

BLACK AUTONOMY AND THE WHITE LEFT  
or Whites doing politics around race issues

Big Flame Discussion  
Bulletin.

This is a very brief rehash of a talk I gave at the BF Anti-Racist Anti-fascist Commission a few months ago. I've only got two stencils so the point of view I hold will not be very fully backed up by my version of the historical events which have led to my view.

A document entitled "Black Autonomy: why Big Flame offers unconditional support" was written by a certain F Read in February 1978 and it contained the views I agreed with at the time. They weren't an entirely agreed upon set of views within Big Flame - the article in the BF Journal Revolutionary Socialism No2 (Spring 1978) written by John Howell and entitled "Black Autonomy in Class Struggle" was, in my view, a serious watering down of the Read article, but it was still unequivocal in its support for black autonomy.

The journal article failed to clearly state the analytical basis for BF's support for black autonomy, which in my view is this: there are important material divisions within the "working class" (I think this term is now virtually useless, to be honest - I prefer to think of everyone who is exploited and oppressed). These divisions result in contradictions between the various sections which cannot be overcome by waving a Leninist wand called "the party". Each section has to formulate its own understanding of its own social, economic, political and spiritual needs. To do so it requires its own organisations, in which it will analyse its own specific relationship to the dominating forces in society and form its own structures and demands, tactics and strategies. It is counter-productive for members of the dominating groups (middle class communist intellectuals or white workers or men or heterosexuals or whatever) to be inside the organisations formed for this purpose. This is why we supported organisational autonomy. We also supported political autonomy: we supported the demands, tactics and strategies which were totally antagonistic to what we used to call capitalism (and which we should now call "the racist, capitalist patriarchy" or some other such mouthful, I think). I don't think we demanded that we only should support those groups which were autonomous politically and organisationally, though there were always problems with this. For instance some would be quite hostile (as the Howell article is) to black nationalist autonomy, on the grounds that their political demands were mere separatism, and not antagonistic to capital as such. Some of us would take a softer line, and support their right to autonomous organisation, while privately disagreeing with their political demands. The long term argument about autonomy and unity was resolved by the notion that, on the basis of the strength built up, politically and organisationally, by the autonomous groups, real unity between the various sections of the "class" was then an the political agenda. Black organisations (or women, or gays and, some also said, young people) would be in a position to unite with other sections on their own terms, imposing their own political perspectives and not taking a back-seat while the white men drove the van.

A pretty good position you may say. It was - by far the most sophisticated position available then, and far better than those operated today by the white left groups. All the left groups underwent major splits with their black members until, by the end of the 70s, none of them had any left. The up and going organisations like the RCG and RCP learnt the wrong lesson (but have temporarily recruited blacks because their position appeared superior to the SWP and IMG etc): their conclusion was (a) place race at the centre of the political stage, and stop marginalising it as the rest of the Leninists had, and (b) stamp out this idea that blacks should have their own caucus; insist on Leninist centralism and abstract unity.

Despite the virtues of the BF position, I now believe that some refinement is called for. I now believe that, without withdrawing from the basic analysis or the support for autonomy, there is a

need for closer links between blacks and whites, and a firmer statement of our own politics as revolutionaries. In the past the tendency was to be so supportive of black autonomy that we either avoided black groups and black people, or we courted those who we thought we were closest to, or we worked alongside groups and individuals without voicing our own political views (I explained my own failings in this respect in Race Today Oct-Nov 1982 in relation to the Bradford 12 campaign). What I'm suggesting is that (a) we prioritise political work on race issues where we can work with black people (b) that we make clear our view that on these issues the main political force should come from black people themselves (c) that where there is a political majority of blacks we openly argue for our perspective in the struggle, and that we accept the political consequences - ie that we may be outvoted, or asked to leave the campaign (d) that where whites are a political majority we decide either to leave the campaign or to seek alliance with those blacks whose position we identify with and then to fight openly for our point of view (e) throughout all this we expose our general politics of autonomy and our notion of how unity may emerge, and that we test this view in debate and action with the black people with whom we are campaigning.

I've come to this conclusion for various reasons :

- 1 The general situation for the oppressed and exploited has changed since our position was developed (ie 1973 - 1978). Struggle has been contained and autonomous groupings do not have the political weight they did have. At its worst, the terrain has shifted to Labourist manoeuvres, where autonomy was buried long ago
- 2 The position inside the black masses has also changed. Nationalism is no longer a political force, though one of its conclusions, Rasta, is a force to be taken very seriously. Insofar as there is a political conclusion from the struggles of the 70's, the conclusion is that we can organise for ourselves, but we see that our destiny is inextricably linked to the fate of the white oppressed and exploited. The Black People's Day of Action (for New Cross Massacre) was the clearest manifestation of this point of view, and it was organised by Race Today, with whom most of Big Flame has had a comradely relationship for a long time. There is also a shift among the black militants. They now have at least 15 years experience of the modern struggle in Britain. The younger ones have read the pamphlets and papers, and the older ones have learnt through experience (as well as intensive study). There is now a layer of militants in every town with much political wisdom. They are all autonomists (apart from the CRC and Labourist handful). They will work with whites, but on terms which they lay down as blacks,
- 3 The position inside the white left has changed. The RCG and RCP and RCL are tiny, but disciplined organisations whose members are intent on recruiting blacks for their manipulative schemes which masquerade under the revolutionary banner. They are doing as much, probably more, harm as their predecessors, and we have a duty to counter them - not as a favour to blacks, who will deal with them for themselves, but for the sake of the eventual emergence of revolutionary unity (there is a real danger that marxism will be entirely discredited, along with leninism).
- 4 At an entirely subjective level, I get the impression that black people find the "unequivocal support" position hard to swallow - it can be interpreted as patronising (you can't be bothered to argue with me) or manipulative (you're only saying this to give us a false sense of security). I think they'd prefer to hear a solid point of view which can then be argued out. If we're sincere, we'll learn more from that argument than from hundreds of statements of support.

I hadn't got much more to say, even if I had more space. Glad to see the Discussion Bulletin rides again. Let the Hundred Flowers Bloom, as we used to say, in the days when the East was Red.