

true confessions of a market trader

(written by me, January 2001)



Camden Lock Market, London

"I am technically a petit-bourgeois - I buy and sell, and trade in a market. I am not "petit-bourgeois" if by that is meant "small capitalist", since I never employ anybody, except in the way almost everyone does, like they might pay a car mechanic or electrician, for example. In my case, I occasionally get someone - a friend - to work for a few hours, for instance when my kid has a birthday party. This lack of desire to hire someone is partly because I can hardly afford to, but more importantly, because being a boss is wholly alien to me, makes me feel awkward. For instance, on those rare days when I've asked a friend to help, I've often avoided pointing out failures to do something that was part of the job of running the stall because it would have been telling them off, embarrassing. If a mate of yours says he's going to do the washing up and he/she doesn't, then you say something, but in a commodity relation, when someone is there just for the money, it's not friendly, it's hierarchical, under duress. So, if you're so cynical about your friends that you find yourself stuck for a pretext for ending the friendship, just employ them - and a pretext will pop up as quick as a virgin's cock in a brothel.[\[1\]](#)

I say this as an example of the fact that the critique of business and of the State can't just be confined to that of Big Business etc. "out there", but ultimately only makes sense when one looks at these alienated relations at the heart of daily life. If one opposes this world of money and wage labour, it's basically because of the divisive and destructive effect they have on one's social relations.

As for those who employ others, not all of them conform to the stereotype of the depressingly

cynical mean money-grubbing petit-bourgeois. Many are not involved in primitive capital accumulation, hardly earning more than those who work for them, who don't have to take the same degree of risk and responsibility (sure, the "risk-taking businessman" is the model of social improvement constantly encouraged by the State, but the image of adventure has little to do with the petty reality of stress-filled nights and days, the suffocating tedium of the paperwork, the insecurity of barely keeping your head above water, and, above all, the fact that the more one risks in terms of business the less one risks in terms of love, friendship and rebellion). Often they treat "their" employees as friends, drinking with them, seeing them socially, sometimes helping with their daily life problems, and even feeling guilty about telling them off about some work-related problem. Nevertheless, they invariably, as traditionally, accept this hierarchical commodity relation as inevitable. (buying and selling tends to make the petit-bourgeois dismiss without second thought the long-term possibility of the abolition of money as a silly utopian fantasy, an automatically contemptuous attitude less common amongst those who work for others, who are generally more prepared to at least argue about it). What's more, some of them use friendliness cynically as a ploy to getting these friends' to shut up about their wages (it's true they often have major money worries also - and may even genuinely get upset about having to "let someone go" - i.e. sack their friend' in order to do the work themselves because they can no longer afford to pay wages, but...). But if friendships like this are in many ways illusory, it's usually the lonely petit-bourgeois boss, who has far less idea about what friendship entails, who has the illusion rather than the worker.

Despite surviving in what is partly a petit-bourgeois^[2] manner, partly because of my history and choices, I can still recognise my increased proletarianisation and the effect of the history of the class struggle in the intensified misery of immediate market relations. On the most basic level, I am now working twice as much and yet getting half of what I was 8 years ago, and this is the experience of many, if not most, long-term traders.

But it's more interesting to talk about things on the level of social relations than going into the more directly financial misery of the situation. For instance, seven years ago no one was punished if they were ten minutes late or so. But nowadays you only have to be two minutes late and, if the manager doesn't like you, you're suspended for a week. This, in the run-up to Christmas, is a major cut in income. Likewise, you could lightly wind up the manager 10 years ago and he'd make some retort, maybe even threatening to kick you out of the market, but in practice there'd be no consequence. Nowadays, you might be suspended or even lose your permanent status, and have to queue up with the casuals.

About seven years ago, in the market next door, traders went on a rent strike, refusing to pay an exorbitant rent increase: management backed down. Nowadays they'd all be kicked out. That is, if you could even begin to organise such collective action - in fact, a couple of years back when an American multi-millionaire took it over, rents were doubled overnight and most of the long-termers had to leave, with no resistance. It's that threat - of an even worse market next door - that keeps many traders in order. A few months ago, management decided, with just a few days notice, to turn one of the rooms in the market into an art exhibition for a couple of weeks, basically a chance for friends of lower management to get a cheap exhibition for their tacky artworks. Traders were not reallocated positions, or, if they were, they were offered spots outside, completely inappropriate for those with stock susceptible to bad weather and/or stock which required several hours to set up and then later pack up. This, at a time of high sales, was a major blow: people were offered the opportunity to take a holiday' as if they were being done a favour. When another exhibition was proposed a few weeks later, with an equal lack of notice, 90% of the traders concerned immediately signed a petition. But within 24 hours some 35% had dropped out under some pretence or other, any excuse to cover up their cowardice. One, seriously, thought that the tannoys might be two-way, that the management might be bugging stallholders' conversations. Though this was indicative of the atmosphere of terror management has created, it also shows how the petit-bourgeois clings onto his isolation, paranoid fantasies

being the excuse not to break out of it. It was only a petty petition, for fuck's sake! Pathetic! However, such paranoia has a basis. The eventual weak compromise reached over this issue was to get a representative from another section of the market to bring the issues up at the monthly meeting of shopkeepers, stallholders' reps, management and directors, unbearable get-togethers where people talk of spending thousands of pounds on paying some company to re-style the market in order to give it more publicity; complaints about graffiti; how to pressurise traders to work there longer; wonderful stuff like that. The rep brought the issue up and the manager visibly cringed, burying his head in his hands, which shows how if things don't go management's way even just a teensy weensy bit, they feel like their world, their ego, is falling apart. The only result of this, however, was petty vindictiveness on the part of the managers (so, in a sense, the previously mentioned traders' paranoia has a real basis). They told people they were going to do a count of the numbers of customers coming into the room, and if it was below quota, they'd stop people trading there and use the space for something else. But it turned out to be a total wind-up, as they had no planning permission to use the room for anything other than trading, apart from only occasional use for other purposes. Also, some people were suddenly told they couldn't use the lighting that they'd used for years and years. Though he couldn't get at people directly, which would have made him look silly and insanely touchy, and wouldn't have been approved of by the directors, he resorted to underhand irritations as revenge for being made to feel slightly awkward in front of them. How he would cope when faced with more really threatening problems would make a bad psychological horror movie. Perhaps if there'd been some more forceful response from traders to their manoeuvres, management may have felt incapable of being so petty. But weak opposition' got us nowhere.

There is, however, one area of minimal solidarity' between stallholders which is still fairly prevalent: if a trader near you is late you uncover for them. However, even this, on occasion, no longer prevails. Once a stall the other end of the room where I work was left covered a few minutes after the 9.30 cut-off time, and the manager walks by. Where's so and so?' he asks. She's not arrived' replies X, another stallholder. The manager walks off in a huff. Since X doesn't uncover, I walk over and do it, saying, "You could have told him she's just gone to get a coffee or something. If he comes back again tell him she's just gone to get a drink." A couple of minutes later he turns up again. "Who uncovered the stall?" he asks. "Z did" she says, pointing to me, at which the manager comes over and gives me a bollocking. After he left, I obviously had a row with the woman who grassed me up, who was completely unapologetic (significantly, a woman I know, who's been involved in Reclaim the Streets for years, who was working for another stallholder nearby, very blatantly avoided being involved in this dispute; after all, for many of those in RTS fighting capitalism is, as criticised in the first paragraph, something out there', never to do with social relations).

This extremely limited solidarity can partly be explained by management divide and rule. It's not just that different sections of the market pay different rents, but those in the same part of the market are treated differently. Newcomers, in order to entice them into the market, are often treated better, given low rents, etc.; at the same time, their permanent status is put on hold so that their position never feels too comfortable, and consequently they are often, with notable exceptions, the most submissive to management. Permanent stallholders, who have grown to be more dependent on trading in that particular market, are treated with scarcely concealed contempt: often they are told that their display and products are acceptable only to have this reversed a few weeks later, after they've got their orders in and re-arranged their stall. The result is that more and more long term stallholders just end up leaving the market, since management is so utterly arbitrary and unpredictably authoritarian. It doesn't even make capitalist sense, since the multinational that owns it actually loses rent money because there are less and less long-term stallholders. It's all a bit feudal: everything comes down to the whim of the top manager. 'Accept Authority', even if it makes absolutely no sense is the rule, whether at the level of international politics or of small market politics. Of course, it's only the bad aspect of feudalism that dominates - none of the protectiveness of the patrician, no moral economy - just subjectivity turned into the will for power in the unprotected jungle of the commodity economy.

This fundamental irrationality has meant that, whereas in the past, say in the 80s or early 90s, the top manager was just schizophrenic, nice cop one minute, nasty cop the next, nowadays he's just increasingly mad, psychotic even. For the most part, he seems to have given up on that internal conflict between wanting to be liked and wanting to be feared: taking his cue from the State he's decided he's going to be a crazy bastard.^[3] Try to ask him about anything slightly problematic and he goes berserk. The other day he was seen going back and forth, muttering to himself, holding his palm to his forehead, clearly trying to rack his brain about what he was meant to be doing, utterly oblivious of how peculiar he looked. Sure, he can't cope with inciting conflict all the time, so he does try to smile, though it's as contorted as his laugh is phoney. Sometimes he'll even take a mild joke at his expense from someone he likes a bit, just to show that he's got a sense of humour, though from anyone he's had a run-in with, even years previously, even the mildest joke could lead to suspension. At other times he'll seek some easy complicity with one stallholder against another, putting them down for laughs, knowing full well that the trader can't answer back without major risk. It's rather like the classical teacher tactic of humiliating one kid in order to get the class on their side. In fact, this comparison with the dark sarcasm of the classroom is constantly alluded to by traders: "I've been told to write out 500 times I must not be late or else" and jokes like that. Most traders can't stand him but many feel the need to be on his good side by lightly joking with him and some women lightly flirt with him. Considering the humiliation he inflicts, sometimes having women and men in tears, such complicity is nauseatingly submissive. Me, I prefer to keep a margin of dignity and, apart from a reluctant straight-faced hello' or nod in the morning, keep my contact purely functional.

As for the absence of solidarity, it more importantly comes down to the petit-bourgeois mentality and material situation itself than direct divide and rule tactics by management - the petit-bourgeois relation to the economy. Everyone's situation is very different from everyone else's^[4]: some are raking it in, others are on the breadline. For some, trading there is their sole source of income, others do it part-time. Some are legit, declared for inspection by Her Majesty's Inland Revenue, some, though less and less, are signing on, on the sick, or, more commonly, do the work as a bit of extra, whilst their main job is declared (including someone who works for Social Security or whatever it's called nowadays). Some get their products from Third World cheap sweatshop labour, others from the back of a lorry, and an increasing amount make them themselves, which certainly makes them identify far more with their work than the traditional worker of former epochs. Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*: "...there is found with medieval craftsmen an interest in their special work and in proficiency in it, which was capable of rising to a narrow artistic sense. For this reason, however, every medieval craftsman was completely absorbed in his work, to which he had a contented slavish relationship, and to which he was subjected to a far greater extent than the modern worker, whose work is a matter of indifference to him." (I don't think this is any longer true of the modern worker': the unprecedented levels of stress associated with modern work in this country is partly due to the fact that modern workers feel more identification with their work than previously and, whilst working far longer than twenty years ago, they proportionally feel the need to find some greater margin of dignity in it than they used to; whether they do or not is another question). But this valorisation of their work isn't always consistent: Recently a guy who makes his own puzzles sat at his stall wearing a sticker on his forehead saying "I hate puzzles". In fact, there are a few traders who are positively turned off what they sell, like some prostitutes are turned off sex. For many, business and pleasure don't mix. I knew a book dealer who hardly read because books had become just a commodity, a cultural commodity. It was as if he was buying and selling them by the kilo. Once he said he felt he was becoming kind of philistine - he knew the exchange value of every book, but the human value' of none. In part, this was a reaction to all those who wear their culture on their sleeve, who believe in the civilising value of The Written Word, a bit like those who worship The Computer. He quoted Artaud, "All writing is pigshit", but forgot to mention the fact that Artaud wrote and, above all, wrote perhaps the best critique of culture of his time (of course, he's not really useful for a critique of modern culture and writing, which have easily co-opted and adopted him, but that's another story).

One of the attractions of markets, particularly where people are running their own stalls, is that the reified commodity relation is somehow made human, unlike in a supermarket or department store, where the person selling is only smiling - if that - because they have to. The trader sells his personality as the free gift of the exchange. Many traders pride themselves on how they get people to buy, for instance when they subtly avoid over-selling their product, or when they show curiosity about where the customers come from and what they think of this city or just by turning on the charm, cracking jokes, etc. There are some traders who virtually only smile at customers. Consumers like to be enticed, won over, flattered and entertained and traders like to entertain themselves, especially if it helps a sale. It's another example of how entertainment and the cynicism of economic relations are utterly intertwined.

Another change over the years has been an obsession with aestheticisation, of which the art exhibition was an example. One lower management bright spark even had the idea of getting rid of loads of stalls around the balcony of the main hall, because the balcony looked so beautiful and lovely. Though the idea didn't last more than a couple of days, it was illustrative of management thinking: if in doubt, make a lousy situation even worse (the project would have meant kicking out loads of traders). In fact, this epitomises the essence of aesthetics: the beauty of things, the supposed consolation for the ugliness of social relations, actually makes such relations uglier.

The real reasons for the decline of the market are mainly the proliferation of other similar markets, their consequent saturation and the loss of novelty of this particular market arising from this, the strong pound putting off tourists, the massive increase in consumer spending on computer/internet-related products etc. Management have no interest in looking at these reasons, probably because they are in no position to do anything about them. Management has decided that the best way to entice the punters along is to make the market look prettier. A bit like putting out Bauhaus deckchairs on the Titanic. So now every stall has to look like a Knightsbridge shop window, and increasingly craft commodities are encouraged. This conveniently intensifies a hierarchy amongst traders, with some - though not many - of those ever so creative craftsmen and women thinking themselves as artists, superior to the rest, an attitude which is fortunately only subtly expressed so far. And the traditional stuff you get in markets - cheap watches, secondhand goods, etc. - are increasingly pushed out (except for clothes and a bit of cheap jewellery, up till now). The result is that those looking for cheap goods are less and less attracted to coming to the market, whilst there are more and more customers whose main interest is in buying some unique artistic commodity, possession of which is meant to surround them with the mystique of some special individuality. There is, I suppose, a genuine capitalist logic in all this: with the reduced disposable income of everyone below the middle classes, only the middle class should be encouraged to come and spend.

The stereotype of traders as utterly conservative people is in the vast majority of cases true. Many like to flash their money around, ostentatiously counting their takings in public, subconsciously showing their desire to be flashers in the popular sense of the word. And some are certainly mean-spirited. Management once put a woman casual trader selling jewellery next to an old hippy who made his own jewellery. Though her jewellery was totally different, because he'd had a crap day he went up to her, placing his face an inch away from hers' and screamed "It's because of you that I've made no fucking money today!" Isn't the competitive ethos a wonderful thing? But there are numerable exceptions to this stereotype, and even conservative traders aren't consistent. For instance, one of the most politically conservative people in the market (always votes Tory, supports Bush) is also the most generous when it comes to helping people - uncovering the stalls of late arrivals, looking after peoples' stalls, shifting stuff for people, etc., and never expecting or asking anything in return. And one black woman, a shopkeeper, though she supported some riots, especially those in response to cops killing blacks, is an out and out tyrant with her employees. It's intellectuals who judge people solely on the basis of their explicit

ideas, not on their behaviour as a whole.

As for the stereotype of traders being politically reactionary, well, unlike the rest of the population if we're to believe the opinion polls, probably over 50% of stallholders opposed the Gulf War back in '91, for instance. And many were quite excited by the Trafalgar Square Poll Tax riot of 1990. A few are old trade union or tenancy struggle militants, independent Leftists, old rebels, and it was these who were most excited by the fuel blockades of September 2000, whereas the more politically right-wing ones seemed largely indifferent to them. What's more, I used to know a guy who worked in the market who not only signed on for 10 months of every year of the 14 years he worked in the market, but got at least half his stock from shoplifting; moreover, he participated a bit in the '81 riots, the miners strike, the '85 riots, the Poll Tax rebellion and many other social movements, and, despite some abstractions, had a pretty good take on this society. However, he told me once that the fact that he "liberated" for his living gave him a certain distance from most of the rest of the traders and from the whole ethos of exchange a bit arrogant really since, as a market trader he was inevitably immersed in exchange. I suspect, also, it was more the other way round: his political rejection of the ethos of exchange preceded and justified his attitude to shoplifting (he also said that nicking in order to re-sell did, in fact, weaken the pleasure of this forbidden fruit). However, unlike certain situationist and anarchist-influenced people in the past, he didn't seem to valorise theft as some radical means of survival. "Property is theft, certainly, but theft is property", as he once said to me when stoned.

There are, of course, many traders who survive off legitimate theft - going twice a year to Bali or Thailand or wherever to buy cheap jewellery etc. which they then bring over to sell. However, it's indicative of a niggling bad conscience that many of them feel the need to justify it even before any hint of criticism - "I give them a good price, and it enables them to eat and provide for their families in countries where many people go hungry or starve" they often say with a slightly guilty tone (the finger-wagging liberal moralist is the alter ego in their head). Of course, they're doing them a favour. Rather like those big bosses who, increasingly in this utterly archaic atmosphere, resort to the old Victorian bourgeois self-justification - "We're job-providers/creators" (in the 60 years up until the 1980s they wouldn't have dared take the piss like that). One fairly new trader to the market proudly declared that his stock came from his father's factory in Vietnam. Though the stuff certainly came from Vietnamese sweatshop labour, it turned out there was no family connection to it. He obviously thought that this would impress people, which shows how fucked in the head he is, as if living off your father's work, and such nasty super-exploitative work at that, is a basis for pumping yourself up. Undoubtedly, the reactionary atmosphere of "Anything Goes" indifference which is prevalent today in the market, as it is in the country as a whole, means that the trivial fact that he gets his income from Third World poverty plays not even a tiny fraction of a part of the contempt of many of his fellow traders for him, though 20 years ago it would have done.

As for theft from stalls in the market, it seems worth mentioning that the attitude of management is a bit more liberal than that of management in shops and supermarkets. If the goods are handed back without any struggle, they're generally told, or rather, bawled at, to get off the site and never come back. Only if they claim their innocence are the cops called, mainly because security have no right to search them. A few of the more reactionary traders - a minority - complain about this, moaning, "What's the point? It's no deterrent. And sooner or later they'll be back." Well, what else can one expect?

However, despite these miseries, and probably lots more that I haven't mentioned because I've not thought about them, or not heard of them, there are aspects of the market that are better than many other workplaces. For instance, people bring their kids to the market, who are then partly looked after by other stallholders, and this does create a friendly atmosphere. And in the quiet periods, traders often stem the boredom by pissing about, playing football or cricket with

lightweight “balls”, chuck paper aeroplanes, playful things like that. It's refreshing that, despite autocratic management, we can entertain ourselves a little. Certainly these things are fairly banal, common to many other workplaces, but I suspect that even this tiny margin of freedom' is being increasingly squeezed out in the stifling repressive work work work atmosphere of most places where you're employed rather than self-employed. And, despite the illusions of the ideology of “working for yourself” (it's the economy who's boss, and renting the stall forces you to submit to managements' terms even though you have no contract with them), you are able, within limits, to choose when not to work, taking holidays when you want and can afford to, taking a weekend off here and there. Sure, this happens in many of the more temporary forms of wage labour, when you sell your skills for a specific piece of work, but not in more permanent jobs

If I've written this, it's partly to encourage other people in different work situations to give accounts of their situation and history. If one can say one thing about the present epoch, it's the fact that, despite, the so-called information revolution, people have never had so little knowledge about what people live outside their immediate increasingly narrow circle. A movement against this insane world will partly arise out of each of us examining and publicly sharing how we, ourselves, produce and consume this society. Though the neat print of the above makes writing and critical reflection seem like a task only a specialist could do, this has been written patchwork-style, much of it coming from a stream of consciousness that began as a tiny trickle of notes. Moreover, it's not definitive, not set in stone - it's open-ended, open to question. When you write to discover, you unearth the buried treasure of your own subversive point of view and hopefully connect to others'. In this, I've been aided by the spade of a rather pedantic habit of digging into reality with all its ifs and buts, its almost intangible nuances, avoiding the swamp of received phrases and the potholes of stylised exaggerations (except in this sentence, of course). Anyone with a will to revolt against the authority of other people's ideas and their own petrified ideas, and with the desire to consider writing as just one means of empowering yourself, of encouraging the return of the repressed, will find such a task a pleasure. This is the raw material of our revolt - the critique of daily life. A critique whose written theory is just a prelude to practice, to an adventurous dialogue.”

W. Tyler, London, January 2001.

Footnotes

[1] Virgins seeking out brothels be warned - this slightly archaic-sounding metaphor is not to be taken literally since, according to an ex-prostitute, your anxiety makes you pretty slow at getting hard-ons, so don't get your hopes up too high...

[2] A friend writes to say that I am not petit-bourgeois: “You don't regularly employ wage labour in any stage of a commodity production process, you just “buy and sell”. Most of us buy and sell to some extent, it is just that you rely on this for a living much more than the majority. The commodities you trade in aren't necessarily being traded in the service of the capital process.” After similar objections from other friends, I changed the original title of this, which was “Confessions of a Petit-Bourgeois”. The idea was to turn around the traditional ultra-leftist/pro-situationist/marxist etc. stereotyping of the self-employed as petit-bourgeois', particularly when they used this as a way of dismissing the recent fuel protests unthinkingly (see the text ' [“Looks as though we've got ourselves a convoy”](#) for an analysis of some aspects of this movement). In fact, many of the self-employed have a far more precarious existence than most

of the skilled working class, some of whom - computer programmers, for example - can command wages far in excess of many of the professional middle class. Moreover, many of the so-called self-employed sell their labour for specific tasks to someone who employs them for a short period of time, and many of the professional middle class are also employed. Simplistic marxist categories are no help when it comes to examining this epoch now developing, which is partly characterised by what could be called “the petit-bourgeoisification of the proletariat, and the proletarianisation of the petit-bourgeoisie”.

[3] Of course, the representatives of the State or of Big Business, being in the public eye unlike those in authority lower down in the hierarchy, always have to play the nice cop image for the vast majority to hide their nasty cop practice. Unlike our market manager, after every economically-provoked disaster they feel the need to take the heat out of the situation by confessing certain failures, apologising and reassuring, in soft reasonable tones, that they are listening to people and that things will change, you can rest assured that there'll be a no-holds barred Public Inquiry, etc. They know full well that this society ensures that people's memories are short and that anger delayed is anger defused. By this method, in ten years' time, to take one example, rail crashes may well be as acceptable as the tens of thousands of pensioners who die each year of hypothermia.

[4] This applies all over the place nowadays, whether in the workplace or in the community: just as gentrification has divided up and weakened the working class in the localities they live in, so the development of what is formally self-employment has divided up workers at work. This means a hell of a lot when it comes to questions of solidarity. And it even applies to the unemployed nowadays, as well. Before the war if you had a group of unemployed queuing up at the Labour Exchange, the majority of them would have roughly similar circumstances. Today if you are in the dole queue, the person in front could be an unemployed unskilled worker with no money, the person in front of them might have savings and not under such pressure to get a job, the person in front of them might be working on the side, cash in hand, the person in front of them a rich kid slumming it for a year or so, in front of them a professional benefit fraudster, in front of them a well-paid professional worker in between jobs, etc.

