CHAPTER 5

Looking for the Working Class

Introduction

This chapter examines Socialisme ou Barbarie’s efforts to engage practically with the problems of organisation, politics and gaining wider access to worker experience through the medium of a ‘worker newspaper’. The chapter is organised in three parts. The first is an overview of the Correspondence project, which Socialisme ou Barbarie took as the model. Based in Detroit, the Correspondence collective operated in a field of cultural production quite different from the one at whose margins Socialisme ou Barbarie found itself. Rather than provide an account of that context (a task that another is encouraged to undertake) I focus on the collective as an interlocutor to Socialisme ou Barbarie and the paper as a counterpart to Tribune Ouvrière. The main themes are the intertwining of organisation and worker writing.

The second part examines the relations between Correspondence and Socialisme ou Barbarie. While the former was of fundamental importance, what Socialisme ou Barbarie collectively valued was the kinds of writing that Correspondence was able to elicit. Insofar as the Correspondence collective itself was concerned, both theoretically and practically, there were basic disagreements. The second part of the chapter illustrates this through the analysis of C.L.R. James’s presentation to the group in early 1956, and the range of responses to it. I then turn to Socialisme ou Barbarie’s theoretical appropriation of the Correspondence model, focusing on two key texts: Castoriadis’s ‘Sur le contenu du socialisme (I)’ and Daniel Mothé’s ‘Le problème d’un journal ouvrier’.

The two groups employed the same basic approach to linking revolutionary organisation and theory to new forms of autonomous worker action. They shared similar views on a socialism rooted in direct democracy. The differences over organisation that separated Correspondence and Socialisme ou Barbarie originated with divergent understandings of the status of socialism as it related to working-class experience. Correspondence saw worker culture as already

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1 Both articles were published in Socialisme ou Barbarie no. 17, along with translations from Correspondence, including extracts from the special supplement on organisation and Tribune Ouvrière.
containing elements of socialism. Socialisme ou Barbarie saw socialism as a future possibility, a telos, the nature of which was shaped by potentials generated in the course of everyday worker experience. This difference comes down to a matter of how each group construed the relationship between shop-floor worker collectives and the dominant culture. For Correspondence, workers rejected and took a distance from the dominant bourgeois culture. Socialisme ou Barbarie, by contrast, took the fact of domination more seriously. For them, workers were alienated from the dominant culture, but there was no outside. This characterisation is fleshed out in the second section.

The final section analyses Tribune Ouvrière, the problems it encountered and its failure to become a ‘worker newspaper’. This section is based on reading and situating accounts of micro-political conflict in semi-skilled shops at Billancourt. The section moves from these readings to explore the cultural divisions that separated the realm of politics from the realm of everyday experience and the effects of the routinisation of political language. The sociological factors that shaped this routinisation of political language proved fatal for the idea of a worker newspaper, which asked workers to write about their own experience in a language close to the oral culture of the shop floor.

Correspondence

Like the Johnson-Forest Tendency before it, Correspondence was a fundamental interlocutor for Socialisme ou Barbarie. The header appended to the first Correspondence translations to appear in Socialisme ou Barbarie indicates the importance attached to the paper:

[M]uch more than a new revolutionary publication, it represents a profoundly original effort to create a journal for the most part written by workers, to speak with workers from the workers’ point of view. Whatever critiques or reservations that might be formulated regarding those issues which have already appeared – which are related to the fact that we are still taking our first steps – it must simply be acknowledged that Correspondence represents a new type of journal and that it opens a new period in revolutionary worker journalism.²

² Unsigned, ‘Un journal ouvrier aux Etats-unis’, Socialisme ou Barbarie no. 13 (January–March 1954), p. 82.