

## AUTONOMY - A Case of Too Many Meanings

Probably of all the jargon words uttered by BF members 'autonomy' must be pretty near top of the list in frequency. 'Autonomy' is a concept that is central to our politics but by now it has too many meanings to be of much use.

'Autonomy' as a theoretical concept (that is what it is) can to BF politics via Italian Marxists in the early 1960's who wrote in publications like Quaderni Rossi (Red Notes) - there it was a theory of working class autonomy. The argument being that the needs of the working class were independent of capitalism (and of the trade unions) and that what the working class had to do (and revolutionaries working with it) was to assert in struggle its autonomous needs. The theory was already on the wild side for 1960's Italy (in the sense that working class needs were defined by capitalism and not autonomous from it) but it made some kind of sense - in that Italy was a comparatively backward capitalist country without a welfare state and with little incorporation of the working class into the state and its institutions. So many militant Italian workers responded to a political programme which advocated direct action in the work-places (the slogan was 'we are all delegates'), direct action over housing ('take over the city') and a refusal to compromise and accept reforms ('we want everything'). In time, this wave of direct confrontation ebbed - the conflict was institutionalised: the state made some concessions and so did the militant workers and the role of the trade unions (backed by the Communist Party) was re-inforced. Those revolutionaries who did not accept the compromise formed the Red Brigades and other armed vanguards, which never had any mass support although many workers admired the nerve of their actions. The idea of autonomy lost its class dimension and was taken up by groups like Autonomia whose politics occupied the uncertain space between flower-power and the 1968 generation and the politics of the gun.

Though workerist in that their main point of reference was (young, male, migrant) workers at the point of production and consumption, these ideas of class autonomy did have some resonance in Italy of the early 1970's and they enabled groups like Lotta Continua to grow fast - until the confrontation between workerists and feminists put an end to the organisation in 1976. But they made no sense at all when imported to Britain of the early 1970's - for there there was never any sense in which militant sections of the working class were autonomous. Neither were they autonomous from capital and the state (there was the welfare state, state subsidised co-ops, workplace legislation etc) nor were they autonomous from labourist institutions - in particular the trade unions but also the Labour party (Italy is the European country with one of the lowest rates of unionisation - under 20%, the U.K. has one of the highest - over 50%). Right from the failure of the Pilkington strikers in St. Helens in 1970 to set up a breakaway trade union - the writing was on the wall: the strategy of working class autonomy would not work in this country. The majority of BF (at that time Liverpool was totally dominant in the organisation) learnt the wrong lessons from the Pilkington and other conflicts and BF went on ultra-left bender that lasted until at least 1978. In those years we published pamphlets attacking shop-stewards and which took the line that workers would 'rise up angry' if only the union bureaucracy (which included the stewards) got off their backs. This view of a working class longing to mix is no longer prevalent in BF though it ritually surfaces at conference time in nostalgic articles by Jack Brown. It serves the function of connecting the

present membership with our historic myths. A myth that unfortunately cost us dearly since it meant that BF was unable to relate to the rank and file militancy of the 1971-74 period - dominated by the SWP (then IS). It's true that even at this time many BF members were active in their unions - but our publications reflected an ultra-left perspective that put off many of the workplace militants we came into contact with. (For the historical record, it should be mentioned that it took dissidents from Manchester BF a long, hard struggle to get a saner, more balanced position on stewards and the unions adopted by the organisation as a whole - and by that time it was too late since the rank and file militancy was on the decline). Workplace politics with this ultra-left perspective dominated early BF - it was the politics of the BF Ford base groups in Dagenham and Halewood and of other BF industry base groups. At the same time, there was considerable activity in the community (around housing etc) - in Tower Hill and on other estates. This was very important political work informed by the perspective that it was necessary to take the class struggle beyond the workplace and to involve those sectors of the working class (e.g. housewives, the unemployed) who do not participate in labour movement activities and who traditionally have been neglected by the labour movement. This work was always an uphill struggle - necessarily so given the lack of any permanent forms of radical organisation in the community and the few BF activists involved were unable to (help) build forms of organisation that survived the ups in the struggle (e.g. around the time of the rent strikes). After a period of time, the comrades involved in this work got demoralised and for years there has been virtually no BF work in the community. Not only has BF not been active on Tower Hill for years but Tower Hill is almost demolished - though the myth of our activity there still lives on without any critical assessment of what we did right and wrong there. A critical assessment would point out the virtual impossibility of setting up permanent workingclass institutions without some labour movement support and the need to involve rank and file workers to make the link between workplace and home - it's important to remember that in Turin where 'take over the city comes from' almost all workers work for Fiat or a company dependent on Fiat, working class housing is owned by Fiat and the buses that take workers to and from work are run by Fiat subsidiaries - Turin is a company town and the links are much easier to make.

A look at the situation of the working class in Britain today shows how inappropriate the notion of class autonomy is. In fact the working class today has much less autonomy than in the 19th century - when there was a working class culture, working class social, educational and cultural institutions, workers' newspapers, working class communities etc. Today the working class is fractured geographically (the mining communities of South Wales and Yorkshire are an exception to the rule), culturally dominated by the media and multi-national entertainment corporations and its educational institutions (e.g. what is now the WEA) have been taken over by the state. It is political madness not to see that the needs, cultural aspirations, values of the overwhelming majority of working class people (including militants) are to a large degree formed by capital and the state. By and large, what is striking is the success of the state and capital in eradicating what autonomy the working class used to have. The state may not be able to fulfil the expectations it has promoted (e.g. in the welfare state) by that a very different matter. And even the more real autonomy of sections of the working class like black youth is the result of their remaining outside of the labour market and the consumption process: their autonomy would be sharply weakened if the system were able to provide them with jobs, wages etc as it has been able to do to a certain degree in the States (where is the black movement in the States today?). The notion of class autonomy neglects the enormous

growth of state involvement in the economy and society.

At a more fundamental level, one has to argue that the notion of class is itself in a process of erosion. When Marxists talk about class they are not referring to a sociological entity but to a class (e.g. the working class) as a conscious agent with a sense of its own cohesion and unity. And it is this sense of cohesion and unity which is being undermined as different social groupings (women, blacks, gays etc) assert their own needs and demands. This development of the new social movements (the womens' movement etc) cuts across the concept of class (i.e. within the movements there are people from different classes) and as well as being in confrontation with capital, the new social movements are often in confrontation with the back-bone of the working class - the labour movement. The notion of class autonomy is an outdated luxury that BF can no longer afford.

These confrontations between the new social movements and the labour movement are in no sense accidental. And they should make us think how the notion of class is (has always been?) short-hand for the interests of skilled, white, male workers and that the rise of feminism and black consciousness is leading/will lead to an unmaking of labourism as the ideology of white, male privilege. We are fully aware of the role of consciousness-raising in the development of the womens' movement. In the same way, it's important to see how the labour movement was from the start a social movement and how early trade unions worked as c-r groups for skilled (and later unskilled) workers. Notions like skill which are central to construction of the labour movement and labourism are to a large extent ideological notions and to gain parity with the labour movement, the new social movements will have to confront them. (In a excellent article in Feminist Review 6 called Sex and Skill, there is the following quote; 'Ben Birnbaum argues that the distinctions (between skilled and semi-skilled jobs) cannot be rationalised in terms of the content of the work - it arose out of the struggle of men workers from the Russian, Jewish and Polish communities to retain their social status within the family, even when excluded by their position as immigrants from the 'skilled' jobs they might otherwise have done. Forced as they were to take on machining work usually done by women as semi-skilled, they fought to preserve their masculinity by re-defining (their) machining as skilled labour. Within the clothing trade he concludes 'the only way to become skilled was to change one's sex'.) As the confrontations between the labour movement and the new social movements become more acute, BF's attitude of sitting on the fence and wishing 'love and peace' to both side becomes more and more inadequate. It reflects our inability to see that there is no compatibility between class autonomy and the autonomy of the new social movements.

#### THE Autonomy of the New Social Movements

With much more relevance, 'autonomy' has been used inside and outside BF to describe the position in society of the new social movements (the womens movement, the black movement, the gay movement) that have developed in 'advanced' capitalist countries over the last 10 years. Within the movements, the notion of autonomy operates at (at least two) levels:

- firstly, there is organisational autonomy. This means groups/campaigns that are e.g. women only and/or autonomous from political groups and the labour movement.

- secondly, there is the autonomy of individuals within the social movements.

It is not clear to me what exactly is the relationship between these two levels - though I am sure that the second is much more important than it is usually taken to be. Under the impetus of the social move-

ments, what is going on is a process of personal liberation that is radically changing people's concept of politics (the whole 'personal is political' issue) and changing ideas about what kind of political organisation radicals are prepared to be active in. The emphasis on personal liberation - which includes a changing relationship to one's body and to nature - is potentially a return to individualism and a turning away from collectivist values that have been seen (and still are seen) as the backbone of socialism. Much current feminist theory (especially writers like Dinnerstein and Chodorow) is a re-working/critique of psycho-analysis and starts with the family as the place where an individual's psyche is formed. That these theories lack a class dimension in no way invalidate them as theories of the formation of an individual's consciousness and character.

What this quest for personal liberation means for BF members is that the notion of revolutionary sacrifice has disappeared off the horizon. The majority of BF members are not prepared to sacrifice personal life, sexuality, family etc for the organisation and will only undertake a limited commitment. Although BF has always portrayed itself as an easy going laid-back organisation, in fact it has always relied on a small number of 'head-bangers' to keep the organisational structures (NC, commissions, newspaper etc) going whilst the rest of the membership more or less did their own thing and rather hypocritically criticised the head-bangers for being 'power mad', 'bureaucrats' etc. The change over the last year is that the head-bangers have eased up or left BF to join the Labour party or had kids or taken up jogging etc. And now there's hardly anyone left to keep the structures going. If we are to resolve this problem it will not be by asking for individuals to volunteer themselves as head-bangers, it will be by convincing all and all local groups that they must make a certain commitment to keeping the structures of the organisation going - that is assuming that there is a consensus that such structures are necessary. We need to be critical of a notion of autonomy which boils down to no more than individualism and sees all demands the collective makes on the individual as tyranny. If BF is to survive (as anything more than a dying social grouping), individual members and local groups have to accept certain limitations on their autonomy - e.g. that they send members to commissions, that they send someone to the NC, someone to work on the paper etc. If at the day school local groups (and individual members) are not prepared to commit themselves to doing this - BF should immediately dissolve itself. Since there is no point in passing motions at conference and day-schools if there is no one prepared to be involved in carrying them out. For instance, no doubt everyone voted for anti-racism and anti-fascism to be BF priorities - yet only 3 comrades turned up at the day school in June to discuss how to implement this priority - and this is not an isolated example. In London, it is quite impossible to get a meeting of delegates from the different London groups organised and if a public meeting is held (as over the Falklands) less than 10% of the membership can be counted on to attend. In this situation, BF undertakes nothing since you can't guarantee anyone being there to carry it off.

I would suggest that this discussion of the solution of the conflict between the demands of the organisation and personal autonomy is crucial: firstly because the majority of people likely to join BF come from the social movements where they have already had to face up to this conflict. (the recent decline of the new social movements is in part due to their inability to function collectively. And BF being the political group closest to the new social movements is reflecting this decline more acutely).

and secondly because a resolution of this conflict lies at the

heart of the rekindling of the socialist project.

Certainly, there are important political differences between us but these do not stop us from working together (e.g. on the newspaper). What is crippling BF at present is its inability to carry out decisions made collectively. And this is because many members do not feel that decisions made collectively (that they are involved in) make any demands on them. We need to begin to argue that autonomy and individuality are not the same as individualism and that it is only in a collective environment that individuality can flourish. If we can convince our members of this, we can go ~~xxx~~ and check out the masses.

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