Frame: On Claude Lefort’s ‘L’Expérience Prolétarienne’

Socialisme ou Barbarie saw a new ‘problématique’ for revolutionary theory emerging from the East Berlin uprising and the French general strike of Summer 1953. Central to this new problématique was the elaboration of a notion of autonomy. Socialisme ou Barbarie’s initial understanding of the term designated strike actions that workers carried out beyond the control of, and in opposition to, the bureaucratic trade unions and political parties that adopted direct-democratic forms of self-organisation. The group connected direct democracy to the potentials continually posited in the course of the conflicts that shape everyday worker experience on the factory floor. Claude Lefort’s 1952 essay ‘L’expérience prolétarienne’, outlines the way to understand that experience. For the moment, suffice it to say that the group conceptualised this experience as being shaped by the basic contradiction of bureaucratic capitalism, and as following from the worker response and resistance to its effects. Actions like the East Berlin ‘June Days’ and the August PTT strike were both expressions of these conflicts and experiences that made linkages explicit. In their modes of self-organisation and the collective formulation of demands, autonomous actions were the ‘germ’ of revolution ‘from below’. The task of revolutionary theory was to comprehend, clarify, and situate this ‘germ’ by connecting it, on the one hand, back to the everyday experience at the point of production and, on the other, to a vision of revolution and of direct-democratic socialism. The task of revolutionary politics was to make this theoretical project as widely available as possible in order to help the ‘worker avant garde’ become more self-reflexive on the question of organisation, and more cognisant of the revolutionary implications of their actions.

‘L’expérience prolétarienne’ outlines a project for Socialisme ou Barbarie rooted in a vision of the worker and of worker experience that is derived from reading and interpreting ‘proletarian-documentary literature’. The project is the temporal inverse of the group’s collective approach to autonomous worker actions. In the latter, aspects of autonomous worker actions were linked retrospectively to conflicts that arose in the ordinary experience of production. Lefort proposes a time-forward form of revolutionary political action that presupposes a distinction between manifest and latent dimensions of worker experience and situates the dissemination of a comparative analysis and
interpretation of worker narratives as a production of social-imaginary significations that could unify and transform this latent register into the subjective basis of a form of proletarian class consciousness.

Because of Lefort's positions on organisation, for him there was a strict separation between what working people could write about, from ‘inside’, about their experience at the point of production and what revolutionary militants, who are outside of that experience, could otherwise access. From this follows the centrality of worker-autobiographical narratives. The second part of this chapter considers this source-material directly. Lefort envisioned Socialisme ou Barbarie's primary role in revolutionary politics as consisting of collecting and disseminating a wide range of these narratives, supplemented by comparative analyses and interpretations alongside systemic critiques of contemporary capitalism. But for reasons that will be touched on here, and explored in more detail in Chapter Five, the collection never materialised. Workers simply did not write. The second section examines some of the consequences of this unforeseen limitation. I analyse Paul Romano and Eric Albert’s first-person accounts of experience at the point of production as literary constructions that produced a specific ‘realism effect’ through the use of particular generic and linguistic conventions. By doing this, I hope to introduce a certain instability into the relation, which Socialisme ou Barbarie took as unproblematic, between shop-floor experience and its textual representation.

**Claude Lefort's 'L'expérience prolétarienne' (1952)**

The schema that ordered Socialisme ou Barbarie's conception of revolution relied upon the close examination of working-class experience. This put the group in little-explored territory. Even though traditional Marxism placed the proletariat at the conceptual and political center of its concerns, its treatment of the working class as the embodied expression of abstract economic forces foreclosed close analysis of concrete relations of production. It also evacuated questions of how the proletariat could act as a revolutionary agent by conceiving of revolution as a quasi-automatic result of contradictions that played out at the level of ‘objective forces’.1 French ‘human sciences’ had not yet begun producing researchers who took the French working class as a legitimate object of study. Through the 1950s, anthropology was dominated on the one hand by research on the ‘exotic’, and on the other by the conflict between structural anthropology and philosophy over which discipline ‘owned’ episte-

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