

DOES THE STRUGGLE CONTINUE ?

A REPLY TO THE CRITICS OF THE THEORY OF WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY.

This will be contraversial. It is long overdue. The critics of working class autonomy in Big Flame are a multitude from the highly significant CHIPS WITH EVERYTHING (1975) by P.T. and B.S. between the lines of which you could read their fight to drag BF back into the more traditional spheres of politics around left regroupment, a narrower view of reformism and finally their departure into the Labour Party to the misinformed WORKERS AUTONOMY: ANOTHER VIEW T Sheen (1982). The most serious critique, in my view, was F McKool in 1981 in his A CRITICAL LOOK AT BIG FLAME'S THEORY. It is a pity that the answer I promised him should take shape after his departure into the Labour Party.

For me the most significant thing is that the vast majority of Big Flame members would confess to knowing almost nothing about the theory and application of working class autonomy; a theory which furnished the richest source of collective practice in BF's entire history. It is my guess that there are less than half a dozen of us in BF now who feel that working class autonomy (WCA) is the mainspring of our theoretical inspiration. We have a responsibility to shine a torch on the lifefulness of the beast before it is finally put to death!

A word on the FACING THE CHALLENGE OF THE EIGHTIES grouping. It's members' are taking a lot of flak for theoretical ideas they do not have. Some of the EMERALD STREET writers assume that the former group and support for WCA are one and the same. They are not. It's guilt by association. There is some understandable confusion about what the ideas behind FtC 80s are. In fact, there is only a vague feeling: NO COHESION. However, I feel it's valid to take on board in this article all the criticisms (anti-intellectualism, workerism etc) levelled at both FtC 80s and WCA. (I'm into both). On the other hand, I won't be having a go at Emerald St 'cos they just don't seem to be one group.....either.

THE AREA OF AUTONOMY; THE AUTONOMOUS MOVEMENTS; WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY.

First of all to clear some ground. T Sheen is confusing things when in his article he fails to make the distinction between WCA and the 'Area of Autonomy' in Italy of recent years. The latter has been influenced by the former, for better or worse but it is quite unfair to mix up a rag bag of 'Maosts...Bourdigists...straight leninists etc' with WCA with its particular ideas and debates. It's like failing to distinguish between the Militant Tendency, Big Flame and the S.W.P.

Second, and more important, we must distinguish between WCA and the Autonomous Movements (Women, Black people, gays, youth). Inso far as WCA is about being autonomous from capitalist development and the womens/black movements are about being organising autonomously from men/whites there are similarities but WCA is a particular (the best!) marxist tradition and needs to be seen as such. I think we WCA-ists should back off and think of a new name for WCA.

It's in this light that Clark and myself for the NC have arranged the agenda for the DaySchool 3rd July '82 to seperate (i) the Autonomous Movements from (ii) Working Class Autonomy.

IS THEORY USEFUL? IS WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY USEFUL?

".....to understand the daily struggle between the classes, between capital and labour... (can) make possible the development of a revolutionary, political movement... capable of grasping the specific thrust of the working class, and in the forms it takes... to rebuild (society) in a working class image" (Dossier 74) And Lenin said something like "without communist theory there can be no communist organisation".

To take up the second question - is WCA useful, it would be useful, again using Dossier 1974, to spell out what this Working Class Autonomy is all about.

A BASIC DEFINITION

The use of these terms implies a way of seeing the basic confrontation between the working class and capital as the meeting point of two antithetical forces, two drives, which counterpose each other, and which develop along with capital accumulation.

FIRST, the organisation of workers by capital. By CLASS COMPOSITION we mean the structure of the working class as constituted in a given historical period around a given structure of the organisation of production. Thus, the question: how is the working class composed at any given moment. From capital's point of view, this means things like capitalist use of the labour market; the directing of labour migration; the control of education and job training; the division ('hierarchy', 'articulation' of the labour force) of the workforce into skills, ages, nationality etc. In other words, the way in which capital both uses and constructs the divisions of the class in order to maintain control.

Workers within a given composition of the working class organise to overcome these divisions, and become strong in their workplace situation. Within this permanent and ongoing situation, capital created new machinery, new branches of production, to create and exploit new types of workers, while older, militant sections become redundant, promoted, or marginalised. This is what is known as CLASS COMPOSITION. A typical case would be the liquidation of the skilled 'Bolshevik' vanguard in the 1920s by the introduction of assembly-line production, starting in the USA with Ford. (Note: the class is also 'composed' by capital outside the workplace - in the community and in the home: here decomposition takes the form of urbanism and town planning, architecture and the organisation of social capital (...social security legislation and social work, but this isn't the point of this introduction..)

SECOND, and conversely, the working class tends always to recreate its unity, tends to recompose itself in struggle, overcoming all the above divisions: each phase of decomposition leads to a higher and more generalised RECOMPOSITION OF THE CLASS AGAINST CAPITAL (...). Furthermore, the more class unity and confidence in the struggle builds up, the more workers lose their identification with work. From being wage labour, they become working class against capital. The struggle, instead of being confined within the terms of work, now takes a more radical form - against work itself. The goal of this movement is no longer socialism, but communism, and this is not a distant future dream, but is inherent in the day-to-day struggles of the working class.

The further stage is POLITICAL RECOMPOSITION OF THE CLASS, the stage where this process of defining the contents and goals of the struggle takes on an organised and political form.

The struggle outline above is a constant condition of relations between capital and the working class. In periods of capitalist crisis and global class re-unification, it becomes, public and violent.

extract from Intro on Oil Crisis - DOSSIER 1974

I've quoted this - warts and all - because it gives a good idea of COMPOSITION-DECOMPOSITION-RECOMPOSITION-POLITICAL RECOMPOSITION. I'll come back to socialism/communism and struggle against work later on.

COMMUNISM IS INHERENT IN THE WORKING CLASS??

Let's take the hardest one first. The main criticism of this statement is based on the fear that it means you don't have to engage in political struggle for communism or that communism will magically appear without organisation, a programme, alliances. Nothing is further from the truth as the rest of the quote concerning POLITICAL RECOMPOSITION OF THE CLASS makes clear. A very important and little read WCA pamphlet FIGHTING IN THE STREETS! by LOST HORIZONS (1974) takes a historical view, suggesting that perhaps conditions have changed (the world is different to 1917) and so:

"...Boggs argues, capitalism has passed beyond the stage of socially necessary production. The sole rationale of capitalist production is the reproduction of capital....Secondly this 'overdevelopment' of productive forces throws into question the traditional left-wing schemas

of historical development. Socialism, as a society transitional between capitalism and communism within which the workers run industry themselves will develop the productive forces, is no longer necessary..."

Note how similar this is to the BF's positions on State Collectivism. It for Industry that after seizing state power we wouldn't want the same old production lines producing ~~xxxx~~ Socialist (!) cars or the same shitty old isolated estates to live in with Socialist Street Names or the same old hierarchical school system with State Socialist History and Red Maps we would fight for a whole different view of relationships and power between people at a grass roots level.

A NOTE ON CHANGED CONDITIONS THAT WCA WAS ABLE TO START FROM.

It's worth following the idea that times change, that demands and struggles change. FIGHTING IN THE STREETS (which, above all else, is worth a read) has a creditable go at analysing the changes in capitalist society and I feel this is the best way to locate WCA theory. Some quotes:-

"...the current situation is characterised by a prolonged crisis which has as its roots the contradictions of American Imperialism.."

"In the 30s, capital begins to propose a new strategy for controlling its own anarchic development, of which Keynes will be the leading ideologist... a revised theory of the wage...of the-state-as-planner...and organised labour."

It lead to the emergence of "the mass worker. Unlike the skilled worker, the mass worker...can move easily from job to job...Units of labour can be shunted around according to demand."

This is accompanied by "the development of a social factory....breaking up the independent, unsocialised culture of the working class....open up new possibilities for struggle and form the basis of the workers' estrangement from traditional forms of labour organisation..."

"The material and ideological conditions of reproduction must be such that the revolutionary nature of the proletariat is constantly repressed. The emergence of the modern state is central..In Britain we got the 'Welfare State' in which the proletarian project (to suppress the conditions of its own existence and disappear from history) is transformed into the promise made to each individual worker and his family to 'work THEIR Way out of it'...(this meant) systematic destruction of the inner-city working class communities...mass 'education' and immigration.."

"With the extension of state activity the crisis ceased to be a 'natural' uncontrollable event. The crisis is now a planned initiative, aimed at regaining control of the class struggle...it is not a sudden crash but a war of attrition."

In this perspective revolutionary theory is no longer conceived as a set of principles which 'penetrate' the class struggle from the outside"

I haven't the brain to really lay all this out clearly and flexibly; I hope it gives a taste and an interest to read more of WCA, perhaps to take it a bit more seriously and I must apologise to Lost Horizons for blunt scissors job. However, perhaps it is possible to see how WCA inspires a particular area of political practice. For example : working class power is not only to be gained through the workplace or L.P. type struggles. The total terrain of Welfare, Housing, Local State, Community is central. (I know no other theory that says this). The workers' estrangement from work and traditional organisations becomes central. The kind of revolutionary organisation needed is not to be built outside struggles. WCA explains why mass politics is necessary. As a theory it has a lot of strengths.

STANDING MARX BACK ON HIS FEET

The reading of Marx done by the communists from CLR James to Negri (all ~~re~~ referred to in F McKool) leaves them with the conclusion that the working class is an active force : no matter at what level, low or high, THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES. Capital has to constantly be on the run from its contradiction: the working class.

VICTIMS - WORKING CLASS AUTONOMY - SUPPORT FOR THE AUTONOMOUS MOVEMENTS

WCA is alone as a marxist theory that puts the horse before the cart - that is, it sees the working class as an active force. Trotskyism, for example, casts the working class in the role of VICTIM. The crudest versions of this see the party as the mighty liberator freeing the downtrodden workers from the ravages of capitalism. It's not surprising that both the womens and black movements have taken on the left for portraying them as victims. Linton Kwesi Johnson says in INDEPENDENT INTAVENSHAN

wat a cheek
dèm t'ink we meek
an' wi can't speak up fi wi self

Whereas the success or failure of working class struggle can be up or down, it is never right to say that the working class 'has been emasculated' (S.T. in BF: Death and Birth, accompanying notes) or to imply that the working class as a whole has been defeated (C Marshall document dated 4.3.82). Whatever these comrades mean precisely by these views I'm not sure but I would agree with Jack Brown in this bulletin who argues that we might be heading for a 'historic defeat' but certainly aren't there yet. But the struggle continues (lotta continua) and it's our task to work out what form it takes.

So, there is a remarkable connection between the marxist grasp of WCA and the independent nature and goals of the autonomous movements. But there is more to relate WCA and support of the autonomous movements than that....

WCA THEORY OF DIVISIONS AND PATRIARCHY/CAPITALISM.

Unlike every other marxist theory WCA makes a good start on divisions around sex, age, race, skill, workplace-community. This was the traditional strength of BF; it meant support for the autonomous movements in the early 70s. The idea of decomposition-recomposition on an international scale by the very nature of it has to be concerned within the problem of lack of unity within the class, within the class struggle and between people. It's not about splits in leaderships but about the process of achieving the self-organisation of the class.

However, as the womens movement developed theoretically and the understanding of Patriarchy as a long powerful force (existing well before capitalism) provoked new and important questions. BF's WCA theory of material divisions didn't necessarily go far enough. Yet, WCA from the quote above from Dossier '74: "capital used and constructs the divisions of the class in order to maintain control". I don't think that this Patriarchy/Capitalism debate is at all clear in my mind but I do feel that to recognise Patriarchy as an autonomous force used by capital and influenced/constructed by it gives a fair account of the interplay by these forces in our lives. There's not time here to list the usual marxist approaches - women are a minority; women can only have power in the waged workplace; patriarchy is a comparatively insignificant force and so on.

WCA surely is a helpful marxist approach to the relations between capitalism and patriarchy :- it's discouraging that significant articles like H Hartman THE UNHAPPY MARRIAGE OF MARXISM AND FEMINISM (Capital & Class) and, within BF: A DAY RETURN TICKET don't seem even aware of WCA theory (only one of its worst branches/deviations the Wages for Housework campaign). Couldn't we debate this out???

WCA IS NOT AN ECONOMIST THEORY

T Sheen in his WORKERS AUTONOMY several times says something like "Because (WCA) conceived of capitalism as an economic system primarily....". This is nonsense. Most marxisms suffer from the view that capitalism is fundamentally economic, that the working class can only make an economic opposition to it and that the party will bring in the shining light of revolutionary consciousness (see Mandel, for example, Leninist Theory of the Party). WCA, however, above all marxisms is a political reading of marx. WCA is about power relations between and within class (as Reading Capital Politically by H Cleaver - one of the books Sheen refers to - would have told him).

WCA INCAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING REFORMISM?

A consistent focus of argument in BF has been around whether we understand REFORMISM in a narrow or a wide way? And people have left over this, some because we discuss institutional reformism too much and some because we discuss it too little. One of the breakthroughs in BF, certainly influenced by WCA, and apparent in BF Manifesto and Organising to Win has been to see reformism not just as struggles within the Labour Party and Trade Unions but as part and parcel of every day struggles: the option to widen divisions within the class rather than oppose the bosses, the option to campaign in sectional ways (all part of Britains boom prosperity and imperialist role). Tendency 1 and the THESIS ON REFORMISM by concentrating the debate on state power/the L.P. only confronted half the question.

INTERCONNECTIONS?

C Marshall (4.3.82 document) when criticising J Brown (a FtChallenge and WCA supporter) makes a couple of accusations that need a reply. He implies that J Browns position ~~unintentionally~~ is preoccupied with 'the male industrial workforce'. 'That position' as must surely be clear by what I've already written is neither preoccupied with the workforce nor with men. (and articles in DB's by Tom Hardy, who like J Brown actually works in a mainly male workplace, must all make clear that the criticism is wrong)

Second, and more serious, C Marshall accuses 'that position' of neglecting the 'interconnections' between different issues and struggles'. Again, this is not a valid criticism - is it? A political theory that has done more than any other to tease out the relationship between factory and community; which pushes for health service worker-health service worker links; which at Fords has taken up immigration, the effect of assembly line work and shifts on the family etc; which on London Transport backs Worker-Passenger links AND SO ON AND ON that theory surely does not come in for that particular criticism.

A final point on this. Some of my friends in SOCIALIST ORGANISER (Revolutionaries in the L.P.) repeatedly state their view that the present scope for struggle within the L.P. got its main impetus from the Winter of Discontent when workers through their unions polarised the L.P. leadership. Such as Healey proposed Monetarism (which Thatcher took to 10 Downing St); the Gang of Four split off to form the S.D.P. and the Left got shaken up. This, to me, is an example of how things work - not confined to narrow limits, but certain things can spill over.....

STRUGGLE AGAINST WORK

T Sheen says "the slogan of Refusal of Work tended to ignore the dependence of most working people on capitalism for their jobs to survive" What is Terry saying? Of course, we live in a system based on bosses control of employment/wages (and the rest of society). But equally, they must all the time be able to not just keep us working and reproducing for them but doing so in a profitable way. Capital is as much caught in the contradiction as the working class.

Struggle against work doesn't mean something like everyone should go on the dole or social and turn their backs on the work ethic. Opt out! It means that in our whole lives (and in our working for a wage lives) we are engaged in a battle to dictate the terms of existence. It might be line-speeds. It might be price rises, health, schools or other parts of the social wage. It might be wages. Womens paid work. The right to join a union.

A ~~fundamental~~ fundamental cause of the crisis is the problem for national capital to ~~keep~~ maintain ~~both~~ their profits over the last 30 years. A divorce between wages and profits which means that workers are fighting to get more and let the bosses have less in US, France and UK as well as Germany and Japan has made capital want to take on resistance to work and the struggle against work. More of this ~~is~~ in part 2 'cos Monetarism is all about this problem.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Looking back at this part one it seems very shopping list-like. Mainly a couple of long quotes on what Working Class Autonomy is and a series of replies to criticisms.

In short it says that for a theory to be useful it must relate to modern conditions and that is why WCA has been concerned about divisions, about support for autonomous movements, about community, about links between sectors, about forcing a break between productivity and wages, about struggle against work, about a different understanding of the revolutionary party.

But most of the work I refer to is itself of 10 years ago. I believe that the oil crisis, the monetarist option and the Malvinas Crisis (perhaps the worst blow to the progressive side of the working class movement in the whole of my life time) are among the major influences on CHANGED CURRENT CONDITIONS. From a consideration of them will come our theory, perspectives, strategy and tactics.

So, Part 2 will be an attempt to update Working Class Autonomy theory for the 80s (an attempt made already in a few documents). It's this I believe to be what's needed - not a wholesale rejection of that theory.

LASTLY

If some comrades wish to criticise WCA for being in favour of a loose and undisciplined approach to collective practice I hope the preceding pages should set them right. It is only by detailed and shared work that BF is going to get itself moving again. I feel that it is because from the mid-70s onwards BF turned to the I.M.G., to Socialist Unity, fused with R.M.C. and later the L.C.G. and ~~then~~ all the time recruited people without a proper deep debate and educational process that we are so muddled now. To take all these turns meant we adopted a too easy-come easy-go approach (too libertarian) and so now find ourselves attractive to outsiders but unable to sustain A COLLECTIVE PRACTICE. As I said earlier, when WCA was more influential so was our practice more collective. It's not because of WCA that BF is weak, it's because we haven't re-applied it to the current situation.

J Kimberley (Nottm BF) June 25 1982