

Visions of Class, Visions Beyond Class

Some Thoughts About Socialist Renewal

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The State of the Left

Currently the Canadian left largely consists of small groups that focus on specific issues. Occasionally some of those groups are able to mobilize people beyond their activist membership base. However, even rather successful mobilizations against corporate globalization or imperialist wars haven't helped to build bigger and more unified organizations. They haven't impacted electoral politics either. Returning to their homes, the mass of protestors left the various activist groups alone as possessors of an alternative expert knowledge that NGOs, union and party bureaucracies can tap off whenever they wish. If needed, such alternative expertise could even be incorporated into state policies. While some circles on the left, namely the NGO-community, don't ask for more anyways, radical groups constantly either bemoan or discuss their marginal status in Canadian society.

Attempts to funnel high levels of mobilization into a more sustainable structured movement that would help to rebuild a left outside of traditional parties and union machineries overestimated protestors' readiness for long-term political commitments. Other attempts that aimed at building a socialist current within the NDP, to push the party as a whole to the left, underestimated the organizations capacities to absorb individuals and draw some activist groups into its orbit. Recent discussions about socialist renewal are largely confined to groups that identify themselves as socialist but haven't yet found ways to pursue socialist politics within topical coalitions with non-socialist groups.

What this signifies is that socialism is at best one among other issues the left is concerned about. It is far from providing the overarching framework within which environmental destruction, sexism and racism can be tied together. Instead of one big movement with different facets, there are fragmented single-issue groups that can hardly claim to represent one or many movements. Neither regrouping among those groups, organizing efforts, nor any kind of coalition building will help to strengthen the left unless such endeavours are part of a shift of the discursive field in which the left is currently operating. Beyond their internal meetings, even socialist groups have accepted the dominant notion of civil society, which leaves room for all sorts of topical, and often isolated, movements and mobilizations, but is rarely understood as a terrain of ideological struggle that is structured by antagonistic class relations.

The Working Class Spectre

The reason that there is no socialist politics which inspires people beyond small circles is the absence of a concept of working class. To be more precise, socialist circles, and a few academics it might be added, talk about class in an abstract manner that doesn't resonate among other activists, let alone the people who are theoretically predestined to be members of that class. Actually-existing workers rarely identify themselves as members of the working class and would much rather see themselves as part of imagined communities such as nations, members of religious communities or sports clubs. Work enters their self-identification mostly through professional associations and unions.

Although socialists see the latter often seen as "distinct organizations of the working class", unions, in this regard, clearly reflect the views and attitudes of most of their members and rarely try to transcend the sectionalism of business and craft unionism. Where unions adopt social movement unionism they typically understand social movements as present-day topical groups, with which labour can engage in coalitions. Only hard-nosed union lefties know that social movement was once used in the singular and was just another word for the labour or working class movement.

However, this past haunts not only the small number of socialists who bemoan the decline of a once powerful movement, it also haunts union bureaucrats, NDP leaders and topical movement activists. Ask any of them about their views on working class politics and most likely you get a caricature that portrays the working class as marching columns of white male blue-collar workers who follow their union or party leaders. Some, mostly aging union and NDP folks, use this caricature to express the grief about the decline of a certain kind of working class politics. More often, the decreasing employment share of white male blue-collar workers is used to substantiate the claim that a once homogenous working class has vanished into a multitude of social positions and identities that can't be forced into the one single concept of class. Some bemoan the decline of a labour movement that had largely failed to organize workers beyond manual factory jobs; others happily join the postmodern mainstream of minorities. Both identify the working class as nothing but a bunch of white male blue-collar workers.

Working classes always were, and still are, comprised by men and women of different colours and citizenships, working in different sectors and occupations and under rather different conditions. Only (petty) bourgeois class prejudice fails to recognize diversity and dignity among workers; but it sure loves to subordinate them as a homogenous and mindless factor of production. As often, it should be noted, neoclassical economics offers much more succinct expression of such class prejudice than postmodern jargon. →

Discontent, Culture & Socialist Imagination

Talk to ordinary people and you hear about lots of frustration: Speed-up at work, on-call work, constantly changing jobs, fear for plant closures, insecurity about the kids' future, difficulties to coordinate work and family schedules, lack of money, feelings of shallowness and emptiness that can't be consumed away and on and on and on. Dealing, or at least coping, with these issues is difficult because an all-pervasive market logic, maybe better called market magic, tells people that they are free to choose and that therefore, if they fail to achieve what they were aiming at, it is either their own fault or anonymous market forces decided not to deliver on certain choices. Thus, life seems to be a gamble where some are simply luckier than others. Even hard work might be a wrong bet and therefore not be rewarded. This logic conven-

iently denies the bourgeoisie's responsibility for poor working and living conditions. It also leaves those who live and suffer under these conditions with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Sure enough, it's not the job of the bourgeoisie to comfort the working class anyways. All they and their hired middle-class ideologues have to do is to produce workers' compliance with the existing conditions. But what about the left? There are certainly groups and activists who, within the dominant civil society discourse, consider themselves as left and are seen as such by others, although they effectively have turned their back upon ordinary people's problems. But there are also many others who do care about those issues. There are some who understand the ways industrial restructuring causes work-related stress, others who know about the concerns of female workers, immigrant workers, the working poor or any other particular segment of the working class. However, often their expert knowledge only allows them to talk about or to their "target group", but doesn't enable them to engage in mutual exchange with them. Where such exchange happens, it is mostly organized around specific issues, such as gender, immigration or poverty, but the common denominator, being working class, is lost. Thus, there are antagonistic class relations that allow capitalists to subordinate and exploit workers. At the same time, classes have become invisible behind the veil of civil society and individual market exchange.

The reason for this is the lack of a common culture that would allow workers and activists to engage in the exchange of ideas and the exploration of alternatives beyond particular issues and the organizational confines of union and party apparatuses or the more informal, but usually very hierarchical, NGO structures. Whenever there were powerful labour movements in the past, they developed around working class cultures that transcended particular concerns, disseminated feelings of solidarity between activist core groups and less involved outsiders and included visions of a better world.

Just for clarification, culture is neither understood here as the consumption of mass-produced films, music, etc., nor as the subservient admiration of the artefacts of the high cultures of current and previous ruling classes. Contrary to such notions, culture is understood as a collective communication process that helps its participants to identify as a group and also to define and articulate their interests. In this process symbols and languages, such as songs, film and texts, serve as means of communication. However, it's neither the genius of working class artists or intellectuals that provide those means to the ordinary worker. What artists and intellectuals can do, though, is to pick up ideas that are floating around in communication processes and express them in a concentrated form. Poems,



songs, films and texts that are produced this way may in turn enrich further communication and eventually lead to commonly shared working class politics, which transcends particular concerns without subordinating them to abstract notions of class.

What's to be done? Mapping Class Relations, Making Working Classes

To contribute to the reinvention of working class culture, politics and socialist imagination, discussion groups of organized and un-organized socialists should be formed. The intent of such groups is not to abandon any existing groups or tie them into any form of united front. As was pointed out above, such attempts will not create a stronger left unless dominant notions of civil society, no matter whether they are actively promoted or passively accepted, can be replaced by a discourse on class. This is what

these new discussion groups should be about. They aim at creating a space in which individual activists, regardless of their political affiliations or specific fields of activity, can explore approaches to working class renewal.

Two steps are suggested in this regard. Step one could be called mapping of class relations. Various approaches to class theory and a wealth of empirical information on all aspects of the living and working conditions of ordinary people can guide a discussion about the dividing lines of class. Contrary to notions of individual market exchange and civil society involvement, class puts people into different categories. It is a process of classification that does not only aim at identifying those who belong to a particular class but also those who belong to a different class. Thus, class discourse mainly explores the borderlands between classes. Given the role that nation-states and the attached notions of citizenship play in determining an individual's position within society, the question of class is inextricably linked to the question of borders between classes in different countries. It would be pointless to neglect actually existing social and political borders just because we are aiming at a classless, and therefore borderless world.

Maps are meant to guide people in unknown territory; this is as true for geographical maps as for a social class map. However, while the former can be bought cheaply and allow anyone who knows how to read them to find their way, the latter hardly exist. This is not only because few efforts to draw them have been made recently, it is also because the mapping of class is much more entwined with the making of classes as agents of change than the mapping of landscape impacts geographical change. The political geography that has developed since European imperialism conquered the world, and depicted it on world maps mirroring its bourgeois self-image, should certainly not be forgotten, but is not the main point here.

What matters here are the actual relations between the mapping of capitalist class relations and the making, or remaking, of working classes. Discussions among socialists may lead to ideas about the ways in which communications with ordinary people could be organized. This would be step two and, to be sure, does not mean that the former advise the latter. Any such approach would only reproduce the existing gulf between the small number of left possessors of alternative expert knowledge and the unarticulated estrangement among masses of people. Only mutual respect and recognition would allow the creation of a communication process beyond socialist discussion groups. Only such a process can help to remake a working class and thus a stronger left. **R**

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