



Call for papers for an *ephemera* special issue on:

Workers, despite themselves

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Workers' inquiry is an approach to and practice of knowledge production that seeks to understand the changing composition of labour and its potential for revolutionary social transformation.

It is the practice of turning the tools of the social sciences into weapons of class struggle. Workers' inquiry seeks to map the continuing imposition of the class relation, not as a disinterested investigation, but rather to deepen and intensify social and political antagonisms.

The autonomist political theorist Mario Tronti argues that weapons for working class revolt have always been taken from the bosses' arsenal (1966: 18). But, has not it often been suggested, to use feminist writer Audre Lorde's phrasing (1984), that it is not possible to take apart the master's house with the master's tools? While not forgetting Lorde's question, it is clear that Tronti said this with good reason, for he was writing from a context where this is precisely what was taking place. Italian autonomous politics greatly benefited from borrowing from sociology and industrial relations – and by using these tools proceeded to build massive cycles of struggle transforming the grounds of politics (Wright, 2003; Berardi, 2009).

Of these adaptations the most important for autonomist politics and class composition analysis is workers' inquiry. Workers' inquiry developed in a context marked by rapid industrialization, mass migration, and the use industrial sociology to discipline the working class. Workers' inquiry was

formulated within autonomist movements as a sort of parallel sociology, one based on a radical re-reading of Marx (and Weber) against the politics of the communist party and the unions (Farris, 2011). While the practitioners of workers' inquiry were often professionally-trained academics – especially sociologists – its proponents argued their research differs in important ways from 'engaged' social science, and all varieties of industrial sociology, even if it there are similarities. If bourgeois sociology sought to smooth over conflicts, and 'critical' sociology to expose these same conflicts, workers' inquiry takes the contradictions of the labour process as a starting point and seeks to draw out these antagonisms into the formation of new radical subjectivities.

This is not to say that workers' inquiry is an unproblematic endeavor. We remain skeptical that the weapons of managerial control can be cleanly re-appropriated without reproducing the very social world they were designed to take apart. For as Steve Wright argues, "the uncritical use of such tools has frequently produced a register of subjective perceptions which do no more than mirror the surface of capitalist social relations" (2003: 24). As the legacy of analytical Marxism reveals, imitation is never far removed from flattery, and at its worst moments, workers' inquiry risks becoming its object of critique. To be fair there are disagreements among the proponents of workers' inquiry over the limitations of drawing from the social sciences. But to continue the metaphor, like any potentially dangerous 'weapon', sociological techniques must be carefully examined, and when necessary, disabled.

Today we find ourselves at a moment when co-research, participatory action research, and other heterodox methods have been adopted by the academic mainstream, while managerial styles like TQM carry a faint echo of workers' inquiry. In the contemporary firm workers are already engaged in self-monitoring, peer interviews, and the creation of quasi-autonomous 'research' units, all sanctioned by management (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Workers' inquiry is now part of the accepted social science repertoire: its techniques no longer seem dangerous, but familiar, at least at the methodological level. The bosses' arsenal now includes weapons mimicking the style, if not the substance, of workers' inquiry. And as George Steinmetz (2005) has suggested, while blatantly positivistic research styles have fallen out of favor, this obscures the 'positivist unconscious' that continues to interpellate even apparently anti-positivist methodologies.

The pioneers of workers' inquiry argued researchers must work through/against the ambivalent relations of (social) science; now, there may be no other option. Wherever there are movements organizing and addressing the horrors of capitalist exploitation and oppression, the specter of

recuperation is never far behind. The point is not to deny these risks, but to the degree such dynamics confront all social movements achieving any measure of success. It is by working against and through them that recomposing radical politics becomes possible (Shukaitis, 2009). Today workers' inquiry remains, as Raniero Panzieri claimed (2006 [1959]), a permanent reference point for autonomist politics, one that informs continuing inquiries into class composition. With this issue we seek to rethink workers' inquiry as a practice and perspective, and through that to understand and catalyze emergent moments of political composition.

Contributions

We invite papers that update the practices of workers' inquiry for the present moment of class de-/recomposition. Can we develop, taking up Matteo Pasquinelli's suggestion (2008: 138), a form of workers' inquiry applied to cognitive and biopolitical production? The very possibility of a *workers* inquiry begs reconsideration when official unemployment figures drift toward 50% among sectors of the industrial working class.

This issue picks up themes that developed in previous issues of *ephemera* inquiring into affective and immaterial labour (2007), digital labour (2010), militant research (2005), and the politics of the multitude (2004). We encourage submissions that draw upon this previous work, particularly on the politics of social reproduction.

Recently, workers' inquiry has proven its versatility through new applications and reconfigurations. Groups like Colectivo Situaciones (2011) and have used the practice of workers' inquiry to analyze popular uprisings. Scholars have drawn from class composition analysis to explore areas such as cognitive labour (Brophy, 2011; Peters & Bulut, 2011), citizenship and migration (Papadopoulos et al, 2008; Barchiesi, 2011), and finance (Marazzi, 2008; Mezzadra and Fumagalli, 2010). Militant research collectives such as Kolinko (2002), Team Colors (2010), and the Precarious Workers Brigade (2011) have employed workers' inquiry to intervene composition of social movements and labour politics.

We are particularly interested in research that expands and/or deconstructs the project of workers' inquiry, or that transposes workers' inquiry onto unconventional terrain such as archival research and cultural studies. Additionally, we encourage contributors to include a substantial reflection on

method, possibly addressing some of the tensions outlined above and engaging with recent debates about method and measure.

Deadline for submissions: July 1st, 2013

Please send your submissions to the editors. All contributions should follow *ephemera* guidelines – see <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/submit.htm>. In addition to full papers, we also invite notes, reviews, and other kinds and media forms of contributions – please get in touch to discuss how you would like to contribute. We highly encourage authors to send us abstracts (of 500 words) outlining their plans. The *ephemera* conference in May 2013 will focus on a related theme, with contributors for this issue invited to present their work.

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