

# Death of a paper tiger: reflections on Class War



Class War's attempt to break out of the anarchist ghetto, which had been dominated by eccentrics and liberal pacifists, has had a profound impact on many anarchists and revolutionaries. In this issue's Intakes we have a piece written in response to the disbanding of Class War which looks at the fundamental problems of Class War's populist approach.

The Class War Federation have recently announced their decision to dissolve themselves. The last issue of their paper (Summer 1997) gives some reasons why and also serves as a post mortem on the history of Class War. This prompted the following reflection by some comrades, which we have included as the Intakes article for this issue. [Note from libcom editors: many members of Class War Federation decided to keep the group going. They still publish the paper, and have active groups, for example <http://www.londonclasswar.org>]

(Note: although the article dwells on the aspects of Class War we feel need to be most criticized, this is partly to counteract the somewhat self-congratulating boastful attitude that lies alongside the more useful self-critical insights in the final issue of the paper. But we do

recognize that some people joined Class War out of a sincere desire to challenge this society and did some good things to further that goal while in Class War. Our point is that the effectiveness of such actions was not determined by their membership in the publicity machine called Class War (except on those occasions when the group orthodoxy became an obstacle to action); their participation was not necessarily any more effective than others trying to achieve the same goals. Organizational loyalties only became relevant in struggles when they become a hindrance and a cause for separation.)

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On the level of appearances, which was always their main form of existence, Class War was essentially a marketing concept of the 80s - a kind of anarcho-Saatchi and Saatchi. Like the Tories under Thatcher, they invented a new way to sell politics to the working class. Thatcherism achieved a crushing victory in the arena of class conflict, and its tactics have been copied by ruling classes across the globe. Politically it has even succeeded in redefining its opposition; Tony Blair's New Labour is only the most obvious example, but we can also see Class War as the bastard child of Thatcherism. At a time when Thatcherite policies were destroying or radically restructuring the industries and communities that had been the strongholds of class struggle (and thereby also destroying the old forms of struggle) Class War responded by publicising themselves as the defenders of the traditional working class values of these communities. This took the form of various kinds of opportunism such as the Bash the Rich marches; media spectacles designed only to publicize the organization and keep its personnel occupied. [1](#)

The Hampstead Bash the Rich march was not allowed into the area and was instead diverted by the cops through the back streets of Camden. It was ironic to see council tenants watching from their balconies as a couple of hundred predominantly anarcho-punk types marched down their streets with a banner proclaiming '*Behold Your Future Executioners!*' Publicising a Bash the Rich march in advance is like informing the law beforehand of your intention to hold up a bank. Other opportunisms included their adoption of archaic cockney slang - denouncing swanky toffs etc - the sub-Chas 'n' Dave mockney style betraying the London-centrism of the 'national' paper. Logically, to be really populist, they should have done other regional dialect issues of the paper - perhaps an 'ee by gum' Yorkshire issue or 'De Cluss War' in Jamaican patois to be truly patronising?

Class War's other main stereotype was of the typical proletarian rebel as young, white, living on an estate and swearing a lot; like all organizations looking for a constituency to recruit from and sell to, Class War reduced all the individual and collective diversity of real people down to a convenient lowest common denominator.

Class War always projected an anti-intellectual pose as part of their identikit working class image; in effect this meant being generally anti-theoretical and ahistorical. This denial of an historical perspective led them to define the working class, its interests and consciousness in terms of their most immediate, temporary and shallow manifestations. This was the basis of Class War's adopted tabloid style.

Obsessed with the powerful social influence of the content of the media, and constantly prostituting the organization as a public image, Class War failed to grasp any real understanding of the social function of the media form. Populist journalism was an invention of middle class tabloid hacks which claimed to speak for and represent the working class -

but like all media representatives, the real function was to pacify and manipulate. Its intention was to mould working class identity, not merely to reflect it. The desired effect of all populist journalism (of whatever creed) is to suspend critical thought on the part of the reader and to reduce choices of opinion down to a simple duality - good/bad, black/white - through a simplistic representation of reality. Constant repetition of this tends to numb thought and encourage predictable (Pavlovian) responses.

Class War failed to see tabloid populism as an historical trend needing to be ridiculed, but instead took it at its face value and embraced it. As the mass media came to invade daily life more and more, this and other factors combined to close off areas within working class culture where people could find time and space to think, read, reflect, discuss and debate social questions and organize struggle around their needs. There has been a massive and unprecedented decline in class struggle in the UK since its high point in the '70s. A working class under attack and in retreat from Thatcherite monetarism, a more repressive architecture and policing changing the use of public space, new more isolated forms of leisure consumption etc. - all this contributed to a withering of a combative proletarian culture. More than ever before, opinion is no longer created but only received.

We live in the age of the sound-bite, where carefully constructed pre-arranged fragments of words and images are constantly recycled in the media. (The average length of a Party leader's sound-bite in the 1992 election was 18 seconds.) As always, the media is a one way transmission belt from Power to the passive spectator, offering only various impotent false choices. The whole process is a closed circuit, completely stage managed, denying the possibility for collective discussion and development of complex ideas and realities. An historical development of the repression of critical thought or cretinization process - influencing the whole of society - is at work here. With their anti-theoretical attitude, Class War unconsciously became a part of this process.

Class War's anxiety and awkward self-consciousness about using long words, abstract concepts, political terminology etc. was a symptom of the retarding effects of their populism. (It was sometimes implied that being theoretical was 'elitist' or 'middle class' - a patronizing insult to the self-educating efforts of the historical working class movement. This was quite dishonest, as many Class War members had studied for degrees, and many were well read in what they might call 'difficult theory' - the Situationists, left communism, Barrot, Blob and Combustion. etc. The assumption seemed to be that while politicians like them could grasp it and were influenced by it, your mythical average prole couldn't or wouldn't be interested. [2](#)

This retarding influence meant that Class War's analysis and coverage of events was usually quite limited and shallow, avoiding dealing with the real contradictions within the working class; especially the conservative aspects of working class culture, e.g. the internalized and conditioned values, attitudes and practices that are an obstacle to liberation.

*'Apart from opportunism, they also embody the other side of practical anarchism, elitism. Witness the weirdly affected tone of articles with titles such as "Why I hate the rich", written as though throughout our lives we only experience poverty because we are bossed about and because we have less money than the rich. There is no doubt that readers off Class War are supposed to be recruited opportunistically. The perfect reaction would be for Joe Worker or Joan Housewife to say, "Class War is the only paper which really puts the verbal boot in against the rich in real working class language; they really know the business."' (Anarchism Exposed, London, 1985). [3](#)*

Underlying this populism were certain patronizing assumptions about what the 'average prole' was capable of comprehending and what projected image of Class War would make them most popular to the largest number of 'average proles'. While Class War remained on the terrain of wanting to escalate class struggle, their chosen methods only reinforced certain tendencies of existing society. Being basically anarchist, there could be no hierarchical leader figures to worship (although inevitably there was some informal internal hierarchy) but the real star of the show was the media image of the Class War organization itself - and all those associated with it could bask in its reflected glory. This was the source of the boring arrogance often displayed by Class War, along the lines of 'Class War is the bizness and does the bizness.'

For most of the history of the proletarian movement, a demanding critical thought was not seen as alien or elitist. In fact research into the use of union libraries, workers' book collections, radical publishers etc shows that 'deep' theoretical works were often far more widely read amongst sections of the proletariat than the upper classes. Knowledge was something that had to be fought for collectively and did not come cheap to the poor, and was therefore all the more highly valued. Proles were open to theory if it could be seen to be useful and related to their own reality and struggle. There were also many lectures, debates, meetings and workers educational events regularly held; 'it can be estimated on the basis of published speakers' lists in various journals that between 1885 and 1939 there were approximately 100 street corner meetings per week throughout London.'<sup>4</sup> Self-educated artisan/worker theoreticians produced by this international culture include; Weitling, Proudhon, Dietzgen, Bill Haywood, B. Traven, Paul Mattick, Lucy Parsons, Makhno, Arshinov, Jack Common, Fundi the Caribbean Situationist etc.

All this is mentioned not in the interests of romantic nostalgia, but to show how much autonomous working class culture has been repressed, and the consequences of its loss that we have to suffer today. Class War's resort to tabloidism could never be a solution; you could never cure the problem by using the very form that had helped to create it.

The contradiction between Class War's stock-in-trade populism, which was their basis of existence, and the growing need of some members for greater theoretical clarity could not be resolved and ultimately it killed off Class War. The tabloid form, although a dead-weight, could not be abandoned without robbing Class War of its only identity and character. But this form was, by its very design, simplistic and reductive; wholly inadequate for and incompatible with theoretical expression and development.

*'Class War's main fault, and it includes all the others, is to be a political organisation as hundreds have existed in the world before, imbued with ideology, unable to look at the past and gain knowledge from it, more concerned with denouncing this society than with searching for its weaknesses and go on the offensive in a considered and coherent manner.'*  
(A view on Class War by a former member, op. cit.)

In any future proletarian social movement channels of direct collective communication will need to reappear as practice; in exactly what forms remains to be seen. Class War's populism pandered to the anti-intellectual/anti-theoretical tradition within British culture; as one of them put it, 'We want action not theory' - a slogan fit only for headless chickens. Many of the criticisms in this article were shared by some of Class War and were voiced internally; but these contradictions were never allowed to surface publicly, so as to preserve a 'sussed' group public image. This is the opposite of what is necessary - rather than the working class itself

searching for an adequate theory and practice by confronting openly its own contradictions, instead a political faction attempting to recruit people around a false image of unity which is the result of repressed contradictions. If these criticisms and contradictions are worth mentioning now in the final post mortem issue of the paper, why were they not worth sharing with the readers when Class War was a functioning organization?

At the Anarchist Bookfair in 1985, when Class War were in their ascendancy, intoxicated by media attention and believing their own hype, a Class War celebrity got on stage and drunkenly announced to the assembled anarchists, '*You pacifists and liberals have had the anarchist movement for long enough - now its our turn. And if we haven't turned this place into rubble within five years then you can have it back*'. Well, 12 years on and it's Class War that are in ruins, with little but a collection of fading newspaper cuttings to show for it, while this society carries ruthlessly on. Testimony to the fact that you can't fight alienation with alienated means.

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Dedicated to Julian

- [1.](#) According to an ex-member: '*Class War isn't based on any practically applicable theory, hasn't any practice to build a theory on and these deficiencies have often been felt during the low activity periods. But instead of discussing these gaps and ways to tackle them, the leadership - aware it has nothing to gain from such debates - prefers loud speeches and has always managed to impose its diversions: at the end of the miners' strike, during which no revolutionary critique of the NUM was published for fear of putting off the miners, the first problem cropped up: what was Class War and what was it to become as it had not much left to go on about? Inspired by its nostalgia for the '81 summer [riots], the leadership took the Bash the Rich Campaign out of the hat - a smoke screen that effectively prevented any profound discussion for over 6 months. This campaign ... failed for the ... simple reason: the proletariat doesn't give a shit for militants nor for these artificial, desperate calls for action.*' From 'A view on Class War by a former member' [Julian] *Flamethrower*, London 1986.
- [2.](#) '*The separation of "theory" from propaganda stems from an ... elitist motive: get the workers interested on a simple level and "politicise" them on the heavy stuff later.*' *Refuse*, BM Combustion, 1978. *The Heavy Stuff* was Class War's theoretical journal; it contained some useful articles alongside a lot of vague generalities that often read like someone's rewritten sociology thesis. Articles were submitted by various individual members, but it was never a collective theoretical effort. *The Heavy Stuff* sank like a stone after a few issues.
- [3.](#) Class War were always ready to answer attacks from the Left and the media, but valid criticisms from a radical perspective, such as the *Flamethrower* article or *Anarchism Exposed*, were met with a deafening silence. To have dealt with these critiques demanded some theoretical self-reflection and discussion that would have threatened the fragile unity of the group, based as it was on an uneasy compromise, and challenged the arrogance of the group with facing its own repressed self doubt.
- [4.](#) Quoted from *Stilled Tongues - From Soapbox to Soundbite*, Stephen Coleman, Porcupine Press, 1977.