

Workers' Inquiry

Militant research and the business school

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The autonomist political theorist and strategist Mario Tronti in his classic book *Operai e capital* argued that weapons for working class revolt have always been taken from the bosses' arsenal.

At first glance this easily can come off as a kind of hyperbole or even a contradiction. Has not it often been argued, to use feminist writer Audre Lorde's phrasing, that it is not possible to take apart the master's house with the master's tools? Despite the contradictions and tensions contained within his argument, Tronti said this with good reason, for he was writing from a social and historical context where this is just what was taking place. Autonomous politics in Italy emerging at this time greatly benefited from borrowing ideas and methods from bourgeois sociology and social sciences, as well as tools of management theory and industrial relations. And using these tools proceeded to build massive cycles of struggle that vastly changed the grounds of politics in the country and from which people have drawn much inspiration since then.

Of these adaptations the best known and most successful is the development of practices of workers' inquiry as integral part of class composition analysis. Workers' inquiry was developed at a juncture of Italian history characterized by rapid industrialization (the so-called 'economic miracle') and massive migration from southern Italy to the rapidly industrializing north. At this time the methods of industrial sociology and proto-human relations management were being introduced to more effectively discipline the recalcitrant and rebellious working class. Many migrants from southern Italy, moving from an agricultural context to industrial conditions that were anything but ideal, were both aggravated with the working conditions in the factories as well as the relatively cold reception they received from the recognized trade unions and parties. The Italian Communist Party, for various reasons, had become disconnected from the needs and desires of the working class population, and tended more to act as a disciplinary mechanism rather than as a force for liberation.

It is at this point that practices of workers' inquiry emerge. Rather than assuming too much about the conditions of the working class, or what is politically possible, why not borrow from the tools of the social sciences to investigate the existing conditions? That is, to turn the tools developed with bourgeois thought and management theory to investigate working class conditions, and through that to work and build from the realities, experience, and conditions of the wildcat strikes and autonomous struggles emerging at the time. To work from them and build upon their possibility rather than to make assumptions about what they are possible of accomplishing or their nature. Thus workers inquiry developed within autonomist movements as a sort of parallel sociology, one based on a radical re-reading of Marx (as well as Max Weber) against the interpretations and politics of the communist party and the official unions. It also borrowed heavily from the work and ideas of figures such as Danilo Dolci, a social reformer who used questionnaires and life histories among the poor.

What I want to suggest here is that at this juncture it is desirable to rethink workers inquiry and class composition in relation to the business school. In particular, to what extent is it possible to utilize spaces within business school and management departments for engaging in forms of workers' inquiry and militant research useful to ongoing organizing efforts and movements. This might seem a quite strange proposal, for it is more often that the

business school is the location from which processes of class decomposition are launched, where the tools for the more efficient and intensive exploitation of labor are developed and circulated through future managerial populations as they are socialized into, these roles. And it is true that business schools are deeply ambivalent places. The rise of the business school during the 1980s is closely connected to the neoliberal assault against the gains of movements during the 1960s and 1970s. But this is precisely why such a suggestion is all the more pressing in relevant: to understand the enemy from within and develop tools for the recomposition of cycles of struggle by stealing from the master's workshop.

The business school is an interesting site of inquiry itself, precisely because the role it has and continued to play within the workings of the regeneration of capitalism. Most obviously the business school is the space where new managers and typically lower to middle level functionaries for capital are trained. But perhaps more importantly, business schools also function as important sites for the development of responses to existing struggles, finding ways to turn demands for flexibility into precarity, autonomy into self-managing job teams, and other such operations that render movement demands into mechanisms of accumulation.

To the degree that we live in the social factory, where capitalism strives to subsume all of life into the workings of one diffuse factory, all universities are business schools. What are the art, media, and language departments other than training grounds for the cognitive, affective, linguistic, and cultural workers? That is they are sites of the socialization of productive capacities into forms useable by capital. This may seem less obvious in certain departments, but while the appearance of not being directly involved in flows of capitalist development may facilitate the denial of the reality, it does not mean that is true. This is a condition that most students within business and management departments are free from. That is, they are less likely to have illusions (or at least this particular kind of illusion) about the nature of university education. Many are there simply to attempt to gain a position with a bit more security in their life, or because they didn't know what to do and their parents thought it was a good idea, and so forth. Many do not have any particular ideological attachment to capitalism at all. This is a point that was presented to me quite starkly when I asked in the middle of a recent lecture for all those in the room to raise their hand if it is possible to be ethical within capitalism. Out of the approximately 150 students in the lecture theatre, only one person raised their hand.

To launch a project of workers' inquiry and class composition analysis inside the business school means to work from its existing resources and conditions. This is a terrain marked by opportunities for intervention, even if there is a degree of ambivalence in such a proposal. While the resources available for these projects are by no means infinite or even necessarily spectacular, they provide or can provide a space of possibility that can be utilized. In a minor way, this is what there are already, clusters of people engaged in (of which I have been working as a part for the past several years) in universities in Leicester, Queen Mary, Essex, and other locations. Over the past several years we have coordinated a number of gatherings, seminars, and events drawing from autonomous traditions of thought and working towards creating spaces for militant research within the unexpected space of the business school environment. There is also the work and ideas of many people involved in the continued development of 'Critical Management Studies,' which is a strain of organization theory and research that grew out of labor process debates and sociology during the 1980s, expanding from then to also include research drawing from feminism, queer theory, and postcolonial thought.

This is not to say that such is an unproblematic endeavor, or that it does not have its own tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences. Where there are movements and researchers organizing and addressing the horrors of capitalist exploitation, oppression, destruction, and related dynamics, the specter of recuperation is never far behind. This is readily apparent when manifested in forms like corporate social responsibility, business ethics, and research into equality and diversity, which often serve to apparently address these concerns but more often than not act as little more than safety valves at best. Furthermore, they are used to find ways to make social insurgency and energies into new levers for accumulation, to foster yet another spirit of capitalism and keep the whole bloody mess propped up a little longer. The point is not to deny or ignore the risk of recuperation, but to the degree that these dynamics confront all social movements, and achieve any measure of success, it is by working through and against this ambivalence that recomposing radical politics is possible. The business school thus becomes one possible location from where it is possible to launch inquiries and investigations to develop knowledge and research useful to emerging movements and organizing. Or to borrow the phrasing of Italian political theorist Raniero

Panzieri, “the method of inquiry is a permanent point of reference for our politics and underlies the illustration of this or that specific fact and investigation.” As the grounds of politics are transformed by the power growing compositions and cycles of struggle of autonomous movements, workers’ inquiry and militant research keep open the question of how to intervene in the composition of the present to work from the liberatory future already existing in the present.

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