

Title: The Schizoid Dialectic: 11 Theses on Winning the Union Back

Authors: Gary Anderson, John Bennett, Steven Shakespeare

Abstract:

11 Theses on Schizoid Dialectics

Bringing together my own work as a cultural activist in performance (the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home (www.twoaddthree.org)) and my role as Branch Chair of our institution's union for teaching staff (University and College Union), this performative paper will argue that a dialectical, agonistic blurring of boundaries across the borders of conflicting identities and interests is not only productive and desirable, but liberatory and could constitute a small act of social justice.

From directly lived experience this paper will stage a series of arguments - in dialogue form - between the anarchist art-activist and the reformist trade unionist branch chair. Whilst both would agree that social justice is the 'bottom line' neither would agree that the task of institutional transformation is in part to recognise the dialectical flux inherent in their (my own) conflicting identities. Yes, this is what emerges when these identities are juxtaposed to engage in agonistic debate. The short dialogues will focus on the institutional context of higher education in particular, and will suggest that agonistically robust debate produces not a winner and a loser, but a dialectical schizoid (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) who occupies both positions, more or less, simultaneously.

The dialogues will be based around two texts: Karl Marx's *11 Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) (of which the union chair is enamoured) and the rewritten *11 Theses on Winning the Union Back* (which the art-activist performance artist has vandalised) and will contain the full text of the rewritten *11 Theses on Winning the Union Back*.

Seen dialectically, through the lens of performance studies, union work in Higher Education can occupy a key position in the transformation of the neoliberal university workplace. As elected Chair of the UCU branch, the opening up of already closed down spaces (David Harvey, 2001) is a central tactic of my practice supported by my research work as an art-activist in performance (The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, The Free University of Liverpool et al). This dialogue will also refer to some institutional 'wins' for our branch and will outline, practically, a vision for the dialectical nature of social justice work in higher education as a model of institutional transformation. In this, the dialogue seeks to present a working model of how to 'educate the educators' (Marx, 1845) and then revolutionise the revolutionaries through an application of dialectics. In other words, to misquote Marx, 'Unionists have only ever complained about the workplace in various ways, the point however is to *enjoy it*' (from *11 Theses on Winning the Union Back*)

I

Gary: Gary, you are living in cloud cuckoo land! The latest raft of legislation directed against organising in the workplace, including the Trade Union Bill is where class war is actually happening. It's the chipping away of hard won rights won over the last century. What we are witnessing is the legislative reversal of organised labour. Class war is taking place where the working class, because they are not solicitors, lawyers or judges, have very little say, but are deeply affected. The ruling classes, with full cooperation from the upper middle class, are attacking us through the practice of neoliberal jurisprudence. The unions are the only force that can protect working class interests in this field.

Gary: Gary. I'm sorry, but you are living in a comfortable, meaningful past where your life is legitimised by the sad imaginings that you are part of a crucial struggle, with your 'us and them' thinking. I'm not only tired of it, I'm beginning to find you utterly irritating.

Gary: You are not listening. The Tories are laughing all the way to the banks since the crash, with a whole shipload of punitive legislation legitimizing the transfer of resources away from ordinary people to the hands of the extraordinarily wealthy.¹ It makes John McGrath's calculation of 7:84 look like a socialist alternative!

Gary: Listen, you need to get your head out of orthodox Marxian tracts and read some literature that was written in the past couple of years at least. A lot of it emerges on the blogosphere, bypassing the bourgeois institutions of legitimisation like *Performance Research*.

Gary: That's a progressive journal!

Gary: Whatever! The forms of organisation which you are buying into don't offer any exit from the way our bodies and minds are disciplined by ideology – in fact, they are part of the problem. They co-opt you, and all your militant energy, into making the system work more efficiently. That's what neoliberalism does: it makes you most subservient, when you feel most free. God, you can even list your union work when you're applying for a promotion! What does that tell you?

Gary: It tells me that union work is compromised, that we have to work and live in the world as it is, even as we want to change it. Of course management wants to incorporate and tame unionists. But doesn't that show that they consider us a potential threat? Why else are the ruling elite taking away union rights? And what's your alternative? It sounds like the infantile leftism which Lenin identified, a series of abstract demands for radical change with no basis in material reality.

Gary: You're painting yourself as a realist, but that's hard to distinguish from a failure

of imagination. That's not just realism, it's capitalist realism – what Mark Fisher means when he says that it's easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. I don't think you've recognised how much neoliberalism has changed the terms of the game, by reworking our sense of who we are from the inside out. We're living off the scraps from the table, offers of dialogue and sham consultation, and all the time our radicalism becomes a kind of aspirationalism which only fuels the enhancement of the system, its capacity to generate and absorb its own opposition. That's a closed dialectic which needs to be broken open again.

Gary: Yes, but we're not looking in on the system trying to crack it from the outside. We're in it, it shapes us, that much I agree with. But the question then is, how do we create those ruptures which will push the system to breaking point? Pretending that we can do so from a transcendent position above it all is an illusion, it is magical thinking. We need to build pressure from within, confident that capitalism is a contradictory and unstable system which will produce crises.

Gary: We've heard all that before though, haven't we? The far left sects, the left union organisations: they're always saying 'now is the time, capitalism is in crisis, the government is weak', and so on ad nauseam. These groups talk revolution, but their real interest is in recruiting to and sustaining their own machines. They are constantly asking you to sacrifice yourself to a joyless, humourless activism, spouting slogans as if victory were always around the corner. How can liberation be the end result if the means to achieve it are so alienating? I can't look at those people with their paper sales and stalls, their endless meetings and their sense of desperation, without shuddering.

Gary: Comments like those display the contempt you have for ordinary workers trying their best to organise in a pitiless, capitalist milieu. Your sense of yourself as a clued up intellectual, au fait with the latest streams in post-Marxist junk confirms to me that you're not a revolutionary at all but a self-satisfied intellectual whose gloomy analyses support your own sense of self rather than supporting movements and the people who struggle within those movements, for genuine change, for their fellow siblings.

Gary: Now, come on!

Gary: No. Just the way you dress, sip your single estate red wine, doesn't even Paolo Virno and his multitude warn us of so-called activist-intellectuals struggling for simplicity by downing bottles of red wine one at a time?ⁱⁱ

Gary: Against simplicity, against it. It's complexity that requires careful negotiation.

Gary: It's your puffed-up ego that requires negotiation.

Gary: Gary, this is going nowhere...

Gary: Fast.

II

Gary: I wondered if we could change topic a little.

Gary: You sound like you've got something prepared.

Gary: I've been thinking of joining the UCU committee.

Gary: Well, this is a change of heart.

Gary: I've been thinking about under what conditions an anarchist-syndicalist academic with a wee history of art-activist work in performance could contribute to the everyday workings of union life. I know that sounds naive...

Gary: ...well, I've got leaflets on committee work stuffed in the top drawer of my desk. I'll just...

Gary: No, I've been thinking about Marx's line 'Philosophers have only ever interpreted the world, the point however is to change it', you know the one from the 11 Theses?

Gary: Exactly! Welcome aboard. All social life is essentially practical. The basis of praxis is not to over distinguish between word and deed, thought and act, theory and practice. After all, theory is a practice too.

Gary: Yes, that's fine, but...

Gary: Of course there are many issues with the union these days. Fighting on Pensions or 2% pay rises when the whole Higher Education sector is undergoing privatisation. That's not how I'd run a union of 120,000 members...

Gary: OK, but...

Gary: Take the current HE Green Paper (2015) that proposes the Teaching Excellence Framework be strongly linked to variables such as student satisfaction, student retention rates and graduate job prospects as the fundamental markers of teaching quality. Or the provision for new private providers making so-called 'failing' colleges easier to close down to be taken over by for-profit companies. Or the outrageous zero hours contracts that are endemic in our sector – more than 40% of academic staff are not on permanent contracts. The levels of casualisation of the workforce are terrifying and private interests always dovetail sweetly with a difficult-to-organise, casual workforce.

Gary: Yes, but...

Gary: It all started with the transfer of higher education away from the Department of Education into the Department of Business Innovation and Skills, formerly the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, and the uncritical adoption of their new, pernicious mantra: 'accelerate the commercial exploitation of creativity and knowledge'.

Gary: I just wanted to...

Gary: From there came student tuition fees, privatisation, education for-profit and the current neoliberal predicament we currently find ourselves in. If I ran the union I'd be...

Gary: OK. Enough! I've been quietly working away on Marx's 11 Theses on Feuerbach.

Gary: Oh? OK.

Gary: And while I appreciate some of what you say about praxis, I'm interested in how this text can speak to us today. Perhaps even as unionists. I particularly like the emphasis on sensuousness as human practical activity, the deauthorisation of any flimsy compartmentalisation of how things work, how they feel or how they are changed. I think the point of union work hitherto has been to complain about the workplace in various ways, the point, however, surely, is to enjoy it.

Gary: But, that's..that's...

Gary: That's the basis upon which I'd like to join the committee, perhaps as Health and Safety Rep, if there are any spaces left?

Gary: You've got to be joking. You've spent, not only this conversation, but *weeks* sneering at, looking down on and dismissing union work . . . and now you want a role on the committee? And why? Because you've pulled a self-indulgent rewrite of Marx out of your arse? Excuse me if I'm not ready to open another bottle of single estate red.

Gary: And you've spent the last few weeks trying to justify yourself and win me round to unionism in the process. And now it looks as if you're more worried about defending your turf than anything else. Is being on the committee a privilege for the 'initiated' – for which read: those who already conform to a pre-existing model of what the union is? That's exactly what I want to call out and challenge by getting involved and *enjoying myself at the same time*.

Gary: Oh, I see now. You're having fun. Because that's what your activism amounts to in the end, doesn't it? Make protest a carnival, and all of that. Well fine, I'm all for fun. But if you want it to result in real change, you'd better factor in the hard work. The boring preparation, reading documents, going through minutes, holding meetings, negotiating with managers, when not everyone else is there to stand and admire your wit and invention.

Gary: Look, you're missing the point . . .

Gary: Really? Can't you see that there is nothing transgressive or challenging at all in making enjoyment the defining affect for political work? Enjoyment is a universal commandment in capitalism. Enjoy, consume, express! And watch yourself and others doing it in the process! Don't think I haven't read my Guy Debord and all of that. We live in a system in which diversion and spectacle have become our absolute motivation. Capitalism doesn't offer us fun and entertainment to compensate for or distract us from boring work. It makes enjoyment the goal of everything, driving us to enjoy work, enjoy shopping, enjoy the spectacle of it all – and when we don't enjoy it,

to blame ourselves, hide our failure away and put on our social media face for all the world to see.

Gary: Of course capitalism tries to do all that. But does that mean we shouldn't try to reclaim enjoyment? When I talk about sensuous activity, I mean a way of living which transforms us and the world we produce. That won't happen through slogans and 'correct' lines. Your problem is, you have no idea of how to overcome the fact of workplace alienation, of the duplication of the world into a fully just and fair world and its opposite. Unless we start enjoying the workplace differently, defiantly, we're just replicating the misery of work in our unionism.

Gary: Oh, so now it's 'our' unionism is it? Don't forget you're not on the committee yet, and there is the boring reality of hustings and voting to get through before you get there.

Gary: Oh, come on, this insecurity is beneath you.

Gary: Don't tell me that. You judge and patronise, but what you have to offer is just another abstraction. You have no idea what we've actually achieved for our members, the concrete gains we've made: an agreement on limiting teaching hours, a much better maternity leave policy, better equality across promotions, the list goes on. Do you think we got that by putting on an avant-garde production of a play by Antonin Artaud?

Gary: Caricature is so easy, isn't it? But I've thought about the daily life of academia more than you think. Haven't you noticed: more and more, we are asked to police ourselves and our students? We monitor student absences, and the absence monitoring system monitors us monitoring them! Our desire to be scholars, and our vocation for teaching make us ripe for this kind of thing. We internalise the surveillance system, because we're so used to being the ones who drive ourselves onwards. Academics moan and complain, but it doesn't seem to stop us becoming self-exploiting workers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Gary: Is this sermon over yet? Of course I've noticed all of this, why the hell do you think I have meetings with senior managers about all the policies they want to impose on us?

Gary: Oh, what's the use? You've got your little empire, working on the same logic as the system you claim to oppose. You're the reason why the whole 'representative' system is so screwed up: it just creates another layer of bureaucratic managers. I bet you love it: being the expert, the one with the ear of management, the one all your passive members rely on to get things done. It's never crossed your mind that you might just be helping to keep the lid on something really revolutionary, all that power and joy and life locked up in the trained bodies and minds of the people around you.

Gary: I was elected!

Gary: In an election of only one candidate . . .

III

Gary: What's to be done in spite of the times? How can we have agency over the processes our own lived experience is subject to? The nightmare of dead generations weighing heavily on the living, choking up anything revolutionary, that's what prevents agency! Relying on thought that has had its day. We don't want the new just for the sake of it, we want the new and all that arrives with it. The 'arrivingness' of that new; the new that brings with it new ways of understanding what is new. L'avenir! The future of the future.

Gary: That makes *no* sense.

Gary: You're not listening.

Gary: You're not even referencing properly.

Gary: I want the future, now!

Gary: You're such a feeble thinker! You can't have a break with what is happening in order to forge a new tomorrow, there will always be continuation of the old into the new. Hoping the future undergoes a radical break from current, everyday reality is the perfect reactionary position.

Gary: But that can't mean we only 'ameliorate', 'reform', 'improve' because that ends up with nothing but 'perpetuate'. Agency lies in the conscientised intervention into the level of complicity our everyday lived experience undergoes. The problem isn't out there in society, it's you and me. It's the construction of our subjectivities ready for capitalistic work which directly pre-empts agency.

Gary: No it doesn't. That's just blaming the victim, a bourgeois moralism. Agency lies in the revolutionary praxis of the seizure of power and its functions. We used to call it getting control of the means of production, but it's still as valid now as it was then, just that the means of production have moved from looms and factories to media and education, among other things.

Gary: But the 'means' of production don't suit the 'ends' of production. That's where your agency evaporates. Agency lies in acting on the recognition of the deep, dense materiality of our current situation, where understanding the flows of ...

Gary: ...please, you're not going to start talking about infinite substance, are you?

Gary: ...multitudes are composed of an infinite variety of capabilities, with wildly unpredictable patterns and modes of articulation.

Gary: Unpredictable?

Gary: Yes, there's no way to know, in terms of the deep, dense materiality of our everyday lived experience, what is actually going on. At least that truth is not available to our understanding. The truth is: *no one knows what a union can do*.

Gary: Perfect. The cutting edge revolutionary winds up plagiarising Spinoza.^{iv} Ok, let me make a prediction then.

Gary: OK.

Gary: You, along with all your anarchist art-activist chums who got jobs in the university around the Blairite expansion of higher education, will produce a lot of namby-pamby 'practice-based' performance work over the next several years and enter it into the REF2020, only to be bitterly disappointed that it scores quite low. You'll then have yet another conference about how to get 'practice-based' research more fully recognised. At the same time you'll be flooding SCUDD with open letters and hurt emails about how unfairly all your work has been treated. That's my prediction...

Gary: I, erm...

Gary: ...unpredictable flows of infinite substance, my arse!

Gary: Now you're getting personal.

Gary: Your critical work, so called, is recuperated before you've even finished it. There's no exit from capitalistic production, even if you kid yourself into believing that your work is somehow anti-capitalist...Oh, what's the point?! I'm sick of this.

Gary: There's no role for anything other than miserabilist, joyless 'hard work', then? Don't you see, you're performing a script yourself. Your so-called concrete reality is nothing but a sedimented repetition, so much tissue and shit clogging the sewers . . .

Gary: Choose sides, stay there and re-check your basic assumptions!

Gary: Oh, shove it where your Marxist sun don't shine!

Email received the following morning

[all boxed words in greyscale]Dear Gary
I've been thinking about our recent conversation and decided that I'd like to send you my rewrite of *11 Theses on Feuerbach*, retitled *11 Theses on Winning the Union Back*, just to see if you'd like to make your own comments or make your own changes? I'd welcome them.
Please see attachment.

Solidarity,

Gary

Attachment

11 Theses On Winning-the-union-back
(after Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach')
I
The chief defect of all hitherto existing unionism – that of UCU included – is that the thing itself, the daily graft, is conceived negatively, not as sensuous human activity and practice. Hence our conceptions of unionism do not grasp

the significance of affirmative, practical-critical activity. This is why unionism seems so unattractive to most.

II

Whether our branch, our region or our national union 'lead' or 'support' or 'reject' the revolution is a purely scholastic question. It would seem that the idea of unionism, generally understood, is conceived in order to force members to either choose between leading, supporting or rejecting the inevitable replacing of capitalism with something else. This, however, is to miss out on the fruits of sensuous, human activity and practice on a daily basis in and out of the workplace.

III

The previous doctrine must, therefore, divide the membership into (at least) two parts, one of which is superior to the other parts. It also assumes those who are superior are stable and unchanging. Sensuous, human activity (or self-changing) can be conceived and rationally understood as revolutionary practice. Given that this is the case it is essential to activate the activists, educate the educators and revolutionize the revolutionaries.

IV

Unionism starts out from the fact of workplace alienation, of the duplication of the world into a fully just and fair world and its opposite. Its work consists in resolving the unfair world into its just version. This can be done by pursuing the human, sensuous activities available to us as unionsists in and out of the workplace.

V

The revolutionaries thus conceived will engage in sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity (or self-changing).

VI

Unionism resolves to replace injustice with justice at a moment in the future. All else is sacrificed for this aim. Integrity is maintained and thus valued only when this aim is being relentlessly pursued. But the struggle for justice thus conceived makes human activity abstract or, even worse, stable. In reality human activity is a multiplicity of social relations, itself radically unstable and changing.

VII

Unionism, consequently, cannot see that struggles for justice are themselves complex multiplicities with a potential unending variety of articulations. Unionism's static analyses belong to a particular form of society which many agree has already vanished.

VIII

All social(ist) life is essentially practical. All forms of social and ecological justice find their rational solution in sensuous human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.

IX

The highest point reached by unionism, that is, historically successful struggles for social justice, do not comprehend sensuousness as a practical activity.

X

The standpoint of the old unionism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society, or social(ist) humanisation of ourselves and each other.

XI

The unions have only complained about the workplace, in various ways; the point however, is to enjoy it.

Email received back from Gary the following day:

Dear Gary,

Thanks.

I read your rewrite with interest.

I have made a few changes.

Please find an exact copy of the text at this location (click on link below).

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/>

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The Institute for Employment Rights <http://www.ier.org.uk/resources/coalition-timeline>

i The Trade Union Bill 2015-16 is the accumulation of a series of legislative procedures against the right to organise and freedom of assembly. For an outstanding 'timeline' on the topic see The Institute for Employment Rights (IER) based in Liverpool. They write 'THE CONDEMS' IDEOLOGICAL ATTACK ON WORKERS. Since they took power in May 2010, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government has consistently undermined the employment rights of UK workers. Explore our interactive timeline to find out how.'
<http://www.ier.org.uk/resources/coalition-timeline>

ii 'How much easier it would be to say that there is a multitude now, that there is no more labor [sic] class... But if we really want simplicity at all costs, all we have to do is drink up a bottle of red wine. (Virno, Paolo, (2001)
<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0605/virno/en>

iii For an excellent account see Gill, Rosalind (2009) 'Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia' in Flood, R. & Gill, R. (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. London: Routledge. Also see Cedestrom, Carl and Fleming, Peter (2012) in *Dead Man Working*, Zero Books: London.

iv Baruch Spinoza (1632 - 1677) in *Ethics* (1677) poses the question about what a body is capable of after Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679). Deleuze puts the point usefully in his series of Spinoza lectures at Vincennes from 1978-81: '[T]he only question is that we don't even know what a body is capable of, we prattle on about the soul and the mind and we don't know what a body can do. Deleuze, Gilles, (1978)
<http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/texte.php?cle=14&groupe=Spinoza&langue=2>