

TICKLING THE CLAM L.S.

I don't think I am particularly confused. Like most people I tend more to oversimplify complexity and avoid contradictions. But how can anyone deny that the way forward is confusing? We do face problems in accepting the importance of building a national organisation, Big Flame, and at the same time working in and encouraging independent and autonomous movements of resistance and change.

Big Flame has, of course, always been committed to supporting the importance of autonomous movements, in particular the women's movement and black struggles. This is one of the main ways we have differentiated ourselves from orthodox Leninism. But there are certainly differences inside BF as to what we mean by this.

First of all, there are a number of people in BF who still talk as though almost anything important that happens on the left occurs inside Trotskyist groups. One of the main claims of *Beyond the Fragments* is that this is certainly not so. Connected to this view, is the view of a number of people inside BF that, even if what happens of importance on the left is not all inside Trotskyist groups, certainly that is where we get 'the best' or 'most effective' forms of militancy. I see a recent example of this belief in the draft appeal of 'Tendency One*' which argues:

'The SWP meanwhile, are able to be the most combative force inside *the variety of resistance struggles* that are taking place all the time, picking up members out of the defeats.'

(My italics) I think this is mistaken and dangerous. Since when, I'd like to know, have the SWP been the most combative force, or any force at all, inside any number of resistance struggles, from women's aid, rape crisis centres, local socialist papers, prison struggles, claimants unions, socialist alternatives in health work or anywhere else etc. etc.? Such statements seem to reject the perspective in *Beyond the Fragments*, that there are important and crucial areas of resistance and socialist struggle with which the Leninist groups have not concerned themselves at all. They may at some time come to concern themselves with such struggles, but usually only after they have already taken off. The most recent example being the issue of nuclear power.

I think the authors of the document would perhaps say that they were only referring to industrial struggles. Here, it is true SWP would claim to be the most combative force. But if this is what they mean it is crucial that it is made clear. It is crucial also because it raises the problem which the document describes as central of how you connect this combative industrial militancy with the need to ^{realise} ~~realise~~ alternative socialist strategies, like workers' plans, and more generally raises the even more difficult problem of how you attempt to make links between industrial militancy and the great variety of struggles which do occur, even if with less ~~and less~~ consistency, outside of the labour movement. Of course we also face the problem of always having to emphasise that those fighting against specific forms of oppression need also to understand the way in which their oppression, and all hierarchical divisions, are maintained in a capitalist society *partly* to strengthen the efficiency of its control over the exploitation of its working class (see Roberts current article).

A tendency to overemphasise the importance of left groups and the strategies which they adopt is linked to a second issue, which is another central theme of all three articles in *Beyond the Fragments*. We know that most people do not become socialists through recognising the correctness of any particular socialist programme. They become socialists through seeing that there is something wrong with their lives. There are a large variety of ways in which we first feel this dissatisfaction. We will not usually understand it until there is some *collective milieu* in which we can become confident enough and find the words to express it. Women who became a part of the women's liberation movement did not do so because they read and agreed with the six demands.

But in Big Flame, as in other left groups, there is often an impatience with the slow and muddled way in which political consciousness develops. It is hard to avoid this. It is hoped that simply through correct interventions we can make short cuts and hurry people along the road to revolution. I don't think this is so. Alongside this, there is at times still a basic

* I have not selected this document out for special criticism. I am merely using it to illustrate criticisms that at times could be made more widely in Big Flame. Other documents written by the same people are quite different.

elitism in Big Flame. The recruitment of politically experienced people, e.g. ex-Trotskyists, can be regarded as of even greater importance than the recruitment of those just venturing onto a socialist path. (As though we are choosing players for some football team.) Of course we do urgently need the wisdom of experienced militants, but in considering the growth of the socialist movement as a whole, it is those just turning towards socialism who we must be able to reach and convince. Also it is unfortunately true that helping to build other people's collective confidence and consciousness in any situation *is* something distinct from our other emphasis on building our own organisation. It's not that I don't see the need to raise national perspectives in all struggles, or the need to build Big Flame, but we do need to do other things *simultaneously* in helping to build a general socialist consciousness and culture. It's a delicate and difficult undertaking.

In general then I feel in disagreement with certain BF accounts of how we should relate to independent and autonomous movements. Again I can illustrate this inadequacy with reference to the Tendency document. (I appreciate this is only a draft document — these are only draft comments. I welcome all attempts to clarify Big Flame's theoretical positions and elucidate differences.) The document stresses the need for 'fighting for a *new relationship* between revolutionary organisation and independent autonomous movements' But I can't see **anything new in the relationship** they suggest. They write that we have 'an independent role to **play in intervening** in any viable area, with distinctive political perspectives, attempting to draw **strategic and practical links**.' I agree with this, insofar as it goes, and it seems to me little different from a classic Trotskyist position on intervention. It just does not go far enough. It does **not say**, e.g., that as a political organisation we realise that we must learn from, as well as contribute to, the perspectives of the independent and autonomous movements.

As it is written in the document, I think it is alienating, for example to women in Big Flame, in that it does not describe the importance of these movements to the development of our own political perspectives. In this sense it seems to reject the arguments in *Beyond the Fragments*. Although the document argues that autonomous movements must 'shape a modern transitional politics' this seems to me to become mere **tokenism**, when there is no indication at all of just *how* they affect a transitional politics, just *how*, for example, you unite women's sexual liberation and socialist politics. In *Beyond the Fragments* we did make some attempt to do this. In BF we have also made the attempt to do this, but we need always to stress these attempts in our theory and our practice.

Finally, in common with other organised left groups, the main objection which some comrades in Big Flame have to the three articles in *Beyond the Fragments* is that they reject the need for national organisation. It's true that in all three articles what *is* being stressed is the importance of having a strong local base for your politics. A base where you can relate to very wide sectors of working class people, of women, and to already politicised militants in a non-sectarian way. A purely workplace orientation, for example, will mean that sometimes you are not relating to people, and especially not to women, where they are most active and most likely to become involved. Of course, BF has always said this. But I don't think we have been honest enough about the problem that being active in a national organisation can create for us.

I accept absolutely the need for theoretical work and for national perspectives in guiding our everyday political activity. I accept that there are many areas of struggle which we need to make a priority at any particular time. But it's true that national involvement, and the need to be active in a number of different areas all the time, can drain energy away from committed local or base work, whether in the workplace or the 'community'. We are not, and we don't want to be, twenty-four hour militant cadavers (I make interventions in my sleep). If, and hopefully when, Big Flame is ten times bigger the problem will not be so great; It will become easier for more people to be active in different areas of struggle. But at the moment we do have a problem, and we must recognise it.

There are differences between the three of us who wrote *Beyond the Fragments*. Hilary is concerned mainly with the importance, at the moment, of building the broadest possible local socialist alliances, linked up with interconnecting national structures. Sheila, while suspicious of the degeneration of any form of democratic centralist national structure, does not reject the need for forms of national organisation. She has said that she is not trying to question the need for national organisation, but to raise the question of how you keep the advantages of a national organisation and really keep in contact **with your base as well**. From my own experience, I believe even more strongly in the **immediate** need for a national organisation with overall perspectives, we need overall coordination and also self-discipline to strengthen class struggle and the struggle of all oppressed groups.

But, if we are really going to be able to relate to people, and not alienate them, then we have to convince them of the 'joys of liberation' (Brecht). We can only do this through the most open and sensitive approach to all movements of resistance (including ones the SWP has yet to dream of). We must be able to see how easy it is for the 'experienced militants', however correct their perspective, to serve also to put people down and create inequalities.

In an interview some of us did with the American socialist feminist Barbara Ehrenreich she said that there is a lot of confused thinking about leadership. A leader has to be a person who creates other leaders. We must not be afraid to delegate things, or be afraid to write and to teach because we're afraid that his might dominate or put others down. We need to accept that some people are good at certain things, and help each other to share these skills and to see what they involve. There is nothing biologically 'male', for example, about being able to write well or talk confidently. We mainly need the confidence and encouragement to try. I don't feel it's useful, inside Big Flame, to be resentful that some people, usually men, find it easier to write and to speak. I welcome that and hope it will help to educate us all. But I do want to try to find ways to increase the confidence of all of us to acquire these skills. I do think the problem is more one of confidence than of lack of time etc.

This is one of the problems with the Leninist models adopted by Trotskyist groups today. They do not pose the question of the need for struggle against their own perpetuating hierarchical formations. Therefore they cannot serve to illustrate what we mean by socialism. So they cannot attract many people, and they are no fun, for, as Marge Piercy says, 'there is no known way to tickle a clam'.

These are some of the issues in *Beyond the Fragments* which I think Big Flame needs to consider further.

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SOCIALISM AND THE INDIVIDUAL — SOME NOTES FOR THE DAY SCHOOL

In the period since the election most sections of the left from reformist to revolutionary have produced some evaluation of the Tory victory; the variety of analyses produced have generally been oituaries to the passing Labour government. At the same time strategies have been developed to attempt to combat the more predictable efforts of the Tory monetarist policies, e.g. cuts campaigns, wages struggle, defence of the unions etc.

What is less evident is any serious appraisal of Tory propaganda during and since the election. However much we consider that the policies of the Labour government paved the way for the Tories' victory, we are still left with the fact that Tory propaganda appealed to a significant portion of working class voters.

Tory propaganda

The Tory party has gone to great lengths to parade itself as the champion of individual freedom. The ideological thread, echoed and augmented in Fleet Street, that ran through the whole of the Tory campaign is the formula:

Socialism = Bureaucracy = Control

Capitalism = Freedom of the individual

They have applied this to institutions ranging from Local Government, the TUC and the Labour Party to shop stewards committees and the far left. All and sundry on the left are tarred with the grey on grey brush of the socialist societies of Eastern Europe. The recent