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Scientists As A Revolutionary Class

William Gillis

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Scientists are driven to inquire, to engage with the world around them and reshape their own minds in doing so. Regardless of whether they recognize it this places them fundamentally and diametrically at odds with power relations.

Consequently those power dynamics that have survived have found ways to hold back and rigorously control science, but this control rarely takes the form of direct oppression. Yes scientists do occasionally get shot, threatened, censored, fired and shipped off to gulags to starve, but as these things go they're not a particularly oppressed class. Indeed if we accept for a moment the perception of "scientist" as a mere job description rather than intellectual orientation, then scientists have done extraordinarily well for themselves in the modern era. A pampered and privileged pet class whose fortunes have slowly been wrapped around that of the establishment. In terms of material security scientists have been made a beneficiary of global capitalism and it would be insane to ignore the cultural allegiances this has spurred. But so too would it be folly to overstate them as inherent or even characteristic.

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<http://humaniterations.net/2011/09/10/scientists-as-a-revolutionary-class/>

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I would argue that scientists constitute a very important class in the context of social struggle — a class not created by paycheck but defined in terms their desires the same way that queer folk constitute a class. Those driven by inquiry who act to expand collective understanding of the material world. In this sense scientists are without a doubt a class with immense revolutionary potential. Perhaps even the most potential.

To reiterate just to be absolutely clear: Scientists are not a profoundly oppressed class. Sure, IP law impedes their livelihoods and empowers parasitic academic hierarchies. Corporate and political powers stomp on results they don't like. Huge numbers of would-be scientists around the world are refused access and opportunities. And of course for thousands of years scientists have faced systemic and constant threats of murder from the religious wings of social power. Even in this extraordinary modern political shift to subversion rather than suppression, scientists are still significantly impeded by power relations. Yet no one would compare the travails of scientists as a whole to those faced specifically by women, people of color, the poor, etc.

But revolutionary potential does not follow a 1:1 relationship with the degree of oppression faced. A starving person is not inherently aligned against power relations wholesale, all they can at face value be relied on opposing is the context that keeps them in starvation. Along many if not most class lines the motivating grievance is not inherent but contextual. This can of course be quite potent just as it can develop into an enlightened empathic rejection of power relations but such development is in no way assured. Once those defined solely by their dispossession cease being dispossessed they cease having any fundamental tension with power.

True scientists on the other hand can never cease being scientists. Their defining desire is both contingent upon liberty and insatiable. As such they will never stop being in conflict with power. That the tension of this conflict has been minimized in the modern era is actually the whole point.

While flagrantly oppressed classes like the working poor once held a tactical advantage through proximity to things like the means of production, the ruling class has long since rectified that mistake. Former points of criticality have been dispersed or made redundant and those few folks left in contact with critical components or potent tools have almost all been bought. It's hard to build working class consciousness in an ostensibly "blue collar" worker who has a summer home and a boat from their snug 60k union contract. And perhaps harder still to do anything with all those disenfranchised and angry but safely positioned out of reach from anything critical save their own support systems.

We no longer live in an era in which mass mobilization (simply fielding the most soldiers/voters) is relevant unto itself. Technological progress — always favoring the attacker — continues to seep out to the margins and empower disruption, but not in proportion to the number of users and still in limited directions/degrees. That seepage has so far been the result of short time preferences on the part of competing power structures. But obviously as the instabilities increase a point will be reached when they recognize the competitive advantage technological development can provide between power structures is outweighed by the existential threat it poses to power relations as a whole. A resumption of full blown hostilities between scientists and the champions of power relations is inevitable.

Because of calculational limits and the rigid nature of their composition, power structures have always responded sluggishly to technological development. The faster the development the slower the response and the longer window for that technology's capacity to bleed to the periphery enabling autonomy through abundance and resistance through weaponry. In short, scientists, whether employed as pure researchers or in engineering fields, are perfectly equipped and situated.