

The Proletariat and Self-Emancipation

Or, Can a subject seeking to abolish itself as a class achieve self-realisation?

That “the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself” (*MECW* v. 24, p. 269) is the very foundation of the socialist movement and the key concept of the *Communist Manifesto*. It is clearly expressed in “The Holy Family” as follows:

“The proletariat ... is compelled as proletariat to abolish itself and thereby its opposite, private property, which determines its existence, and which makes it proletariat. ... When the proletariat is victorious, it by no means becomes the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it, private property.” (*MECW* v. 4, p. 36)

And the General Rules of the International affirms:

“That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” (*IWMA* 1864)

It is widely recognised nowadays that *any* social group can be genuinely liberated only by its own efforts, and a whole series of liberation struggles have been fought over the past century which have proven the truth of this insight: the numerous national liberation movements which won independence from colonialism, the civil rights movement of the American negroes, the women’s liberation movement, and the fight by homosexuals, people with disabilities and many other groups against their specific forms of exclusion or denigration. In none of these cases however was the movement conscious of “abolishing itself,” but only the specific objectionable social conditions which gave rise to the movement, which were abolished once the appropriate measures were institutionalised in new social arrangements which had the necessary side-effect – often regretted (see Jamison 1991) – of demobilising the social movement. But it is the social movement itself which gives the social group its self-conscious identity, as opposed to the group being simply an objective sociological category that somehow knows itself as a sociological category. Marx’s conception was that the sociological category of proletariat would be abolished through the abolition of private property in the means of production. This task could only be achieved by the proletariat as a self-conscious class/movement continuing in all its strength until the job was done. Metaphorically, it would cast the last spadeful of dirt onto its own grave.

The idea that the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself, is one of the claims that separated Marx from Hegel. Although Hegel is the source of a great deal of how we see the development of self-consciousness in terms of social movements and ideals, he always looked to the more educated and politically emancipated classes for social progress. Indeed, slavery was not ended by a revolt of the slaves and Hegel (1821) did not expect ‘the rabble’ to be an engine of social progress. Rather, he lumped the proletariat in with the bourgeoisie as part of the “business class” on the basis that he believed that they shared economic interests and participated in a common way of life. In his earliest works (1802) Hegel called upon the wealthiest members of the community to voluntarily redistribute their own wealth. The way history unfolded in the century after Hegel’s death proved that Marx was right and Hegel wrong on this question. For 100 years after the 1830s the organised working class was the chief motor of social progress and nation-building.

The problem lies, I believe, in the idea of a social class abolishing not only the special conditions of its oppression but abolishing *itself* as a class. And it is fundamentally an objective historical problem, not a problem of conception. Marx was not wrong on this question, but we have for a long time now been confronted with the objective problem posed for a social movement which aims to abolish the very conditions of existence of

its own class basis. A social movement can only be organised around an ideal, which represents a morally superior relation of the social group concerned to itself and the wider community. This concept is meant to replace the existing concept which is responsible for the denigrating and exploitative position being negated. The liberated social group is always a 'universal' class in the sense that its emancipation invariably requires, to one extent or another, a transformation of the entire community. And there is always some sense in which the social group 'abolishes' itself by bringing about these new social conditions. The African-American of today is not the same as the Negro of 100 years ago; today's woman is not the same woman as her grandmother, and nor are the worlds in which they live.

The spirit of self-sacrifice, ethical life and self-consciousness of a movement is derived from the concept of itself as a universal class. Indeed the concept of socialist society did, and to an extent still does, provide such an ideal, and the ethics of solidarity, mutual aid and internationalism which inspired the workers movement for a century were directly drawn from this ideal. It proved possible for proletarians to take pride in their social status in the light of the morally superior mode of life which was exhibited in the norms and ideals of the workers movement and implicit in their social position. To this day, the trade union movement prosecutes the class struggle, motivated to counter economic exploitation and redress economic inequality. Insofar as workers have transcended the aim of improving the lot of the wage-workers as wage-workers, they have been motivated mainly by a vision of a better world which broadly corresponds to their existing mode of life while negating that which is abhorrent about that life – wage workers who are better paid, healthier and more educated, etc., with a much stronger and broader public sector, democratically controlled and free of privatisation and subordination to capital. As has often been remarked, trade unionism at root represents "collective individualism" just like the AMA (Australian Medical Association) or the Coal Council. The actual union movement is a unity of socialistically inspired activism, and an economically self-interested mass membership.

The experience of a revolutionary generation – which wins national independence, eradicates institutionalised racial prejudice or gains equal pay and access to formerly inaccessible social positions, but then finds that their children take these benefits for granted and little care to defend them, far less treat with respect those customs and practices which were necessary to make those gains – is universal. Once the worst excesses of oppression are thrown off, even while smaller insults remain in place and much more remains to be done, a new generation ceases to find the vision which motivated its parents worth fighting for. Other issues seem more pressing. Every woman today supports all the aims of feminism, including those yet to be realised, but the majority (at least of young women) claim not to be feminists.

Is it any wonder that the trade unions and the great socialist and communist parties which created the welfare states and universal benefits are no longer able to summon masses to the barricades like they once did?

One of the struggles which the trade union movement in Australia regards amongst its most important successes is the fight for superannuation. Whereas the first generation of unionists successfully fought for universal old age pensions, which remain in place though eroded by inflation, the union leaders of the past several decades have proudly collaborated in undermining this universal right by winning relatively generous compulsory private pensions for all those in employment, bringing benefits in proportion to wages earned. By the time a worker retires their living is predominantly derived from the proceeds of capital via share ownership by their pension funds. My own experience as a Marxist and union activist was that not only was this objective promoted by the leadership, but was embraced by the mass membership with a tenacity

which would not be denied. So called 'self-funded retirees' escape the stigma of those who are dependent on 'welfare', even though it is difficult to specify objective distinctions between superannuation pensions and government pensions which mark the superannuant out as 'deserving'.

If anything would serve as a means of abolishing the proletariat as a class, surely it would be a policy which ensures that every employed worker aspires to become and actually eventually becomes an owner of capital? The 'abolition' of the proletarian social position of each individual proletarian is to be furthered not by abolishing private ownership of the means of production, but by *extending* it, thus at the same time extending the subordination of the mass of the population to dependence on wage-labour and the expansion of capital. Let there be no misunderstanding: superannuation does not abolish the sociological class of those dependent on wage labour and denied control of their own means of production. Indeed this category of persons is larger than ever. But it does function as one among a number of processes, to undermine the proletariat as a self-conscious social movement and identity.

The historic objectives of the workers' movement which remain treasured both amongst its leaders and the rank-and-file, are the universal and free provision of public education and health and welfare benefits for illness, injury, disability and unemployment. Not that these are free from threat. A substantial section of working class people purchase private health insurance and send their children to private schools, whilst fees for tertiary education are approaching levels which will restore university education to the status of a privilege of the bourgeoisie and the professional classes. Public health and school education remain in place and so far, in Australia at least, have withstood pressure for their reduction to the status of a welfare 'safety net'. In general, the public provision of social goods remains a focus of class struggle. If there is anything which unites a significant proportion of the population against capital, it is the protection of public services such as education and health against the inroads of capital. (I am talking only of the Australian context here.) The only sense in which we have a class of wage workers dedicated to the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production is the existence of a constituency for public enterprise in the domain of universal goods. On the other hand, capital seems to have an undisputed grip on production of the majority of goods. The utilities – gas, electricity, water and postage – are almost entirely under the sway of capital now, and increasingly the 'private sector' gains its share of public sector activity as suppliers of goods and services, and the various forms of out-sourcing and privatisation.

Every public sector enterprise is organised along the same lines as a capitalist enterprise, obliged to balance a budget and employ wage labour to provide services, just like any subsidiary of a capitalist corporation, the board of directors of which is elected by 'shareholders' – only in this case the 'shareholders' are the entire adult population. This is a conception of government which has a great deal of purchase in the community, in fact, to the extent of many people accepting that the government ought to make a profit by spending less on services than it collects in taxes, and to the extent that the government itself is now an investor in the Stock Market, alongside the superannuation funds. Capital makes sure that it extracts its share of surplus from the labour of public sector employees and that the actions of the government are securely circumscribed through its control of public opinion. The share of total wealth subsumed under capital is such now that activities which have long been community and leisure activities are now only possible, it seems, thanks to 'sponsorship'. Governments are apparently too poor to build infrastructure without borrowing from the banks, so that in addition to paying three times over for their house citizens now pay three times over for public infrastructure. The wealth controlled by the finance sector dwarfs that of the government.

This situation is a legacy of the reformist policy adopted by the labour movement a century ago, and in particular, the post World War Two settlement which averted world socialist revolution by means of a strategic retreat to the welfare state.

The crisis of capitalism marking the end of World War Two, leaving half of Europe occupied by the victorious Red Army, and very soon half of Asia under control of the Communist International led to a settlement in which the demands of the international workers' movement were in a large measure met, but at the same time, the people of the colonial world were excluded from this arrangement and women, blacks and other groups saw their just demands ignored.

That the reformist perspective prevailed over the revolutionary perspective is due to the effects of Taylorism in fragmenting the proletariat into innumerable class layers, the majority of whom to a greater or lesser degree would share the boss's perspective. Having already been fragmented by Taylorism, working class solidarity was finally dissolved by the mediation of workers' mutual aid by the capitalist state. Under conditions where no person could feel that the state was *their* state, the provision of aid by the state on the basis of individual right, from coffers filled by generalised taxation, mutual aid and solidarity was replaced by individual entitlements and universal individual suffrage in geographical electorates. There is no place in this for the workers movement other than to drum up votes for the Labor Party on election day.

But the fact remains that there exists no other source from which a movement capable of overthrowing capitalism could be drawn than the working class (here meant in the sociological rather than political sense). That much has never changed. But actually, a class which is already independent of capital would in many senses be better placed than a class which is directly subordinated to capital. Public sector employees (not just the civil service, but teachers, university staff, municipal workers, hospital, health service and aged care workers, ABC staff, etc., perhaps even the police and military? but alas no longer gas, water, electricity and telecoms workers) are a readymade corps of organised workers, in the main dedicated to public service, which also makes up a very substantial section of the unionised and left-voting working class.

While the public service could not in itself transform into a revolutionary social movement – in fact it is more likely that it would begin with an attack on the public service or a protest against it! Were a self-organised social movement to *penetrate* the public service or section of it, and through a protest against it, seek an *alliance* with it, then I think most of the technical tasks of reorganising social and economic life could be overcome. All the more so if the movement could also win the “battle of democracy.” The question is whether an institution can be re-oriented to its essential mission by means of a social movement which penetrates it and promotes a new concept of its social role. Changing the concept of the relevant activity doubtless entails both changing the conception of the government of the day as well as that of the public service operatives. I do not at all mean achieving socialism by administrative means, directed by government. On the contrary. The very first thing that a new concept of public service has to do is to *negate* the concept of administration of society. It would address itself to the bodies administering aspects of society with the aim of abolishing them as administrative functions.

The perspective implied in this observation does not exclude either the aphorism “Be the change you wish to see in the world” or the placing of demands on government, but constitutes a specific unity of the two perspectives.

To develop its new concept of how some public service ought to be carried out the movement must implement that concept insofar as it is possible. But a concept must be objectified, and it is in the objectification of the concept in the practical, symbolic and material domains that a concept is irreversibly realised.

Examples are the trade union movement (which has caused minimum working conditions and wages to be secured in legislation and awards), the women's movement (which has also objectified many of its demands in legislation, as well as transforming custom and practice in relations between the sexes), the women's health movement and the AIDS movement (Power 2011) (which changed practices in the health services and even in clinical science) and so on. This is in fact the normal path of social progress.

The remaining problem is that the capitalist mode of production is a totalised, global regime of power, presupposing gigantic cultural development for it to be transcended, and subsumes so many distinct projects and institutions within a single concept, capable of surviving changes to any of its functional components.

The idea of 'regimes of accumulation' of the Regulation School in which the totalising concept of 'capitalist mode of production' is disassembled into a series of institutions interlocked in such a way as to stabilise a historically specific instantiation of a mode of capital accumulation. This conception means that dramatic changes could be in the institutions of wage determination, or state form, or monetary policy, norms of consumption, distribution and circulation, etc. – but capital accumulation could continue by adapting to the new environment. But on the other hand, this does not lead us to the conclusion that capital is infinitely adaptable. It suggests that social arrangements can be successively modified in ways which may enhance the prospects for future changes without triggering catastrophic collapse.

The establishment of free public education up to the age of 16 is undoubtedly a gain which smooths the path to social revolution in the future. So far it has proved to be an irreversible reform. Likewise, free public health services, the emancipation of women, etc.. Such progressive reforms also underpin a specific mode of capital accumulation. The fight for free public education, something which has been widely recognised as an essential element for civilised life, was a gain of the working class movement and was resisted by capital nonetheless. Likewise free public health services. Each such project can therefore probably expect to win the support of important sections of the bourgeoisie as well as the working class. Such projects are always collaborative. But socialists can still perceive which projects further our long-term objective: the abolition of capital.

What is foreshadowed here is a successive modification of the concept of 'worker' – one cannot even use this word now because it is so laden with connotations which are extraneous and counterproductive – let us just say 'productive citizen' ('working family' is intended to take the concept in the opposite direction), which at every stage posits a transformation of social relations such that the productive citizen is able to live in a way which is true to their real nature and their real place in social life, which necessarily more and more isolates capital and contains and finally terminates its capacity to control social life in its own inhuman interests. This perspective presupposes collaborative projects which aim for specific new institutions or changes in existing institutions, but accept from the outset that their existence as a social movement is only transitory. This is not a unitary project, but requires the sewing together of an immensely intricate tapestry, each fibre of which poses different challenges and engages different interests and motivations.

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