

THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY AND THE WORKING CLASS:  
Some Preliminary Observations

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The purpose of this paper is to try to suggest some dimensions for understanding better the reaction of the working class in European countries to the European Community. Having no data from other countries in Western Europe to rely upon I am limited in this exploration to the situation in my own country, Norway, and more particularly to that situation when it was crystallized to a very high point of political articulation in connection with the national referendum over Norway's entry into the European Community, as proposed by the government, in September 1972.<sup>1</sup> As is well known the Norwegians rejected entry by 53% against and 47% in favor of entry--very much to the surprise of the government that seems to have expected a 75% vote in favor of entry. The question then arises; why did the Norwegian population react this way, and how did the working class, here simply defined as people engaged in manual work, be that in the primary, secondary or tertiary sectors of economic activity, react to the issue?

Of course, there are many factors at work in this connection. To simplify the picture let us divide the Norwegian population into center and periphery, meaning by "center" those who live in the geographical center, including the towns (of cities we have very few in our small country); people with more than average income and more than average education, and people in secondary and tertiary sectors and those not engaged in manual work. By "periphery", then, we would mean exactly the opposite, in the countryside, in peripheral districts, with less than average education and income, in the primary sector and certainly engaged in manual work. Using

such dimensions it goes without saying that there are all kinds of in-between categories, and they will play a certain role in the following.<sup>2</sup> By and large we would expect a new idea with profound implications for Norwegians in their private lives, for what happens inside Norway and for the relationship on Norway to the rest of the world to be met with the resistance of conservatism in the periphery and an ability to contemplate change, particularly if it is incremental, in the center.<sup>3</sup> This will certainly generally speaking be the case: the periphery resistance was overwhelming, up to 100% in some municipalities, and the center acceptance considerable in the sense that those who were in favor of the European Community tended much more than average to have the characteristics just mentioned (they also tended to be male rather than female). Maybe at this point the reader should once more be reminded that here we are not just referring to standard public opinion surveys in social science research but to political decision-making: this was one of those rare cases where power was given to the people over concrete issues, not only to select issue-bundles, such as parties and presidents, who afterwards behave pretty much as they want, defining issues as they come along, hoping to get away with it before the next election. Here we are dealing with real politics and real democracy, an experiment which the Norwegian government probably prefers not to repeat in the foreseeable future.

However, there was much more than general periphery resistance and center willingness at work. The European Community, or Common Market as it was most commonly referred, to had its specificity, and that specificity has to be discussed, as indicated above, at the

personal, national and international levels.

Thus, at the personal level there was certainly the question of whether the concrete individual would gain or lose. The calculus was relatively clear, supported by the experience gained at that point in time with the European Community, with the documentation available. Broadly speaking it could be summarized as follows:

- The primary sector, agriculture, fisheries and extraction industries, felt that they were going to lose through membership. Norwegian agriculture was not seen as able to stand up against solid competition from the continent, having very little economy of scale, being based on rather small family holdings, particularly in the western and northern part of the country. Consequently the resistance from the farmers/peasants was rather massive, defending their position not in terms of economic rationality, but with slogans such as "farming is not a way of making money, but a way of life". This type of resistance was more pronounced among small farmers than for those with bigger farms, both because of the conservatism of the latter (rightly perceiving the European Community as essentially conservative), and because of the feeling that "I might be able to stand up, against competition". Correspondingly, among the fishermen the resistance was almost total, reflecting a feeling of Norwegian fisheries as vulnerable to competition from

the trawler fleets of other European countries, who would then start fishing right inside the Norwegian fjords, threatening the livelihood of the quite numerous fisher-farmers along the long coast of the country (constituting about 5% of the Norwegian population).

-- For the secondary sector of economic activity in the country the situation was a little more complicated. I think it makes sense to divide Norwegian industry in export oriented and industry for domestic consumption, and by and large conclude by saying that workers in the export-oriented industries tended to agree with their employers that membership in the European Community could be beneficial putting at the disposal all Norwegian industries a much larger market with no tariffs and very low non-tariff barriers to overcome. Smaller industries for domestic consumption had exactly the opposite perception and probably rightly so: they would be inundated and go under in competition with more powerful industries from the continent. Consequently, the working class in a more traditional sense, limiting it to the concept of the secondary sector only, was split on the issue, a split dividing the Norwegian Labor Party very neatly in two parts, one part being as much against as the other was in favor, a division that is still to some extent discernible in the party. This is not modern traditional or cosmopolitan vs local--rather its rational cost-benefit analysis leading to different conclusions.

-- For the tertiary sector of economic activity the picture was again mixed. Subdivisions would be needed and the distinction between domestic and export-oriented service industries would certainly tend to lead to the same conclusions as above. On the one hand there would be large scale shipping operations and others (but not oil, that came later, after the 1972 referendum) dreaming of larger markets for their services; and there would be that little enterprise, the small local bank or insurance company, for instance, afraid of continental competition. And the same could probably be said about the level of public administration: on the one hand a Norwegian foreign office only too eager to participate in the glories of the European Community, "eating cherries with the Big", entertaining at least the illusion of participating in great decisions; on the other hand the minor bureaucrat in a small municipality feeling that the autonomy he with considerable struggle was able to maintain relative to Oslo would be totally undermined by and from Brussels. And some of the same might apply to the intellectuals who at the universities were to a large extent against Norway's entry into the Common Market: they might feel that they possessed an expertise which was specific to Norway and would not only be undermined by foreign competition but also be made irrelevant and this would constitute damage not only to themselves but to the nation as a whole.

Summarizing these points, it is worth noting that the interest analysis at the more private level of farmers, fishermen and workers in small scale industries for local or at most domestic consumption, all of them located in the periphery of the country by the definition given above, would yield two reasons not to be in favor of the european community: periphery inertia and the conviction that they would be short shrifted by membership. This could be contrasted with the situation in Denmark where the farmers by and large were convinced that they would gain from membership by having larger markets without tariffs at their disposal, given both the quality, the price and the traditional reputation of Danish agricultural products. Thus, interest analysis would lead to another conclusion than conventional periphery inertia, thereby providing the momentum for a Danish majority in favor of entry. Some of the same might apply to Britain, although I am not sure that what has happened afterwards have proved those right who were of the opinion that British goods and services would now find a considerably expanded market.

At the next level, the national level, there was a relatively shared perception among Norwegians, but particularly among working class Norwegians, that the Norwegian welfare state would be threatened by entry into the European Community. Trade unions would be weakened, their negotiation rights undermined, and social security

in general would suffer. Much statistics were produced to show how the Norwegian welfare state by and large catered better to the citizens' needs than was the case in countries already members of the European Community--probably a correct perception at that time (but no longer necessarily the case, particularly not after some period of conservative rule in Norway). Needless to say this argument would further strengthen the conviction of the periphery that they should be against, giving them three good reasons--and at the same time weaken the conviction of the people in the center.

On top of this, then, comes the international level of discourse. To Norwegians, a very moralistic people with considerable capacity for solidarity with the oppressed and exploited around the world, words such as "peace" and "development" are taken very seriously. Was the European Community really a positive factor in the question of peace? In favor of development? Opinions on these questions were very divided, indeed. Perhaps one could make a distinction between those who were against the European Community because it was too big, and those who were against it because it was too small. Nobody would dispute the important argument that the European Community was a very successful formula for friendship between those traditional enemies, to some extent at the end of both the First and the Second World Wars, Germany on the one hand and France and later Britain on the other. But many people would then add: excellent, good for the continent.

In other words, those who felt the European Community to be too big would think in terms of the threat its bigness might constitute to the development of Norway,

and perhaps also to peaceful relationships between the big and the small inside a community. And those who felt the European Community was too small would argue in terms of Norwegian loyalty ~~to the~~ world in general, and the United Nations in particular, and see the European Community as a minor part of the total system, although highly ambitious and probably wanting to become a super power in its own right with which Norway should have nothing to do. The former being a periphery position, the latter certainly more of a cosmopolitan center position--the two positions not excluding each other one might say that at this level extreme nationalism or even localism on the one hand and internationalism or even globalism on the other hand became bed-fellows.

But what about the European Community funds for development of underprivileged districts, could that be applied to Norway? Maybe Norwegians did not feel that it would apply to Norway, the country not having major district problems of that kind. Maybe they also had an uneasy feeling of interference in internal affairs; at any rate the argument did not become a significant one. Much more significant was the diffuse feeling of a threat to Norway, some of it cast in the old catholic-protestant division of Norwegian protestants being invaded by catholics on the continent, as revealed by the fact that the major instrument behind the European Community was the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Important, to many.

So, Norwegians had reasons and not bad ones for voting against. The periphery was afraid that fundamental interests would be threatened whether they were working in the primary, secondary or

tertiary sectors; they saw membership as threatening the Norwegian welfare state and as invading our christian identity; they did not feel that Norway, "a small country without colonial traditions", belonged in the company of otherwise patent colonial powers. And, correspondingly: the center felt that they personally had much to gain, that social security was not meant for them anyhow and hence there was not much to lose,<sup>4</sup> and they had definitely no objections at all to whatever designs the bigger continental powers had, particularly if Norway could participate and pick up some of the spoils.

Conclusion: the referendum split the country down the middle, and the split is still with us. It paralyzed the Norwegian classe politique to the point that they even today, fourteen years after the referendum, do not dare raise the issue of the European Community. However, the issue is now to some extent, nevertheless, coming up from the left because the European Community is perceived as an antidote to United States in the field of foreign policy. It is seen as the only antidote there is, the only organism with sufficient strength to stand up against the giant across the Atlantic. Since the United States is seen as the major threat to peace and development around the world, the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" logic applies and former antagonists of the European Community suddenly become protagonists. The European Community is no longer seen as too small for world participation, nor as too big relative to Norway but as a counterweight to somebody badly in need of a brake sufficient to stave his hand.

But how all of this will develop in the future is difficult to say--with events certainly beyond Norwegian control. But it must be permitted to make some guesses.

Thus, I doubt very much that there will be many and important economic incentives available to members, states or citizens, of the European Community; economic growth being in East Asia rather than in Western Europe. Consequently, the European Community is likely to be judged by other criteria. And Norwegians, particularly the working class, will tend to use moral criteria from the field of international relations.

As mentioned, there is a demand for somebody strong in the West to stand up against the United States. Greece is admired under the present government. Small is heroic, not only beautiful, but may also be vulnerable. The problem, however, is what big EC could do in addition to standing up against the US, being more inclined to arrive at solutions with the Soviet Union (I then take it for granted that the 1986 "summit meeting" will be as unproductive as the one in 1985).

EC has been lukewarm on sanctions against the racist regime in South Africa, far below US Congress. EC, or rather Western European countries might serve as a setting for the emergence of Euro-nuclear forces through German, French or British, French cooperation, or other schemes. After an initial response that will be positive because it is interpreted as autonomy relative to the US there will be the agonizing realization that nothing has been solved, maybe even aggravated by putting nuclear antagonists closer to each other. Moreover, EC countries are as disinclined as the US to ask why there is

so much "terrorism", treating the phenomenon like some epidemic with "seek and destroy" attitudes instead of looking at roots and motivations.

In short, the foreign policy perspectives for the future may not all be that positive from the point of view of the more progressive parts of the working class.

But then there may, perhaps, also be other forces, so far not too visible, that might change the balance. Suffice it only to be said here that they should show up relatively soon, and be relatively strong, in order to have an impact on the situation of the European working classes sufficient for a political momentum to be created.

## NOTES

1. For one analysis of the European Community in the early seventies see Johan Galtung, The European Community: A Superpower in the Making, Allen & Unwin, London, 1973;-- also in Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Finnish, Dutch, and *German and* Argentinian editions.
2. For a general discussion of this type of analysis, see Johan Galtung, Essays in Peace Research, Vol. III Ejlers, Copenhagen, 1978, part I on Social Position Theory.
3. Not too much change, though--that would be more of a periphery outlook on social cosmology.
4. Actually, if the upper third in a welfare state pay more to social security than they receive there might even be something to gain if EC membership means lower tax rates.