

WE
UNHAPPY
FEW

The Communist Group

Communism will be an intense and unpredictable struggle for life on the part of the species, which no one has yet brought to a conclusion, since the sterile and pathological solitude of the Ego does not deserve the name of life, just as the treasure of the miser is not wealth, not even personal wealth.¹

1. Amadeo Bordiga,
'The Guignol in History', *Il
programma comunista* 7
(April 3-17, 1953).

THE CASE OF THE PRAXIS GROUP

A group of people who met through their participation in various struggles decide to produce a theoretical magazine. What they produce could be described as a Marxist journal for anarchists, combining reports of struggles and movements, many of which they participated in, with longer historical and theoretical material. It also embodies a set of assumptions about the role of those who want revolution, assumptions that could be summarized along the following lines: you intervene or involve yourself in struggles not as teachers or provocateurs, but as fellow proletarians who share a desire for revolution. While ready to make friends and comrades in the struggle, you never make growing a group the goal. Instead, you push struggles as far as they will go by being open to the radical potential of any given moment. You ruthlessly oppose bureaucratic manipulators of all stripes, and all those who for whatever reason are wedded to the return to normality. To do this you must draw on the rich history of proletarian struggle, a history that—from the Paris Commune to May '68, from the emergence of workers' councils in the early twentieth century through to the refusal of work and the "Movement of '77"—demonstrates again and again the spontaneous capacity of proletarians to leap ahead of their situation, to educate their educators.

This way of orienting itself to struggles worked well for the group both in its practice and in its capacity to make theoretical sense of what was going on in the world. However, when confronting a sophisticated theory that challenged some of these assumptions, the group proved unable to deal with the crisis that the new ideas provoked. A division emerged between a group orthodoxy and dissidents attracted to the new ideas. The group's internal discussion, which had been characterised by an openness and seriousness towards critique, became polarised between these two sides: one side feeling it had given the discussion as much time as it deserved, the other wanting to pursue it to the end. The discussion became stuck. Following a logic of conflict escalation—trust broke down, motives became suspected. One side argued that the ideas it was fed up with did not really make sense or add up to that much. They suspected that behind the other side's insistence on pursuing the theoretical discussion there was a destructive impulse towards the group's

previously shared aim. The other side saw a defensiveness and bad faith in the first side's argumentation, which they traced back to the discussion, implicitly questioning some key unstated assumptions of the group. At a certain point, the group seemed to arrive at a thoughtful way of going forward. The orthodox side agreed to develop their critique of the new ideas. Although this course of action seemed to offer the possibility of real progress, it was suddenly abandoned. The orthodox side moved from talk to action, expelling the dissidents without any further discussion. Thus, despite the group having enshrined a critique of the sect-like behaviour prevalent in other groups, it had split and had done so in an acrimonious and unpleasant way, which had a wrenching, traumatic character for both sides. Those who had left or been expelled reformed as a discussion group taking a great deal of time to work through what had happened. The residual group redirected itself to practical matters, to what it saw as its prime task—the production of the magazine—and rarely discussed what had happened and why.

THE CASE OF THE THEORY GROUP

A small group of individuals meet regularly, reading and discussing a variety of texts, talking about whatever is raised that is considered worth talking about. The group imposes a very strict frame for its discussion: everyone is expected to do the reading, come to every meeting, and be committed to the process for at least a couple of years. The notion is that such rigid boundaries will allow the content of the group—the conversational process—to be unconstrained and attain a depth that would not be achievable if the commitment to the process was less demanding. Whilst an interest in struggles, in communism and in the revolutionary overcoming of capitalism forms a background to why the group had come together, this purpose is not held to tightly in the conversation, which is instead allowed to take its own course. There is an idea of being maximally open to what is happening in the world rather than trying to fit it into any existing theoretical framework. One or more people take up subjects for research with the intention of writing something and bringing it back to the group. There is an idea of eventually publishing in some form, but there is a desire not to rush into it. There is a faith in the idea that if one takes one's time

something truly worthwhile may emerge. That approach seems to be paying off. The discussions are rich and creative. There seems to be something like a collective field between the participants: ideas flow freely, with each adding to others' contributions without much sense of anyone owning the ideas. There is a shared sense of making progress together and that something worthwhile, even important, is developing. The comparison is made to the good feeling of a band jamming whose music is really coming together.

However, at other points, relations between individuals and between individuals and the group as a whole become troubled. Distrust, hostility, even paranoia emerge that negatively mirror the intensity of the positive feelings when the group is working well. At times what is going on feels for some members strange, distressing, even a bit mad. At such moments the group which seemed to thrive on the freely given creativity of its members suddenly makes great demands of time and emotional effort to understand and manage its internal tensions. With some members engaged in post-graduate academia, one fear that emerges is that the ideas freely given to the group's collective discussion may be appropriated by some members to pursue individual academic careers. When one member states his desire to go abroad to study and requests altering the group's way of operating so that he can continue to be involved in some way, a strong reaction is provoked. His departure is felt by everyone as a big loss and a threat to the group's continuity. However, while some might be willing to facilitate "membership from afar", others feel the group must take this member's decision to leave the country as a complete break; this, or they themselves cannot continue with the group. The group is consumed by a tension that is only resolved when this member "agrees" to cease group membership. Less than a year later, an individual who has played a leading role in the group resigns, expressing exhaustion with the "politics of groupuscul life". Going forward, efforts by new people to become involved are as often as not difficult either for the new members, the existing ones or both. The group survives these and other stresses, eventually producing a publication that has a measure of success, but the feeling in the group rarely touches either the exhilarating creativity or the tension and struggle of the earlier period.

These stories express some of the gratifying but also frustrating and unpleasant sides of being together in groups, in this case "political" groups. Neither group were sects in the normal sense: they were not orientated towards recruitment and numeric growth but focused on specific tasks. They were composed of people with a degree of maturity and experience in struggles and theory. Indeed, the way in which the Praxis Group related to struggles (an orientation largely shared by the Theory Group) is perhaps about as good an approach as can be suggested. Participation in struggles on such a basis creates moments of connection with others that can be profoundly transformative. However, the emotionally charged way some of the conflicts were expressed underscores a darker side of group life that is also a common experience.

What was striking about the experience of the Praxis Group was that it prided itself on openness and non-dogmatism towards struggles, but in its own discussions succumbed to an intractable conflict resolved only by resorting to actions that it did not even try to explain rationally. The Praxis Group pattern of conflict between a side representing the established position and a dissenting tendency is one often repeated in political groups, frequently leading to acrimonious and venomous splits that those outside the group — and even participants themselves — often find hard to understand.

In the case of the Theory Group, there was a sudden switch to hostility and distrust after it had functioned at a high degree of almost effortless cooperation. This case captures something experienced by other groups and projects we have heard of, namely an inability to sustain themselves at an initially exhilarating, intensely rewarding, and high level of cooperation and shared creativity without at some point crashing into an opposite experience of suspicion, mistrust, and antagonism.

These experiences seemed quite baffling until we came across some psychoanalytic theories of group dynamics. These theories can help explain these and other cases, and we will return to them later.² However, we might wonder what relevance such small group experience really has to getting beyond capitalism...

If "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves";³

2. See parts III and IV below.

3. 'Address and Provisional Rules of the Working Men's International Association', 1864 (MECW 20), 14.

if communism is a matter of billions ceasing through revolution to produce and reproduce capital, changing their form of life and thus themselves, then how do we understand the existence and activity of those “minorities” (including ourselves), who in the apparent absence of such a general movement develop an explicit consciousness of the need for “revolution” or “communism”? Do they have certain “tasks” now or in the future? Is it possible to be revolutionary in the absence of revolution or to be communist in the absence of communism? If not, then how do we understand ourselves and our activity?

We?

This is a text about the *we*. Who do we think we are? How do we understand what we are doing? Naturally, we do not mean only the “we” that produces this journal but a wider we whose boundary remains unspecified. This text attempts to look in two directions at once. In one lies the group phenomena that will produce communism—this will clearly be at the level of class struggle and social movements, mass strikes, occupations, assemblies, crowds, riots, insurrections, and ultimately revolution(s) and communisation. In the other direction is the experience of being in a small group, more or less formal, orientated mostly to thinking about capitalism and the real movement of its overcoming. Drawing on a distinction made by Henri Simon, we can say that the former phenomena display the features of *spontaneous organisation* while the latter is characterised by forms of *willed organisation*.⁴

Spontaneous organisation emerges from a given collectivity acting to defend its interests in an immediate, concrete situation and is able to change its forms and goals as that situation develops. By contrast, willed organisation is defined by a “a limited (often very limited) number of people” coming together on the basis of some pre-established ideas of their interests, which they then attempt to promote.⁵

Such a polarity corresponds to an experience of the division between the small formal or informal willed groups we participate in and the wider, dynamic movements and collectivities of struggle that rise and

fall with a logic that goes beyond our wills. Those involved in willed organisation are often very attracted to movements of spontaneous organisation because they recognise it is the pole out of which social transformation will come.

What is the relation between the willed communist group explicitly thinking about the overcoming of capitalism and the spontaneous group phenomena that will carry out that overcoming? There is a naïve conception among some communist groups, in which they feel that their key role is to persuade other people of the validity of their ideas and/or to lead the masses or class in its struggles. Faced with their lack of impact on the world, their main activity often becomes to increase in numbers—build their group, organisation or party—so that they can have greater influence.

Of course, within the spontaneous organisation of existing struggles and social movements, there are tasks performed by those involved. Often those performing these tasks or taking such roles emerge from the situation of struggle itself; at other times, a role can be played by those connecting to such struggles from a pre-existing political identity or “willed group” involvement. In a revolutionary movement, there would also be tasks to be done. However, it is not at all clear that there are *revolutionary* tasks in relation to *existing* social movements and struggles. Nor is it clear in any future revolutionary conjuncture what role (good or bad) those with pre-existing political identities will be able to play.

It is with some caution then that we attend to the question of who we are and what we do in terms of the pole of willed organisation. The focus on the small group or milieu can look like navel-gazing in the face of the enormity of developments in the world that seem to beg for attention. Talking about who we are, even in a critical way, risks falling into issues of identity formation and position-taking, and is reminiscent of some of the bad habits of unreconstructed “revolutionaries” who spend most of their time talking about (and to) themselves and their “movement”.

A relatively healthy impulse perhaps would be to avoid the identitarian question entirely—what matters is to express theoretically what one is able to learn from struggles. If, as suggested by Debord

5. Ibid. This distinction has the merit of not posing the ‘problem of organisation’ as one of spontaneity on the one hand and organisation and consciousness on the other. In Simon’s formulation consciousness and organisation exist at both poles but in different forms.

4. Henri Simon, ‘Some Thoughts on Organization’, *Anarchist Review* 5 (Cienfuegos 1979). Henri Simon was a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SouB), and *Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières* (ICO), and since 1975 has produced *Echanges et Mouvement* where this text first appeared. For an account of his life see the film: ‘Henri Simon – The Story of a (Non-) Militant’ (labornet 2018).

(following Marx and Hegel), theory is the expression of our times and its struggles in thought, it is a matter of indifference who expresses it.⁶ Yet, of course, those who actually produce works of theory like Hegel's *Logic*, Marx's *Capital*, or Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* do tend to be people with time to read, to discuss, and to think.

As Wilfred Bion suggests, if the "I" or the "we" of a statement is to the fore, then that is a sign that something false is at work.⁷ Ideas that seem indelibly imprinted with the supposed identity of those who have them—whether an individual ("this is my opinion"), a group ("here is what we think"), or even an imagined lineage such as Marxism, Leninism, Trotskyism, anarcho-syndicalism, council and left communism, or situationism⁸—are nearly always suspect. Even if such traditions emerged once as a dynamic way of making sense of the experience of a period of class struggle, they tend to become hardened frameworks into which experience is forced to fit.

One can see such "isms" as so many apparatuses for thinking which in fact have generally become apparatuses for *not* thinking too much. We would hope that the texts that have appeared in *Endnotes* simply give expression to some true thoughts about the world, about capitalism and the movement of its overcoming, rather than imply our identity as a group, as individual authors, or as a political tendency.

However, we are, on some level, also a group composed of a number of individuals, and our participation in larger group processes and struggles are also mediated through this. As we draw from our own experience of being a small (anti-)political group oriented to the development of theory, we are aware that this is a pretty peculiar and unfashionable experience. However, the task that we set ourselves—thinking about capitalism and the possibility of its overcoming—is one that we suggest is not so alien, at least to our readers, and is perhaps, at some level, "in everybody's heads". We engage in self-reflection about what we do and how we do it. That is why, in this text, we are sharing aspects of how we do this.

6. As we shall see, the Situationist International (SI) actually felt that being able to give expression to such theory placed heavy demands on the revolutionary organisation and the individuals who composed it.

7. See back cover quotation and part IV below.

8. The SI's antipathy to this term and their critique of pro-situs showed an awareness of the problem even if it was not overcome.

The Impotence of the Revolutionary group?

In a still-provocative text published in 1939, Sam Moss, a member of a council communist group in the USA, mercilessly undermined the significance which "revolutionaries" and "revolutionary groups" assign themselves.⁹

Moss starts off from how the problem appears: on the one hand, there is a "we"—that of "revolutionaries"—and on the other, there are the masses or the working class. The former wish to overthrow capitalism but are incapable of doing so, while the latter, the only possible agent of a revolutionary struggle, are concerned with everyday needs and not the revolution. Asking himself about the reason for this apparent difference in objectives between the masses and "revolutionists", he argues that while the masses are socialised by capitalist culture to "play the role of machines", the "revolutionists" are a harmless "byproduct". For Moss the masses are an understandable product of the society while the "revolutionists" are merely "deviations from the working class" representing "isolated cases of workers who, because of unique circumstances in their individual lives, have diverged from the usual course of development".¹⁰

Going further, Moss suggests the ground of the difference is that the "revolutionists" are "unsuccessful careerists"—workers who have acquired an intellectual interest and a higher level of education than their fellows, but whose personal advance has been blocked. He continues that although their efforts to help the rest of the class may appear to come "from the noblest of motives, certainly it doesn't take much to see that one suffers for another only when he has identified that other's sorrow with his own".¹¹

Separated from their fellow workers who don't share their concerns, the "revolutionists" tend to unite outside of the workplace with others like themselves, people who are interested in changing society. Yet these groupings, in wishing to influence the class struggle in non-revolutionary circumstances, are faced with a dilemma: either they can have an effect but only by adapting themselves to the limits of the movement—thus no longer being revolutionary—or they can maintain their revolutionary principles but their intervention will thus be lacking in effect.

9. Sam Moss, 'On the Impotence of Revolutionary Groups', *Living Marxism* vol. 4 no. 7 (1939).

10. *Ibid.*, 216.

11. *Ibid.*

Moss maintains that such groups “have done nothing to affect the course of history either for good or ill”.¹²

The separate existence of “revolutionary groups” is not, then, an expression of their revolutionary nature and function, but a product of this non-revolutionary situation, and “when the revolution does come, their numbers will be submerged within it, not as functioning organizations, but as individual workers”.¹³

A key aspect of Moss’s argument is the way he undercuts the justifications that “non-Leninist” groups and individuals—such as his own avowedly anti-vanguardist council communists—use for their own activity. Noting that council communists and others emphasize their difference from Leninist groups by claiming they do not want to “lead the working class”,¹⁴ he brutally points out that this amounts only to an ideological difference to which corresponds no practical material difference in such groups’ exterior relation to the working class.¹⁵ He also points out that if an “anti-Leninist” revolutionary group against all likelihood succeeded in their stated purpose of escalating the class struggle, it would be playing exactly the “leadership” role they reproach the “Leninists” for wishing to perform.

Having given up on the idea that the revolutionary group can escalate the class struggle, Moss outlines a more realistic conception of how “what we do” might relate to revolution. Rather than delude ourselves with illusory stories about the “role of revolutionaries” and the persuasive power of ideas, we should recognise that our existence and activity emerges from a personal—one might say emotional—need based on the peculiarities of our life histories. Moss notes that while in present circumstances only a small minority feel the need for this activity, and they cannot lead or persuade others who do not share it, their existence suggests that when large masses are induced to feel a similar need—not by peculiar personal circumstances, but by the objective situation—they will act in the same way, namely to come together and use whatever weapons they can find. Moss suggests

12. Ibid., 217. Acknowledging that there is a contrast between today’s groupuscules and the ‘mass revolutionary organisations of the past’ which might have appeared to have more impact, Moss asks pertinently ‘but how revolutionary were they?’

13. Ibid., 219.

14. As a wag put it: ‘not even if they asked us!’

15. ‘Like them, we function outside the spheres of production, where the class struggle is fought; like them, we are isolated from the large mass of workers. We differ only in ideology from all the other groups, but then it is only in ideology on which all the other groups differ. Practically there is no difference between all groups.’ Ibid., 218.

that when they act, it will not be because their ideas have been changed but because of a changed sense of necessity, which when acted upon, will result in a change of their ideas. In the meantime, he suggests that while other groups overemphasise the importance of ideas and thus of themselves as the carriers of those ideas, “we wish to see the truth of each situation”.¹⁶

16. Ibid., 219.

So what are we? — Deviants and freaks.

Why do we do what we do? — Because it serves a personal need.

What can we do then? — We can at least see the truth of the situation, perhaps.

Moss’s scepticism hits a chord. There are hundreds of “revolutionary” groups, often expressing adherence to particular ideologies which are defined by a prominent thinker of the past, often with the terms “marxist”, “communist”, “anarchist”, “socialist” or “workers” in their titles, often claiming to be parties, or seeing themselves as embryonic poles of regroupment for a future (or imaginary) party. An understandable reaction to these groups and much of this activity is scepticism. One may find some of these groups more agreeable than others, and/or find some of their members more agreeable than others, but as a whole, they paint rather a sad picture. There is so much unconsidered and naïve presupposition, so much evasion, illusion, and delusion, brazen mismatches between what people actually do and what they think they do, between the story they tell themselves and the reality of their impact on the world, between the grandiosity of their ambition and the misery of their actuality. The great deal of time and energy these groups expend simply on maintaining themselves is also notable, and from time to time, they suffer crises, often resulting in venomous splits and fallouts.

Many prefer to avoid that world of formalised groups and exist loosely in a scene or milieu, perhaps engaging in more modest projects. However, even those who have never felt attracted to or are personally repelled by participation in groupuscules may remain in a certain sense part of the “communist group”, defined as the set of people oriented to the communist overcoming of capitalism.¹⁷ And it should be

noted that illusions are not restricted to formal groups, but also exist among informal milieus and scenes,¹⁸ and, of course, even within individuals themselves.

The critique of the failings of other people and groups rarely extends to oneself, and indeed such criticisms of others can act as a binding agent for those sharing one's prejudices. We can all experience some of the difficult and even crazy stuff that tends to afflict formalised groups. Think, for example, of the way in which, within informal scenes as much as in organised groups, conflict is often not about what it purports to be about; how others' behaviour, particularly when it is seen to transgress certain norms, can become the subject of scandal and intrigue; how one is pulled to take sides in petty personalised disputes; how emotionally charged arguments can become; how one can feel sucked into certain kinds of behaviours and roles; how painful and personal political fall-outs can be; how nasty people can be to each other. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that both formalised radical groups and looser milieus are prone to forms of madness from time to time.

In relation to the pretensions of political groups, we and others often reach for certain Marx quotations. There are his dense "Theses on Feuerbach", in which Marx criticised those who divide society into two parts, one of which has the role to educate the other, and argues that social and self-change must be understood as a unitary revolutionary practice in which the educator must be educated.¹⁹

There is his insistence, in a letter to Ruge, that "we" do not have principles and doctrines to give to the world and its struggles, but rather that our task is to help the world become conscious of what it is already fighting for.²⁰

Then there is the line from *The German Ideology* about communism not being an ideal that we seek to realise but rather the real movement that abolishes the present state of things.²¹

17. If not, it is unlikely they would be reading this text.

18. See Tiqqun, 'Theses on the Terrible Community' in *Tiqqun 2* (October 2001).

19. 'The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.' Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', 1845 (MECW 5), 4.

20. 'We do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles. We do not say to the world: Cease your struggles, they are foolish; we will give you the true slogan of struggle. We merely show the world what it is really fighting for, and consciousness is something that it has to acquire, even if it does not want to.' Marx, 'Letter to Ruge', September 1843 (MECW 3), 144.

While the thrust of all these statements is to put the "role of communists" in perspective, and the "real movement" notion, in particular, seems to be a fundamental part of Marx's (Hegelian) contribution to communist theory, it is not at all obvious what behaviour they actually imply. A notion of the real movement can, it seems, mean (and justify) anything, everything and nothing. Indeed it seems to have a danger of acting as a comfort to justify whatever sort of activity one is already committed to. If there is a movement of the abolition of the existing conditions happening before our eyes it is not at all clear what this is and how we might relate to it or participate in it.

There are three main approaches or threads that have particularly informed our understanding of this question of who we are and what we do. These approaches can be filed under the following headings:

1. Conceptions and *critiques of organisation* that emerged in the second revolutionary wave of the 20th century, primarily among councilists, situationists and left communists.
2. The "open Marxist" understanding of theory as based on a *conversation* involving mutual recognition, practical reflexivity, and immanent critique, as exemplified in some texts by Richard Gunn.
3. Psycho-dynamic conceptions of *groups and thinking*, especially those associated with Wilfred Bion.

These are approaches that we have found useful, which have and continue to inform our activity, so we offer them here. The essential idea is that these threads can inform each other, making up for weaknesses or blind spots of each approach on its own.

We do not think that these approaches exhaust the resources that can be drawn on. Reading Gunn is not necessary to make a critical and open use of Marx, nor is it necessary to know Bion's theory of thinking in order to think. The post '68 debates on organisation and the party that we find significant are not the only ones worth looking at. Moreover, much of what any of these sources tell us can be discovered or rediscovered in other ways. What matters is learning from

21. 'Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things.' Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1846 (MECW 5), 49.

experience, including the experience of trying to think for oneself and with others. The abstraction of this text has to be, ultimately, brought phenomenologically back to one's own experience. This is something we all have to do in our own way, but we expect people to recognise themselves and their experiences in what follows, and we think what we have found useful might be of use to others.

I. COUNCILISM AND ITS CRITIQUE

In the matter of organisation this, then, is the dilemma of the radical. In order to do something of social significance, actions must be organised. Organised actions, however, turn into capitalistic channels. It seems that in order to do something now, one can do only the wrong thing and in order to avoid false steps, one should undertake none at all. The political mind of the radical is destined to be miserable; it is aware of its utopianism and it experiences nothing but failures. In mere self-defence, the radical stresses spontaneity always, unless he is a mystic, with the secretly-held thought that he is talking nonsense.¹

As has been dealt with elsewhere, the conception of revolution as "communisation" with which *Endnotes* has identified itself is a product of the second revolutionary wave of the twentieth century.² Specifically, it develops in France in the years after the most famous event of that wave — May '68. It emerged in response to the struggles of the period and the attempts to make sense of this wave of struggles and how revolution and communism were being posed in a new way. One of the central ways in which revolution seemed to be posed differently was around what had been known as "the question of organisation".

From 1917 to 1968

It seemed, at one time, that "what was to be done" was obvious. In the 19th and early 20th centuries there were large groups within the working class that claimed to be for revolution and communism; there was an international workers' movement with mass organisations — unions and parties — adhering at least nominally to revolutionary ideologies such as the Kautsky / Lenin social democratic idea of revolution, or a syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist one. To be a communist or revolutionary seemed to amount to joining such organisations or at least being part of a movement that these organisations did much to define.

1. Paul Mattick, 'Spontaneity and Organisation' in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism* (Merlin 1978), 120.

2. See for example Endnotes, 'Bring Out Your Dead' in *Endnotes* 1 (2008), and Aufheben, 'Communist Theory: Beyond the Ultra-left' in *Aufheben* 11 (2003).

However, in the revolutionary wave that ended WWI, and in Spain later, these organisations were not merely defeated in their attempt to deliver the socialism or anarchism that was taken to be their goals. Rather, when put to the test, they seemed to actively betray or suppress the “revolution”. The parties of the Second International overwhelmingly supported WWI and the dominant party of that International—the Social Democratic Party of Germany—then employed proto-fascists to drown the German Revolution in blood. The Third International imagined itself as refounding “revolutionary Marxism” but soon showed itself to be subordinated to the internal policies of the Bolsheviks in Russia who became engaged in a “primitive socialist accumulation” whose main difference from the ordinary capitalist variety that it copied was the terror and rapidity with which it turned peasants into proletarians.³ In Spain, the anarchist leadership of the CNT/FAI joined a republican government, and when anarchist workers resisted that government’s Stalinist-led police attack on them, the anarchist leaders told them the barricades must be torn down.⁴ The very groups that distinguished themselves from the rest of the class as its revolutionary component, and which might at times have played a revolutionary part, also took active counter-revolutionary roles.

One reaction in the subsequent period was to cast the issue as one of betrayal. New groups were formed identifying with a view on the earlier history, an understanding of where things went wrong, and of what lessons have been learnt or which leader or tendency was right. In the wave of struggles in the sixties and seventies, such groups grew somewhat in numbers. However, their attempts to replace the main reformist organisations, and to play the heroic role they imagined their preferred ancestors had done in an earlier period, were unsuccessful. While in the previous period “revolutionary” organisations of the working class had displayed a tendency for unity, Trotskyist and Maoist efforts in the latter period generally displayed a tendency towards fragmentation, competition, sect-like existence, and often a disappearance or re-absorption into the social democratic politics they nominally tried to replace. An alternative to the organisational

3. It was perversely this very success in national capitalist terms that led to the continuing attraction of such politics in the colonial and ex-colonial parts of the world where ‘catch-up modernisation’ was the order of the day.

4. See Paul Mattick, ‘The Barricades Must be Torn Down’ in *International Communist Correspondence* vol. 3 no. 7–8 (1937).

and party fetishism of these groups was the perspective of autonomy and council communism.

The re-emergence and re-eclipse of council communism

For many who came together on the streets and in the occupations of ‘68, a dominant perspective was the rejection of “party communism”, whether of the official communist variety or that of the Trotskyists and Maoists, in favour of autonomous action by the workers themselves and the idea of “All Power to the Workers’ Councils!”. The alternative to organisations like the French Communist Party (PCF) and the trade unions, which opposed themselves to the May movement, was seen to be not a new revolutionary organisation but instead working class self-organisation and autonomy, with the revolution seen as the formation of councils and, by means of them, the management of society by the workers themselves.⁵

May ‘68 seemed to vindicate a “council communist” alternative to the failure of the Russian Revolution.⁶ Contrary to the accounts of betrayal offered by Trotskyism, Maoism, and anarchism, and their linked response of forming new organisations, council communism appeared to provide a more theoretically plausible explanation of what had gone wrong with the workers’ movement and “communism” in the twentieth century. Trotskyism held up the advocate of militarisation of labour and suppressor of Kronstadt as a libertarian or democratic alternative to Stalin, “anti-revisionist” Maoism saw through the Russian lie only to replace it with the Chinese lie, and classical anarchism blamed the failure of Spanish anarchism on the betrayal of its beautiful idea by its leaders. The council communist account of the thwarting of workers’ autonomy and self-organisation seemed to reach a deeper level of explanation. It was not one or the other leader that was the problem, but the whole phenomenon of reliance on leadership and bureaucratic organisation which could be contrasted to workers’ self-activity and autonomous organisation. This

5. As a comrade recently observed: the revolutionary wave of which May ‘68 was emblematic was a ‘convergence of two revolts: on the one hand, revolt by the working class against the background of disintegration of the Fordist compromise which had bolstered productivity throughout the period after the last world war. ... on the other hand, revolt by the younger generation against a repressive and ossified society barely able to cope with the postwar population explosion. Taking various forms, this revolt gradually affected young people of all social classes, not only in France but in all Western countries, and even further afield.’ Lola Miesseroff, ‘50 years later in France: From May 68 to the Yellow Vests’, June 2019.

conception suggests a struggle within the class between its own capacities and will to organise its struggles and its tendency to put its trust in something outside itself.

The reappearance of the ideas of council communism in '68 might seem surprising. Council communism as an organised tendency with roots in the German revolution had more or less ceased to exist by the end of WW2.⁷ However, in the post-war period and especially after the re-emergence of councils in Hungary in 1956, there had emerged groups on the edge of the workers' movement — dissident Trotskyists, anarchists, operaismo / autonomists, "anti-authoritarian" and "libertarian" socialists etc. — who, in opposition to the official workers' organisations, took up aspects of council communist critique and especially the perspective of workers' autonomy. In France, the recovery of this perspective had been particularly influential through the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (SouB).⁸ Thus by the late sixties, a council communist reading of the failure of the Russian Revolution and the workers' movement generally, and its attempt to articulate an anti-Bolshevik communism, had a widespread influence. There was a fit between the anti-bureaucratic and anti-authoritarian spirit of the revolts of that time and the tenets of council communist critique. In particular, the reactionary role played by the unions and official communist parties — and workers' opposition to it — seemed to support a notion of an autonomous workers' struggle separate from these organisational forms. Additionally, although council communism and many of these new tendencies held essentially workerist perspectives, it was possible to some extent to adapt the problematic of autonomy as a means of understanding some of the new struggles inside and outside of production — in the revolt of youth and the counter-cultural movements of the time, in struggles around race, gender, sexuality, etc. — struggles which the primary workers' organisations

6. Our attempt here is not to give a complete account of the events but to address how certain organisational perspectives played out among people who thought of themselves for revolution. For a good appraisal of the limits of what actually happened among the workers see Bruno Astarian, *The French strikes of May–June 1968* (Libcom 2013).

7. A partial exception was the Netherlands, see Philippe Bourrinet, 'The *Communistenbond Spartacus* and the Council-Communist Current (1942–68)' in *The Dutch and German Communist Left* (Brill 2016).

8. SouB had dissolved in 1965 but its ideas remained influential as did groups that either originated in it or were influenced by it. Indication of the significance of such ideas can be seen in Daniel & Gabriel Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: The Left-Wing Alternative* (Andre Deutsch 1968) and Richard Gombin, *The Origins of Modern Leftism* (Penguin 1975).

were often indifferent or hostile to, but which a new generation was attracted to.⁹ The perspective of autonomy thus spoke to the general libertarian or anti-authoritarian mood of large parts of the movements of the time, in which the revolution was seen not as the management of society by a new power but the achievement of autonomy in all areas of life.

But if there was widespread agreement that the ideas of "workers' self-activity" and "all power to the workers' councils" represented an alternative to the Leninist dreams of the small Maoist and Trotskyist group(uscules), there was disagreement on what this meant in terms of activity. Here it is useful to contrast the proper "councilism" represented in '68 by the group *Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières* (ICO)¹⁰ with the understanding of the more famous Situationist International (SI). The perspectives of both these groups had some influence on the situation. While the former was characterised by a deep scepticism about the importance of "revolutionaries" and incredulity about the narratives they tell about their importance, the latter was known for the significance it attributed to the revolutionary movement and itself as its most advanced component.

The Councilism of ICO

The councilist current represented in '68 by ICO and continued to this day by the group *Echanges et Mouvement* starts from a recognition that the question "what we should do" which would-be revolutionary groups pose themselves, is generally a function of their position "outside" a workplace or other situations of struggle.¹¹ Feeling a need to engage with those directly involved in struggle, especially "the workers", the would-be revolutionary will try to influence with leaflets or papers offering, if not explicitly, "leadership", then at least "advice" and "lessons". Or, perhaps, recognising the failure of such external intervention,

9. As Henri Simon writes, 'the new attitudes of students, women, homosexuals and so on, the attitude of workers towards work, all these reflect the desire of those concerned to manage their struggle for themselves and by themselves'. Henri Simon, *The New Movement* (Solidarity 1975), 3.

10. ICO was a more or less direct continuation of ILO (*Informations Liaisons Ouvrières*) a group that had separated from SouB in 1958 because of the more interventionist way Castoriadis wanted to take the organisation. The change in name — from *liaisons* to *correspondances* — indicates the more councilist direction in which the group was moving.

11. We say 'dominant' position because in the aftermath of '68 ICO was infused with individuals and groups with a variety of perspectives until its dissolution in 1972. →

the most militant may try to insert themselves into the situation by going into the factories or wherever the action is expected to be. The “councilist” refuses the desire for such a “role of revolutionaries”. Beyond any immediate activity in their own place of work, councilists largely circulate information and analyses, seeing themselves as simply trying to understand “what people actually do and the real meaning of these actions”.¹²

This scepticism about the importance of “revolutionaries” and their political “intervention” in these struggles has a strong plausibility when it comes to workplace struggles. It is certainly the case that in such conflicts the distinction between those inside and outside the workplace is usually fundamental. What to do from the “inside” is immediately apparent, the possibilities defined by the workers’ positions, their roles in the enterprise, the enterprise’s place in the economy, their relations with those they work with, etc. By comparison to this, what one can do effectively from “outside” is usually not much, unless it is an activity requested by those directly involved.

The collecting and analysis of information about struggles can be a very involving militant activity,¹³ but to limit one’s activity to this role is unattractive for most politicians and “would-be-revolutionaries”. An oft-repeated claim has been that the councilist position implies being passive spectators of the class struggle and a mere mailbox for the class.¹⁴ Most of those drawn to the idea of revolution tend to assert that there must be something more for “us” to do. The councilist will argue that those who think this “councilist” role is too limited are usually impervious to the poor results of their attempts to “do something more”, to play a revolutionary role. As Henri Simon argues, the form of existence of the “willed group”, its organisation around a shared set of ideas rather than the shared situation from which spontaneous organisation arises, leads to certain determined kinds of action: “more often than not a limited

What we might call the original ICO perspective was then carried on by *Echanges*. We will run together the positions of ILO, ICO and *Echanges* because they have an essential continuity, one represented by the “non-militant” Henri Simon, to whom some of the main texts are attributed.

12. Echanges et Mouvement, ‘What is Echanges et Mouvement as a Group?’ *Collective Action Notes* 14–15 (1996), 31.

13. Indeed if a defining feature of such councilism is a skepticism towards organisation, a remarkably consistent and determined will to organise can be seen in the ILO/ICO/*Echanges* continuity.

14. In actual fact, the desire to be a mailbox for the class, i.e. for globally billions of people, is a very ambitious and quite unrealisable desire.

collectivity speaks to and acts towards a larger one, in a direction which is inevitably that of people who ‘know’ (or think they know) towards those ‘who do not know’ (or know imperfectly) and who must be persuaded”.¹⁵

By contrast, what is needed for the councilist is to learn from those struggles and to resist temptations to offer advice or direction. The latter is seen “as an elitist concept created by those who seek to use and dominate workers’ struggles”.¹⁶

With the last line we see that a realistic sobriety and justified scepticism about the pretensions of willed groups¹⁷ slips into something else — the view that such groups and their “unwanted interventions” are a major obstacle to the autonomous development of the struggle. From the councilist perspective the mentality of the “willed group”, this sense of a determinant role, is normally of little consequence, but in times of struggle it is seen to have a detrimental effect. Such groups are seen to relate to the spontaneous organisation as an object, at best perhaps going along with the movement while “trying to bend” it “towards its own ideology and objectives”. One senses here an inversion: the revolutionaries whose sense of their necessity and importance is seen as mistaken, are nonetheless granted a powerful role, that of recuperating and fucking up the struggles that would otherwise go further.¹⁸

The SI

This fear of doing something in relation to the class was strongly criticised by another group active in May ‘68, the Situationist International (SI), who wrote:

for these workers, ‘doing something’ has automatically become a shameful inclination to substitute oneself for ‘the worker’ — for a sort

15. Henri Simon, ‘Some Thoughts on Organisation’, *Collective Action Notes* (1979), 3.

16. Echanges et Mouvement, ‘What is Echanges et Mouvement as a Group?’

17. ‘Class struggle exists and develops independently of revolutionary groups or movements. The level and size of the so called participation of revolutionary groups in individual struggles never determines or fundamentally influences the level and size of those struggles.’ *Ibid*.

18. *Théorie Communiste* would later argue that councilism’s problematic of autonomy involves critiquing all the mediations that link the class to capital (trade unions, politics etc.) as imperfect expressions of its revolutionary essence. Intervention by revolutionaries is then seen as one more mediation thwarting the expression of the revolutionary essence. But essence and existence can not be opposed in this way. See *Théorie Communiste*, ‘Théorie Communiste’, in *Théorie Communiste* 14 (1997).

of pure, being-in-himself worker who, by definition, would exist only in his own factory, where for example the Stalinists would force him to keep silent, and where ICO would have to wait for all the workers to purely liberate themselves *on the spot* (otherwise wouldn't they risk substituting themselves for this still mute real worker?). Such an ideological acceptance of dispersion defies the essential need whose vital urgency was felt by so many workers in May: the need for coordination and communication of struggles and ideas, starting from bases of free encounter outside their union-policed factories.¹⁹

Indeed as the SI's argument continues, there is something self-contradictory and metaphysical in the councilist line of reasoning, for surely even the limited activity of the few dozen members of ICO producing and sharing their analyses with other workers is a form of "substitution" of their ideas for those that the passive workers reading them would otherwise spontaneously have had!

The SI combined a perspective of "all power to the councils" with no small sense of the importance of the revolutionary movement and of themselves as its most advanced part.²⁰ Most commentators on the SI have failed to pick up on how their own understanding of themselves as an organisation was central to the strengths and the limitations of the theory they produced.²¹ As Roland Simon argues, the lack of modesty in the SI's ideas about the importance of the role of revolutionaries and the revolutionary organisation is connected to the novel content that the SI assigned to the workers' councils and thus to a way in which the SI made a fundamental advance on other groups of the time.²²

In notions like the critique of the poverty of everyday life and the rejection of work, the SI were in touch with a different quality of the revolutionary wave they were immersed in compared to those earlier in

the century. In keeping with this different character, the SI argued that the councils would have to adopt a new content, based not on the management of work and the existing world but the abolition of work—"in the usual present day sense"²³—and the never-ending radical transformation of the latter.²⁴ The contradiction in the SI between its slogans—"All Power to the Workers' Councils!" and "Never Work!"²⁵—is not an absolute contradiction, but a site of the productive tension in their outlook.

It is thus wrong to see the SI as simply taking over the limits of SouB who had identified socialism with workers' self-management. The SI, as Roland Simon writes: "never conceived of communism as workers managing production, 'the pseudo-control of workers of their alienation', communism is always posited as the construction of the human community through the abolition of exchange, of the commodity, of the division of society into classes, it is posited in its content rather than as a form of management". But, as he continues, "in order to reach this point, the SI remains a prisoner of the theoretical necessity of positing a moment in which the proletariat becomes its own object, a moment in its liberation, which explains the great importance of the form of the Council as being this existence for itself of the proletariat, this existence as subject-object, the proletarian class of consciousness as a form."²⁶

It is in this need for workers, through the councils, to realise this new revolutionary content of the abolition of work, to become the "class of consciousness", that a fundamental role for revolutionaries and revolutionary organisation is implied. This high demand placed on the workers and the organisational form through which they become subject is paralleled with an absolutely high demand on the revolutionary organisation in the period before this is achieved. The SI rejected out of hand the model that most revolutionary organisations adopt: the proselytising and recruitment of naïve members who are then taught the party line. Instead, they demanded from prospective members an autonomous and full integration of the theory and

19. SI, 'Beginning of an Era', *Internationale Situationniste* 12 (1969), 12.

20. For an account of situationist involvement in the '68 events see Rene Vignet, *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement* (Autonomedia 1992).

21. In one of the better books about Debord and the SI, Anselm Jappe states: 'Certain issues, among them the question of revolutionary organization, will be given short shrift here, because, whatever importance they once had, discussion of them now tends to resemble the byzantine debate on the human versus the divine nature of Christ'. Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (University of California 1998), 3.

22. Roland Simon, *Fondements Critiques d'une Théorie de la Révolution* (Senonevero 2001).

23. SI, 'Domination de la nature, idéologies et classes' *Internationale Situationniste* 8 (1963).

24. 'Such an organisation... aims not at the masses' self-management of the *existing* world, but at its uninterrupted transformation.' SI, 'Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations', *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (1967).

25. Gilles Dauvé, 'Back to the Situationist International', *Aufheben* 9 (2000).

26. Roland Simon, 'From the critique of work to the overcoming of programmatism: a theoretical transition: the Situationist International' in *Fondements Critiques*.

a level of “practical truth”,²⁷ namely a coherence of their practical behaviour with the theory.²⁸

The SI would never claim to have produced this total critique from their own heads. While their advanced position in detecting the nature of the new upsurge can be linked with their roots in the avant-garde (itself a product of the last revolutionary wave), they also derived their theory from the signs they recognised in new struggles against alienation: from Asturian miners to the rioters of Watts and more generally the youth rebellions seen across the western world.²⁹ The task of the revolutionary organisation was to grasp what was going on, what was being prefigured in the revolts that were taking place within a unitary revolutionary theory, and to communicate it to those seeking clarification.

In their *Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations*, while they write of the need for the revolutionary organisation to dissolve itself in its moment of victory, that victory will be the realisation of its total critique by the masses themselves in the councils.³⁰ If there is to be a coming together of the total or integral critique with the forms of spontaneous organisation, then that total critique must itself come into existence, and the vehicle for this is the voluntary willed organisation. In the year before ‘68, Debord, Khayati, and Vienet declared that the present task of the SI is to, “work, on an international level, for the reappearance of certain basic elements of a modern-day revolutionary critique. The activity of the SI is a *moment* which we do not mistake for a *goal*: the workers must organize themselves, they will achieve emancipation through their own efforts, etc.”³¹

There was an important match between the SI’s perspectives and what happened in the ‘68 period, particularly with students and young people. May ‘68 was the high point for the SI, and there was certainly a widespread impact of their analyses in the student

27. ‘The SI should act like an axis which, receiving its movement from the revolutionary impulses of the entire world, precipitates in a unitary manner the radical turn of events.... Group or individual, everyone must live in pace with the radicalization of events in order to radicalize them in turn. Revolutionary coherence is nothing else.’ Raoul Vaneigem, ‘Aiming for Practical Truth’, *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (1967).

28. ‘[E]ach member must have recognized and appropriated the coherence of its critique. This coherence must be both in the critical theory as such and in the relation between this theory and practical activity.’ SI, ‘Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organisations’, *Internationale Situationniste* 11 (1967).

29. The SI could think that their ideas were in everyone’s heads because sex drugs and rock and roll were doing their work for them. It is not so obvious to us how cultural developments are helping us in this period.

30. ‘Proletarian revolution depends entirely on the condition that, for the first time, theory as understanding of human

and youth side of the movement, with situationist graffiti being one of the most memorable aspects of the revolt. Nevertheless, they were faced with the fact that their theory did not combine with the action of the workers who, contra their fantasy, did not come close to setting up workers’ councils.

The attitude to and later problems that the SI had with their own organisation are related to the role that they saw for theory. As Roland Simon points out, the SI replaced a dialectic of productive forces leading to communism with a dialectic of “theory—organisation—consciousness”. If it is the council that is to provide the practical conditions for this consciousness, the theory that prefigures this consciousness must itself come to be, and it does so through the spreading of revolutionary critique in which voluntary organisation or revolutionary movement (and not just the SI) play a part.

This need for the coming together of totalising revolutionary critique which, on the one hand, would be worked on and spread by groups and individuals within a relatively small milieu and, on the other, by a spontaneous upsurge from the masses themselves, is the task that the SI confronted itself with and on which it ultimately fell down.

Thus, though the SI had predicted and helped prepare the grounds for the events of ‘68 better than any other group, its hopes for the formation of councils that would have a radically different content failed to materialise.³² The internal struggles which the SI fell into in the aftermath of ‘68, and their forlorn hope for a “Strasbourg of the factories”,³³ was an expression of the impasse of their underlying model of theory, organisation and consciousness.

practice be recognized and lived by the masses. It requires that workers become dialecticians and put their thought into practice. It thus demands of its “people without qualities” more than the bourgeois revolution demanded of the qualified individuals it delegated to carry out its tasks’. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Zone 1994), §123.

31. From a working document—‘Response aux camarades de Rennes’—signed by Debord, Khayati, and Vienet, quoted in T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, ‘Why art can’t kill the Situationist International’, *October* vol. 79 (1997).

32. SI, ‘The Beginning of an Era’.

33. Vaneigem suggested (‘Notes on the SI’s direction’, 1970) that what the SI needed to get past their impasse was a kind of “coup” at the level of factories and the industrial proletariat that the 1966 Strasbourg scandal had been in relation to the student milieu. However as Miguel Amorós notes:

‘To declare that contact must be made with the workers milieus does not mean that the contact is actually made, but →

The Citroën Action Committee at Censier

The different conceptions of *what to do* held by ICO and SI in '68 can be seen in the Citroën Action Committee at Censier. In the second half of May, as strikes began to spread, worker-student action committees formed throughout France that attempted to support the movement. Those who wanted revolution came together based on their perception of tasks that needed to be done in relation to the movement.³⁴ Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman argue that such worker-student committees were a spontaneous recovery of the kind of creative social activity from below that characterised previous revolutionary upsurges like the Paris Commune. They describe their involvement in the Workers-Students Action Committee of Citroën, one of many such committees based in the occupied Censier centre of the University of Paris. Composed largely of people who had met in the street battles of the previous days, it came together in response to the Citroën factories forming a strike committee and calling for an indefinite strike. Perlman and Gregoire describe the kind of leaflets produced and actions taken: the way they confronted the issue of the division between immigrant and native French workers (from whom the union militants were drawn); the way the factory's union-run strike committee found the action committee useful in bringing about an occupation of the factory but then shut it out; and the connection they made to groups of non-union workers in the factories.³⁵

The committee was autonomous in the sense that it did not recognize the legitimacy of any "higher" body or any external "authority". Anyone was able to participate equally in a daily meeting where projects were thought up and actions planned in response to the ever-changing situation. The direction taken by the committee indicated that whatever the political orientations of participants before May, the orientation which prevailed during the events was more or

rather the discovery of a psychological compensation mechanism: faith in an abstract proletariat, the depository of the radical essence, beyond the reach of discouragement, with regard to whom all that was necessary was to communicate to them their own theory, a task that devolved upon a select group of theoreticians. That is why Vaneigem's formula, "a Strasbourg of the factories", viewed in retrospect, remained in the category of good intentions'. Miguel Amorós, *A Brief History of the Italian Section of the Situationist International* (Not Bored! 2014).

34. Though probably not at the intensity of May '68, many of us will have experience of this kind of ad hoc organisation in relation to movements.

35. Roger Gregoire and Fredy Perlman, *Worker-student action committees: France May '68* (Black and Red 1970), 12–18.

less a councilist one comprised of workers' assemblies and workers' self-activity.

In terms of Henri Simon's distinction between willed and spontaneous organisation, such committees were a spontaneous group where, to a significant extent, the participants left behind their previous allegiances in an orientation to the changing needs of the situation. However, it also had qualities of a willed group because a main purpose of the Censier committee was to speak and act towards the wider movement, and to the workers in the factories in particular.³⁶

What is striking about Perlman and Gregoire's account — and of particular interest to us — is their self-criticism. In unfavourably comparing the worker-student committees they were involved in to the March 22 Movement,³⁷ Perlman and Gregoire say that for those who gathered at Censier, being revolutionary meant participating in something whose dynamic was elsewhere. Rather than understanding themselves as a concrete group of individuals proceeding by the elimination of concrete obstacles, capable of taking the initiative, they rather trapped themselves in a position of wishing to follow the "spontaneous" activity of an abstractly imagined group: "the workers themselves". As they argue, the concrete group of which they were part (the worker-student committee), while subjectively feeling ready to make a choice for revolution, looked to some other group than themselves to trigger this situation.³⁸ In this they were perhaps like the overwhelming majority of those participating in the '68 movement.

Perlman and Gregoire describe the emblematic moment when a march of ten thousand militants confronted CGT stewards at the entrance to the Renault Billancourt factory,³⁹ which had been occupied the day before by its workers. It would have been easy to climb into the plant, but the marchers allowed themselves to be turned back. A vast crowd, who thought they were for the revolution and who had recently fought the real cops of the CRS, were nonetheless

36. 'I must underline that I am talking about "poles". Between these two extremes we can find all sorts of hybrids whose complexity of nature and interaction are those of social life itself.' Henri Simon, 'Some Thoughts on Organisation'.

37. The March 22 Movement had originally come together in a similar way in relation to the student agitation as the worker student committees did in relation to the later phases of the events.

38. 'Who would bring it about? There was March 22; there were "the workers"; even the Gaullist police were expected to "trip off" a revolution by mistake. But these people were only ready to step into conditions created for them.' Gregoire and Perlman, *Worker-student action committees*, 83.

39. Renault Billancourt was a classic workers' →

turned back by a small number of union cops.⁴⁰ This was due, for Perlman and Gregoire, to a certain way of relating to the “workers”.

If the “Leninist” notion was that workers must be advised on what to do, and Leninists suggested their parties as an alternative leadership to the PCF/CGT, the ultra-left or councilist notion, in contrast, was that they had to wait for the workers to do it by themselves. They failed to see themselves as capable of creating a situation that would force such a choice. What this meant practically is that they left the initiative to the union bureaucrats.

Perlman and Gregoire suggest that the more radical ultra-left or councilist “direction” offered by people at Censier was simply a different discourse in which the Trotskyist and Maoist calls for a “revolutionary party” and “nationalisation” was replaced by calls for “workers’ self-organisation” and “socialisation of production”. They write:

[E]loquent speeches were not accompanied by eloquent actions, because the speaker did not regard himself as deprived; it was “the workers” who were deprived, and consequently “only the workers” could act. The speaker called on workers to have a conviction which the speaker didn’t have; he called on workers to translate words into actions, but his own “action” consisted only of words.⁴¹

41. *Ibid.*, 85.

And, as they say of the Billancourt confrontation:

[T]here were clearly very few “revolutionaries” in the march or inside the factory; there were very few people who felt that whatever was inside that plant was theirs. ... [T]here was apparently no one inside or outside the factory who regarded it as social property. One who knows it’s social property doesn’t accept a bureaucrat blocking the door. People in that march had varied pretexts for doing nothing. “Such action is premature; it’s adventuristic! The plant isn’t social property yet”. Of course the

fortress whose occupation was a key moment in the general strike.

40. Gregoire and Perlman, *Worker-student action committees*, 73. The balance of forces between ‘revolutionaries’ and union cops may in general have been different at other times and places — the example that Perlman and Gregoire quote is one where it was in the former’s favour.

CGT bureaucrats agreed with this reasoning, a reasoning which completely undermines any “right” the workers might have to strike. And ten thousand militants, ... blandly accepted the authority of the union toughs who guarded the factory gates.⁴²

42. *Ibid.*, 84.

In taking up Perlman and Gregoire’s self-critique here, the point is not that Billancourt was the great “if only” moment when all could have been different if a different action or consciousness had prevailed. If the crowd outside Billancourt had acted in a different way, this would have had an impact. But what happened, happened for specific reasons, contingent on the overall situation of the crowd, including their sense of themselves and what revolution involved.

The ideology of “the workers themselves” — the notion that only the workers can do something — was one limit to the activity of many participants in ‘68. The idea that revolution is self-organisation, and that the “self” here is not whoever we are but “the workers themselves” was an objective feature of the situation. This conception of the revolution was not a mere idea that could contingently have been replaced with another, but a product of the whole cycle of struggles leading up to it. What Perlman and Gregoire’s text indicates is that some of the more lucid participants were starting to question this conception. While the idea that “workers and students must meet and dialogue” was fairly prevalent, their text poses the issue differently. It suggests: why not take the factory? Not to restart production (it was a car factory after all), but to deny it to the enemy, and yes, at the risk of being called substitutionist, to try to push the situation forward.

The distinction between inside and outside which, in the normal course of events, is a fundamental one — with interventions by “revolutionaries” or “activists” usually failing — must be called into question in situations of intense class and social struggle. Factories, the means of production, reproduction, and communication, do not belong to their workers. Communist revolution requires an overcoming of the division of production by separate enterprises and of the separation between those who are inside and those who are outside of production. If this is now theoretically recognised as the problem that communism must overcome, in situations of intense class struggle, this can begin to be posed as a practical problem.

Was this really posed practically in '68? Clearly not. Would it be in the future? Whether in Argentina in 2001, Greece in 2008, Cairo in 2011, or the yellow vests in France recently, one of the pronounced aspects of more recent struggles has been that they occur on a social terrain where the inside/outside issue is posed differently than it was in '68. The events of May '68, which saw almost no looting despite the withdrawal of the police, belonged to an earlier cycle of struggle. Though more minoritarian than May '68, the recent yellow vest movement shows how different the times are.

What's at stake in this question is the very meaning of revolution and communism. If communist revolution is about workers self-managing production, then surely it is only workers who can do this (and in '68, workers showed very little interest in this). But if revolution and communism is the overcoming of separation, then the very notion of worker and not-worker, my workplace and your workplace, is something to be challenged and overturned. As Perlman and Gregoire argue, those who displayed inactivity while waiting for the spontaneity of the workers appeared to reject the bureaucratic model of socialism but accepted its ontological premises:

Consequently, revolutionaries whose aim is to liberate daily life betray their project when they abdicate to passivity or impose themselves over it: the point is to wake the dead, to force the passive to choose between a conscious acceptance of constraint or a conscious affirmation of life.⁴³

To "force the passive to choose" is, of course, often how a minority of workers inside an enterprise initiate any wildcat strike — what Perlman and Gregoire suggest is that, in the right circumstances, that is what an active "outside" group can do as well.⁴⁴ In most cases, such an attempt would be derisory and would fail — and likely it would have in '68 — but this failure would be its critique, not the fact that something was done by one group in relation to another.

43. *Ibid.*, 87.

44. French society had been forced to choose at this point. As the present day Mouvement Communiste have pointed out, the spontaneous general strike was spread (and controlled) by CP militants. Nevertheless the workers had been forced to choose by the wild actions on the streets in the weeks before. Mouvement Communiste, *May-June 1968: A Situation Lacking in Workers' Autonomy* (Libcom 2006).

Reclaiming the Party?

An important figure in the post '68 debates was Gilles Dauvé. In "Leninism and the Ultra-Left", Dauvé, while making some similar points to Perlman and Gregoire, goes further in trying to explicitly redeem the notion of the party.⁴⁵ Dauvé argued that the "councilist" position on organisation was a critique of "Leninism"⁴⁶ which was tied negatively to its object — a reaction rather than an overcoming. In particular, he argues that councilism, like anarchism, accepts the identification of party with the Leninist party. As a reaction to the historically counter-revolutionary role that the Bolsheviks came to take, the notion of a separate collectivity of revolutionaries or communists doing anything was seen as substitutionist and as threatening to dominate the class. What this misses for Dauvé is that there is a different conception of the party to be found in Marx based on the distinction of the "historic" and "formal" party.

Marx had drawn this distinction in an 1860 letter to the poet Freiligrath, who had been a member of the Communist League with Marx ten years before. Marx had been attempting to enlist Freiligrath's support against slanderous claims being made by Carl Vogt about Marx and the Communist League, but Freiligrath declined to be involved, saying he was no longer a member of the party. Marx replied that he also no longer belongs to such a party because "the party... in this wholly ephemeral sense, ceased to exist for me 8 years ago" when it disbanded at his urging:

Since 1852, then, I have known *nothing* of "party" in the sense implied in your letter. Whereas you are a *poet*, I am a *critic* and for me the experiences of 1849-52 were quite enough. The "League", like the *société des saisons* in Paris and a hundred other societies, was simply an episode in the history of a party that is everywhere

45. Jean Barrot [Gilles Dauvé], 'Leninism and the Ultra-Left' in *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement* (Black and Red 1974). The text was produced as an intervention at a conference of ICO, which had swelled in size in the aftermath of the May events. It was then published in the journal *Mouvement Communiste* and translated in various versions slightly modified down to today, it is one of the best known products of the theoretical ferment of the time.

46. Whether the idea of 'Leninism' held among both its proponents and opponents actually understood what the Bolsheviks had been and done in Russia was itself questionable. See Denis Authier, 'The Beginnings of the Workers Movement in Russia' (Spartacus 1970) and Gilles Dauvé, 'The "Renegade" Kautsky and his Disciple Lenin' (Wildcat 1987).

springing up naturally out of the soil of modern society. [...] I have tried to dispel the misunderstanding arising out of the impression that by “party” I meant a “League” that expired eight years ago, or an editorial board that was disbanded twelve years ago. By party, I meant the party in the broad historical sense.⁴⁷

It is likely that Dauvé had become aware of this distinction made by Marx through the text “Origin and Function of the Party Form”.⁴⁸ In that work, Jacques Camatte and Roger Dangeville trace the evolution of “the party” and how it has been understood by Marx and those influenced by him. Starting with the sect phase of the Communist League of the 1840s, Camatte and Dangeville follow the changing meaning of the party through the First International and the Paris Commune, and then show how these notions were first developed and then betrayed in the Second and Third Internationals, and finally how the Italian Left stood in relation to this history.

The text argues that the party is not fundamentally about forms of organisation or bureaucratic rules, but is defined instead by its “programme, the prefiguration of communist society, of the liberated and conscious human species”.⁴⁹ The communist programme, in turn, was not a product of Marx or any other individual, but something born of the struggle of the proletariat against capital in which it tries to form a community to replace the atomisation of capitalist society, and it is only given expression, often rather imperfectly, by individuals and groups.⁵⁰ Marx and Engels had an intuition of the future society based on this struggle and their work was an attempt to describe its emergence and to defend it against bourgeois society.⁵¹ Thus, the text argues that, in its historic sense, the party is an “impersonal force above generations, it represents the human species, the human existence which has finally been found. It is the consciousness of the species”.⁵² Organisations which claim to be the party, whether in the present or the past, are at

47. Marx, ‘Letter to Freiligrath 29 February 1860’ (MECW 41), 82.

48. Jacques Camatte and Roger Dangeville, ‘Origine et fonction de la forme parti’, *Invariance* Année VII, Serie II, Numero Special (1974). This text was originally written in 1961 and, at Bordiga’s request, published in Italian in *Il programma comunista*.

49. Ibid.

50. ‘That coincides with what we have often said, that the revolution will be anonymous or will not be.’ Ibid.

51. ‘All Marx’s and Engels’s work was to be the description of this society and its defence against bourgeois society.’ Ibid.

52. Ibid.

best formal groups that temporarily express this historic force, but which just as often fail to do so, or represent it for some time or degree before passing over to the side of the counter-revolution.

Dauvé argued that the historic/formal distinction turns the opposition of need for the party versus fear of the party into a false dilemma. Shorn of its Leninist associations, the party no longer posed a problem: the party was not something created and built by a process of recruitment and indoctrination—as in the practice of the bureaucratic sects—but rather a spontaneous product of capitalist society that could only really be seen to emerge in revolutionary periods. Capitalism produced people who tried in one way or another to understand and combat the situation they found themselves in. Dauvé felt we can call some such people revolutionaries⁵³

or communists, and suggested that, contra the councilist fears, they should not be worried about seeking theoretical coherence and acting collectively to propagate their understandings. He contends that “the revolutionary movement is an organic structure of which theory is an inseparable and indispensable element”. Those trying to articulate such theory, those trying to “express the whole meaning of what is going on” and make practical proposals, may in normal times have little effect. But in revolutionary periods, “[i]f the expression is right and the proposal appropriate, they are parts of the struggle of the proletariat and contribute to build the ‘party’ of the communist revolution”.⁵⁴

The councilist opposition between willed and spontaneous organisation is undermined by this kind of argument. If capitalist society gives rise spontaneously to forms of organised resistance, such as strikes and social movements, then the production of communists as a willed group is in its own way a spontaneous product. There are always minorities being produced who seek out others like themselves both during struggles and in periods when less is going on. Thus, for Dauvé, the councilist valorisation of the pole of spontaneity and their denigration of the willed alternative is unjustified. That the revolution in a fundamental sense comes from one pole does not mean that minorities at the other pole don’t play a role. Individuals drawn to ideas of revolution and communism who then form “willed groups” or relate to

53. Talking of ‘revolutionaries’ undoubtedly felt more reasonable in 1969. At the time of the ‘Hot Autumn’ or ‘Rampant May’ in Italy, it made sense to speak of a ‘radical minority of revolutionary workers in the factories’ in a way it clearly does not today.

54. Dauvé, ‘Leninism and the Ultra Left’.

each other in some less formal way are as much a natural product of capitalist society as the “spontaneous” struggles and movements that arise from time to time. Such groups will be imperfect because they, too, are part of bourgeois society. Many will, like most of the sects in ‘68, play a poor role, but if they do manage to express something “communist” they are ephemeral expressions of a movement that emerges in and against capitalist society. Produced in revolutionary periods such as the one which Dauvé thought he was living through, the party was not built by an act of will, it was just the organisation of an emergent movement. As a member of the informal group Dauvé was part of puts it:

When the proletariat is not revolutionary, it does not exist, and revolutionaries can produce nothing with it; isn't they, who by playing the people's educators can create the historic situation in which the proletariat *becomes what it is*, but the very development of modern society. When such a situation appears, revolutionaries of non-working class origin, those who for many reasons, find themselves “confined” within bourgeois society, unite themselves in the proletarian party, which spontaneously forms in order to solve the revolutionary tasks.⁵⁵

55. Authier, ‘The Beginnings of the Workers’ Movement in Russia’.

However, if this 1969 critique of councilism, which draws on the historic/formal party distinction, is indebted to “Origin and Function...”, by that time Camatte’s own position had moved on. Camatte was impressed by and open to the character of the new revolt in a way the formal “Bordigist” group he had been part of was not. In the same year as Dauvé’s intervention in ICO, Camatte with Collu produced a letter later published as *On Organisation*, which is, if anything, more critical of the “willed group” than the councilists. Their letter denounces the attempts by political groups to recruit from the revolutionaries that were produced by the period, and rejects the suggestion by some that the journal *Invariance*, in which they were both involved, should constitute itself as such a group.

On Organisation goes beyond the rejection of Leninism common to anarchists and councilists by identifying a tendency for any organisation, whatever ideology it may espouse, whether it uses the term

party or not, to become a gang or racket. This tendency is a result of the rivalrous, competitive existence that the capitalist mode of production imposes on individual and collective subjectivities. Consider the way political groups relate to each other as they compete for members and try to keep the ones they have. If in earlier capitalism it had been possible for working class organisations to represent some sort of community against capital, in its period of real domination, capital shapes both individual and collective subjectivities.⁵⁶

In Camatte’s view, even the group he had been part of – which, by practicing anonymity and refusing democratic voting, had opposed bourgeois individualism, or the “sterile and pathological solitude of the Ego” – evolved into a gang, a collective form of that pathological ego in relation to the world.⁵⁷

Linking back to the arguments of *Origin and Function*, Camatte and Collu write:

Today the party can only be the historic party. Any formal movement is the reproduction of this society, and the proletariat is essentially *outside of it*. A group can in no way pretend to realize community without taking the place of the proletariat, which alone can do it. Such an attempt introduces a distortion that engenders theoretical ambiguity and practical hypocrisy. It is not enough to develop the critique of capital, nor even to affirm that there are no organizational links; it’s necessary to avoid reproducing the gang structure, since it is the spontaneous product of the society.⁵⁸

So if the idea of the party as a spontaneous product had seemed to Dauvé to cut through the fear of the party of the German/Dutch Left, Camatte warned that the gang structure and its mentality is also spontaneously produced by capitalist society.⁵⁹

In 1969, when *On Organisation* was written, Camatte and Collu argue for adopting the attitude

56. On Camatte’s concept of domination/subsumption see ‘The Passion of Communism: Italian Invariance in the 1970s’ in this issue and ‘The History of Subsumption’ in *Endnotes 2* (2013).

57. For this reason, he would break the rule of anonymity and print Bordiga texts under Bordiga’s name.

58. Jacques Camatte, ‘On Organisation’ in *This World We Must Leave* (Autonomedia 1995).

59. Henri Simon is making a similar point when he argues that the willed group is led by its attempt to exist outside such a movement to ‘in one way or another, conform to the imperatives of capitalist society in which it lives and operates. This is accepted by some, fully assumed by others, but rejected by yet others who think they can escape it or simply not think about it’ *Some Thoughts on Organisation*, 8–9.

they see Marx taking in his letter to Freiligrath. One should refuse to constitute any kind of group, and instead simply maintain a network of contacts with those who have appropriated or are in the process of appropriating theoretical knowledge. This appropriation would have to be an independent process without followerism and pedagogy because, “the party in its historical sense is not a school”. Thus rather than identifying with a group, the revolutionary can orientate to a theory: “a work that is in process and needs to be developed”.⁶⁰ Such theory is not dependent on a group or journal but is the expression of the class struggle.

However, in a note written in 1972, Camatte identifies weaknesses in and possible misinterpretations of *On Organisation*. He noted that he and Collu had been incorrect to take as a model a moment of Marx’s activity from a very different period of capitalism.⁶¹ He observed that their focus on theory risked being seen as an elitist conception of the development of the revolutionary movement bringing consciousness to the masses from outside. He suggested that the critique of organisation could become an anti-organisational position, a unique selling property with which to seduce and attract in a new process of racketization.⁶² It could be seen as a return to Stirner with each individual cultivating his or her own revolutionary subjectivity. As Camatte writes:

All political representation is a screen and therefore an obstacle to a fusion of forces. Since representation can occur on the individual as well as the group level, recourse to the former level would be, for us, a repetition of the past.⁶³

So many false paths!

Starting from an Italian Left position on the party, seemingly the opposite of the councilists, we see Camatte ending in a similar place with a rejection of the pretensions of the small organised group. There is an underlying continuity in that Camatte’s notion of

60. Camatte, ‘On Organisation’.

61. It should be recognised that after Marx’s letter to Freiligrath (see above) he went on to be involved in the First International and to support the formation of mass parties.

62. This paradox whereby criticising a revolutionary identity can become a new identity, points to the trouble with the formation of an identity around the notion of ‘communisation’ something which *Théorie Communiste* (after a period where they could be said to have encouraged this) acknowledged: ‘The theme of “communization” and the name of “communist” may become fashionable simply as a sign for recognition, a fear of emptiness inside emptiness. To be “communist” may have become a way to oppose to the other identities in the milieu a kind of counter-posture: “we do not think we are revolutionaries” (implicitly

the group becoming a gang or racket overlaps with the councilist view that the willed group will tend inevitably to be oriented to survival in capitalism.⁶⁴ Both put their faith in the spontaneous organisation that the class (or species for the later Camatte) is led to. In spontaneous organisation there is much room for a learning dynamic in which the identity and self-understanding of those involved is transformed. In the willed group there will be more of an investment in an identity (around a set of ideas) that leads to forms of behaviour to defend that identity. The willed group — even if such group emerges spontaneously in response to a revolutionary wave — has a tendency to stick around longer than it has a purpose, becoming dominated by the gang mentality or of being “pushed towards reformist or capitalist areas and forced to have a practice which is increasingly in contradiction with their avowed principles”.⁶⁵

To Camatte, this is a reason to avoid the group form entirely. A different way of responding to the tendencies he describes is to recognise that any “willed” collective undertaking, especially outside the excitement of a revolutionary moment, will have its identitarian gang dimension — the point is to be alert to it, name it when it shows itself, and try collectively to avoid or restrain it. Indeed, one might note that the longer such groups last, the more they risk falling into this structure, which suggests that groups should form for specific purposes and only continue as long as they think they are contributing to that purpose, and if that purpose is theory, then only so long as they feel they are contributing something useful.

A purpose that we have found takes our interest indeed to which we have found ourselves driven is communist theory, the thinking about capitalism and its overcoming. Our next section addresses how we think to do this.

meaning : AND this makes *true* revolutionaries of us), but once this is said, the question is what we can do and what we really are.’ TC, ‘Fin de parti(e)’ (2013).

63. Camatte, ‘On Organisation’.

64. ‘From the moment that it exists as an organization, its only choice is death or capitalist survival. ... The forgetting of, or hiding of this situation or the refusal to look it in the face creates violent internal conflicts. These are often hidden behind conflicts of personality or ideology. For a time they can also be dissimulated behind a facade of “unity” , which one can always hear being offered, for reasons of propaganda, to non-members (from here springs the rule that inside such organizations internal conflicts are always settled inside the organization and never in public).’ Henri Simon, ‘Some Thoughts on Organisation’, 8–9.

65. *Ibid.*, 7–8.

II. OPEN MARXISM?

Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.¹

If we are interested in thinking about capitalism and its overcoming, Marx's work, and especially his description and critique of the capitalist mode of production, would seem an essential theoretical reference point—a foundation. Yet if we look at the record of Marxism in power, from social democracy, through the USSR, China, and other nations, we see that Marxism has by and large been a force for the development of capitalism rather than one for its overcoming. How might one separate Marx and Marxism from this history?

Starting in the late 1980s in journals such as *Common Sense* and in a series of books,² Richard Gunn, Werner Bonefeld, John Holloway, and others took up the term “open Marxism”. They adopted this expression from Johannes Agnoli, who in a debate with Ernest Mandel³ suggested the term for a Marxism open to the “heresy of reality”. Gunn, Bonefeld, and others took this up in a similar sense, not to specify a particular school or kind of Marxism, but rather as a useful label to capture the living (and revolutionary) thread that various heterodox Marxisms—council communism, the Frankfurt School, the German New Marx Reading, Operaismo, and Autonomist Marxism—had in common against the more dogmatic varieties.

At a time of a perceived crisis of Marxism, in the face of a capitalist restructuring and “bosses’ offensive”,⁴ their move was an intervention in the name of Marxism’s critical, revolutionary, and destructive purpose—not just against the then retreating forms of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, but also against the sociological and positivist forms of Marxism that had become dominant in academia. Instead of responding to the perceived crisis with a fundamentalist assertion of orthodoxy,

1. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota 1984), 110.

2. See Werner Bonefeld, ‘Open Marxism’, *Common Sense* 1 (1987), 34–38, and the introductions by Gunn, Bonefeld, Psychopedis, Holloway, et al. to *Open Marxism* vols 1, 2, and 3.

3. Johannes Agnoli, *Offener Marxismus: Ein Gespräch über Dogmen, Orthodoxie und die Häresie der Realität* (Campus 1980).

4. Amadeo Bordiga, ‘Class Struggle and “Bosses’ Offensive”’ *Battaglia Comunista* 39 (1949).

they argued that the principle of doubt and the dissolution of false certainty was essential to an open Marxism:

Despite Marxism’s allegedly final exhaustion... Marxism is not in crisis as long as it provokes and produces crises of historically developed ‘schools’ or of Marxists themselves. Metaphorically, Marxism is the theoretical concept of practice and the practical concept of theory which provokes crises of itself as a matter of its inherent strength and validity.⁵

Of course, it might be asked whether one needs to defend something like “Marxism” at all? One might, as the SI did, reject all “isms” as ideologically fixed forms of thought.⁶ One might reserve the term “Marxism” for the ideology based on Marx’s ideas, which is to be distinguished from their revolutionary or communist use.⁷ Yet even if one was to take this route, there would remain the question of how to distinguish, other than by fiat, one’s own “authentic” communist use of Marx from an ideological Marxist one. The impulse behind identifying an open Marxism or, like the SI, being “(not a) Marxist... in the same way as Marx”,⁸ are the same. The point is not whether one adopts or resists the label Marxist, but how to develop thinking that is adequate to the raw material of reality.

How do we avoid filtering existence to fit our preconceived ideas, simply asserting our limited perspective as the truth? More specifically, how can one grasp one’s experience through Marx’s categories without dogmatically reading reality through their prism? Do we have or need a philosophy or a method? Do we have principles of some sort that we apply? How do we deal with arguments from people who do not share the categories that we use? How do we conceive of the unity of theory and practice? If the point is “to change it” does this mean we pick up and discard theory based on how useful it is in struggles?

5. Bonefeld, ‘Open Marxism’, 37.

6. ‘The world of *isms*, whether it envelops the whole of humanity or a single person, is never anything but a world drained of reality, a terribly real seduction by falsehood.’ Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (PM 2012), 9.

7. As Dauvé does when he writes that if ‘one can and must use Marx’s works’, one does so to reassert ‘communism against an ideology named “Marxism” — official, academic, or leftist’. Dauvé, *Eclipse and Reemergence*, 21.

8. ‘Are you Marxists? Just as much as Marx was when he said, “I am not a Marxist!”’ SI, ‘Questionnaire’, *Situationist International* 9 (1964). On Marx’s statement (reported by Engels) see Michael Heinrich, ‘Je ne suis pas marxiste’, *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 2015.

Can theory be seen as a kind of weapon used in the fight, or as Moss suggested, is its first purpose to “seek the truth of the situation”?

One idea from open Marxism that has consistently informed how we see ourselves and what we are doing is the notion articulated by Richard Gunn of the “good conversation”. This notion is key to our self-understanding of how thinking occurs and how theory is developed.

The idea of the conversation grasps in a very concrete way the sociality of human thinking. As Bakhtin and Volishinov have persuasively made clear, even that thinking which we do “inside our heads” is part of a conversational chain. We are always taking up thoughts started by others, agreeing or disagreeing, responding to critics and interlocutors, and anticipating what may be said in response.⁹ Thought is social through and through. However, such sociality applies as much to ideology as to theory, as much to the way we reproduce ideas that conform to the existing social order as to developing a thinking which points beyond it. If we are interested in the latter, we need a more nuanced conception of the conversation. Just as not all of what people consider as thinking is really thinking,¹⁰ not all conversation, on our own or with others, is good conversation. We are also aware of the way that appeals to dialogue and conversation—and to “free speech”—are commonplace calls that can perform very ideological functions, including that of diverting us from necessary action.¹¹ Even within milieus that see themselves as antagonistic to this society, there are forms of bad conversation, such as preaching to the converted, dialogues of the deaf, endless discussions with no consequences. It is thus necessary to specify what we mean by good conversation. What kind of conversation is to be aimed at?¹²

For Gunn, as we shall see, good conversation is defined by mutual recognition, practical reflexivity,

9. Much of what Marx wrote is entitled ‘critique’ and involves a full engagement with thinkers from the famous ‘sources’ of German philosophy, French socialism, and English political economy. Indeed that critique may partly be understood as a putting of these different ‘systems’ into conversation with one another. See Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (MIT 2003).

10. As we shall see in section IV below.

11. Debord spoke of the spectacle’s ‘pseudo-dialogue’, to which he contrasted ‘real communication’ and ultimately a dialogue which ‘has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world’. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, §221.

12. Gunn’s idea of the conversation and the consensus theory of truth has a certain debt to the Habermas of the early seventies—in various places, he makes clear the limits of this debt and what separates his view of mutual recognition and the conversation from Habermas, Honneth etc. See, e.g., Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘A Note on Habermas’ *Heathwood Institute* (2014).

and immanent critique.¹³ In more recent texts, Gunn and Adrian Wilding argue that notions of mutual recognition and the conversation are nothing less than a key to revolutionary action and to communism itself.¹⁴ The idea that the small “willed group” aiming to understand capitalism and its overcoming, and the spontaneous revolutionary crowd and mass action that will actually produce that overcoming, have an underlying coherence through the notion of mutual recognition is an idea that is fascinating for us, and we will try to unpack it in detail.

Marxism and Philosophy

The initial reason for Gunn’s essay “Marxism and Philosophy”¹⁵ was to respond to Roy Bhaskar’s offer of Critical Realism as a philosophy for Marxism and “the Left”. In his response, Gunn notes that before one decides whether or not Marxism needs a Critical Realist philosophy, one needs to ask whether it needs a philosophy at all. We are not interested in Gunn’s text for what it says about Bhaskar but in its attempt to “sketch *in contrast* to Critical Realism an alternative understanding of the conceptual status of Marxist thought”.¹⁶

Gunn argues that in offering a philosophy for the Left, Bhaskar accepted the bourgeois separation of second-order metatheory—theory about categories—from first-order theory about the world. Gunn argues that this separation is a product of bourgeois enlightenment, which reached its apogee in the 20th century when philosophy reduced itself to the handmaiden of science.¹⁷ He argues that Marx, and Hegel before him, rejected this separation.¹⁸ This is not, however, because Marxism is a positivist or scientific discourse “uninterested in categorical questions”,¹⁹ nor because it returns to the old cosmological unity that prevailed before the rise of capitalism, but rather because

13. Richard Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy: A critique of critical realism’ *Capital and Class* vol. 13 no. 1 (1989).

14. Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘Marx and Recognition’ *Heathwood Institute* (2014).

15. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’. Critical realism was first developed in Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Harvester 1975).

16. *Ibid.*, 88.

17. ‘The consequences of this separation are (a) the *positivism* of a first-order theory which disallows reflection on categories and (b) the *tedium* of a philosophising which, as purely metatheoretical, treats engagement with worldly issues as infection of a non-philosophical kind. Anyone who has studied either the social sciences or philosophy knows what this positivism and this tedium mean.’ *Ibid.*, 91.

18. ‘Marx saw Hegel as the paradigmatic “philosopher” but, I would urge, he was never more Hegelian than when the critique of philosophy is present as a figure of his thought.’ *Ibid.*, 98.

19. *Ibid.*, 89.

it has integrated what are seen as philosophical questions in a unitary form of self-reflexive theorising about the world.

Gunn argues that Marxism doesn't need a philosophy or meta-theory to back up its theory of the social world because Marxian discourse such as *Capital*, like Hegel's *Phenomenology* before it, moves between first-order theory about the world, and second-order theory about the categories with which it grasps the world, in a single movement of totalisation.²⁰ If such totalisation is at once "practically reflexive", "immanently critical", and based on mutual recognition, then it constitutes "good conversation".

Though Gunn writes at a fairly high level of sophistication and abstraction, the thrust of his argument is to locate:

a capacity to address issues of categorial validity (a capacity, in other words, for 'critical theory') within the first-order experience and self-awareness of, so to say, everyman rather than in the privileged meta-awareness of a philosophical elite.²¹

Gunn argues that theory or truth is produced in a good (not necessarily polite) conversation in which all participants put their views of the world, the categories with which they grasp the world, and indeed all aspects of themselves at stake.²²

Such conversation is based on or moves in the direction of mutual recognition. Gunn suggests that, outside of conditions of social revolution and struggle, mutual recognition only exists in a contradictory form, and thus, moments of such conversation are relatively rare and perhaps only to be approximated imperfectly.

It is sometimes said that a defining aspect of the kind of conversation we want is a particular orientation to practice. In his famous "Theses on Feuerbach" Marx suggested an orientation to changing the world. But it is important that this not be understood in the rather facile and normative

20. 'to read Marx's *Capital* either as sheerly first-order and empirical (the reading attempted by bourgeois sociology) or as sheerly second-order and philosophical (the reading attempted by Althusser) is to miss its challenge. *Capital* is both first- and second-order. It is both because it is neither on its own; it is neither because it is both.' Ibid., 92.

21. Richard Gunn, 'Practical Reflexivity In Marx' *Common Sense* 1 (1987), 13.

22. "Good" conversation is good rather than "disappointing" — it does not merely chew over factual disputes or retreat into a play of disembodied concepts — because it, and it alone, allows conversational partners to challenge one another and to learn from one another in a fashion which brings all things about each partner into play.' Gunn, 'Marxism and Philosophy', 88.

way in which theory and practice are imagined as separate realms that need to be brought together in an activist way.²³

The bringing together of theory and practice suggests an external relation between the two.²⁴ Rather, as Gunn suggests, we can conceive of the unity of theory and practice in terms of practical reflexivity.

Gunn argues that the relation of theory and practice is internal, not external: they mutually constitute each other. Practical reflexivity is a theorising that recognises itself and its categories as part of the contradictory social practice that it tries to make sense of. The categories it uses are not guaranteed by a separate philosophy or methodology. Rather, in a process of immanent critique, theorising that is practically reflexive takes up and critically interrogates the meaning of the categories found in its social world. Such categories are part of the way capitalist society spontaneously presents itself to all its participants; they occur in everyday common sense as much as in systematic theorisations by philosophers and ideologists.

An example that Gunn takes up from Marx is the moment in *Capital* where Marx determines that the key prerequisite for capital, "M-C-M", is the buying and selling of labour power and what this involves. When Marx says that the sphere of exchange within which labour power is bought and sold is a realm of "Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham",²⁵ he points to the fact that everyday social practice includes theoretical categories as part of its reproduction, that the very notion we have of the individual — the kind of subjects we are, how we understand ourselves, how we think and act — is constituted by such social practice.²⁶ For example, the categories of individuality and rational self interest that Bentham reflects in his utilitarianism appear self-evident and self-explanatory to agents in bourgeois society. However, such obviousness is socially and historically constituted through a process of alienation, atomisation, and separation. Practically reflexive theorising refuses the "obviousness" of those categories by asking

23. For critiques of activism see Amadeo Bordiga, 'Activism', *Battaglia Comunista* 7 (1952) and Andrew X, 'Give Up Activism', *Do or Die* 9 (2001).

24. The views that theory comes first and then finds an adequate activity, or activism comes first and then looks for theory to justify it, are perhaps two sides of the same undialectical coin.

25. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), 186.

26. "[I]deological categories are not merely added to social reality like icing on a cake: they are rooted in social existence. Patterns of thinking are not, for Marx, merely bound up with social relations but form an essential part of what, in a given instance, "society" is.' Gunn, 'Practical Reflexivity in Marx', 3.

how such obviousness is socially constructed. Practical reflexivity—recognition of the social constitution of oneself and one’s categories—is required if one is to grasp the mystificatory, partial, and thus false nature of these appearances/ideologies, that is to say the way they are a necessary, functional mediation of other processes (exploitation, alienation, domination) which they at the same time systematically conceal.²⁷ Thus the critique of capitalist social relations involves at the same time a critique of ourselves and the categories with which we understand ourselves and vice versa—to question ourselves and our categories is tantamount to the critique of capitalist social relations.

Another example of the simultaneity of first- and second-order theorising is Marx’s statement in *Capital* that individuals are treated only in terms of their “character-masks”, as “the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests”.²⁸ This is generally taken as a methodological (second-order) point. But as Gunn and Wilding suggest, this point is at the same moment a very first-order critique of the reductivism, experiential impoverishment, discomfort, and oversimplification of the life-world which he is describing.²⁹

What makes for good conversation?

To critically examine one’s own experience and categories, one must be open to the other experiences and theories found in one’s social world. This means not simply criticising other experiences and theories from one’s own position, but being open to their criticism, “since a critique that is merely external and third-person would omit the moment of “in-the-course-of” self-risk”.³⁰ Thus Gunn suggests that practical reflexivity and immanent critique are essentially a conversation. A practically reflexive, immanent critique of capitalist society and the everyday ideas and theories which justify it is not a critique from a superior worldview or from an already assumed political position of opposition. It is rather an open encounter with other viewpoints and experiences.

27. As Marx points out in the *Grundrisse*, ‘exchange value or, more precisely, the money system is in fact the system of equality and freedom, [the realization of which proves] to be inequality and unfreedom.’ Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), 180.

28. Marx, *Capital* vol 1 (MECW 35), 34.

29. Gunn and Wilding, ‘Marx and Recognition’, 18.

30. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’, 101.

This suggests an answer to the crucial question of how it is possible for a conversation between those who don’t share the same categories to nonetheless come to compelling conclusions.³¹ Because we share the same social and practical world—in a way we did not before the dominance of the capitalist mode of production—the fundamental question we pose one another within conversation is: “It’s like this, isn’t it?”. Each statement of how things are always invites response from others along the lines of “no, it’s like this” or “yes, but also”. In a dynamic relation with others we constantly describe and redescribe the world. The phenomenological³² aspect of this—the appeal to experience—means for Gunn that no prior agreement on method or categories is necessary for the conversation. The object itself can “play a (partial) role in determining how, validly, it may be categorically known”.³³ In such a conversation, every aspect of each participant’s view must be able to be brought into play: “theoretical and metatheoretical dimensions” as well as considerations of where, practically, each participant is coming from. But this does not mean one can simply dismiss, monologically, the other as, say, a bourgeois apologist, an academic, a militant or of the wrong identity category. One must draw out the limitations of the other’s argument with regards to its own contradictions and inadequacy to the world which it claims to explain. It is only reasonable to question the other’s viewpoint along the lines of “you would think that because you...” if one is open to both hear how the other responds to this claim, and to have similar questions directed toward oneself.

The idea of a rigorous open conversation in which each participant challenges the other on the basis that they too are open to such challenge can be a regulative idea. Gunn merely makes explicit something that people already try to do—through discussions, reading, meetings, critiques, publications—and offers a prophylactic against the way notions of philosophy or method can detract from such openness.

31. ‘Only that which goes through the dialogic process is rational. Those who refuse dialogue, no matter how deep the truth they may grasp, are irrational. Whether or not the world or the self contains reason in and of itself ultimately counts for nothing; only those who are subjected to dialogue are rational’. Karatani, *Transcritique*, 71.

32. As Gunn argues, unlike the phenomenology of Husserl who starts with the individual in his splendid isolation, a Hegelian phenomenology is dialogical and intersubjective right from the start. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’, 88.

33. Richard Gunn, ‘In Defence of a Consensus Theory of Truth’, *Common Sense* 7 (1989), 76.

Conversation, of course, happens all the time, and this cannot in itself play the role Gunn suggests. Crucial here is the difference between “good” conversation and disappointing conversation. Gunn does not valorise “conversation” per se, but “good conversation”, which he says is relatively rare. The difference between “good” and “disappointing” conversation is an experience we all have and to which we can refer to make sense of what Gunn is getting at.

If this focus on talk or ideas seems too “idealist”, let us note that a reference to experience and practice constantly feeds into this conversation, and if it sounds too polite or democratic, Gunn notes: “nothing is less polite than rigorous conversation pursued to its end. [...] no-one can say in advance where (into what issues of life-and-death struggle) good conversation may lead”.³⁴

As Gunn’s comments about the tedium of philosophy and the positivism of the sciences indicate,³⁵ in the area of bourgeois society apparently reserved for free and disinterested truth-oriented conversation, the specialities of academia work against the totalisation that good conversation needs. His fundamental point, though, is that inside or outside of academia, good conversation cannot occur where the theory/metatheory distinction is respected (whether as academic specialty or as an unreflected limitation on thinking) nor where people relate through social roles including those of lecturer and student, leader and led, represented and representative, or as property owners. These latter considerations lead him to the position that the true site of good conversation in capitalism is the revolutionary crowd.

So far, we have addressed Gunn’s ideas in terms of their relevance for the kind of interactions between and within individuals and small groups oriented to theory production — that is to say, in Henri Simon’s terms, more on the willed pole than the spontaneous pole. It is notable, though, that Gunn, along with Adrian Wilding, in a recent series of texts, has returned to such ideas in the context of the large-scale social movements and struggles since the 2008 crisis. In these more recent texts they argue that the idea of mutual recognition and the conversation is central not just to small-scale interaction with texts and other people in the social production of truth and theory, but also that it is at the heart of recent struggles, of the revolutionary process in general, and of communism itself.

34. Gunn, ‘Marxism and Philosophy’, 105

35. *Ibid.*, 91.

The Unbearable Openness of Communism

Gunn and Wilding argue that mutual recognition as it was identified and described by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* is at the core of Marx’s critique of capitalism and conception of communism.³⁶ The heart of mutual recognition is that individuals “*enjoy freedom through interaction with one another*”.³⁷ Mutual recognition involves the recognition of the other’s freedom. Recognition only counts as recognition when it is freely given, and freedom is only freedom when it is recognised. Their argument is that capitalism undermines mutual recognition. It does so not in the way that the relations of direct domination of pre-capitalism did, but through the structuring of social interaction by social institutions and definitional roles, such as those of private property, politics, educational institutions, the mass media, etc., a kind of structuring that stands over individuals.

It might be objected that capitalism is precisely defined by the mutual recognition of commodity owners, where each recognises the other as the owner of either commodity or money and obtains what the other has only by a freely entered exchange. This aspect of capitalism is affirmed by Hegel as Abstract Right. It was an essential contribution of Marx to grasp how, when one moves from the sphere of exchange to that of production, this system of equality and freedom turns out to be a system of inequality and unfreedom.³⁸ The formal recognition of freedom and equality continually reproduces relations of capital and labour, that is, of inequality, exploitation, and domination. This is accepted by Gunn and Wilding, but their argument is that what this means is that in capitalism we are dealing with a contradictory form of mutual recognition, contradicted by the existence of these role definitions and social institutions, most pronouncedly the social institution of property.³⁹ The relation between wage workers and their bosses is a free contract where each is recognised, but behind this is the fact

36. Importantly, this does not mean another attempt to put the famous master slave dialectic at the heart of the critique of capitalism.

37. Gunn and Wilding ‘Marx and Recognition’, 4.

38. See e.g. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (MECW 35), ch. 6 and Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), ch II.

39. ‘[F]or Marx, property and commodity exchange are rooted in ... a bewitched or diabolically “inverted” conception of mutual recognition itself — [which] is present in property relations. ... the recognition presupposed by property is, throughout, recognition of a contradictory (or, better, a contradicted) kind. Not until property relations are ended may uncontradicted recognition — mutual recognition in, so to say, a non-diabolical form — obtain.’ Gunn and Wilding ‘Marx and Recognition’, 16.

that employers represent a world of absolute property and workers a world of propertylessness, a relation that is constantly reproduced. As such, "reciprocity falls short of unconstrained interaction and freedom is limited to what the role definitions concerned permit".⁴⁰ Property in its various forms — commodities, markets, and the power of money — stands *over and against* the individuals who, in order to survive, must relate to each other as proprietors. As Gunn and Wilding argue:

When property (not just this or that species of property, but property *per se*) is dispensed with, individuality ceases to be monological and possessive; freedom ceases to exist *in spite of* other individuals. Once property is transcended, freedom exists in and through interaction with others and individuals risk their identity in mutual recognition's flow.⁴¹

For Gunn and Wilding, Marx's view of proletarian revolution is nothing less than a break from one-sided and/or role-definitional recognition, into uncontradicted mutual recognition which respects no pre-given structures but on the basis of an unrestricted and thus free interaction, following only those goals which it has set for itself.⁴²

Here we can see the radical difference between the revolutionary recognition appealed to by Gunn and Wilding and that evoked by left liberal theorists of recognition such as Taylor and Honneth. Those figures draw on the "reconciled" Hegel of the *Philosophy of Right* and thus accept the separate spheres and institutions of capitalist society, which means a recognition of social roles, and relating through role definitions. Gunn and Wilding draw on the *Phenomenology*, which is inspired by the "wild" recognition of the French Revolution where social institutions — what Hegel calls spiritual masses — are dissolved.⁴³ Only in such a revolutionary situation is an uncontradicted mutual recognition possible, one where there is an "I" that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I'⁴⁴ and in which "each, undivided by the whole, always

40. *Ibid.*, 6.

41. *Ibid.*, 42.

42. In *Transcritique* Karatani appropriates the Kantian kingdom of ends to play a quite similar role.

43. See Richard Gunn, 'Recognition Contradicted', *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 113 no. 2 (2014), and Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, 'Revolutionary or Less-Than-Revolutionary Recognition?', *Heathwood Institute* (2013).

44. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford 1977), 177.

does everything, and what appears to be done by the whole is the direct and conscious deed of each".⁴⁵ For the late Hegel of *The Philosophy of Right* this possibility is confined to the religious community. This expresses the shift of the historical moment from the immediate, post-revolutionary one of the *Phenomenology* to the conservative post-restoration climate of the 1820s. Gunn and Wilding's argument is that the kind of thinking suggested by Hegel in the *Phenomenology*, while now appearing esoteric and requiring deep effort to grasp, would have been in everyone's grasp in the revolutionary situation — the sunlight of the French revolution — that produced it.⁴⁶ At that time this science would have met a mutually recognitive audience "ripe to receive 'truth'"⁴⁷ that is one that could have "learned and appropriated in a *questioning* and *evaluative* (rather than a merely passive and accepting) way".⁴⁸

Thus the principle of conversation that communist theory invokes is very different from that which is sometimes called up in capitalist politics and civil society. We can say that where uncontradicted (i.e., revolutionary) interaction is denied, good conversation is rare and under pressure at all times. Much of the "difficulty" and "complexity" of communist theory is related to this situation. Communist conversation in a revolution or situation of intense struggle erupts everywhere,⁴⁹ at other times it is not easy.

There is an objection, that Gunn and Wilding are aware of, that their suggestion of the centrality of conversation and mutual recognition to the revolutionary process makes such a process sound "too genteel". Here the links they make between such conversation and the revolutionary crowd and its form of violence are important. In a situation of role definitions and separation of spheres, violence can be a necessary part of establishing the conversation — a form of communication that tends toward mutual recognition. The pre-established channels, social roles, and institutions that distort or contradict mutual recognition are cleared away in the revolutionary situation which allows

45. *Ibid.*, 584.

46. Camatte makes a similar point: "[W]hen there is no longer any action, only reflexive and intensive thought can reencounter that which the activity of the masses had been able to discover after its generous impulse." *Bordiga and the Passion for Communism* (Spartacus 1974).

47. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 71.

48. Richard Gunn, 'Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*: Theory and Practice', *Heathwood Institute* (2013), 14.

49. The coming together of individuals from varied political histories in the worker student committees that Perlman and Gregoire describe is an example (see section I above).

an “unconstrained interaction... interaction which is open to all comers and where any issue whatever may be raised”.⁵⁰

A revolutionary process with society polarising into a party of anarchy and party of order advances by drawing more and more people into the conversation. Mutual recognition is arrived at in and through conflict with those who would deny it, and indeed, when confronted with the active enemies of mutual recognition — for example the police — violence and force is the way the party of order enters into the conversation. In the example of the French Revolution, it was the perceived threat of the army that created the “fused group” which stormed the Bastille.⁵¹ Writing in the aftermath of the 1990 poll tax riots, Gunn turns around the normal distinction between “violence” and “force” — it is not the instrumental violence of the state that is acceptable but the communicative violence of the crowd.⁵² Gunn argues that a consistent and genuine pacifist position may “have to celebrate the (participatory or communicative) violence which liberals count horrendous, and deplore the (instrumental and statist) violence which liberals reluctantly defend”.⁵³

In a strikingly spiky passage, Gunn suggests that the violence of revolution involves:

a rise and fall of factions so swift that none can claim legitimacy and so contingent that we can never declare an allegiance to one or other of them — opens a space for political conversation of the best sort. Over our last glass of wine, at the end of the evening, our conversation is likely to be sharpened if neither of us knows which of us may be unlocking the guillotine blade tomorrow.⁵⁴

Humanism?

The unashamed embrace of Hegel in this kind of argumentation may be uncomfortable to those steeled in the anti-humanism of recent French thought. Gunn and Wilding address this issue directly. Noting that

50. Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding, ‘Occupy as Mutual Recognition’, *Heathwood Institute* (2013). Their reference here is to Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, 357.

51. Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (New Left Books 1976), 345–63.

52. Richard Gunn, ‘Politics and Violence’ in Richard Bellamy, ed., *Theories and Concepts of Politics* (Manchester UP 1993).

53. *Ibid.*, 288–289.

54. *Ibid.*, 286.

“humanism” can mean several things, only some of which are objectionable, they argue that Marx and Hegel reject a humanism based on a scenario of history involving a pre-existing human essence waiting to be realised. Thus they state: “If the notion of humanism turns on the idea of self-realisation, Marx is (we may agree with Althusser) a theoretical anti-humanist.”⁵⁵ But so they would contend was Hegel. Their claim is that neither Marx “nor the Hegel of the *Phenomenology*” has a teleological view of history in which “‘humanity’ is seen as a grand totaliser or global subject, and history as that subject’s expression or self-realisation”.⁵⁶

They acknowledge that they have placed the idea of “uncontradicted recognition” in a similar conceptual place to the idea of such a subject. However, they point out that uncontradicted recognition is not a fixed and determinate entity, self, or subject that can realize itself. It is rather “an endless process”, because while such recognition is a situation “where freedom (understood as self-determination) and an unfolding of human capacities obtains”, it is at the same time “the polar opposite of fixity and determination”. Thus Gunn and Wilding assert “the ghost of ‘humanism’ is laid”.⁵⁷

However, Gunn and Wilding recognise that laying to rest the ghost of humanism, and ending the mystification it entails, involves a cost. Compared to the comforting humanist vision of self-realisation of the historic subject, Gunn and Wilding emphasise that revolution conceived as mutual recognition has dark or less-than-comforting aspects. The world of social institutions that Hegel called “spiritual masses” [*geistige Massen*] implies something quasi-natural that stands over individuals. Revolutionary recognition overthrows these institutions.⁵⁸ At the same moment, this quasi-natural aspect of social institutions provides — for most people, most of the time — a certain reliability and security. Human society reproduces itself behind people’s backs; it appears to follow natural laws. This is at the same time alienating and reassuring. One knows where one is with money; it can reliably command the labour of others, and relatedly one can rely on people acting out of role definitions because their private attitude is essentially irrelevant.

55. Gunn and Wilding, ‘Marx and Recognition’, 44.

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*, 45.

58. ‘The reality, which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals, insofar as reality is only a product of the preceding intercourse of individuals themselves.’ Marx, *The German Ideology* (MECW 5), 81.

By contrast, relations of mutual recognition make more demands upon us. They are based at all times on personal relations, and one has to assess if the speech or action is made in good faith. Mutual recognition involves a relinquishment of the “beguiling and bewitching” security afforded by institutions and social roles. A condition based on mutual recognition is, as Gunn and Wilding put it, more “artificial” and less “natural” — or, strictly speaking, less “quasi-natural” — than a condition of alienation.⁵⁹ Freedom is exposed or, as Gunn and Wilding say, “excoriated”. They write:

Communism knows no natural or quasi-natural inertia: although it is humane, there is no question of man’s (or humanity’s) realising its “true essence” — or “true nature”. Lacking quasi-natural security, communism lacks the stability that inertia brings. At each stage in a communist society’s existence, a relapse into what Hegel terms history and what Marx terms “hitherto existing society” remains a possibility. No guarantees against a relapse are conceivable. More than this: what may be termed ontological insecurity and communism are inseparable. In the margins of a text describing communist existence, hints of existential horror appear.⁶⁰

The idea that communism involves the achievement of good conversation is similar to the way some groups, like *Théorie Communiste* and the Invisible Committee, have taken up the traditional African idea of the *palabre*.⁶¹ Speculating about communism, Bernard Lyon states:

The central element of praxis is the *palabre*, which is at the same time antecedent, concomitant and subsequent to all action. The *palabre*

59. For a similar argument see ‘Life Against Nature’ in this issue.

60. Gunn and Wilding, ‘Marxism and Recognition’, 46. The authors here reference a 1918 Bloch essay: ‘The course of liberation ... is ... not aimed at facilitating somnolence or generalising the pleasurable, comfortable leisure of the contemporary upper classes. We do not propose to end up with the world of Dickens, or to warm ourselves at the fireplaces of Victorian England, at best. The goal, the eminently practical goal, and the basic motive of socialist ideology is this: to give to every man not just a job but his own distress, wretchedness, misery and darkness, his own buried, summoning light; to give to everyone’s life a Dostoevskyan touch...’ Ernst Bloch, ‘Karl Marx, Death and Apocalypse’ in *Spirit and Utopia* (Stanford 2000), 268.

61. Comité Invisible, *L’insurrection qui vient* (La Fabrique 2007), 111. *Palabre* — ‘word, speech, talk’ — refers to a custom in parts of Africa of creating and maintaining a social bond through a meeting, often under a tree, in which all or part of the community of a village participates.

is the mode of decision, of control and rectification of all acts; it has no end. It includes all activities, and for all activities we take the time to go right to the (provisional) end of the *palabre*. The *palabre* is knowledge of the real, conscious action. Conscious history means that we come to an agreement! The quest for the best possible decision, for the maximum possible points of view, for an action that can be changed, or even canceled, not weighing down the future, is the constant concern of the *palabre* in and between the networks. Conflicts are never conflicts of interest because there is no situation to reproduce in which the conflicts are insoluble.⁶²

Communism will be the achievement and maintenance of “good conversation” through the overthrow of existing social institutions. In the absence of such an overthrow, the achievement of mutual recognition in good conversation can only be approximated and is always at risk. It is possible for two people or a small group to maintain a good conversation, but it is difficult. The maintenance of good conversation in a group oriented to communist revolution is thus a challenging endeavour, which can only be approximated. The cases with which we started this text provide examples of the kind of tensions that may interfere or destroy mutual recognition in a group and cause the conversation to fail. How can we make sense of such occurrences?

62. Bernard Lyon, ‘17 Theses on Communism’, *Sic* (2012).

III. CASE STUDIES ANALYSED

The cases of the Praxis Group and the Theory Group with which we began this text concerned examples where the conversation in small groups broke down. In trying to make sense of them, the theory of the conversation offered by Gunn (which both these groups were aware of and referred to) seemed insufficient to deal with the crises the groups faced or to understand how they were resolved. To make sense of experiences like those cited in the case studies, we have turned to psychoanalysis — “group relations” — and in particular to the work of Wilfred Bion.¹ Here we found some texts that seemed to speak uncannily to us and to the experiences related in our case studies.

In “The Internal Establishment”, Paul Hoggett, using a case study of a community project he was asked to consult with, gives an account of certain dynamics of group life that are similar to the case of the Praxis Group and the experiences that many people have when they start to question aspects of political groups with which they are involved.²

Hoggett draws on psychoanalytic ideas from a number of sources,³ but especially Wilfred Bion’s idea of an “establishment” within the group, through which to understand what he identifies as a deep structure in collectivities that allows certain forms of thinking and life to exist, but which ruthlessly acts against others.

Borrowing Christopher Bollas’s term the “unthought known”,⁴ Hoggett suggests that groups, like individuals, have aspects which, while known in some sense, cannot really be thought about, for to do so would threaten the group’s illusions about itself. For Hoggett, the fact that groups tell partially illusory stories about themselves is not a problem in itself — it is part of “the creative quality of all social life”.⁵ “Groups” as Hoggett puts it, “occupy that potential space where nothing is simply ‘real’ nor simply ‘hallucinated’”.⁶ Their creative capacity exists in a space

1. It is indeed part of the openness that we intend that it is open to much more than simply various traditions of Marxism, communist or revolutionary theory, but also to psychoanalysis and other forms of ‘scientific’ thought in the broadest sense, of discourses oriented to truth about ourselves and the universe.

2. Paul Hoggett, ‘The Internal Establishment’ in Parthenope Bion Talamo, et al., eds., *Bion’s Legacy to Groups* (Karnac 1998), 9–24.

3. Significant references other than Bion are Christopher Bollas, Herbert Rosenfeld, Donald Meltzer and John Steiner.

4. Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known* (Free Association 1987).

5. Hoggett, ‘Internal Establishment’, 20.

they make for themselves through their self narrative. But, as he warns, “the step between illusion and delusion is short indeed”.⁷ The “imaginative fiction” has the propensity to become a “consolatory myth... constantly reinforced by propaganda”.⁸ The story the group presents to others is as much about misleading itself as misleading others. Questioning this story is often experienced as persecutory and shaming, and produces a reaction from what he calls the group’s “establishment”: a “pathological organisation” within the group which guards its “unthought known” against examination and critique, and responds by patching over gaps in its illusions.

Summing up the idea, Hoggett suggests the establishment is “a reactionary and secretive force”, a hidden deep structure, which operates “more like a network than an institution”; that, while capable of acting with violence and terror, it normally relies on “guile, propaganda and patronage”, adeptly drawing upon individuals’ worst qualities, “their desire not to think too much, not to ask too many questions”.⁹

Hoggett suggests that the split between a restrictive establishment and the rebel within a group pushing new thinking is not one of good and bad individuals, but something that exists within individuals themselves.¹⁰ The conflict of which Hoggett speaks is between two universal tendencies in groups and individuals: one towards development or learning from experience, the other towards resisting such learning. As he puts it, in a group every “member, in differing proportions, is both a victim, a tyrant, a rebel and a collaborator — that is, part of the establishment and part of the opposition. The function of the establishment is to police this racket.”¹¹

Hoggett’s typology suggests that “individuals” criticising groups from “outside” can be as much a victim of restricted thinking, and as conformist to a “group in the mind”, as the members of more obvious groups in the world that they subject to criticism. Moreover, Hoggett’s interpretation can be easily extended from formal groups and

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. He thus describes the establishment as ‘an area of silence in the life of the mind or the group where the body of the group is sensitive and should only be touched with the utmost care’. Ibid, 23.

10. While Bion’s idea of the establishment was developed especially in relation to the group (specifically his experience of the psychoanalytic group), he suggests it applies to the individual as well. The other psychoanalytical theorists on whom Hoggett draws — Rosenfeld, Meltzer, and Steiner — developed their ideas of ‘pathological organisation’, ‘rackets’ and ‘gangs’ to understand individual personality structures. Hoggett then reapplies those notions to the group.

11. Ibid., 23.

institutions to the informal milieus and networks that people now tend to operate in, and even loose identifications like “the left”, “anarchism”, “marxism”, “the ultra-left”, or “the movement”, which may have their own “unthought knowns”, their own establishment, their own injunctions against thinking certain thoughts, and their own pathological ways of dealing with dissent.

Drawing on Hoggett, we might say that what happened in the Praxis Group was a failure of the group and its establishment to deal with the change and development that the new ideas represented. The new ideas challenged the group’s “unthought known” regarding the relation of theory and practice and the role of radicals and revolutionary theory. The focus on the new ideas was seen to get in the way of the group’s practical orientation, its existing conception of its purpose. The new ideas were seen as a threat, and action was taken to eliminate their disruptive presence.

The Theory Group formed with an explicit aim of being open to new ideas, and ultimately to reality itself. It was influenced by the same ideas that tore apart the Praxis Group. One danger it faced was that the new ideas that were so explosive to the framework of the Praxis Group would become their own restrictive framework that functions as an establishment. However, the tensions that almost tore the new group apart in its early years were of a different character, related as a shadow to the very positive feelings its open creativity generated.

Interestingly, just as we found in Hoggett’s “Inner Establishment” a description that uncannily matches aspects of the Praxis Group, in his *Partisans in an Uncertain World* Hoggett offers a way of thinking about what he calls the creative or “Revolutionary Work Group” that resonates strongly with the case of the Theory Group. Hoggett recounts an experience of forming a group with politically like-minded academic colleagues. He describes the excitement, free-flowing creativity, and sense of possibility of the group. Spontaneously bound together by the shared desire and imagination of its members, the group does not require any formal discipline. Noting Bion’s concept of co-operation applied to the work group, Hoggett suggests that, as apt as it may be, it “hardly does justice to the electric-like nature” of the group he is describing, which can be better thought of as a “free association... in which the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all”.¹²

Similar to Gunn’s account of the conversation, Hoggett finds a model for this peculiar kind of willed group in the accounts given of crowds and other collectivities that form in relation to revolutionary events. He draws on a description of such collectives by Polan (who in turn is drawing on Sartre) who states that they can draw “on an almost electric field of common assumptions and shared norms”, allowing them to carry out their tasks and pursue their goals “with a speed, efficiency, willingness and comradeship that makes formal structures and procedures practically redundant”.¹³ People who have seen barricades thrown up, whether in Paris in 1968 or Gezi Park in 2013, or participated in lower key events of social contestation, will recognise what is being talked about here. Yet Hoggett claims that such a process can also apply to a more willed small group.

Hoggett’s description of the character of his small group and its mutual supportive common purpose as “exciting” and “electric-like” resonates with many people’s experiences of the initial period of a political group or project, whether it be a reading group, publishing venture, or a more immediately struggle-oriented collectivity. What he describes as the problems that such groups encounter also, unfortunately, resonate. He noted that, almost immediately,

...we were each aware of the possibility of betrayal. This was not about defection, of joining “the other side”, for at that moment there were no sides to be drawn; rather it was a fear of one’s fellows not giving of themselves. The creative [or revolutionary] group demands one thing: the generosity of its members ... What is feared, then, is not defection but the failure to give generously; for the group this is the one form of dissent which is difficult to tolerate.¹⁴

12. Paul Hoggett, *Partisans in an Uncertain World: The Psychoanalysis of Engagement* (Free Association 1992), 156.

13. *Ibid.*, 157.

14. *Ibid.*, 157.

In the Theory Group, the tension that Hoggett describes seemed to be at work in the conflict around the member who wished to go abroad. It came up at other times around fears that someone might use ideas developed in a collective context to advance a personal academic career. For Hoggett, “This possibility, that one’s comrades may differ

in their commitment arouses both psychotic and depressive anxieties, both the phantasy of the disintegration of the group and the phantasy of its disfigurement".¹⁵ One might add that what one sees and finds unbearable in the other may also represent a part of oneself that one disavows. The anger and hatred directed at the comrade who is seen to betray or sell-out is a way of expelling a part of oneself that might like to act in this way, and it is the way that the other stands in for such parts of oneself that accounts for the passion of the hatred.

As Hoggett suggests, such anxieties — "potentially unbearable feelings of mistrust, betrayal, disappointment and disillusionment"¹⁶ — are unavoidable; the best that can be achieved is their containment. This means that the creation of some sort of establishment (whose function in part is such containment) is inevitable, and the task becomes to create an establishment "which has more the quality of being benign and less the quality of being destructive".¹⁷ He suggests that the way to minimize the need for this establishment — and to make the one that inevitably is created more benign — is to create a culture or "a way of being" in the group which is generous and tolerant, that which in everyday language, "is referred to through phrases such as 'it takes all sorts' and 'live and let live'". This is difficult because "the greater the intensity of one's own commitment the more it cries out to be requited". However, as he argues, if "the group demands the generosity of its members, then it must adopt a generous attitude in return".¹⁸

The power of such analyses as Hoggett offers seem self-evident to us. Their illuminating power derives from a combination of Marxian and psychoanalytic perspectives.¹⁹ These insights have also led us to turn to psychoanalysis and in particular the work of Wilfred Bion which underpins Hoggett's work.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 158.

17. Ibid., 157–158.

18. Ibid., 158.

19. Hoggett was a socialist activist in the 1970s and maintains such a sensibility today, with a particular concern for climate change.

IV. A THEORY OF GROUPS AND A THEORY OF THINKING

[T]he difference between a true thought and a lie consists in the fact that a thinker is logically necessary for the lie but not for the true thought. Nobody need think the true thought: it awaits the advent of the thinker who achieves significance through the true thought. The lie and the thinker are inseparable. The thinker is of no consequence to the truth, but the truth is logically necessary to the thinker. His significance depends on whether or not he will entertain the thought, but the thought remains unaltered. In contrast, the lie gains existence by virtue of the epistemologically prior existence of the liar. The only thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies. Descartes's tacit assumption that thoughts presuppose a thinker is valid only for the lie.¹

1. Wilfred Bion, *Attention and Interpretation* (Karnac Books 1995), 102–103.

Wilfred Bion, possibly the most cited author in psychoanalytic literature after Freud, is a somewhat extraordinary figure in the history of psychoanalysis. He revolutionised the understanding of groups through a psychoanalytically informed theory, and then transformed psychoanalysis itself through his theory of thinking. We find both these theories of relevance to what we are and what we do. Before exploring these theories it is worth saying something about the social context and individual that produced them.

Bion was born in 1897 in India into an upper middle-class Anglo-Indian family. His father was a civil engineer directing the construction of railways and irrigation canals. The nature of his father's work meant that the young Bion absorbed more Indian culture than most colonialist children. A key figure in his upbringing was his Indian nanny or *ayah*² who may have been the source of a certain Eastern philosophical feel to some of his later ideas. In a form of abuse the English upper classes do to their children, he was sent to boarding school in England at the age of 8. He never saw India or his beloved *ayah* again. He was then further traumatised by his experience as a tank commander in WW1. While

2. This woman, who was of the 'untouchable' caste, is the first adult mentioned in Bion's autobiography, Wilfred Bion, *The Long Week-End 1897–1919: Part of a Life* (Fleetwood Press 1982), 9.

others saw him as behaving heroically, with both France and Britain awarding him medals, he described himself as having died on the road to Amiens.³ After the war he studied history before becoming a doctor, psychiatrist, and then a psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic. In this capacity he was a therapist to Samuel Beckett for two years, prompting much later speculation on their influence on each other. Dissatisfied with the eclectic form of therapy he had received and been taught, in 1938 he started a training analysis with John Rickman. With the start of WW2, they broke this off to work together as army psychiatrists.⁴

Bion and Rickman became part of the Tavistock “Invisible College” in the army. This was a time of widespread sympathies with “socialism” among the British intelligentsia and the Tavistock group was no exception.⁵ Experimentation with the possibilities of groups was the order of the day. They were strongly influenced by Kurt Lewin’s field theory.⁶ Rickman was also an important conduit for the idea of “leaderless groups”. During WW1, while Bion had joined the army and played the role of war hero, Rickman — a Quaker — had been a conscientious objector and gone to Russia as an ambulance driver and relief worker. In 1918, he witnessed the revolution in the countryside. Observing the peasant village council, or “Mir”, at work, Rickman noted: “the village formed a leaderless group, and the bond which held the members together was that they shared a common ideal”.⁷

Bion was instrumental in developing a new way of selecting officers. The method he pioneered involved putting candidates together in a “leaderless group” and observing how leadership spontaneously emerged when a group was set tasks. Later in the war Bion and Rickman created what is recognised as one of the first therapeutic communities at the Northfield military psychiatric hospital. This involved giving the patients autonomy to form their own groups to aid

3. ‘Oh yes, I died — on August 8th, 1918’. Bion, *The Long Week-End*, 265.

4. Rickman had been analysed by Freud and Ferencsi. During the war he became Bion’s friend, mentor and collaborator. After the war, the friendship they had developed precluded a continuation of their analysis together, and Rickman recommended Bion start a training analysis with Melanie Klein.

5. A collaborator writes, that during the war, ‘much talk centred on the Gestalt quasi-Marxist approach of Kurt Lewin... In fact the Russians at that time were much favoured by many of us including Rickman and Bion, and Stalin was referred to as Uncle Joe’. Patrick de Mare, ‘Major Bion’ in Malcolm Pines, ed., *Bion and Group Psychotherapy* (Routledge 1992), 112.

6. Kurt Lewin, the ‘father of social psychology’, was a refugee from Germany where he had been an associate of the Frankfurt School. He is attributed the saying, ‘If you want truly to understand something try to change it’. Charles W. Tolman, et al., eds., *Problems of Theoretical Psychology* (Captus 1996), 31.

their rehabilitation. The army High Command were disturbed by the experiment and closed it down after six weeks but it blazed a trail for others to continue such work. After the war, and on the basis of his war-time reputation, the Tavistock Clinic asked Bion to pioneer the use of groups for therapeutic purposes. The patients and staff composing the groups expected him to lead as an expert. To their frustration Bion’s approach was instead to encourage the participants to examine the tensions within the group, including the wish for him to take charge. Bion theorised his experiences in a series of papers later collected as *Experiences in Groups*.⁸ While Bion himself did not pursue this work these ideas became foundational for a method of research and experiential training and development in groups known as the Tavistock or Group Relations approach.⁹

A theory of groups

Bion’s key idea was that all groups operate simultaneously in two ways, displaying two different mentalities. On the one hand, every group is what Bion calls a “work group”. This is what the group consciously thinks it is about. It also refers to the mentality, attitude, and actions that reflect this purpose.¹⁰ The connection of the members in a work group is one of cooperation, where members draw on and develop their skills, capacities, and maturity out of a shared sense of purpose. For Bion, the work group is “in however embryonic a form, scientific”¹¹ because in pursuing their activity, whatever it is, its members probe reality, seek knowledge, learn from experience, and thus change and develop.

However, groups do not always operate in such a transparent, rational, and straightforward way. Groups often also display a mentality and activity that operates on a less conscious level that pulls in a

7. Quoted in Sebastian Kraemer, “The dangers of this atmosphere”: a Quaker connection in the Tavistock Clinic’s development’, *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 24 no. 2, 2011. 85.

8. Wilfred Bion, *Experiences in Groups* (Tavistock Publications 1961).

9. ‘In the final analysis, however, whatever group relations education has become is based on Bion’s thought, which provides the heuristic perspective for unravelling the unconscious functioning of groups’. Lawrence et al., ‘The Fifth Basic Assumption’ *Free Associations* no. 24 (1996).

10. The oddness of a Bionian group is that it makes the understanding of itself its work task.

11. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 143. As Grotstein suggests, for Bion ‘scientific’ is about ‘a respect for the undeniable’, an orientation towards truth in the sense of ‘emotional truth both about oneself and about one’s relationships with one’s objects’. James Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion’s Legacy to Psychoanalysis* (Karnac Books 2007).

different direction. Puzzling and often obstructive to the group's conscious aim, Bion found that this mentality and activity coheres and makes sense once we start to see the group as assuming it meets for something more primitive or "basic" than its consciously imagined purpose. He termed this aspect the "basic assumption group".

Bion identified three such basic assumptions, which he linked with primitive emotional drives: *dependency*, *fight-flight*, and *pairing*. These group-states each give rise to a different kind of leadership, which may or may not correspond with any acknowledged or unacknowledged leadership of the work group activity.¹²

Under the "dependency" basic assumption, the group acts as if it meets to receive everything it needs — wisdom, knowledge, guidance, etc. — from one member. Under the "fight-flight" basic assumption, the group acts as if its purpose is to fight or escape from a perceived enemy. The threat may be external or internal, clearly or poorly defined. Close to panic, the group is particularly hostile to thinking, but will follow anyone who seems to offer an immediate way of dealing with the threat, whether this is by attacking or running away from the enemy. In the "pairing" basic assumption, the group orients itself patiently to the interaction of two people (or perhaps two sub-groups). There is a mood of hopeful anticipation, a sense that the group will be saved, with the underlying assumption being that through the pair the group is going to give birth to something great, perhaps a new idea or new way to do things.¹³

An essential point for Bion is that the work group and basic assumption group do not apply to separate groups, but to forms of activity present in every group and every participant simultaneously, with sometimes one and sometimes the other aspect dominating. If the work group aspect is dominant, the group gets on with its task; if the basic assumption aspect is dominant, the group behaves defensively. Groups can be seen to be influenced by a certain basic assumption for a long time, at other times a rapid oscillation between the different basic assumptions can be observed. Basic assumptions may at times have a negligible effect on, or even be compatible with work group

12. The focus on the issue of 'leadership' may disturb the sensibilities of those who for good reasons like to think 'we don't have leaders', but to refuse to think about something doesn't abolish it. Bion offers a way of understanding how leadership functions often in quite spontaneous ways.

13. The messiah, of course, never actually comes.

activity,¹⁴ but at other times the basic assumption group interferes with or substitutes itself for the work activity. At times when stress circulates through the group, this mentality may come for extended periods to dominate the group in ways that can be compared to psychosis.¹⁵

How might such ideas apply to the "political" or "revolutionary" group? As was alluded to in the introduction, one of the problems with the idea of a "work group" orientated to revolution or communism is that this is clearly not a practical object for willed groups in the present. Thus the idea suggested in Bion's group theory of "keeping on task" is particularly difficult for a willed group when the tasks it orientates to — communism or revolution — will actually not be its product but rather a product of spontaneous (i.e. *determined*¹⁶) group processes at a class and societal level.

Bion suggested that the idea that a group acts consistently in the manner of the work group is "an idealised construct" or even a "group phantasy". This seems particularly true of groups nominally committed to the idea of revolution or communism. We all know that other stuff goes on in such groups. Whether it is routinised activity that no one really believes in, competition with other groups, or internal dramas and intrigues, there is much that goes on that has little to do with making progress in terms of what participants imagine to be their work group function. Observing basic assumption behaviour in such groups is not hard: there is the common enough dependency phenomenon of a group having an — often unacknowledged — leading member or guru who the others consistently look to for guidance (even if at the same time this may involve regularly being disappointed by what is delivered). Fight/flight behaviour can be seen in the hostile and competitive relations such groups often have with each other, and in the internal splits they are prone to. One might also see an affinity with the

14. In certain circumstances, for example, fight-flight might be very useful if a group does have a real and distinct enemy to contend with.

15. As we shall see below, Kleinian psychoanalysis normalises what it is to be 'psychotic' through its idea of the paranoid schizoid position as a primitive form of mental functioning we all fall into at times.

16. '[M]ovements of the proletariat are completely determined, both by the situation which this class occupies within the totality of the social relations that are fundamental to modern society, and also by a specific conjuncture which, during a given period, provides it with the opportunity to intervene on the historical stage.... So "spontaneous", in the sense in which Marx and Luxemburg employ the term, means nothing more than absolutely determined by the whole of social relations. [It is not revolutionaries] who by playing the people's educators can create the historic situation in which the proletariat becomes what it is, but the very development of modern society. When such a situation appears, revolutionaries of non-working class origin... "confined" within bourgeois society, unite →

pairing basic assumption when a group is dominated by a messianic hope.

The notion of a fundamental assumption that the group must be preserved also seems apparent and glossed as the necessity for political organisation (or for “the party”). Political groups also seem particularly prone to times when strange, often disturbing and unpleasant things happen “between individuals, in factions and sometimes throughout the group” persisting “sometimes to the point of the demise of the project, more often to the point of a split or expulsion”.¹⁷ But we should not limit our recognition of these behaviours to formalized political groups — all kinds of networks, scenes and milieus that people operate in can display such behaviors as well.

Analysing what is going on in a group is not just a matter of applying basic assumptions. It is possible, for example, to see basic assumptions at play in the two case studies with which we began; however, the analysis we borrowed from Hoggett in the previous section indicates that any specific group difficulty will require not just identifying basic assumptions but imaginative exploration of what precisely is going on in any given case.

A seemingly simple lesson from Bion’s work is that when operating in groups we can attempt to bring into focus both the work aspect of the group, its aim or purpose, and the less conscious aspects of what is happening that interfere with this. Alongside its work group activity, the group may make, to use Bion’s phrase, the study of its tensions a group task. Are the energies of the group focused on its agreed task or are they being dissipated in something else? This may involve not suppressing the processes that are interfering but exploring them. At times — and such times are inevitable — when the work group is no longer dominant, collective awareness can be brought to it. This may, however, be difficult and require courage from its participants. Those who ask the group to examine itself often become the target of group hostility. Bion argued that when strange things are happening in a group, everyone is affected, and the best one can do is retain a capacity to “think under fire”.

Bion is often taken as having a largely negative view on groups. This is because the approach he took to leading groups brought out the

themselves in the proletarian party, which spontaneously forms in order to solve the revolutionary tasks.’ Authier, *The Beginnings of the Workers’ Movement in Russia*, 1.

17. Robert M. Young, ‘Group Relations: An Introduction’ (Process Press 1997).

strange and disturbing things that can occur within them. By producing stress and anxiety in participants, Bionian groups bring into prominence the unconscious and defensive basic-assumption aspects of group functioning. Bion’s point was that we all carry these capacities with us. Groups, just as they allow us to achieve possibilities we can’t attain on our own, can also bring out some of our less appealing, even psychotic, qualities. He thought, however, that in the long run “despite the influence of the basic assumptions”¹⁸ the work group was triumphant.¹⁹

Indeed far from upholding the individual against the irrationality of the group, there is in Bion an insistence that group-ness is fundamental to the individual, as he puts it:

The individual is, and always has been, a member of a group, even if his membership consists in behaving in such a way that reality is given to an idea that he does not belong to a group at all. The individual is a group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his “groupishness”.²⁰

Drawing on this, Wolfenstein argues powerfully that the whole idea of the individual as “a self conceived outside of society and essentially constituted from the inside out” is a group phantasy.²¹ Difficult experiences with groups may encourage taking refuge in this defensive phantasy, but it is a delusion.

The “scientific character” that Bion attributes generically to the work group aspect of any group takes on particular significance for a group oriented to theorizing the communist overcoming of capitalism. In this case, thinking — developing “insight and understanding” — is fundamental to what “we” are about; at least it is what we like to think we are about. Though not entirely separate from any engagement we may have in struggles, it is thinking, understanding, and theorising experience that offers itself to us as a task worth pursuing. At the same time, such a task is not a straightforward one. The object of enquiry —

18. Bion, *Experiences in Groups*, 135.

19. ‘[O]ne can see both the strength of the emotions associated with the basic assumption and the vigour and vitality which can be mobilized by the work group’. *Ibid.*, 100.

20. *Ibid.*, 168.

21. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, ‘Group phantasies and the individual: A critical analysis of psychoanalytic group psychology’ *Free Associations* no. 20 (1990), 154. Marx makes a similar point in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*.

capitalist society – is not something that stands over and against the enquirer but is rather a dynamic process of the composition and decomposition of social relations through crisis and struggle that includes the enquirer within it. Capitalism is not out there, it traverses us, it *is* us. As Wolfenstein puts it, in both psychoanalysis and the theory of social revolution: “We are the problem we are trying to solve”.²² To be aware of what is going on is painful. Outside of struggles there are no easy benchmarks to judge if one’s work group activity is having results, nor does such enquiry make one’s life easy. Indeed it is perhaps the difficulties of this task, which involves going against all the obviousness of bourgeois society, that give rise to some of the pseudo-answers and pathologies that particularly afflict such groups.

It is relatively easy to identify how basic assumptions may interfere with the group orientated to revolutionary change, but what, in the absence of revolution, might its work consist in? If we are going to say that we have a task of *trying to think*, then it is worth examining the second period of Bion’s work which has informed our understanding: his theory of thinking.

Towards a Theory of Thinking: the Kleinian Development

While others enthusiastically took up the ideas on groups that Bion had developed, he was not particularly satisfied with them.²³ Finishing a training analysis with Melanie Klein, he went on from the early 1950s to practice individual psychoanalysis and in particular to work with psychotic patients. It was out of this work that his most significant contribution to psychoanalysis would emerge – the theory of thinking.²⁴

Bion’s theory of thinking only makes sense in relation to the Kleinian development in psychoanalysis, and its key concepts of projective identification and the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. For this reason, and because we find such concepts are independently of value to understanding ourselves and the world, it is worth outlining them here.

22. Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *Psycho-analytic-Marxism: Groundwork* (Free Association Books 1993), 208.

23. In a letter to one of his children, he says of *Experiences in Groups* that ‘the one book I couldn’t be bothered with even when pressure was put on me 10 years later has been a continuous success’. Wilfred Bion, *All My Sins Remembered (Another Part of a Life) & The Other Side of Genius: Family Letters* (Fleetwood Press 1985), 213.

Drawing on an earlier discussion of mania and depression by Karl Abraham and Freud, and her own pioneering work with children, Klein postulated an affinity between early infantile states of mind and those encountered in psychosis. She described two fundamental ways of relating to the world, which she termed the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, and the movement between them as the key task of development. Klein thus displaced the Freudian focus on the oedipal drama, around the fifth year, by a concern for more primitive levels of mental functioning, which emerge sequentially in the infant’s first year, but which she thought continue to play a role throughout life.

Klein contended that the infant, in its first few months, has a dominating anxiety of being annihilated, and defends itself against this by a process of projective identification. Projective identification is an unconscious phantasy of taking things in and spitting things out which feels real and has real effects on the developing ego. This involves a splitting of its experience into that of either wholly good and or wholly bad objects. The infant coheres its first sense of self through identification with and love for its introjected good object, which it needs to keep separate from its “bad” feelings of hatred and destructiveness which it puts into the bad object. The prototypical good object is the gratifying mother or good breast, the bad is the non-gratifying mother or bad breast. Klein thought the absence of the object, of the real breast, was “too much” for the youngest infant, and that in its phantasy it instead experiences the non-breast as a concrete “bad breast”, which it tries to get rid of or evacuate through what she called projective identification. In a recurrent struggle to lessen its dominant anxiety, a cycle of splitting, projection, and introjection ensues. The projective identification of the paranoid-schizoid position is thus what one does to one’s difficult experience when one is unable to think about it. If not excessive, this projective identification fulfils a developmental function, allowing an eventual shift to the depressive position.

The depressive position involves a more realistic and integrated picture of the world, in which the ambivalence of one’s objects and one’s feelings towards them begins to be tolerable. The infant recognises that the good and bad perceptions of the maternal object, which

24. Wilfred Bion, ‘A Theory of Thinking’ *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* vol. 43 (1962); Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (William Heinemann 1962); Wilfred Bion, *Elements of Psycho-Analysis* (William Heinemann 1963); Wilfred Bion, *Transformations* (William Heinemann 1965).

it has previously kept rigidly apart, refer to a whole object, an *other* person. It thus recognises that the bad (absent) breast which it has intensely hated is actually the same object as the good breast which it has loved. As a result, the main form of anxiety shifts from fear of one's own imminent annihilation to concern for this object: the person upon which the individual depends and which it is not able to control through mechanisms of projective identification, as it previously phantasised it could. The dawning awareness of the reality of self and others, and of the impact of one's actions on those others, is painful and subject to retreat back towards the paranoid schizoid position.

Importantly for Klein, transition between these positions, though occurring for the first time around the middle of the first year, is not to be understood as a once-and-for-all achievement, but as a continuously active process. The paranoid schizoid position is not so much a stage that is left behind, but more a distinct way of apprehending reality and organising experience which continues to play a role throughout a person's life. The attainment of the depressive position then, is neither smooth nor certain; it continues throughout childhood and indeed can be considered a lifelong developmental task.

The understanding of the positions as two fundamental modes of organizing and processing experience, different ways of relating to the world, each generating its own quality of being, means that whether or not one is persuaded by the Kleinian speculation about the psychic world of the infant, it is possible to accept the positions on other grounds: namely one's own observation of one-self and others.²⁵

Splitting of good and bad, an idealisation of the good object(s) and denigration of (the) bad object(s), in which thoughts and oneself seem to be un-integrated or dis-integrating — this is the paranoid-schizoid position. Recognition of the ambivalence of self, of others, and of the situation, in which one's thoughts and perceptions are more integrated, expresses the realism of the depressive position. If the depressive position is hopefully where we more normally operate from, we all will have encountered the paranoid-schizoid state in ourselves, in others, and especially in collective life. We are all capable of moving into

25. Thus while it might seem to us that a lot of psychoanalytic language such as that of an external and internal world, with projective identification as a form of sender/receiver communication, is metaphorical rather than a description of actual processes, it has provided a way of understanding and exploring human subjectivity—its phantasy and emotion, distress and suffering, destructiveness

the paranoid-schizoid state of mind, especially if put under enough stress. The psychotic part of our personality exists alongside the non-psychotic part, and thus the shift into the paranoid-schizoid position is more a sideways than a backwards movement. If Freud showed us we are all neurotic, Klein showed us we are all psychotic. and pathology — in a way few other languages have.

From Working with Psychosis to the Theory of Thinking

Freud famously thought psychotics were unanalyzable. Bion was one of a small group of analysts who, fortified by the exploration of their own primitive mental functioning in their analyses with Klein, felt able to work with such patients.²⁶ Puzzling over why such patients were so hard to understand, Bion identified what he called “attacks on linking” — attacks on the awareness of reality and the linking of objects necessary to thinking itself.²⁷ Such attacks defend psychotics against the unbearable emotional truths in their lives. Working with such disordered forms of thinking (or what the psychotic did *instead* of thinking) led Bion into theorising what the normal person does when they think. As he stated later:

It would be easy to say that the obvious thing to do with thoughts is to think them; it is more difficult to decide what such a statement means in fact. In practice the statement becomes more meaningful when it is possible to contrast what a psychotic personality does with thoughts *instead* of thinking them, and how much discipline and difficulty a measure of coherent thinking involves for anyone.²⁸

Thinking is hard and can be painful — most of the time people do not really think, they reproduce ideas that are already circulating without any development of them. What we have found is that Bion's theory of thinking offers us a way of helping make sense of what some of the obstacles are to such development. In this section we are asking readers to immerse themselves in rather difficult

26. The others were Hannah Segal and Herbert Rosenfeld.

27. In psychoanalysis 'object', while sometimes a physical thing or a concept, more often refers to another person or to part of a person (e.g. the breast).

28. Bion, *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, 30.

material whose importance and relevance may be hard to ascertain. We find it is worth it.

Getting a handle on Bion's theory of thinking poses certain problems. One difficulty is that it is not really one theory, but a series of models of mental growth and development, and there are questions how each model relates to the others. Another difficulty is that, in Bion's writings, in addition to introducing a series of new concepts, he often chooses to represent them with symbols and algebraic notation. The reader is faced with "K" and "-K" ("minus K") for knowing and its opposite; "beta elements" (β), "alpha function" (Ψ), and "alpha elements" (α) for the most basic mental functions;²⁹ "pre-conceptions", "realizations", and "conceptions" for steadily more complex forms of proto-thoughts; "K>O" for a shift from knowing to becoming; "Ps \leftrightarrow D" for an oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Even the concrete-sounding metaphor of container and contained is sometimes represented by "♀" for container and "♂" for contained.³⁰ Bion's stated purpose in using such symbols was to avoid words already saturated with existing meanings and associations, so that readers are forced to themselves look for realizations of the ideas in their own thinking. The reader is then asked not to passively absorb the theory but to actually *think* themselves.

For our purposes we will not explain all of Bion's terms and symbols in any depth, but just touch on ones which have come to have a particular significance for us:

K and -K
Container and Contained
Ps \leftrightarrow D
Mystic and Establishment

K and -K

Bion sees that in the individual and the group, there is both a drive towards thinking, learning, and development—which he terms "K"—and forces that are antithetical to thought and change, which he calls "minus K" or "-K".³¹

Bion distinguishes between possessing bits of knowledge and knowing as the function of a relationship. The former is a kind of "knowing about" that lends itself to controlling the object, the latter K involves "getting to know" an on-going link between subject and object, and links between one's objects. In the Kleinian and "object relations" version of psychoanalysis before Bion, the main relations between self and objects were love and hate. With the notion of the K link, Bion elevated the drive to knowledge (K) to a level with love (L) and hate (H) as a fundamental affective emotional link between the subject and its objects. Just as "x L y" (or "x H y") indicate a relation of love (or hate) between x and y, the phrase "x K y" indicates a relation or process in which "x is in a state of getting to know y and y is in a state of getting to be known by x".³²

For Bion, attempting to be in a relation of knowing (the K link or K) makes emotional demands. K involves a process of exploration which entails openness and risk; a process that is never completed and has a transformative effect on the knower as well. It requires tolerance of the pain and frustration of not-knowing, in the faith that if one has patience and perseveres, then sense will emerge, and transformation or mental growth will occur. However, Bion was quick to note that there exists an opposite process: the mind actively seeking not to know: minus K (-K). -K is not the same as not knowing, it is a state of avoidance of awareness of not knowing. In -K, instead of the pain and frustration of not knowing being tolerated, allowing it to be modified towards mental growth, it is evaded. To evade frustration is to evade knowing the object. Thus x -K y indicates that x is in an active (if unconscious) way attempting not to know y. Bion offered that -K can express itself in extreme ways,

31. '[T]he theories in which I have used the signs K and -K can be seen to represent realization in groups. In K the group increases by the introduction of new ideas or people. In -K the new idea (or person) is stripped of its value, and the group in turn feels devalued by the new idea. In K the climate is conducive to mental health. In -K neither group nor idea can survive partly because of the destruction incident to the stripping and partly because of the product of the stripping system.' Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 99.

32. *Ibid.*, 47.

29. Beta-elements are something like the 'things in themselves', raw sensation from inside or outside that cannot be thought. Alpha function (something close to dreaming, but a dreaming that happens also when one is awake) turns these into something that can be thought: alpha elements.

30. Discussing his use of the symbols ♀ and ♂ for container and contained, Bion says 'this leaves ♀ and ♂ as unknowns whose value is to be determined.' Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 127.

as he found in his psychotic patients, but also in much less obvious ways, as something we all engage in.

In terms of the earlier theory of groups, we can see the work group as oriented to K and the basic assumption group as expressing minus K. Minus K can take numerous forms, simply rejecting the new experience, asserting that one's existing categories are adequate, substituting an assertion of right and wrong for determining what is actually the case or jumping to action without reflection. Such forms as these are all means to avoid recognising the need for new thinking and the benefit of learning from experience.

One of the most effective obstacles to knowing is the idea that one already knows. It is possible to use the mind to acquire more and more pieces of knowledge, but at the same time avoid any significant change. This is common in academia but is also present in the political sphere in the form of the hack who has read some books. The idea that one knows already, that existing categories and schemas make sense of experience, can be one of the most effective ways of evading the transformative relation of getting to know.

Morality as substitution for K

When there is an attempt to understand a subject, it is possible to short-circuit the process by shifting the issue to whether something is good or bad: morality substitutes for K.

One notices such a move—where a moral attitude gets in the way of understanding—occurs fairly regularly in political discussion and controversies. To take two current examples: the white middle class character of Extinction Rebellion and its civil disobedience tactics are not just taken as a feature of the movement, limits to be explored, but as a reason to dismiss it.³³ Or the right-wing views of many participants in the yellow vests movement is used to deny its proletarian nature. These are things that must be engaged with theoretically if one wants to understand, and practically if one wants to participate, but morality can be used to obviate the difficulty in properly understanding and engaging a phenomenon. To assert that something is bad is typically to claim to know it and to

33. We can understand the feeling that there is something unbearably pious, moralistic and middle class about this movement, but we would suggest approaching it similarly to how *Midnight Notes* analysed the anti-nuclear movement in 'Strange Victories'

be separate from its badness.³⁴ One doesn't have to make the effort to understand its complexity, tensions and contradictions. It seems fairly clear that much of what gets seen as "identity politics" and "political correctness" is bound up with forms of moralism—the establishing of good and bad, with good residing here and bad residing there—without trying to go deeper into the real sources and nature of domination. At the same time, the way some dismiss identity politics without trying to understand the stakes in any particular case of what gets ranged under this term can express an omniscience-claiming moral superiority and splitting of its own.

Bion developed the notation xKy and $x-Ky$ in a psychoanalytic context where the object, y , that x is attempting to know or avoid knowing is another person. At first glance the attempt to understand the social world would appear to be a very different task, and thus not involve the same difficulties. However, in both cases the object is not something inanimate to be known like a thing, it involves an emotionally charged experience, one in which the subject is totally implicated. Understanding capitalism is about understanding oneself, and understanding oneself requires understanding the socio-political world of which one is part.

There are good reasons to avoid knowing this world. With the idea of $-K$, the use of thinking against itself, Bion provides a fresh way of looking at what has often been seen through the idea of a pejorative conception of ideology. Indeed we might say that capitalist society is pervaded by $-K$ in the sense of an attack on the linking between self and other in its fullest sense. In a world dominated by the capitalist mode of production, to properly understand ourselves requires grasping our relation to everyone and everything else. Yet capitalism necessarily produces a sense of ourselves as atomistic individuals, separate from the matrix out of which we emerge.³⁵ To a significant extent, taking that illusion for granted ($-K$) is functional to survival within those social relations, even if that survival is existentially impoverished and in the long term places the survival of this and other species in question.

Midnight Notes vol 1. no. 1 (1979).

34. 'Omniscience substitutes for the discrimination between true and false a dictatorial affirmation that one thing is morally right and the other wrong.' Bion, 'Theory of Thinking' in *Second Thoughts*, 114.

35. "The individual" (a self-constituted outside society and essentially from the inside out; the self of psychological individualism) is an element in a group phantasy,' Wolfenstein, 'Group Phantasies and the Individual', 174.

Not looking at what is going on in this world, not thinking about the unfolding catastrophe, is a major form of -K, and just as with the psychotic's attacks on linking, it defends against an unbearable emotional truth. However, having an understanding of capitalism is no guarantee of an absence of -K. In the field in which we operate, we have certainly witnessed groups and individuals who seem to be engaged in resisting knowing things which threaten their identity and what they think they know. The challenge of course is to recognise such states in ourselves.

In the political world we encounter -K again and again. At the same time, struggles continue to show their capacity to surprise us. It is a common observation that in a situation of struggle and of new experience it is often the "politicos" with the rigidity of their existing expectations — their saturated pre-conceptions³⁶ —

who prove much less able to learn from the new experience than the fresher participants in a movement. At the same time, as a struggle recedes so does the rapid learning many participants showed during the movement. They seem to return to their older ways of thinking (ways that are more appropriate to the return to normality) and it is the politicians who are left with the task of attempting to explicitly assimilate the experience — something they may do well or not.

The most important period of struggles have of course been revolutions and revolutionary waves. The importance we have attributed to the German-Dutch council communist Left and the Italian "Bordigist" Left, and their influence on the French and Italian ultra lefts of the 1970s, has been that they represent some of the keenest attempts to assimilate respectively the experiences of the revolutionary waves at the end of WW1 and at the end of the 1960s.

The challenge is to relate to such ideas in an open and not dogmatic way, to not turn a way of making sense of experience into an overly restrictive framework.

36. If a pre-conception—e.g. one's conception of how change can happen—is saturated it cannot meet with a new realization and become a conception that can then be a pre-conception for future experience.

Container and Contained

The relationship of container [♀] and contained [♂] is for Bion a flexible model or metaphor to describe how thinking occurs both within individuals and between them — in groups. Other theories of knowledge tend to assume that thoughts are the product of a prior process of thinking. Bion argues that rather than conceiving of thoughts as the product of a prior apparatus for thinking, the thinking apparatus is something that is developed to deal with thoughts. This container is built up gradually, largely from previous thoughts and in relation to other people's thinking, which at first can do the job of containing for us.³⁷

The container/contained model of thinking emerged from Bion's engagement with the phenomena of "projective identification" as theorised by Klein. Drawing on work with his highly disturbed patients, Bion sensed that they were communicating with him through projective identification. Bion's leap was thus to see projective identification as sometimes having a healthy function. It was not necessarily just a way of getting rid of or evacuating a bad feeling by projecting it into another person, it could also be a form of primitive or embryonic communication. When the infant has an experience of bad feelings (pain of hunger or worse: an inchoate sense that it is dying), it acts in such a way as to make its carer feel the kind of feelings that the infant wants to be rid of.³⁸ If this goes well, the mother takes on board the feeling, identifies what is wrong, and responds not only physically, with say, milk, but soothingly. At a mental level of mutual recognition shared by her and the infant, she has observed, processed, and given meaning, so as to transform³⁹ the feeling that the infant is unable to deal with into something named and manageable. The infant deals with its fears — a part of itself — in phantasy by projecting them into the container of the

37. 'The pattern ♂♀ represents an emotional realization associated with learning that becomes progressively more complex as it constantly recurs throughout mental development'. Bion, *Learning From Experience*, 93.

38. 'As a realistic activity it [projective identification] shows itself as behaviour reasonably calculated to arouse in the mother feelings of which the infant wishes to be rid. If the infant feels that it is dying it can arouse fears that it is dying in the mother. A well-balanced mother can accept these and respond therapeutically ... If the projection is not accepted by the mother the infant feels that its feeling that it is dying is stripped of such meaning as it has. It therefore re-introjects, not a fear of dying, but a nameless dread'. Bion, *Theory of Thinking*, 182-183.

39. This is the mother's alpha function turning something physical (beta elements) in the infant into something that can be thought. Experience like this will eventually allow the infant to incorporate its own alpha function.

mother's breast, then again in phantasy by feeling it has re-introjected them in a modified, more tolerable form. The mother can be seen as a container – represented by ♀ – in which another object (the feelings) – represented by ♂ – is placed.⁴⁰ The mother is thus in a real sense thinking for the infant. Development occurs for Bion when the ♂♀ activity occurring between the infant and mother gradually builds up the infant's capacity to tolerate frustration, allowing the child to "introject" its own ♂♀ apparatus. The infant gradually develops a capacity to contain more feelings and thoughts, that is, its thinking of thoughts becomes less dependent on others carrying this out in its stead.⁴¹ This apparatus for thinking is thus at the same time a containing of emotional experience and a transmuting of it into cognitive activity. For Bion, thinking is thus an internal apparatus (♀) for dealing with emotionally invested thoughts (♂) that we gradually build up, becoming capable of containing more experience and thoughts of increasing levels of abstraction while at first relying on an other's apparatus (♀) to contain us.

While each person has, in a sense, their own thinking apparatus, an individual's way of thinking is largely assimilated, adopted, and borrowed through engagement with others. We need to maintain relations with the apparatuses of others – we need first the maternal object, then a wider group – in order to grow and develop. That group does not have to be an actual group, but can include the thinking of others, living and dead, that we access in whatever way. Though we develop our own capacity to contain ourselves and our thinking, this is only relative. Ultimately, we constantly rely on others to contain ourselves and our thoughts. This other expands from the mother to the wider circles in which we are involved, including texts we read, discussions we have, and so on.

At a certain level, the communist group, in whatever way it exists, whether as an actual group or as the theory we adopt from reading or engaging with others, is an example of ♀ – a container or apparatus for thinking. Being able to "think for oneself" means that one has incorporated such an apparatus, but even then one constantly engages with

40. We follow Bion here who, from an original situation of an infant's experience being contained by a maternal object, derives symbols ♂♀ which are then used in very diverse situations. ♀ and ♂ can refer to container and contained of any gender.

41. We can see an example of this in the way an infant's own 'baby talk' starts to fill the role played by the soothing and designating talk of the mother.

"groups in the mind", our thinking is always responding to and anticipating others' utterances. Thinking happens through the linking or interpenetration of one element with another to produce a third, and these connections have an emotional aspect.

Bion contended that the more abstract and complex forms of thinking and theorising involving "concepts" that we become capable of as adults are built up from, and grounded in, linking operations carried out by the infant with more primitive kinds of thoughts he labelled "pre-conceptions" and "conceptions". In the familiar and basic example, the infant's inborn disposition to seek the breast is seen as a "pre-conception", a state of expectation,⁴² which "mates" with an awareness of its realization (the presence of the breast) to form a "conception" of the breast. Once established, this conception can then act as a more developed pre-conception for further realizations of increasing complexity. Alternatively the pre-conception meets not with a realization but with the frustration of this expectation – its non-realization – and, if the infant is able to tolerate its frustration, the perception of the no-breast can transform into a thought of the breast. Thus from a process that started with some simple preconceptions around feeding, breathing, and excretion, the meeting of pre-conception with a realization (or negatively the failure of a pre-conception to meet a realization) produces conceptions that are then pre-conceptions for further realisations and conceptions in a hierarchical way that becomes increasingly abstract and generates, ultimately, the most sophisticated thinking, and finally even complex scientific hypotheses and theories.

This is what we are doing when we try to make sense of new developments and struggles. Is the new event a realization of an existing pre-conception, thus not challenging us to develop our theory, or is it something different, a non-realization of existing ideas requiring us to tolerate the frustration of not-knowing in hopes that a new thought will arrive?

Thinking, even in its most complex, rational, and abstract forms – "theories" – is rooted in experience, which in the first place is not cognitive but emotional. At each step, the functions of satisfaction and

42. '[T]he counterpart of a variable in mathematical logic or an unknown in mathematics. It has the quality that Kant ascribes to an empty thought in that it can be thought but it cannot be known! Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 91.

frustration play their part in furthering the developing apparatus for thinking. Tolerance of frustration, which at the adult level involves tolerance of doubt—tolerance of not knowing—is the emotional connective tissue in which mental growth occurs and such growth still has the emotional flavour of the original process.

From this perspective communist theory may be conceived of as an apparatus for thinking that has been built up through an ongoing relationship between the experience of capitalism and previous attempts to think about and make sense of it. Marx is a key figure here in taking some of the most sophisticated theories developed within the bourgeois frame—political economy and Hegelian idealism—and, by connecting them to the meaning of the proletarian class struggle, transforming them into a theoretical container for thinking the real movement towards communism. It was an extraordinary contribution, but key to such theory is the ability to use it to learn from and think about new experience, the ability to be surprised by the class struggle.

The acquiring of knowledge of history, theories, critique, etc. can be part of this process of K, but equally the acquiring of theoretical frameworks and facts can be about the production of an illusion of knowing that helps one avoid learning something new from experience. The idea that “I” or my “group” knows or has the answer undermines uncertainty and the questioning attitude from which alone new ideas can come.⁴³ We can acquire knowledge to avoid learning from experience, as ideas can be used to evade the experience or to rationalize why the experience should not impinge on one’s existing paradigm.

In discussing the relation between Ricardo and the Ricardian school, Marx seemed to anticipate the difference between open (K) and dogmatic (-K) forms of thinking that he himself would inspire:

With the master what is new and significant develops vigorously amid the “manure” of contradictions out of the contradictory phenomena. The underlying contradictions themselves testify to the richness of the living foundation from which the theory itself developed. It is different with the disciple. His raw material is no longer

43. Bion was fond of Maurice Blanchot’s line ‘La réponse est le malheur de la question’ (The answer is the disease or misfortune of the question).

reality, but the new theoretical form in which the master had sublimated it. It is in part the *theoretical disagreement of opponents of the new theory* and in part the *often paradoxical relationship of this theory to reality* which drive him to seek to *refute* his opponents and *explain away* reality. In doing so, he entangles himself in contradictions and with his attempt to solve these he demonstrates the beginning *disintegration of the theory* which he dogmatically espouses.⁴⁴

44. Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (MECW 32), 274–275.

This rejection of dogma in favour of being receptive to the living foundation from which theory emerges connects to what we have derived both from the idea of open Marxism and in terms of Bion’s theory of thinking. The “raw material” of reality is of course capitalist society and the struggles it engenders.

“Marxism”, in the sense of the theoretical approach that Marx with Engels can be seen to have arrived at in the mid 1840s, is unthinkable without the struggles of the proletariat of that time. Marx famously changed his views on the state in relation to the Paris Commune of 1871. Correspondence with Russian revolutionaries led him to immerse himself in trying to understand social conditions in their area and to question the linearity and determinism of his own earlier conception of capitalist development.⁴⁵ The proletariat’s mass strikes and creation of soviets in the early 20th century produced the basis for the currents that theorised and tried to act on these developments and who formed a nucleus of opposition to WW1. The revolutionary wave that ended that war produced the intertwined revolution and counter revolution in Russia and the attempt to make sense of it and their own experiences by the German/Dutch and Italian Lefts. The revolutionary wave around ’68, with its struggles against and beyond work, questioning all forms of identity, produced the idea of revolution as communisation.

45. See Teodor Shanin, *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (Monthly Review 1983) and Jacques Camatte, ‘Community and Communism in Russia’ *Invariance* II (1974).

Part of the difficulty in this is that learning from experience—being in a state of getting to know—involves the necessity of changing the apparatus with which one makes sense of the world—that is, changing oneself—and this can be perceived as a threat of catastrophic

change. To make sense of this, Bion returned to the central Kleinian notion of the positions. As we have seen, with Klein, the depressive position involves a movement of integration from the non-integrated state of the paranoid-schizoid position. Bion posited oscillation between a kind of healthy version of the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position as an essential condition of thinking new thoughts, an oscillation he symbolized with the expression: "Ps↔D".

Ps↔D

Bion argues that "the capacity for learning depends throughout life" on the "ability to tolerate the paranoid-schizoid position, the depressive position, and the dynamic and continuing interaction between the two",⁴⁶ an interaction he represented as Ps↔D.

As we have seen, for Bion growth in K—learning from experience—is not a merely cognitive or intellectual matter, but depends on an emotional climate composed of tolerance of frustration and uncertainty. While accumulating new pieces of knowledge within one's existing framework is relatively easy, further growth or development, being open to new ideas to make sense of new experiences which do not fit into existing pre-conceptions requires that one allows one's frame, what one thinks one knows, to be questioned.⁴⁷ This questioning of one's framework is a destruction or de-structuring of the existing thoughts and theories of which the thinking apparatus (♀) is composed. Growth in ♂ requires growth in ♀—an alteration in the container. This series of recombinations can be represented ♂ⁿ♀ⁿ. Growth in the apparatus (♀ⁿ) whether that of the individual or of the group requires that it is able to lose rigidity and even some integration. There is a process of breaking up of the integration—the D position—previously achieved. It is thus a limited return to a less stable and more fragmented paranoid-schizoid position (Ps) in the hope that a subsequent restructuring can allow the Depressive position to be regained at a higher level.⁴⁸

46. Wilfred Bion, *Cogitations* (Karnac Books 1992), 199.

47. 'Any attempt to cling to what he knows must be resisted for the sake of achieving a state of mind analogous to the paranoid-schizoid position.' Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 124.

48. Bion suggested this healthy form of Ps and D might be called patience and security to distinguish them from more pathological forms of Ps and D but this wording has not caught on.

Ps↔D is then a process of integration, disintegration, and reintegration. There is no finality in this process, there is always an ongoing process of making sense of, or giving meaning to, experience, being open to further discoveries, and modifying what one thinks one knows through engagement with what Marx called the raw material of reality. Following Ronald Britton we can represent it like this:⁴⁹

Ps(1) → D(1) → Ps(2) → D(2) → Ps(3) → D(3)...

or

Ps(n) → D(n) → ...Ps(n+1) → D(n+1)...

The arrows indicate a process of forward development and the Ps(n+1) is a normal, controlled or healthy form of the paranoid schizoid position that comes after the depressive position has been achieved. Ps(n+1) represents a state of taking on board new material—new experience, new ideas—that doesn't fit into the state of integration one has previously reached in the hope that a higher state of integration D(n+1) is possible. But this is not guaranteed. When one enters the state of Ps(n+1) the D(n+1) that one is aiming for is not present, there is only a hope not an assurance that coherence and meaning will arrive. One is also relinquishing an achieved position (D), a state with a certain moral and cognitive confidence, for the incoherence and uncertainty of a less stable and more fragmented state. There is something persecuting in this. It involves accepting emotional discomfort and narcissistic loss. The individual or group is threatened with the prospect of a catastrophe. Thus the response to the Ps(n+1) state of having to deal with new material may be not to advance to some higher D position, but to retreat or regress to earlier forms of D which are no longer adequate.⁵⁰

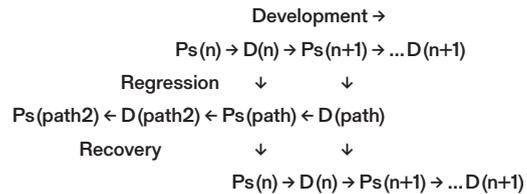
Instead of a forward (→), there is a backwards movement (←), a regression to an earlier and now inadequate state of D.⁵¹ The controlled Ps is lost and one regresses into

49. Ronald Britton, 'Before and After the Depressive Position Ps(n)→D(n)→Ps(n+1)' in *Belief and Imagination: Explorations in Psychoanalysis* (Routledge 1998), 69–81. Britton suggests that Bion's formula may give the impression of a movement between two unchanging substances while his re-formulations suggest development from one state of D to a new one at a higher level D(n+1).

50. We have certainly met situations where someone appears to recognise something in conversation but then later reverts to their old position.

51. We can see the forward movement is a form of K, the backward a case of -K.

pathological states of Ps and D which Britton represents as Ps(path) and D(path):⁵²



When an individual or a group encounters ideas or an experience that question their framework they have to tolerate the dispersal and threatened loss of meaning in the hope that a D(n+1) will emerge. A concrete example was the case of the Praxis Group. The group had developed a framework together over a period through reading together and engaging in struggles and movements. The battle over the new ideas resulted in a division of the group into those representing an Establishment and those inclined to engage with and partially accept the new ideas. This process, including the conflict, was potentially part of a forward development. However at a certain time the pain and discomfort of the loss of cohesive functioning became too much. The Ps(n+1) became a Ps(path) state where action instead of thinking was used to deal with the problem, by getting rid of the disruptive elements. The D state that was returned to can be seen as D(path) because it was not a new achievement involving loss of the old but a retreat to an earlier position which was now a defensive organisation excluding rather than incorporating the new material that was being grappled with in Ps(n+1). The frustration had been evaded rather than tolerated.⁵³

Holding on to a state of integration and meaning that may be coherent but is no longer adequate is a feature of most political groups. Most of what presents itself as revolutionary or communist theory has been held on to “past its time”.

52. This diagram reproduced from Britton, ‘Before and After the Depressive Position’ in *Belief and Imagination*, 76.

53. However as Britton’s diagram indicates there is a possibility of recovery that is a return to a developmental path. We might observe that this recovery may be harder for a group than an individual.

Political Ps

In the model we have been describing, the sense of controlled Ps moving towards the achievement of a new D involves a kind of wait-and-see attitude. Bion adopts Keats’s notion of “negative capability” to describe the necessary posture.⁵⁴ It means being open to new experiences and new ideas, accepting that one doesn’t know and that opposing views might be correct. Ps(n+1) involves refraining from decision until one is able, perhaps through the emergence of a “selected fact”,⁵⁵ to bring together and make order out of the chaos in a new whole.

A difference between the post depressive position Ps(n+1) and the original infantile Ps or the regressed Ps(path) is that in Ps(n+1) one as much as possible does not engage in splitting. This is appropriate for the analyst who is calm and almost disinterested in his drive to understand but not to judge or even change the patient. Hoggett, drawing on Meltzer, suggests that there is a different and still healthy way that the paranoid schizoid mechanisms (including splitting) must be mobilised. When engaged in struggle reality is not a “given” which must be understood dispassionately but a process of becoming which must be engaged with. Acting on and in the world is sustained by a passion—“anger, grief, hope”—which is, as he notes, “based on a certain degree of splitting”.⁵⁶ We cannot just be “in doubt and uncertainty”, which implies movement towards the maturity of the depressive position, for at times we must risk acting, at which point we abandon the openness to a new depressive position and commit ourselves to one course of action that excludes others. As Donald Meltzer suggests, at times the “irritable reaching after fact and reason” that Keats abjures is in fact required because:

splitting processes are necessary for the kind of decisions that make action in the outside world possible. Every decision involves the setting in motion of a single plan from

54. ‘Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. John Keats, *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (Houghton, Mifflin & Company 1899), 277.

55. Bion borrowed the idea of the ‘selected fact’ from Henri Poincaré who had used it to describe the mathematician’s intuitive discovery of an element that gives coherence to a collection of scattered data.

56. Paul Hoggett, ‘Climate change and the apocalyptic imagination’, *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* no. 16 (2011), 262.

among its alternatives; it is experimental involves risk, a certain ruthlessness towards oneself and others.⁵⁷

This is another way of thinking about Ps and D. Those involved in politics even “radical (anti-)politics” have a propensity for the splitting into good and bad, friend and enemy, of the paranoid-schizoid position. Much of the unpleasant group stuff, the understanding of which in part motivates this text, reflects the proneness to the paranoid schizoid position within this space. The observation of this can be part of “pathologising the political”, but while it can certainly be pathological, the paranoid-schizoid mode may also perform a necessary and valuable role in the development of both individuals and groups.⁵⁸

Hoggett points to a creative and experimental use of the paranoid-schizoid position, which can figure as more than a mere stage before a new depressive position takes hold. He points to the fact that a decision to act involves a suspension of doubt and openness towards other courses of action and perspectives. Indeed, while a claimed need for action is often used against thinking, it is also possible when one needs to act to instead “retreat into thought”. In action there is a risk, potential costs to oneself and others, and thus as Metzler suggests a certain ruthlessness towards both is required. The uncertainty and tolerance of doubt in one’s position is no longer functional. In periods of struggle this kind of creative use of the paranoid-schizoid position, this kind of certainty and commitment to one point of view, is necessary;⁵⁹ but it needs to be tempered by moments of reflection and openness and a possibility of reviewing one’s course of action in relation to its results or lack thereof. When the dust clears, the point is to be ruthless with oneself about what the success or failure of any initiative one took could tell us about the nature of the struggle in which one was involved and the stance one has taken in relation to it. This is to move from a necessary period of active Ps back into controlled Ps and D.

57. Donald Meltzer et al., *Explorations in Autism: A Psycho-Analytical Study* (Karnac Books 1975), 241.

58. ‘The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man’. George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (Brentano’s 1903).

59. It is perhaps worth observing that ‘critique’ can be a form of action.

Mystic and Establishment

One of the key concepts that we found in Hoggett which seemed to illuminate our two cases was the idea of the Establishment within the group. In the Praxis Group we described a conflict between an established orthodoxy within the group and new ideas. In the Theory Group we described a group functioning creatively without much of an Establishment but that this was unstable, leading to crises which eventually necessitated the creation of a sort of establishment.

This use of the term “Establishment” derives from Bion. In a book published in 1970 he notes the way that the term Establishment has become used to describe that “body of persons within the State” who exercise power and responsibility and adopts the:

term to denote everything from the penumbra of associations generally evoked, to the predominating and ruling characteristics of an individual, and the characteristics of a ruling caste in a group (such as a psychoanalytical institute, or a nation or group of nations).⁶⁰

60. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 73.

Bion pairs this notion with another concept, that of the “mystic” a figure he says could interchangeably be termed the “genius” (or even “messiah”). There is, Bion writes,

an emotional pattern that repeats itself in history and in a variety of forms [...] of an explosive force within a restraining framework: For example the mystic in conflict with the Establishment; the new idea constrained within a formulation not intended to express it; the art form outmoded by new forces requiring representation.⁶¹

61. *Ibid.*, 74 & 79.

This pattern, like that of container and contained (which it is an example of), is a somewhat abstract one that can unsurprisingly be seen in all sorts of places. Bion was prompted to think about the mystic/Establishment pattern by his experience of the institutionalisation process of psychoanalysis.⁶² It seems useful to think about it in relation to the communist group.

62. Bion was appointed to leadership roles within it and described the fate of an individual placed in ‘a position in the Establishment where his energies are deflected from his creative-destructive role →

The Establishment describes a conservative structure in the group (or the individual mind) composed of the containing force of old ideas. By “mystic” Bion has in mind the creative/disruptive force of new ideas (and those who express them). The ideas in question could be scientific, artistic, religious, political, psychoanalytic—whatever represents a profound break from existing dominant ideas and paradigms and opens a new way of thinking in any field. For Bion the mystic/genius can take the form of a specific individual or individuals, but it can also be seen as something less personal—the “flash of genius”, the moment of creative insight that any individual “should be ready to produce” at some time.⁶³

Bion includes in the mystic/genius category such figures as Galileo, Newton, Freud, Shakespeare, and Marx, but also actual mystics: Jesus, Meister Eckhart, Isaac Luria. The common pattern is the way new ideas and those who represent them challenge the established conventions of the group in which they emerge. New ideas are perceived as disruptive (and even destructive) of the group; they can be perceived to threaten a catastrophe, but they are also necessary if the group is to develop. Bion thinks it is a proper function of the Establishment to create an environment in which genius, whether it be the particularly gifted individual or the “flash of genius” that any of us can have from time to time, is able to emerge.

However, this function comes into tension with the Establishment’s other purpose which is “to find and provide a substitute for genius”.⁶⁴ Because mystics or mystic flashes are in short supply, the Establishment makes up for their absence by promulgating “rules”, “dogmas”, and (scientific) “laws”, that allow knowledge to be had and to be conveyed without group members having to create it themselves. In creating and enforcing such rules the Establishment allows group members “a sense of participation in an experience from which they would otherwise feel forever excluded”. However, as Bion notes, the problem is that these rules (or dogmas) must at the same time maintain a continued supply of “genius”:

and absorbed in administrative functions. His epitaph might be: “He was loaded up with honors and sank without a trace”. Ibid., 79. His response was to leave the group and move to Los Angeles.

63. Ibid., 74. Sam Moss’s text, ‘The Impotence of the Revolutionary Group’, was an example of one such flash of genius. No other theoretical texts are attributed to its author.

64. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 73.

This cannot be ordered; but if it comes the Establishment must be able to stand the shock. Failing genius, and clearly it may not materialize for a very long period, the group must have its rules and a structure to preserve them.⁶⁵

65. Ibid, 74

Bion suggests that relations between the mystic and the group can take three forms: parasitic, commensal, or symbiotic. The difficult relation of the three actual mystics Bion has mentioned to their religious Establishments shows these three forms in a clear light. In the parasitic relation, the relation is destructive: the creative new ideas are either crushed by the rigidity of the container or the container is blown apart by the power of the new ideas (Jesus crucified by the Establishment). In the commensal relation, the old and new ideas manage to exist alongside each other, but without really affecting growth in either (the Christian Establishment tolerates mystics like Eckhart without the church being changed by them). In the third relation—the symbiotic—Bion writes that “there is a confrontation and the result is growth-producing, though that growth may not be discerned without difficulty”⁶⁶ (the Hasidic movement in relation to Rabbinical Judaism). He suggests that, as well as within the group, these shapes exist within the individual and can also be played out in the encounter between different individuals and groups. Just as a group may reject a new idea and the person who expresses it as something they are unable to contain, an individual may reject a new idea as something he or she is not able to bear. As with the development of thinking in general, we are dealing with something that can be intra-individual, inter-individual, intra-group and inter-group.

66. Ibid, 78.

Though it might be tempting, it would make little sense, in relation to the communist groups (or even groups more generally) to simply take the side of the mystic/genius. The Establishment’s resistance to mystics and their dangerous ideas is necessary. One reason is that most new ideas are not better than the old, and some are destructive, which Bion evokes in the figure of the nihilist mystic. Even when there is something important in the new ideas, they need to be tested. It is the creative tension between new ideas and the old, the mystic and the Establishment, that may produce something worthwhile,

while if the new impulse meets no resistance, it may dissipate itself in formless splurge.

Bion's term "genius" may meet with scepticism in communist circles, as it appears to be a rather bourgeois individualist notion.⁶⁷ However, the apparent tension between Bion's concern for the fate of the individual thinker⁶⁸ and a Marxian idea that ideas are produced by the class struggle is perhaps not so insurmountable. An important part of Bion's understanding is that creative individuals do not produce their challenging ideas from their own minds, but instead create links that make sense of experience, giving expression to new ideas that have a social or transindividual source.

Moreover, Bion's seemingly individualist concept of genius or mystic needs to be placed in the context of his profoundly non-individualist notion that true thoughts are not the product of the individual thinker but that, instead, the individual gains his significance by being able to entertain them. The genius for Bion is not someone who invents things from his own brain, but one who opens up to the ideas that are there to be expressed.

Yet breakthroughs to a revolutionary new way of approaching reality, opening a new field or problematic, are often linked to an individual.⁶⁹ Bion's reflections on these questions are prompted by Freud and the psychoanalytic establishment(s) created on the basis of his work. Marx would seem to be clearly, in Bion's terms, another such genius/mystic, upon whose legacy a new Establishment or establishments have been produced. Interestingly, however, one of the few recorded remarks that Bion made on Marxism was that (at least as a theory) it had "approximately achieved"⁷⁰ (along with Sufism!) doing without an Establishment.

The idea of Marxism doing without an Establishment might seem odd. Hasn't Marxism often been compared with religion in a negative sense? Wasn't

67. Bordiga, who we will treat as a mystic/genius below, insisted that Marx's formulation of communist 'doctrine' should be seen 'not as the invention of a genius, but as the discovery of a result of human evolution'. Amadeo Bordiga, 'Considerations on the party's organic activity when the general situation is historically unfavourable' *Il Programma Comunista* no. 2 (1965).

68. He has his own tense relationship to the London Kleinian Establishment in mind.

69. Similarly the anti-individualist Bordiga states, 'knowledge is conquered by the brains of living men who gradually accumulate the results of the work of their thinking; and, from time to time, a personality of greater importance and power takes the common heritage of science a step forward'. Amadeo Bordiga, 'On the Thread of Time' *Il Programma Comunista* no. 1 (1954).

70. 'The Establishment cannot be dispensed with (though this may appear to be approximately

Kautsky referred to as the "pope of Marxism"? Didn't the parties of the Second, Third and Fourth Internationals operate by way of an established orthodoxy with the same conformist modes of thinking and exclusion of heresies? Hasn't doctrinal dispute often been settled by appeal to quotes from infallible scriptural authority? Marxism certainly seems to have had its own Establishment(s), both in the sense of institutional authorities like parties and even states, but also in the less obvious sense of the rigidities of thought that even those who see themselves as independent Marxists often fall foul of.⁷¹

Yet as we suggested in part II, Bion's suggestion that the theory of Marxism has "approximately achieved" the avoidance of the Establishment also captures something. The critical impulse of the communist theory expressed by Marx—a thinking open to the "raw material of reality"—has never been entirely contained and stripped of meaning by the various worldviews, parties, schools, traditions, and orthodoxies that have been established in his name. Within, outside, and against these currents there have always been critical, heterodox forms of thinking that have clashed with the conformist use of Marx. Indeed communist theory has not been without its own supply of new genius, though the critical impulse of thinkers like Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Bordiga, Korsch, Lukacs, Pashukanis, Rubin, Bloch, Adorno, Debord and Camatte, and the fresh take on reality they provide, has often, in turn, been a basis for new establishments.⁷² Such thinkers are a product of their times (notably the two revolutionary waves that characterised the 20th century) and often they themselves fall back from their more interesting and revolutionary positions in the period of retreat.

To place Amadeo Bordiga in this line of mystics/geniuses might seem odd. After all, Bordiga himself insisted that he had not created anything new. He rejected "the banal idea that Marxism is a theory

achieved in Sufism and in the theory of Marxism) because the institutionalised group, the work group, is as essential to the development of the individual as he is to it'. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 75.

71. In these days when the establishments of organised Marxism have largely fallen away and the place it has found for itself is increasingly in the academy, it is worth noting Bion's warning of the 'dangers of the invitation to a group or individual to become respectable, to be medically qualified, to be a university department, to be a therapeutic group, to be anything in short, but not explosive'. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation*, 79.

72. The list, though not a sign of agreement with all of the ideas of such thinkers, (we prefer Pannekoek to Luxemburg etc.) obviously reveals our preferences. There are other figures like Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, etc. that were not without moments of genius but who are too implicated in the counter revolution for a place on our list.

'undergoing a process of continuous historical elaboration' that changes with the changing course of events and the lessons subsequently learned", and instead asserted what he called the "Invariance of Marxism".⁷³ In the period after the defeat of the post WW1 revolutionary wave and the failure of WW2 to end in a similar wave, Bordiga saw his task and that of the group who gathered round him as essentially one of defending this doctrine until better times.⁷⁴

While we have emphasised the need to be willing to change one's framework, Bordiga railed against those who would change the Marxist framework too easily. Writing in the fifties, he divided the opponents of the "Marxist doctrine" into three broad groups: the deniers—the bourgeoisie for whom the market and commodity production are eternal; the falsifiers—the Stalinists and others who claim to be Marxist but practice a social democratic reformism; and the modernizers—those who still claim to be revolutionary but think the doctrine needs to be modified. He reserved some of his heaviest critique for the latter group with Cardan (Castoriadis) of Socialism or Barbarism being a frequent target. Thus just as he rejected those who would moderate Marxism by emphasising peaceful and democratic methods, he scorned those who claimed to still be revolutionary but saw a need to modernise the conception of capitalism by defining it, or at least its Eastern bloc variant, in terms of bureaucracy.⁷⁵

Bordiga would thus appear to reject our emphasis on doubt, receptivity to the new, negative capability and theory as open or good conversation.⁷⁶ Bordiga indeed seems not so much a mystic as the promoter of an Establishment, a rigid doctrine. What figures like Luxemburg, Pannekoek or Debord see as the creative discoveries of class struggle—the Paris Commune, the Soviets, modern forms of revolt etc.—are for Bordiga ways in which a renewal of the

73. Amadeo Bordiga, 'The Historical "Invariance" of Marxism' *Sul Filo del Tempo* no 1 (1953).

74. 'This is a moment of the deepest low point of the curve of revolutionary potential; we are therefore decades away from the right moment when original theories can be born. At this moment, which is without the perspectives associated with a great social upheaval, not only is the political disintegration of the world proletarian class a logical datum of the situation, but it is also logical that there should be small groups that know how to maintain the red thread of history of the great revolutionary process, stretching in a great curve between two social revolutions, on the condition that such groups show that they do not want to disseminate anything original and that they continue to adhere strictly to the traditional formulations of Marxism.' *Ibid.*, thesis 23.

75. We can note that Bordiga's assertion that in Russia and China we were seeing a transition to the capitalist mode of production and his prediction that the post war boom would give way to a return to classic capitalist crisis in the mid 1970s

class struggle allows the theory to return "with affirmations reminiscent of its origins and its first integral expression".⁷⁷

But we know that claiming to fulfill the law and not abolish it is a venerable role for the mystic.

In Bordiga's writings, along with statements of rigid tactical doctrine that seem on the surface not so different from (other) versions of Leninism,⁷⁸ we find an extraordinary communist vision, including the rejection of self-management and a prescient grasp of capitalism as an ecological crisis. Bordiga's thought expressed the high points of the post WW1 revolutionary wave and held it when most other Marxists capitulated one way or the other. He knew the difference between capitalism and communism, something that, with few exceptions, isn't understood by social democrats, Marxist-Leninists, Trotskyists, democratic and libertarian socialists.⁷⁹

Bordiga and his group kept something communist alive in a period of the defeat of the revolution, and they did so through a certain doctrinal rigidity. This rigidity served a protective function. However, while Bordiga himself was able to develop theory within this shell, most of his followers were not. Their rigidity meant that they were largely unable to connect to the new revolutionary wave that rose in the 1960s.⁸⁰ It was through the work of the quintessential communist mystic Jacques Camatte that the insights of Bordiga spread to the new movements which arose especially in France and in Italy.⁸¹ Yet by that time Camatte had been marked as a heretic among "Bordigists".⁸²

Camatte's relationship to the Italian Left has similarities with Bion's relationship to Kleinian psychoanalysis. The latter has been known, like Bordiga's Marxism, for a certain rigidity or dogmatism. However, it was through and with this rigid Kleinian apparatus, which he made his own, that Bion developed his

proved more reliable than some of the up to date theories he rejected. His prediction that the return of economic crisis would be a revolutionary crisis on the old model proved less accurate.

76. In 'The Historical "Invariance" of Marxism' he rejected 'all chattering and know-it-all discussions' and the idea that theoretical development can 'be assumed by tiny groups with hardly any members' or even worse through 'a free discussion that constitutes a parody on a Lilliputian scale of bourgeois parliamentarism and the famous clash of individual opinions, which is not a new breakthrough but rather old nonsense'. *Ibid.*, Theses 22 & 26. One might say that such discussions within the milieu are not 'good conversations'.

77. *Ibid.*, Thesis 16.

78. Which itself is not a simple and unified historical and theoretical object. Bordiga's 'Leninism' is an adherence to initial positions of the Third International, and he becomes critical of the direction the Bolsheviks took it from its third congress in 1921.

79. A key example here is the way Trotsky saw →

creative breakthroughs. Similarly it was through absorbing the intransigent Marxism of Bordiga that Camatte made his own leaps. The relationship between Bion and the Kleinian group was at least for a number of years probably a symbiotic one, but he found it necessary to escape the group in which he had at first been able to develop. Beyond the constraints of the groups that had produced them, both Camatte and Bion were able to produce more freely (with some wondering if their production became a bit too free).⁸³

Despite Bion's intriguing idea that communist theory (like Sufism) can approximately do without an Establishment, we can see in these examples that groups and individuals — who are always part of groups if only the many groups we connect with in our minds — necessarily produce establishments as part of the limits and containment of their thinking. Often, such a container is adequate to get on with things. The point is, without seeking out novelty for itself, to be open to the expression of new things, which requires breaking or modifying such limits of our thinking.

AN ENDING NOT A CONCLUSION

By its nature this is a work in progress. As there must be for now an ending, if not a conclusion, let us attempt to tie our threads together.

Our starting point was that communism is and will be “the intense and unpredictable struggle for life on the part of the species”. If the communist group at one level is all those — millions even billions — who *have been, are, or will be* involved in that struggle, then that also includes us, right here, right now, feeling moved to be part of this struggle and to do what we can. This involves us connecting with small numbers of others to think about capitalism and its possible overcoming.

something socialist in Stalinist industrialisation, while Bordiga correctly saw it as the development of the capitalist mode of production in Russia.

80. As Camatte suggests, it was Bordiga's very refusal of innovation that both protected the theory from the kind of opportunist degeneration of most other varieties of Marxism in the period of counter revolution, and also led to his limitations: ‘the impossibility of irrevocably cutting his ties with the past (the Third International and its sequels), the inability to correctly delimit the process of becoming of the new revolutionary movement, not recognizing its first manifestations in May 1968’. Camatte, *Bordiga and the Passion for Communism*.

81. See ‘The Passion of Communism’ in this issue.

82. In a postface to *Origin and Function of the Party Form* Camatte stated that despite its nods to Lenin, one of the intentions of that text was to clarify the ‘anti-immediatism and anti-activism’ of the Italian Left and to present it, ‘in its originality, to divide it from Leninism and Trotskyism, to make a real break with the Third International’, a break that

We are admittedly a bit unusual (“deviations” as Moss put it). For accidents of our personal history, we have, like Marx, found that the ideas of communism “which have conquered our intellect and taken possession of our minds, ideas to which reason has fettered our conscience, are chains from which one cannot free oneself without a broken heart: they are demons which human beings can vanquish only by submitting to them”.⁸⁴

These ideas are not personal possessions but something impersonal, transmitted through the generations. Communist theory is an apparatus for thinking the experience of life dominated by capital and the movement beyond it. Some take up this apparatus, making it theirs for as long as they are able.⁸⁵ They may, in the process, succeed in adding some new true thoughts, which increase the capacity of the apparatus in relation to the evolving experience that it attempts to contain. At its best this process is international and self-correcting. We have suggested Gunn's model of the “good conversation” for the way that it develops. In Gunn and Wilding's more recent work we also identified a tantalising suggestion of what might link the conversations of the willed small groups we participate in and those that occur in the spontaneous group processes of revolution.

At a certain level, the communist group, in whatever way it exists, whether as an actual group or as the theory we adopt from reading or engaging with others, is an example of a container or apparatus for thinking. We always need others to talk to. At the same time, with our case studies of small group life we pointed at some of the problems that arise in this small world we inhabit. We expect that others have their own stories. Such tales reveal that attempts at good conversation often meet obstacles and tensions within the group. Dealing with such tensions can make severe emotional demands. While coming together with

Bordiga was not prepared to make. As a result Camatte found himself in increasing conflict with the rest of the Bordigist milieu and left. Bordiga chose his epigones over his more gifted follower, describing Camatte's course as the ‘the poor doctrine: I turn my back on the formal party, as I go towards the historical one’ (Bordiga, ‘Considerations on the party's organic activity’). Yet Bordiga's ‘formal party’ irrevocably splintered following his death in 1970.

83. Bion poses a question of relevance to both himself and Camatte when he talks of the need to get ‘a sufficient shell to be protected and then having to rebel against a shell, because it not only protects you but can also shut you up. The shell that protects also kills. Let me put it this way: individuals can be so rigid that they don't seem to have any ideas or they can be so free and so profuse in their outpourings of ideas that it really amounts to a pathological condition [...] How permeable are you to make this envelope of self, this shell? To get back to the Freudian phrase, how permeable is the ego to be?’ Bion, *The Tavistock Seminars* (Routledge 1976), 97–114.

others is necessary and rewarding, the groups that we form often seem to involve swapping the pathological solitude of the Ego for the pathologies of small group life.⁸⁶ This is understandable, because the group or collective in capitalist society is no less a part and product of capitalist society than the individuals of which it is composed.⁸⁷ Reflection here can benefit from drawing on the theory of the unconscious, which can be understood not as something personal and individual but a social and transpersonal phenomenon. Groups bring out the unconscious and make it visible. A psychoanalytic take on groups and on thinking offered by Bion and others helps make sense of this process.

The recurrent tension is between the universality of what we want and the particularity and limits of who we are as individuals and small groups. The stakes seem so different but at some level we sense that they are the same. The healthy impulse is to focus not on who we are as a group but simply on the tasks we set ourselves.⁸⁸ However, the pathologies of communist groups can at times be more interesting than what such groups produce, because it tells us something about capitalist life itself.

We do not produce struggle or revolution, we are produced by it. This is why the periods of the most creative leaps in thinking have occurred at the time of revolutionary moments and waves (1848, 1871, 1917–21, 1968–71).

What Marx calls the “party of anarchy” makes its reappearance from time to time.⁸⁹ Though those who produce *Endnotes* did not actively participate in the struggles of those years listed above, we, and the world we live in, were shaped by them, their measure of success and their defeat. These events and cycles of struggle have tended to be followed by much longer periods of more stable capitalist development and more limited struggles. The capitalism we face today

84. Marx, ‘Communism and the Augsburg *Allgemeine Zeitung*’ (MECW 1), 221.

85. ‘[T]he revolution gives birth to or causes the death of groups, compels works to be taken up or interrupted, conquers militants and rejects them continuously (like the process of *apoptosis*, the death of cells which occurs as a normal and controlled part of an organism’s growth or development). In the end: revolution does its own work, as it always has’. n + 1, ‘Who we are and what we want’ n + 1 no. 18 (2005).

86. Which then, as Camatte noted, tends to operate in relation to the outside like a collective Ego or ‘gang’.

87. Individual and group life will not be without their problems beyond capitalism; they will just be very different.

88. We thus find affinity with the point made by n + 1 that ‘We are not a “group”, we are a work’. However, as they note ‘It is obvious that, somehow, we are also a “group”’. n + 1, ‘Who we are and what we want’.

89. Marx. ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ (MECW 11), 111.

learnt the lessons of those struggles and restructured itself accordingly. Thus, we do not need to pass on to the working class lessons from those years, for the relation with capital they live today contains all the lessons of history that they need.

We, however, find something useful in looking back. A large part of the communist theory we have inherited was a product of the encounter of a container — councilist, situationist, and “Bordigist” thought — with the “contained”, the new experience of the struggles of the last revolutionary wave and their defeat. Such theory was tested, and while some concluded that reality was guilty of not measuring up — the working class did not produce councils or join the(ir) party — others were able to transform the theory to better express what this wave and its defeat was telling us. The burst of theoretical development had largely concluded by the end of the 70s. However, just as with the small groups of “Bordigists” and council communists after the previous revolutionary wave, some of those who were turned communist by the revolutionary period did not go over to the counter revolution but rather theorised it and the restructuring that accompanied it.

We have been drawn to this theory, and we attempt to contribute to it. Our lives too have not been without their moments and cycles of struggle, such as the anti-globalisation movement at the turn of this century, the movement of the squares in 2011–13 and what may be a new global wave unfolding at the time of writing. The instability of our times assures us that there will be plenty more.

We can imagine that some readers of *Endnotes* may at times have asked themselves: “Well that’s all well and good, but what do you propose we actually do?” The perceived alternative seems to be of “revolutionary intervention” or “attentism”,⁹⁰ there is either a revolutionary communist way of relating to struggles or one should not be involved at all. Theorie Communiste provide us with a helpful way of cutting through this false alternative:

In the meantime, neither orphans of the labour movement, nor prophets of the communism to come, we participate in the class struggle as it is on a daily basis and as it produces theory.⁹¹

90. Wait-and-see-ism

This idea that it is not *we* but the class struggle that produces theory reminds one of Bion. Of course this leaves a lot open — for example, *what* class struggle is participated in, and *how* is the theory being produced by the class struggle recognised.⁹²

There is no revolutionary way of engaging in struggles unless of course those struggles are revolutionary. This does not mean one should not be involved in “non-revolutionary” struggles. However, one can only relate to struggles according to their limits. Being involved may help you to find those limits, allowing one to make sense of them in ways that non-participants cannot. However, involvement may also lead one to deny those limits, and to be only interested in ideas that support one’s own illusions. Illusions or myths are a necessary part of group life, allowing a creative escape from the given into the realm of the possible, of the “not yet”, but at times dis-illusionment is also necessary for moving forward.

Openness is not just about being open to the ideas of self-identified communists and revolutionaries. We wish to be open to moments of genius wherever they may be found, in all forms of “scientific” thinking (in a broad and not reductive sense as a search for truth). Marx’s motto was “nothing human is alien to me” and it would be absurd for communists to limit their interests and concerns as if they “were workers specialised in a particular art instead of aiming at devoting themselves to the whole universe”.⁹³

Communist theory has a universal significance. It expresses a will to life on the part of humanity against capital, a force it has created and continues to create which threatens its destruction. At the same time those trying consciously to think it are just individuals and small groups doing what we can. A guiding thought for those engaged in such a task:

The group must be capable of maintaining the dominance of its own depressive attitude. This means, despite its sense of vision and grandiosity, retaining the capacity to keep a sense of perspective and, hence, knowing that what might be created will not be perfect but could be good enough.⁹⁴

91. *Théorie Communiste*, ‘Who are we?’ *Théorie Communiste* no. 14 (1997).

92. TC themselves suggest that it is a ‘matter of analysis and intuition’. R.S., ‘Que faisons-nous?’ *Meeting* no. 4 (2008).

93. n + 1, ‘Who we are and what we want’.

94. Hoggett, *Partisans in an Uncertain World*, 158.