

# About the Elephant in the Room

## Peter Conlin interviews Stefan Szczelkun

This is an edited interview with Stefan Szczelkun; artist, organiser and one-time member of the legendary Scratch Orchestra, who set up 'Working Press: books by and about working class artists'<sup>1</sup> in the 1980s, and more recently organised the 'Agit Disco'<sup>2</sup> project with Martin Dixon, in which people are invited to write a playlist of their favourite political music. He currently teaches part-time at the University of Westminster and is a parent. Peter Conlin, originally from Canada, is an artist, writer and organiser, now active with rampART<sup>3</sup> social centre collective and researching self-organisation in neoliberal times.

The interview, conducted prior to the implementation of the 'austerity' cuts, presents views from different generational and national contexts, and attempts to use these differences as a way to articulate thoughts on working class identification and dis-identification, oppression and solidarity. The questions are vast and some of the issues potentially divisive. The intention of this interview is to contribute a larger discussion about the current lived experience of class beyond being an object of academic research and outside the terms of the mainstream media.

Peter Conlin: I think a lot of people when they hear the term 'class oppression' would think it an anachronism or something better applied to India or China. While there is an increased interest in class in some academic circles, and the recent financial crisis has reinvigorated Marxist critiques of capitalism, this doesn't seem to be evident in the lived experience of working class people, or is it? But I assume that you think class oppression is alive and well. And so I'm interested in something that you and I feel is very active, formational, and yet considered not to exist. Of course in the UK there is a never ending obsession with class, and yet so many day-to-day experiences are nevertheless assumed to be class neutral which results in a kind of elephant-in-the-room situation.

Stefan Szczelkun: Yes it is extraordinary. But that's the whole thing – when people can't even talk about something, it shows the power of the oppression. If you can't talk about something then there are unconscious forces at work to silence discussion. And I think that within middle class circles [discussion of class oppression] is considered vulgar, because it starts to bring up emotions that people don't want to feel. And mentioning it is seen as divisive. I was vocal in a recent collective meeting where we were discussing how we felt about an upper class patron... and it's difficult to talk about it. I said to one person, "I went to your wedding and I saw the house your parents live in and I found it quite intimidating". There was a pause and I felt awkward. It is difficult to say things like that. And then there's the history of those sort of jokes of saying, 'I'm more working class than you' – one person says that they lived in a house without carpets and then pretty soon someone is claiming to have been brought up in a shoe box, that you went to grammar school and I didn't. I have another friend who is always going on about people who go to university – that all these people that go off to university and say they are working class that they don't know what they're talking about, and they all use these long words that nobody can understand theorising about it. So all these things are kind of uncomfortable, and you don't really want to go there maybe, in a normal chummy chat with people.

PC: Seems like we're left with an indirect approach as the only way to talk about 'it'. But then there are blanks, things that can't be said, and the very fact that we can't talk about it shows its power.

SS: The discussion starts to go into areas that you can't talk about within the university setting. The discussion of painful stuff might require something like thumping on the table, or ranting, or bursting into tears. And this level of emotions is not part of a normal 'rational', as in academic,

discourse.

PC: I understand that your approach to class has often been on a psychological level, trying to understand class in that way. And so I'm wondering, with your experience of approaching class on this personal or affective way, how can we broach class without it becoming merely personal, or without it being seen as resentment, an accusation, triggering guilt? Like a petty personal thing as opposed to a social- and political-personal?

SS: Maybe that is the key problem. I have for years taken part in revaluation co-counselling, which was very interested in understanding oppression. The practice which was, simply on a very basic level, exchanging time with peers: You talk about what you want to talk about for 20 minutes and then they talk about what they want to talk about for the same amount of time. There was interest from working class people to do that and share common experience. So the protection of having this really clear amount of time, and, also, with the general agreement that what was said was confidential and you could say whatever you wanted to and be as emotional as you felt, produced a space to speak beyond the normal boundaries of polite conversation. So there was more chance to explore the affective sides of the class experience. So that was a very important experience in understanding my own ambivalent feelings, but also in being able to witness other people going outside the limits of the conventional discourses.

Also, that segues into culture and what culture has to do with class. ...I think that fluid expression in all forms relates better to working class *oralacy* than everything having to go through the funnel of not only words, but written down words, and written down words that relate to a background of a particular literary tradition. I've always thought that was a place where something could happen, where we could get a bit more elbow room, be a bit more expressive...

PC: You have used this term 'the Definition' (from the 1990 essay 'Myths of Class Identity'), and it refers to how working class people are taught to feel inferior. It is a shorthand for a set of scripts and situations that have been internalized, and produce a sense of illegitimacy, and, in doing so, subjugates. So I'm wondering how 'the Definition' works today?

SS: To me it's logically necessary that it must be the case (that we have been conditioned to feel inferior), although I'm not saying I can describe exactly how this happens or have seen it described. If you could describe the mechanisms of oppression they would fall apart because they would become absurd. And people would say, 'We can change that'. But as long as they are kept outside our ability to express and define them, we cannot change oppression. But logically it must be the case that something pretty drastic happened to us. All of us human beings with all these fantastic abilities to think and do, but we carry within us this sense of illegitimacy, we can't do anything to take charge of our own lives. In upper class people you can see the sense of entitlement. Now I would think that every single human being was born with the same potential to take charge of their lives. So if you cannot see that character in most people, where does it go? So something must happen in the lives of young working class people. I don't think we are conceived as oppressed people – something must have happened in our lifetime. So what is it exactly that happens? It is extraordinary that the mechanisms can be so unknown. The job, as I see it, is to assume that these things did happen and find ways of getting knowledge of them. This is seeing oppression as an affective, psychological, but also mechanical thing that can start to be dismantled once it is known.

PC: So you could say that one side of class culture is to unearth these and to expose what these

scripts are, but I'm wondering what are our current examples?

SS: Current examples of what we can't describe!

PC: But I think they can be described, they are not forever ineffable. You can find really clear examples, lots of songs, a film like *Frozen River* or books like Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman*. That seems to be a classic example of someone exposing these patterns, but they seem few and far between now?

SS: I think there are examples of artists who have made breakthroughs about this, but the reason we don't get a picture developing from these piecemeal breakthroughs is because of this silence we are trying to talk about. There is, perhaps, some extraordinary level of embarrassment about bringing together all the people who have made these insights. As *Working Press* we published a book on 20th century working class women's writing<sup>4</sup> after some work had been

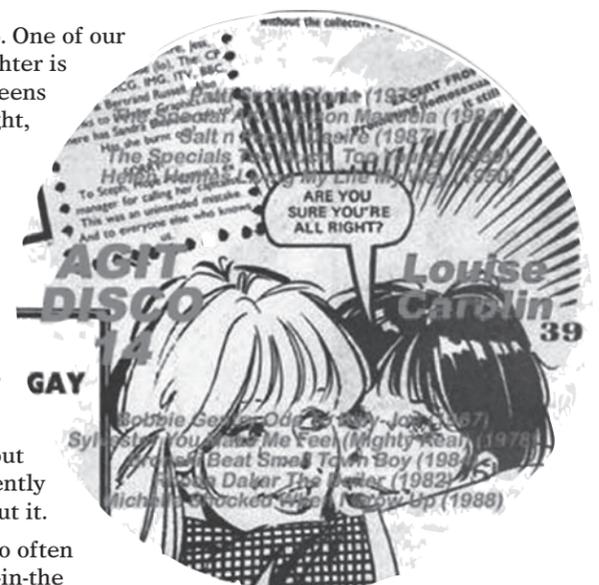
done on male British authors by Howard Slater<sup>5</sup>. But people did not seem to really get excited about looking at things in this way – there wasn't any shared vision of how this could lead to a dismantling of oppression, or something!

...Let's put all of that stuff together and see what we can learn from it. See what they have already discovered. No, it's all kept isolated as fragments. My idea with *Agit Disco* was to put the musics that talked politically together and see what that was. As Stewart Home<sup>6</sup> said, "There are shed loads of agitdisco tracks out there", it is just that they are enormously diluted in the media.

PC: So in terms of this whole internalized inferiority routine I wonder about the 'chav' phenomena as an example of how working class people are seen as worthless. It's part of the class vocabulary of today isn't it, the classic split between the worthy and the unworthy working class?

SS: I guess so. One of our friend's daughter is in her early teens and very bright, but she talks about people in her school as 'chavs' – people who do not have intellectual upwardly mobile ideas; 'chavs' take on popular culture without being sufficiently selective about it.

PC: Class is so often the elephant-in-the-room – it's shaping everything but no one's saying anything. For myself, some situations in 'radical culture' scenes in London, it is sort of a working class environment, and sort of not. There are perma-culture people, radical environmentalists, most of them squatters in their 20s and 30s who cannot really relate to the existing class terms. They can see it as important, but cannot see their own reality in all that.



There are also some ties with 'Class War'<sup>7</sup>, who want 'real working class' and anything outside of that doesn't fit. Often when class comes up in conversation people think immediately of the 'Class War' style, and it ends there. And then there are middle class people who are all very 'anti-capitalist' and everything, but reject any reference to working class issues as something outmoded and in fact part of the problem. And then there is the situation in primarily middle class settings (in universities and also well-heeled art and activist collectives), where to broach the topic of class will get you, directly or in a euphemised way, responses like: 'Yes, I have had middle class entitlement, and that isn't fair, but it has resulted in a certain confidence and abilities and I shouldn't have to apologise for that, as a group we require those things', or 'Class domination of course exists, but not among us, we're too aware and nice', or just triggering guilt and awkwardness.

People realise the truth in whatever statement but feel all this is too deeply rooted, much of it is beyond our control and was set in motion before we left the womb, so while it is true, 'What can we do?' Once I had a guy tell me that I didn't really come from a working class background because my mother was a nurse, and so the training required to become a nurse severed proletarian ties! And of course having a university degree automatically makes people middle class.

SS: Everyone of us needs to talk about those situations. Everyone has their versions and they need to be talked about! And I guess people, like the guy you mentioned, also need to do a lot of venting their frustration, but be told in no uncertain terms what crap they are talking when they wrongly project that frustration on to others.

PC: In a different way, part of the elephant-in-the-room situation comes from really narrow ideas of what class is. There is the approach that we shouldn't focus on class belonging but rather on class becoming. It comes from J.K. Gibson-Graham who attempts to do a very direct post-structural theorisation of class, which ends up in the unfortunate direction of social businesses, but I think this point is a really good one. If class is seen as a frozen entity, and solidarity is built upon matching a fixed set of characteristics, then the whole thing is doomed to a bad end. However, if class is something that is actively made, and continually remade, then solidarity lies more in people coming together in struggles and situations which aren't entirely known. It sounds promising, but what could it really mean?

SS: Yes, I think that's an exciting idea. I don't think solidarity necessarily means belonging to a similar class. I think solidarity and culture are really closely linked and that's one of the reasons I'm interested in culture. When we make culture, that's about making agreements, we are collectively able to come to agreements on things, look at how we generate language, and any culture is a complex set of agreements. And that is a basic mechanism of solidarity, surely. Solidarity is based on some kind of mutually held set of meanings, goals, recognitions or something like that.

PC: But it seems that, traditionally, working class power came from similar kinds of people sharing similar kinds of situations. Or at least that is what we are led to believe. Now the working class is much more diverse – different ethnicities, different genders, different kinds of work from so-called low level white collar looking work, to an endless array of service work, to 'classic' manufacturing jobs, and let's not forget about all the situations that are hidden by the term 'unemployment.' It's the big question: How does solidarity come out of that?

SS: Maybe those 19th century proletarians had it easy! They're all in one great big shed all doing the same thing, with the same blue overalls on, knocking off at the same time, with the same hooter. Why wouldn't solidarity come easy in that situation. But how do you achieve solidarity within our possibly more diverse and fragmented situation? ...It is interesting to see the current limits of this idea in the *Agit Disco* project. People

have very different genres of music they relate to. I would say, 'Oh, here is a new Agit Disco by so and so', and Stuart might say, 'Oh, very interesting but that is not my kind of music', or 'Don't bother sending the CD to him because he won't listen to it'. So it shows me how most people are in different worlds of taste and genre that they identify with. But, how about you just listen to these things because it is not about trying to convert you to folk music if you are into the blues. What is needed is an appreciation of the widest spectrum of approaches to thinking about politics with music.

PC: You have been involved in a lot of collective organisations through the years. How do you understand class in those contexts? As you well know, to say something is a collective organisation is a little bit optimistic because in actual fact all of these existing hierarchies are right there and quite active, so it is more of a goal.

SS: Well yes, they vary a lot, because some things I have been in like the Scratch Orchestra<sup>8</sup>, by its name it suggests a collective – it was 50 or so people improvising. In actual practice playing a piece of music it would actually be extremely collective, but it also had an aristocratic and charismatic leader in Cornelius Cardew. And it had other kinds of senior people who were part of the early formation of it, and surprisingly they contradicted the normal hierarchy by saying the youngest should arrange concerts first. So it turned the whole structure around, so those things were there but the actual conscious nature it took turned the whole usual order on its head. Something like Brixton Gallery<sup>9</sup> was, I would guess, 95% working class, and everyone used to meet in this huge open meeting once a month, and thrash out the next two or three months' shows. Obviously people who could speak more forcibly, who had good rhetorical skills, could get their ideas supported more than those that were quieter, or silent, or drunk! But we were aware of that and worked against it. It was the most open, democratic situation you could imagine. People did take administrative jobs and things like that, but they didn't really impose themselves on, well, they didn't draw power away or bring undue attention to themselves. Well they did slightly, but essentially the thing was this very open, democratic entity for about three years, and very interesting results came out of that. So collectives vary a lot really.

PC: A couple of different things come to mind when you say that. I find cross-class alliances are not so easily made in collective groups; they can in some ways almost be a blood bath in terms of recreating class hierarchies because of a lack of structure. But in other ways I was never a big 'group person' until 7 or 8 years ago, coming out of a highly individualistic society, and from an arts education that for all its sophistication is still based on the solitary artist. I felt I sort of came to the end of the road with that. And then I discovered all of these really frustrating organisations! Which I think are invaluable, right, but for me this is a different way into a kind of class politics – essentially learning to work together, countering individualism, but it doesn't come easy, in some ways it comes horribly! We have to figure out how to do it, and often this is almost starting from scratch.

SS: Absolutely, even more, the fact that we don't have easy ways of working on our class differences, and countering those senses of entitlement in people that tend to dominate, makes those situations very difficult. I think I would run away from a collective where I saw that going on!

PC: There are lots of good people in the groups I am talking about, but the question is how to introduce class issues into these situations?

SS: Far from it that I suggest what you do. What I would like to see is working class artists, environmentalists, or scientists, coming together and thinking about their own particular area, and how they are affected by the class situation. I tried to do this with Working Press. By inviting any working class artist I met to publish a book, on

their own expense but under a collective imprint that supported it, people would, I thought, express what working class artists think and do. I'd often thought that if 6 or 10 artists got together and said to the Arts Council [England] or powers that be, 'Look, we want this!', we would get it. They would have to fund us or respond, because 6 or 10 people saying the same thing is very powerful. Only 6 or 10, I'm not talking about tens of thousands... a few people can be very potent if they can speak fearlessly.

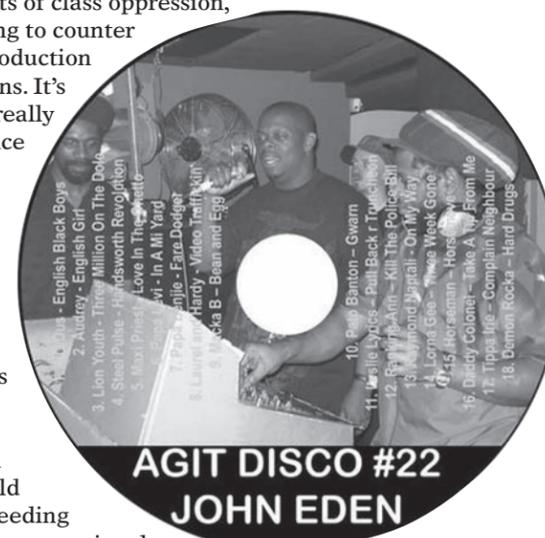
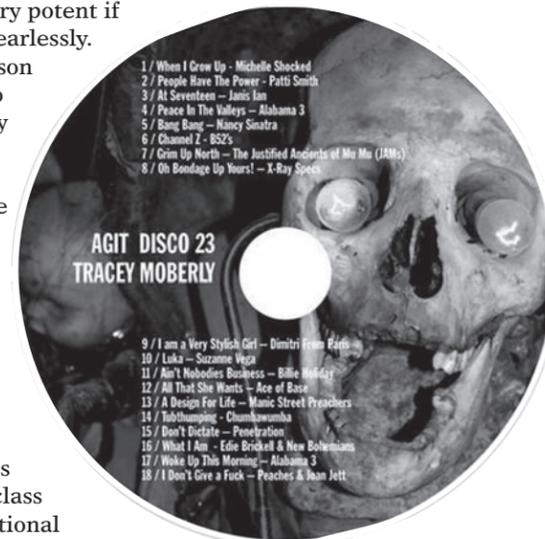
But for some reason no one wanted to do that – to really assert ourselves as working class artists. Like some artists didn't want to be seen as black artists, they didn't want to be labelled, they just wanted to be an artist...

PC: The focus of this interview has been largely on class and affect – emotional domination and resistance, class antagonism from within. I guess this is part of the longer project that has been going on since the late 1960s of getting away from reducing class to economics, seeing culture as a superstructure, etc. But maybe we have gone too far in this direction? We can talk about attitudes, behaviours, mental scripts, humiliation stories, etc, but how much of all this psychological and emotional stuff is tied directly to not having the bucks? Growing up with limited resources means you just cannot entertain certain ideas, you write off entire avenues; and this isn't due to feeling bad about yourself, negative thinking, what you will, it's a material limitation. We can say the economic and cultural are all tied together, interdependent, but all too often it is one or the other.

SS: Is it all solely held together by economic lack? I think that the effects of economic lack and the past accumulation of the effects of oppression on our psyche are woven together and hard to untangle. If we suddenly got economic equality we would still have a legacy of deep affect issues. But in sum I think it will be difficult to get over that mountain range to achieve economic equality and the end of class division without first doing some other work to recover our ability to think about these things more clearly. This is talking about the effects and affects of class oppression, and then engaging to counter the ongoing reproduction of those conditions. It's not an either/or really – better to advance on all fronts.

PC: For myself, coming from a working class background with limited resources, there seemed to be this choice between being ultra-ambitious, which more or less would have meant succeeding through the most conventional channels and conservative roles (being the dominated of the dominated as Bourdieu referred to the ambitious working class climber<sup>10</sup>), or accepting more limited horizons. In some ways I am talking about refusing either 'becoming middle class' or 'staying what has been defined as working class'. How do you deal with the 'career' question in this respect?

SS: ...AFC Wimbledon is an example of how collective action is struggling with economic necessities that arise because of the success of



the team. Wimbledon was a football team bought by an investor and 'moved' from South London to Milton Keynes leaving their fans behind! The fans were a community that existed for generations so when this happened they decided to form their own football club from scratch. The joint resources of about 5,000 hard core fans turned out to cover every productive skill that was required to set up and run a football club. The fans also pooled money from their savings to fund it and so the club, AFC Wimbledon aka The Dons, is now fan owned. The club is doing well and has now climbed up to the Conference League. From now on they may struggle with the rules and regulations that come into play in the higher leagues and their financial implications. Will the club be able to stay fan controlled as well as being successful? Or will they be tempted to take on an investor that will trade capital for control?

In terms of career questions, the best simply theoretical model I've come across is Habermas' use of *system* and *lifeworld* as a binary abstract. When we get into careers to the extent that they become the most important aspect that drives our lives we can no longer respond effectively and honestly to the lifeworld which is the direct unmediated communication of our collective desires and needs; the street, the underground, the crowd, even smaller groups. The need to protect career and what comes to depend on it is part of the mindcage that constrains us. Of course the ingenious ways in which people negotiate this is perhaps one of the main things we should look at...

PC: One thing I didn't really get across in our talk thus far is what seems to me to be the absolutely dire situation of class politics today, at a time when there is growing inequality with a whole series of indicators of this, such as Danny Dorling's work<sup>11</sup>. Who actually identifies as being 'working class'? Anyone under 40? Sociologist Bev Skeggs said "who would want to be seen as working class? (possibly only academics are left)". Or Barbara Peters' observation, something to the effect of: 'If you can choose to be working class, you're probably not'. What vital forces are there to identify with? This connects with the importance of the current economic situation: The professions are harder for working class people to enter into than they were in the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Real incomes of working class people are declining, and there seems to be no vital class movement happening. The only class action the mainstream press identifies is the English Defence League and the British National Party. In many ways it seems to be a real dead end situation, this is why I wanted to do this interview. Do you see it as dire? In most of the things you've said I don't detect a sense crisis or anguish, which is good – it's always bad to panic! – but the actual situation seems to be pretty bleak. What's your take on this?

SS: Maybe having lived through the Cold War when imminent nuclear holocaust seemed quite likely, plus the fact I've always chosen to live on the edge of poverty to do art, I don't know...

PC: Mounting student debt and situations where it is harder for working class people to become journalists or doctors is disempowering, irrespective of negative or positive outlooks.

SS: I think we should resist these slides, but in the longer view I prefer to take an attitude based on strategic thinking and theory. As oppression tends to picture us as powerless I think it is useful to look at the reality of our power both in terms of our historic achievements and our current possibilities. Do we emphasise the direness and downward trends or do we look at the ways we are doing well, celebrate achievements, and look at what resources we do have now that we could make use of. It's a choice of strategies and what is the best use of our time.

PC: Further on this line. One thing I see in you is an identification with the working class – it's definitely not dogmatic or just some theoretical claim. So many people I know who come from working class backgrounds, and who are now in art and the academy, have honed the

art of 'passing' as middle class. For them the idea of identifying as a working class person would be the kiss of death. With the exception of people like Damian Hirst who haul out their working class-ness, on occasion, as a badge of authenticity. My bind is that in many ways I can't identify as working class because I am not identified as working class by any class. My class position is too indeterminate; but no way am I interested in the sorry spectacle of trying to pass as middle class. So I can only identify with what is called working class in a few ways. Also my current position – my non-middle class financial situation! – is in some way chosen and other ways not. I never know if it is a virtue of necessity kind of thing. But this question undermines class identification, and is part of how 'the refusal of work' May '68-type protest has in many ways turned into the basis of current forms of exploitation. We refuse kinds of work as a kind of class assertion, but if you are able to refuse work then you can't really be working class. Or so it is said. What are your reflections on this?

SS: I just had an evening with an Italian poet who does temp teaching jobs, in his 40s who is obviously working class to me but who claims himself as middle class because of his 'good' Italian education, mortgage and so on (he has a small flat in Thornton Heath one of the cheapest property areas in London), but also because of the failures of Italian communists who have lost so many people to the Northern League. Then towards the end of a long argument he suddenly said that he was pleased I didn't see him as middle class! I think that the term 'working class' can be taken up as a provocation and strategy rather than being too worried about exactly how it is mapped out at any point...

PC: But maybe this problem of identification is that class politics is going under new terms? This could be anything from seeing the rights of migration as a class politics to 'social justice' approaches. I think of the thirst for collective forms that we have seen in the past decade, such as recent factory and university occupations, open source production, wiki-forms, and also the collectivism seen in community organisations and self-organised projects – whether this be social centres, co-ops, or supporter-run football clubs. However, a lot of these are lacking in any class language, and generally carefully avoid any overt politics, and not surprisingly, are easily co-opted within capitalism and existing social patterns. Terms like the 'precariate' from the Euro Mayday movement, or theoretical concepts like 'the multitude' aren't used by actually existing working class people in the UK.

In terms of activism, who can we identify as active in class issues now: SWP, Class War, organised labour (though unions are expected to usually work for their members' interests, not for the working class), what else? Does it matter? But maybe the idea is to look for working class culture rather than parties or activist groups. But if we start claiming cultural acts as a putative working class resistance or hidden political agency I am not sure we are left with a social movement. It is too indirect, hedged, all too 'cultural'?

SS: Maybe there aren't big flashy organisations but a whole lot of people up and down the country. Maybe we can't point to groups or activism because of the ubiquitous elephants, but people are there, quietly picking away at their patch.

In term of looking at working class culture rather than parties or activist groups, I think this could be my next project: To create a virtual festival of working class culture – in all imaginable categories – to seed it with a few names, even reclaim significant venues. Perhaps it could be published with the title of 'A Guide to Working Class Culture: to all those who doubted its existence(s)'. There is a Festival of Working Class Music<sup>13</sup> in Liverpool each year but that is the closest I know of...

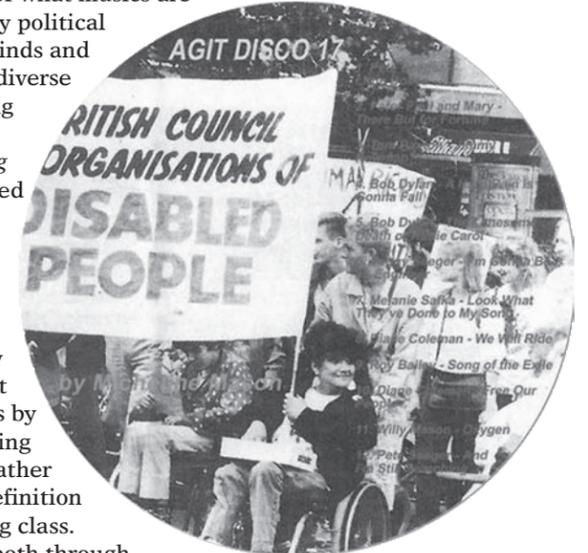
PC: I certainly am not too attracted to the tedious game of definitions but there is no way around it. Coming up with terms, names, metaphors, coinage,

handles, schema, and all that, is how it works. It is part of a symbolic struggle. We can just let it ride, there is a loss in never asking what it means, and it usually means being defined by some other group, on their terms. If you have a festival of working class music, or whatever, you will have to figure out some kind of criteria of who to invite, the focus of the thing (aside from one's friends!), etc.

SS: Perhaps friendship is key... I wouldn't worry about who is and who is not... I always thought of working class culture being a welcoming thing. Funny thought as son of a refugee. But it comes from my mum who felt the exclusion of the class above us that she aspired to and yet had an idea of the East End of London as a warm place that would want her (or me?) back, even though she came from Nottingham. Maybe that's just a comfort blanket fantasy?

To define things you have to collect them together first... So I'd go about this by intuitively collecting expressive stuff that working class people do. How do we know they are working class? Biography; content of their artform; contexts in which their work is made public; the present day financial situation of each artist; a sense of resonance with the informed collector. Agit Disco is an example: asking (mostly) working class people who know their music to say what music effected them in a political way. The results start to give a sense of what musics are having pointedly political effects in the minds and lives of a quite diverse group of working class writers.

With *Working Press* I just invited all the people met who were activist some way take part. They had to be happy with the imprint subtitle – 'books by and about working class artists' – rather than fitting a definition of being working class. So it was done both through personal meetings and a kind of intuitive agreement.



#### Notes

- 1 <http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/phd108.htm>
- 2 <http://www.agitdisco.com/>
- 3 <http://therampart.wordpress.com/>
- 4 Richardson, Sarah with Merylyn Cherry, Sammy Palfrey and Gail Chester. *Writing on the Line, 20th Century Working-Class Women Writers*, Working Press, 1996.
- 5 Slater, Howard. *Working Class Novelists 1930 – 1950*, Working Press Research, 1993.
- 6 <http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/>
- 7 <http://classwar-uk.blogspot.com/>
- 8 <http://www.stefan-szczelkun.org.uk/phd102.htm>
- 9 <http://brixton50.co.uk/artists/>
- 10 For Bourdieu the climber is in a further dominated position because they are exposed to cultural insecurities and lack the correct habitus for the positions they attempt to secure. This point is not to be confused with the classic Bourdieuan formulation of the intellectual as occupying a dominated position within the dominant class.
- 11 *Injustice: Why social inequality persists*, Bristol: Polity, 2010; *Poverty, wealth and place in Britain, 1968 to 2005*, Bristol: Polity, 2007.
- 12 According to recent research by the Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change at the University of Manchester.
- 13 <http://www.workingclassmusic.org.uk>