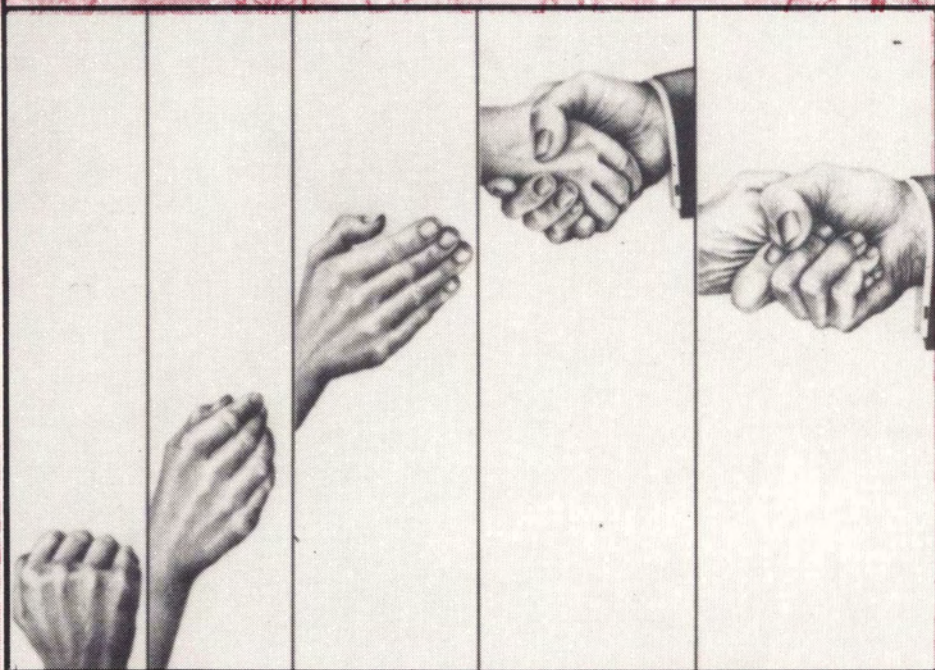


COMMON SENSE

Journal of Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists



- *A WORKERS' INQUIRY*
- *THE FLEXIBILIATION OF LABOUR & THE ATTACK ON LIVING STANDARDS*
- *STRUGGLE IN HIGH-TECH CAPITALISM*
- *REVIEWS: 'RACE REBELS' & 'ZAPATISTAS! DOCUMENTS OF THE NEW MEXICAN REVOLUTION'*

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No Politics Without Inquiry!

A Proposal for a Class Composition Inquiry Project 1996-7

Ed Emery

This article is a direct appeal for like-minded people to come together in a project of shared political work.

The idea is: to muster all available forces to work on a militant class-composition study project. This is to inform, and to be the basis of, possible future political organisation.

Prelude

A small group of friends. We celebrate Mayday each year. We look forward to the day when everyone makes May 1st a dayoff-work-day, to celebrate struggles past and present - to meet, to eat and drink, to sing and dance... [Incidentally, Mayday 1996 is a Wednesday. Don't just let it pass. Celebrate it.]

Mayday as a time for reflection. Look at the past. Plan for the future. So what happened this year?

Mayday 1995: Friends reported that the TGWU branch at the Ford-Dagenham Assembly Plant voted explicitly against taking the day off work on Mayday. For fear of being "in breach of contract". That is how things have changed.

Mayday 1995: A hundred thousand workers marched in Turkey to celebrate Mayday, despite the massive presence of armed Turkish police, who had killed people on previous marches. That is how things have changed.

Mayday 1995: For our part, we ran up the red flag in the back yard. We marched with the Turks and Kurds (as usual, just about the only people marching in London). A few friends round for supper in the evening. And we sang the old songs of struggle and resistance.

But absolutely, categorically not enough. Some of us feeling an urgency. A drive for a particular kind of work. A deepseated wanting. A need to know what is happening. Because something is stirring, all around.

Twenty years, perhaps, since class power was last winning. We've lived the years of defeat. Years of impotence. Years of anger. The rich getting richer and life's been shit for the rest of us. The foundations of working class power systematically destroyed. No doubt. We've been on the losing side.

But in some vaguely definable way, class power is on the move again. We're picking ourselves up out of the wreckage. And the question is: how do we regroup, gather strength, mobilise social forces for a project of winning rather than losing?

A Small Proposition

The old class forces have been taken apart. World-wide. "Decomposed". New class forces are emerging. New configurations. This is what we call a "new class composition". Nick Witheford offers definitions, and their history, elsewhere in this issue of Common Sense.

The new class composition is more or less a mystery to us (and to capital, and to itself) because it is still in the process of formation. Eternally in flux, of course, but periodically consolidating nodes of class power.

Before we can make politics, we have to understand that class composition. This requires us to study it. Analyse it. We do this through a process of inquiry. Hence: No Politics Without Inquiry.

The Proposition Stated in Other Terms

Relations between capital and labour have been radically restructured during the past two decades, in favour of capital. Labour is being recomposed into new circuits, cycles and patterns of production. A new class composition is being formed, world-wide. In time, this class composition will begin to assert its interests - in its own new circuits, cycles and patterns - of opposition, of struggle. At that point, mere technical class composition turns into political class composition. It becomes real power, political power.

The enemy constantly studies class composition in order to fracture it, break it, disperse it, permanently dissipate its strength. We, for our part, study class composition in order to strengthen it, consolidate it, turn it into a real basis of power.

The old compositions and their associated bastions of class power (miners, auto workers, dockers, steel workers etc) have been broken down. New class compositions (information industries, services etc) are being built up.

Before we can be active in building the class power of these new compositions, we have to know who they are, where they are, what are their conditions of work and life, and around what issues, slogans, struggles they will mobilise during the coming years.

And at the moment we know just about fuck-all.

So: an invitation to comrades far and wide to join in a process of INQUIRY.

The Conference of Socialist Economists as a Possible Base

After the 1994 Conference a group of us in the CSE set up a "Working Group on Work". Our interest has been in the changes taking place in work, and struggles arising from these developments. Similar work has developed previously in CSE.

For example, in the lead-up to the 1976 "Labour Process" conference. This analytical work was particularly strong around the motor industry, and led to useful organising activity in that industry.

CSE Conference provides one useful forum for mobilising these kinds of collective energies. There are people who could build a base for a serious project of class composition analysis. Each contributing some small part of the overall inquiry.

Thus part of my purpose is to propose a "class composition" theme for a future CSE Conference. Perhaps for 1996. Left to find a title for it, I would propose:

"Class composition: Studies of changing relations between capital and labour. Global restructuring and the rebuilding of class power."

We might all, each in our own way, undertake to make small contributions of insights, towards building a pool of knowledge in these areas.

Need for a Network of Research and Action

However, the project needs a far wider base.

I could pretend to speak for a group, an organisation, a world political perspective. I am none of these things. I speak merely for myself, and for the particular baggage of historical and political experience that I carry with me.

I am convinced that serious revolutionary politics is impossible without a committed, detailed, daily work of analysing and understanding class composition, in all its varied and changing forms. This work needs to be undertaken by large numbers of people, and its methods and results need to be coordinated by a process of regular bulletins and regular meetings. It is only lack of political imagination, a sense of defeatism, and basic human laziness that stand in the way of our doing it.

A Momentary Diversion: My Envy of the Scientists

In recent months I've been reading physics books. Atoms, particles, astronomy, cosmology, that sort of thing. A new wave of popularisation in science. Exhilarating to ride this wave. Huge and wonderful discoveries. Old ways of thought turned on their heads. A lot of nonsense thrown out of the window. The whole essence of "being human" is being challenged, redefined.

I watch these scientists working. They have teams of researchers. Networks of international contact and cooperation. Extraordinary machines for observation and analysis. Confidence and enthusiasm. Reaching out to audiences that are not familiar with their language. Creating new public languages. And in the process you find them celebrating and documenting the development of the intellectual history of their discipline.

I am deeply envious.

Once there used to be a "science of class struggle". After all, class struggle is as available to scientific analysis as any area of the physical world. But the science of class struggle got itself a very bad name when it transmuted into "scientific socialism" and Stalinism.

The science of class struggle never recovered from that. It had a brief and glorious resurgence in the Italian revolutionary Left, as *scienza operaia* ("working-class science"), but the prevailing anti-scientism of the post-1968 Left sank any notion that the class struggle could be approached scientifically.

I hold to that idea of a scientific approach.

Another Momentary Diversion: The Rhetoric of War

The miserable debacle of state socialism in the "communist" world has deprived us of great chunks of our language. Who are we? What are we? How do we describe ourselves? What is our politics?

Where do we choose the words with which to name our politics. Communism? Socialism? Revolution? Redistribution of wealth? Social reform? Working-class autonomy? Class war? There is a problem here. These names are all variously tainted by previous associations.

So at this time I prefer to give the project no name.

Except that I believe that we must see it in terms of war.

War is being waged on us. Class war. (Sometimes literally, by military means.) We would do well to respond in the language of war.

The rhetoric of earlier communist and anarchist movements always had a strong military flavour to it. But the notion of war is less than fashionable nowadays.

When I say "respond in the language of war", of course I don't mean rushing round killing people. I mean that we begin to speak (once again) the language of tactics, strategy, fields of battle, mobilising of forces, application of technologies, and a theory of war.

I find that the joining of these elements provides me with the bones of an operating system. On the one hand, a notion of a "science" of the class struggle. And on the other, a notion of the class struggle as a "war" within which we have a part to play. Plus, as a basic foundation, the conviction that if you're not part of the solution then you're part of the problem.

Moments of Crisis and Dislocation: No Politics Without Inquiry

You might object to the notion of a somehow "objective" science.

You might object to the notion of "war" and its associations of militarism.

You might object to the notion of disembodied intervention in the body politic.

You might say that the very notion of an "Inquiry" is a nonsense without a prior questioning of the self-stance of the "Inquirer".

I agree. All these notions are deeply problematic.

In answer to the objections, I say let us take these notions and problematise them. Frankly. Enthusiastically. Without fear. Then see where we go from there.

So this article proposes an Inquiry, in the hopes of generating small amounts of discussion, and perhaps also generating practical activity.

To this end, we might look briefly at earlier instances of the Inquiry, to see whether they offer insights regarding method, content, ways of approaching knowledge etc.

A note, here. We are not starting from a basis of nothing at all. Even a minimal glance at the literature makes it clear that the Inquiry has a strong and substantive intellectual pedigree.

For example: Marx... Lenin... Luxemburg... Mao... Not to mention the US

National Commission on Civil Disorders (1968).

Over the years I have done amounts of work on class composition analysis. Some of this work has appeared in *Common Sense* [Sergio Bologna on "The Historiography of the Mass Worker" in CS 11 and 12, and his work on "Nazism and the Working Class", CS 16]. During this period books and pamphlets have accumulated on my shelves.

During the years of defeat my view of my books and pamphlets has oscillated (daily) between seeing them as a precious historical resource for the furtherance of struggle, and as useless mounds of paper taking up space.

Anyway, in preparing this article I went fishing in my library. I pulled down volumes fat and thin. Dusted them off. To see what they had to offer, as regards class composition analysis and the possibilities of a new communist project.

What I found was that, at each major point of crisis and dislocation in the development of capitalist society, various kinds of people have instituted mass social inquiries. Their intention has been to document and research the attitudes and conditions of life of the oppressed masses. As a political project.

Studies that ranged from Chinese peasants labouring under feudal despotism to the Black proletariat of the racist ghettos of Newark and Detroit. Studies of various kinds. London housewives. FIAT car workers. The shifting masses of migrant labour toiling across whole continents. The collective flux of intellectual labour energies concentrated on the Internet.

In short, at certain points in history people have felt the urge to ask: Who are we? What is happening? How have things changed? Hence the Inquiry.

It is generally at points of fracture, crisis, restructuring, dislocation of capitalist development etc that these Inquiries come about. And the Inquiries see themselves as a prelude, a precursor and a precondition of politics.

We are living such a period right now. And the need for an Inquiry is urgent. It is not an optional extra. It is fundamental. In short: No Politics Without Inquiry.

Contained Excitement

I offer below a small list of some of the material I found on my shelves. The list is not comprehensive. It is indicative. It indicates the kinds of treasures that are in store when one begins researching previous exemplars of the Inquiry. Source materials for a science of class struggle. Method. Content. Theoretical framework. Epistemological basis.

The class struggle Inquiry is a scientific discipline unto itself. Related to other disciplines, but with a peculiar fire all its own. Extraordinarily exciting. Ill-considered trifles, a marginal field of human knowledge, lost and buried chapters from forgotten books, but at the same time the very basis of a political project. An incitement to action.

It would be good to produce an annotated bibliography of the Inquiry, together with a commentary on its intellectual history. The antecedents, the past practices, reflecting on future possibilities. Given time and energy, I might do this during the coming year. For the moment I shall contain the excitement sparked by these texts. I offer a few bits and pieces from examples of the Inquiry as conducted in the past 150 years. Very brief.

Some Previous Examples of "THE INQUIRY"

The Inquiry has its own typology. It has varieties of genres, varieties of intention. Some are produced by the state. Others are produced by political organisations, by way of external intervention. Others are produced from within the ranks of organised labour. Yet others are the product of people's observation of their own condition. Earlier examples include:

Karl Marx: The Workers' Inquiry

In the later years of his life, Marx prepared a comprehensive questionnaire designed to elicit the conditions of life and work of the labouring classes. [It was republished in Detroit in the early 1970s, with a view to promoting this kind of militant research in the auto industry. And again, only last year, in Italy.] Here Marx outlines the project:

"Not a single government... has yet ventured to undertake a serious inquiry into the position of the French working class. But what a number of investigations have been undertaken into crises - agricultural, financial, industrial, commercial, political!

"We (shall organise) a far-reaching investigation into facts and crimes of capitalist exploitation; we shall attempt to initiate an inquiry of this kind with those poor resources which are now at our disposal.

"We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviours sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies from the social ills to which they are a prey.

"We also rely upon socialists of all schools who, being wishful for social reform, must wish for an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class - the class to whom the future belongs - works and moves." (Marx 1973, p. 4)

Inevitably this brings to mind the fifteen pages at the start of *The Communist Manifesto* that provide the classic statement of the class-composition analysis ("Bourgeois and Proletarians") that led into the organising project of communism:

"The essential condition for the existence and for the sway of the bourgeois class is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage labour. Wage labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore

produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."

And, in among all this, we also have to consider Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, the precursor of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1902) and Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861). Not to mention, in our own time, Gareth Stedman Jones' *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Classes in Victorian Society* (1971).

Lenin and Luxemburg

Lenin. *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1898). A huge work - the bibliography alone runs to some 500 titles, begged, borrowed and perused both in prison and on the road into exile. Three years of work to provide the analytical grounding of the Bolshevik project. Detailed work on the composition of the labouring classes in Russia. And the potential for politics: "The increase in the number of peasants thrown into the ranks of the industrial and rural proletariat... The population of this 'corner' - ie the proletariat, is, in the literal sense of the word, the vanguard of the whole mass of toilers and exploited."

Rosa Luxemburg. *The Mass Strike, the Party and the Trade Unions*. Rosa, released from prison and recuperating in Finland. Extending the analysis of the proletariat and its real movements and interests. "We have attempted... to sketch the history of the mass strike in Russia in a few strokes. Even a fleeting glance at this history shows us a picture... Instead of the rigid and hollow scheme of an arid political action carried out by the decision of the highest committees and furnished with a plan and panorama, we see a bit of pulsating life of flesh and blood, which cannot be cut out of the large frame of the revolution but is connected with all parts of the revolution by a thousand veins." (Luxemburg 1970, p. 43)

US Riot Commission Report

An example of a state-sponsored class composition analysis. In 1967, in the wake of the riots in Newark, Detroit and other cities, President Johnson instituted a commission of social inquiry, whose report was published under the title "What Happened? Why Did It Happen? What Can Be Done?" This documented in large detail the experience of the Black proletariat living in the urban ghettos. A comprehensive analysis of the newly-formed class composition that had rioted in the streets. A state initiative. Framed in a rhetoric of social reform and repressive control. Over 600 pages, in the popular edition.

Its Introduction reads: "...An extraordinary document. We are not likely to get a better view of socially directed violence - what underlies it, what sets it off, how it runs its course, what follows. There are novels here, hidden in the Commission's understated prose; there are a thousand doctoral theses germinating in its statistics, its interviews, its anecdotes and 'profiles'." The report represents a beginning "on a task that beggars any other planned social evolution known to human history". (National Advisory Commission 1978, p. ix)

[From our side, the Report had its counterpart in the seminal *Regulating the*

