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Is Syndicalism Class Reductionist?

Tom Wetzel

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Most activists who use this “class reductionist” refrain don’t just use it against syndicalism but against any emphasis on workplace struggle and organizing. It’s part of the so-called “retreat from class” of the past 30 years, especially in academic circles, where the charge originated.

The downplaying of race and gender was a general feature of the socialist movement in the late 19th Century and early 20th Century. This should not be denied. However, there is nothing inherently class reductionist in syndicalism as a strategic orientation.

Many who use this phraseology also don’t even know what “reductionism” means. They use it as just a slogan. But the term originated with logical positivism in the ’30s. The positivists proposed a program for the “unification of science” which assumed a kind of deterministic relationship between all the structures in the world studied by science and the “ultimate” structures studied by physics. The most successful unification that had occurred was between physics & chemistry. In the physical sciences, it could be shown that chemical traits can

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be fully explained in terms of underlying physical properties. This is an example of a “reduction” — in this case, chemical properties are “reduced” to physical properties. This reduction presupposed a deterministic relationship between the physical and chemical properties or structures.

For a “reduction” of things like gender and racialized structures to class to be successful, this would presuppose a deterministic social theory which would show how gender and racialized structures emerge from the class system and class conflict. The only available social theory that claimed to be deterministic in this way was the orthodox interpretation of “historical materialism” advanced by the German Marxists before World War 1 and then taken as orthodoxy by the Communist (Leninist) movement in the '30s and '40s.

But a social viewpoint that emphasizes the reality of class oppression and struggle doesn't have to embrace any such deterministic theory. Moreover the tendency in libertarian circles in the early 1900s was to reject a deterministic theory through greater emphasis on the self-activity of the class in the class struggle. Orthodox historical materialism tends to be “productivist” in seeing increasing labor productivity through capitalist development as “progressive” rather than as a way that capital uses technology to control the working class and reduce labor costs, and thus as based on a destructive logic. Syndicalism with its struggle against Taylorism and such did not agree with this “progressive” character of capitalist technical development but rather saw it as a class weapon.

In the '20s and '30s syndicalism's main enemy was the tendency towards repression and fascist movements, which were typically nationalist and racist, so the syndicalist International Workers Association in early '30s did a lot of educational work against racism and nationalism, especially against Nazism.

It seems to me also that the workforce itself has become increasingly heterogeneous over the course of the past 80 years with the widespread migrations of recent decades and bringing

in women increasingly into the workforce from the '20s on, and especially since the '50s and '60s.

This heterogeneity of the workforce means that within the workforce itself there are various groups who were subject to the non-class structures of oppression, and the capitalists have long used these to double down on oppression. In 20th century companies typically had racialized and gendered divisions of labor, with disfavored groups in the worse jobs and paid the least, etc.

The class solidarity which lies at the core of the syndicalist strategy has a dual character. On the one hand, developing common goals and aims to unite the class, but also developing solidarity with struggles specific to sub-groups of the class, who are subject to injuries or abuses that are specific to them.

This does actually have a fairly long history in syndicalism. For example in 1923 syndicalist unions in Peru carried out a general strike against an anti-Indian law that required the native peasantry to work for free on projects favored by the landlord class, such as building roads.

As far as recognizing class struggle spreading outside the workplace, there is quite a long history among syndicalists, going back to for example the rent strike in the early '20s in Vera Cruz, and when the Mexican CGT built a "revolutionary renters union" and were about to struggle for reduction of food prices when the nationalist government engaged in repression against them. In about 1925 Spanish syndicalist theorist Juan Peiro wrote a piece saying that the CNT in Spain needed to figure out how to work on larger social questions facing working class otherwise they would get bogged down into sectoral struggles against employers. He proposed the creation of neighborhood organizations. This led to debate in their newspaper, and lead eventually to the 1931 citywide rent strike and the creation by the CNT of neighborhood assemblies of CNT members to take up broader social questions.

These are examples of how syndicalists were aware of class struggle outside the workplace even in the earlier heyday of syndicalism between the early 1900s and the '30s.