

# IN A BARBED

## WIRE CANOE - some ideas for a discussion of

### REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS AND THE CRISIS OF PERSONAL MEANING

(for Big Flame, and friends)

#### Introduction

I wrote this in a caravan in North Devon during the sun soaked summer. Now it's raining; the personal traumas have changed, and I've had the big political stimulation of the Big Flame conference. But, even though the context has changed, I think the content of this article is still worth putting out for discussion. There are a number of theoretical problems with the argument, and there are probably some factual errors too, since I'm not an expert on the political economy of the family. I've not gone into the theory problems in the body of the text, because I'm trying to make the article interesting and accessible to people who haven't had the dubious benefit of a university education. Occasionally I use academic references, and I've added a glossary at the end to give a straightforward (and probably oversimple) definition of them. The notes are for those who want to get ammunition to shoot down my theory, or lack of it.

The stimulus for all this is the personal traumas I've been through over the past eighteen months or so. I think the issues raised are important to discuss for two reasons first, because many revolutionaries seem to regard their personal lives as separate from their political lives, keeping them locked away in a far corner of the political house, like the mad wife in "Jane Eyre"; secondly, because I can't fail to notice that literally all my close friends and comrades are going through similar traumas. Since we subject everything else to political scrutiny, it is a glaring omission to let these personal issues go by without political discussion.

Some hardheads will dismiss these traumas, saying that they are the problems of middle class students having difficulty trying to be revolutionaries. But I want to argue that, while the details of these problems may well be specific to people like me, everywhere I look I see, expressed in many different ways, disaster in people's personal lives.

It would be unfair to my friends, and even less fair to my acquaintances, if I was to try and reduce their personal lives to a few sentences on paper. So I'm not going to give examples to substantiate my feeling that personal disaster is widespread. But I will say something about myself. I hope this won't be seen as self indulgence. I'm writing it because I think it's important to reveal the kind of person I am outside meetings, and because it provides a context for my argument that the political analysis which follows is necessary for Big Flame.

#### The personal is political

For me, the personal crisis of the past months has two elements: the experience of the Bonfire Night Trial, and the collapse of a set of personal relationships which have been my lifeblood for the last three years. The details of these experiences are obviously unique to me, and anyway this is not the place to try and analyse them in depth. But, since most of us know about collapsing relationships, and since the trial is just an acute form of the strain that political life puts upon us all, I think they both bear a mention.

First, because it's simplest, the trial. It wasn't until several weeks after it was all over that I realised what a strain the trial was, both on me and on the people I lived with. As you'd expect, I was obsessively involved with the day-to-day courtroom experiences (six hours a day for five weeks) and with the political machinations with the black people

involved in the defence. A lot of the time I tried to deal with the experience lightheartedly; then, when I was told this would create a bad impression with the jury, I became withdrawn, weary and worried. I think, though, that I must have given the impression that I was coping well, because very few people felt it was necessary to express much personal sympathy, either to me or to the people I lived with, who were also under great strain and worry. A few people attended the court, and wanted to know how it was going legally, but that's about all. Later, when I realised how deeply the whole thing had affected me - how I'd had to cut myself off from my friends personal problems, how I'd failed to acknowledge the real support I was getting from the people I lived with, how I'd failed to appreciate how difficult life was made for them by the trial - in short, when I realised what a one-sided person I became during the trial, I felt resentful at the way so many friends and comrades had treated the trial as though it was just another hassle. Next time, I hope we are all able to give whoever's in the dock some real support. It's only when you've been through such an intense experience that you realise how, almost without knowing it, your personality is stripped and distorted.

The great advantage of the trial was that I could sublimate my anxiety into the politics of the situation. It was easier to deal with the lies of the black bourgeoisie than to comprehend the possibility of going to prison. In fact, it was the political demands, both of the trial and of our work in other areas, that provided a welcome relief from the helter skelter of the courtroom. And it was the children who kept me sane.

But when the trial was over, I had to try and make sense of the chaos of my friends' relationships. I can't give details, but the effect is that two of the people I've lived with for three years have separated and moved out of the house; both of them, and their eleven month child, are deeply upset. The same trauma has disrupted our relationship with them, and with two other of our closest friends. Long before all this, my own relationship with J was fundamentally challenged, and this too involved, and had a deep effect upon, the four people I've just referred to. The crises are still going on, and there is no sign that all of them will be resolved. I'm left feeling depressed in a way that I've never felt before, with the optimism that has been the main source of my political energy almost whittled away. The main thing that is keeping me afloat - these crises sound cold in print, but many of you will know what they feel like - is the combined effect of renewing my relationship with J and the beautiful growth of our child. But here we are, three of us in a house which once had six, helpless witnesses to our friends misery, in the ruins of relationships which once gave meaning to our lives.

You can put away your handkerchiefs: the point of this is not to jerk the tears, but to expose what I know happens in different forms to many of us. The exposure is not designed to send us all into Red Therapy groups (though these may well help) but to bring into the open the amazingly debilitating effect these traumas have on our everyday lives. And, for us in Big Flame, a large part of our everyday lives is our politics. One of the effects of my depression is that I become bad tempered in meetings, and I often upset or annoy other comrades. Other people become withdrawn, and their silence is heavy in the room, while others just feel they cannot make it to the meeting.

So this is the context for the following discussion. I'm trying to comprehend these traumas, in the hope that understanding them, at least at the political level, will help us deal with them better ourselves. I'm not going into any psychology, so I'm not offering any recipes for solving these crises. I'm trying to give a marxist framework to the discussion of personal life - trying to put flesh on the bones of the statement that the personal crisis, what I'm calling the crisis of personal meaning, is, just like the economic crisis, the product of this insane system called capitalism. And I'm suggesting one or two things we should do in Big Flame, both to relieve the pain and to advance our politics.

## THE CRISIS OF SUBJECTIVE MEANING

One common, underlying factor in our personal crises is that we are being forced to recognise the fragility of the structures which give meaning to our lives. I'll try and explain this academic phrase: Different things have different significance, or meaning, for each one of us. Tables and chairs don't have much meaning for most of us - but they have a lot of meaning for a craftworker who makes furniture. For a lot of men, the motor car has a lot of meaning - but not for many women. The family is probably the single most significant thing in most people's lives, and for a lot of women the happiness of their children is the most meaningful aspect of their lives. For them, life is made worthwhile by successfully bringing up their children. The family, therefore, can be described as one of the structures which gives meaning to our lives. For a lot of people, particularly men, their work structure is equally important, in the sense that, without it, a lot of them would be lost, though work itself doesn't have much meaning to them. So, when these structures get disrupted, by death, say, or unemployment, people often feel depressed and say "life has lost its meaning". Both the experiences I have described, about Bonfire Night and the collapse of some of my relationships, brought home to me just how tenuous are the structures which sustain my emotional life. In particular, I'd describe the relationship problems as a crisis of subjective meaning.

You don't have to be a marxist to know that there can be no ultimately meaningful activities in capitalist society. Given that this society is fucked up, our personal lives and most of our activities are bound to be fucked up too. Bohemians, artists and existentialists have said this, usually in a rather more poetic way, throughout the twentieth century. But despair seems to be part of their philosophy, and they seem to get a certain satisfaction from experiencing this despair and creating 'works of art' out of their attempts to drown it.

As marxists, on the other hand, we have a vision of how things could be. Often, we put ourselves forward as though we don't feel the personal problems of the rest of the world, and instead seem confident, purposeful and sure that what we are doing is meaningful. This does lead to various problems, and Brecht satirised one of the solutions put forward by the worst form of marxists:

"I've noticed, said Mr Kreuner, "that a lot of people are put off by our teaching because we know the answer to everything. Couldn't we, in the interests of propoganda, draw up a list of questions which appear to us quite unresolved?" (B. Brecht, Anecdotes of Mr Kreuner) (From Michael Schneider's 'On left wing dogmatism, a senile disorder' and 'Vanguard, vanguard who's got the vanguard' first published in Liberation (USA 1972), reprinted by Leeds Libertarians (1974) and distributed by Rising Free)

Another outrageous example of the way leftists have tried to deal with the problem of seeming holier than thou comes from a University of Wisconsin Young Communist League leaflet in 1939. After listing all the 'ordinary' things that YCL members do (like 'dating girls' - presumably there were no girls in the YCL, or they might have said they 'dated boys' - or maybe they thought that would look a little unconventional...) the leaflet concludes:

"In short, the YCL and its members are no different from other people except that we believe in dialectical materialism as the solution to all problems."  
(From Ely Zaretsky's 'Family Capitalism and Personal Life' Pluto 1975)

So remember, next time your lover leaves you, buy a tube of dialectical materialism and apply it thickly on all sensitive areas.

But even if revolutionaries today aren't so crass in their claims to have all the answers, there is a tendency to act as though we have, ....

especiallly by our refusal to discuss personal life. This is far from the truth - so far, in fact, that most revolutionaries don't even consider such problems to be significant; or, if they are forced to consider them, either dismiss them as 'bourgeois abstractions', or resort to bourgeois social and psychological ideas in order to explain them away.

Yet this problem of meaning stares most of us in the face at one time or another, and it's no service either to ourselves or to the revolution to ignore it or mystify it. It may crop up when we stare at the pile of unsold newspapers and can't be bothered to get out and sell them; or when we wish we didn't have to go to that 'important' meeting. The problem of meaning may be more challenging when our relationships break up, or even when we have to leave the political organisation we've devoted a lot of our lives to. More nebulous problems arise if we step outside for a moment and ask why so many comrades seem so depressed/cynical/humourless, or why their energy and self-confidence somehow doesn't ring true.

Many of the leftists who have faced these problems come up with misleading 'explanations'. They may give reasons which don't really touch upon themselves - eg "The relationship broke up because she took her feminism too far"; or "I had to leave the organisation because it took an incorrect political turn". Or they may uncritically employ bourgeois concepts - eg "She left me because she was too weak to stand the demands of revolutionary politics". Aside from bitching and gossip, the personal feelings of comrades are rarely gone into in a political way except when they have a direct bearing on the organisation, and then the consideration is purely manipulative - eg a depressed person will not be sent round to see a possible recruit because his or her depression may put the person off the organisation. A person who talks too much at meetings will be criticised not in terms of political concepts like authoritarianism, but for creating a bad impression on new recruits or contacts.

It is extremely rare for a marxist to go more deeply into these problems and discuss them in an open and supportive way with his comrades. (I say 'his' because the problem seems to be far less acute among marxist feminists. In fact, one inspiration for this piece comes from the positive sides of the women's consciousness raising groups.) Almost noone will say "I'm in a barbed wire canoe/I don't know what the fuck to do/Life has lost its meaning/I might as well be dreaming." But the problem does occur - much more frequently than we like to admit - and the solution is often to leave the organisation, to go elsewhere and try and 'work things out'.

#### Some arguments against 'subjectivism'

Having to leave an organisation to 'work things out' on your own is, to me, one of the strongest indictments of an organisation which claims to be communist. It is the living denial by that organisation of any sense of collective responsibility for its members' lives. I think it is worth discussing why this occurs - since it is hardly ever thought to be worth mentioning, except in terms of differences of political lines.

Basically, many marxists claim that concern for an individual's personal problems is subjectivism, and subjectivism, they say, is opposite to marxism. When used in this context, 'subjectivism' refers to the idea that the "objective" world - the hard, nitty gritty world of work, and the institutions created by workers - can be reduced to the personal, emotional and psychological world of the individual. Now there are some good reasons why marxists reject subjectivism. The objective or material world, the world made by workers, is the foundation of our personal lives - all that we think and do is based on the material things around us. As marxists, we believe that our personal lives can only be made truly meaningful when the material world is revolutionised. To try and create the revolution by simply dealing with personal problems would be to turn marxism on its head. And there is no doubt that, in one sense, subjectivism is the

tittle-tattle of the bourgeoisie - mere gossip about relationships, romantic novels, theories about society which start with the child's experience of the nipple. At its best, subjectivism is a sincere concern with 'people' and their problems, but even here the attitude can be politically disastrous. My mother, for instance, is a left wing member of the Labour Party, but she sees no contradiction between her socialism and her personal and psychological approach to the problems of her friends. So she 'explains' a person's breakdown in terms of his or her childhood and upbringing, and she feels personally guilty when her children get in trouble with the law. No wonder: almost all socialists believe that personal problems are to be dealt with psychologically. One of the aims of this article is to show how a political approach to personal problems can be argued.

There is another source for the marxist attack on subjectivism. Those of us who used to be anarchists or libertarians will remember when marxists contemptuously consigned us to the dustbin of history by saying (with a fine spray of marxist spittle) "You're just a pettybourgeoisindividualist". The sting of this curious mouthful was lost on most of us at the time, and it would have done the marxists some good to have translated these words into english, since they do have an important point. The reference is to those artisans and shopkeepers (the petty bourgeoisie) who supported the anarchists in their struggles with the marxists in the middle and later parts of the nineteenth century.

Anarchists who followed people like Proudhon and Bakunin disagreed on many issues, but they were united in their concern for the rights of the individual against the demands of the emerging capitalist state, and this included a strong concern for such 'personal' issues as the family. At this stage the working class, in the sense of industrial workers in factories, had not fully developed, and because many workers were still in small scale manufacturing units, or even had independent businesses, the sort of politics which appeared to champion the rights of small scale industry and individual rights against the state was bound to be popular amongst those hostile to capitalism. Thus anarchism was a far more potent force among the working class than marxism, since marxism accepted large-scale factory organisation as inevitable and a necessary step towards socialism.

Marx fought bitterly against the anarchists, going so far as to effectively dissolve the First International, rather than let it fall under the control of a tendency which owed more to the anarchists than it did to marxists. His hostility was not based upon the anarchists concern for individuals and personal problems (Marx's concept of alienation shares this concern, but takes it further than anarchists ever dreamt of). He was hostile to the anarchists' individualism, their abstract assertion of individual rights and their opposition to collective, formal organisations as the means of advancing working class struggle. The marxists understood the nature of capitalism and the anarchists did not, which is the basic reason why anarchism is no longer a potent force in the working class. Unfortunately, however, the legacy of this dispute is that many marxists throw out the baby with the bathwater. For them, any mention of individuals and their problems smacks either of liberalism or of anarchism, and so they reject any discussion as 'subjectivism', which they say is against marxism. Their mistake is to polarise the individual and the collective, saying that marxism is only concerned with the collective. In fact, our politics makes enormous gains when we take up the anarchists concern for individuals and put this concern in a marxist framework.

## THE ROOTS OF THE PERSONAL CRISIS LIE IN THE NATURE OF CAPITALISM

Those were some of the ideological reasons why most marxists refuse to give serious political consideration to the problems of our personal lives. Big Flame has never taken such a crass and heavy-handed view of personal life. Instead, we have maintained a sort of News of the World 'All Human Life Is Here' perspective, and our propoganda is geared to all the problems faced by the working class. But this propoganda is still limited to material problems (wages, houses, playspaces etc) except, in some cases, where women are concerned. So while we are good at putting political energy into problems of everyday life which are usually neglected by the left, we still don't concentrate on problems like depression, sexuality or family life. It is left to the women's groups to deal with these issues, when they bring up facts about drug prescriptions to housewives, or when they discuss lesbianism or wife-beating. Even then, there is a tendency to discuss them as women's problems. I'm not for a moment questioning the right of women to put these problems into a specifically feminist perspective. What I'm trying to argue is that Big Flame as a whole should develop a perspective which brings everyone's (men's women's and kids') personal problems into the political arena. This means that men in our organisation should no longer relegate these questions to the women's groups. We should take our personal oppression as men more seriously. We should contribute to the discussion about family life and childcare, which, in fact, is not brought up very often by the women, presumably because they rightly say it's not specifically their problem.

Problems of personal life - like depression, sexuality, family life - are not confined to women, and the general crisis of meaning is not confined to young white revolutionaries (though it's only us who give it such pretentious names). They are engendered in the whole population, and especially in the working class, by capitalism. Big Flame has long argued that tenants and housewives are as important to the revolution as factory workers, because we have understood that capitalism structures the lives of the unwaged, as much as it structures the lives of the waged.

We must now take a further step and say that our personal lives are structured, just like our material lives, by capitalism, and the resulting de-humanisation is as important as the alienation and material poverty which results from the economic organisation of society. A lot of us in Big Flame feel this already, but I think we have lacked a clear marxist perspective to give weight to the argument.

### A short social/political/economic history of family life

One powerful source for a political view of personal life is the Good Books themselves - Marx's own writing. Particularly in his early work, Marx analysed the subjective experience of the worker in capitalism in some detail. His concept of alienation refers both to the material fact that the worker has no control over the product of his work and to the personal feelings of the worker in this situation. I'm not going into this in detail, because Marx is very difficult to follow unless you've been suitably trained, but it's worth one quote because a lot of people think Marx was only concerned with the nitty gritty, the objective side of life. Far from it, as you can see:

"We have now considered the act of alienation of practical human activity, labour, from two aspects: (1) the relationship of the worker to the product of labour as an alien object which dominates him (or her!). This relationship is at the same time the relationship to the sensuous external world, to natural objects, as an alien and hostile world; (2) the relationship of labour to the act of production within labour. This is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something alien and not belonging to him, activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness,

creation as emasculation, the personal physical and mental energy of the worker, his personal life (for what is life but activity?), as an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him. This is self-alienation as against the above mentioned alienation of the thing."

(Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844) First Manuscript; in 'Karl Marx, early writings' by T. Bottomore, Watts 1963)

Although Marx is here writing about men who are using machines to make things, it is clear from his writing on religion, which he described as

"The sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."

(Contribution to the critique of Hegel's philosophy of Right

and from his discussion of man's relationship with woman, which <sup>ibid</sup> Marx says expresses "the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself"\*- it is clear from all these quotes that Marx was concerned with a political analysis of personal life in general, not just the world of waged work. Nor did he depart from this conception in his later work (don't listen to these crazy Althusserians, read I. Meszaros 'Marx's theory of alienation' Merlin 1970) but I'm not going into all that here, so you can breath again.

The easiest way into a marxist perspective on personal life is to study the history of the family and of woman's place in society, and to look at the way capital has progressively stripped waged work of any meaning, has recognised this, and is now trying to impose its version of a 'meaningful personal life' as a substitute for this alienated work. In what follows, I'm using a lot of Ely Zaretsky's 'Family, Capitalism and Personal Life' (Pluto 1976) - an excellent short book which everyone should read. Zaretsky works with the Socialist Revolution group in California, whose politics seem to be close to ours, so I'm sure he won't mind the extra bits I've added to his analysis.

Early capitalism - the housewife as worker

Zaretsky links the changes in the role of the family and the position of women to the development of the productive forces. He describes how, in the early stages of capitalism (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) the lower class family was an integrated productive unit, in which the woman had low status, but was at least an essential part of the economic life of the family, in the sense that she helped make the goods which the family sold. As capitalism advanced, Protestantism had two important effects. It both encouraged hard, regular work, the saving and investment of money (all essential to make capitalism work), and it improved the status of women. Housework, like directly productive work, was seen as a 'calling from god', and the woman was now given the status of 'helpmeet' or companion to the man.

This religious outlook also encouraged introspection, self analysis and an awareness of one's inner, psychological life, since the early Puritans (extreme protestants) maintained that internal purity was the only guarantee of salvation. Fortunately for capitalism, this proved too much even for the Puritans, and it came to be believed that you could demonstrate your internal purity by your hard, thrifty work (which is why so many of them got so rich). These new ideas also went along with a new idea of human nature - which became described as competitive, possessive and individualistic. Such ideas about work, women and human nature, first established with the rise of capitalism, clearly form the basis of present attitudes.

In the nineteenth century, of course, the factory became the main workplace for working class men, women, and children. this was a major blow to the family, which had previously been the basic economic unit, and it is inter-

(\* Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Third Mss, <sup>ibid</sup>)

est'ing to note that many workers opposed the abolition of child labour because, apart from the loss of money, they knew that if children were to be dispatched to the non-existent home, families would be broken up even further. With the destruction of the family as a productive unit went the abandonment of housework as a divine service. Work in general had been devalued and alienated as workers lost all control over the nature of the goods they were producing. But for the developing bourgeoisie, who owned and controlled the factories, work had a different meaning, and their wives had a different role. Confined to the house, where housework was done by servants, the role was created for the middle class woman as the source of emotion, sensitivity and the 'finer feelings'.

In the later part of the nineteenth century, workers standards of living rose, but radical writers continued to attack the capitalist system. Waged work was characterised as brutal, competitive, meaningless and alienated -- and one argument which appeared was that the family was the only refuge from the soul destroying factory. The family was idealised as natural, ethical and human -- in stark contrast to the 'outside' world. In this context, men were pictured as the workers -- hard, rational, competitive, aggressive -- while women were seen as the opposite -- gentle, emotional, sympathetic, with a duty to withdraw from the harsh world of work and devote themselves to the children. Zaretsky must here be referring to the middle class family, as many working class women had to earn a wage, but these ideas about the nature of men and women have come to dominate the whole of society -- as would be expected, since the bourgeois view of the world dominates in the absence of a strong socialist ideological alternative. (The fact that the workers movement has, in general, accepted a bourgeois view of the nature of men and women ever since it began must be counted as one of its greatest failures.)

#### Opposition as capitalism develops

This is the first stage in the splitting of life between 'work' and 'home'. Despite rises in living standards, society became increasingly mechanical and industrial throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The lives of the mass of working people was, and still is, dominated by the harsh and uncompromising routine of wage labour, and the process of polarising society into the working and the ruling classes went on.

The first opposition to this process came from two sources, both of which are important to our theme. First, from the petty-bourgeois and artisan class. This group had enjoyed some independence and status by owning their own small businesses and workshops, and when factory based capitalism began to threaten this independence, they protested. Although the petty bourgeoisie lost the battle against large scale capitalist organisation, they have contributed two ideas which are still important.

Artisans -- who were often craftsmen, owning their tools and controlling their product -- knew that work could be, and often was, satisfying and creative. Unlike the new working class, created in industrial society, artisans thought about their work, built the article and had a lot of control over what happened to the finished job. In marxist terms, their work was not alienated. This idea that work can be fulfilling, worthwhile and meaningful, if the means of production are controlled by the working class, is one of the basic inspirations of revolutionary politics. The other idea we have inherited from the petty bourgeoisie is individualism. They asserted their rights as individuals against the increasingly collective nature of capital and the state, and, as I've said, it was this feeling which the anarchists picked up on. While we have to ensure that we do not make the same mistakes as the anarchists, we must also not repeat the mistake of many marxists who dismiss this idea as 'petty bourgeois individualism'. Our problem is to separate the legitimate demands of the individual from the legitimate demands of the group, asserting that true communism is more sensitive to individual needs than capitalism.



The second source of opposition to early capitalism came from radical writers and artists. In a slightly different form (less material and more idealistic) they also asserted the rights of individuals against those of society. Expressing both capitalism's brutal attack on nature and the potential beauty of life, these thinkers drew attention to the plight of the emotional human being faced with a mechanical and dehumanised world. From these radicals and artists, we have inherited the ideas of feeling, introspection, beauty and the lonely human being.

### The personal crisis in modern capitalism

It should be clear, therefore, that the ideas which marxists often dismiss as 'more subjectivism' or 'purely personal (as opposed to material)' - individual rights, feeling, emotion, masculinity, femininity etc - these ideas were developed under specific historical conditions, namely the growth of industrial capitalism. It is our role as revolutionaries to challenge the bourgeoisie on this terrain with the same vigour as we challenge them on material issues. These so-called subjective issues take on even greater importance when we consider modern developments of capitalism.

Over the last forty years we have seen improved living standards (until recently) combined with proletarianisation and de-skilling. Proletarianisation refers to the process by which 'middle' social groups like teachers, nurses, lower civil servants, who once enjoyed a higher standard of living and status than the old working class are now in a work situation which, in terms of wages, conditions and status, is becoming more and more like that of the working class. At the same time deskilling has been imposed by the managers - jobs once performed by the elite of the working class (the skilled craftsmen) have been broken down so that they can be done by unskilled workers. So, for both the middle and working classes, work has become increasingly meaningless. On the other hand, while work has become less and less fulfilling or worthwhile, wages have (until recently) risen faster than prices, a welfare state has been introduced, and the mass of people has been convinced that "they've never had it so good".

It is in this context that most people have come to accept that material possessions (cars, TVs, household gadgets etc) plus holidays and the leisure industry are a substitute for meaningful work. Trade unionists who have restricted themselves to demanding higher wages have gone along with this trend, saying 'if you want us to do this shitwork, then you'll have to pay us'.

But the contradictions continually break through. Capitalists soon realised that if they were to go on expanding the market (which they have to do if they are going to continue to make profits) they would have to persuade people to go on buying new things. It is not self-evident that you need a new car every two years, or that you need new Miss Selfridge T shirts if you are going to stay young and beautiful. Several ideas have to be put over, and accepted, if we are to go on spending our money on things which, in fact, we do not need. One idea is that consumption is an end in itself - that pleasure is to be had simply by eating more, drinking more, having new furniture/clothes/cars etc, without giving a thought to whether you need these things, or whether they have any real meaning. Another idea we have to accept for capitalism to function profitably is that your status and self respect depends upon the goods you own and on your 'style of life'. Perhaps the crucial idea, however, is that if you don't have these possessions and this lifestyle, and therefore don't gain the respect of 'respectable people', then it is your own fault. According to the conventional wisdom, it's your fault if you don't have a foreign holiday - after all, they say, there's equality of opportunity in education, and it's a free market for jobs, where the best qualified get the best positions, so if you've got a low paid job or are unemployed, it's your fault: you're thick/workshy/a scrounger, and you've only got yourself to blame. Likewise, it's

get the cosmetics, slimming pills, clothes and vaginal deodorants to make you Tower Hill's answer to Brigitte Bardot. So you are encouraged to

your fault if you're not beautiful - we've given you the opportunity to get all the cosmetics, slimming pills, clothes and vaginal deodorants to make you into Tower Hill's answer to Brigitte Bardot. So, when things don't quite live up to your TV advert expectations, it can only be yourself to blame.

To the extent that people go on buying, and go on 'keeping up with the Jones', this propaganda effort has been successful. But cracks are widening. Most people know that 'advertising is a con' and 'work is shit' and with the growth of feminism there is an increasing awareness of the way that women have been subjugated and abused. The problem pages of every magazine are testimony to the fact that the possession of goods doesn't mean happiness.

The underlying tendency of capitalism is to make these personal problems worse. As we have seen, capitalism has alienated work, making it meaningless and soul destroying for the mass of people, and it has created the idea that 'happiness' and 'fulfilment' is to be found outside work, in the family, in leisure, in the possession of things. But the strain on this personal side of our lives is made ever more intolerable. Unemployment is a frightening prospect not because you like work, but because the money it brings is essential for any kind of pleasure. Even if the artificial aids worked, there's not enough money to look as beautiful as the adverts, which means no-one will love you, which means you won't have a family, which means you won't be 'happy'. You can't care for the kids properly because the state has taken away your role as educator and creates an environment in which kids are oppressed on all sides, by police, teachers and the false values of the world of pop.

At a more general level, the contradictions are as stark. We are supposed to believe that we will be happy if we are really in love, and are loved by one member of the opposite sex. Yet the very idea of love is challenged in a society which wages war (eg in Ireland), which encourages economic competition (justifying the violence of poverty), and which destroys living space so that vandalism becomes an understandable way of entertaining yourself. And the idea of heterosexual love is nonsense for the millions of gay people. And if we do delude ourselves such that we think we can escape the horrors of capitalism by creating a womb in personal life, we come up against the family. How can family life work when children are increasingly drawn into a different world from their parents, when sexual fidelity (the supposed basis of love) is countered every day by the mass media, and when all the problems of living in a capitalist society are supposed to be psychological in origin and solvable by individual adjustments within the family? In fact, the family becomes the repository of all the anxieties, frustrations and hatreds engendered by capitalism. "You've got to laugh", they say - and the expression is apt: you've got to laugh, otherwise you'd go bananas.

All kinds of statistics can be used as evidence of the acute malaise of capitalist society: enormous rises in the amount of drugs prescribed to tranquilise us all, and women in particular; the incidence of mental illness and suicide; juvenile crime; school refusal; absenteeism; sabotage; divorce; and, of course, unemployment. All these things have gone on throughout society, and we can't use mere statistics to 'prove' that things are getting worse. But we should remember that inside each of these figures lies a human being trying to find a way of coping with an intolerable personal situation.

I don't think it is too big a leap to suggest that, underlying all these personal crises, is the basic contradiction of capitalism - a system which cannot allow us to meet our deepest needs for meaning and purpose, a system which, instead of providing a context in which we can make sense of our lives and reach real fulfilment, imposes alienated work, meaningless leisure and even tries to destroy our personal lives. Instead of allowing us to be human, capitalism contradicts our human-ness.

### Capital's "solution" to the personal crisis it has created

But the ideologists of capital are well aware of the 'unacceptable face' of personal life, and they are well ahead in the market for "solutions". So well ahead, in fact, that the left has never entered the field. As we have seen, in the first round (excuse these mixed metaphors, all you budding Bertholt Brechts) they gained widespread acceptance for the idea that personal satisfaction (family, leisure, sex, possessions..) was an acceptable substitute for work satisfaction. In the second round, they got people to accept the idea that, if personal life wasn't hunky dory, it's your own fault. "Happiness", they say, "is a deeply personal thing" and you get it by individual action - a good screw, a nice house etc. But of course they are faced with all sorts of opposing tendencies, where people act collectively in pursuit of happiness. Despite all the failings we can see in these strategies, people are acting collectively when they take trade union action for higher wages to fulfil their need for money; and, to some extent, the family is a vehicle for collective happiness for many people; again, for most people, the best times are to be had when you're out with a group of friends, enjoying yourselves together.

So capitalism's yes-men have to work hard to maintain the idea that happiness is a personal thing, to be achieved individually. A whole industry has emerged - the human relations industry, paralleled at work by the personnel relations people. These people supply us with an unending stream of recipes for how to be happy. Most of the short stories in most women's magazines give us these recipes, and it's worth noting the enormous popularity of men's glossy magazines which re-assure us that it doesn't matter if we've got short pricks, because we can always get into a bit of sado-masochism (and women really dig it).

Some leftists dismiss psychoanalysis as the ultimate in individual 'solutions' to capitalism's problems, but this is not the place to go into the subversive aspects of this school of thought. One opposition to this school is important to our theme, however. While Freud maintained that sexual satisfaction was linked to one's experiences as a child with one's mother or father, the modern human relations people have managed to completely divorce sex from any kind of social context. Masters and Johnstone and their followers teach us, via countless magazine articles and their own best selling manuals, where to poke our partners if we want to achieve maximum lift-off. So long as you're coming, who cares if meaning is going?

It sometimes seems as if sexual satisfaction is posed as the lynch pin of personal happiness, but the human relations people have an interest in other areas of personal life too. They have recipes for how to control our emotions, how to get along with people, how to bring up our children, how to forget about our problems. Since most of the other recipes don't work, most energy goes into the last one. Tony Blackburn's jokes, and his repeated plea that you have "a really super/fabulous/wonderful day, won't you?", plus that magical phone call as David Hamil on "makes your day", the never ending stream of bourgeois propaganda disguised as "popular music" - all these help blot out the ugliness. If that fails we can try Marge Proops and her gang. Failing that, we can hope that our stars are telling the truth. In all this, the hidden basic message comes home time and time again, more effectively because it is usually unstated: happiness is personal, to be pursued on your own.

### Personal crisis: the revolutionary alternative

One theme of this paper should by now be clear. The crisis in our personal lives has been created by capital. It works at a different level, and is better disguised, than the crisis manifested by bad housing, low pay, dangerous roads and unemployment. But this personal aspect of the crisis has to be taken as seriously as the material aspects; our activity as revolutionaries has to be to transform both, recognising that the personal and the material crisis have the same root.

In Big Flame we have made a better start on this analysis than most other sections of the left, mainly because we have tried to take the insights of the women's movement seriously. We have tried to incorporate two facts, awkward for the traditional left, into our organisation. First, the women's movement showed that the original marxist position 'On the Woman Question' was hopelessly inadequate. Briefly, Engels had argued that women would gain equality when they joined in with the waged workers struggle for revolution. After the revolution they would be 'full' members of the working class and, therefore, would have equality with men. Feminist revolutionaries have shown that inequality both within so-called socialist states and within marxist organisations in capitalist states give the lie to this idea. They have also pointed out that Engels ignores the important role of housewives as reproducers of labour power and the vast potential for political action outside the waged workplace.

Secondly, the women's movement has shown that masses of people will mobilise for political action over issues which are not simply economic. Women have placed their personal lives, their subjective feelings of oppression, at the centre of their political activity. Now they are developing a series of anti-capitalist demands, some of which are unique in their combination of personal and material factors. "Free abortion on demand - a woman's right to choose" is both a material challenge to the state, demanding an extension of the welfare state, and a personal demand, for control of one's body, against domination by a largely male medical system.

So Big Flame starts from the position that capitalism oppresses us in all aspects of our lives - in our personal lives, in the community and in the workplace. We recognise that this oppression is maintained by the deep splits within the working class between men and women, white and black, young and old. We attempt to counter this split by calling for autonomous organisations, so that each section of the class can build its own power and forge class unity in struggle against the basic enemy, the capitalist class.

#### Room for improvement : in our propoganda and practice

But this attempt to deal with the total nature of capital's oppression remains highly formal, and too little expressed in our political practice. It's not enough to say 'we maintain the autonomy of women and struggle in the community'. At its worst, I think there is a tendency for us men to hide behind the 'women's autonomy' position - recognising that the women often bring personal issues into their propoganda, we leave this area of politics up to them, and we get on with the 'serious' material issues. We all, I think, assume that personal issues are 'community' issues, and fail to relate them to other political work.

I think we should attempt to formulate demands and perspectives which relate to the personal problems discussed in this paper. Obviously, the underlying theme has to be that these are not 'individual' problems - they affect each of us 'personally', but they are common to us all and can only be solved collectively. We have to guard against raising personal issues in an abstract way, or in a way which becomes utopian or ultra-leftist. For example the demand 'The abolition of impotence' may well strike a chord in many Fordworkers, but should be introduced with great care!

Perhaps the best approach would be try and relate our propoganda to the personal issues whenever we can. For instance, health issues are just as important to men as they are to women. The hazards of work are not just poisoning and accidents - they include insomnia, indigestion, headaches and all manner of sexual disruptions. In fact, the issue of sexuality is full of political meaning because it is at the front of our minds most of the time. We should try and discuss sexual stereotyping, homosexuality (male and female), as well as family life, childcare etc. Only if we show in our propoganda and practice that we are concerned about, and are trying to point real solutions to, the way in which capitalism de-humanises us as people can we give any weight to our claim that we are countering the total oppression of capitalism.

## Room for improvement : within Big Flame

We should take more seriously the fact that, for many of us in Big Flame, the personal crisis is just as acute as it is for everyone else. In some ways it might be easier to cope with - at least we blame capitalism as much as we blame ourselves for our problems - but in other ways it is made worse by the strain we feel from the continuous pressure of our political work, inside and outside the organisation. This is a political issue, should be recognised as such, and should be dealt with politically. At the crudest level, we should adopt the motto 'To take a holiday is a political act (so long as you don't have more than x days a year)!!'

We should reflect more on the personal reasons why people join revolutionary groups. I became a revolutionary at least partly because it seemed to be the only way I could give meaning and purpose to my life. That may sound pretentious, but I'm sure it's true because, when I feel most pissed off with politics, I realise that nothing else could be more worthwhile. It would be interesting to know why others joined. As I type this, I've just read Ann and May's piece in the Internal Bulletin, December 1976. They emphasise the material problems, the cuts etc, and I know now that I'm in BF to fight for a decent standard of living just like everyone else. But Ann and May also emphasise how they felt about BF and the people in BF that they knew. If I understand them right, they are saying that they joined BF when they saw that both they and BF had changed so that they could identify with the organisation, when they could see themselves as part of the organisation. This shows how important it is that we think about the personal side of people's relationship with BF. Other people, I think, have joined in a less clear headed way, perhaps hoping that being part of a revolutionary organisation will help them solve their personal problems.

Whatever the reason for joining, we will only keep people in BF, and we'll only attract more people, if we meet two criteria. First, people want an organisation which will provide a set of ideas and practices which makes sense, which both interprets what's going on in the world, and which shows realistic ways of revolutionising the world. Big Flame, like all other left groups, gives a lot of attention to this. But no organisation gives much importance to the second thing - the need we all have to feel 'at home' in the organisation. There are a lot of issues here. One is that the leadership never generates this kind of discussion because the leadership always feels 'at home' - otherwise it wouldn't be the leadership. Another is the regrettable tendency in the left to rule these personal feelings out of court - thus the reasons given for leaving an organisation are either 'political' (disagreement with the 'line') or because the person is 'fucked up' (can't stand the pace/neurotic etc).

Big Flame must generate a real sense of collectivity if it is going to avoid the turnstile membership of most other left groups. We will avoid the situation of, for example IS and WRP where there is an enormous turnover of members, only if we are genuinely committed to a collective approach to all the problems we face as revolutionaries. These are not just problems of finding the right political theory and practice, they are the problems of relationships, of commitment, of our sense of identity, meaning and purpose.

This is not to say that BF must become the neurotics rest home of the left. People must join because their first commitment is to our kind of revolutionary politics. Given that, we then have to make everyone feel part of a collective in which everyone takes each other seriously as a person, and not just as a two legged political machine. To some extent we can make organisational steps towards this goal - more socials, meetings at which we talk about 'how we feel', collective holidays etc - but basically it's a matter of us all taking this up as part of our everyday politics. I'm pretty bad at this myself, and I think it's essential that these issues are openly discussed if I am to change myself. It should be clear that I don't have too much sympathy for the old

libertarian 'sexual-politics' approach to these problems, and this paper has been an attempt to give a materialist grounding to the debate which I think we should have.

### Conclusion

This piece started with a hint of the crisis in my personal life. It's taken so long to type it that a lot of things have changed - for the better. But the basic point still stands : personal life, for all of us in Big Flame and for the working classes as a whole, is at best difficult and at worst disastrous. We have not given this fact the political attention it requires.

Using Zaretsky's book, I have tried to sketch a marxist approach to understanding the crisis in personal life. The argument was that capitalism has alienated waged work, making it meaningless and life destroying, and has tried to persuade us that 'personal life' can be substituted as the source of pleasure, meaning and fulfilment. Now, as more and more workers are de-skilled and proletarianised, the contradictions are breaking through even more viciously at the personal level, as family life falls apart, mental breakdowns increase, all forms of violence grow ...

Big Flame has always tried to comprehend and struggle against capitalist oppression in all its forms, but we have to take the struggle for the liberation of personal life more seriously. Not by following the recent libertarian experiment in abolishing monogamy and destroying family life - a project which doesn't seem to have worked even for the few who could try it. Instead, Big Flame has to discover a political practice which relates to the crisis in all our personal lives and which convinces people that the solution is socialist revolution. And we have to create an organisation whose communism helps its members to fulfil their own needs and dreams. We can do it ... with a little help from our friends.

Max Farrar  
Leeds  
January 1977

## GLOSSARY to the barbed wire canoe

I know I'm backing a loser here. The theoreticians are going to shoot me down in flames for the incorrect or superficial definitions that follow, and the guts and struggles merchants are going to accuse me of being patronising. So, in case people subscribe to the popular myth that I enjoy being kicked to shit, I'll say why I'm attempting the impossible. It's simply because I believe that theory is important - it's important if we are going to make sense of capitalism, and we need to make sense of capitalism if we are going to overthrow it. Theory should be generated through struggle - the only theory which does make sense comes through struggle - but it also requires ideas and concepts, and that means reading and discussing some ideas that people get boils on their bums working out. There are some special words which have been developed to help us understand capitalism (sometimes dismissed as 'jargon'), and I've used some of them. I think it is essential that those of us who use these words and concepts put ourselves in the firing line: that we force ourselves to find clear, short and accurate definitions of these concepts. If we can't explain what we mean, and if we can't convince people that it's a help to their understanding of capitalism to use them - then we shouldn't use them either. I'm hoping for as much feedback to the glossary as for the text itself.

ALIENATION Part of Marx's definition of this term is given on page 6. The basic point is that the worker has no control over the things he or she produces (the object is alien) and this gives rise to the bad feelings associated with work, that work is useless, annoying, that the worker feels powerless (you feel alienated).

ANARCHISTS According to the anarchists, the main enemy is the State, since this embodies all that is bad about authority. Some anarchists have a marxist, class analysis of the State - that the problem is the fact that the ruling class controls the State. But anarchists believe that even when the working class controls the State authority and domination will continue, so they champion individual rights, and are usually fanatically opposed to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and all the modern political groups, saying that they are not truly democratic.

ARTISAN The name given to the craft workers who, to a large extent, worked for themselves and controlled their products. A significant class in early capitalism. Few remain today.

BAKUNIN (1814-1867) Often thought of as the cartoon image of anarchism, with his secret organisations, his brief glorification of violence for its own sake, appearing at every barricade throughout Europe for twenty years or so. Not as wild as he sounds, translated Marx and Engels Communist Manifesto into Russian, and although Marx said he was an idiot, he may well have incorporated some of Bakunin's ideas about the need to destroy the State into his own thought.

BOHEMIANS A name given to the people who broke bourgeois social conventions in their lifestyle and ideas - rejecting marriage and fidelity, working irregularly, defying 'good manners' etc. Some of them were also revolutionaries, especially in art and theatre. Associated with the writers, poets and artists of the 19th century, also applied to the "Beat generation" of the 1950s. Forerunners of the Hippies.

BOURGEOISIE A rather loose term, usually used to describe the middle-class, but also sometimes applied to the ruling class. Used in various ways in the text:

\* bourgeois abstractions: it's characteristic of bourgeois social thought that it removes ideas from their material context - it deals with things abstractly. Unless you can see the context in which an idea is generated, you can't understand it. Bourgeois thought is abstract, and therefore it confuses or mystifies the issues involved.

\* black bourgeoisie : refers to the emerging middle class among the black population - the doctors, headteachers, lawyers, businessmen - who, despite strident black talk, operate in the interests of the white middle class.

\*petty bourgeoisie : the lower middle/upper working class - people who own small shops and small businesses - like the artisans, they've reduced in numbers, but still a significant force.

bourgeois sociology and psychology : just as it abstracts ideas from their context, so bourgeois thought segments ideas. For them, psychology is the study of the internal processes of animals eg thinking learning, seeing. Sociology is the study of people and their social activity. As marxists, we attempt to understand the whole of social life, and not divide the study into sociology/psychology/economics/politics/philosophy, since the process of segmenting knowledge stops us understanding (and changing) society as a whole.

BERTHOLT BRECHT (1898-19 ) The best known revolutionary socialist playwright, poet, songster and novelist.

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING : a word used to describe the discussions in the women's groups, when there was collective effort to reveal and understand the nature of oppression experienced by members of the group - and to liberate themselves from that oppression.

DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM : Some people say that marxism is 'dialectical materialism'. In fact Marx and Engels used the term 'historical materialism' to describe their method. material things are \* materialism is the theory which says that/the starting point for human life. This is the reverse of the Hegelian or Idealist theory which said that human life started with the Idea or Spirit. Marx said that society is founded upon the work that people do and the social relationships they set up when they use tools and raw materials to sustain life. It is from this (working with the means of production and the social relations of production/<sup>the economic base</sup> to use the jargon) that ideas, laws, religions, consciousness (the superstructure) are derived. There is a dialectical, or two-way, relationship between the base and superstructure.

\* dialectical is the word Marx took from Hegel to describe the progress of history. Hegel said that history was a process in which the dialectical relationship between the 'thesis' and the 'anti-thesis' was resolved by the 'synthesis'. For Hegel, the Idea or Spirit was the thesis. Marx was far more down to earth. He substituted the real, working human being for the Idea. His dialectical view of history was that the conflict between the working class (the thesis) and the ruling class (the anti-thesis) was resolved (or synthesised) by the creation of communism.

ENGELS (1820-1895) A German businessman who collaborated with Marx from the 1840s, helping clarify his ideas and developing his ideas after Marx's death in 1883.

EXISTENTIALISTS : philosophers who are concerned with the here and now, the intricacies of the process of 'being' or existing, often reflecting on the 'nothingness' or pointlessness of life.

IDEALISM : The philosophical school which believes that ideas or consciousness is the main force in society. Marxists believe that humans working with MATERIAL things is the source of social life.

PROUDHON (1809-1864) French anarchist, bitter critic of religion, the State and capitalist work, said 'property is theft' but believed in individual ownership of tools, upholder of the virtues of the family

Notes \* for discussion with ... to ...