

# Introduction

## Lynne Segal

There is a great deal of discussion of strategy and tactics amongst the revolutionary left. Necessary as this is, it often fails to confront the main problem we face in Britain today, which is how to develop a revolutionary socialist movement from a very small popular base. The left has not yet been able to popularise the idea that there ever could be a socialist alternative to the capitalist (or soviet-type) state.

Revolutionary politics were mainly influenced by the post-war Leninist position that you couldn't change anything under capitalism, you had to build an organisation to overthrow it. And it would have to be built with similar hierarchical structures to the capitalist state. This goal dictated all the structures and strategy on the way. A criticism of this view was made by the libertarian groupings which developed in most of the advanced capitalist countries from the late 60s. They said that in these countries, as distinct from Third World countries, there would be little reason for people to join a revolutionary movement unless it brought an immediate improvement in the quality of their lives, for example through changes in their personal relationships.

Some ways in which this was theorised were as follows. A libertarian catchword was that 'you must live your politics.' The German student activist Rudi Dutschke wrote about 'the long march through the institutions', trying to build an analogy with the Chinese Communist Party's strategy of gradually setting up liberated areas. And a pamphlet from the American movement asked 'How do you fight fire? With water of course.' What all this was about was the belief that the desire to change your own life and the world about you now is an important part of building for socialism in the future. The concept of 'pre-figurative' politics has been used to describe the attempt to build socialist relations now within the movement to overthrow capitalism.

### Changing ourselves

The idea that changing ourselves as a society now is an essential part of making the revolution emerged most strongly of all from the women's movement. Women knew that their subordination to men in every sphere of their lives had been ignored by the left. Marxism had always concentrated almost entirely on the exploitation of people who work for wages. But women realised that their

oppression in waged work rested on an even more basic oppression for them, their situation in the family. So women started talking about the nature of socialism and the forms of organising for it in new ways.

### Sexual division of labour

They argued that there could be no liberation for women without changes in the sexual division of labour, in the home and the workplace. So the struggle for socialism had to include changes in the way in which housework and childcare as well as waged work are organised today. They understood that unless housework and childcare are shared by both men and women on the left, then most women could not participate in its activities. They also said that the Leninist party mirrored the prejudices and social hierarchies of capitalist society, of class, race, age and sexual preference. Women could not even begin to work with men, on any level of equality, without a shared battle against the ideology of sexism. An ideology which ensures that women are seen, and see themselves, in ways which allow men to dominate them. This requires that both men and women struggle to change themselves now.

### Sexism

The importance of our ideological attack on sexism, and the notion of there

being separate spheres for men and women, is at the moment greater than ever. For it is now, in order to solve its economic crisis, that the ruling class is attempting to strengthen the sexist aspects of bourgeois ideology which confine women to the home, in order to justify its growing attacks on the working class in general, and women in particular. So we increasingly hear, as was announced recently in the House of Lords, that 'unemployment could be solved at a stroke, if women returned to the home.'

### Threats

We are now faced with threats to all of women's recent gains, restrictions on abortion facilities, the closure of family planning clinics, the closure of nurseries and playgroups, deterioration of health care, and even threats to women's rights to maternity leave. All this amounts to an attack on women's rights to waged work, if they have young children. The links between personal life and women's oppression and class exploitation are thus revealed more clearly than ever to-day.

Both libertarians and feminists were active in many struggles, particularly in the community, around housing and health and in other areas. But for obvious reasons it was on childcare and personal relationships that much of their ideas and activity focused.

The following two articles describe these ideas and activities. The first article consists of a discussion between four people, all of whom have lived in collective households. In the second article, Paul Holt, now living as a couple with his two children, is critical of what he describes as the 'Stormy Libertarian Days of Hope.'



# Living Your Politics

## A Discussion on Collective Living: Ten Years On

This conversation is between four people who have been active in community politics over the last ten years. They discuss the impact of libertarian ideas on collective living and childcare.

**M**ick: I suppose what it comes down to is it's very easy and it's quite common for a lot of political groups to have a verbal and propaganda commitment to some kind of alternative life-style which they see as integral to their politics, but when it comes to the crunch very few of those groups are able to live by that practice.

**J**ack: I don't think that left groups generally have had a commitment to collective living.

When you are walking, running, crawling away from what you know you can't go back to, which is the social structure handed to us by our parents' generation, what we move towards is something so unknown, so unsupported by the social structure we live in, with the whole capitalist structure working against it, that every time you get something together it is not surprising that it can easily collapse.

What has developed over the 10 years of the women's movement has been a bit of space made for ideas like that the working day is too long, that the sex division of labour is bad, that nurseries are good. These ideas have crept in, and some groups give more space to them than others.

Some lefties will argue that the woman left isolated at home with the small children, or going to work and using baby minders, or the man working day and night and coming home tired, and the nuclear family itself is all bad bad bad. That is pretty generally accepted. But basically what left groups have moved towards is a social change that will make living in the nuclear family a lot better. They haven't challenged this family, or tried to develop an alternative.

**M**ick: That's true, but there's so little clarity about what this means in practice. What seems to me to have happened is that the alternative it's bred is individualism, where you don't have commitments to anybody, where you're not dependent on anybody and nobody's dependent on you. And though you may live with other people you are only respected as an individual. That has a positive side to it, particularly for women, but it also has a negative aspect. It hides a lot of what people



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really need. It hides basically the need for relationships and friendships.

**M**arge: I think that relates to people you know who are going off to have kids on their own. That's the time when you need stability and security and it's hard for people to provide the necessary stability and security.

I think some people on the left have a picture of themselves as professional revolutionaries which I feel is quite against forming any kind of alternative living situations although they may give lip service to that. What they are really doing is making a political career.

When I told the household I used to live in that I was pregnant and wanted the baby I was told it was counter-revolutionary to have children, real people were involved in the struggle out there and how could I be so selfish and individualistic.

**L**inda: I think for those of us trying to create alternative living situations there might be a difference between households that come together around children and households where people live together without children. In my situation, I lived with other people without children, and they were not very involved with my child. But then two

other women moved in, one woman who had left her husband nine months before, and she knew that she wanted to be living in a home where we'd all help in looking after the children. Already that was a change of focus.

**J**ack: Yes. Because of the nature of capitalism (and capitalist ideology) it's quite convenient to be free, and without any commitments domestically; to be able to loon around madly as an activist. The only thing about that is that it's quite easy to lose sight of a lot of the 'textures' of what we're on about. As a result the introduction of children can be a problem. It can cause particular problems unless somehow you manage to

develop an ethos of live and let live, and accept that there are people who are more into interventional politics, people going to 64 meetings a week, and there are those that aren't, and you can still respect each other.

I think a lot more commitment to collective living goes on amongst people who I'd see as less political, perhaps more politically naive or reactionary.

There is a whole branch that has gone into the festivals, and quite ambitious collectives. They're into sophisticated self-sufficient living, craft work, farming and so on. The communes movement is quite impressive, and perhaps there are things that we could learn from them. Of course, they all bugger off into Wales or Scotland and no-one knows they are there and in the short run, they don't have the effect that we have in the inner city politics, which is our arena.

**M**arge: The story I always tell, I think it typifies the whole thing, is when I was at a bop last year, and I met this bloke in the IMG I used to know. He said what are you doing now, and I said, well, I've got a child and I'm living in a household with other kids and they go to a nursery which I'm involved



with, and also I've been involved in certain nursery campaigns, and I've been teaching nursery nurses as a matter of fact. And he said yes, but what are you doing politically?

He totally negated my whole experience as being some irrelevant personal little thing, and what was I *really* doing, you know, about the big things that *really* matter. I think it's so myopic and so stupid.

**M**ick: But what does an alternative life style mean when you're talking about young kids? How can you share looking after babies? For example, if you breast feed them, how can you share that?

**M**arge: When the babies are very little, it's often the mother or mother plus one other who takes most of the responsibility. But we've always had other people in the house to sit and talk to about the babies, and I've never lived in a house without a baby sitting rota. And as they got bigger, we developed a creche system, where you can even out more collectively the commitment to the children.

**J**ack: We'd better start from the beginning. By the time Rosie (Marge's baby) was born there was already quite a complex creche existing between three or four houses near each other in Notting Hill Gate. Through accidents of housing policy, conditions in the Gate, squatting, and because there were people around not working, living on social security, we had already developed quite a complex creche, for under fives, which quite a lot of different children were able to use, for whom there was no adequate provision. But Rosie was not really wanted at the creche, as they had got out of babies, so we immediately looked around for another baby Rosie's age. Which we found. So then three of us, me, Marge and Susie were looking after two babies. This escalated, because Susie was living with her baby in such shitty conditions that she ended up living with us.

Because it was so good for these two little kids, they first met at four or five months, the three adults who were responsible for the kids set up the nucleus of another creche, creche 2. And slowly that creche expanded, so that by the time we were evicted in '76 we had a really complex set-up, involving about five households with parents and single people. It ran with meetings and rotas. Basically the kids were looked after five days a week by different groups of adults.

**M**arge: I think it's important for kids to grow up with each other and other adults. I taught nursery workers last year and they were all taught, as an absolute fact of current child care theory, that children only indulge in 'parallel play' until they are 2½ years old, i.e. that children do not play with and acknowledge each other until 2½ years. And that's just simply not true. Our babies would crawl up the stairs together, laugh at each other, play with toys together, and I think that is really good.

**M**ick: Why?

**M**arge: Supposing I'd had a council flat on my own. I wouldn't go so far as to say Rosie wouldn't be happy, but I'm pretty sure there'd be more pressures on our relationship. I was talking to a woman who is on her own with a child and had said to her that I was really cross and irritated with Rosie that day, and didn't want her on my lap, I just wanted my own space. I said it only happens now and then but I get worried when it does, that I'm rejecting her or something. She said to me 'I feel like that nearly all the time, 'cos we're right on top of each other, there's no escape. The way you talk about your relation to Rosie it's as though you're talking about another person who you have a close relationship with, which is sometimes up and down, sometimes difficult and sometimes close. But I don't feel that I have that space at all from my daughter. I just feel that she encroaches on my life, and I get so that I

don't want her around me at all much of the time, and I really resent her.' Well, I'd have got like that in her situation, especially after the first few months, when you tend to be really in love with the baby. But when it goes on year after year, you're stuck, and can't bloody do anything.

**L**inda: Yes, I always knew that I wanted help with childcare. I would get lonely and bored if I had to spend all my time at home with a child. I wanted to be able to do other things as well. So I needed to live with other people who my child related to emotionally, to give me more freedom. Even when I lived on my own, I always encouraged my child's relation to other adults. (Many mothers do not, the possessive child is often simply a reflection of the possessive mother.) And this was always successful. Other adults always did grow fond of him, and Joe would go off and stay in their houses. This did help my relationship with Joe because we seldom had to be together if I was miserable, or wanting to go out. I feel that I have never had to make any 'sacrifices' because of having a child, I have never been restricted in what I wanted to do. Joe has always been only a source of pleasure and pride to me, though I have been a single mother since he was 14 months.

**M**arge: The kids also experience love and relationships differently from how I did, which is basically through one person, who I couldn't bear to let go. I used to freak out if my mum went out for the night when I was little.

If Rosie hears there's a creche somewhere, she wants to go, I may say I'm not going to the meeting, and she says, 'but can't I go to the creche?'

It's also important having other people around who you can talk to about what's happening. That's the difference between collective childcare and childminders.

**M**ick: Isn't there a danger in some of this of simply looking for the least inconvenient way, to me, of bringing up kids, and isn't that different from having a commitment to kids built into your perception of the world?

**L**inda: No. Personally, I do feel that it's good to have children in your life, it's good to live in houses with children, and I feel I'm lucky to have a child. It makes a difference to how people live and how they relate to the world and each other . . .

And, as Mick says, I am also saying that it's been good for me, and it's been good for my child, to live in a more collective living situation. But, I'm not simply saying this is a more convenient way to bring up children. Looking at our children, and looking at ourselves, I am *certain* that we are living in a healthier way than most parents and children today.

**J**ack: Yes, I'm quite involved in the kids' nursery administration, and it's quite easy to get so structural in quite a political way about it — its

finances, its role in the community, its relationship with the Council — that you forget about what goes on from day to day. I often have a bit of a dilemma, when I have a free day, which I could really use doing overtly political things, but I usually end up spending the day at the nursery with the kids. And I find it's incredibly important to do that. It's nice to see them all again and keep in touch and it actually forces me to change my pace and my mind. I might be thinking about anything from Vietnam to China to the cuts campaign. It forces me to get into children's rhythms and think about their development, and just get kicked around a bit, and think in their sort of way. It also affects my living situation, I come home to a house of kids and that immediately makes a difference between me and single people I work with, in that they sort of rush from meeting to meeting and don't have to be anywhere at any time, except to get a leaflet out on time, whereas I have a much stronger rhythm of getting home to see the kids for a couple of hours each evening which is really important.

**M**ick: There seems to be a particular difficulty for men who want to look after their children, but who live in a couple situation.

We tried to live not just as a couple but to make our collective, if you like, the other people in the street. That's fine in theory. But in practice as soon as kids come into it, I ran into a big problem, which is that I can't go and talk to the other women about kids. They don't talk to me in the same way as they talk to Kathy. So you get a lot of folklore going up and down the street between the women as to how to bring up kids and that, and little technical problems that you need to hear about, but it doesn't come to me. I have to get that through Kathy, because there isn't a network of men who've been through it and know about it. So I end up feeling totally iso-

lated. I feel strange knocking on women's doors, who I don't know very well, with the baby, and they're thinking, who's this man, he's a bit odd isn't he?

It does seem to me that for a man to make a serious commitment to bringing up kids, especially when they are very young, there's a strong case for some kind of collectivisation, because it's an area you don't find ready made in the society around you.

**L**inda: One thing that's always worried me about collective living situations and collective childcare, is the rights of the non-parents. It is really hard for them to be confident, if they're having a relationship with the child, that their commitment to the child will actually be taken into account. Because in the end it comes down to the fact that all society sees the mother as responsible, so therefore the mother is going to be responsible. At times I think one of the main problems for us can be for the people who aren't parents who are involved in childcare to feel secure in their relation to children.

**J**ack: Yes, in the very last resort, between Marge and I, if it came to a showdown, she would keep control of Rosie. But in the realistic or near future, it's equal. We discuss it together and come to a consensus over it. But that's because I've been involved right from the start, and Rosie and I have an independent relationship anyway. But for most situations the third party, whether they're men or women, the single people that get involved, have to earn every bloody bit of trust, every bit of control they have.

**M**arge: And there's no doubt about it, you get people who suddenly get terribly enthusiastic about your kids, especially men, and six months later they're off.

**L**inda: But I know lots of examples of the opposite: people I've been involved with who've begun minding my children and years later, when there's no involvement between us as adults, still have a very close relationship to my child.

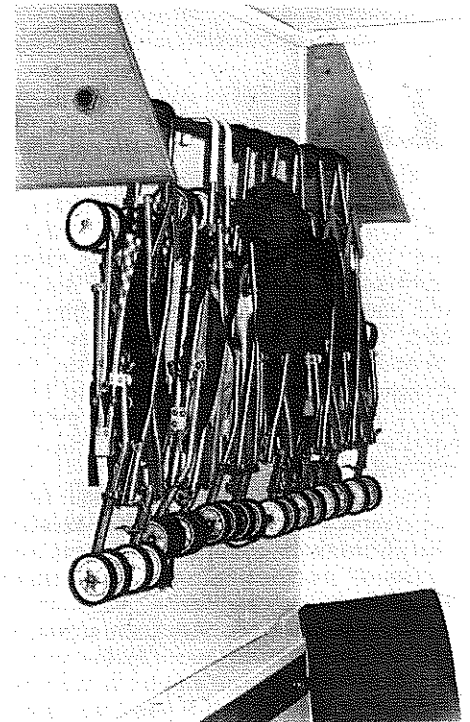
**M**arge: I think there has been a backlash lately on our scene. In the early 70s the pressure if you like was that everybody should be able to have multiple relationships and be terribly liberated and be bisexual if not gay, . . . now the general ethos is that basically when it comes down to it, let's face it, everyone wants to be monogamous even if they don't want to live together just as a couple. And if you actually say that you genuinely don't want that, that what you're looking for is something else, people say you're kidding yourself.

**M**ick: Well I think I was kidding myself.

**M**arge: Well I don't, I genuinely think that that isn't what I want. I find it quite oppressive that there's a lot of people around who seem to think that.

**L**inda: I think there can't be a socialist policy on all areas of sexual practice. That's not what we need, but instead to recognise the importance of creating caring, co-operative and sharing relations amongst ourselves, and of opposing the traditional relations in the family, through which women, children and gay people have been oppressed.

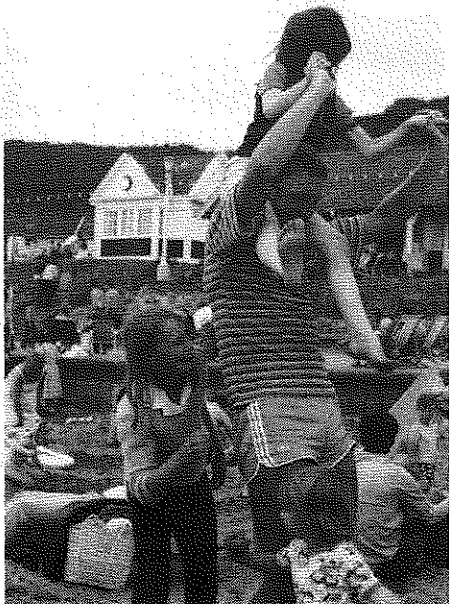
**M**arge: Yes, if there is a return to monogamy, in my experience one of the reasons for it — there are probably several — is that people are getting to the age when they want to have kids, and that leads to the problems we've been discussing. Also if you do have principally an individualist outlook on life then it's much easier, once you've got the feeling that you want to settle down a bit, to get into a single relationship than to build a collective one.



A collective one is much more complex, it isn't already laid on for you, you have to build your networks carefully, you have to get your houses, it's a problem getting houses big enough, it's a much more complex task and it requires a much greater commitment to the kind of caring we're talking about.

In fact it is almost inevitable that the left should have landed itself with this backlash because it hasn't built into its politics in the past a sufficiently strong commitment to *interdependence*, if you like. Maybe we could have forecast this backlash if we'd thought about it.

Big Flame Photo



**M**ick: Yes. . . the more I think about this the more the ethos running through the left seems to conflict with building carefully and patiently an adequate living situation.

**L**inda: I think there are real tensions. But that doesn't just come from joining a left group.

Of course, there are tensions between putting time and care into collective living and being involved in any public Politics with a big P. But it wouldn't necessarily be joining a left group that creates that tension. It could come from being involved in any sort of political work which took up a lot of time.

I think in all our households there is that tension — between people who are going to put more time and energy into the house and people who are involved in a lot of politics outside the house.

**M**arge: I think that since I've had Rosie and lived in this household, that though I'm confused politically about a lot of things, I've developed in some way a more mature and clear politics overall.

A few years before I had Rosie I was a female version of a professional revolutionary. Now I feel I don't do things unless I've really thought about why I'm doing them, and how that relates to who I am, what my struggle is, and what I can contribute.

**L**inda: I don't agree. It's more complex than that, because I don't think I can just get involved in things that I see as important to me. I do see myself as essentially a part of the left, and being a part of the left that I have to work out what are the most important things we should be doing. And one of the most important things I think is trying to build left unity and responding to particular situations of struggle. So I would say that I do feel that I have to involve myself in public political work around certain things as they arise.

But at the same time, I know that this also creates a tension with another part of what I think is important, the area of personal politics and establishing supportive living situations.

There really are competing demands. Perhaps we have to learn to live with some kind of tension — and try to respect how we're all working out our own political commitments.

**M**arge: I wouldn't say people shouldn't be involved in public politics at all. But I think we need to have a realistic idea about what you can contribute and how that fits in with what you're doing. I used to do things out of guilt almost. I used to feel that I had to go and do this, that and the other and I felt very individually responsible for every aspect of every struggle. If I wasn't involved in Troops Out, the ANL etc. then I was somehow failing. Now I don't feel that.

**L**inda: But the tension is real, isn't it? I think what libertarians have realised is that to have good



Big Flame Photo

relations with each other, with your kids, your lovers and your friends, you do have to put a lot of time into that. And that does conflict with other things which you think are important for building socialism; with putting a lot of work into trade-union or anti-racist activities; or building up local contacts with people or being a part of trying to build national links or a national organisation. And it is true that they are in conflict.

**M**ick: But how much is the tension of our own making and need it be so acute? There was a time when we were doing all these things because we believed they were *all* legitimate aspects of political work. Then you got a split in the movement, in the early 70s, a division between people going off to do their own things, in a fairly personalised way — to Scotland and Wales and wherever as Jack said earlier — and others taking to 'public' political work.

As a result the potential richness of the movement which was there in the late 60s was lost. You've now got your formal left politics which is institutionalised in various organisations, and you've got a separate movement created by 'personalised' politics.

**M**arge: I went to San Francisco last summer and met a lot of women who were seriously talking about collectives and combatting couple-ism and really trying to live it. Then I read something recently by a woman who'd been incredibly critical of the women's liberation movement, especially on the West Coast, saying it had moved from being a women's liberation movement, to being a women's movement, to being a women's community. Basically people building an alternative culture, which is oppositional, but that's not really going to change very much. It's not a combative political movement. And I think that's true really.

I suppose what I say, for me, is that the way I fight in a public way is slightly different. I've worked as a teacher for two years in F.E. colleges. I've been involved consistently in nursery politics, and the particular nursery that our kids go to, and I think that in a slower way I'm actually contributing more by doing that than when I used to run around being at every meeting that ever was. Obviously both are important. But when the public political thing gets to the point where the people involved aren't caring about each other, and just really stamping on each other . . . then people are totally undermined in the name of some bigger objective.

**L**inda: Well I do believe that we have to try to work out a flexible strategy and priorities in our struggle to build a movement against capitalism and sexism. I reject the idea that in doing that we dismiss this other part of our history, all the ways we've been talking about to-night of bringing socialism into your personal life, into how you live, how you relate to your own and other people's children and to each other. But it's also true that many of my old libertarian friends do have a sort of blanket hostility to the left, as if they don't see themselves as part of it, seeing it as traditional 'male-politics', alien to and separate from them. I reject their position also.



# Coming Down to Earth

Paul Holt

*The previous conversation could only be had by that small group of people who fought their way through The Libertarian Experience of 1972-1976. The following article attempts to put that conversation in context via a critical examination of the libertarian notion of personal politics.*

## The beginning

The first Libertarian Newsletter appeared in August 1973, and the first national Libertarian Newsletter Conference took place in December 1973, in Leeds. It was an effort to give some national shape to the collectives and activities which had sprung up in most cities, led, for the most part, by people who had been politicised by, and sometimes taken a major role in, the events of 1968. Like the Newsletter (which ran to three 50 or 60 page editions) and like each of the subsequent conferences, it was a confusing affair.

The problem that the comrades who came to those conferences could not resolve was the contradiction between the need for some sort of national co-ordination of their political work and their desire for the complete independence (sometimes called autonomy) of the local groups. Collectively, libertarians could not resolve this contradiction, though individual libertarians did and, like myself, many of them were involved in the building of Big Flame as a national organisation.

## Revolution on the agenda

In the early 1970s, the libertarian movement consisted mainly of people who had rejected both the anarchist and the International Socialist/International Marxist 'solutions' to the problem of following up the heady days of 1968. Libertarians realised that the events of May 1968 in France once again placed revolution on the agenda in the countries of Western Europe. But they also realised that it would have to be a revolution that understood the desires and expectations of a working class that had experienced the period of post-world war two reconstruction.

In her contribution to *Beyond the Fragments*,\* Lynne Segal sums up the basic libertarian ideas as (1) a stress on autonomy, (2) the demand that we must live our politics now, 'pre-figuring' social relations after the revolution, (3) organising around one's own oppression, as a woman, a squatter, a tenant, a claimant or whatever and (4) a rejection of vanguards, both in terms of leadership by an organisation, and in terms of one sector of the class (the industrial workers in orthodox left thought). Libertarians



Big Flame Photo

stressed the political importance of unwaged people and of youth, and saw the revolution as a much 'bigger' process than the 'seizure of the means of production' envisaged by the straight left; at the same time, anarchism was seen as no solution.

This is not the place to go into the whole of libertarianism's relationship with the left. The topic of this article is personal life, and if the context for our discussion is libertarianism, it is clear that on this issue, as on many others, libertarian theory and practice left a lot to be desired.

## Libertarian life

The experiences described in the previous conversation are typical of what many of us went through. The basic libertarian idea which runs through all of the four points listed above is that our personal social and sexual lives are at the centre of the revolutionary stage. Unlike the orthodox left, and in common with the women's and gay movements, we saw that the only revolutionary society worth having was one in which people related to each other in a radically different way. We tried to analyse the way in which men oppressed women, older people oppressed youth and children, heterosexuals oppressed gays. The revolutionary had to change him- or herself so that he or she no longer oppressed others.

Insofar as we had a theory about the source of our oppressive and self-oppressive behaviour, it was felt that the capitalist, nuclear family was the cause. Drawing from the ideas of Wilhelm Reich and R. D. Laing, it was argued that sexual repression, imposed by capital and

mediated by the isolated nuclear family, distorted our personalities so fundamentally that we were unable to make a *real* revolution. The key words in the critique of our relationships with our lovers were 'dependency' and 'exclusiveness.' Each partner in the couple was dependent on the other, and the relationship as a whole excluded meaningful relationships with other people. This was criticised because true revolutionaries were to be 'autonomous' individuals and were to relate equally to all comrades. To political independence and democracy, we added the demand for emotional independence and emotional democracy.

## Kids to be different

Because we had been emotionally impoverished by our own childhood experiences, we had to devise methods of bringing up our own children in a way which would make them independent and non-exclusive. Collective childcare methods were introduced in which biological parents were to take their turn with other adults in looking after the children in the creche. The children would be moved between the houses involved in the creche, sleeping there each night, and be looked after during the day by a rota of adults. Meetings of the adults would determine policy for how the children should be related to. The purpose of these complicated arrangements was to avoid the situation of the

\*Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism. Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright, Newcastle Socialist Centre/Islington Community Press 1979 (to be republished by Merlin Press)

conventional nuclear family where the prejudices, neuroses and dependencies of the parents are passed on to the child. In the collective creche, the child had the benefit of the stimulation of other children, and of emotional contact with a number of adults.

### All change

This arrangement for the children tied in with the ways that the adults were attempting to overcome the personal problems bred into them by their own families. Independence and non-excusefulness were to be gained through collective living and having sexual relationships with more than one person at a time. The advice to become exclusively gay was preceded by the more liberal slogan 'Hey, hey straight or gay, try it once the other way.' The emphasis all the time was on changing oneself via a continuous process of struggle in the collective and with others in the libertarian network. The process for women was reinforced by their women's groups, and some libertarian men were also in men's groups.

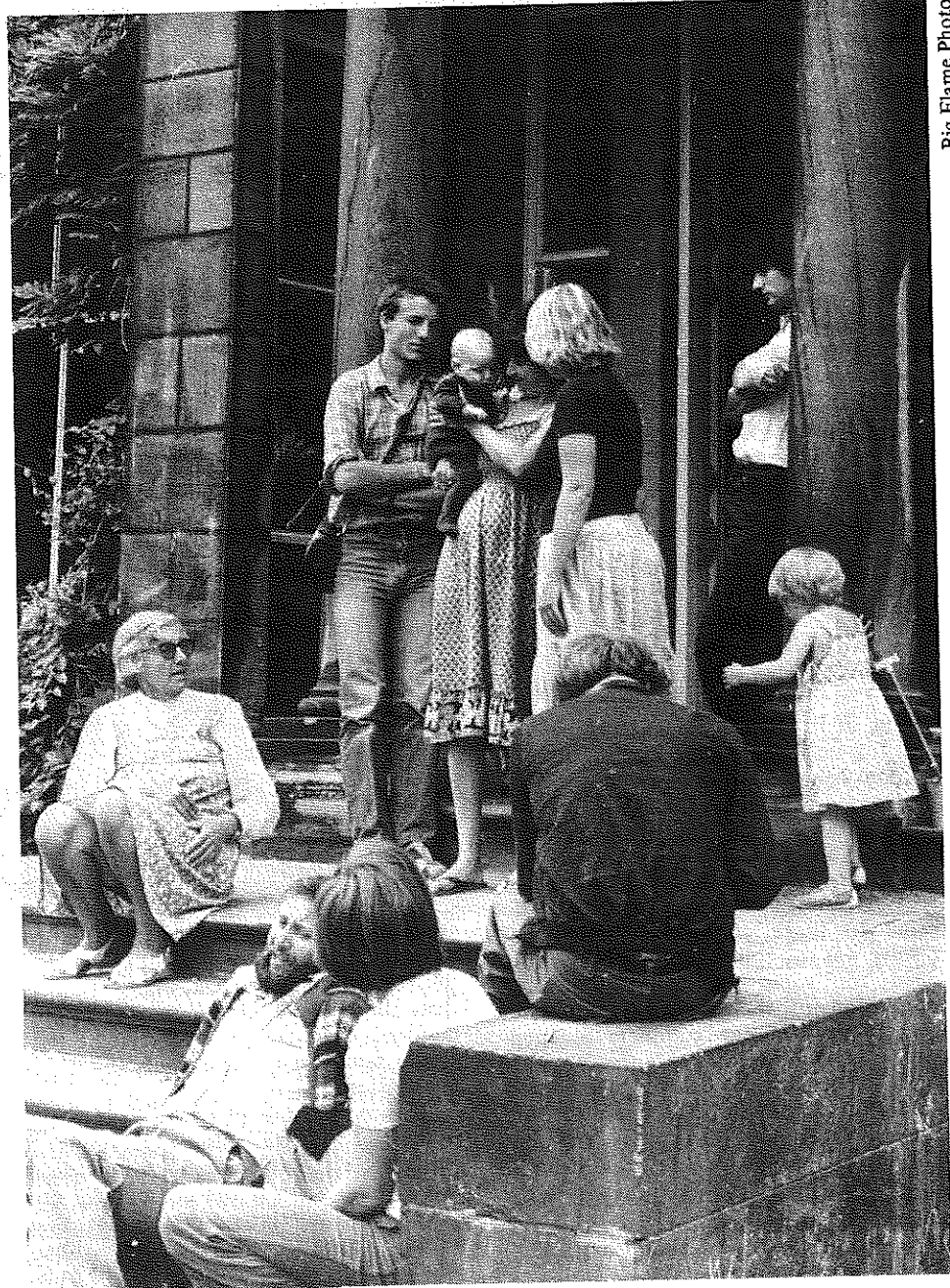
Life was highly charged, and the air was thick with rumours and recriminations, break-ups and breakdowns. The 'objective' tone of the preceding description masks the torment, and leaves out the excitement of trying to break new ground. There was the enormous pleasure of finding new depths to oneself, and developing new relationships with a positive intensity which we had never known before.

### As time goes by . . .

The picture today, some years later, is rather different. People have taken a number of different paths in their personal and political lives. The basic split is between those who have cut all connections with orthodox political activity, and those who haven't. In the first category, there are the people who have emphasized the use of therapy — sometimes in a collective form, sometimes individually or in pairs — as the main way of putting their personal lives in order. Others have gone even further into movements which combine eastern religions with modern psychodynamic techniques. Of those who still 'do politics', there is a division between people who join groups and those who do not.

In their personal lives, those who have rejected orthodox left politics have maintained a commitment to personal liberation to the exclusion of working for socialist revolution. Among the politicians there has been a trend towards monogamy and living as couples, often with the intention of having kids. Others still live collectively, though with far less intensity and sometimes within a monogamous relationship. Where multiple relationships still go on, it seems to be more for pleasure than for ideological purity!

The other major development since the demise of libertarianism is the growth of radical/revolutionary feminism, a movement which denies the possibility of decent relationships between men and women, demanding instead lesbianism and the exclusion of men.



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### Why has it changed?

How do we account for the decline of libertarianism? First of all, it seems to me that the libertarian critique of personal life and social relationships under capitalism was, at best, incomplete. Oppressiveness does not stem simply from the relationships in the family. Not all families are as bad as our own — and very few are as tortured as those we read about in Laing and Esterson. Couple relationships do not *have* to make people exclusive — and anyway it may not be desirable to relate with complete emotional impartiality to everyone. The opposite of dependency should not be the type of independence or autonomy which amounts in practice to individualism and selfishness (yet this is what happened with many libertarians, particularly the men).

Second, the libertarian concept of political practice in personal life was individualistic and moralistic. Behind the talk of the 'real' collective practice that would overthrow capitalism, there lay a notion that what was really needed was a

supreme effort of individual will. I was very much in the junior league when it came to libertarian sex-pol, but when my lover was upset by my relationship with another woman I told her that this was simply because she had the wrong politics. Libertarianism was so strong that she half believed what I said. Like the American football teams, we argued that 'when the going gets tough, the tough get going.' It was a terrible struggle, but each of us, if we were strong enough in our personal politics, would be able to force our way through into the golden valleys of free relationships. The collective acted as a kind of group conscience, applying moral injunctions and using psychological pressure (rationalised as 'correct politics') to see that each individual carried them out.

Third, the basic cause of the libertarian decline, underlying the previous two reasons, is its neglect of any systematic reference to the material factors which affect personal life. Most of us thought of ourselves as marxists, but we somehow omitted to notice the fact that

— even if our theory and practice were right — only people like ourselves who were willing to live on the dole or able to live on private incomes would have the necessary twenty-four hours a day to devote to our personal and public politics. Similarly, though part of the new left with its 'discovery' of the young Marx, we never tried to apply concepts like alienation to our personal lives. Again, we saw history as a process which we participated in making, but we never allowed for the possibility of collectives breaking up because people wanted to change their material situation — get jobs, earn money, live more comfortably or whatever. When that occurred, and particularly when parents took their children with them, the trauma was enormous.

Our ideas had a basis in *our* material situation — education, free time and what we considered to be enough money to live on. But they were not based on the material situation of the working class, and insofar as the libertarians claimed to be developing a generally applicable revolutionary practice, we can be accused of moralism. As far as the working class was concerned, these ideas were plucked out of the sky. It certainly felt like moralism to me when I was told I shouldn't work, and if I had to work I should share my money outside of the collective household.

There isn't space here to give a full evaluation of libertarian ideas and practices about personal life. My own views are infected by the particular experiences of one city — sometimes regarded as extreme even by libertarians — and highly charged situations which I still feel guilty about. But, while I think that the brief criticisms of libertarianism made here are a valid starting point for discussion, the enormous strengths of our ideas must also be stressed.

Libertarians — especially the women — must take much of the credit for the fact that nowadays, relatively few on the left can dismiss the feminist critique of marxism and leninism. The present halting discussion of sexual politics inside some left groups, involving men as well as women, owes much to libertarian ideas of four or five years ago. The steps towards caring for and involving children, through properly run creches, community playgroups and nurseries, were pioneered by libertarians. The sometimes reluctant concession of the validity of the autonomous movements has come, not only from the sheer power of those movements, but also from the effectiveness of the political arguments used by libertarians in their critique of orthodox leninist ideas about organisation.

It is unfortunate that so few of the libertarians have been willing to develop the most positive aspects of their earlier views. Instead, they seem to have gone in various directions away from their earlier desire to find ways of organising to destroy capitalism.



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The religious and the therapists have even less grip on marxism than before, or they feel that their experience proved marxism to be wrong, and just want to concentrate on the 'personal growth' side of libertarianism. Among the older revolutionary feminists are those whose experience of libertarianism and marxism has also proved totally unsatisfactory, and while they maintain a rhetoric of revolution and a notion of socialism which makes sense only to themselves, they have more in common with the inward-lookingness of early libertarianism than with the socialist movement. As to the non-party left, they have kept closest to the libertarian tradition, but pessimism has replaced the naivety of the early 1970s, and they feel that the best they can do is push for left politics in their place of work.

The great danger of rooting your politics in personal intuitions can be seen

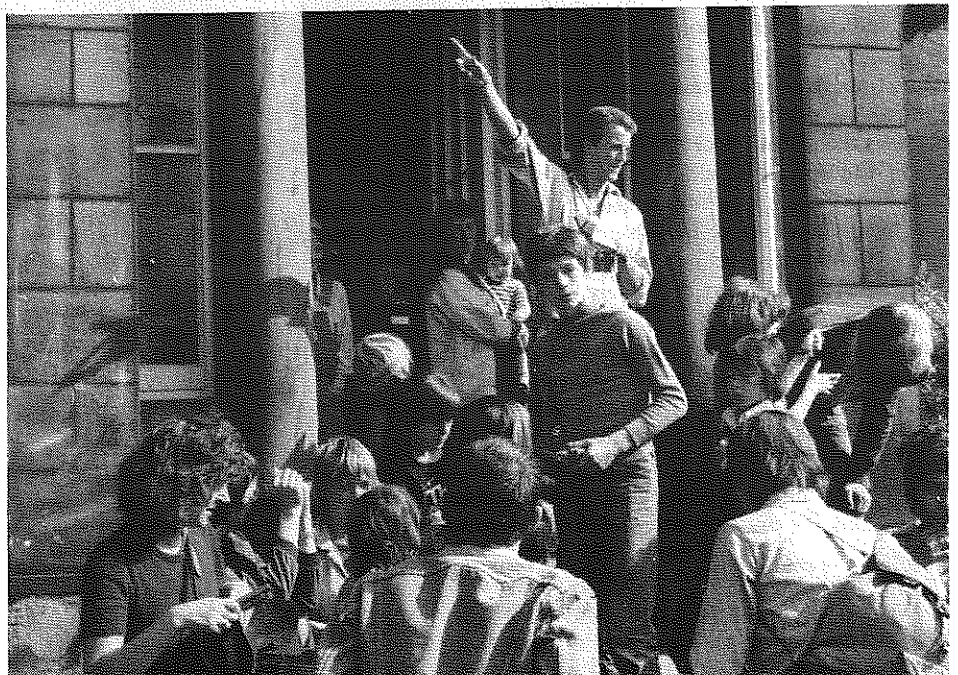
in the number of libertarians who are abandoning the 'ultra-leftism' of their youth and joining the Labour Party: as they become more 'mature' and respectable, they feel attracted to a politics that reflects this 'maturity' and respectability.

## Retaining the tradition

My own story — from student anarchism to libertarianism, to Big Flame, a mortgage, two kids and a Ford Escort — may not be one to warm your hands by. But Big Flame is at least making an effort to retain what is valid from the libertarian tradition. We want to build an organisation which is capable of playing a real part in helping the working class to smash capitalism and build communism. But we see the crucial rôle in building such an organisation of a theory and practice which can deal with the crisis in personal life, both those inside and outside revolutionary groups.

We realise that, as revolutionaries, we have a lot to sort out in our personal lives. Big Flame has an elected National Committee, but the organisation functions as a collective, and, like the libertarians, we put great stress on the way in which members relate to each other personally. At our Summer Schools, when many of us live together for a week, it is remarkable how thoroughly we try and act on our ideals of open, supportive and non-sexist relationships. The recognition of how far we have to go has resulted in the formation of a Sexual/Personal Politics Group, which will try and collectivise the wide experiences and ideas that we have on all these issues.

*If you are sympathetic to Big Flame's general political positions, and you would like to be involved in the Sexual/Personal Politics Group, please write to the National Secretary, 217 Wavertree Road, Liverpool 7.*



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