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# The Workers' Inquiry from Trotskyism to *Operaismo*: a political methodology for investigating the workplace

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## abstract

This article discusses different approaches to conducting a workers' inquiry. Although there is a certain level of ambiguity in the term, it is taken to mean a method for investigating the workplace from the point of view of the worker. The article aims to examine the methodological concerns involved with conducting a contemporary inquiry and to consider the different debates that have emerged from its use. It examines a particular set of examples from Marx, the breaks from orthodox Trotskyism with the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and early phase of *Operaismo* or Italian Workerism. It is intended as a specific intervention that aims to understand what can be learned from an unorthodox Trotskyist interpretation of a workers' inquiry and how this moment can provide an inspiration for the rethinking and reapplication of Marxism, both in terms of theory and practice, to the changing world.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to consider what can be learned from a number of different attempts at workers' inquiries. This will be neither an exclusive nor an exhaustive study, but examine particular moments of interest. The different groups that broke with orthodox Trotskyism and the later Italian tradition sought to critically reassess the changing world around them, something that remains an important task today. The current conjuncture in the UK is characterised by the continuing impact of austerity. This follows previous decades that have been marked by defeats of the organised working class and the rise of neoliberalism:

sustained attacks on worker's pay and conditions, the slashing of government spending, and the prizing open of public services to the market (Harvey, 2007: p12).

This current context is of course different to that of Karl Marx, the Trotskyist groups in the 1950s, or the Italian *Operaismo*. There have been significant and far reaching changes since the examples chosen for this article. Marx indicated that the dynamic of constant change was a fundamental part of the logic of capitalism: the 'constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation . . . all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, 2008: p38). The changes in the organisation of capital have resulted in new areas of employment expanding as the relative numbers employed in traditional working class jobs has fallen. The growth of the service sector has not seen a new wave of unionisation or the building of sustained workplace organisation. In 2011 there were 6.4 million members of trade unions in the UK, representing 26% of workers. The membership is divided between 3.9 million in the public sector and 2.5 million in the private sector, with density at 56.5% and 14.1% respectively (Brownlie, 2012: p7, 11). The possibilities for organisation and resistance in new sectors of the economy – and in the private sector more generally – pose important questions which are going unanswered.

The renewed interest in the workers' inquiry as a method has the potential to open up an interesting and fruitful debate about how to address these contemporary questions. The moments chosen here are not the only possible sources of inspiration, in some ways a form of the method is implicit in any attempts at organisation. However it is necessary to make the method explicit in order for it to play an active role in understanding what organisational forms can emerge and succeed in new contexts. The focus on the Marxist tradition in this article aims to draw out the debates around the use of sociology in this endeavour, and recognise the tensions between the two. This article is intended as an intervention into the emerging debate surrounding the workers' inquiry as a method that seeks to understand what can be learned from the unorthodox Trotskyist tradition and the connection to *Operaismo* through a number of historical moments.

## Marx

The starting point for this article is the work of Karl Marx (1976) in *Capital*. Of particular importance is chapter ten which represents a shift in form from the previous chapters in its ethnographic character. It involved the 'massive use of

empirical evidence' (Kincaid, 2008: p388) to document the struggle over the length of the working day by workers in factories in the nineteenth century. It draws on the same kind of documentation that Frederick Engels (2009) used in the *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, and the decision not to update the book on its reissuing in 1884, points perhaps toward the success of Marx's achievement in this chapter. In the chapter Marx (1976: p344) argues that 'the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between the collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and the collective labour, i.e. the working class.' This is a significant step in *Capital*, summed up by David Harvey's (2010: p137) exclamation that 'finally, after 344 pages, we get to the idea of class struggle. Finally!'

The chapter on the Working Day is made up of a number of different voices. The empirical investigation carried out in the chapter relies on the evidence supplied by the bourgeois factory inspectors. Marx comments that 'the "ruthless" factory inspector Leonard Horner was again on the spot' (Marx, 1976: p397) and that 'his services to the English working class will never be forgotten' (Marx, 1976: p334). The use of these reports allows Marx insights into the conditions of workers, but does not draw on their experience directly. The inspectors starting point was to treat the workers in the same way that the quality of the soil was important for agriculture.

It is therefore necessary to draw attention to what Michael Lebowitz (2009: p314) has called the 'silence of *Capital*.' The chapter on the working day discusses only 'a defensive action' on the part of the workers, a struggle against the extension of the working day, rather than a fight for better wages or conditions. The subject of *Capital*, as the name perhaps implies, is capital – rather than workers. This can result in a 'one-sided Marxism that fails to recognise that *Capital* presents only one side of capitalism' (Lebowitz, 2009: p310). This understanding is critical when considering *Capital* as an inspiration for a workers' inquiry. If the silences in *Capital* are not taken into account there can be a resulting failure to 'investigate the worker as subject', leaving only the 'Abstract Proletarian' which is 'the mere negation of capital' (Lebowitz, 2009: p311).

The correction has to begin with the fact that workers produce for, and are produced by, capitalism. As Marx (1976: p283) argued, the worker 'acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.' This 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and self-change' is crucial for understanding how the 'old subjects, the products of capital, go beyond capital' (Lebowitz, 2003: p180). Harry Cleaver (1979: p20) stresses that in reading *Capital* it is important to keep in mind 'Marx's original purpose: he wrote *Capital* to put a weapon in the hands of workers.' Therefore *Capital* was written,

and rewritten, over and over again precisely because of the ‘inherent mystification of capital, *demystification* is a necessary condition for workers to go beyond capital’ (Lebowitz, 2009: p314). So in order to re-emphasise the role of the worker in this argument there must be a focus on the ‘examination of workers’ actual struggles: their content, how they have developed, and where they are headed’ (Cleaver, 1979: p58).

In order to understand Marx’s contribution to the workers’ inquiry, there needs to be a move beyond *Capital*, and in effect attempt to speak to the silences. A direction for this is signalled in Marx’s (1938) own call for a workers’ inquiry published in a newspaper in France in 1880. Although it achieved circulation to some extent at the time, it remained relatively unknown for fifty years. In the introduction to the survey Marx outlines the aim of the inquiry:

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 saviors sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey. (Marx, 1938: p379)

This introduction clearly articulates the intention of the inquiry: understanding the exploitation of workers from their own perspective. The workers are not considered simply as passive subjects to be researched; instead they are positioned as the only people who can describe their own conditions, and more importantly as the only ones who can transform them. Marx continues to argue that those conducting such surveys:

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, 1938: p379)

As Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi (2013) argue Marx ‘established a fundamental epistemological challenge’ with the short introduction to the inquiry. What is less clear is the nature of the ‘relationship between the workers’ knowledge of their exploitation, and the scientific analysis of the “laws of motion” of capitalist society’ found in *Capital*.

This attempt to uncover the actual experience of workers and their struggles was a novel step. It has similarities with the approach of subaltern studies that begins from an ‘insistence upon the subaltern as the subject of history’ (Spivak, 1988: p16). This radical re-reading of a history from below focuses on the masses rather than the actions of the elite. In a similar vein, Sheila Rowbotham’s (1977) *Hidden from History*, placed women as the subject. These insights, alongside those from radical anthropology, provide examples of other ways in which the silences –

whether of the oppressed or exploited – can be spoken to, drawing a much needed attention to their self activity. For Marx the postal survey was also intended as a method to make contact with workers. He states that ‘it is not essential to reply to every question’, and emphasises that ‘the name and address should be given so that if necessary we can send communication’ (Marx, 1938: p379). However, there are no records of the results that were gained from the survey, nor is there a discussion of either its successes or failures.

## Trotskyism

The workers' inquiry was developed theoretically through the debates in the Trotskyist movement about the impact of Taylorism and the emergence of Fordism. It also involved a new analysis of the class basis of Stalinist Russia. The proposal of alternative positions led to splits from the Fourth International between 1948 and 1951 and the creation of three new independent groups. The first group was the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the USA. This was formed primarily by C.L.R. James with the pen name (common in the Trotskyist movement) Johnson and Raya Dunayevskaya, who had been a secretary of Trotsky, under the name Forest (Dunayevskaya, 1972). The second was the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency in France, with the pen names of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort (Kessler, 1978). The third was the International Socialists in Britain – which did not solidify into a group until later on – led by a Palestinian Jew called Ygael Gluckstein, also known as Tony Cliff (Kuper, 1971; Cliff, 1999). The groups maintained regular contact with each other, with Castoriadis and Dunayevskaya still working together into the 1960s (van der Linden, 1997: p11).

### *Johnson-Forest Tendency*

The Johnson-Forest Tendency broke with the orthodox Trotskyist analysis of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state. The new position was put forward in full in *State Capitalism and World Revolution* (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950) which involved a re-reading of Marx. The Hegelian perspective informed the analysis of the USSR, which can be seen in works like *Notes on Dialectics* by C.L.R. James (1980) and *Philosophy and Revolution* by Raya Dunayevskaya (1973b). They argued that the rise of Taylorism, followed by the developments of Fordism, had resulted in significant changes to the organisation of production and laid the basis for totalitarianism, not just within the capitalist heartland of the USA, but also Germany and the USSR. The production regime of Fordism ‘before unionization’ is ‘the prototype of production relations in fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950: p40).’ This analysis

led them to argue that the USSR was state capitalist, and that the ‘Stalinist bureaucracy’ was effectively the ‘American bureaucracy carried to its ultimate and logical conclusion, both of them products of capitalist production in the epoch of state-capitalism (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950: p42).’

This new analysis was an attempt to reclaim Marxism, not just from the potential one-sided reading of *Capital*, but also from the distortions of Stalinism. The emphasis ‘grew out of studies and contacts with factory workers’ that were ‘the hallmark of the political tendency’ (Clever, 1979: p62). As George Rawick (1969: p23) points out in his discussion of labour history: ‘Marxists have occasionally talked about working-class self-activity, as well they might, given that it was Marx’s main political focus.’ One part of the project was to understand that behind observable institutional phenomena are the actions of an actually existing working class. Instead of studying these formal aspects – membership figures or the number of newspaper subscriptions – what is needed instead is:

The figures on how many man-hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class’s own initiative. (Rawick, 1969: p29)

This argument shows the possible utility in drawing on different kinds of quantitative data to understand the realities of struggle from the perspective of workers engaged in it. The choice of what sources of statistics to use is loaded with political implications; taking only the official statistics from union sanctioned industrial actions would obscure much of what is actually happening. In a sense what Rawick (1969) is arguing for is an attempt to discover the unrecorded or difficult to excavate figures of class struggle, perhaps analogous to the distortion created by unreported figures in official crime statistics referred to as ‘the dark figure’ by Coleman and Moynihan (1996), if it is possible to shed the negative connotations.

This perspective can be found in *The American Worker*, a pamphlet by Paul Romano and Ria Stone (1946), which aimed to document the conditions and experience of rank-and-file workers in an American car factory. It is a two part study, the first part is a workers’ inquiry written by Paul Romano, who worked in the car factory; the second part contains the theoretical analysis, written under the pen name of Grace Lee Boggs. Romano worked in a car plant during the research for the study and describes how he had spent most of his life in various industries of mass production amongst many other workers. Romano was very much an insider, arguing that in terms of the workers:

Their feelings, anxieties, exhilaration, boredom, exhaustion, anger, have all been mine to one extent or another. By “their feelings” I mean those, which are the direct reactions to modern high-speed production. (Romano, 1947: p1)

The pamphlet was distributed to workers across the USA. Romano (1947: p1) describes how workers were ‘surprised and gratified’ to see their experiences in the pamphlet. This is in direct contrast to the response from ‘intellectuals.’ Their view is summed up as ‘so what?’ and Romano (1947: p1) argues that this ‘was to be expected’ as ‘how could those so removed from the daily experiences . . . expect to understand the life of the workers as only the worker can understand it.’

The analysis of the workers inquiry’ by Romano (1947) is conducted by Stone (1947: p2) who introduces the report as ‘a social document describing in essence the real existence of the hundreds of millions who constitute the basis of our society.’ Stone (1947: p2) argues that it is ‘only by understanding the actual conditions and the actual strivings of an actual working class at a certain stage of its development, can the problems of humanity as a whole be understood.’ The description of the factory provided by Romano is steeped in rich detail and Stone (1947: p10) argues that its strength lies in fact that ‘never for a single moment’ does it allow the reader to ‘forget that the contradictions in the process of production make life an agony of toil for the worker, be his payment high or low.’ As the description unfolds it details in ‘shocking clarity how deeply the alienation of labor pervades the very foundation of our society.’

A key theme that runs through the analysis is a hostility to academia and the intellectual. Stone (1947: p29) argues that the ‘petty-bourgeois intellectuals’ seek ‘universality’, but ‘in an alienated fashion because they are themselves the production of the division between manual and mental labor.’ This division of labour is seen as ‘the culminating point of the inhumanity of class relations because it deprives both poles of the division of one essential aspect of human existence’ (Stone, 1947: p29). The intellectual is affected by this division between manual and mental labour, which Stone (1947: p31) argues is the ‘basic philosophic reason for the incapacity . . . to develop the concept of the social individual.’ Glaberman (1947: p4) argued that the group fought for a perspective that ‘the worker understands the complexity of modern production but sees directly its integration, its social character.’

The method set out in *The American Worker* became a format for a political intervention. There were further inquiries: *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal* (Denby 1989), focusing on the journey of a black worker from the American south to militancy in car factories, and *A Women’s Place* (Brant and Santori, 1953), on housework, reproductive labour, and women’s struggle. The aim of these inquiries was to proceed ‘by learning to seek out in the daily life of



the workers in the factory the expression of their instinctive striving towards their liberation' (Glaberman, 1947: p1). This locates the worker, or more specifically groups of workers or oppressed, as the focus for empirical research. Glaberman (1947: p1) argued that the group 'based our politics in large part on Trotsky's conception of the instinctive urge to socialism of the working class.' The form of analysis required for this type of investigation tried to follow Marx's method. Glaberman (1947: p2) states that they 'learned to analyze the thought, the speech, the actions of the workers – not at face value, superficially – but rather fundamentally, in its innermost essence, in a word, dialectically.'

These inquiries documented the experience of workers and the oppressed in a particular form. Haider and Mohandesi (2013) point out that this development opened up Marx's call for an inquiry to allow 'workers to raise their own unique voice, express themselves in their own language' rather than responding to formulaic, closed questionnaires. This does complicate the original intentions as the 'openness of the narrative form exaggerates a tendency to slip from measured generalization to untenable overgeneralization.' For example in *The American Worker* the individual worker's experience is put forward as a voice for all factory workers. However, *The American Worker* was explicitly intended as a political intervention in struggles in the USA. This can also be found with examples like *Punching Out* (Glaberman, 1952) and *Union Committeemen and the Wild Cat Strike* (Glaberman, 1955), which detailed and analysed the struggles of workers against both their management and the union bureaucracy. The methodological approach of the workers' inquiry they articulated was an attempt to follow in the footsteps of Marx by focusing on 'the actual life of workers' while 'never' losing 'sight of the revolution which would transform labor into human activity' (Stone, 1947: p32).

The resistance to both capital and the Stalinist bureaucracy was not only a theoretical possibility, but would develop with new forms of organisations. James (1974: pi) argued that the struggle against new forms of control would require a rejection of old forms of organisation, as 'the proletariat always breaks up the old organization by impulse, a leap . . . the new organization, the new organism will begin with spontaneity, i.e. free creative activity, as its necessity.' This intensified the focus on the action of workers themselves, on a rank and file level, as a way of discovering the new forms that can emerge to challenge capital. The argument draws on a variety of examples from the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1905, to contemporary workers struggles, while reasserting that 'however high they soar they build upon shop floor organizations and action on the job (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950: p11).' The role of the workers' inquiry is therefore a crucial component in the process of building political

organisation, but a flexible form that stems from the changing circumstance and needs of the current period.

### *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

The formation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, like other Trotskyist groups that broke away from the Fourth International, began with a rejection of the orthodox analysis of Russia. The two key theorists associated with the group were Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Their new analysis confronted the growth of the bureaucracy in Russia and argued that it was no longer a degenerated workers state but in fact had become bureaucratic capitalism (Castoriadis, 1975: p131).

The analysis of Russia as 'bureaucratic capitalist' shifted the focus of the group onto the role of bureaucracy in society, and in particular the bureaucratization of social movements. It posed the questions of whether 'it is an iron law that movements opposing the existing order either fall apart or change into rigid hierarchies?' and 'how can militants organize themselves without being absorbed or rigidified into a bureaucratic apparatus?' (van der Linden, 1997: p7). This involved furthering the analysis of the trade union bureaucracy as an independent layer, mediating between the workers and the bosses, careful not to lose support from either side. The group's interventions aimed to test new forms of organisation, the basis of which was the use of 'direct democracy' driven by a 'lengthy search for a new relationship between spontaneity and organization, between practice and theory' (van der Linden, 1997: p7). These theoretical positions informed the attempts at workers' inquiries that the group would carry out in the factories (Carrier, 1949; Mothé, 1954).

Castoriadis and Lefort took inspiration from *The American Worker* (Romano and Stone, 1946) and reprinted it in the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Romano, 1949). Like those in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, they were interested in understanding how the 'new structure of the labour process' was leaving 'its mark on the daily life and the consciousness of the workers' in order to understand 'the consequences . . . for the self-organization of the workers' (van der Linden, 1997: p19). The inquiries were built upon with factory based newspapers. For Claude Lefort (1952) the daily experiences of workers had within them:

Prior to any explicit reflection, to any interpretation of their lot or their role, workers have spontaneous compartments with respect to industrial work, exploitation, the organization of production and social life both inside and outside the factory.

Therefore the newspapers aimed to solicit testimonies from workers in order to analyse and publish them as political interventions. This raises a problem posed by Lefort (1952): 'who had the right to interpret these accounts?' The conclusion was that if the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* took on this role this could be done if it would allow workers to reflect further on their own experiences.

The members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* embarked on their own version of the workers' inquiry project. They conducted investigations into the factories in France, for example Georges Vivier's (1952) 'Life in the Factory.' This work was continued by Daniel Mothé and Henri Simon, following in the footsteps of Paul Romano in the Johnson-Forest Tendency. The General Motors car factory is replaced with the Renault Bilancourt factory for Mothé and an insurance company for Simon (Cleaver, 1979: p64). This was the first instance of inquiries into a white-collar workplace and not only mass production. The attempts at leafleting and inquiry in the Renault factory had a degree of success; in 1954 the first issue of the factory-based, independent monthly newspaper *Tribune Ouvrière* was published (Mothé, 1955). This factory work – some of which was initiated by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* but not all, was mostly built upon the previous struggles that had taken place – led to a flourishing of newspapers in France: from Paris to Nantes, Bordeaux, and Toulouse, which by the start of 1958 had begun to work together (van der Linden, 1997: p20).

The workers' inquiry formed the basis for this kind of syndicalist factory organisation. It allowed for the particular issues of the workplace to be uncovered and build links between different workers. The forms of organisation that developed were based on the 'fundamental critique of social hierarchy' that was one of the 'main achievements' of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (van der Linden, 1997: p32). This allowed the organisation to focus on the actual experience of workers in France, and to construct a perspective from the bottom up, despite the limitations that 'this "view from below" was male and factory centred' (van der Linden, 1997: p32).

The early part of 1958 saw the circumstances in which *Socialisme ou Barbarie* operated in change drastically. The De Gaulle coup spurred some in the group, like Castoriadis (Chaulieu, 1958), to argue for the formation of a revolutionary party that could aim for the coordinate action across the country with a national newspaper (van der Linden, 1997: p21). However, the view put forward by Castoriadis was 'certainly not commonly shared in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*' and in September 1958 the organisation split (van der Linden, 1997: p22). Castoriadis would subsequently break with Marxism, and then continue to reject historical materialism as a whole (Cardan [Castoriadis], 1964). *Socialisme ou Barbarie* received little attention outside the French speaking world; but this changed after

the outburst of student and worker struggle in 1968. The remaining copies of the journal 'became a hot-selling item' (van der Linden, 1997: p7) and it had an influence on 'important figures of the "workers' autonomy" wing of the Italian New Left in the 1960s and 1970s' (Clever, 1979: p64).

## Operaismo

The next part of this article will focus on the use of the workers' inquiry in Italy. It involved inquiries into Italian car factories, which 'were informed by a reworking of some of the best Marxist analysis of earlier periods' and, in particular with the work of *Quaderni Rossi*, the rediscovery of ideas of the Johnson-Forest and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* groups (Clever, 1979: p65). The break with orthodoxy that took place with the early *Operaismo* differs from the examples examined so far, as it did not involve a new analysis of Russia. Nevertheless, it has been described as 'a veritable "Copernican revolution" against the Marxism derived from the Third International' which involved a 'reassessment of aspects' of Marxism (Turchetto, 2008: p287). The context of this new approach was an attempt to understand the use of Taylorism and the new forms of supervision and control in the factories of Italy. It required the development of new analytical tools which were sought through a radical re-reading of Marx. The work of *Quaderni Rossi* in the early 1960s signalled the beginning of the *Operaismo*.

These analytical tools were used to search for resistance against the new forms of capitalist organisation. The position of workers' autonomy developed through the journals informed the methodological approaches that followed. The research focussed on the form and content of workers self-activity. Steve Wright (2002: p32) argues that 'most were guilty, in the words of Lelio Basso of "positing the centre of gravity of struggle within the factory".' The focus on the factory led to a series of further developments of the workers' inquiry as a methodological approach. Marx's (1938) workers' inquiry was rediscovered and republished in *Quaderni Rossi* (Lanzardo, 1965). There were studies of historic struggles of the working class like Sergio Bologna's (1972) research on examples of workers' councils and the struggle for workers control. Mario Tronti and others focused on 'retracing and going behind the rise of Fordism,' with an examination of the 'relation between class composition and working class organization' (Clever, 1979: p67).

Romano and Stone's (1946) *The American Worker* was translated into Italian (Romano, 1955), alongside Daniel Mothé's writings from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and 'the Italians were influenced by and drew on this Franco-American experience of the direct examination of workers' struggles' (Clever, 1979: p66).

The American example in particular was ‘an important reference point’, and the translations of the Johnson-Forest Tendency’s work ‘probably received wider circulation and discussion in Italy than in the United States (Cleaver, 1979: p66).’ Wright (2002: p24) argues that both the American and French examples ‘provided corroborative evidence of what they took to be the most important of their own discoveries.’

The first concerted attempt at a workers’ inquiry took place at the FIAT car factory in Turin. There had been a series of industrial conflicts in the car industry at the end of the 1950s, ‘with the glaring exception of FIAT’ (Wright, 2002: p35). Vittorio Rieser (2001: p1) illustrates in an interview how those involved wanted to conduct an inquiry in a factory where struggles were actually taking place, but Raniero Panzieri argued against it saying: ‘No! We have to take up the questions and issues in FIAT, and the only means of doing this is enquiry (Inchiesta).’ The choice of FIAT as a subject for the inquiry was deliberate. To those on the left in Italy, ‘FIAT evoked images of poor working conditions, company unionism, and a docile workforce besotted with consumerism’ (Wright, 2002: p47). Therefore the choice of the firm represented the opportunity to test the theory that it would be possible to uncover the processes that were taking place at FIAT and understand the potential for future conflict in the factory.

The inquiry involved an investigation into the subjectivity of the workers employed in the factory. The local trade union provided access to the factory and the opportunity to conduct a study in contact with the workers themselves (Wright, 2002: p35). The inquiry was therefore able to proceed with interviews with FIAT workers and union activists at the factory. The results were detailed in the report by Romano Alquati (1975), which although Wright (2002: p46) argues was ‘somewhat impressionistic and rudimentary’, posed important questions. In the interviews the workers would move from criticising their individual job to broader questions in the factory. The criticisms put forward – ‘despite its often confused and naive form . . . revealed a preoccupation with “the problem of workers’ management, even if these young workers have never heard the expression”’ (Wright, 2002: p50). The study builds on the concepts of workers self-management, a theme that runs through much of the work of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The report aimed to use the workers’ inquiry as an organising tool, gaining contact with workers and attempting to understand the processes taking place, specifically to understand how and why the factory had not seen industrial conflict in the previous wave of struggle.

The methodological component of the workers’ inquiry was elaborated further in the *Quaderni Rossi* and the theorists around it than in either the Johnson-Forest Tendency or *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. There was one particular issue, the

difference between inquiry and co-research, which resulted in debates in the journal. A distinction was drawn between the inquiry 'from above' and inquiry 'from below', of which 'the latter was favoured by Romano<sup>1</sup> and others.' For the group at the time, 'this was an abstract dispute between two sociological approaches' (Rieser, 2001: p4). Although the distinction between 'from below' and 'from above' is useful, it was argued that 'Co-Ricerca' or co-research:

is a fundamental method, but it requires being in a condition where you are pursuing enquiry with workers that you are organizing or workers that are already organized and therefore in either case strictly related to political work. As a small group we were not in the position to do this and neither were the unions that were able to organize workers in FIAT. (Rieser, 2001: p4)

In the case described by Rieser it is therefore necessary to use traditional research methods. It is described as being abstract because the conditions for pursuing co-research were not present. However, 'if the conditions are there, this is clearly the best method.' Traditional research methods can be used to 'acquire knowledge of the situation', and that includes the use of 'quantitative questionnaires (of which data must nevertheless always be approached with a critical eye)' (Rieser, 2001: p4).

This debate opened up the question of how to approach the use of sociological tools, however, the 'search for a meeting point between Marxism and sociology' (Wright, 2002: p23) encounters a series of difficulties. Marxism contains within it a political suspicion of certain forms of sociology, whereas sociology contains a suspicion of politics – especially in terms of a political conception of the working class. This creates an instability in the combination of the two, something that can be seen in the tension between the continued use of sociological tools in the inquiries and the search for other ways to inject the political component into the project.

The hostility towards sociology is evident in the example of Alquati's attempt at an inquiry at the Olivetti factory. Although initially the militants who were members of the PSI (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, the Italian Socialist Party) were prepared to participate, the rest of the workers were 'more cautious' because of the 'contributions made by previous left sociologists to the intensifications of labour', and were not prepared to take part (Wright, 2002: p54). To clarify this, it is worth considering that management use techniques – at least similar in parts – to gain a better understanding of the processes of production:

The managers assume . . . the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then the

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1 referring to Romano Alquati rather than Paul Romano.

classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae. (Taylor, 1967: p36)

As Braverman (1999: p60) has argued, these kind of investigations – starting with Taylor’s own project at the Midvale Steel company – not only laid the groundwork for the intense supervision of modern production, but also involved ‘a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production.’ Sociological tools can therefore be used in the process of knowledge theft, gaining an understanding of production from the point of view of the worker, and using it to extend the methods of control in the workplace.

The politics of knowledge plays an important role in the understanding of how to use sociological tools in a workers’ inquiry. For Tronti (1966: p18) ‘the weapons for proletarian revolts have always been taken from the bosses’ arsenals’, but the question of which tools and how they are used requires attention. Wright (2002: p24) argues that the conclusion of the debate about sociology in *Quaderni Rossi* was that there were ‘insights offered by certain sociological techniques’ and that these ‘could indeed play an important part in the reinvigoration of Marxism.’ But as Cesare Bermani and Sergio Bologna (1977: p31) have argued, the interview and questionnaire methods used in *Quaderni Rossi*, were ‘even if it passed for sociology, at bottom oral history.’ As Wright (2002: p24) has pointed out, ‘the uncritical use of these tools has frequently produced a register of subjective perceptions which do no more than mirror the surface of capitalist social relations.’

The kind of partisan knowledge that the workers’ inquiry has the potential to produce begins from a very specific starting point. This approach starts with an understanding of a unique working class perspective linked to a political position rather than the experience of work. In doing so it forms a political epistemology which differs from the sociological conception. This is asserted by Tronti (1966: p53) in his claim to ‘ferocious *unilaterality*’, and that this:

Class science was to be no less partial than that of capital; what it alone could offer, however, was the possibility of destroying the thraldom of labour once and for all. (Wright, 2002: p38)

This new form of inquiry held important differences to that of the Johnson-Forest Tendency or *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Haider and Mohandesi (2013) argue that:

No longer was the goal . . . to discover universal proletarian attitudes, or even the content of socialism, but to access a specifically *political logic*, which emerged from the *working-class viewpoint* – a consequence of the difficult relation between strategy and science represented by Marx’s theoretical practice.

To understand the significance of Tronti's argument it is necessary to return briefly to the discussion of chapter ten of Marx's (1976: p415-6) *Capital*. The 'worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it.' Starting as a seller of their own labour power, the workers come to the conclusion that they 'have to put their head together . . . as a class' so 'they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital.' For Tronti (1966: p202) this is '*a political leap*', and 'It is the leap that the passage through production provokes in what we can call the *composition of the working class* or even the *composition of the class of workers*' (quoted in Haider and Mohandesi, 2013).

This concept of class composition is an important step for the workers' inquiry. It refocuses attention on the autonomy of the working class, not only by seeking to give a voice to workers, but understanding that capital attempts to 'incorporate the working class within itself as simply labour power', while the 'working class affirms itself as an independent class-for-itself only through struggles which rupture capital's self reproduction' (Clever, 1979: p66). Therefore the inquiry aims to uncover the composition of the working class at particular points or in different contexts to understand how struggle will develop. While the political component has been summarised by Alquati in a straightforward way:

Political militants have always done *conricerca*. We would go in front of the factory and speak with workers: there cannot be organization otherwise. (quoted in Roggero, 2010: p3)

The method itself becomes a way to develop strategies for the working class to overthrow capital through its own self activity. This is clarified further by Gigi Roggero (2010: p4):

Alquati taught us that the problem is to grasp the truth, not to describe it. For the capacity to anticipate a tendency is not an intellectual artifice but the compass of the militant and the condition for the possibility of organization.

## Contemporary Inquiries

There is a tradition of conducting similar research in academia. There have been studies involving 'primary material of academic researchers, first-hand accounts marshalled by journalists and autobiographical testimonies of workers themselves' (Taylor et al., 2009: p7). From the 1970s there were a number of critical studies that sought to understand the workplace. These included Huw Beynon's (1973) *Working for Ford*, Anna Pollert's (1981) *Girls, Wives, and Factory Lives*, Ruth Cavendish's (1982) *Women on the Line*, or a number of studies by Michael Burawoy (1979) starting with *Manufacturing Consent*. However, as this



article has sought to argue there is an important difference between studies in a workplace and workers' inquiries, the first seeks only to research and the second is also a political project.

The tradition of participatory action research has the potential to go beyond the limitations of pure academic research. The orientation aims 'to create participative communities of inquiry' and encourage 'a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or lesser extent as co-researchers' (Reason and Bradbury, 2008: p1). This seeks to move research out of the ivory tower of academia to engage in the world outside it. The project, Reason and Bradbury (2008: p5) argue must contain a 'liberating and emancipatory dimension' otherwise it will be 'a shadow of its full possibility and will be in danger of being co-opted by the status quo.' Paul Brook and Ralph Darlington (2013: p240) discuss the possibilities of developing an 'organic public sociology of work' basing itself in this tradition, but highlight how 'the ebb and flow of struggle 'from below' obviously affects the opportunities.' It is worth drawing on these traditions in academia, especially those starting from a perspective like this, as they can inform the initial stages of inquiry.

An attempt to take theory out of the academy and directly into the workplace was undertaken in the *Hotlines* project; a workers' inquiry into call centres in Germany. The introduction states that they wanted to combine their 'rage against the daily exploitation with the desire and search for the struggles that can overcome it.' The project aimed to 'understand the class reality at this point, be part of the conflicts and intervene' (Kolinko, 2002). This introductory statement is clear in its intentions, following in the footsteps of the previous examples discussed in this article, with specific reference to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Quaderni Rossi*. The difference in this case was the small number of people involved which limited the scale of the project. This is not to claim that any of the groups discussed before were mass parties, but it also means the project outlined is easier to reproduce with limited resources.

The project involved a group of militants engaging in discussions, working in a call centre, and collectively writing up the experience over a period of three years. They worked in ten different call centres and included discussions with other groups in Europe, USA, and Australia. The explicit nature of the inquiry was detailed as an attempt to understand 'the context between the daily cooperation of the workers and their forms of struggle and finding the new (communist) sociality within' (Kolinko, 2002). The writers argue that similar projects 'in all areas of exploitation, not just those of "wage labourers"' are worth undertaking, but that for it to be a workers' inquiry workers must be the subject. For the

workers' inquiry to be viable, they argue that there are two criteria. Firstly exploited people need to meet collectively, something which is a problem with people outside of the workplace, particularly with the unemployed. Secondly whether the struggles impact on other workers and in doing so interrupt the accumulation of capital. They point out that this is a problem with catering workers, or other workers whose 'strikes have little effect on the creation of capital overall.' This applies to other sectors, 'universities, cleaning and... most call centres' (Kolinko, 2002). However, these workers do have an impact on other workers and other processes under capitalism.

The workers' inquiry itself was divided into different stages. The first stage was called the 'pre-inquiry.' This involved research the workplace: academic and news articles, information from trade unions. These would then be used in theoretical discussions amongst the group aiming to collectively develop 'theoretical knowledge' which could be compared with 'our everyday life experience at the call centre.' The next stage would be conducting interviews, both with themselves and other workers in the call centre to develop further insights. The interviews were intended as the opening stage of a discussion about the possibilities of struggle. A further aim was to encourage other militants to take part in further workers' inquiries so that experiences could be shared (Kolinko, 2002).

The possibility of resistance and organisation was of particular interest for the Kolinko (2002) inquiry. Searching in the call centre for struggles to intervene in was an explicit aim of the research. It blurs the distinction between the workers' inquiry as an organisational tool and as a method of knowledge production, an issue which emerged in the previous part of this chapter. Although the researchers did not find struggles to intervene and engage in, their often frank and honest analysis of the project they undertook is revealing. They conclude by saying that 'the absence of open workers' struggles limited our own room for "movement".' In terms of intervention this created a complication they describe when they pose the question: 'what is the point in leaflets and other kind of interventions at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to?' (Kolinko, 2002).

### **Towards a Method for a Workers' Inquiry Today**

The varied tradition of workers' inquiry is a rich one. Although this article has only touched on a particular moments it has sought to draw out a number of inspirations that can be used to inform a workers' inquiry today. The project laid out by Marx is still ongoing. There is no 'state capitalist' moment today that can provide a clear point of differentiation from an existing orthodoxy, but that that

certainly does not mean there is no need to critically engage with the changing world. There are significant changes that require attention: new forms of work, the impact of neoliberalism, the possibilities for resistance and organisation all pose serious challenges for Marxists and the left more generally.

The workers' inquiry provides a potential means to do this. By combining the insights of previous attempts – from Marx, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and *Operaismo* – with the tools of contemporary academia – sociological and ethnographic methods and the insights of participatory action research for example – it is possible to sketch out an inquiry for today. The framework provided by Kolinko (2002) is a useful starting point, as is the reflexive and open criticism they themselves raise. There needs to be an initial stage, like that of the inquiry 'from above' discussed by the Italian Workerists, where the aim is to develop theoretical insights and access to a workplace. This should be followed by a detailed investigation of the workplace itself, either through auto-ethnographic methods or with contact with workers. The aim is to move towards an inquiry 'from below', a form of co-research that breaks down the separation between researcher and subject. At its core the project is one of knowledge production and political organisation, and there has to be an awareness of this tension. The workers' inquiry cannot simply be limited to an academic tool for refreshing theory. This connexion between theory and practice is crucial for both the component parts.

A contemporary inquiry can draw on many more tools than either Marx or the later attempts had at their disposal. There are a number of digital resources that can be used: online surveys, discussions boards, and blogs. These methods make it significantly easier to collect and share experiences of workplaces. The prevalence of these also lowers the barriers to writing, and it is a much more common experience now to write, even if briefly on social media. This greatly widens the potential scope, both in terms of how inquiries can be conducted, but also where and by or with whom.

What are needed are more attempts at workers' inquiries: either where we work ourselves, or where we have contact with workers. They should follow on from Marx's (1843) call for a '*ruthless criticism of the existing order*, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be.' This is the foundation for the workers' inquiry today: the importance of studying exploitation and resistance in the workplace and why this has to be closely tied to a project for the radical transformation of society.

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