

17 June

Dear comrades,

this is a letter about personal politics, because this is an area of our politics which is often misunderstood or not understood at all by comrades in LPOO1, and because when we have discussed it with you it has usually been with individuals, or "well that's something you should talk to the women about" or accepted with a smile as an eccentric sideline of the East London group, but I don't feel it's been accepted into the central arena of political debate. Our group's interest in personal politics has a lot to do with the interests and histories of the individuals in the group (as maybe your development has been much influenced by the arrival of a certain individual from a certain country) and that should be a point of strength rather than a point of weakness, just as the differences in interests and experience between the different Big Flame groups should be a source of revitalizing new ideas and mutual learning and development, rather than a cause of acrimony, polarization, competitiveness and put downs, (that goes both ways). It's not that we think 'personal politics' is more important than 'class struggle', but that 'personal politics' is an equally important dimension of class struggle which is often unrecognized on the Left. For all these reasons, I hope a lot of people will read and talk about this letter in the spirit of comradeship, especially people who think that 'personal politics' is not something they're interested in.

By 'personal politics' or 'subjective politics' we mean the politics of people's everyday experience of their oppression, the things they feel immediately oppressed by, the immediate sources of their unhappiness and anxiety. The failure of traditional Left groups to recognize people's feelings (as opposed to their comprehension) is why one of the main reasons why, in times of social crisis, the Fascists have blossomed and thrived. No advance understanding of the contradictions of capitalism will of itself bring people out onto the streets until they understand that the things that really bug them deep down are a part of the capitalist system too, and not either their own inadequacy or a permanent law of nature: the fact that they can't get it on sexually, the fact that they feel angry and uptight with the people they live with, the fact that they're always tired, always getting some minor nagging illness, the fact that they feel unsure of themselves and inadequate in a lot of situations, the fact that they haven't got any friends, that their marriage is breaking down, that their life doesn't seem to have any meaning, they're bored in and out of work, the fact that they can't afford the things they want, the fact that their house is too small and the kids are on top of them all the time, or just that they work too bloody hard.

Tronti and the LC theorists have developed an analysis which covers the latter part of this ~~right~~ ground - the politics of the autonomy of the needs of the worker, the refusal of work, the struggle against labour - the overriding importance of the subjective experience of the worker is recognized, and the way it determines his response both to his work situation and to Left strategies; the lack of ~~worker~~ interest workers show in traditional type of Left politics and slogans such as 'workers control' which correspond to their lack of any form of gratification in the work situation. The economic analysis of post-war capitalism which Tronti etc. have made is generally seen as really valuable in suggesting strategies and ways of fighting, but ~~was~~ is not generally recognized is that this economic analysis also implies a sociological and psychological analysis of the direction capitalist institutions have taken in their constant endeavour to capture the hearts and minds of the workforce and enlist them into the capitalist process too. We can and must show that not only economic misery but all the other miseries and anxieties and frustrations of everyday life are rooted in capitalist society.

The same goes for the subjective factors which hold people back from class struggle. The capitalist system perpetuates itself not only through physical repression and co-option, it perpetuates itself too through the character structures of people brought up and bringing up their children in capitalist society, initially by repressing (through the authoritarian family) our emotional and sexual drives, or latterly through harnessing them too to the capitalist machine. Unless we understand how many inhibitions to freedom and the fight for freedom are rooted in the very psychological make-up of people living in advanced capitalist societies, we will never touch their sources of liberating creative energy. "Why is the proletariat not revolutionary? Because even in the very midst of the death throes of capitalism, broad sections of the proletarian masses still feel that the state, the laws and the economy of the bourgeoisie are the only possible environment for them to exist in." (Lukacs) Fear of freedom is real - we must recognize and confront it in ourselves and in the wc. We cannot understand racism or sexism unless we understand sexuality and people's fear of sexuality. We cannot understand authoritarianism or deference to authority unless we understand how children are brought up to mistrust and fear their own bodies and their own instincts. We cannot understand competitiveness, sectionalism, individualism, privatisation, unless we understand the deep seated insecurity which makes us believe that

ultimately we will have to fight for our own interests against other people. Unfortunately

unfortunately even when we do understand it, it's fucking hard to do anything about it, both in ourselves and in others.

So the first thing is to recognize the importance of people's subjective experience in determining their political consciousness and their political actions, and this is true both of intellectuals and of working class people (in fact it's even true of me writing this letter). Now the second thing is how to affect and change consciousness, granted that it is so deeply rooted in the character that no simple change of material circumstances will of itself bring about that change.

In the East London group we often feel so angry and frustrated and uptight and miserable and ratty and depressed that we just don't feel we can hang on till after the revolution, so we try to change ourselves a bit here and now, we do various kinds of therapy, mainly Reichian, and on the whole it makes us feel better. Obviously we don't think of this as something to be done on a mass scale; but it helps us to keep going and it also gives us some insight into the mechanisms that have made us feel so bad for so long (our Mums and Dads for example). The therapy consists in learning to express and so release feelings which we learn to discover and identify which are already there; it means we don't turn them in self-destructively on ourselves or vent them damagingly on each other or on our politics. And it makes it much easier to understand and deal with Fascist attitudes in others once we've come face to face with the racist the sexist the authoritarian the cry-baby in ourselves.

We also all are or have been in consciousness-raising groups, and this has been really important in helping us to reach a political understanding of ourselves - the problems which up until now we thought were our own personal hang-ups we come to see as a part of a whole system of class oppression (in which the oppressors are as fucked up by their role as the oppressed). And sometimes this kind of understanding does happen on a mass scale, as the women's movement blew up three years ago with thousands and thousands of women suddenly realizing their problems were not individual but were part of the collective experience of life under capitalism and could be fought collectively.

I think the LPool and EL groups are quite similar in our intervention practice in trying to pick up on the ways people experience their oppression in Fords or on an estate or whatever. But we need to develop and extend this understanding to include oppressions which are more internalized, and also to draw clear links between personal oppression and economic life even at the most intimate level. The British Movement are doing it already. They have posters up all over showing a pretty woman clutching a baby to her breast, with the slogan KEEP BRITAIN WHITE. The implication is that at present you (the white male) fuck the woman and she's yours and the baby's yours; but if you don't act soon she may go off or be taken away by a black man, who's sexier than you. Or that you (the white female) are threatened by the powerful and mysterious sexuality of the black man. KEEP BRITAIN WHITE. KEEP WOMEN PURE. (That's what SPUC's about) The Fascists know only too well how to play on our fears and repressed feelings, and so in another way do the consumer and media lackeys of the system. We cannot afford to ignore people's irrational drives (including our own) when we work out our political strategies; of course this doesn't mean we should manipulate them like the Fascists, on the contrary we should try to expose them as the internal policemen of the capitalist state. We need to understand class consciousness better, both through our theoretical work and through being sensitive and responsive in our practice. We need to criticize forms of 'revolutionary' organization which reinforce the weakness, underdevelopment, passivity and psychological dependence of the masses of the people in the name of providing a 'revolutionary leadership'. (Of course we also need to be strong and organized enough to recognize and build on class consciousness when and where it develops, but we're working on that as well.) We hope that we will be able to work these things out with you or at least with your support; to develop a long and venerable tradition from which we feel we have learnt much- 'early' Marx, 'late' Freud, Reich, Lukacs, Marcuse, Horkheimer, Habermas, Reimut Reiche, and Gramsci somewhere in the middle. I suppose a psychological and sociological analysis to complement the economic analysis of post-war capitalism, though I hadn't really thought of it that way before. I think we might try and write something a bit more worked out for the Heavy Publication; meanwhile, a good thing to read is 'What is Class Consciousness' by Reich, where a lot of these ideas are set out though not in a way we all agree with. The thing is, we don't want you to think we're 'soft' because we 'don't believe in theory' or 'don't believe in intervention' or 'don't believe in organization', or kinky because we go on about sex all the time. I suppose I wrote this letter because I want us to be taken seriously (even if you don't agree with us altogether) and I want our work to be taken seriously,

Love and solidarity,

Elaine M Langdon.

ps. this was originally going to be a letter to one person, then I thought that these discussions shouldn't be private all the time.