

Review article: *Catalyst* - A Return to Class

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The first two issues of *Catalyst*. See catalyst-journal.com for more information.

Catalyst is a new quarterly journal published by the popular, US radical left journal, *Jacobin*. Its co-editor, socialist and historian, Robert Brenner, argues that the left in the US right now has an opening of the sort that it has not had in living memory.

Jacobin has a print magazine of over 30,000 subscribers and a web audience of a million a month and certainly reflects the upsurge of interest in socialism in the US. *Catalyst* expressly aims to address more theoretical and strategic issues confronting the left.

The journal is in part a product of the rapidly expanding Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), whose membership, at the last count, had risen to 25,000. *Jacobin's* editor Baskar Sunkara is the vice-chair of DSA. Contributors to the first issue, Chris Maisano and Joseph Schwarz, are on the DSA national political committee. *Catalyst* co-editor Vivek Chibber, a sociologist based at New York University is a DSA supporter. But the journal has attracted people across the wider US left: *Labour Notes* founder Kim Moody, Mike

Parker union activist in the independent Richmond Progressive Alliance in California, Mike Davis, Sam Ashman and Trevor Ngwane from the Socialist Workers Party tradition, and many others.

The first two issues of *Catalyst* look promising indeed. The introductory editorial lays out the political ground, post-Trump. The crisis of legitimacy in US capitalism, arising from massive income inequality has exposed both the fault-lines of a weakened, 'not your parents' capitalism', and the Republicans and the Democrats as the neoliberal twins of the mega wealthy. The ensuing political vacuum explains the rise of the Trump Right and the surge of popular anger against poverty and racism. In Europe, it notes, the radical left has led mobilizations against austerity in three distinct phases: on the streets and squares marked by autonomous anti-politics, via electoralism and capitulation to 'office without power' as Syriza did, and through workers' action and the *nuit debout* movement as in France in 2016. By contrast in the US, there has been 'a stunning failure' on the part of the opposition movements to 'derive the necessary political lessons in order to take the struggle forward and to build political organizations or develop political programmes'. This is the 'yawning gap' that *Catalyst* aims to confront. Putting the working class at the centre of the fractured political landscape would seem to be central political message of *Catalyst*. The articles which do this are worth reviewing in some detail as they are the main strengths of the journal so far.

In the first issue, in Spring 2017, Mike Davis gives a prescient, and characteristically eloquent, analysis of Trump's victory. He cautions against jumping to con-

clusions about embittered, racist white US workers, arguing that disgust with the Democrats among white blue-collar workers, the effective mobilization of the Romney vote and the religious right provided the true explanation. His fears about Trump emboldening fascists and the alt-right proved accurate as Charlottesville showed. Davis argued that the angry millennial generation, whose bleak future and deep impoverishment already galvanized them to follow Sanders, could point things in a different direction providing they rebelled against the Democrat establishment and backed the resistance in the streets.

Davis, extends his analysis, in *Catalyst's* second issue, to a more theoretical discussion of working class agency. Whereas so many contemporary arguments on the left stress its fracturing, Davis stakes out the reasons why the working class is a revolutionary subject with the qualifications for universal emancipation. Drawing on many Marxist sources, he shows that the working class's position in industry, the nature of its economic and political chains, its collective solidarity, its urban experience, its cultural creativity, its strikes and struggles still mark it out for a potentially transformational role. He defends the possibility and necessity of working class politics, endorsing Marx's idea, which rings true for our wrecked world today, that what is at stake in workers' struggles against capital is the fate of humanity itself. His listing of the components of potential class consciousness may err sometimes on the side of abstraction, and does not stress enough subjective factors, such as the type of politics available to the working class. Nevertheless, the article is full of insightful gems. Quoting Lukacs, Davis highlights the potential of the working class (far better than the capitalists) to see soci-

ety as a whole and thereby to understand what needs to be done to make it better. We see glimpses of this today. The people's response to homelessness - as seen in Ireland earlier this year in Home Sweet Home - or to the needs of refugees - as in Greece or in Germany - stand in sharp contrast to the petty and brutal indifference of national governments.

Beyond theorization of the working class, *Catalyst's* strength is its compelling descriptions of workers in capitalist production today. The detail of some of the articles recall the richness of earlier versions - Braverman, Hinton, Cliff and Barker - which flourished in the US and the UK in the 1960s and 70's. Kim Moody's 'The New Terrain of Class Struggle', in *Catalyst's* second issue, takes head-on the accepted notion that manufacturing in the US has declined and led to the marginalization of the working class. He shows that while employment has declined manufacturing output increased over the period of 1989-2007, by 131%, according to Moody's figures. Even after the Great Recession, jobs have declined, but not overall manufacturing output. Moody takes issue with the notion that precarious employment has irrevocably weakened the working class, insisting instead that the decisive characteristic of workers today is the massive intensification of work imposed on them. One striking example that Moody gives is the 2015 contract agreement between Ford and the United Auto Workers which grants the company one minute less in break-time for each hour worked each day. Ford has 53,000 unionized workers and so that amounts to more than 7,000 extra hours work per day for the entire workforce, and the equivalent of almost *four years* for the company, at no extra cost.

In the expanding service industries, he

argues that class struggle has been reshaped, not eroded, by the re-structuring of work. His argument is that logistics clusters are at the center of today's broader production processes, much as the clusters of auto-assembly plants in Detroit or the steel mills in Gary were in the past. New technology, the logistics revolution and greater competition between capitalist companies has created 'global supply chain gangs', whose time-boundedness makes them extremely vulnerable to workers action. Despite a sharp decline in organized union membership and low numbers of strike days, recent outbursts of US worker militancy amongst teachers, teamsters, transit workers, nurses, telecommunications workers, public employees, machinists, and railroad workers are proof of a strong wave of rebellion against bureaucratic and corrupt unions. His account is a strong antidote to the divisive sectionalism peddled by union leaderships.

The battle between capital and labour and its role in management decisions within the Ford plants of Detroit is the subject of the article by Joseph Schwarz and Joshua Murray. Their view is that Ford decided to reorganize production, drop the flexible and highly productive system originally installed by Henry Ford and relocate plants in order to demobilize the power that workers had in the old system, even if this meant seeing profits fall and losing out to Japanese car makers who managed to skirt round this capital-labour confrontation. In response, Mike Parker takes issue with their underestimation of class struggle within the Japanese system. He argues that US capitalists have adopted and imitated 'Toyotaism' and, in some cases, gone into partnership with Japanese companies - for example the GM-Toyota plant in Fremont, California, a plant whose short his-

tory was characterized by intense union-management battles. Parker's detail of the shop floor shows convincingly how the Japanese 'flexible' system, 'lean production', 'management by stress', multi-skilling, 'pulling the cord', etc. is ruthlessly about driving up profits. He reminds us, despite the Human Resources management speak, intense exploitation lurks under the team system, something which people in white collar and hi-tech jobs have come to know as well.

Beyond these key debates about workers in capitalism, the range and depth of articles in *Catalyst* articles are impressive. They offer original left-wing accounts on subjects as diverse as subaltern studies, the Black Panthers from a class perspective, the dynamics of the Tea Party movement, a new academicization of the 'culture of poverty', and important contributions to Marxist debates. Charles Post's review essay of the specific dynamics of commercial plantation slavery and its place in the overall development of US capitalism provides a useful introduction to what is known as Political Marxism, a current which Brenner and many contributors to the journal are strongly identified with.

Sometimes, however, it seems that *Catalyst* sits uneasily between a voice of the radical left and an academic journal. Vivek Chibber's article with the promising title of 'Rescuing Class from the Cultural Turn' is a case in point. Aiming to mesh a 'materialist class analysis' with a cultural analysis to explain 'class practice', Chibber's method and orientation severely limits the possibility to apply or test his claims. Written for the academy, it seems unnecessarily abstract, relying on diagrams of the interaction of culture, class structure and class practice rather than on reference to actual class struggles. This is a pity as Chib-

ber is a forceful public speaker and is able to put across ideas simply and convincingly, as in for example his contribution to the pamphlet, produced by *Jacobin*, *The ABCs of Socialism* which is wonderfully practical political tool.

Dylan Riley, a sociologist at UC Berkeley, manages to take on academic argument in a more accessible way. His exposure, in the second issue, of Bourdieu's erasure of class is a real breath of fresh air because so often in universities Bourdieu is taken uncritically. Riley strips Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* down to its weakness - that it is presented as an indicator of class rather than an outcome of it, a tautological claim that allows Bourdieu sidestep political economy. Riley exposes, with devastating clarity, how the logic of Bourdieu's sociology manages to focus on a range of *capitals* (cultural, symbolic, linguistic) but not on capitalism itself. Bourdieu's distance from the workings of class within capitalism results in depriving history of its driving force. Riley recognizes Bourdieu's impressive anti-neoliberal political activism, but claims that Bourdieu resonates with academics for an entirely different reason - providing the academic with an elevated social role, or 'an honourable perch as the modest sage of the good society'.

Finally, following in *Jacobin's* footsteps, *Catalyst* wants to include international perspectives. In the second issue, it carries a very comprehensive socialist assessment of South Africa After the ANC by Sam Ashman and Zachary Levinson and Trevor Ngwane which brings out the shocking limits of nationalist parties in power. The ANC, strongly supported by the South African Communist Party, has presided over a society with one of the highest level of poverty in the world while flagrantly lining the pockets of its ministers with payments from deals sup-

posedly done in the public good. The ANC's 'Growth, Equity and Redistribution' programme, despite its name, actually promoted deficit reduction, tariff lifting, wage moderation, labour market flexibilization, tax reforms for 'international competitiveness' - all the things which actively worked to demobilize the movement that had brought it to power. Yet while resistance against these attacks has been determined - as shown by the bravery of the Marikana miners in 2012 - no political organisation has emerged to take the struggle forward. The militant mining union NUMSA and a break-away from the ANC, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), beset by bureaucratic leaderships and opportunistic electoral alliances with the neoliberal opposition, have both damaged their chances of providing leadership to the movement. Meanwhile a strong student movement over fees and the legacies of racist colonialism has emerged on university campuses which the authors argue present opportunities for an organization to unite workers and student struggles against the corrupt regime.

With respect to Ireland, *Catalyst's* contribution is less illuminating. *New Left Review* contributor Daniel Finn, in his article 'Irish Politics Since the Crash' offers a rather standard account of the economic and political crisis in Ireland whose contours he draws mainly from the mainstream media and their commentators. While Finn accepts that political life on the island will have been 'transformed to an extent that seemed inconceivable before the crash', there is little political analysis of the forces at play. Labour's pro-austerity policies in government is judged a tactical mistake; Sinn Féin's duplicity (pro-austerity in Northern Ireland and anti-austerity in the South) is seen merely as deft ma-

noeuving; and the growth of the radical left not really explained at all, except to imply that its growth will be limited. Recognition is given to the impact of the water charges movement but the author shows little familiarity with the debates that went on within the biggest and longest mass movement seen in Ireland for decades. Readers of this journal will be able to fill in the gaps, but Finn's rather removed 'bird's eye' view of politics shows something of the randomness of *Catalyst's* international points of contact. Hopefully *Catalyst's* publisher, Baskar Sunkara will have the opportunities to hear alternative interpretations when he visits Dublin to speak the Marxism 2017 event at the end of November.

More generally, it has to be said that *Catalyst* has not so far prioritized detailed discussion of strategy, despite its stated aim to do so. Pressing strategic questions in the US, of linking working class struggles to existing movements, of possible cross-overs between struggles against

racism on the streets and those on campuses, of discussing tactics of the movements against Trump, all this has not yet surfaced in the journal. Moody briefly mentions an 'alt-labour' conference organized by *Labour Notes* in Chicago last year, which gathered two thousand activists from the 'militant minority' in the unions along with immigrant rights' groups workers centres and other community representatives. But the difficult question of how to build outside the umbrella of the Democratic Party is not broached at all in *Catalyst* as yet. Perhaps this is because of the influence of the DSA which, not a political party itself, sees its role as a 'radicalizing democratizing force for all areas of life' which can include the Democratic Party. It would be useful to have more discussion of political strategy in future issues of *Catalyst*, to ensure that the journal goes beyond excellent articles to providing a platform to build something more lasting.