

# **The Libertarian Movements of the 1970s**

**What We Can Learn**

Max Farrar

1989

# Contents

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| Leeds Libertarians . . . . .       | 4  |
| Personal politics . . . . .        | 6  |
| Beyond the Fragments . . . . .     | 8  |
| In and Against the State . . . . . | 9  |
| Autonomy . . . . .                 | 10 |
| Learning . . . . .                 | 12 |

Max Farrar, born 1949, was by 1969 (at Leeds University) calling himself an anarchist, and by 1979 he was deeply committed to Big Flame. By 1989, when this article was published, he was starting a part-time job at Leeds Polytechnic. Over the next 20 years he taught community studies, sociology and cultural studies at what became Leeds Metropolitan University. He remained involved in local political organising, was a co-editor of the independent journal Emergency, and is a founder of the Taking Soundings, the political-cultural discussion group in Leeds. In 2008 he was made Professor for Community Engagement and in 2009 he thinks he's going to be asked to retire.

---

This article was commissioned by the editor of *Edinburgh Review* on the recommendation of one of his friends, who was BF's National Secretary in the early 1980s. The personal context in which it was written was the bruised emotions of someone whose hyper-political youth seemed somewhat irrelevant. The wider context was the belief that the political ideals of left libertarianism in general, and Big Flame in particular, remained valuable, even if there seemed to be no political formations at the time in which they might come to life.

The article itself attempts to trace the strengths of those ideals – the commitment to personal politics; to the feminist, gay and anti-racists movements; to the theory and practice of autonomy – and explain how their weaknesses – inadequate understanding of personal psychology; excessive confidence in the local state; overemphasis on organisational autonomy and lack of understanding of political autonomy – contributed to the political malaise of the left in the late 1980s.

---

It's uncomfortable turning over your own past. For about ten years, from 1972, I immersed myself in the left political milieu which styled itself libertarian with the enthusiasm of a missionary. Today I am defrocked. I find it hard to believe that I was so impressed by the tall, red-haired man in a pink beret who came to the Leeds University Union Angry Brigade Defence Committee meeting from a commune in Oxford which hung a banner on the wall facing the street saying 'Hey, hey, straight or gay, try it once the other way'. I was never reassured by the 'once'. He told me that he would never have children of his own because he believed in collective childcare and the abolition of biological parenting. His commune established itself in Leeds and within months they had chivvied our motley crew of anarchists, women's and gay movement members and community activists into forming the Leeds Libertarian Group. They slaved over typewriters and duplicators; in a selfless effort to recruit for the group and destroy the nuclear family, they took their policies into as many bedrooms as they could. It's easy to slide like this from description into mockery, but it's a mistake to do so. I want to argue here that many of the ideas which were briefly established in the libertarian movements during the 1970s are to be revered and refined, but that we held other ideas that were fatal to our cause. A major problem for left libertarianism is that one of its most important insights – about the politics of sexuality under capitalism – became almost completely subversive of the movement. Its other theoretical contributions to modern socialist and revolutionary politics – the theory of autonomy and the linking of community and workplace struggles – were equally badly applied, leading to the debacle of radical reform in the GLC and other big city councils.

What were the libertarian movements of the 1970s? In the late 1980s a clear distinction has to be made between libertarians of the left and the right. Today, the expression has been hijacked by people around Margaret Thatcher, and has been thrust into the headlines by young conservatives who champion a form of complete ‘freedom of the market’ which would include the legalisation of heroin. In the seven-ties, those of us on the far left used the term to distinguish ourselves from Leninists and Trotskyists. It ran alongside the word ‘Liberation’ in the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Front; it identified us with the historical critique of authoritarianism in the conventional marxist parties but it consciously distinguished us from the antiquated and male-dominated practices of English anarchism.

We had groupings in most of the major cities in Britain, and came together between 1973 and 1975 at ‘National Libertarian Newsletter Conferences’. In common with the rest of the far left, we engaged in struggles around workplace and international issues (particularly supporting republicanism in the north of Ireland), but our distinctiveness lay in our effort to extend the horizons of politics into what were called community issues – Free Schools, playgroups/nurseries, housing, Claimants Unions, local newspapers and so on.

## Leeds Libertarians

Within the Leeds Libertarians, the Oxford commune gave such priority to another libertarian theme – sexual or personal politics – that we gained a certain notoriety even among our most adventurous peers. Their women members formed one of Leeds’ first Women’s Groups and their men established the first Men’s Group. One of them produced a pamphlet on New York’s Revolutionary Effeminists; they circulated information about Berlin’s Kommune 1; they organised a national conference on sexual politics and the family (in Leeds, May 1973) – in short, they pushed us into recognising that, under capitalism, our sexual and personal relationships were oppressive and in just as great a need of transformation as the boss-worker relationships in industry. But it wasn’t just rhetoric. They embodied the new way of living that they proposed in their communal household and collective childcare arrangements, immortalised by Nell Dunn in Chapter Four of *Living As We Do* (Futura, 1977).

Reading the minutes of the Leeds Libertarian meetings fifteen years later, I’m shocked to recall that, as a Group, we were right about so many things, yet we split within two years into separate tendencies and made exactly the same organisational mistake that *Beyond the Fragments* made in 1980. We thought that people with similar, though not identical, politics would want to meet together to discuss their various points of view and engage in common action. If only political life was so simple. Just like BiF we failed to realise that, if you reject the Leninist fetish of party discipline, you rely upon goodwill, solidarity and political coherence in proportions rarely found in mere mortals – and even less often found among middle class radical intellectuals.

Of course, the humanistic psychology of people’s personal dispositions and methods of relating to each other in groups was not on the agenda. The Leeds Libertarians split on strictly ‘political’ grounds. We discussed in detail the 1973 Miners’ strike and the economic crisis – a discussion led by the people from the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists, who soon despaired of the Group’s refusal to organise; we discussed Women’s Liberation, the Gay Liberation Front and Men against Sexism – and the initiators of these discussions soon despaired of the Group’s wavering commitment to these issues; we discussed the position of children in capitalist society

— and the most dedicated withdrew into the Free School and communal childcare movements. Issues that were not so close to home, like the north of Ireland and Allende's socialist victory in Chile, could be discussed and acted upon with less threat to the Group's dynamic, but, as the numbers who were attracted to our meetings grew, the inclination to split grew proportionately.

It was the issue of personal politics which I found hardest to deal with. I turn up pages, handwritten on beaches in Corsica and Sardinia in the summer of 1974, in which I agonise over the problem of relating the massive evidence of Leninist activity in Italy to the failure of marx-ism to deal with social relationships; these remain crucial issues. The Italian marxists' failure to deal with personal politics was one reason for the degeneration of that massive popular revolt into the adventures of the Red Brigades, and the parallel, if less dramatic, failure in Britain is part of the explanation of the collapse of movement politics into the soulless corridors of Labour Party bureaucracies.

Instead of indulging in '1968' nostalgia we should examine the political rise and fall of the generation formed by the insurrections of the late sixties. We need to explain why so many have left their collectives, their consciousness-raising groups, their squats, the Black Power organisations, their community action groups, their rank and file workers' groups... and why many of these activists have now buried themselves in labourism.

By July 1975 Leeds Libertarian Group had fallen apart, and another twenty of us were meeting to try to pick up the pieces. The open intention of these meetings was to clarify our theory and organise. The documents we circulated stressed the political limitations of our community-based politics in the Adventure Playground, the Nursery, the Advice Centre and the community newspaper. This new grouping was strongly influenced by the recently formed 'revolutionary socialist' organisation Big Flame. *Big Flame* had started in Liverpool in 1971 around local industrial struggles. In 1972, inspired by the Italian marxist organisation *Lotta Continua* they formed additional 'base groups' on some of Liverpool's housing estates to contribute to the emerging community struggles. BF's contributions to the Libertarian Newsletter brought a sense of theory and organisation to an otherwise inchoate bundle of duplicated texts, and by late 1974 there were branches of the organisation in East and West London, Manchester and Birmingham.

Some of us former members of Leeds Libertarians joined Big Flame in 1975 because that organisation seemed to provide a theory which linked community, industrial and public sector activity, and which integrated the pro-feminist, anti-racist and internationalist concerns that we had developed. Above all, Big Flame could provide a national and international network with a clear public face, without falling prey to Leninist hierarchies and authoritarianism. The organisational and conceptual breakthrough was the concept of autonomy, which was borrowed from the new Italian marxists and bent into a shape which fitted the development in Britain of the women's, the gay and the black movements. (Its many publications should be available through inter-library loans: magazine; ISSN 0309 9067; pamphlets: ISBN prefix 0906082; also see John Howell, 'Big Flame: resituating socialist strategy and organisation in *Socialist Register*', ed. Milliband and Savile, Merlin Press, 1981.)

For the next five or six years, *Big Flame*'s theory and practice made a lot of sense to me. It keyed in very well with the arguments of Lyn Segal, Sheila Rowbotham and Hilary Wainwright in the 1979 book *Beyond the Fragments — Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, which is not surprising, since Segal and Rowbotham were longstanding libertarians (Segal joined *Big Flame*) and Wainwright was a recent exile from the more open-minded wing of the *International Marxist*

*Group*. But of course only fools and Trotskyists could fail to notice that this theory and practice wasn't making much sense to the masses whom we claimed to serve.

By 1988, the distressing fact of the virtual collapse of a libertarian tendency in Britain has to be confronted. Many of the 70s libertarians are now to be found within the machinery of the local state, and, often with mixed motives, many have joined Labour — a party which, a handful of years before, they had utterly scorned. A degenerate semblance of left libertarianism lives on in the squats and street fighting antics of groups influenced by *Class War*, whose peculiar mixture of venom, autonomy and authoritarianism may well be an understandable reaction to Thatcherism, enforced unemployment and the debasement of the non-party left, but which bears little or no ideological resemblance to the movements of a decade ago.

Like the writer of an Elizabethan tragedy, I want to try and uncover the part we libertarians played in our own downfall.

## Personal politics

A major part of the libertarian politics was an inter- and intrapersonal war of attribution on the psyche. In my case, this traumatic process had, in the long run, the benefit of checking my authoritarianism and helping me walk more cautiously along the path laid down by my gender, class, colour and education. Our movement was small in number, but large in political influence, and many of the other white men in our sphere were, it seems to me, affected in quite different ways by our politics of subjectivity. If these politics reached your bed it was rare for you to wake up in the same place. The news of the commune in which all doors were removed and you weren't allowed to decide for yourself who was to share your bed spread fast, especially when a time bomb of a pamphlet by the *Red Collective* called 'The Politics of Sexuality under Capitalism' seemed to provide a theory which justified this bizarre practice. The assault on the nuclear family, opened up for many of us by R. D. Laing, added to by Wilhelm Reich, helped along by the women's movement pamphlet 'The Myth of Motherhood', was translated into a ideology of anti-monogamy and the substitution of the collective for the parent. It took about five years for these politics to work themselves out for those who were involved, and a myriad of less challenging domestic arrangements have emerged.

The shock-waves of personal politics had a much larger effect on subsequent political action than is commonly acknowledged. Although the number of us who were actively experimenting was small, many others read or heard about these ideas. More significantly, the very large number of people who were either members of women's groups, or who identified themselves with the women's movement, were engaging in personal journeys through their own biographies, as well as taking public, political action. The spin-off from the subjective changes in the women (whether it was the move towards political lesbianism or to radical reappraisals of their heterosexual relationships) had as significant an impact on men, and ideas about social relationships, as their other actions had on the material world.

The people who came into contact with these ideas, but who avoided the psychological trauma of trying to put all of them into personal practice, drew, I think, several conclusions which affected their politics in the 1980s; many of those who were temporarily shipwrecked by libertarian sex-pol resurfaced with similar conclusions.

As an indirect result of these personal experiences and the accounts of these experiences, a new form of politics has been constructed in the 1980s. The ruinous effects of the libertarian lifestyle jolted many of us out of libertarian politics; and, to use that macabre commonplace, we threw out the baby with the bathwater.

The first stage of the 1980s political process was to construct a consumptionist, left-wing life style out of libertarian subjectivism. Our emphasis on the quality of relationships, the nature of domestic lives, how children were moulded by capitalist patriarchy — combined, in groups like *Red Therapy* (which spawned commercial radical therapy practices) with a new attention to psychoanalysis — made it possible to justify an escape into living well, while remaining on the left. Wide layers of the non-Trotskyist left took on the idea that personal life had to be a focus for political change, under the combined pressure of the women's movement and the mixed libertarian movement, but this pressure was translated into an obsession with the quality of our own lives, and the revolutionary component — the need for transformation of the subjective lives of the population as a whole — was lost in demands which met our own needs as political activists. Since we believed that the personal is political, and that politics should start from personal needs, and since we had discovered that self-imposed poverty, chaotic sex and disoriented children were making us miserable, we had to make some changes. We wanted psychological and physical comfort.'

This need to nurture ourselves and our children was merely a rediscovery of something which most of us had grown up with. Many of us came from reasonably affluent, family-centred homes. We'd grown up in the post-war boom: the first teenagers with cash of our own. Whether we'd been Mods or Hippies (or both), we had consumed as much of the music, the clothes and the drugs that we could afford. Some of us had travelled with our parents, others had hitch-hiked across continents; very few of us were *poor*. The temporary libertarian rejection of middle class affluence was real — many an heiress lived in a squat — but when voluntary material hardship is combined with the collapse of personal relationships, only the most devout will forego the strange security of consumption.

Those of us who had bought big houses in which to practice our collectivist ideology found that we had laid a solid material base for the good life, particularly if they had been purchased in London's working class neighbourhoods in where we had chosen to proselytise, and we proceeded to add fitted kitchens to our holidays in Greece, tetchily arguing about who had done the most housework that week.

The tiny libertarian milieu found that its concerns echoed those of the wider political movement when the patter of tiny feet started to become a stampede. Feminists decided that they were going to have children with or without men's assistance after conception. Collectives dissolved altogether under the conflicting demands of biological parents, collective members and the children, who, as they grew older, showed a surprising clarity about their needs. Domestic life began to approximate the conventional patterns — heterosexual and gay couples with or without children, single parents, collections of childless individuals and so on. As our need for personal emotional support became clearer to us, and as we began to make joint financial arrangements, we let ourselves into the sticky embrace of the consumer culture of the 1980s.

## Beyond the Fragments

The second conclusion drawn from the seventies flowed from another aspect of the libertarian ideology. Most libertarian groups, and in particular *Big Flame*, attempted to link in theory and in practice all the struggles that were manifesting themselves in the late sixties and seventies. We rejected the Trotskyist notion that the industrial struggle was the prime (for many of them, the only) focus for political action. (This idea was best summarised at a mid-seventies meeting at the Leeds Trades Council Club when the Socialist Workers Party's leader told us that 'It's the miners who turn the lights out' (Tony Cliff). As the lights go out for the Leninists, they cling harder to their shibboleths).

Instead, we took the view that *capital* was now *social capital*, that it was intent on controlling *social* life in the same way that in the nineteenth century it was able to control factory life, so the struggle in the community, in the public sector and in personal life were all identified as significant aspects of the struggle against capital. We argued that oppositional groupings were expressing their demands autonomously from capital, and were creating their own organisations in which to express their demands — in autonomous movements of waged workers, of communities, of white women, of black men and women, of gay people, of youth — all of whom, we believed, would begin to coalesce at the highest point of struggle against the state.

The *Leeds Libertarian Group*, *Beyond the Fragments* and *Big Flame* attempted in their different ways to provide a basis for that process of encouraging coalition. In the present period, there is no organisational force which can play that role; in the seventies it was arguable that the level of mass struggle justified the attempt. It hardly occurred to us that, in many circumstances, it may well hasten the demise of struggles to attempt to harness them into one organisation, even one which respects the inherent demands for autonomy.

This problem was compounded by the experience of politics in the late seventies and throughout the eighties. Thatcher's 1979 victory was not immediately perceived as the ushering in of a new era for British politics, but it was well understood by the extra-parliamentary left as the failure of both the Labour Party and our own practice. The *Beyond the Fragments Conference*, held in Leeds in August 1980, gathered almost 1600 adults and 130 children of the libertarian and non-party socialist tendencies and, in direct contradiction to its professed aim of building a coalition of these tendencies, it presaged the subsequent rush into the local state and the Labour Party.

Reading the discussion papers for the conference and the post-conference Bulletins today, I'm hit by the twin themes of the personal experience of political organisation and the need for practical policies and activities to restimulate what was already observed as a downward spiral of political struggle. Duplicated sheets of questions about the nature of organisation, strictures on Workers' Plans and Hospital Fightback, carefully wrapped in contributions from men against sexism and gay socialists show a movement which is articulate about the problems and absolutely lost for solutions. This emphasis on theory and discussion has enormous value in a period of motivation for political action; in the 'downturn' it can too easily lead to the exposure of problems which seem insuperable. The armchair, the video and *Marxism Today* seduce the radical intellectuals.

*BtF* held enormous promise and those of the organising group who continued to meet afterwards worked hard to build on its energy. Several Bulletins were produced, and there was money in the bank. But the proposed regional groupings never materialised. It was as though the participants were overwhelmed by *deja vu*. The vast majority of us had been to one conference

after another over the previous ten years and our optimism was collapsing. Perhaps there was something dispiriting about the resolute refusal of the organisers to take a leading role; it may have been even more dispiriting to acknowledge that our politics dictated that we reject anyone who did attempt to lead.

Personally, my confidence in *BtF* evaporated when 600 youngsters turned up to the anti-racist, pro-feminist punk band the *Au Pairs* while, next door, almost all the *BtFers* were absorbed in Frankie Armstrong and Leon Rosselson. I'd organised the *Au Pairs* to play as an alternative to Rosselson and Armstrong because I had assumed that many *Fragments* supporters would share my enthusiasm for *Rock Against Racism*, and the flourishing punk-reggae-political culture that it had harnessed. *RAR* was the one mass movement of the late seventies which had real promise. But as young people, who had not taken part in the *Fragments* discussion, flocked in to enjoy the *Au Pairs*, the *Fragments* were engaged in quiet communion with the radical folk singers who captured the spirit of an era that was disappearing before our eyes.

It was not just the failure of the *Fragments* to assemble, nor the increasingly triumphal passage of Thatcherism, nor the peculiar situation inside the Labour Party which led to the new attitude towards labourism, though all these played their part. The debates within the Trotskyist groups about the failure of the far left in seventies and the apparent rise of the grouping around Tony Benn led to many of their groups splitting and entering the Labour Party. (*Big Flame* lost several of its most experienced members in the same way). These developments did combine to make the Labour Party seem a more attractive proposition to people who had tried the *Fragments* networks and found that they had little to offer.

There was, in addition to this, an important contribution to this trend from within libertarian ideology. The most significant ideas which lead to the new sympathy for the politics of local councils and the Labour Party may be found within the work produced by the libertarian and non-party movements of the seventies. There were strands in our ideology and practice which, I now see, laid the basis for a sympathetic attitude towards left-labourism. Despite our antistate rhetoric, much of our political practice was soft on reformism. The tenants' movement had spawned community workers and demands on local councils; teachers' struggles were often aimed at their local Town Halls; health workers made demands on the state which fostered the idea that a left Labour government might meet these demands, unlike the right-wing Labour government which had introduced the cuts in the first place. The idea of Workers' Plans for each industry, formulated by Mike Cooley and his associates at Lucas Aerospace, gave a new authority to these ideas (even libertarians sometimes felt that industry was the focus for 'real politics'). Workers Plans met the libertarian critique of economic workplace demands and they pointed towards the idea of concrete preparation for a truly socialist future in industry; but implicitly they relied on a government adopting this approach on a national scale.

## In and Against the State

The most developed articulation of this line of thinking within the 'Fragments' movement came in another 1979 publication called *In and Against the State* by an ad hoc collection of radical non-party intellectuals called 'The London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group'. Originally published privately as a pamphlet, it was later republished in book form by Pluto Press. It's hard to know how influential this piece was. I certainly thought it was brilliant at the time; re-reading

it today I see how it opened the door still wider to working *for* the state, when its clear intention was to show people how to work *against* the state. Partly, the writers were victims of their time: they were reviewing the experience of state workers in sectors like teaching, hospitals, community work and advice work, all of whom had played a real part in the militant activities of the seventies. The pamphlet took these struggles a step further by showing how these were battles with a *capitalist* state apparatus, and by asserting that activity now had to be directed against the particular forms of social relationship engendered by that type of state.

A warning of the flaw in their analysis came when they stated, in a rare bout of metaphorical writing, that the state is merely ‘a thin crust on a seething, bubbling cauldron of soup’ (p.38). They went on to argue that to take the struggle into the arena of social relationships we must get jobs within the state apparatus: ‘It is possible to see many courses of action that can challenge the ‘state form’ while we stay within the state. That is the point: such action cannot be taken from outside the state, only from within’ (p.48). Although they reported the views of left Labour councillors, and were quite clear about the limitations of their role given the nature of central government’s underfunding of local services, they said that ‘there was a clear distinction to be made between opposition and managerial space’ in local councils (p.62).

Many of the leading officers appointed in the early 1980s by the Greater London Council were well versed in the theories of the ‘Fragments’ movement and (in various degrees of dilution) some of the GLC’s policies were taken on by Labour councils throughout Britain. To debate in detail whether or not these policies ‘worked’ during the eighties is beyond the scope of this essay; suffice it to say that the optimistic tone of *In and Against the State* would not be echoed today by anyone who has been close to that experience over the past eight years.

The ground for entry into the local state was theoretically tilled by the non-party movement during the late seventies, and those of us who were a part of that movement and who are not impressed with its results are now forced to recognise our ideological complicity. The arrogance of the 1968 generation is nowhere more obvious than in its unashamed espousal in the 80s of technical expertise and Party professionalism — values which they subjected to a withering critique during the 70s.

## Autonomy

There was a third conclusion drawn from the seventies’ movements’ theory which has also rebounded upon us. ‘Autonomy’ — usually used in the expression ‘autonomous movements’ — was a well-worked word in the seventies; but, *as a theory*, discussion took place in the narrowest confines of the movements. This is partly because there was always a desperately English contempt for theory within the movements, combined with an insistence on the sole value of experience and practice; an attitude which was reinforced in some circles of the women’s movement by the denunciation of theory as an aspect of male power. Even in Sheila Rowbotham’s long contribution to *Beyond the Fragments*, where she provides a stimulating, gentle and jargon-free review of leftist and feminist theories of organisation, her section entitled ‘autonomy and power’ never explains what the theory of autonomy actually entails.

*Red Notes*, a tiny, home-made publisher in east London, provided a string of theoretical pamphlets throughout the seventies composed of translations of the Italian marxists (Toni Negri, Mario Tronti, Sergio Bologna and company) whose theories on autonomy underpinned the ac-

tivities of organisations such as *Lotta Continua*. It's rare to find anyone in Britain who read these pamphlets, partly because the arguments are often obscure and partly because of the system of publication. (Red Notes pamphlets address was Box 15, 2a St Pauls Road, London N1. Its ISBN prefix is 0 906305.)

*Big Flame*'s effort to apply this theory has been briefly described above. But *Big Flame* became increasingly reluctant to openly identify itself with the theory when, after the collapse of *Lotta Continua* in the latter part of the seventies, 'autonomist' ideas became associated with the Italian 'armed opposition', of whom the *Red Brigades* were the most famous example. *Red Notes* has resolutely refused to interpret the texts it translated and published. When Toni Negri was held in prison prior to trial for alleged association with the *Red Brigades*, *Red Notes* implicitly distanced itself from Negri and autonomy theory by failing to publish any further texts on the Italian theory.

With hindsight, this absence of theoretical development of the ideas — whose implications for Britain were quite different from Italy's — may be one reason why they were so badly applied when people who had been influenced by them took up important jobs in local government in the eighties.

In Italy, the theory of autonomy was used as a method of analysing the volatile struggles which involved literally masses of students, tenants and workers. In England, where struggles were both numerically and politically less developed, the ideas took on two aspects in *Big Flame*. One, reflecting the reality of the movements of (predominantly) white women, of black women and men, and of gay and lesbian people, was the stress on the right to *independent organisations* of the oppressed groups in capitalist society. *Big Flame* argued that this organisational autonomy was to be encouraged in workplaces as well; workers who created independent rank and file organisations, separate from the ossified trade union structures, were offered support. The underlying argument was that all oppressed and exploited groups needed to create arrangements whereby they could define their own needs and goals entirely separately from those whom they identified as either directly oppressing or exploiting them, or who were characterised as the accomplices of the oppressors and exploiters.

The second part of the theory was equally important. This emphasised the creation of a *revolutionary politics* among the movements of the oppressed and exploited. Building on the marxist notion that the dominant ideas are those of the ruling class, the theory recognised that within the subordinate sections of society, including those in movements who were struggling against the oppressors, many of the ruling class' ideas would still exist. Political autonomy, in the sense of independence or separation from the dominant ideas, was stressed. The theory argued that reactionary ideas would have to be displaced by ideas and demands which were completely antagonistic to the dominant ideas and practices. *Big Flame* for instance supported the revolutionary socialist demands within each of the movements (distancing itself from the party-building Trotskyists by supporting organisational and political autonomy for the movements).

Of the two limbs to the theory — organisational autonomy and political autonomy — only one, organisational autonomy, seems to have been carried through into the eighties. In a prescient paragraph of her essay referred to above, Sheila Rowbotham wrote: 'It would be ironic, wouldn't it? The autonomy of the women's movement and gays might be recognised, the right to have gay and women's caucuses on everything granted, the specifics of sexual politics could be allowed more regular space in left papers. But the ideas of what socialism is and the relationship to these ideas would remain the same'. Her omission of the black movement (indeed the lack of serious attention to black people in all the *Fragments* writings and *In and Against the State*) is significant,

but her point has been borne out in the workings of the GLC's 'race', women's, gay and lesbian policies and in the plethora of 'equal opportunity' programmes in Labour councils throughout Britain.

The Labour council's policies on grants for groupings of gays, lesbians, women (white and black), black people (male and female), people with disabilities, Labour's efforts to provide equal opportunity in service provision; the small expansion of jobs within Labour councils for people in these categories... none of these are to be condemned out of hand. But it has to be clear that, while these ideas clearly derive from the activities of the autonomous movements, the practice has nothing to do with the theory of autonomy. It would be absurd to expect the Labour Party as a whole to adopt the real theory and practice of autonomy – this would result in the dismembering of its historical project – but it needs to be said that this theory appears not to have been understood by those who thought they were entering the Labour Party and the local state in order to propagate its implications.

What seems to have happened is that former members of *Big Flame*, supporters of autonomy for (white) women, black men and women, gays and lesbians, have entered the Labour Party and local councils with a view to diverting resources to the oppressed groups. There were significant resources to be diverted: the GLC's ethnic minority budget for 1983–4 was £2.5 million, and Urban Programme funding (which goes primarily to inner city areas) in those years was £317 million).<sup>1</sup> Particularly in the GLC, many organisations connected to the social movements obtained cash, workers and equipment. Perhaps some of those within the bureaucracies who processed their applications hoped to foster autonomy and were aware of this contradictory role for the local state. If they were aware of the problem, there is no evidence that they were able to solve it. In fact, since autonomy theory, properly defined, requires both political and organisational autonomy for the oppressed, the contradiction is insoluble. Even if council funds can be surreptitiously used to build an independent organisation, as soon as the group turns its attention to the development of independent, antagonistic political demands and practices, the council must cease its support in order to maintain the hegemony of the Labour Party.

## Learning

Once again, lack of political and theoretical clarity within the libertarian movements has fostered illusions and, in creating practices which have borne few progressive results, important ideas have become lost or discredited. Perhaps the main lesson is the one which, when perverted, leads us back into the comforting armchair. We have to think more carefully and draw more eclectically on the radical theories available to us internationally – and then these ideas have to be tested in practice and continually re-evaluated.

Of the specific ideas discussed here – libertarian personal politics, methods of organising, the state and the theory of autonomy – I want to suggest that the issues defined in the seventies are, if anything, more pertinent today. The problems are posed more sharply because, for the activists of the sixties and seventies, their need for material and emotional growth links these issues in a particularly intractable fashion.

---

<sup>1</sup> Chetan Bath's 'Funding the Flames' in *Emergency Magazine* 4 (ISBN 0 86356 008 3) analyses the contradictory nature of state funding of anti-racism. The cash figures cited here are from the draft of another article by Chetan Bath.

In ‘Love and Dread in Modern Times’ (Emergency no. 2, 1984), I have reflected in personal terms on how this problem has wrenched my soul. I tried to explain how the very idea of politics began to collapse as I faced the irrelevance of my experience in the seventies to the harsh new world of the eighties; I tried to justify my immersion in pop music, pulp TV, the home and family life by clawing at the progressive ideas (particilarly around ‘love’) to be found in those popular activities.

Here, I’m putting a slightly different perspective. For people with marketable talents, people who can command a good wage for their services, there comes a point at which they find that they are capable of accumulating the kind of wealth which can be used to make life very comfortable, materially. Around that time, or, more often, before that realisation, they may well have decided to become a biological parent. If their skills are primarily intellectual, and they are politically radical, the chances are that, by this time, they will be selling their services to the state, in one of its many forms. If they were involved in, or influenced by the libertarian milieu of the early seventies, they may still bear the emotional scars. All these factors will conspire towards a new theory of personal and political life which, in current political discourse, seems to centre on the word ‘consumption’. Out of the self-imposed relative poverty and emotional experimentation of their lives in the seventies many of the libertarians have now reconstructed themselves into affluent, well dressed members of relatively conventional emotional units, with steady jobs (and a good pension) in local government, the voluntary sector, a trade union, or education. We may not have moved to the suburbs, but our houses are becoming increasingly suburban, and we worry increasingly about whether our children are suffering at these inner-city schools.

It’s in these circumstances that it becomes ever more important that we rescue some of our old ideas. If we work for the state, for the voluntary sector or a trade union, we have to renew our commitment to the idea of autonomy. Our job is not to do what our paymasters want us to do — to nurture progressive but non-antagonistic activities ~ but to grapple with the inherent contradiction of our role and clarify those areas in which genuinely independent organising and autonomous political thinking may develop. In our intimate relationships with lovers and children, the libertarian emphasis on oppression, gender stereotyping, the nature of housework, the role of the nuclear family as a conduit for capitalist patriarchy are no less relevant today than they were fifteen or twenty years ago.

It was the libertarian movements of the seventies — particularly the women’s movement and those involved in sexual or personal politics ~ which did the groundwork for these ideas, and they need to be developed. For those of us who have fifteen or twenty years of a wage behind us, this thinking has to be accompanied bya critical appraisal of the political value of our chosen employment. The new generations of radicals will no doubt put a pitchfork to this history and, with luck, improve upon it.

In fact, as our spending power increases and we plunge ourselves into the world of consumption with an enthusiasm we had forgotten since our teens, all these issues are sharpened. Our children become the capitalists or radicals of tomorrow via our methods of lavishing love and consumer goods upon them: what we say, what we do, what we buy has a major impact on their personal and political dispositions. For a libertarian, there is nothing more subversive of your ideology than your first baby’s smile — if you’ve got power in the market you say goodbye to squatting, to collectives, to ‘poverty’, to emotional egalitarianism. All these political practices, which were so important and so tormenting a few years before are now reinterpreted as fetters on your baby’s development. If your commitment to the underlying ideas of political liberation

is thin, you buy yourself into capitalism very fast. As you climb the hierarchies of your bureaucracy and you shed your politics as you shed your jumble sale clothes your material interest in the status quo climbs with you.

This, I think, is what had happened to many of us radical children of the sixties. Long ago Engels wrote that ‘the production of the means of existence... (and) the propagation of the species are in the last resort the determining factors in our lives’<sup>2</sup> so we cannot be surprised to find that the material facts of money and children throw many a radical into the arms of the enemy. Nor should the punks visit them with such wrath. The need for love and comfort is real: it will expand, not contract, after and during radical transformation of society. The point is to develop ways of achieving these fine goals now, without diverting from the struggle to transform the present institutions and ideas which make it impossible for most people to achieve even a fragment of either of them. ‘Consumption’ isn’t the problem. Whatever your politics, you consume to live and to establish your identity. The problem is that, under capitalism, consumption becomes a fetish, a mask, and a substitute for the fulfilment of the real human need to live as equals and to love selflessly.

---

<sup>2</sup> Engels ‘The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State’ (Pathfinder Press, New York, 1972 p. 26). (Michelle Barrett discusses what this text might really mean in ‘Women’s Oppression Today’ (Verso, 1980 pp. 20ff).)

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Max Farrar  
The Libertarian Movements of the 1970s  
What We Can Learn  
1989

Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> May 2022 from [bigflameuk.wordpress.com](http://bigflameuk.wordpress.com)  
Published in the *Edinburgh Review* Issue 82, Winter 1989.

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**