

AUTONOMY AND MASS PRACTICE : NOTES TOWARDS A POSITION FOR BIG FLAME

Fred Read /Leeds/22nd September 1981

1. It is the conclusion of these notes that Big Flame should maintain the ideas of autonomy and mass practice as part of our political vocabulary; should publicly modify these ideas as classically argued by Lotta Continua (and by early BF); and, having made clear what we mean by them now, should argue the ideas very forcibly as an important part of our assertion of BF as a unique political organisation with an essential political theory and practice. Without these ideas, I maintain, BF cannot make the latter claim.

2. These two ideas are being ripped out of the broader context of Italian 1960's and 70's marxism because they are the ideas which appear to have the strongest adherents and the strongest critics in BF. A total review of this strand of marxism is sorely needed (and I think BF should undertake it). It would start with an analysis of the concepts "social capital" and "class composition". But it will have to wait.

3. Definitions :

Autonomy : "Workers' autonomy refers to both the forms of organisation and the immediate, proletarian content of workers' struggle through which the proletarian movement develops. On the one hand, it means the direct control of workplace struggles by rank and file workers through autonomous mass organisations such as base committees, without the control of the trade unions or vanguard parties. On the other hand, it means the progressive tendency, clearly evidenced in workers' struggles in Europe, for rank and file controlled and organised struggles to focus on class objectives. These class objectives have been focussed on capitalist relations of production as expressed in the capitalist organisation of production."

(Source: Introduction by "a number of militants in southern Ontario" to Adriano Sofri's 'Beyond trade unionism and vanguardism : Organising for Workers' Power' translated from the French version in Les Temps Modernes, October 1969. Sofri was a founding member and leader of Lotta Continua)

Mass practice : "Mass practice is first of all a question of politics. It is the duty of every revolutionary organisation. It is the necessity to be within the masses and their struggles ... (it involves having) a mass line ie a line which starts from the needs and the struggles of the people ... mass practice is the duty and right to express the content of the struggles. To make it conscious. Otherwise we would just tailend. And finally it is the right of every revolutionary organisation to operate as a combat organisation. To push their political line and organisational perspective..."

(Source : "The working class, the unions and mass practice" internal BF document by Mark Dryden, 1976. Dryden was a member of Lotta Continua and a founder of BF)

"By mass politics we mean:

- a) independent self organisation of the working class. Organisations built in the heart of struggle that can carry the fight beyond what the traditional structures are willing to do.
- b) full involvement of all sections <sup>in</sup> leading their own struggles. Too often lack of involvement leads to defeat, as leaders get isolated or struggles in a factory are not spread to the community or vice versa.
- c) clear anti-capitalist politics based on the needs of the mass of the people, not outworn formulas developed outside the unfolding of class struggle and consciousness."

(Source: 'Towards a new rev soc orgn - Big Flame draft manifesto' (p12) March 1977) Drafted by McKenzie, agreed by Nat Ctte.

4. Defined in these ways, autonomy and mass practice make pretty embarrassing concepts. The revised formula "mass politics" is a considerable improvement, precisely because it is a revision, but it is such a catch-all formula that it becomes almost useless as a single term. In arguing for a coherent revision of 'autonomy' and 'mass practice' we have to take the full weight of our past sins on board, and we have to make sure that anyone in BF who uses these terms faces up to their severe defects in their original definitions. It cannot be argued that the definition of 'autonomy' from the Canadian comrades is any different from ours. The definitive article in Big Flame Journal No 1 (1975) used the term in just this way, even if the overall tone of that article was not so exclusively industrial. (I'll find the actual working and quote it in full eventually!)

5. Just to be clear about our wicked past, the criticisms I would level are :

Of the autonomy definition :

- it fetishises the proletariat in a totally traditional way
- it reduces the traditionally defined proletariat to the waged workers
- it assumes a "progressive tendency" for autonomous organisations to focus on class (ie anti-capitalist) objectives
- because of its traditional definition of the proletariat it totally ignores sexual or racial struggles

Of the mass practice definition :

- it is traditional Leninism in the worst form : duty, necessity, combat, push, make it conscious.
- the one modification of Lenin, derived from Mao, the "mass line" is exceptionally vague : who decides what are the needs of the people?
- in the acres of rhetoric from which the above quote is culled, the only mention of what mass practice physically consists of is "mass leafletting" - a method, apparently, of getting "directly involved in the struggle". Even if this is the case (and it may well be in some situations) this cannot amount to a total political practice.

A more academic and theoretical critique of the whole school of Italian marxism from which these ideas are derived is elaborated by Paul Piccone in a forceful (if obscure and sectarian) way:

"Tronti's positivist bias to reject the problematic of alienation, reification and fetishism prevents him from dealing in any meaningful way with the real problems associated with the genesis of the mass worker and its epiphenomenal social manifestations." (Intro to Tronti's "Workers and Capital", Telos 14, Winter 1972)

"The solution Bologna chooses (to the problem of why a real revolution has not been achieved) is that of class immaturity, which ends up by up-dating the coming-into-being- of the working class to very recently so as to keep the "orthodox" account of revolution fundamentally unchanged." Bologna's account is "caught within the positivistic theoretical orientation of official communism". It is a "metaphysical mosaic". (intro to Bologna's "Class composition and the theory of the party at the origin of the workers-council movement", Telos 13, Fall 1972)

(Both these articles, but not Piccone's introductions, are reprinted in "The labour process and class strategies", CSE pamphlet No 1, pub Stage 1, 1976)

Telos, obsessed at this stage with Hegelian Marxism and now just obsessed with Hegel, was unable to appreciate the enormous

STRENGTHS OF THE Italian school, but Piccone's criticisms have to be acknowledged. The ideas of 'autonomy' and 'mass practice' as classically advanced do entail the most traditional ideas of orthodox communism (zapped up, to be sure, but still traditional) and they do overlook the complexities of the formation of consciousness, the probelism of subjectivity and alienation, and they do tend to reify the 'working class'. Dave Feikert's article on micro-chips and labour time (DB 41, May 1981) betrays all these features, while remaining just as stimulating as all the early Italian marxism, which shows that critique of BF's early ideas just has not begun.

6. So what is useful about these ideas? It's my opinion that the following positive features outweigh the disadvantages.

#### Autonomy

- a) there is one sense of autonomy whose validity cannot be denied by anyone who call him or herself a revolutionary. This is the sense in which the term asserts as fundamental the independence of the working class (and, I will argue the oppressed groups as well) from capital (and patriarchy) if revolution is to be achieved. Independent objectives and independent organisations are basic features of the revolutionary project in classical marxism. It could be said that 'autonomy' is just a new word for these old ideas, coined at a time when, in Europe, revolutionary marxism was almost displaced by the reformism of the European CPs.
- b) But the term does have an advantage over the more prosaic "independence". It is inextricably linked, particularly on the continent, with the upsurge of militancy in workplace and community and university, among men and women, blacks (USA) and whites, old and young, in the late 60's and early 70's. This is our base, and however many mistakes we made, we should maintain our theoretical continuity with it.
- c) Perhaps the chief advantage of the term is its resonance with the movements. In particular, a defining feature of radical politics in the 70's was the womens movement, which very openly and politically defined itself as "autonomous". Whatever the present state of the women's movement, and to whatever extent people now want to say <sup>that parts of</sup> it is neither entirely independent of capital/patriarchy in its organisational forms of its objectives, the fact remains that this movement has put autonomy on the political map, and has maintained its position far more effectively than any other radical body, precisely because of its insistence on autonomy. Neither the black movement, nor the youth, nor the gays have achieved such success, but their most revolutionary elements all insist on autonomy with equal force. Big Flame is nothing if it cannot maintain its open political commitment to the same objectives.
- d) A further point in favour of the term - though requiring some qualification - is its assertion that workers and oppressed groups are capable of drawing up their objectives and creating their organisations on their own. Later I will argue that BF must distance itself from the spontaneist overtones of many uses of the term 'autonomy'. Here, I claim its implied de-emphasis of the classical Leninist formulas as an advantage. (The contrast with Dryden's ideas about mass practice will have to be examined elsewhere).

#### Mass practice

- a) Again, in one sense, mass practice is the stock in trade of all but the most elitist social democrats. Every left group attempts to "be within the masses in their struggle" and to

EXPRESS ITS LINE THROUGH LEAFLETS (and, one hopes, other means as well). At a time when many formerly independent revolutionaries are joining the Labour Party, and when orthodox Trotskyism is moving to the right, it is necessary and valuable to stress work directly aimed at the mass of workers and oppressed

- b) The notion of the 'mass line' can hide a multitude of Leninist sense, but it too has a kernel of truth in it. It is essential that we start our political work from a serious investigation of the ideas, methods and needs of the people in struggle, and that we build from the sympathetic rapport which should be generated. How Dryden squares that with "pushing political lines and organisational perspectives" needs to be checked out in far off mountainsides.
- c) Although it is not spelled out in Dryden's document, it is the case that "full involvement of all sections in leading their own struggles" (see the 'mass politics' definition in (3) above) is a central feature of the current usage of 'mass practice' - and its importance is undeniable.

## 7. Revising the definitions

An outline of the revisions I think need to be made to these two ideas includes:

- they must be seen as part of an armoury of concepts, rather than as two particularly special ones. The whole of the 'Italian theory' needs critical modification.
- the 'waged workerism' has to be removed. This cannot be just a minor amendment: Italian theory is avowedly 'waged workerist' (eg the attack on the left's "criminal retreat from the factory" by, I think, Bologna, in "Working Class autonomy and the crisis" CSE/Red Notes 1979). Negri's efforts at revision (the "social worker concept") are, insofar as I understand them, insufficient.
- thus, the importance of the struggles of women, black people, youth and gays have to be made central. Autonomy theory, as it stands, is embedded in an analysis which makes them marginal.
- the exclusively materialist theory of consciousness has to be removed. In particular, an analysis of the effects upon the consciousness of the exploited and oppressed by culture and by reformist institutions has to be included. Class composition is a key concept, but it is not the whole story.
- such an added dimension will lead us to withdraw from the spontaneist connotations of autonomy. It would allow us to recognise that not all the needs of all people in struggle are necessarily progressive (let alone the "seeds of communism"), and that not all the organisational forms thrown up in struggle, however independent, are necessarily the best.
- we need to also withdraw from the Leninism of some definitions of mass practice. They rely on dutiful, mechanical self sacrifice, along with alienated leaflet thrusting (characteristic of the new wave of sects), along with a messianic notion of the correct line.
- the term mass practice must be de-fetishised: it is a method of doing politics; it is not a central theoretical concept. If people want to complain that too few people in BF are directing their political work at the factories, let them do so, but not under the guise of a supposed "retreat from mass practice". So far as I know, everyone in BF aims their politics at the masses, rather than at the leaders - and that is one definition of mass practice.

8. Armed with these ideas, suitably revised, I believe that BF can re-assert its claim to have a unique and indispensable political role. It may be some time before everyone agrees with us, but at least we'd be back on the road towards saying things openly and clearly that no-one else in a national organisation is saying.