**What is to be done between moments of excess?**

Last year Leeds Plan C hosted a talk by a veteran of the 1970s/80s libertarian socialist group Big Flame. One of the most telling comments referred to the decision of the group to dissolve in response to the harsh political climate for the Left following the defeat of the 1984-5 miners strike. As the story was told Big Flame saw that the Left was adopting an even more sectarian, 'build' the party mode as the means through which their organisations could survive the 'downturn'. In response Big Flame thought that the price of this means of survival was too great, in both its damaging effect on ongoing struggle, and one suspects the personally injurious costs of adopting such shrivelled subjectivities. In response Big Flame dissolved their organisation into other projects such as the ill fated "News on Sunday" attempt at a Left-wing tabloid.

The collapse and disappearance of the Climate Camp and the crisis of horizontalism that has followed the collapse of Occupy has also made the limitations of that movement obvious to all.

Any recomposition limited to the Trotskyist Left is utterly doomed to irrelevance yet the more autonomous left has also proved unable to recompose itself. Any recomposition will not take place through one organisation. Indeed it will probably involve several recompositions with perhaps the key question being the relationship between them. It is only if these different recompositions can coordinate together that we will be able to produce enough force to really impact on the direction of society.

*Set up some discussion of MoE?*

There are at present several ongoing attempts to regroup the Left into new configurations. These have been driven, in part, by a number of splits within longstanding Trotskyist groups driven by the specificities of certain disagreements and scandals. Beyond the specificities of each individual incidence we can find a shared and fundamental crisis of a certain Left strategy. This strategy, in existence since at least the mid 1980s, has been to undergo activity with the aim of reproducing or maintaining an organisation (the needs of reproducing that organisation take precedent over other concerns). The self justification for this strategy has been that when objective conditions change then the organisation can change from a self –reproducing one into a mass organisation that can effect or influence change.

The problem is that objective conditions have changed. The current economic crisis was exactly what people had in mind when they said objective conditions have to change – but no organisation is growing or gaining any more traction on the world. Some can ignore this problem and carry on out of habit but many can’t and this is causing splits and regroupment attempts.

There are a number of regroupments and some of them seem genuine in their desire to re-consider questions of organisation. Part of what was exposed during the SWP split was the horrible bureaucratic manoeuvres that Trotskyite groups use in order to maintain discipline within their organisations and to maintain hegemony within front groups, etc. These have been brought into the open and people want to move away from them.

However it seems to us that this gets things the wrong way around. We need to reconsider what role political organisation actually needs to fulfil. In fact:

We need to start by thinking about how class composition has changed.

This can guide us as the role that political organisation presently needs to fulfil.

From this we can work out the best organisational structure.

B) On the other hand we can also see a crisis in more horizontalist (and particularly spontaenist) forms of organisation. 2010-2011. There was a real adoption and spread of horizontalist methods – consensus, assemblies, etc. These politics did gain some traction but that traction seems to have ended.

To ask why our project at the moment is firstly to look at the last wave of struggle and look what functions a spontaneous horizontalism failed to fulfil. Or what functions were previously fulfilled by political parties and ask if these functions are necessary now and then ask whether there are ways we could address these functions without falling into the traps and problems of traditional, hierarchical party organisation.

Some of the functions that we can see were lacking in the movements of 2011 are as follows:

1. Hold together network - We need to work out ways to hold together the network of militants and wider participants that came together during the MoE –go into next wave of struggle in stronger position. The lesson from the SWP split here is that we need to do this in ways that don’t then cut us off from recognising when a new wave of struggle erupts in a place or form that we weren’t expecting (we’ve tried to address this problem through the concepts of generations).

-Infrastructural role – change on a more micro-political level – developing technologies, tools that make certain political responses more likely. – We can think this in relation to viral leadership – this fits with a projectal politics. The invention of Sukey, etc. – Can discuss the idea of planka Nu or at least pirate bay in relation to this – **Could indeed nick stuff from the plan c talk we did.**

2. Memory – Parties have often been thought of as the memory of the class. We need forms that can carry the lessons of previous waves of struggle. To stop us reinventing the wheel every time.

3. Analysis - We need mechanisms through which we can collective analyse where we can analyse where we are and what needs to happen next. Need to spread that ability through society. From the Commune article on Big Flame "They involved a serious engagement with class reality, rather than the posture of leadership, and pre-fabricated answers; supporting a struggle, but doing so by finding their latent anti-capitalist content, not merely by providing logistical assistance."

What is the role of enquiry?

4. Shock absorber – One of the functions that analysis can play is to act as a shock absorber – to help us cope with new stuff that occurs without shattering organisations or our understanding of the world. We are thinking of the effect of the 2011 London riots as an example of a shock on the body politic here.

5. We have also been wondering whether political organisations also need to directly providing welfare or care, as these are being addressed less and less through state. We aren’t used to thinking of political organisations playing this role but past examples might include the BPP (free breakfast programmes), The MST in Brazil and the German SDP in the early 20th century. Even movements we wouldn’t want to follow such as Hamas – directly provide welfare for their supporters.

Then there are other functions that political parties have fulfilled which we might have traditionally steered away from such as:

6. Leadership – providing initiative to break inertia, providing guidance on the question: What is to be done?

Even though this is normally a thorny question for libertarians but we do this. If we look at the practice of the 2011 we can see some new ways to think about this problem. People have talked about this as viral politics – where a group can provide leadership by example, which if it is easily replicable, can be picked up and copied by others who have no formal connection to the original group – UK Uncut as an example of this (we might also think of OWS). However unlike traditional idea of leadership there is no guarantee that the same group will provide the right idea next time. So there is a supplementary role for groups here – which is the role of the amplification chamber – during the viral spread of ideas or forms of action pre-existing groups or networks of activists played an important early adopter role. Groups might have to be sensitive to when they can play a leadership role or an amplification role.

7. Taking power - This brings us to the Party function that most comes to mind. Can we change the world without taking power? An open question but we should recognise that quite often we want what is gained by movements turned into institutional change – such as changes in the law – which brings us to the relation between movements and electoral parties – the problem is that a turn to electoral politics tends to be demobilising – this isn’t on the cards in the UK at the moment so we haven’t too much to say on it.

8. Transference/Identification – The final function we want to look at, which we think is the most interesting, is also the most difficult to get a grip on – we want to use a psycho-analytic term, transference, to think about it – which is a certain way in which people identify with an organisation.

To explain it we can look at the Occupy movement and in particular the prominence of the general assembly.

What role were the general assemblies fulfilling? In part decision-making but there was also a big emphasis on people expressing themselves. Expressing yourself politically and getting taken seriously by large numbers of people can be a very powerful experience. So there was a big emphasis on allowing people to express themselves and to testify about the lives. We are taught to see any problems in our lives, such as debt, as a result of personal failings. When we testify about our lives in a collective situation and see lots of other people in the same situation it becomes obvious that this can’t be down to personal failings but must have structural causes. It is a way of recognising our commonalities.

The problem is however that testifying isn’t enough. It’s a starting point but we then need to change the world and changing the world means changing ourselves at the same time. It means becoming different people. So as well as projecting and recognising ourselves as we are how can we recognise each other as we change?

This is a complicated problem so to clarify it we want to compare it to another process of personal transformation – the one in which we get the concept of transference – which is the Psychoanalysis. – This isn’t to argue for a psychoanalytic politics but to pick up a concept from there and try and adapt it to our political situation.

There is a particular relationship in psychoanalysis between an analyst who is supposed to guide the transformational process and the person undergoing analysis who is the one being transformed. The concept of transference tries to capture how that relationship becomes caught up in the process of transformation. So there is a tendency for the person being analysed to project on to the analyst – either in feelings of attachment/love or its flip side feelings of rejection/resistance. Freud thought that this was an example of the patient transferring their feelings towards their father on to the analyst. If the analyst reveals this transference then the analysand can recognise their subjectivites, their problems and resolve them and indeed recognise their transformation in their altered attitude towards the analyst.

Now we don’t have to sign up to an psychoanalytical world view to recognise some insight into how we relate to both political organisations and to political leaders. So people talk about how the figure of Chavez allowed the poor to become an active subject in Venezuela - when it isn’t in many other countries. OK Bolivia might explain another example but we can see how projection onto a leadership figure might provide confidence in political change in certain circumstances.

The problem with this is that when Chavez dies the potential for political transformation seems to die with him. The potential for transformation really lies in the social body as a whole but because we have used a leader as a screen to upon which to project our potential to change we can come to think that the potential to change is some special property of his particular body.

Che Guevara is a classic political icon. His picture was in student bedrooms throughout the world and he stood for the desire for revolution. Thirty years later you have a different political figure – Sub-commandante Marcos of the Zapatistas – and once again iconic images spread throughout the world.

But this time instead of an individuals face we have a mask – identifying features and there is an individual under that mask but it is still a mask, a screen to project yourself upon.

And this difference is reflected in their different attitudes towards being a revolutionary – for Che you needed to follow him into the jungle and do what he did, take up arms and through armed struggle create the new man. For Marcos to be a revolutionary you didn’t need to come to Chiapas but you had to struggle where you were.

So is there another way to think about this? Is there anyway we can address this role in a more horizontal way?

Well we want to think this through we now want to turn to pop music for other examples of this leadership through a relation of transference.

So Johnny Rotten is one example – seeing his example on TV made lots of people wan to be like him – and indeed punk rock did change lots of people’s lives. So there is one difference – people want to follow Chavez but they want to be Johnny Rotten – Do It Yourself.

But Johnny Rotten is also a warning of what can go wrong – he is trapped in a personae he adopted as a 17 year old and now cant escape it. So we have also been thinking of the example of David Bowie and some of the characters he adopted over the years such as Ziggy Stardust – who was supposed to be an emissary through which aliens wanted to speak to us. – The point here is that it was obviously a character – where as Rotten’s personae could be mistaken for the actual person of John Lydon – this was less the case with Ziggy Stardust. Yet lots of people saw that character and wanted to adopt that persona because it spoke to them. People used it to change themselves and to recognise others who ere were doing the same.

What was great was that it was a character that you couldn’t mistake for a specific person but also that in 1973 he pulled the plug on that character, killed him off and adopted a new character.

Is there anyway in which we could incorporate this idea of invented characters, that perhaps different people could inhabit and which could allow people to identify with the process of transformation?

Comments for later:

It’s these limits that have led us to re-think the role of political organisation and in fact to help form a political organisation – Plan C.

But we’d be the first to admit that neither the Left regroupment projects nor our own attempts have gone far enough in re-thinking the role of political organisation. Why is it so difficult?

Any form of politics has a certain internal consistency. It makes sense if political questions are approached form a particular angle, or if you ask the right questions. They make less sense and then stop making sense if different problems are posed.

Just as we are asking Left groups to consider problems that they normally wouldn’t – so we think that we militants from more libertarian traditions need to examine the places where our approach stops making sense.