Small Images from the Claimants Union

[**Slide 1**]
This presentation looks at an image mostly reproduced small, at the size of a logo, and printed across material published by a social movement organisation called The Claimants Union (CU) — active as a federation of groups across the UK between the late 1960s and the 1990s. I don't know who designed this image, which (by the way) doesn't make a direct reference to the CU – but I kept stumbling upon it when browsing through publications produced by different groups.

This image is a subversion of the United Kingdom's Royal Coat of Arms. Smaller to the right you see the original version. Everyone living in the UK is familiar with it as a symbol of the monarchy and state authority — it's on every British passport and used as a Government insignia across documents, buildings, etc. The subverted version to the left, shows the crowned English Lion attacked by a blue collar worker; and a protester wearing a balaclava assaulting the Scottish Unicorn (the horn broken suggests a violent clash). Inside the shield, the quarters representing the UK states, are replaced by icons showing police power (an helmet and a truncheon); a pound sign, and what looks like silhouettes of crammed people lying horizontally (to replace the rampant lions in the original emblem).

Around the shield is the Order of the Garter, (the belt representing the highest order of knighthood), where the Anglo-Saxon motto *Honi soit qui mal y pense* (Shamed be whoever thinks ill of it), and the French *Dieu et mon droit* (God and my right), are replaced by a quote by the Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong: 'If you don't hit it, it won't fall'.

[Slide 2]
Together with appearing on covers and through the pages of CU publications, I found the same image on the publishing of other groups sharing similar insurrectionary views. It's here on the back cover and inner pages of the *Hackney Gutter Press*, a community newspaper published in east London in the early 1970s (1971—73?) – focussed on community organising around squatting, food co-ops, and the campaining of liberation movement of women, gay and the black community in the local area) – all the 6 issues that I found feature activities of local Claimants Unions.

It's also on the front cover of an activist publication called *Fact Folder* (produced in London in the same period). *Fact Folder* published the research of members of a left-libertarian organisation called Big Flame, active in East London around workers struggles at the Dagenham Ford car plant.

A different use of the same image is on the cover of Claimants Union pamphlets published by the between 1972–77: 'The Claimants Handbook for Strikers' (advising workers on how to obtain maximum social security benefits while on strike); 'A load of Bullshit: a counter report on the right to live' – produced in response to Henry Fisher's enquiry on the abuse of social security benefits (from 1971); and different CU Handbooks published in London and Birmingham show a larger and more detailed illustration.

As this image kept cropping up during my research into pamphlets and printed material produced by groups of what's often referred as the alternative left, the non-aligned, or the autonomous left – I became interested in tracing the journey of this subverted Royal Coat of Arms. To me, this image seemed to travel with the same fluidity characterising the temporality and ephemeral nature of social movements themselves, its travelling involves complex relationships and networks of people, ideas and practical/real-life struggles. Escaping notions of authorship and copyright, and being appropriated, adapted, and repurposed as required – this small image kept appearing across pamphlets, leaflets, journals, bulletins, newsletters, membership cards and printed material published by The Claimants Union movement through the decade.

Looking at this image in relation to the network of people, ideas and struggles that prompted its making and circulation, sociologist Nicholas Thoburn's work on the materiality of radical publishing is particularly relevant, in that he argues that publishing that is anti-racist, feminist, communist, anarchic, queer, trans, indigenous, abolitionist, environmental, emerges from social conditions that are fundamentally hostile. While this form of publishing develops within the very capitalist system it aims to critique, radical publishing always exists in a condition of crisis; and its materiality becomes visible looking at the publishing forms, processes and relationships, modes of authorship and linguistic structures that are instrumental to the development of their political concepts — helping movements to better understand what they do.

Art historian Jacopo Galimberti, in his book 'Images of Class' which focuses on the image production of Ultra-left currents in Italy between the 1960s–80s, explores the constant search for proletarian self-expression, and a richness of images that reveal 'subtexts and lineages'.

Considering this small image as a particular form of proletarian self-expression which includes peoples, ideas, and practices, I kept stumbling upon different versions of the same image. I got interested in thinking about its own lineages and subtexts, and how it was used by the the CU to express tactics, struggles, and the complex membership and composition of the movement. To me, these different versions made visible a nuanced and at the time original understanding of traditional Marxists ideas of class composition, and class struggle. Therefore, with the risk of sounding too enthusiastic and naive, I started asking wondering: is this what a Marxist image looks like? And is it a true radical image?

[**Slide 3**]

To provide a brief background before I attempt to answer my question, the first Claimants Union was established in Birmingham in January 1969, and the movement coincides with the rediscovered history of the Unemployed Workers Movement of the 1920s and was a reaction to the social security acts of 1966 and 1971. The image on screen explains that CU were set up as an autonomous self-help group to confront the Social Security bureaucracy. At a time of rising poverty level, a global energy crisis and rising inflation, most people knew very little about how to claim benefits, and what they were entitled to – and the union aimed to give support to those outside the regular trade union movement: low-paid workers, the unemployed, the old, the sick, one-parent families and so on.

The 1976 edition of the encyclopaedic guide 'Alternative London', refers to 120 unions across the country, and 13 of them in London. Each London group published its own news bulletin, had a weekly meeting, there was an all London conference once a month and a national conference every 3 months. The page on the right, from 'The Claimants Handbook for Strikers', shows some of the publication titles available, and a list of addresses.

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Published by the east London group, the leaflet on screen directly addresses marginalised groups like the unemployed, the old, the sick and disabled, striking workers and pensioners, adding to pamphlets aimed at unsupported mothers and homeless in the previous page.

Writing the article 'Up Against the Welfare State' for the journal *Socialist Register: a survey of movements and ideas* in 1973, sociologist Hilary Rose speaks about the CU as a movements for Community action organising around the neighbourhood and the home, and that its history [quote] 'has to be seen in the context of the working out of the Welfare State, and the changing consciousness of its inadequacies during the 1960s'.

On the one hand, central to the work of CU were very practical concerns around lack of transparency on benefit entitlement rules. Many Claimant felt isolated and 'depersonalised' by decisions pertaining the conduct of their life taken by officials. Publications provided information about appealing decisions

in tribunal, and how claimants could protect themselves from the intimidation of officers. On the other hand the underlying belief was that supplementary benefits were not a matter of charity and discretion, but a human right. CU demanded control of the social services by the people who use them, to guarantee an adequate minimum income to all without distinction between people deserving and not deserving.[5]

This combination of: the provision of an informative service to the poor and marginalised, while building a movement around welfare state self-management, and working class power is striking.

[**Slide 5**]

Furthermore, I've been fascinated by the different small details that we can spot across the images here – developing the image in my 1st slide into a palette of images that keep cropping here and there – as a coherent set of revolutionary graphic assets. Hilary Rose explained that the contribution of the CU to the working class movement is precious: it revealed the oppressive and discriminatory nature of the Welfare State; and demonstrated how surfacing people's collective experience of poverty – the movement grew class consciousness and solidarity, encouraging disadvantaged people to take collective action.

Portraying a set of different revolutionary characters[6] and bodies, the images show antagonism against a state that was seen as the institution reforming and regulating the capitalist system they oppose. Together with the worker and the protester, you see revolting are a male and a female worker (top right image showing the tilted crown about to fall off and a raised fist popping up behind the shield). The motto is here replaced with the first demand in the Federation of CU charter 'an adequate income without means test'. What looks more like a family is shown below: the female character is portrayed wearing a dress, the male has no working tools in their hands, a happy child is pulling the tail of the lion.The 2 images at the bottom look like variations of the previous ones, male and female characters are swapped around and I'm not sure if the quarter in the shield at the bottom left represents someone imprisoned.

I wonder if it's possible to read these small images and the tiny differences within them, as subtexts and latent / concealed meanings, that carefully detail the movement's constituency and their revolutionary vision. Looking at the images together, they challenge the traditional marxist idea of the working class as a single body of unionised workers (sharing similar experience and interests); they illustrate groups of marginalised claimants becoming the centre of the struggle; they also illustrate resistance tactics: the refusal of work, demands of wages for housework, and I wonder if this the silhouettes of bodies crammed in the in the top left quadrant in the bottom left image, indicate sits-ins, protest and strikes action.

Hinting towards different forms of oppression faced by claimants, these images seem to try to understand the nature of CU as a movement acknowledging its complex nature and needs, and challengingg the idea that marginalised groups can't organise and take action.[1]

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[1] Capital-initiated images culture, images showing a loose group of people responding to their own personal and historical circumstances. These images reproduce some of the struggles / or the idea of struggle in the symbolism itself -- it represent of respond to the personal, material, historical circumstances of oppressed groups.