The 47 Percent, Reconsidered

Posted on December 1, 2012 by Clarence Lang

No, this isn't another commentary on Mitt Romney's denunciations of the so-called "47 percent" of Americans who, according to him, freeload off the government. Suffice it to say that his remarks – which he shared at a private campaign fundraiser and reiterated during a post-election conference call with top donors – exposed his class politics and those of mainstream American conservatism. This narrative of the "47 percent" also revealed a neoliberal economic outlook that disdains social citizenship rights and reduces all social relations to the market (hence Romney's references to Obamacare and college loans as "financial gifts" in exchange for Democratic votes).

A more useful imagining of the "47 percent" involves data from the 2010 General Social Survey. As reported by Matthew Di Carlo, senior research fellow at the Albert Shanker Institute, and highlighted by Working Class Studies scholar Sherry Linkon ("The Changing Working Class," *Working-Class Perspectives*, November 19, 2012), 46.8 percent of Americans, including those with college education, identified themselves as working class when given the option. This is the highest percentage in three decades. It occurs at the same time that a "rising American electorate" of unmarried women, Hispanics, African Americans, and people under the age of thirty has surfaced. At 48 percent, this group constituted almost half of the 2012 electorate. Its members are not only more racially diverse, but they are also, as *Truthdig* editor Robert Scheer writes, "more culturally sophisticated, socially tolerant and supportive of a robust public sector."

And, notwithstanding the use of cultural wedge issues to stoke white working-class fears and resentments, a recent study by the Public Religion Research Institute confirms that white people in non-salaried jobs are more varied in political temperament (on the basis of gender, religious affiliation, regional location, and experiences with economic hardship) than often assumed. Approximately half of the study's respondents believed that government has paid too much attention to the problems of African Americans and other minorities – which helps explain how the right has been able to sustain opposition to domestic social welfare spending,

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particularly means-tested programs associated with the black and brown "underclass." At the same time, 70 percent of those surveyed agreed that the U.S. economic system unjustly favors the wealthy, while 62 percent supported raising taxes on household incomes over $1 million.

There's more. According to a December 2011 report by the Pew Research Center, 40 percent of Americans shared a negative view of capitalism, up from 37 percent in April 2010. In contrast, 31 percent expressed a positive view of socialism. The percentages were notably higher among people of color. Among African Americans, 51 percent reacted negatively to capitalism, while 55 percent responded positively socialism. Among Hispanics, 44 percent reported a positive view of socialism, though in comparison to black respondents a higher number of respondents (55 percent) had an unfavorable view of capitalism.

Clearly, it would be an error to make sweeping conclusions about what any of this data means, especially in the aggregate. The fact that 47 percent of Americans self-identified as working class does not, by itself, signify the existence of any particular politics or coherent group perspective. Likewise, the presence of a "rising American electorate" does not automatically translate into meaningful power. This darkening of America, in fact, is already being met with vigorous efforts to suppress the vote at the state level and undermine provisions of federal voting rights law. In terms of the Pew Center's study of popular attitudes toward capitalism vis-à-vis socialism, we should be even more cautious about overreaching in our interpretations. The study tells us little about how respondents define "capitalism" or "socialism." Reactions to these terms also offer no predictive insight into political behavior on the part of African Americans, Latinos, or any other groups. Occupy Wall Street supporters, for example, favored capitalism more than they rejected it, and even among those who identified with the reactionary Tea Party right, a significant minority reacted negatively to capitalism.

Popular sentiments, and even articulated grievances, do not organically give way to mobilization; at best, they are only preconditions for action. Yet, the neoliberal turn in the 1970s and 1980s was achieved in part by stunting people's capacity to imagine alternatives to capitalist globalization – consider Margaret Thatcher's slogan, "there is no alternative," in the 1980s or Francis Fukuyama's assertion of "the end of history" in the 1990s. What I find intriguing about the trends discussed above is that they contain a latent challenge to this consensus, and to the equally debilitating myth of the United States as a middle-class republic. If nothing else, the recent Chicago teachers and the national "Black Friday" protests by Walmart

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employees suggest the possibilities of a self-consciously working-class politics. As the growing voices against fiscal austerity at home and abroad illustrate, a vigorous discussion about the prevailing political economy is also in full swing. And all options appear to be on the table.

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