



## A workers' inquiry or an inquiry of workers?

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### abstract

This article considers the issue of workers' inquiry in light of the qualities and features of working class scholarship within the mass labour movements of the early twentieth century. A clear analysis of the conditions that have shaped and changed the role of socialist intellectuals reveals the weaknesses of existing academic radicalism, and the diminished capacity of radical research to cultivate cultures of class consciousness and solidarity. The ethics and practices that defined the educational and research activities of traditional worker-intellectuals provides the outline of an alternative model of scholarship in the form of a reflective community of worker-organisers. Such a community could prove both a useful resource for the initiation of workers' inquiry as well as a potential source of Left renewal.

### Introduction

In Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx quotes with approval the account of a French workman, returning from San Francisco, who passed through almost every trade that was made available to him. The workman commented that he had changed his occupation 'as often as his shirt' becoming in a short time a miner, typographer, slater, plumber amongst other jobs. Following this experience, and to Marx's interest, he was surprised to find that he was 'fit for any sort of work' and as a result felt, 'less of a mollusc and more of a man' (Marx, 1867: 534). It appears strange that Marx should comment so favourably on the precarious nature of the workman's life. Yet in spite the indignities of constantly searching for new work there was clearly something valuable in the pursuit of such a varied life. The way the worker had come to appreciate the diverse capacity of their own

powers struck Marx as a richer, and perhaps more human, experience. It was a small glimmer of socialism buried beneath the proletarian experience.

The implications of Marx's, admittedly rather cursory, example are a little nebulous. The experience, however, was an important one not only for migrant workers of this period but also socialist organisers and activists. Lacking the support and stability enjoyed by academics today, worker intellectuals necessarily had to adopt an integrated approach to work, scholarship and organisational concerns. Circumstances demanded that they be intellectuals, researchers, writers, orators, organisers and activists all rolled into one. The same conditions drove the creation of self-sufficient sources of working class support and solidarity which were to play an instrumental role in cultivating the growth of mass movements. The labour organisations of this period are characterised by the growth of a distinct, proletarian counter-culture that worked to cement socialist principles in communities and workplaces as well as acting as an independent sphere of debate, social criticism and research.

The decline of mass movements and increasingly comprehensive access to both basic and higher education has meant the gradual eclipse of this form of socialist scholarship. The activity and attitudes of worker-organisers of this period, however, still offer a distinct model of worker-led research, or 'workers' inquiry', worthy of re-consideration. Such practices not only present an alternative to a reliance on professional research expertise but also address the limitations of academic radicalism in light of current challenges for the Left. Rising levels of education and better access to information has diminished the value of academic expertise as a tool for political mobilisation. Workers are increasingly both educated and politically literate. Meanwhile cultures of working class solidarity have continued to decline. Collaborative inquiries conducted by a community of worker-organisers present a potential tool in the development of the expertise necessary to re-build working class power. Historically where such communities have existed they have played an empowering role enriching both the organisational and intellectual capacity of working class movements. There is a compelling case for individuals who share socialist goals to cultivate such communities as a potential source of Left renewal.

### **Critical research: A brief overview**

The decline of mass, socialist movements across the West has meant that voices from inside the academy have increasingly become core intellectual representatives of the contemporary Left. Historically this is a break from a tradition in which contact with the ideas, debates and discoveries of the workers'

movement were largely delivered via the oration, pamphlets and newspapers of socialist organisations and their worker activists, most of whom were self-educated. Tom Mann, 'Big Bill' Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were the Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri of their day. This transformation of the socialist intellectual from an organic, activist to a formal, professional figure has been a slow process following changes to the university and its social role. Improved access for those of lower economic status and a rising tolerance of critical research practices have allowed academics to offer public support, social criticism and pursue the production of new knowledge in the service of struggles for social justice. This gradual professionalisation of socialist scholarship has had implications for the way intellectuals relate to both political organisations within the tradition and the wider working class. It has, in particular, driven changes in critical research as academics have attempted to systematise a new form of connection between the paid researcher, the class and communities of struggle.

The first 'wave' of socialist intellectuals to emerge from the academy followed the rolling out of social welfare systems across the West in the post-war period. This was at a time when orthodox Marxism was the hegemonic doctrine of the global communist movement. As a result the relationship of most intellectuals, professional or otherwise, to both these organisations and the workers' movements was expressed in terms of their role as representatives of Soviet ideology. Practically, the stigma associated with being an outwardly revolutionary, public figure meant a strong dependence on communist parties, also tied to Moscow, as a resource to support collaboration and study in an otherwise hostile academy. As this hostility eased, however, the academy increasingly presented an alternative resource for intellectual work and space free from the requirement to operate within party discipline.

The result was a growing political distance for a new wave of Marxist and radical intellectuals from the ideologies of the established communist organisations. Events such as the Hungarian revolution of 1956 are frequently cited as a watershed moment for the various heterodox intellectual projects of this period. The violent crushing of the workers' councils by Soviet troops alienated many Western Marxists and provoked a deeper questioning of established party wisdom. But a break with the old ideas was also prepared by a growing consensus that orthodox methods were failing to serve as a useful tool for research and study. The rationale that drove groups such as the British Communist Party Historians and the Italian "workerists" over this time was an awareness of a working class distanced from socialist ideas and increasingly dominated by the ideologies and practices of mass consumerism. To these particular problems the rigid and economistic theories of orthodox Marxists

offered few solutions. Neither did they have much to say of the emerging struggles around gender, sexuality, race and the environment.

The challenges, however, went beyond simply shedding the stale and increasingly redundant orthodoxies. A post-war system of European states broadly orientated towards social partnership and welfare provision fundamentally changed the political terrain in which socialists operated. Revolutionary unions and socialist organisations entered a period of sharp decline – a tendency that has not really halted - compared to the levels of mass participation of the early twentieth century. The independent educational institutions that were a feature of these movements disappeared with them leaving a decreased capacity for a socialist culture within working class communities. Where left parties and unions retained large memberships they were broadly integrated into the political establishment abandoning commitments to revolutionary social change. The traditional model of the self-educated, worker-intellectual of the old trade union and socialist organisations was made redundant by comprehensive access to education through social welfare. Radical thought found its home within a more accepting academy, but the scope for putting these ideas into practice was limited by an increasingly conservative working class and a shrinking worker's movement, both in its size and also in terms of its capacity to develop organisers and activists within working class communities.

Access to new, socially-orientated research methodologies within political science, history and sociology presented to academics a means of tackling these challenges. Critical research offered opportunities to reconnect intellectual activity with the lives of working people as well as a potential tool for rebuilding the foundations of socialist consciousness that had declined with the mass movements. LeFort's article 'Proletarian Experience' and the work of his group *Socialisme ou barbarie* outlines most clearly the theory underlying this new method. He and his group noted the appearance of a new 'worker sociology' within the academy that had increasingly concentrated on 'social relations within production and...their practical intentions'. He saw the appropriation of this method, and its application in the form of critical research, as a means of augmenting and improving the theoretical framework of Marx in a way that sought to reveal valuable insights to workers. The desired outcome was that the researcher and the participant could re-assert the need for social change and together chart out paths for political action. Marx's 101 questions submitted to *Revue Socialiste* in 1880 concerning the conditions of work and the organisation of industry in France were held as an important prototype of such a 'workers' inquiry'.

In contemporary terms the declining influence of Marxism has meant that many of the motivations that sparked interest in workers' inquiry are much less attractive to contemporary academics. Instead there exists a loose, international community of radical scholars working with a broad interest in social justice and using a range of methods developed from the same base of socially-orientated research. Further changes in the university structure have meant that the interests of critical researchers have in some cases been institutionalised as new fields of study, for example in the case of social movement theories. That is not to say that these have altogether lost a radical agenda, a continuing focus has been on challenging hierarchies within knowledge production, ensuring greater representation of minority groups and attempting to match scholarly demands with a desire for social action. Such a search has, at points, re-sparked interest in the original conception of workers' inquiry. This is a model which undoubtedly remains appealing because, in spite of the many efforts to democratise and make research more participatory on the part of radical researchers, an essential 'structural separateness' between academics and workers remains (Wright, 2002: 24).

The starting point for most scholars concerned with this issue is to attempt to unpack the particular identities and relations of power that exist within knowledge production. It is assumed the frequent failure of radical research to galvanise political action is because research methods are not sufficiently liberating or fail to live up to egalitarian principles. Consideration has not been given to what can be learnt from the practice of socialist intellectuals before this developed into a largely professional role. From a period in which research, study and education were conducted in the mass, labour movements and socialist organisations active within them. The practice of self-educated, worker-organisers during this phase of the workers' movement reveals an entirely different approach to the production of critical knowledge. Worker-organisers not only operated independent from, what they considered to be, the bourgeois education institutions of the time but also adopted a much more integrated perspective on research, study, working-life and activism. Understanding the conditions that gave rise to these practices and the ethics which motivated them not only offers a new perspective on critical research but points to a wholly distinct model of radical intellectual activity.

### **Education, research and social change**

It is not possible to talk about research within the workers' movement in the same sense that it exists in the world of professional study. The publication of periodicals, debates, studies and research experiences were an organic and

integrated part of much wider practices involving a cross-section of activists, organisers and rank-and-file members. Pedagogy, debate, study and research practically co-existed within the educational activities of most labour organisations and as a result it is best to characterise the practice of research as an interconnected activity within the provision of socialist education. There was, of course, a lack of infrastructural support for the kind of specialist training required of professional researchers. However, as I argue below, such an integrated approach was not only a practical concern but also built from a natural understanding of the limitations of research alone as a tool for political mobilisation. That is not to understate the importance of both education and research. Worker-run educational institutions were an important means of overcoming barriers to access to even basic levels of education throughout this period. Research, likewise, could arm organisers with the strategic knowledge to concentrate their efforts and provide a clearer understanding of their constituencies. That such barriers no longer exist for the overwhelming majority of Western workers is an important discontinuity between the material conditions facing socialist intellectuals in the early twentieth century and today. The fact that radical academics, while not sharing the organisational experience of traditional socialist intellectuals, rationalise their activity as a method of specialist intervention is an important point for reflection in a period where access to education and information has never been easier while working class organisational capacity is in decline.

That the development of an independent, socialist base of knowledge should be identified as a priority from the birth of the workers' movement is not surprising. Early agitators understood that ignorance allowed capitalists to promote their own values, sew divisions and antagonisms and obscure the exploitative nature of the class system – what Gramsci outlined as the power of bourgeois hegemony and the utility of 'common sense'. An example of the importance of this issue as a strategic concern for early organisers is illustrated by the question raised by Bakunin to the readers of *L'Égalité*:

Will it be feasible for the working masses to know complete emancipation as long as the education available to those masses continues to be inferior to that bestowed upon the bourgeois, or, in more general terms, as long as there exists any class, be it numerous or otherwise, which, by virtue of birth, is entitled to a superior education and a more complete instruction? (Bakunin, 1869)

His subsequent demand for 'complete and integral education' on behalf of the socialist organisations fits within a strong tradition within the working class movement. The Paris Commune had as its first act the establishment of an educational commission to provide all children with such an integral education. These proposals were no doubt heavily sponsored by the Proudhonists who

would have been inspired by Proudhon's belief that in the future society, 'the industrial worker, the men of action, and the intellectual will be rolled into one' (Edwards, 1969: 87). The need for a working class system of education likewise featured strongly in the thought and activities of Marx and was established as a central plank of consciousness-raising activity for the International Workingmen's Association. Of the three stars that composed the famous globe of the Industrial Workers of the World – claiming an estimated 40,000 workers in the US at its peak – two were devoted to the principle of schooling the workforce in socialist methods: agitation and education. Within the mass movements of the early twentieth century this tradition flowered into an increasingly global spread of worker-led, counter-culture in the form of libraries, social centres, modern schools, 'anarchist' Sunday schools, educational and cultural associations, publishing houses and print shops. Such initiatives not only sought to subvert the control of information by the capitalist class but challenge more fundamental representations of the individual's role within society. As long as the production and circulation of commodities was presented as the only natural and legitimate state of affairs the real, creative powers that lay behind the human economy would remain buried in social thought. Even the critical social sciences would be squeezed within the limits of the need to, at all times, reproduce value.

For Marx, Bakunin and others this was the essential value of historical materialism, a method of study that cut through these false representations and highlighted the social forces that determined the organisation of societies. It challenged the supposedly natural qualities of the existing order by establishing both the class interests behind them and their changing, historical character. It is also possible to see from the same line of reasoning how a critical appropriation of the research methods of social science, putting them at the service of workers needs over capital, later appeared as such a natural tool of intervention for radical academics. If the basis of social conformity was in an acceptance of the appearance of capitalist relations, outlining the essential relationships that existed underneath would seem to provide the first step towards acting against them. In many ways perhaps even a prerequisite of the development of any socialist consciousness. As Mattick, Jr. (1986: 115-6) succinctly puts it:

Those who wish to control their social (or their natural) conditions of life need to understand the situations in which they find themselves and the possible choices of action within these situations.

Yet while the representation of 'society' can act as a constraint that denies certain forms of action it is equally important to note that such a representation is simultaneously a reflection of real mechanisms of discipline and control within class society. Before the rise of the bourgeois class in Europe is a particularly

bloody history of primitive accumulation that violently removed the peasantry from access to common land and property and forcefully integrated them into the capitalist market. The manipulation of wage rates, the industrial reserve army, technological advancement, the movement of industry and the repressive forces of the state likewise form an arsenal at the disposal of the capitalist class to ensure the discipline of the workforce and the maintenance of the class system. The relationship at the heart of capitalist system is defined at root not by adherence to specific ideas but of particular relations of ownership. The means of production are at the disposal of social and political elites giving them control of the reproduction of economic life and compelling the rest of society to enter into wage relationships to ensure their survival.

Knowledge alone of these things, no matter how sophisticated, does not change the essential relationship between workers and capitalists nor does it affect the mechanisms by which the market ensures that value continues to be produced via institutional systems of violence and control. The overcoming of these conditions, therefore, is not a question of undermining the dominant representation of society – addressing questions concerning knowledge and knowledge production – but those related to the organisation of social forces within capitalism. As Mészáros (1970) argues, if one realises that the ultimate grounds for the persistence of alienation in the history of ideas lies in the ‘nature of capital’ it becomes only possible, ‘to envisage a transcendence (*aufhebung*) of alienation, provided that one is formulated as a radical...transformation of the social structure as a whole’.

This is the misplaced nature of a model of critical research that concerns itself primarily with hierarchies of knowledge and systems of knowledge production. Ideas certainly do play a role in ordering and structuring social relations to capitalist norms. But the fact that individuals in capitalist society ‘relate to each other as “social representatives” of different factors of production’ (Rubin, 1928: 21) is not solely the outcome of, even socially conditioned, attitudes. Even the most radically minded worker is still compelled to participate in a system of exploitative material exchanges as a result of the economic constraints forced upon them. Moreover as capitalism has advanced it has become increasingly sophisticated at adapting to social and cultural challenges to elite power while preserving the essential exploitative relationships that continue to produce value. In contemporary terms, as Foucault (1978: 353) notes, ‘a condition of governing well is that freedom, or certain forms of freedom, are really respected’.

On this particular issue, from his early to his more mature writings, Marx was absolutely consistent. The problems faced by the workers will not be resolved by even the most incisive analysis but only by the direct, social organisation of



labour. Marx would have considered Marxism ultimately subordinate to the more pressing issue of the need for the amalgamation of labour and the organisation of its co-operation and defence. In his words, 'The philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it' (Marx, 1845).

Interconnectivity and better access to education makes this basic standpoint ever more important. If intellectual intervention did play at least a part in the success of the early labour movement it is an increasingly redundant practice in an information age. For many of the key figures of the early socialist movement the organisation of labour *was* fundamentally an intellectual question. The avant-garde had as its responsibility to *both* educate and organise the workers teaching them of their 'historic responsibility' and evaluating strategic points for intervention. Such a vision was framed not only by the ideologies but the social conditions of the late eighteenth and early twentieth century. Around 1900 many parts of Europe achieved mass literacy, it is now the case that over 99% of European populations can read and write to a basic level. Scientific training is also far more accessible in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the UK it is estimated that 45% of the male adult workforce and 55% of the female will enter further education and leave with a degree (Coughlan, 2013). In some European states the figure is much higher. Many will be taught radical ideas and research methodologies as a result of this training. Can the obstacles facing an almost wholly literate, educated and increasingly networked workforce be characterised as 'ignorance' in the same manner that Bakunin did in the middle of the nineteenth century? Of the challenges that a young, European worker may identify as facing them in their current working life they may talk of powerlessness, poor pay, of inability to find stable work, environmental degradation, racism and discrimination, erosion of social security and perhaps even a lack of community. It is unlikely that education, or at least inability to access information, would feature strongly amongst their concerns. The powerlessness of workers in the face of the latest assault on living and working conditions derive centrally from changes in the economic landscape – from opportunities opened up to elites by an increasingly global chain of production and the continuing collapse of organised labour. The retreat of socialist ideas is certainly an outcome of this broader assault but it would be wrong to talk of this as a primary force behind these changes.

What does research and a critical research agenda have to offer within this context? It has to be acknowledged that research itself involves separate and different objectives from the immediate realities of working life. An increasingly stratified workforce and a largely dislocated sense of working class identity bring into question the representativeness of any particular worker's voice. The novelty and influence of inquiry-based publications like 'The American worker' were that

they brought worker experiences to a space in which these had largely been marginalised. Today social media provides a platform for speaking and sharing the experiences of work across sectors and geographical barriers in ways far more networked, de-centred and organic than academic practices of research, editorship and publication. The space and potential for sharing working class perspectives, where internet access is available, is in theory effectively limitless. In these circumstances it is possible to argue that the particular specialist training of a social scientist may be able to bring a systematisation of these ideas that a less sophisticated practitioner may lack. Even so, what does this really offer participants, even in the most activist orientated models of research inquiry, other than an alternative narration of the largely fixed circumstances that they continue to find themselves in?

### **A reflective community of worker-organisers**

Challenging the value of academic-led, critical research is not to deny the worth of expertise or specialised study. As Bakunin argued, 'in the matter of boots' it is often necessary to 'defer to the boot maker'. Rather the issue that is being highlighted is what *particular* expertise is capable of making a critical impact within movements for social change at this point and whether such expertise can or should be reduced to a range of research methodologies or inquiry interventions on the part of academics. Neither is this an issue of the place of intellectuals and intellectual activity in relation to the workers' movement. There exists a popular myth of a gulf between the supposed everyday concerns of working folk and allegedly abstract and self-indulgent concerns of intellectuals. This is crude at best. It is also particularly unrepresentative in respect to the best practitioners within the socialist tradition. For many of the key figures of the mass, labour movements the role of thinker, organiser and worker were practically inseparable. There are many possible examples to draw from but a particularly illustrative history is provided by the life and experiences of the writer and organiser Paul Mattick, Snr.

A Spartacist at the age of fourteen Mattick, Snr. received his political education through the communist circles and workers' councils that arose during the German revolution. Most of Mattick's life in Germany was spent working in factories and later as a toolmaker where he carried out organisational and agitational work for the left communist groups. In the 1920s he moved to the US and joined the Industrial Workers of the World attempting to unite the various German radical circles operating in Chicago. He wrote and researched throughout this period maintaining correspondence with many intellectuals and authors. He published on varying issues including Bolshevism, political economy

and organisational methods, providing a particularly sophisticated analysis of Marxist theories of crisis. This was alongside making his living as an industrial worker, family life and devoting time to the organisation of worker solidarity and support for the unemployed. In an illustrative example of the integrated nature of his political and intellectual interests he describes the activities of his immediate circle during the height of the Great Depression:

There were many acts of spontaneous solidarity. Our group often organised dinners. We cooked collectively in vacant stores, often having appropriated the food without paying for it, and then we gave it away to the unemployed. At night, strangely enough, we continued with our 'Capital' study groups. During the year when I was teaching one of the courses the number of students rose from 80 to 120. (Quoted in Pozzoli, 1976)

This practice of organisational concerns existing alongside theory, research and education is characteristic of the working class organisations of the period.

One of the most longstanding initiatives of this type, the Work Peoples' College in Duluth, Minnesota – founded by the Finnish Socialist Federation in 1907 and later heavily used by organisers of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) - offered a mixed curriculum of skills that would be useful to organisers and workers in industry (such as public speaking, mathematics and literacy) alongside more intellectual concerns (including economics, history and philosophy). In both cases the stated aims were to equip students with the skills so that they could, 'carry on an organised class struggle for the attainment of industrial demands, and realistically a new social order' (WPC, 1923). Altenbaugh (1989), for example, highlights the utilitarian qualities of public speaking courses where the lesson was designed as a role-play of picket line oration. As well as improving the union's intellectual and organisational capacity the college clearly also played an emotional role in investing students in union culture, as Ollila (1977: 106) notes, the most important learning which took place could be described as 'experiential' in the sense of emotional commitment, comradeship, and a faith that 'the world would soon be ours'.

Certain topics on the College curriculum – those relating to worker experience, labour history, 'industrial geography' – clearly stem from the same priorities that later motivated academic interest in worker inquiry. The schools intake of largely industrial and agricultural workers, as well as the open and co-operative pedagogy practiced, would have made students well placed to reflect and further research on these issues.

The above approaches built from the understanding that effective organisers were not just developed theoreticians and social scientists but drew from a range

of critical and practical skills in order to refine their organisational activities. The issue of working class research and intellectual intervention was holistic in this sense, wrapped into the broader responsibilities of a worker-organiser and their commitment to self-education. Underpinning the philosophy of the College curriculum was the understanding that social change involves building a confidence and capacity to organise, not just clarity of understanding of the workings of the capitalist system or an intellectual orientation towards revolutionary ideas and sentiments.

Programmes of political schooling, like those of the Work Peoples' College, are tied to a specific phase of the workers' movement and, in the case of Mattick particularly, a European communist movement that placed high value on theoretical education and debate amongst party sections. He, like many other intellectuals of his generation, joined academic life in the 1970s with the increasingly radical orientation of university campuses providing opportunities to work and lecture in both Denmark and Mexico towards the end of his life. From a contemporary standpoint it makes little sense to argue the case for initiatives that were born from the specific cultures and conditions facing these mass movements. The more relevant question is as to what lessons can be drawn from this more integrated approach to education, research and political activity in light of the challenges of present circumstances?

Within the Left too often questions of organisation have been straight jacketed into questions concerning revolutionary leadership, the avant-garde and the relationship of political parties to mass movements. These are reference points that are not only increasingly anachronistic in our present political and economic context but lack utility when concerning more pressing concerns of declining class solidarity within workplaces and across communities. A distinction needs to be drawn between these theoretical concerns and the development of a practically-orientated, effective organising method. The value of the above approaches is in terms of the model that they offer to practitioners in search of such an organising method. A reflective community of worker-organisers who involve themselves in the day-to-day issues of workplaces and communities, seek to reflect and share their common challenges and concerns and as a result develop systematic methods for improving their activity has the potential to revitalise a Left, particularly in the English-speaking world, that has lost connection with its basic constituency. An integration of both intellectual and practical concerns could take the form of a kind of self-inquiry initiated by organisers seeking to develop best practice and sharing with others common issues and concerns across industries and geographical areas. The focus of such rounds of self-inquiry would not be exclusively to produce or spread dissident knowledge

but aid in the refinement of practical-operational concerns that feed back into organiser practice.

In the early twentieth century worker-organisers relied on the infrastructural support of union branches, education centres and *déclassé* intellectuals as well as access to municipal services such as public libraries and archives to aid them in the development of their method. The technology available to us now means that the previous support offered by mass movements has the potential to be replaced by the networking and information-sharing powers of the internet, increasingly open access to academic literature and book piracy. That's not to say that the relevant skills and knowledge-base can be developed on an entirely independent basis, as is implied in the above passage the model is based upon a supportive and reflective community of worker-organisers. Rather it is to note that the resources for developing such a community in the changing environment of knowledge acquisition, storage and production could be as limited as access to a networked computer and a printer.

Inquiry interests may well cover many of the common questions raised through the traditional workers' inquiry – what are the common perceptions and experiences of workers? How do these manifest across industries and sectors? Where do workers find they have most and least economic power? The consequence of an increasingly private and service-orientated job market in central economies is similarly likely to feature heavily in any organisational experience. The way that these investigations could be structured means potentially going beyond the limits of the relationship of a researcher to research subject and the fixed, temporal qualities of an inquiry. Extended practice would also allow for a degree of practical experimentation as well as tackling the psychological challenges associated with organising, issues that are very hard to capture through a more traditional research intervention. Such an independent body of knowledge could prove invaluable for a generation of social justice activists and labour organisers who are finding that increasingly the existing models – the centralised and bureaucratic institutions of the old Left as much as the campaign-orientated, networked activism of the turn of this century – are failing to provide substantial guidance in the face of austerity.

The traditional models of worker education offered their participants a means of practical improvement, intellectual challenge, friendship, solidarity and a vibrant organisational culture. Where successful these initiatives were also integrated and stable components of broader communities. While many workers can now access a better quality of education through public institutions – although many of these are now increasingly under attack – the capacity for building solidarity and mutual support that an engaged community of worker-organisers could offer

has the potential to act as an important motor of Left renewal. Workers everywhere are facing an assault on their working conditions, what they lack is not necessarily an understanding of their own situation but a confidence and the support to challenge their circumstances.

### **Final remarks: theory and practice**

'Ignorance never yet helped anybody!' was the irritated response of Marx in 1846 to the accusation of the German communist Weitling that he and Engels concerned themselves with obscure matters of no interest to workers (quoted in McLellan, 1973: 157). What then of the status of theory in respect to the kind of practices outlined above? Is abstract thinking a distraction from the more pressing and practical intellectual concerns that arise from organising?

Marx argued that theory was an essential component of the development of the communist movement. But too often this position has been confused with a more traditional claim of the social sciences that by virtue of method and training it is possible to access, generalisations applying across cultures, yielding knowledge fundamentally different from that possessed by cultural insiders (Mattick, Jr., 1986: 36). In other words, social scientists are able to generate questions and insight that participants, by virtue of their status as insiders, will lack. Undoubtedly there are aspects of Marx's writings that run close to this idea. He was motivated by the belief that an understanding of the inner workings of capitalism would produce a more systematic understanding of the possibilities and limits of political action as well as informing a more constructive communist programme, hence his period of intensive study in the British Library. He also felt that engaging in more systematic and scientific study would yield insights that a worker simply experiencing capitalism could not. The significance that the role of intellectuals and the party programme played within much of the Marxist tradition from the Second International onwards can be attributed to this basic outlook.

Yet within his theoretical writings the value of his method is far beyond that of a particular standpoint as a social scientist. Theory is favoured as an approach because certain lines of inquiry are so systemic they require a level of abstraction to yield appropriate results. The empiricism of social research is inadequate for the kind of deep, social logics that Marx wishes to understand. Undoubtedly history does play a prominent role in Marx's study, but it is poorly characterised as an approach that searches for generalisations on the basis of a survey in the vein of a traditional social scientist. Rather the novelty of his method was in adopting a very specific approach that did not look at individuals or social groups

but considered first the totality of social relations in which these things were situated. The categories of 'Capital' are not drawn from points of contrast or the observation of social or historical generalities but through seeing society first only in its operation. Only at this abstract level was it possible to grasp those essential qualities – class, labour, value and production – that structure its specific, historical features. Just as the 'apparent motions of the heavenly bodies' were 'intelligible only to someone who is acquainted with their real motions' (Marx, 1867: 433) so it was necessary to see through the immediate appearances of capitalism and grasp the essential relations that structured it across time.

What then of the status of this knowledge in relation to the kind of practices discussed above? Behind much of the early interest in the adaptation of Marx's original workers' inquiry was a perception that abstract categories drawn from Marx's works had been changed into iron and immutable laws. As a result they had lost their relevance as a useful framework for study and research. Inquiry was, in this sense, seen as a remedy to these static categories developing ideas that were relatable to workplace experiences and highlighted working class initiative. Looking to Marx's own method suggests that the issue is not necessarily the abstract nature of the thinking but how and to what purpose it is applied. Marx shifted between different levels of analysis throughout his lifetime adapting it to varying contexts. Extensive philosophical works exist alongside speeches to the International Workingmen's Association, correspondence with other intellectuals and revolutionaries, journalistic treatments of the issues of his day and, of course, the highly focused and research orientated style of his proposed workers' inquiry. There is not necessarily disunity in such an approach. Acknowledging the distinctions between both theoretical and applied approaches to research and the unique benefits that each generates is the grounds for the kind of integrated method that stood as the best practice of traditional worker-organisers. It is likewise important to appreciate that a theoretical orientation will have practical implications and should not be written off as abstract or removed from everyday concerns. By understanding the law of value, for example, it is possible to explain in a more comprehensive and sophisticated fashion the limitations of worker owned co-operatives or peoples' banks as strategies for social change. Likewise a close understanding of the conditions of organising derived from everyday experience will help inform more general questions concerning class consciousness, composition and movements within the economy. The benefits follow from the integrated way that this knowledge is applied informing a general unity of theory and practice.

## Conclusions

When Bakunin (1869) talked of a full, integral education as a 'life of thought as well as of work' he was not only describing the qualities of the worker-intellectuals he saw around him but of the personality that animated a future society, a society of 'complete and integrated individuals'. In this sense the kind of qualities that are identified with traditional worker-organisers are not just practical and useful for advancing social change but are tied to the socialist values that animated them. They can be characterised as prefigurative, as building (as the IWW puts it) the values of the new world in the shell of the old. This builds from a vision of the future which anticipates the full blossoming of human potential whether it is in physical, creative or intellectual endeavours. As a result exemplary socialists of this period were critical, educated, self-reflective and well attuned to their social and economic circumstances. This was while effective organising demanded a critical and investigative mindset and an ability to adapt to shifting patterns of employment. Good organisers were, in essence, able researchers and constant inquirers. They were an exemplar of the kind of qualities desirable to the future society.

The life and experiences of Marx's French workman, cited at the beginning of the article, were familiar to the roaming delegates of the IWW at the turn of the twentieth century. Largely self-educated and practically minded it was said that they could carry a union branch in their hat or satchel as they organised amongst a highly mobile and casual workforce of industrial and agricultural labourers (Bird et al., 1985: 8). Their legacy was noted by one of the early pioneers of worker sociology, Carleton Parker, who found in his 1920 survey of Californian casual labourers that almost half he spoke to 'knew in a rough way' the philosophy of the IWW as well as being familiar with its songs (Parker, 1920: 189). The experience of these organisers and the many others that composed the most active sections of the international working class movement throughout this period have, unfortunately, been largely lost to history. What they have left are valuable sketches of a distinctly working class method of organising, research and reflection.

It makes little sense to try and fill roles formed in the context of mass movements drawn from conditions of over a hundred years ago and involving tens of thousands of workers. Present circumstances do, however, call for some honest appraisal by the Left. This means a reassessment of theories derived from the conditions of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century against the conditions of the workforce of today. It also means thinking beyond the well established roles – of workers, academics and specialists – that have animated discussions within the Marxist tradition for so long. On a more practical level it



means thinking more systematically about how organisers reach out to workers and communities in a constructive fashion in spaces where the Left has largely retreated. In this article I have aimed to contribute to this process by laying forward a modest proposal on the basis of some of the best practice of the old labour movement. I believe the opportunities for pursuing these given the growing informational and networking resources at our disposal has never been better. Such a method could act as an important force for Left renewal as well as enriching our collective understanding of our present circumstances and effective tools for social change.

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