A CRITICAL LOOK AT BIG FLAME'S THEORY

No doubt most readers have quickly passed on to the next article after seeing the word 'theory' in the title, so why should the rest of you who are still here at least attempt to read on a bit more? I am aware of the complaints which have been made about the DB containing too many long, boring, academic articles by the same few people. I accept that this does have the effect of discouraging other people from contributing, although I wouldn't agree that all the blame for the narrow range of contributers lies with those who do write. Why then do I still want to inflict a discussion of BF's Theory on you? There are two main reasons:
(i) a brief spell as Education Organiser for the North London group demonstrated that most of the new members who have joined over the last couple of years don't know very much about the ideas which influenced BF in its early years. The majority are probably indifferent to learning more about what those ideas were, believing (and I don't disagree) that the important thing is to have a theory and practice relevant to the problems we face today. However there are at least some members who are interested in knowing more about where BF has come from and how it has developed. Hopefully this article will be of some use although I should state at the outset that I'm a relatively new member myself and those who have been around the organisation longer may well disagree with what I'll have to say.
(ii) I think an important task at the moment is reassessing BF's previous theory and practice. I don't want to imply any idealised image of the past, but there was I believe a period up until a few years ago when BF members were much more confident that the organisation had a theory and a practice which was quite distinct from that of the rest of the left. Since then many members have abandoned many of those ideas without a full discussion of what was wrong or inadequate about them and the organisation as a whole has much less sense of any direction. I think that a re-examination of BF's theory in the past should be one step (although obviously not the only one) in the process of sorting out where we go from here, and the major aim of this article is to encourage a discussion of this topic.

The Origins of BF's Theory

In attempting to give a very brief outline of some of the sources of BF's theoretical approach, I am very aware of the danger of blinding people with a mass of names and dates. Anyone feeling too bored by this section should skip it and move straight to the next one. I believe there were at least two major sources for BF's theory: (i) the 'workers autonomy' current in the Italian New Left and (ii) C.L.R. James and the Correspondence Publishing Committee/Facing Reality group.

The 'workers autonomy' current in Italy had its origins in a small group of intellectuals who produced two magazines from 1960 to 1967: Quaderni Rossi (Red Notebooks) and Classe Operaia (Working Class). As the crisis deepened and political options sharpened, this group split three ways. One tried tactical entrism into the Italian Communist Party and they are still there. Another became the group Potere Operaio (Workers Power) which dissolved in 1973 with members becoming part of the 'autonomist movement' (itself since largely smashed by state repression with former leading Potere Operaio theorist Antonio Negri imprisoned without trial since April 1979). The third became the group Lotta Continua (The Struggle Continues) which disintegrated in 1976 although the newspaper of the same name continues. It was the last of the three which BF was

most influenced by and with which BF established links. I haven't the space here to discuss the theoretical ideas developed by the Italian workers autonomy current except to list some of the major themes which will be explained when I come to examine BF's theory later: the mass worker, refusal of work and working class autonomy. All these ideas which emphasise working class struggle in the workplace can be seen as a reaction to the dominant position on the Italian left of the Communist Party which emphasised a gradual struggle at the levels of ideas and culture.

The influence of C.L.R. James and the Correspondence Publishing Committee/ Facing Reality on BF is not so obvious and you may wonder why I have given it such prominence. I feel it is worth drawing attention to the work of this current in the USA in the I950s if only because it was a major influence on the work of the workers autonomy current in Italy in the I960s (among the articles in the magazines mentioned above were translations from the Jamesian current). CLR James became a Trotskyist in Britain in the I930s. He moved to the USA and with Raya Dunayevskaya formed in I94I an oppositional grouping within the Trotskyist movement called the Forest/Johnson Tendency. After a spell within two Trotskyist organisations the group left and broke with Trotskyism in I950. It called itself the Correspondence Publishing Committee, although it was later renamed Facing Reality after one of its major publications. After a split in I955 Dunayevskaya formed her own group called News and Letters, while further splits in the early I960s resulted in Facing Reality falling apart. Themes of this current which were echoed later in the Italian left were: the importance of Taylorism and Fordism in changing the production process, an emphasis on the daily struggles in the workplace and a critique of Leninist forms of organisation while emphasising instead the creative self activity of workers (again these are points which will be developed more fully when I get on to discussing BF's theory). If the Italian Communist Party was the important context in which to understand the workers autonomy current, then the Trotskyist past is crucial to an understanding of the Jamesian one. Another important part of James's politics wasthe support he gave to the autonomous organisation of black people within the socialist movement (James is black and originally from Trinidad).

While I take these groups as the two major influences there were others. For example Maoism had a significant impact on the politics of some people who joined BF in the early days and, again, it was a vital indirect influence with Lotta Continua bearing the imprint of Maoism and the cultural revolution e.g. in the notion of the mass line (which is also discussed below). It is also worth mentioning two more British groups, although their politics was considerably different from BF's in many crucial respects: the group Solidarity (no connection with the Polish organisation currently in the limelight) and the Power of Women Collective (later renamed Wages for Housework). I mention them because (a) in the early I970s about the time BF was getting off theground in Liverpool they were at the height of their influence; (b) BF groups included ex-members of both; (c) while BF always saw itself as different from these groups they were often the reference points from which BF distanced itself in debates. By the late I970s the reference points had switched to the Trotskyist/neo-Trotskyist left. (Both Power of Women and the magazine Race Today, which influenced some of BF members involved in anti-racist work, owe an important debt to CLR James. Solidarity was inspired by a French group called Socialisme ou Barbarie (Socialism or Barbarism) which was another libertarian split from Trotskyism and had close links with Facing Reality); (d) Power of Women (and Race Today) were much more influential on the first BF East London group which left the organisation in I975 and whose ideas will be compared to the rest of BF later in this article.

Now I've got the historical sketch out the way,I'll turn to the real subject matter: the theoretical ideas current in BF between I973 and I976. Trying to summarise them shouldn't try to hide the fact that BF's

theory was changing over this period and that there were major differences in the organisation over just about every aspect of this theory. The period I have chosen to cover includes Merseyside BF's intervention in the Libertarian Newsletter Network, the debate between Merseyside BF and East London BF at the 1975 Conference, the debate between Plan X and PlanY at the 1976 Conferences and ends with the launching of the project for a new revolutionary organisation. The Draft Manifesto produced in 1977 can in rhetrospect be seen as an attempt to sum up the ideas developed in this period. Obviously there is no way I can aim to include everything in this article and some aspects of BF's ideas e.g. on the oppression of women are mentioned only briefly in passing, while others e.g. the understanding of the international situation are totally omitted. I've confined myself to three areas: (i) the nature of the working class, (ii) the nature of post war capitalism and (iii) how to do political work. I'll begin with a description of BF's ideas in these three areas, then go on to a critical assessment.

The Working Class

Probably the most central idea in the threory developed by BF in its early days was the notion of working class autonomy (the use of the word autonomy to refer to the whole class is of course distinct from the use of the same word applied to the need for separate organisation by specifically oppressed groups). The argument was that the working class is constantly establishing its autonomy from capitalism. By this it was meant that the working class is asserting its own material needs independent of the institutions of capitalist society. One way the argument was sometimes expressed was to say that the working class has a contradictory dual nature: a reformist face which expresses its role as labour power within capitalism and a revolutionary one which represents its attempts to develop its own interests which are antagonistic to capital. This leads on to an analysis of reformism, i.e. the trade unions and the Labour Party, as the organisations representing the face of the working class inside capitalism. The early BF was particularly concerned with examining the role of shop stewards. Stewards were characterised as tending to direct struggles into certain ways of doing things: sectionalism, passive delegation, looking for a financial settlement as the answer to every grievance, etc. (Its only fair to note that the very critical line on stewards expressed in a pamphlet like"Shop Stewards and the Class Struggle" was to some extent modified in later publications like "The Working Class, the Unions and Mass Practice"). The progressive integration of unions into the state and the adoption of policies by the leadership more and more divorced from the needs of the rank and file were seen as the result of limitations within the very nature of trade unionism, that is getting the working class the best deal within capitalism. The relationship of the working class to reformist institutions was portrayed as a dialectical one of confrontation with them, making use of them and being co-opted by them. Thus it was argued that BF could not afford to ignore reformist organisations, but that it should have a tactical relationship towards them based on a position of autonomous strength and involvement in mass activity.

The working class expression of its autonomy was seen as being manifested in a refusal of labour, or in other words the affirmation of workers' power against the discipline of work represents a total rejection of the capitalist rules of production. BF was concerned to identify what it called mass vanguards. The term was used in a rather loose way to refer to the group of workers in each section, factory, town,etc who make up the most active and conscious militants. The aim is to identify a wider group of workers than committed revolutionaries which are identified by their willingness to engage in militant actions. Often the use of the term mass vanguards has involved the search for the group of workers e.g. miners, Ford workers, public sector workers who are going to be at the forefront of attempts to break state incomes policies. Another notion related to class autonomy is that of popular power. This term is applied to periods of acute class polarisation when class autonomy develops at a higher level and workers produce forms of organisation which regain direct control over key areas of their lives. The two examples usually cited are Portugal and

Chile which explains why two of BFs earliest pamphlets (after one on Italy) were 'Portugal: A Blaze of Freedom' and 'Chile Si'. Another early pamphlet was 'Ireland:Rising in the North', one of its main themes being that in the 'No-Go' areas the community was governing itself. The notion of w-c autonomy has as its necessary conclusion the idea that communism is inherent in the struggles of the working-class. This has usually been presented in opposition to the idea of communism as the possesion of the vanguard party. As we shall see later, this argument is advanced simultaneously with one that the party is necessary in the long run to make the communist content of mass struggle into conscious activity for the destruction of capitalism.

The early BF analysis of womens oppression stems also from the role of the working class as wage-labour, and its revolt against this role. The posit ion of women was seen as hinging on the unwaged work women do in the home, with housework seen as fundamental to exploitation of all women in every part of their lives. Housework, it isargued, is organised by capital, and is the way the ruling class organises the work of producing and reproducing labour-power. The analysis of divisions in the working-class starts out from a similar perspective. It is capital which is attempting to use the weaker, less organised sections of the working class to undercut the more powerful. Thus the working-class is weakened by sectionalism, racism and sexism. To overcome th s problem, BF supports sections of the class suffering particular forms of oppression, organising independently to fight that oppression.

Post-War Capitalism

According to the early BF, modern capitalism is characterised by the state taking on a new, wider role as the collective brain of capitalism. This new role is described as Keynsian after the British economist John Maynard Keynes, whose writings influenced the changed role of the state in the post-war boom: on the one hand the state was to become the overall co-ordinator and stimulator of the economy; on the other, there was an attempt to incorporate the working-class into the system by-both involving trade-union leaders in state institutons and b policies aimed at full employment, steadily rising wages, and the expanded welfare state and 'social wage'.

Another trend which was seen as significant by BF was the changing composition of the working-class, which was seen as a consequence of Taylorism and Fordism. The USA was seen as providing the model for 20th century capitalism. Frederik Taylor was the originator of 'scientific management' which sought to carefully analyse the series of operations by which workers performed their jobs, and devise new ways which increased managements control over them. Henry Ford pioneered the technique of the assembly line production in his car plants. BF saw that the logic of these developments was that capital was dispensing increasingly with skilled workers and replacing them with deskilled mass workers. Parallel with this, it was argued, there was the increasing proletarianisation of the middle-class. Occupations such as teaching were losing their previous privileges. Wages and conditions at work were getting poorer and control of how teachers actually carried out their jobs was being lost.

This was related to fur ther developments : the growing influence of capital over every area of social life, which meant that areas such as education and housing were being geared more and more to the needs of production. This was described as the 'Social Factory'. What was meant by it never seems to have been properly defined, but the implication was that the literal analogy of the factory could be applied to many other spheres of life. For example in hospitals, nurses and auxilaries could be equated with the mass workers in the factory, as the logic of capital increasingly determine how hospitals were organised.

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BF believed that it was class struggle which provided the motor for the development of capitalism and, contrary to most of the rest of the left, that it was the working class which was responsible for the crisis of capitalism. The decline in profits was not the outcome of any inherent law of capitalist development, but the strength of the working class in resisting capital's attempts to reorganise the process of production and the ability to constantly force wages upwards. By 1976 (the end of the period I'm dealing with) the depth of the crisis was becoming apparent. There was clear agreement in BF that it was no longer possible for the working class to fight and win struggles on a delegated and sectional basis. There had to be different demands in a period of crisis and recession. It was recognised that growing unemployment would increase the feeling of powerlessness of the working class and that the increasing prominence of racism and fascism would reinforce divisions in the working class. However, there were differences in the estimation of the extent of the problems faced. At the 1976 Conference the supporters of Plan X took a much more optimistic line than those who backed Plan Y believing that it wouldn't take to much more of the social contract before reformism was discredited in the eyes of the mass of the working class and feeling that was a real potential for a new upsurge of mass struggles in the near future.

Doing Political Work

Taking first the question of who to do political work with, BF argued that the orgnaisation's limited resources meant that we should work in those places and situations which most clearly expressed the new contradictions of the capitalist system. Hence the early BF concentrated much of its work with the group of workers it saw as most characteristic of the development of the composition of the working class towards mass workers- in the motor industry. A second question is the form of relationship we have towards those we work with. BF's ideas were contained in the notion of mass work. This meant that organisation and politics had to be built from the bottom up with a creative and non-manipuative relation to the masses. It is seen as vital to work with all of the mass and not just those, for example stewards, who apparently represent them. The aim for BF was said to be to overcome our externality to the masses, to express the needs and intersts of the working class and to synthesise and generalise these needs and to help develop mass vanguards. Sometimes this process is expressed as developing a mass line. The mass line is the political programme thrown up in the struggles of the working class and clarified by the vanguard elements of the class. The role of a revolutionary organisation is to give a guide on the tactics needed to advance the line and to reassess the line in the light of changing circumstances. The line as thus developed is taken back into the struggle and tested in practice, thereby starting the whole cycle again (It should be pointed out that no two descriptions given of what the mass line meant were ever exactly the same. Some writers placed more stress on the mass line having its origins in the working class, others on the role of revolutionary organisations in synthesising and developing it..Allagree that for the process to work that the revolutionary organisation needs to be involved in the struggles of the masses as an active force. The emphasis is on theory being developed through practice. One document supported the argument that practice is the highest educational institution with a quote from 'Comrade Wyatt Earp': "The frontier is my college".

Athird question to answer is what we struggle for i.e. the sort of demands we raise in the struggles we take part in. BF in its early theory rejected the division between economic and political struggles which is seen as central to their politics by many currents on the left. BF argued that day to day confrontations over wages and working conditions were political because they raised questions about the nature of class power and wage labour. This is particularly the case in recent times where wage struggles bring you up against not only management but also the state.Challenging the traditional economic/political division did not mean saying that all struggles are on the same level. Obvhously some struggles are more political in the sense they are more conscious, organised, etc. Another traditional left perspective BF challenged was the distinction between reformist and revolutionary

struggles which defines the former in terms of struggles about immediate issues. BF affirmed the revolutionary potential of everyday struggles and argued that all struggles can be either reformist or revolutionary. It is not simply a question of what is being fought for, but also of how the fight is seen, exactly how it is fought and most crucial of all what the participants learn from the process of struggle.

The last question I want to take up on how to work politically is the role of a revolutionary organisation like BF. The early BF started from the position that what it wanted to do was to encourage and help the working class think, act and organise for itself. But it also believed that the needs of struggles dictates a degree of centralisation. Abstract calls for self organisation on the part of the working class are not enough. A dogmatic anti-organisation position means an inability to respond to the needs of mass vanguards. You are likely to remain an ideological organisation with no political base. The early BF gave Solidarity as one such example. Against them BF took from Lenin the basis of its argument for the need for an overall political organisation. Experience in capitalist society is fragmented and an organisation is necessary to totalise experience and generate overall political perspectives.

Defining a Political Tendency

The ideas I have outlined in the previous three sections seem enough to me to confirm that the politics developed by BF in its early days defined it as part of a distinct political tendency which is distinguishable from other political traditions like Trotsyism, Maoism, etc. In addition the way BF developed the ideas it took over from the libertarian left which it largely originated leads me to support the argument that these politics must also be clearly distinguished from the libertarian currents. In this I am agreeing with most of the points made by P.T. and B.S. in their article in the first BF Internal Bulletin entitled "Chips with Everything" which argued that the politics of East London BF (which had then just left the organisation) identified them as part of an ultra left current whose politics were quite distinct from the rest of BF. Their critique of ELBF's politics included the following points:

I)the theory is a crude materialist one which sees power as derived from a 'hierarchy of labour powers' which is identified with the wage each group receives. Racial and sexual divisions are also seen a corresponding to different levels of the wage.

2) it is predetermined that the most oppressed groups are necessarily the ones which will struggle most. Support is given to some groups of workers solely on the basis that they act outside trade unions.

3) the unification between the different parts of the working class is posed in a purely spontaneous way. Left organisations are invariably portrayed as holding back the class's impulse towards revolution.

4) little attempt is made to distinguish between purely spontaneous, unconscious and individual forms of struggle and more political ones.

5) they use a very vague, catch-all notion of the mass worker which simultaneously includes Ford line workers, housewives and those struggling in Northern Ireland and Palestine.

Thus despite the fact that ELBF shared with the rest of BF a common terminology: mass worker, class autonomy, refusal of work, etc., they did not necessarily understand the same thing by them. Thus I see them as lying outside the political tendency I have attempted to describe in this article.

A year after ELBF split away there was again a debate between two different political positions at the BF conference. This was the 1976 debate between the supporters of Plans X and Y. Whatever differences there were between the two positions both sides viewed BF as part of a distinct political tendency. They may have differed in the number of other tendencies they identified as making up the British left or whether our political tendency should be defined as made up of a set of ideas or a particular social base (i.e. the mass worker) in the working class, but despite these differences there was mutual confidence in BF's political distinctiveness. Since then things have changed. Of course many new members have joined BF

recently from other political traditions with little knowledge of BF's past. However, more importantly, the politics of many of the older members has shifted and they now rarely make any reference to the ideas which previously inspired BF. Today the organisation lacks much of a sense of unity or agreed purpose. There are many reasons for this: the decline of collective practice, the severe the problems the left faces today and so on. Another of them is the lack of any consensus on our political ideas. There may be some people in BF who would argue that the solution is simple: All we have to do is go back to the old positions. I wouldn't argue this , because I think there are major problems with these positions. But what I think we have to do is to learn from the past by assessing what these problems were and what we should be retaining.

Towards an Assessment of BF's Theory

I'll leave to last discussion of BF's ideas on the nature of the working class as I think it contains the most problems and look at the other two areas first. Obviously I'll only have the space here to take up a few of the positions I've outlined, but hopefully this will be a start. Taking first BF's discussion of post war developments in Capitalism, it's important to say that BF was at least trying to come to grips with the way capitalism has changed. Keynesianism, Fordism, etc are major trends which were rightly highlighted. BF's approach was a great improvement over that of some other sections of the left which ignore them and see a single epoch of capitalism in decline extending from the 1930s to today. On the other hand the way BF identified trends was frequently very crude. For example the portrait of the state as the collective brain of capital fails to distinguish enough between capital and the state and fails to see that both of them are not unitary bodies but rather contain within themselves a series of complex contradictions. It implies that groups of capitalists get together and conspiratorially hatch up a new plan to smash the working class. The notion of the social factory has similar problems. While it is true that attempts are constantly being made to impose capitalist forms of the social services which make up the welfare state, there is also a continual tendency for the consumers of the services to struggle against them. The form the services take at any particular moment reveals both working class gains and capital's control. However the form of struggle is particular to each area of the welfare state and the analogy with the factory is more confusing than helpful. BF also exaggerated the trend towards the deskilling of workers and the implications this necessarily has in terms of cosciousness. While the trend is a significant one too much was made of a few industries like motors. Finally I am dubious of the notion of proletarianisation. It is true that there have been major changes in the position of teachers, social workers, etc., I still think that its right to regard them as part of a professional-managerial class who may or may not ally themselves with the working class. The notion of proletarianisation managed to sidestep all the difficulties with alliances between students/professional workers and the working class by dissolving them all into one group. I've probably been overhard on BF's analysis of recent developments in capitalism. While often simplistic it did emphasise some important trends, and it would be totally wrong to have expected BF by itself to produce a fully worked out analysis of what will obviously continue to be the subject to continuous heated debate.

To move on to BF's positions on how to work politically, I believe this is the area which the ideas BF helped develop are invaluable and rightly continue to influence our practice. In contrast to much of the rest of the left BF aimed at a non-sectarian, non-manipulative approach to those it worked with, treating people as people. It also recognised that consciousness changes when people begin to develop a sense of their own power through the struggles they are part of rather than some political party coming along and presenting them with a programme which perfectly embodies socialism. Of course when it comes down to the details of some of BF's practice in the past there are criticisms which should be made. The model adopted in the very early days of local branches being made up of base groups of external militants working around a particular factory or working class community was adandoned. Partly this was a move away from the image of the militant who denies her/his personal needs and engages

full time in political activity. In addition it implied the acceptance of a much wider range of areas as important to struggle in including the public sector work in which many members are employed. However the ideas which lie behind the notion of mass work are still valid without the base group model. Where perhaps there are still problems is when the orientation outwards towards the masses and their struggles means insufficient attention is given to the needs of the organisation. BF continues to debate the problems, which I haven't the space to go into here, of whether we handle properly such things as recruitment, internal education and organisation. Another charge which is commonly made is that BF's emphasis on practice has meant a neglect of theory. While some members may have been overly hostile theory (and this is understandable given the abstract character of such much that goes under the name), BF was right to highlight the link between theory and practice. If you think it is important to develop your politics from what people are thinking and saying, and you believe people's experience is an integral part of a theoretical understanding; then you are going against perspectives which try to map out a total theory and political strategy without taking them into account. Saying this doesn't mean that we can dispense with thinking theoretically about experience and practice, but (as Barbara Ehrenreich says in RS no6) we should remember that what theory is basically is a codification of experience.

The Notion of Working Class Autonomy

BF's theory was a considerable improvement on that of most of the rest of the left which saw the working class as passive and the mercy of abstract lwas of inherent tendencies in capitalism. It rightly pointed out all the ways in which the working class and other oppressed groups constantly struggle against capitalism, many of which are not so obvious as they don't appear to be political in the way the word is normally understood. It rightly placed the working class at the centre of any analysis of how capitalism has developed. Still I think there are major problems with the theory of the nature of the working class developed by the early BF. Taking as the starting point of the analysis the wage labour performed by the working class and the class's revolt against that work, necessarily makes the workplace the main focus of attention. While BF did take more interest than much of the rest of the left in community struggles, the way they were understood was to refer back to production by uncovering the connections between the two areas. This is not always adequate. For example women's oppression is not explained by the unwaged work women do which helps to maintain capital. That's part of the story, but more fundamental is the way men oppress women and to explain that we need a separate theory of patriarchy. There is also another problem with promoting the form of labour people engage in as the centre of the theory. Questions of ideology get left out of the analysis as consciousness is seen as unproblematically produced by the sort of work people do. The process of production obviously has to be a major part of a theory of capitalism, but the analysis has to incorporate other dynamics.

The early BF was again in advance of much of the left in raising the question of divisions in the working class, but the analysis went no where near far enough. The emphasis was on the divisions being created by capital and the autonomy of the specifically oppressed groups is presented as a fleeting step along the road to reunification of the working class. There is no conception that different sections of the working class might have antagonistic interests. That there is no necessary connection between patriarchy and capitalism. That when political programmes are presented as the one to unify the working class they invariably base themselves on the interests of male, industrial workers. One quote will serve to illuustrate the perspective of the early BF (this is not intended to single out the authors as the viewpoint was widespread). It comes from the article mentioned above "Chips with Everything". There the suggestion that we have to discard the notion of the working class in general and that there are divisions in the working class equivalent to those between capital and labour is dismissed as a "sick vision" and a "sectarian blind alley".

The central notion in BF's theory of the working class is that of class autonomy. How useful is it? Well if we look at any struggle BF has trumpeted then we find at the centre a core of dedicated activists. For example Mike Cooley and others at Lucas Aerospace. The idea of class autonomy tends to play this down. It also implies that all we have to do is to help struggles become more militant and the impulse against capitalism will be developed. However, the 'more militancy' approach of some left groups is not enough. It may only lead to defeat and demoralisation. What I am doubting is the claim that 'communism is inherent in the struggles of the working class'. I do agree that in capitalist society struggles develop spontaneously which are anti- capital and anti-wage labour, but do they necessarily imply a move towards socialism. For this to be the case they have to be transformed by generalising them and widening their horizons. The emphasis on class autonomy has meant that many in BF have been suspicious and hostile, initiallyat least, to some of the more interesting ideas originating on the British left over the last few years such as alternative plans and the idea of a 'third road' to socialism (I'm not saying there aren't problems with them, particularly the latter, but they've raised fundamental problems ignored by others). As a total distinction is drawn between working class autonomy and the institutions of capitalist society then such moves are seen as forms of co-option, of being taken in by the state. In the same way BF hasn't taken reformism seriously enough. I don't mean that BF has no analysis of reformism. What it has said about reformism as a way of doing things is extremenly important, but BF hasn't devoted enough attention to developing a strategy to deal with reformism. This is because the position on class autonomy implied that reformist institutions could be simply bypassed.

Even if you accept (and it should be clear by now that I don't) that the theory produced by the early BF was adequate at the time, there is also the question of how much changed circumstances necessitate modification. Much of the theory is based on the experience of the Keynesian state. Now we are faced with monetarism. In particular the ideas which influenced BF came out of the period of major mass struggles from 1968 to 1974. An essentialpart of the theory is that there must be widespread struggles taking place amongst the class which organisations like BF can relate to. Too often people in BF have avoided facing up to the extend things have changed by producing a new list of groups of workers who have recently taken part in struggles and presented this as evidence of a new upsurge. What does the decline in mass struggles mean for the politics of BF? Last summer I was talking to a former member of BF who was previously closely identified with the ideas I have outlined here. He saw no future in BF being an organisation with a finely developed set of political ideas, if it has no relation to those places where significant sections of people were organised. He mentioned two possibilities for such an orientation by BF. One would be towards Beyond the Fragments if it took off and developed into a significant movement (the conversation took place before the BTF conference last August) and the other would be towards the Labour party. He has himself since joined the Italian Communist Party, presumably becauseit did represent given the available options a way of relating outwards towards the masses. I think there is a fundamental problem for BF at the moment. If we don't want to be inward looking and want to go out and relate to people in struggle, how do we identify the areas where struggles are going to occur in the future? How seriously do we take developments in the Labour party? When a fightback does begin to grow in strength against the Tories which groups are going to be at the forefront?

If you begin to question, as I have, the implications BF drew from the notion of class autonomy and, in particular, the argument that communism is inherent in the working class, does this automatically mean that you have returned to the position that the working class has to be taught socialism from the outside by a vanguard party? I don't believe that challenging this aspect of BF's understanding of the nature of the

working class means modifying our ideas on how we do political work. Those ideas, many of which BF has in common with the women's movement, still stand: the relationship between a political organisation and the movement, seeing struggles as having to express people's real needs, the model of how consciousness changes, emphasis on the important of personal life, fighting against hierarchical forms whereever we find them including our own organisational forms, the importance of immediate experience and so on. There is no reason to change any of these points which influence our ways of doing political work and constitute a critique of the approach of the self proclaimed vanguard parties. There is a danger of the response to the inadequacy of some of the ideas which have made up the perspective of BF in the past going to far. This may result in the abandonment of important elements of our past perspectives and the taking up of elements from different political traditions as the new starting points. For this reason I am unhappy with those who identify a crisis of politics as the main problem facing the working class today (rather than the way the crisis has reinforced divisions and feelings of powerlessness) and then see the answer to be found in ideas about the nature of the class, the role of the party and the character of the epoch which are substantially different from those developed by BF in the past.

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I'd like to thank Rob Banks and Linda Suddes for their many useful comments on a rough first draft of this article.

Recommended Reading:
I thought it might be useful to provide a list of some of the things I looked at to get an idea about past debates in BF.

Merseyside BF "From Organising to Organisation" (document for Libertarian Newsletter Conference, Sept 1974).
Merseyside BF "What is a Big Flame Group" and ELBF "What is a Big Flame Group" (documents for BF Conference 1975)
P.T. and B.S. "Chips with Everything" Internal Bulletin June 1975.
P.A. "Economism is Dead- Why can't we bury it?" Internal Bulletin May 1976.
P.T. "Economism in Big Flame" Internal Bulletin June 1976.
P.T. "Why we need political centralisation in Big Flame" Internal Bulletin August 1976.
P.A., J.H. and P.T. "General Organisation and Political Perspectives", M.D., A.F. and A.H. "Towards a New Communist Movement" and M.Y. and J.R. "Do we have a future?" (documents for BF conference 1976), plus the Women's Commission Report to the 1976 Conference.
Many of the early pamphlets produced by BF are worth looking at, especially "Shop Stewards and Class Struggle" and Mark Dryden "Working Class, Unions and Mass Practice".

There's a lot of interesting material in past Internal/Discussion Bulletins and someday when I get the time I'll produce an update of Fred Read's index of the contents.