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What is Class Consciousness?

A Reply to John Holloway

Tom Wetzel

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A crucial concept for understanding the potential for getting rid of the capitalist mode of production and replacing with a labor-managed mode of production is the concept of class formation. The idea is that a working class that has actually developed the “class consciousness”, cohesion, solidarity, confidence, organizational strength, and aspirations for control over their lives to challenge the owning and managing classes for control of the society doesn’t come into existence “automatically” or “spontaneously” due to being an oppressed and exploited class, subordinate to boss power, forced to seek jobs from the employers who run their firms as managerial autocracies.

Some left wing pundits confuse the working class situation with having a certain “identity”. But “identity” is a subjective concept, based on beliefs people have. The proletarian condition, on the other hand, is an objective situation. The working class don’t have our own means to a livelihood. If we are going to avoid dire situations like starvation, being kicked out of our apartment due to non-payment of rent, or being unable to buy needed medicines, we typically have to get a job, where we receive wages in exchange

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for putting our capacities to work at the disposal of the employer. This is an objective situation of being under the domination of the bosses.

Some left wing academics make the mistake of thinking “class consciousness” is merely the awareness of our being in this situation. An example of this mistake is this passage from John Holloway:

“We do not struggle as working class, we struggle against being working class...There is nothing good about...being ordered, commanded, separated from [control over] our product and process of production. Struggle arises not from the fact that we are working class but from the fact...we exist against and beyond being working class...In this sense working class identity is not something good...but...something to be fought against...The working class cannot emancipate itself in so far as it is working class. It is only in so far as we are not working class that the question of emancipation can even be posed...” (quoted approvingly by Chris Carlsson in “Nowtopia”)

Holloway shows here he doesn't understand either the working class situation or “class consciousness.” The working class are hired by the firms because they have the capacities, skills to make the products. The situation of subordination and exploitation leads directly to worker resistance. Workers band together, form organizing committees, form unions and engage in on the job actions and strikes. They also engage in protest actions at times in the streets — loot supermarkets, demonstrate, resist the cops. To the extent unions and strike actions and collective resistance at work are successful, workers gain some sense of power or leverage they have due to the fact they are necessary to the production process. Through building organizations and struggles they also develop

an understanding of the need for mutual support — for solidarity. Solidarity isn't just based on compassion for the person who is in struggle but also is based on the understanding of being in a similar situation, and you might need their solidarity at some point. As this kind of consciousness develops, it helps in getting people to support others who may be different than them in some way — a different immigrant status, different “racial” experience, different gender.

“Class consciousness” thus is understood traditionally by socialists as a kind of disposition in the working class, the tendency to be willing to get together with others to resist bosses or the powers-that-be, the tendency to support other working class people in struggle. This disposition waxes and wanes over time. In periods when resistance and mass actions are at low ebb, this tendency diminishes. If people don't see others supporting each other in things like strikes, people will tend to think “I'm on my own.” During periods when struggle is in full flood and widespread, with strikes occurring all over, thinking will tend to change, as people will be more aware of this potential power available to them.

Thus class formation is the protracted process where class consciousness grows as the working class increasingly “forms” itself into a more united social force, through the building of unions, strikes and other mass actions, overcoming of internal divisions in the working class such as on lines of gender or race, more actual links as working class-based organizations come together into coalitions or a united front. A study of working class history in USA shows this process of class formation building from the early 1900s into the 1930s, with the massive strike waves and union formation in that era as an expression of class formation advancing.

Just as class formation can happen, a process of class DE-formation can happen. This process began with the bureaucratization of unions after World War 2 and the domination of bureaucratic layers in unions and parties, and the more limited challenge to capital. Eventually this led to a collapse of unionism

in the neo-liberal era, from late 1970s on, and a collapse of strike resistance by workers. This was then reflected in declining “class consciousness” — a change in the general disposition to solidarity and resistance action in the working class that I described above.

The “autonomists” since the 1990s have tried to substitute the phrase “class composition” for class formation and “class decomposition” for de-formation. But I think this is not helpful because “class composition” is ambiguous. We can speak of the composition of the American working class in terms of the various groups present in workplaces — for example increasing presence of black and Latino workers and women in manufacturing and transportation industries. This is a different concept than class formation. They are related concepts because the challenge to building unity, unions and collective actions changes as the composition of the workforce changes. Unionism and working class movement building has to reflect, arise out of, the grievances of the actual people, which will vary among different groups of people.

Now, back to John Holloway. Why is Holloway wrong? He’s wrong because “working class consciousness” is not just awareness of being subordinate to bosses, or of having to get managers to hire you; it’s also about the need for resistance and solidarity AGAINST the power of the employers and managers. Holloway says there is no pride in being dominated. But workers do actually take pride in their abilities, and in accomplishing things in the work they do. My blue collar working class family taught me that it was necessary to learn skills, so you can make a social contribution in some way. And many of the types of work people do are socially necessary.

If the working class ran the industries, we’d want to run them differently than the capitalists do, create different technologies, provide more social support to people and more defense of the ecological commons. But we’d still be running them, doing the work, and the abilities working class have will be developed and put to use in a more socially advantageous way.