September it has been a dominant theme in political discourse. Again the easy arguments are Islamophobic. You want to stop terrorism – then keep out the Muslims! One of the main powers of Trump's and Farage's arguments are their simplicity. Never mind the crises that leads to this, that imperialism has been courting the most reactionary of warlords and leaders, Britain's closest ally after Israel, being Saudi Arabia, the heartland of the most reactionary strains of Islam which spawned Al Qaida and Isis and are the people the UK sells arms to and trains their military. Never mind that there is a struggle by many Muslims, women and men, in these regions against these despots who preach a travesty of Islam.

Betrayals

The simplicity of the reactionary responses is not sufficient on their own to account for their success. After all, historically reaction is not always in the ascendancy. There is of course a wealth of history of working class opposition to racism, xenophobic, bigotry and fascism, and such resistance is still very much alive. But reaction is given strength by the fact successive governments have let people down again and again. So in Britain towns and

cities have been de-industrialised under Thatcher and under Blair, whilst Labour councils carry on applying cuts and pursuing austerity to these already devastated areas. So Labour is seen as part of that ‘elite’. In the absence of a fight back by Labour, or a substantial party to the left of Labour then along comes Farage saying, ‘I stand up for ordinary British Workers, blah blah.’ With his easy answers and successive betrayals it is clear why people are drawn to UKIP.

Marx’s Nightmare

There can be a dialectic between revolution and counter-revolution which Marxists tend to overlook but which Marx picked up on. ‘The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time honoured disguised and this borrowed language’ (18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte). So those who would overthrow the imperialists and neo-liberals of Washington, Westminster and Brussels end up draped in the flags of nationalism, racism and xenophobia. In this case the nightmare wins, at least for the moment.

The nature of the social relations of capitalism is not spontaneously visible to those who are in them, they are just there, unconscious. So when a crisis throws them into disarray so our place in the world is confused. We have a need to make the unconscious conscious, asserting our identity – sadly this can be done falsely through race and nation. As Marx said of religion – it is ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions’ so it is with reactionary forces within the working class more generally. Strange to see the likes of UKIP or Trump as a heart or a soul of anything – but is a counterfeit heart, where the real heart of the community has been ripped out by capital.

So is it all just gloom and doom?

No, but it’s pretty bloody bad. But history has not just gone one way. Look at the strong challenge by Bernie Sanders to the Clinton dynasty. This could be been a genuine challenge to the elite. Look at the mass demonstrations in London in support of refugees, the turn out in Germany to welcome refugees as they came off the trains. Look at the confirmation of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party. There have been tremendous struggles of detainees in detention centres, anti-raids groups and so forth. There is a progressive momentum (no pun intended) in all these developments, which stands out against reaction but it clearly is not enough. So what to do?

Marxist forces inside and outside the Labour Party and Momentum must work together to ensure that the Labour leadership do not retreat on immigration but rather insist on defending and extending freedom of movement.

Build solidarity with migrants and refugees fighting back against the state.

Solidarity with victims of hate crime including organising defence – this is not just important in itself but is a way of relates back to the issue of a sense of identity – rebuilding communities means forging links with new communities.

Fight for equal rights in the work place – secure contracts for all, no undercutting minimum wage as per the EU direction, which allows employers to employ workers at the minimum in the country they have come from e.g. Romanian minimum for Romanians working in Britain – Europe wide working class campaign against the rule.

Build the fight back against austerity in public services, health, education, housing, benefit entitlements – work to make sure that migrants and disabled people are an integral part of these campaigns; the very people who get blamed are the people discriminated against. That fight will often be against the local Labour administration.

Socialists inside and outside the Labour Party should not shirk campaigning against these administrations, to defend the working class and because failure to do so will leave a vacuum for UKIP.

Defiance not Compliance – trade union encouragement and defence of those who refuse to act as immigration police. Encourage landlords and employers to refuse to play these roles.

Listening to People

When people in all the mainstream parties, especially the Labour Party, say ‘we must listen to what people are saying about immigration’, after some defeat at the hands of parties like UKIP we know that what this really means is an intention to join in the chorus of those calling for more controls not less or none. But actually it is vital that we really listen to people whilst being prepared to vigorously argue in favour of immigration not against it. To dumbly parrot what people say is actually a patronising politics. Arguing things out is not. More importantly it’s a teasing out of what are the underlying issues – drilling down to where people are or should be – ‘revolutionising themselves and things’ and to abandon ‘the battle cries and costumes’ of the past. Identifying those we can work in the community to help develop a programme and above all unite and fight around that programme.

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