

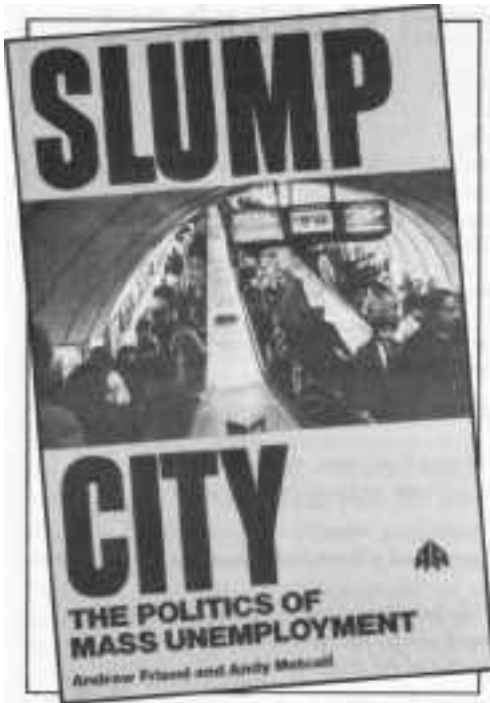
Reviews

SLUMP CITY, THE POLITICS OF MASS UNEMPLOYMENT

Andrew Friend & Andy Metcalf

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So many appeals to working class action gloss over the uncomfortable fact that the working class is divided against itself. If divisions are recognised — well, then, they are deplored and further appeals are made to solidarity and unity. But such appeals are doomed to failure so long as we ignore the historical depth and scope of the rifts, the way they are capable of being used against us and the way divisions are sustained by the oppression we visit upon each other. This book — though its title would not bring it immediately to mind — is about the construction of *difference* in the working class. As such it is a timely contribution to socialist thinking and strategy.

Slump City is a far ranging book which

takes events in the older working class areas as its starting point and proceeds from the perception that 'there is no inner-city problem that can be understood outside of the uneven development of the capitalist system as a whole'. Friend and Metcalf argue that with the return of mass unemployment 'the crisis of social control generated by concentrations of people living on the margins of society is set to become more widespread and more intense' and the book as a whole is an attempt to chart how and why these concentrations occur, their class composition and their significance for the working class on one hand and the state on the other. The main character in the story is that part of the working class — which the authors call 'the surplus population' — for which capitalist industry has little need and less regard, and which for the state is its main drain on public expenditure and its primary problem in terms of control.

The term 'surplus population' is derived from Marx. He used it to characterise paupers, the irregularly employed, inhabitants of rural areas underemployed on the land and the recently juvenile, who had outgrown their usefulness to the employers of cheap labour. The definition used by Friend and Metcalf is a 20th century adaptation. They see the permanent or intermittent unemployed, capital's industrial reserve army, as a large component of this surplus population. But there are others: 'Those participating in the bottom reaches of the "black economy" outside the tax system; all those who are totally dependent on state benefits or forms of charity (including the mass of pensioners, the chronically sick and disabled and single parent families on social security); and those people who, although in regular employment in labour intensive sweated occupations or the state service sector, earn wages significantly below the national average and who live in households where the standard of living only exceeds the minimum poverty level because of the receipt of means-tested benefits . . .' In other words the surplus population today includes both those who are super-exploited by capital and those who are technically free from capitalist exploitation but whose human potentialities are wasted by a society crucified on the law of value.

Slump City is notable for steadfastly holding to an international and gender-conscious analysis, and an early chapter demonstrates the way the working class was reconstituted during the post-Second World War period of prosperity with many more women and immigrants entering the paid labour force. The authors underline the now increasingly made point that the character-

istic member of the working class was for far too long assumed unthinkingly by socialists to be white, male and a worker. It is because so many trade unions, so many party branches, have operated in this belief in the past and ignored the different experiences of exploitation and oppression that there is such lack of confidence in them. 'Unity can only be achieved on the basis of a politics that addresses the needs of those groups who, divided from each other, are united in their alienation from labourism.'

The implications of this analysis for socialist strategy are quite important. The rifts between the different groups that comprise the working class are in part created, deepened and made use of by capital and the state. (The chapter on law and order, although written well before the riots, is of immediate relevance here in showing the way in which the divide between organised workers and groups in the surplus population was exploited throughout the seventies in order to restructure the state's repressive apparatus.) But because the rifts are also determined by the long history of capitalist development, of imperialism and of patriarchy, there are tangible differences of interest between the several worlds. Take for instance the relatively well-off and the relatively impoverished among the working class. Skilled groups have often reached their fairly secure and prestigious standing by curtailing the chances of the mass of their class to improve their position. They in turn are genuinely threatened with a deteriorating standard of living by the de-skilling of their jobs and the introduction of unorganised labour, women, casuals, 'temps'. And this is only one of the ways in which we affect each other, for good or ill. Men have an adverse effect upon the life chances of women. The white working class is not innocent, as we sometimes prefer to think, of the exploitation of the colonised populations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The higher standard of living of white workers in ex-imperial countries today stems in part from surplus value produced in the Third World. The divide between black and white in the working class in Britain today is caused by more than 'ideology' — and the same could be said of the divide between the in-work and the out-of-work, the 'industrious' and the 'scroungers', adults and school-leavers, men and women. Between mere prejudices lie material differences, power structures and struggles which any socialist strategy must pay close attention to if it is to be effective.

Friend and Metcalf's view of the crisis is a bleak one which carries with it a sense of urgency. For growth to be resumed on a capitalist basis in Britain they believe it will

be necessary for the state and the capitalist class to inflict major defeats on the organised working class on a scale far exceeding anything that has yet been approached. In this context, they see the divisions between the more prosperous layers of the working

class and the various groups that comprise the surplus population as being of crucial political importance. They see the struggle to create new unities and new alliances, to evolve an alternative political strategy rather than a purely economic one, as the major

priority for socialists today. The book does not seek to provide a detailed blueprint as to how this should be done, but it does raise major questions which will need to be widely debated if the task is to be attempted.

Cynthia Cockburn

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