



The politics of workers' inquiry

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This special issue brings together a series of commentaries, intervention, and projects in various stages of completion, all centred on the theme of workers inquiry¹. 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.

While the pieces in this issue differ vastly in their approach, theoretical orientation, and political alignment, several common strains can be detailed. Consistent with our call for papers, the authors critically interrogate workers' inquiry rather than accept received knowledge and methodological tools as given. Of course, this is entirely consistent with workers' inquiry, which has always been an intensely self-critical practice. Indeed, the post-War Italian ferment from which workers' inquiry emerged consisted of a number of competing schools (*Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, *Potere Operaia*, *Lotta Continua*), each with its journals and allied forces, characterized more by antagonism rather than camaraderie. But if the pages of this special issue are any evidence, many of these debates are far from settled, and the contemporary social moment invokes still new questions.

1 About half of the pieces that follow were presented in some form at *ephemera's* 2013 annual conference, held 2-3 May at the University of Essex under the banner 'The politics of workers' inquiry', while the remaining pieces were solicited for this issue alone.

To provide some context, a bit of exposition covering the origins of workers inquiry may be necessary. Workers' inquiry developed in a context marked by rapid industrialization, mass migration, and the use of 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 – and especially sociologists – its proponents argued that their research differs in important ways from 'engaged' social science, and all varieties of industrial sociology, even if there are similarities. If bourgeois sociology sought to smooth over conflicts, and 'critical' sociology to expose these same conflicts, workers' inquiry took the contradictions of the labour process as a starting point and sought to draw out these antagonisms into the formation of new radical subjectivities.

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 favour, this obscures the 'positivist unconscious' that continues to interpellate even apparently anti-positivist methodologies.

With this issue we seek to rethink workers' inquiry as a practice and perspective in order to understand and catalyse emergent moments of political composition. We note that the very term workers' inquiry immediately conjures both a subject of analysis (*workers*) and an epistemological approach (*inquiry*). As such, the articles fall into two categories: those that problematize, extend, or decentre the category of *workers* (Curcio, Evangelinidis, Murray, Moore, Cowen/Rault, and Elzenbaumer/Giuliani) and those that trouble notions of *inquiry* (Woodcock, Roggero, Fasulo, Pitts, Colectivo Situaciones, and Wellbrook). In other words, the pieces in this special issue come in two varieties – concrete applications of inquiry to a group of workers, and meta-reflections on the practice of inquiry at a more abstract level. But of course this binary is too simple, for inquiry has always resisted neat categorizations as 'theory' and 'practice'. Instead, theoretical advances in inquiry are typically inseparable from the structural realities from

which they emerge. Therefore, inquiry has undergone constant reinvention as it strives to apply itself in new settings, even as the expanding scope of inquiry is itself generative of increasing theoretical sophistication. So the empirical case studies that follow often gesture toward advances in inquiry, while the theoretical tracts are often suggestive of new research projects.

An article by Fabrizio Fasulo entitled 'Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry: The perspective of living labour, the function of science and the relationship between class and capital' offers a passionate and spirited defence of Raniero Panzieri's ideas on utility of scientific knowledge. One of the major debates that wracked workers inquiry in its classical period concerned the functions of industrial sociology and its applicability to anti-capitalist struggle. Panzieri emerged as perhaps the most vocal proponent of a position that viewed sociology itself as toxic, but believed its essential techniques, including its orientation toward science, could be refashioned into weapons of the working class. As Fasulo observes, this position is derived in part of from a reading of Marx that understands his political economy as proto-sociological. But crucially, Fasulo indicates that Panzieri differentiated between sociological discourses and sociological tools: whereas the former is strictly the province of capital, the latter might be appropriated by forces antagonistic to capital. There is a danger here, as with any act of reappropriation, that the working class might simply reinvent bourgeois sociology in its own name. But for Panzieri, this possibility is all but precluded by the very nature of the working class: whereas capital is only so much dead labour, the working class is both prior to capital and an evolving, dynamic form, so its modes of inquiry are necessary anticipatory. The working class can repurpose sociology, and indeed Panzieri hoped such a socialist sociology would be the essence of inquiry.

An article by Frederick Pitts ('Follow the money') points to the limitations of workers inquiry, which in his view is hobbled by its emphasis on production. Even the much-lauded social factory, with its metaphor of industrial labour (however diffuse), fails to escape the productivist straightjacket. Instead he poses that contemporary inquiry must position circulation alongside production as co-constitutive of value, and therefore intrinsic to the modern economy. Relying on a feminist perspective, Pitts claims that by centring the commodity as the subject of analysis, researchers might move toward a full understanding of intertwined spheres of productive and circulation that points toward the importance of daily life. Pitts emphasizes the elusiveness of value, and how following the commodity through its circulation, in total processes/life, begins to address this shortcoming. It is alluded to that we have now the theoretical foundation for a more robust empirical examination of value.

Though many of our authors take up the role of the academy in shaping knowledge production, Christopher Wellbrook brings this issue into particular focus. One of the most significant debates in workers inquiry concerns the extent to which intellectuals at some remove from the conditions of the shop floor might provide the working class movement with leadership. At one pole, there were those who believed researchers should structure interviews and questionnaires to guide the working class toward the 'correct' formulations (a la Touraine), and others who believed researchers should immerse themselves in the factory setting and seek as much as possible to occlude traditional divisions between workers and intellectual. In 'A Workers inquiry or an inquiry of workers', Wellbrook leans hard toward the latter position, though without entirely dismissing the unique perspective and theoretical insight that intellectuals might sometimes offer. On the one hand, Wellbrook claims the contemporary demarcation between worker and intellectual is a historically specific phenomenon, divorced both from Marx's understanding of knowledge-production as authentically productive, and from the longstanding tradition of working class autodidacticism. In doing so, he calls into question co-research strategies that preserve an unbalanced power dynamic and privilege officially sanctioned forms of knowledge. His piece lays the groundwork for a revived humanist workers inquiry that privileges workers' experience and subverts boundaries between researcher and research subject via a 'reflective community of worker-organizers.'

As many observers recognize, the ascendant logistics sector is a site of particular vulnerability for global capital, as just-in-time production renders nodes of circulation more important than ever. In 'Practicing militant inquiry: Composition, strike, and betting in the logistics workers struggles in Italy', Anna Curcio draws on her experience as an embedded researcher in a wave of strikes by Italian warehouse workers to point to new forms of political recomposition in the modern economy. As she notes, this struggle has spawned new forms of subjectivity, as workers generate new forms of semi-autonomous organization vis-à-vis their unions, and as struggles become increasingly generalized across the social body. In this case, workers' insider knowledge of the production process and circulation cycles allowed them to leverage power in unique ways. One of Curcio's boldest claims is a direct challenge to conventional union thinking about strikes. Whereas unions often operate on the assumption that strikes will remain confined to the workplace, perhaps with token community support, Curcio suggests that unions should instead 'bet on generalization' by gambling on the chance that every strike may grow into a large-scale political mobilization. In a faint echo of Pascal's wager, Curcio seems to suggest that the potential benefit to a union that gambles successfully far outweighs the short-term damage of guessing wrong.

In a note entitled 'Crisis, governmentality, and new social conflict: Argentina as a laboratory', Colectivo Situaciones draws on the context of Argentina a decade since the 2001 economic collapse to ask how militant research can best respond to the partial subsumption of social movements by the state. They propose that militant research should be oriented around forms of protagonism they describe as 'social mobilities' – fleeting and unstable modes of organization that often overlap with government mechanisms. Of course, the contrast with 1970s Italy, when mass movements constituted themselves outside of and inevitably in opposition to government mechanisms, could not be starker.

In 'Workers' inquiry in praxis: The Greek student movement of 2006-2007', Angelos Evangelinidis traces out a trajectory of student activism in Greece centering on a wave of university occupations in 2006-07. Students, with their competing loyalties and ambiguous class position, have always been an attractive subject for inquiry, but until recently, were more likely to be practitioners than objects of investigation. As Evangelinidis points out, student movements have much to gain from an autonomist-inspired critique of traditional student activism. Just as the Italian autonomists found their point of departure in establishment unions, wholly captured by the institutional Left and often the State, the Greek autonomist student movement positioned itself in explicit opposition to organized Left groups on campus, often themselves aligned with political parties. Evangelinidis reports and analyses the finding of a major study of the occupation and strike wave that sought to evaluate the state of class composition within the mobilized student milieu. In the process, the researchers quickly discover that traditional units of measure ('consciousness', 'identity', 'ideology') fail to capture the totality of factors that may provoke a social explosion. Implicitly, they also seem to suggest that the questionnaire and interview, as tools of measure, are wholly inadequate to the task. While Evangelinidis refrains from generalizing his observations, his study would seem to raise questions about the utility of social scientific practices, in ways that directly challenge Panzieri's ideas, described above.

In 'The shame of servers: Inquiry and agency in a Manhattan cocktail lounge', Jennifer Murray puts workers inquiry in dialogue with recent theories of gendered labour, especially the work of Eve Sedgwick on shame. This piece points to the limits of inquiry, particularly when affective labour comes into play. Based on an extensive workers inquiry at a New Jersey (US) cocktail bar, she suggests the interview techniques can be emotionally damaging for vulnerable populations, and that inquiry should carefully consider its impact. Murray deploys the category of shame to examine the downsides of work in an upscale hotel bar for the mostly female staff. She looks at how workers experience shame, and their various strategies for coping with or minimizing it. The piece raises

some provocative questions challenging the paradigm of workers inquiry. It suggests that since unwelcome interrogation of workers' personal lives by bar patrons is a large part of what makes the work potentially shameful, similar questioning by researchers is a fraught endeavour.

As is well established, the sociology that served as an interlocutor for workers inquiry was, above all, a sociology of work and labour that privileged the factory and industrial modes of production. In contrast, artistic labour is marginalized or more commonly ignored by empirical sociologists, and the arts certainly do not figure prominently in the social science cannon. In 'Labour, religion and game or why is art relevant for social science', Michał Kozłowski offers a partial corrective, making a convincing case for positioning art at the centre, rather than at the margins, of social science theory and research. By implication, he suggests that workers' inquiry, to the extent it is modelled on a (heterodox) sociology, ignores art at its own peril. Kozłowski might therefore appreciate that three out of seven 'empirical' studies in our special issue concern artistic and creative workers. But a more generous reading of Kozłowski allows that the artistic turn is not merely a question of conducting research on art workers. Instead, for Kozłowski, a theory of art already lurks at the heart of the social sciences, revealed through thinkers like Pascal, Mauss, and Bourdieu. Giving voice to this subcurrent will have major implications for all social scientists and practitioners of workers inquiry, including those whose research is not explicitly 'about' artists.

'Designers' inquiry: Mapping the socio-economic conditions of designers in Italy', by Bianca Elzenbaumer and Caterina Giuliani, studies an industry populated by disparate workers with few social ties who do not understand their daily practice as labour. While inquiry has often confronted workers who might be classified as depoliticized or lacking class consciousness, this projects teases the boundaries of a workers inquiry, and is all the more important as contemporary workplaces come increasingly to resemble the design sector. In the process, the authors speak to the necessity of reconceptualising design-work as a site for struggle.

In 'Art workers want to know', Alan W. Moore traces out a genealogy of the Art Workers Coalition, a now-defunct collective formation that sought to transform the art world. Moore suggests that the spectre of this organization presents itself in the form of contemporary squatted social centre. By explicitly suggesting that a movement may outlast its formal demise, he flaunts traditional understanding of movement life cycles, and raises important questions about the remainder through processes of decomposition.

A number of contributions to this issue engage with groups of workers that are relatively depoliticized, thus posing questions about the relation between militants and class composition. In 'The labour of being studied in a free love economy', T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault offer a model of an (as-yet unrealized) initiative to study the labour of feminist and queer creative workers. If workers inquiry has often tended to privilege the wage relation as a basic starting point for understanding labour, Cowan and Rault confront the specter of voluntarism and affective labour, and other forms of unwaged work. While they have yet to execute their proposed project, they are particularly attuned to the possibility that their research will be poorly received by a community that has an ambivalent relationship to work.

In 'The workers' inquiry from Trotskyism to *Operaismo*: A political methodology for investigating the workplace', Jamie Woodcock offers something of a heterodox history of workers' inquiry. He recommends that modern inquiry combine the best insights of American Trotskyism and Italian *operaismo* to create a unique amalgam, not far removed from the work of the collective Kolinko in call centres.

In a note entitled 'We didn't expect the revolt, but we've organized it: Notes on co-research and workers inquiry', which served as the introductory presentation for the conference upon which this special issue is based, Gigi Roggero asks a number of prescient questions about the future of co-research, which he views as a privileged subcategory within inquiry. For Roggero, co-research intervenes while struggles are ascendant, but before they have exploded. In what might be read as a rebuttal to Wellbrook et al., he offers a cautionary note to those who conceive of co-research merely as a democratic relationship between subject and object. Instead, he poses that co-research must preserve and foreground power imbalances, as it is itself embedded within class relations.

This issue is admittedly inconclusive with regard to the future of inquiry. Indeed, the authors present wildly divergent positions that are often mutually contradictory, and nearly impossible to generalize. What is clear, however, is that new sites and subjects cannot be agglomerated to the tradition of inquiry in an additive fashion. Nor can workers' inquiry, with its origins in the Italian factories in the 1960s, be transposed across time and space without significant modifications. Instead, workers' inquiry must remain resilient – as it always has been. Just as the relative marginalization of the mass worker led to a crisis in inquiry that later spawned the social factory, the impending implosion of the social factory may portend another looming crisis. Clearly, none of the authors in this issue suggest that inquiry must be abandoned altogether. But for some, the future of inquiry will require altering its fundamental precepts, and therefore

creating a mode of research that may no longer be recognizable as 'inquiry'. In our call for papers, we questioned whether the weapons of managerial control can be cleanly re-appropriated by inquiry without reproducing the very social world they were designed to take apart, and it is clear that many of our contributors share these reservations. But this is no contradiction – inquiry has always traded in ambiguity. Just as Roggero suggests, the modern strike must be both constituent and destituent, and the same precept may apply to inquiry.

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