

# 1968 ~

# TEN YEARS ON

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The left concentrates most of its attention on the more obvious components of the crisis: the problem of reformism; Eurocommunism; strategy in the unions, and so on. Other important areas receive little attention by comparison. One of these is the interaction between the personal and the political. This article focuses on this subject, with an introduction which explains the overall context in which the 'personal and the political' has become a burning issue in the revolutionary movement in Europe today.

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## INTRODUCTION

### THE LEVEL OF CLASS STRUGGLE

The majority of groups that have been prominent on the revolutionary left over the last ten years had their decisive period of growth in the wave of working class struggle that began with May '68 in France, the Hot Autumn of 1969 in Italy and includes our miners' strike of 1972. For revolutionaries, the effect of this wave of struggles was to remind them of the existence of working class militancy — with great pleasure we abandoned the belief of our teachers that the working class had been bought off by an avalanche of consumer durables. [1]

But, though in this period revolutionaries were able to get out of their student ghettos and establish links with the new workers vanguards (the worker-student assemblies in Turin which led to the foundation of Lotta Continua, the links the French Maoists made with immigrant workers at Renault plants, the growth of rank and file papers in this country), we were unable to understand the nature of this new militancy. In particular, we failed to understand its relation to the economic boom (of post-war reconstruction) that was coming to a close. In the workplaces themselves, this militancy was unable to develop durable *organisational* forms and with the onset of the economic recession, worker militants turned back to more traditional 'trade unionist' forms of militancy. In Italy, for example, the factory delegates, whose emergence represented a victory of the Hot Autumn, were quickly recuperated by the unions when the recession came. The imposition of 'social contracts' in many European countries (eg Italy, France, Portugal, the UK) has in the last few years meant conditions of struggle that independent working class organisations have found very difficult to deal with.

## THE INTERNATIONAL SITUATION

The post-68 revolutionary left came into existence during a high point of anti-imperialist struggle. Things were going well for the revolutionary forces in South East Asia (ending in victories in Vietnam and Cambodia), the Cuban revolution had given important space to revolutionary movements in Latin America and in China the Cultural Revolution showed us that the Soviet process of revolutionary decay was not inevitable.

Now ten years later, we can see things are not so easy as we thought; the countries that have successfully made revolutions, like Vietnam and Angola are now faced with the task of building socialism and we are coming to realise that the structures and social forces that were so necessary for the seizure of power are not so suitable for their new task. And, in any case, revolutionary movements in the third world have not provided many answers to questions about how to make a revolution in monopoly capitalist countries like the UK.

This has come at the same time as a decline in the numerical strength of productive workers in monopoly capitalist economies — centres of working class strength (eg docks and ship-building) are being smashed by the introduction of new technology and a changing international division of labour. It is true that one result of this ongoing capital concentration and capital intensification is that the potential power of industrial disruption is being concentrated in the hands (and minds) of fewer workers, but the employers are aware of this and are developing other ways of controlling these highly skilled workers. [2]

Recent events in China have lessened the validity of that country as a 'showcase' for socialism. There is no doubt that revolutionary movements are greatly strengthened when there are countries building socialism to be held up as examples. We

were helped to get over disillusionment with the Soviet Union by the presence of China with its alternative road to socialism. Now that road is also in doubt and we (and the working class vanguards we work with) lack a reference point for our beliefs in the possibilities of building socialism.

From a revolutionary point of view, things have gone very badly in Latin America, where events over the past ten years carry the stark reminder that if the alternative is socialism or barbarism, history sometimes brings the latter.

## THE STAYING POWER OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND THE COMMUNIST PARTIES

This problem for the revolutionary left presents itself differently in those countries where the focus for working class political support is a social democratic party (eg. the UK, West Germany) from those countries where it is a Communist Party (eg. Italy, France and Portugal). But in both these situations the revolutionary left has under-estimated the ability of these parties to retain the support of the working vanguards. In France and Italy, the expectation and hope of the revolutionary left was that, as the CPs moved to the right in the 'historic compromise' and the 'common programme', more and more class vanguards would become open to revolutionary perspectives. But this has not happened. In the main, the class vanguards have accepted the CPs' message — 'The country needs more productivity and more work discipline. Our prime target must be to beat inflation in the national interest'. Why has this been the case?

One main reason is that social democracy and the Communist Parties have been able to break many of the links that exist between the revolutionary left and the working class vanguards. If terrorism had not existed no doubt they would have invented it (and in some cases did) — but their job has been made much easier by the counter-revolutionary activity of groups like the RAF, the Red Brigades and the so-called 'Workers Autonomy', with their beliefs that the working class can be radicalised by the burning down of factories, the shooting of trade union leaders and left-wing journalists. This has come at the same time as the necessary confrontation inside the revolutionary left between male workers and feminists — a confrontation whose consequences could have been less than catastrophic only if the leaderships had been prepared to actively fight for a feminist perspective inside the organisations; something their workerism made very difficult to do. [3]

A second reason has been the failure of the revolutionary left to develop a comprehensive economic and political strategy that it could pose as an alternative to the CPs' 'gradual parliamentary road to socialism'. The strategy of the revolutionary left has remained the barren one of hoping for a left government whose weakness will give space for the 'big bang' of revolution.

The 'big bang' theory which is modelled on the Bolshevik seizure of power goes something like this; 'As the crisis gets worse, so it will be possible to win more rank and file workers over to an anti-boss and anti-trade union leader position. As this rank and file movement developed, the workers will set up organs very much along the lines of the 1917 Soviets in Russia or the 1926 Councils of Action during the 1926 General Strike. These Councils of Action will spread nationally until there is a situation of 'dual power' in which the mechanisms of control of the bourgeois state are unable to cope with working class unrest. At a certain point, the balance of forces swings into our favour and the 'winter palace' is there for the storming. It is the case, since Lenin said it, that on their own the rank and file workers can only develop trade union consciousness as a party is needed. A democratic centralist party led by full-timers who issue forth from the ranks of the intellectuals. For years the revolutionary left has remained faithful to this model and oblivious to important criticisms that have been levelled at all aspects of it. Its critics have included those (the list starts with Gramsci) who have argued that the conditions under which we will make the revolution in late capitalist countries is so different from Tsarist Russia as to make the Bolshevik model invalid. On this Lenin wrote: 'The world-wide experience of bourgeois and landowner governments has evolved two methods of keeping people in subjection. The first is violence with which the Tsars demonstrated to the Russian people the maximum of what can and cannot be done. But there is another method, best developed by the British and French bourgeoisie. . . . the method of deception, flattery, fine phrases, promises by the million.



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petty sops, and concessions of the unessential while retaining the essential'. [Collected Works, Vol. 24]

There are those who have pointed to the lack of democracy inside the Bolshevik Party and the lack of democracy that developed in post-revolutionary Russia. There are the critics of the Leninist theory of consciousness (the idea that revolutionary consciousness has to be brought from the outside into the struggle). These criticisms (and more) remain unanswered as the revolutionary left clings to a strategy clearly inadequate to meet present needs.

Above all else there is the problem that the 'big bang' theory only applies in a pre-revolutionary situation. What it lacks is a strategy to take us there from the situation we are in today. And, not surprisingly, that space has been filled by the numerous 'Eurocommunist' and 'third road' scenarios which are more adequate at providing a strategy for contemporary Britain *but only at the fatal expense* of dispensing with the need for a violent revolutionary break with the institutions of our society — in excessive zeal to be realistic they have forgotten that revolutionaries also have to smash the state. [4]

## THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

I said at the beginning of this article that I would concentrate on 'the personal' factors associated with the crisis of the revolutionary left. I want to do this since a balance is needed to the more traditional analysis of revolutionary success and failure that only considers 'political' factors — that is issues like inflation, the miners' strike, the TUC etc. This approach is limited because it leaves out of consideration that fact that revolutionary organisations are made out of human beings who have their own lives, their own ups and downs and their own limits of endurance. But it is unsatisfactory at another more fundamental level — in that it assumes a division between the 'personal' and the 'political' that is being questioned by the revolutionary left in all capitalist countries. Their questioning of this division reflects their realisation that capitalism is also a social relationship that has affected all institutions — including the relationship between individuals. [5]

'My personality and the American way of life fit into each other so easily, as if by design. To get free of America outside me I had first to get free of America inside me. How to stop performing, break the self-hatred, the guilt, the obsession with goals, the need for things, the drive to keep moving, the urge to look good. Psychotherapy, yes. Learning to feel good about myself, to accept and live my desires and reactions and impulses. And in the process I discovered that my hated self was not my fault but finally the society's, that this isolated unique individual was really a deeply social and historical being. And that



*"There is no liberation of women without revolution;*

*and there is no revolution without the liberation of women."*

breaking free to live humanely now meant attacking the America which had made me fit only to live inhumanely." [6]

This fundamental insight into the way capitalism remains in power through its ability to control 'civil society' (the phrase is Gramsci's) as well as its control of the state has led many to demand a more varied strategy from revolutionary organisations which includes a perspective for revolutionary struggle within the institutions of civil society (education, the media, the family, relationships between people). In response to this pressure the leaderships have thought it sufficient to collect a series of quotes from Marx and Lenin to show that the personal has nothing to do with the political.

A particularly wooden response to the demand that the personal be seen as a legitimate concern for revolutionary organisations is an article by John Ross in 'Socialist Woman' (Summer 1977). He writes: "All social relationships, including those of the family and the oppression of women, are defended by the capitalist state and can only be overcome following the destruction of that state. For that reason, the primacy of the political is displayed just as much in relation to the wider social struggle as in the economic. . . . A social issue can become a political question (for instance, abortion law restriction, divorce, state repression of gays, nursery cuts). But not every social issue is a political one. . . . Abortion is an excellent example of an issue which, from appearing very 'private' and 'individual' has become 'social' – a matter of concern to the community – and then political by raising demands on the state or opposing state restrictions." [7]

And the argument, by stating that an issue is only worth the attention of the revolutionary party when it becomes political has very dangerous consequences since it forgets that it is often by being taken up and fought for by revolutionary forces that an issue is imposed on the attention of the state – usually in an attempt to defuse it. It is pressure from Women's Aid groups that has forced the state to deal with the 'problem' of battered wives, which, according to Ross, was not a political issue until it comes up in Parliament or receives some other form of state recognition.

It should also be pointed out that to separate the 'personal' from the 'political' is to make a concession to the individualism that characterises bourgeois society – the division of the private from the public, the imprisonment of women inside the home, of kids in school, of the mentally ill in the asylum, the division between those who are paid to do politics and the majority whose only function is to vote for them.

Against this fragmentation of bourgeois society, revolutionaries pose a collectivist alternative the beginnings of which are to be found in tenants' groups, mental patients groups (the Socialist Patients Group in West Germany), independent youth groups and women's health groups that exist throughout Europe and the States. And the revolutionary organisation cannot see itself as exempt from this process. To meet the needs and desires of its members, it must encourage collective social relations that prefigure the communist society. Whilst it is quite true that within capitalist society there can be no islands of socialism, this does not mean that nothing can be done until 'we smash the state'. What it means is that any attempt to develop communist relations within a capitalist society will be a contradictory and uneven process – a process without which we will never develop the confidence and power to smash the state

The members of revolutionary organisations (mainly women and gays) that are putting forward these demands of the personal are questioning the tradition that says that the priority is to seize power – that this would make it possible to correct economic oppression, and then, and only then, could one begin to fight against other oppressions; oppression by age, sex, race and so on. But a refusal to accept this tradition has grown as more and militants have come to see that in those countries where there has been a seizure of power (Russia, China etc.) there has been no victory over these other oppressions. In fact, in the case of the USSR there has been a clear return to bourgeois institutions and bourgeois morality after the more liberated years that immediately followed the revolution. [8]

So a position has developed amongst revolutionaries that says: "We are going to fight for liberation from our own specific oppression, right now. We are not prepared to put it aside until after the seizure of power." As Barbara Ehrenreich puts it: "Socialist feminism rejects what I would call 'stageism' – the mechanical notion that history must occur in some predetermined sequence. For example, 'We'll talk about women's liberation after the revolution' or 'we can't change hierarchical structures in the workplace until the forces of production are developed to such and such a point' etc." [9]

Socialist feminist thinking, as far as I can see, is characterised by a much more dynamic and dialectical notion of history. We know that objective conditions in the historical 'stage' we are living in shape our lives; but we also know that we have the power to change these conditions. It is also true that this anti-stageist perspective contains a fundamental insight into the relationship between state power and the institutions of civil society – that a revolutionary movement must neutralise before a complete revolutionary transition is possible. History shows us that seizing state power is not enough – since it inevitably leads to a process of delegation that creates a new class/stratum that imposes itself on the working class.

There are good reasons why this anti-stageist perspective continues to gather strength – it corresponds to the diversity that exists within the working class and the revolutionary movement today. Together with the decreasing importance of industrial workers (numerically and politically) inside the working class and the emergence of a 'new working class' come new vanguards and new reasons for making the revolution.

## PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS [10]

It is clear that revolutionary organisations do not operate in an historical void. The revolutionary left today carries the legacy of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the rise of Stalinism. It means that even if they wanted it, revolutionary organisations will no longer get from their members the blind devotion that characterised members of the Communist Parties in the 1920 and 30s. Today's potential recruits to the revolutionary left will only join if they see evidence of the possibilities of communism in ongoing struggles. This requires from the revolutionary left a radical break from its traditional way of doing politics which is on the one hand defensive ('no cuts', 'the right to work' etc), and on the other refuses to pose a communist alternative. But Lucas Aerospace and GEC workers with their plans for socially useful products; women's health groups with their perspective of preventative rather than curative medicine; and free schools with their emphasis on non-hierarchical learning, are all examples of prefigurative politics that the left neglects at its peril. So far the debate is stuck on an absurd polarisation: either we support alternative technology or the right to work, either free schools or we fight inside the state educational system, either alternative medicine or the struggle against cuts in the NHS. What is clearly needed is a synthesis of the vital element of utopia that these 'alternative' struggles provides with the struggle to maintain the concessions [11] of bourgeois democracy which is the bread and butter of revolutionary politics.

We can no longer point to another country and say 'that is where communism is being built'. We must get the confidence that communism can be built from these alternative struggles that prefigure the communist alternative. [12]

## ENDS AND MEANS

But the critique of the new left is not just about what are the priorities of the revolutionary struggle but also about the relationship between *what you are fighting for* and *how you fight for it*. What the new left is saying is that the ends do not justify the



“... it was feminists who brought to our attention...” “... political choices are involved in how we live our private lives...”

means. As Ehrenreich puts it: “... the revolution is not just something that you read about in the newspapers, it is not just something that occurs in the realm of ‘political economy’ The revolutionary process extends into all aspects of life – including those that have been defined as ‘personal’ and not ‘political’. And the revolutionary transformation involves the entire fabric of social relationships, including those that have been defined as ‘naturally’ determined, such as those between people of different ages – or sexes. Second, socialist feminist thinking emphasises the importance of *subjective* factors in revolutionary change. That is, we don’t have to wait till ‘after the revolution’ to transform ourselves as people – we know that transforming ourselves is a part of making the revolution. From this point of view, the task of consciousness raising – uprooting deeply entrenched bourgeois racist and sexist attitudes – is central to the political struggle.”

It is important that as we redefine the relationship between the personal and the political, we come to realise that how revolutionaries relate to other people (including other revolutionaries) is a political act. [13] To fail to understand this is to neglect one of the fundamental contributions of the women’s movement – that oppression ‘hidden in the home’ is still oppression. There is no intrinsic reason why revolutionary organisations cannot accept these criticisms and use self-criticism to develop a richer and more liberated practice. Unfortunately, what tends to happen is that the leadership (always male-dominated) experience these criticisms as a personal threat and over-react with fear and trembling. Their response is to take refuge in the comfort of past models – a process Marx described well: “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when the radicals seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis, they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.” [14]

## TEN YEARS OF STRUGGLE

Many of the members of the revolutionary left in Europe were politicised by the events in and around May ‘68 in France. They

came into politics with the belief that revolutionary change would happen very soon. This meant that in the short-term they were psychologically prepared to sustain an incredibly high level of political activity – paper-selling outside factories every day, long marches amongst the peasantry (the French Maoists), working in factories to build up factory branches. Modelled on the Bolsheviks, the ideal was of the full-time revolutionary with no home and no ties – except to the party. In this tradition are the words of the leader of the French LCR (Revolutionary Communist League): “The militant does not settle down... He is in transit between two societies, two countries, two dwellings.”

Not surprisingly, this ideal, which owes a lot to Phillip Marlowe, the private dick of Raymond Chandler’s thrillers, appealed mainly to single men in their late teens and early twenties. With it went ideas of sexual liberation which reproduced in a new way the dual standard of bourgeois morality (for example men using women as emotional crutches, men unable to accept that women use any of the sexual freedom they had in theory). As it became clear that making the revolution would take a while longer, some militants came to realise that revolutionaries needed to be human and to be human they had to have time and space in their lives for things like stable relationships, kids, more money than the dole etc. But because of the moralism that exists on the revolutionary left, these first critics felt unable to make their criticisms public. They internalised what they were feeling as personal inadequacy and dropped out of organisations and sometimes out of revolutionary politics. As the failure was experienced at a personal level, the structures of the organisation were not put into question. It was feminists, with the strength of the women’s movement behind them, that first brought into the open this process of militants burning ‘themselves out’. They have shown us the male-oriented nature of the traditional notions of ‘commitment’ and have reminded us of the essential need to find ways of carrying out politics that are open (to the traditionally excluded) women with children. Women militants have quite rightly made the point that a way of organising that involves only single young men cannot bring about revolutionary change in our societies.

It was also feminists who brought to our (male-dominated) collective attention the fact that political choices are involved in how we live our personal life.



We are all agreed that it is wrong to invest in South Africa, but there are still revolutionaries who have servants [15] or are not prepared to socialise their housework or who beat the women they live with. And they see no contradiction between their personal behaviour and politically fighting for an end to exploitation. a woman's right to choose, and the setting up of women's aid centres, for example.

But there is a connection, as a short story in Spare Rib (Jan 1978) makes clear: "Love without listening is violent. The giant hand that lifts the mother of toddlers to the 19th storey of the tower block is moved by brutal tenderness. It's even possible that in the hearts of those who ravished Vietnam, trembled not only fear of reds, yellows and diminishing markets, but also ignorant love, protective, knowing-what-is-bestness. But you need not look so far. Oh brothers, sisters, how many seminal events have you misread in your own beds?" (from 'Eye to Eye' by Tina Reid)

This is not to say that revolutionary organisations should feel free to intervene in all areas of personal life. The point is more that where the boundary between the personal and the political is drawn is the result of political struggles inside and outside of organisations, for example, women fighting to get childcare recognised as important.

As their members desire to have a life of their own grew, revolutionary organisations have not found ways of operating that could give their members more space. And hopes of finding within organisations a higher (more communist) level of social relations have in most cases not been fulfilled. So we have a faster and faster turnover of members and ever-increasing personal tension until the whole thing cracks. As we did in last year's Lotta Continua conference at which feminists and workers came to blows. Or in the LCR in France, where full-timers recently went on strike for better working conditions and a shorter working week. And even if its eruption is less spectacular, the demands of the personal have been the cause of a sharp debate in many organisations, including the OCT in France, the IMG and Big Flame in this country.

## CONCLUSION

Behind the writing of this article is the belief that by looking at our mistakes, those of us in the revolutionary left will be able to seize the opportunities opening up to us better. If it were not the case that increasing demands are being made on us, we would not be in crisis, we would be content to remain the totally isolated bearers of a tradition, as we were from 1930 to 1965. Our crisis comes because as we exit from the ghetto (e.g. the anti-fascist movement in this country, the anti-nuclear movement in France and Germany, the pro-abortion movement throughout Europe), we find ourselves with rigid structures and ideas that cannot cope.

At least two activities are necessary if we are to get out of this crisis.

— on the one hand, we must learn to listen and understand *collectively* what it is that the working class vanguards we work with are expressing in their everyday practice and struggle.

— secondly, we must abandon out-dated models and begin a concrete analysis of the society we want to overturn

Professional politicians — the revolutionary species is of course male, 20s, white, educated, goes to five meetings a week and drinks frequently in certain pubs. A bit unfair, of course, but I've lived the life of a professional politico and dropped out because of what it did to me. I don't mean the effect of the workload so much as the seriousness and intensity of it all, the strain it was putting on relationships with friends most of whom, while left wing, weren't politicians. One of the main reasons why I've always stayed outside revolutionary parties is because the thought of having to spend a lot of my non-working time in the company of their members just depressed me. Talking in the pub in Nottingham with a member of a left group who has been a miner since he left school — he commented on how out of place he felt because of his different cultural upbringing. For different reasons I felt the same way, so would many feminists.

What I'm getting at is not the failings of individual revolutionaries but rather the concept of the professional revolutionary. I suppose they're necessary, the pressure of

what needs to be done dictates it, but yet an organisation composed largely of 'professionals' tends to demand a certain all or nothing adherence, not just to its political line but to its very being. A mass revolutionary party will require both a widespread revolutionary consciousness and also a mass, *part-time* commitment to conscious revolutionary organisation. That's all anybody is going to get from me at this point in my life and I think it's part of why many many working class militants and feminists steer clear of revolutionary groupings. It's much easier to organise a small load of professionals, much easier to ensure the 'correctness' of their views and actions, but it's very self-limiting — co-ordinating, educating, informing a larger grouping of part-timers creates many problems I know, but I don't think in Britain there is any other way.

## FOOTNOTES

[1] The high priest of this belief was Herbert Marcuse.

[2] On this point "Living with Capitalism" by Nichols and Beynon (RKP) is excellent.

[3] On this, see "Fighting For Feminism" a Big Flame pamphlet about the struggle of women comrades inside Lotta Continua

[4] The question of what kind of revolutionary strategy for monopoly capitalist countries will be taken up in future issues of "Revolutionary Socialism". Contributions are welcome.

[5] This phenomenon has been referred to in earlier Big Flame publications as "the social factory".

[6] Ronald Aronson in "Dear Herbert" (Marcuse) in "The Revival of American Socialism" ed. Fischer. OUP.

[7] "... Once people do connect deeply felt personal problems to larger political structures, they often do so to make political sense out of the whole society rather quickly. This is not merely hypothetical: many women in the last decade moved rapidly from complaints about sexual relationships to feminism to socialism. ..."

Another major contribution of feminism is the development of forms of organisation and thereby of community in which new kinds of social relations predominate. The collective investigation of personal oppressions can lead to a clearer understanding that the social distribution of power affects everyday life, and that the elimination of oppression necessitates new social relationships. ... — From "Sex, Family and the New Right" in Radical America, Winter 1977/78. In this excellent article, the authors show the comprehensive perspective the 'New Right' has on 'personal' issues like sex and the family. They forcefully make the point that the revolutionary left has been too bogged down with economism to take up these issues — issues on which it has potentially a lot to say and to offer working people.

[8] Nothing is more important for an understanding of this period than the writings of Kollantai. It is important to remember that as well as a feminist, she was a member of the Workers Opposition which put forward a coherent critique of Lenin's introduction of Taylorism and one-man management into soviet factories.

[9] From a speech given by Barbara Ehrenreich at a US Socialist Feminist conference and reprinted in "Socialist Revolution".

[10] The term is taken from an article by Carl Boggs and William Caspar "Therapy and Revolutionary change" in the Spring 1977 "Issues in Radical Therapy".

[11] I find talk of rights here misleading. There is no 'right to work' in capitalist society. Full employment is a concession of the Keynesian state to working class pressure. There is a 'right to work' in the state collectivist regimes of Eastern Europe, but that's another question.

[12] It is in this perspective that the Big Flame Teachers group is preparing socialist education packs which are alternative curricula to be used in schools.

[13] "We are interested in making a revolution, not in changing one another". This angry comment made by a questioner at a recent Big Flame meeting is typical of many revolutionaries who cannot grasp this.

[14] Marx — "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte".

[15] In France and Italy where some of the left is quite affluent, it is not uncommon to find maids and servants.

*This article is the result of many conversations with comrades inside and outside Big Flame. It is only as good as it has been able to synthesise what they said.*