

A while ago Liz Thompson and I read Bill Brown's 'critique' of communisation theory, and wrote up some comments, the sections of which we finally got around to sticking together over the last couple of days, so this is the result:

Bill Brown is riddled with fear.

*Young men overwhelmed by their pickled emotions
Dislocated, suppressed, and too cool for change
And the boys in the public bar say:
Blah blah blah blah something about football
Blah blah blah blah something about beer
Blah blah blah blah they laugh so loudly
So the women can't tell that they're riddled with fear.
Dirt River Radio, 'The Boys in the Public Bar'*

It is a power move disguised as a theoretical critique: a response to Bill Brown's sexist rant

Bill Brown's text 'On "Communisation": A Response to *Sic* No. 1' seeks to defend left communism and anti-leninist councilism from the communising current(s) responsible for the journal *Sic: International Journal of Communisation*. As a move in an imagined factional competition, of the sort he projects upon those he attacks, this is a bit sad. As a critique, this is neither serious nor honest.

We have no intention of going through this text explaining why virtually every paragraph is filled with claims either empty or wrong, often so obviously so as to appear deliberately dishonest or else the product of someone writing in a rage or aggressive spirit of imagined factional competition. We won't do this because we think there are more useful ways to discuss the work of the communising currents. But some points are worth making.

Brown's procedure is manifest, to pick an example virtually at random from the many many instances of such a method, in the last paragraph of this text, where his criticism of Screamin' Alice is based upon the implicit assertion that her discussions of the fate of the 'workers movement' amount to the claim that no form of class struggle is happening at all anymore - thus this

claim can apparently be falsified by simply quoting her talking about forms of struggle that are occurring. Which would be an awesome ‘caught you in a contradiction’ moment if such discussions of the 20th century workers movement *had* such content. But, in fact, that is a reading of not only Screamin’ Alice but of pretty much any of the discussions of the end of the ‘workers movement’ that is little more than a refusal to read. Refusal to read, or possibly wilful misrepresentation: this is the core of Brown’s process, a process of semiotic interest, perhaps, but little other.

Brown’s critique of communisation theory’s apparent religiosity is particularly perplexing. Given his love of Debord, it seems odd that he would understand an analysis of the only possible positive end of crisis as communisation as the evil communisation theorists reveling in the horrors of a world in crisis. His assertions that they are academics and not engaged in anything, are neither relevant, nor it would appear, true, for various sections of the communisation current. It is unclear where Bill Brown gets the idea that the communisation theorists are excited by burning fires. As if communisation theorists are the first people to suggest that a crisis that doesn’t end in socialism or communism might well be a tad barbaric.

1. Self-management, economy.

The critique of ‘self-management’ did not begin with TC.

The communising current says that the revolution should not recreate relations of exchange or the categories of economy, as these will be the foundation of counter-revolution within the revolution. This is not the same as refusing to do anything and just sitting around starving when the food runs out, and this distinction is not subtle, it is not hard to spot - as a misreading this seems so egregious as to raise the question of good faith on the part of Brown. Especially since he has literally just quoted the text to the effect that it will be necessary to seize the means of subsistence. Choosing to interpret ‘means of subsistence’ as, it seems, ‘already existing food’ - rather than the more obvious meaning of the phrase in this context - allows Brown to attribute positions to the communisers that there isn’t any actual evidence for them holding. Or anyone holding, really, so absurd are such positions.

Brown:

To Jeanne Neton and Peter Astrom, co-authors of “How One

Can Still Put Forward Demands When No Demands Can Be Satisfied,” wildcat strikes that leave “the unions run[ning] behind the employees” are led by “grassroots unionists.” They write, “the workers who fight for such a wage increase cannot ignore the fact that in so doing the chances increase that the company will relocate or go bankrupt,” as if they know nothing about the *deliberate* attempts of revolutionary workers in Italy during the 1970s to bankrupt *as many firms as possible*.

Brown doesn’t tell us why the quoted statement of Neton and Astrom implies this “as if they know nothing”; he doesn’t tell us how this knowledge should inform a discussion of such struggles in far more recent times. Does he think such ‘deliberate attempts’ are involved in the struggles Neton and Astrom are discussing? He doesn’t say so. But the implication is somehow that something obviously inadequate or wrong-headed, even dishonest, is going on. We wonder what? This is Brown’s procedure, it seems.

Maybe Brown actually isn’t trying to argue that the workers being discussed in these recent struggles are engaged in deliberate efforts to drive businesses to the wall, even at the cost of their own jobs. But if he is not saying this, one might even be tempted to suggest that the reasons for these differences between the more recent struggles and those Brown cites from an earlier period might, in fact, suggest something about certain changes in the lived experience of capitalist social relations. Changes which might define periods, which might be consequences of restructuring, of a history in which class struggle reconstitutes relations of exploitation. We’re just sayin’.

Bill Brown appears to believe that without capitalist categories of economy, people will simply starve. That people are incapable of organizing to feed themselves without the guidance of his councils, that they are morons who will sit around and starve because they know not what to do without capitalist categories of economy. The critique of factory take-overs is that if you re-start production and exchange, this *is* the rebuilding of capitalist economy. This is clear in the Suspended Step:

“Some fractions of the insurgent proletariat will be smashed, others will be “turned back”, rallying to measures for the conservation of survival. Other insurrections will pick up where they leave off. Certain of those turned back or bogged down will resume wildcat expropriations, and the organisation of the

struggle by those who struggle and uniquely for the struggle, without representation, without control by anyone in the name of anything, thereby taking up once again the constitution of communism, which is not a goal of the struggle but rather its content.

Counterrevolutionary ideologies will be numerous, starting perhaps with that of the survival of the economy: preserving economic mechanisms, not destroying all economic logic, in order to then construct a new economy. The survival of the economy is the survival of exchange, whether this exchange uses money, any kind of voucher or chit, or even simply barter, which can be adorned with the name of mutual aid between workers!” (suspended step)

B.L is hardly the first to come up with this critique. What is genuinely strange is Bill Brown’s hostility to the idea.

2. Gender.

What was remarkable about the efforts of these communising currents to take seriously questions of gender is precisely that the ultraleft, almost uniquely amongst radical currents, had not produced any significant efforts to do so before.

In contrast to the efforts of these communising currents to move beyond acknowledged blind spots in relation to gender, Brown claims that *his* favoured currents had no such blind spots. Because they simply included women within the proletariat. Problem solved. No need for any specific discussion of, you know, gender. Which is lucky because what, if anything, would Brown point to? This is a serious question.

But according to Brown: "As a result, women, the young and immigrants found it easy in their turn to embrace left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism." Did they indeed? Boasting about how the theory of his preferred imagined factions meant they could, what, recruit better? Fantasised vindication. I think we can comfortably call bullshit here.

Pretending to give a toss about women’s issues, Bill offers up some gems. The existence of Margaret Thatcher apparently disproves B.L’s account of

the relegation of women to the private sphere. Bill thinks that reeling off the shopping list of those he is kind enough to include in the proletariat proves to us that he gives a shit about women. It is precisely this, acting as if women are just another part of the proletariat, that there is nothing particular about the gender dynamic within capital, which creates women and necessitates a particular struggle by women against gender, that has necessitated a struggle within TC, this struggle marking a massive part of the theoretical work of TC and the communisation current. Taking gender seriously is in fact the thing that sets them apart from all the tendencies Brown seeks to defend.

“In this process of class struggle, which leads to the abolition of classes, individuals were ipso facto posed as being beyond gender, since they established a community of immediately social individuals.

*This second part of the text tries to explain this ‘ipso facto’. This overcoming perceived as naturally included ‘in the movement’—as something that goes without saying, due to the nature and content of the movement—should be subjected as such to critique. It is **not** sufficient to say that communisation, being communisation, is by definition the overcoming of genders.”*

Brown: ‘As if people like Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons never existed, he claims that “the workers’ program never contemplated the abolition of gender.”’ Tell us about this contemplation of the abolition of gender being ignored. Those proper names certainly talked about gender - is that the same as contemplating the abolition of gender as part of, and a precondition of, the abolition of capitalist social relations? We don’t want to sink to *ad hominem* attacks, but the answer, Brown, is ‘no’, you childish, dishonest, sexist creep.

Brown says things quite often that sound like accusations but, on closer examination, don’t mean anything. For instance, on B.L., Brown says: ‘He refers to “the abolition of women” several times but never refers to “the abolition of men.”’ What is this supposed to mean? Nothing could be clearer in B.L.’s text than that the abolition of women takes place through the abolition of gender and thus the abolition of men. So what exactly are we supposed to take from Brown’s throwaway remark? His text is littered with remarks like these. So annoyed is Brown at the existence of these communising currents, perhaps, that he loses the patience that would be necessary for a serious effort to read those he wishes to critique. Thus Brown just says anything he thinks makes these communising currents look

bad or ridiculous - such a procedure, of course, risks backfiring.

Even if we adopt some version of Brown's worldview, history as the history of competition between radical factions, what is remarkable about the claims made about left communism and anti-leninist councilism is that they appear, on the surface, to be almost the exact opposite of the historical realities under discussion. At least, if the collapse of women into the proletariat - if we follow Brown's procedure we might ask at this point about Thatcher - is taken as a claim that an adequate or at least coherent account of gender was produced within left communism and/or anti-leninist councilism. (At least after the sixties when they, along with the immigrants and such, were allowed into the workers councils. To stick with Brown's version of history.) The absence of a blind spot because of the existence of relevant theory, not because gender can seriously be dissolved into (some version of) class.

But where is this theory, where can I discover the details of this work? Anarchism and even further afield factional competitors can certainly point to the individuals and tendencies and organisations that were manifestations of struggles within the production and reproduction of gender, gender roles and gender distinction; struggles, indeed, based upon gender as it was understood and reproduced within their own organisations. Such tendencies - call them 'feminist' - usually emerged in such conflictual processes, such as those that led to the formation of Lotta Femminista - struggles within such radical tendencies, as particular moments of far broader conflicts. Even within trotskyism there emerged an international tendency whose immediate notable distinction was the prominence and significance given to "women's liberation". (In Melbourne they exist as the Freedom Socialist Party, as well as a group called 'Radical Women', organised out of the Solidarity Salon.)

But when we look at left communism and anti-leninist councilism, to what is Brown referring? It would be a bit much, I'd suggest, to try to claim Rosa Luxemburg or Emma Goldman; equally Federici, Fortunati, and Dalla Costa are not obviously available for this purpose. The point surely cannot be based upon the role of women in the SI. Surely. Surely? Brown does cite Goldman a bit, so maybe she actually is being claimed. It remains unclear where in the work of Emma Goldman we encounter the concept of the abolition of gender.

This is the critique that Bill Brown is seeking to avoid by continually

asserting that B.L is a man and, remarkably, that women and immigrants found it easy to embrace left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism. Bill Brown the white man may want to look honestly at his circle of comrades and ask himself if he can repeat this nonsense with a straight face. The existence of LIES journal is remarkable for this very fact – that women and feminists in particular see much to criticize, but a value in engaging with, communisation theory, in particular its blind spots in relation to race and the question of sexual violence as constitutive of the gender relation.

...

“Whether in a revolutionary situation or in every struggle in which they are opposed to capital, proletarian women always bring into question, practically, the existence of the private sphere. When working women strike, it is never just a strike. It is always a women’s strike—because the private sphere, to which they are inextricably linked, is pushed into the heart of the public sphere. In that way, women put into question not only the existence of this private sphere but also that of the public sphere, by means of the intimate and personal character of the relations of struggle, which women create, relations which challenge the political and social character claimed by public activities in distinction to private.

The childish statement the women aren’t the only ones who do the cooking is not only demonstrably untrue on a global scale, it makes no contribution to a discussion of gender. Along with the extraordinary Margaret Thatcher example, reminiscent of classic conservative arguments that the “achievements” of a Margaret Thatcher or Julia Gillard demonstrate that women are no longer oppressed, this statement and Bill’s confidence that the ladies just can’t get enough of left communism demonstrate his utter contempt for a serious discussion of gender. Name-dropping Emma Goldman does not make you an okay guy, though I’m sure some of your best friends are women.

Bill peculiar insistence that B.L is a man appears designed to divert attention from the utter failure of his own favoured political traditions to acknowledge gender as a site of analysis of the constitution of capital.

Further demonstrating his failure to grasp a genuinely materialist analysis of gender he claims that it is somehow hetero-sexist for communisers to say that women are assigned to the reproduction of labour-power, as if women who prefer not to fuck men or bear their children are somehow freed from

the material realities of being women. Women are those pressed into service for reproductive labour, regardless of whether they are married to a man and have his children: women's place in the labour market, designed to keep open their availability for child-bearing and home-making, the sexual violence, the lack of reproductive freedoms (the choice to bear or not bear children, the choice to marry or not, is of course denied to the vast majority of heterosexual and non-heterosexual women everywhere except in the richest parts of the world). To claim that women who don't bear children or couple up with men for whatever reason are somehow freed from reproductive labour is simply a demonstration of Bill's ignorance of the lives of the majority of LGBT women, whose poverty in contrast to their hetero sisters is something long acknowledged by sociologists and feminists and even paid lip service to by some leftists. The limited choice exercised by those who enact some variation of an attempt to refuse to be pressed into reproductive labour comes at a price, unless of course they are wealthy and racially privileged enough to buy the labour of a non-white woman to do it for them. Sexual violence is directed at women within the home and outside of the home, regardless of who they would choose to fuck if asked – a critique of communitarian theory's failure to account for the role sexual violence plays in the constitution of the gender distinction can be found in LIES journal (P Valentine's "The Gender Distinction in Communitarian Theory"). So what does Bill's chivalrous defence of the women amount to? Yet another attempt to pretend they don't actually exist.

In a discussion of the character of women's wage labour, B.L identifies all the ways in which all women, hetero or not, married, single, lesbian, childless, are impacted by the imperative to preserve the existence of the private sphere.

The participation of women in wage-labour is not, as such, an incursion into the public sphere since it does not challenge the existence of that sphere. Indeed, women's wage-labour is organised in specific forms—particular sectors, managerial hierarchies (the glass-ceiling) and wage levels. These forms, which are easily identified (and which have already been analysed by feminists—as well as by all sociologists and economists worth their salt), have been designed in order to preserve the existence of a private sphere for the reproduction of labour-power, to which women are assigned.

The ferocious mob sexual assaults of women engaging in struggle in Tahrir Square, the experiences of the women of Oaxaca, struggling on the

barricades against cops and the army and in the home against husbands seeking, often violently, to reinforce their role in domestic labour demonstrate how real this division is within the class and the lengths that proletarian men will go to retain these capitalist categories at the height of their struggle.

This is why a separate struggle, in which what TC call “the future ex-women” will confront “the future ex-men” to overcome this division is necessary. Brown’s analysis is precisely an example of including women in the category of proletariat to make their struggles disappear.

The idea that women have found it easy to embrace the ultra-left does not accord with either of our realities – we can comfortably say it does not accord with any of your either - and is a dull and meaningless assertion for a white guy to make. Bill is being dishonest if he is claiming that women are even marginally represented in ultra-left organisations or that they find their realities taken seriously. There are female members of and even leaders of the Tea Party too. And of course there is always Margaret Thatcher.

3. Bill Brown has a shitload to say.

We were going to include a section talking about TC’s use of Althusser stuff, the accusations of ‘determinism’ that are either wrong or not a criticism at all, depending upon which version is at play, the suggestion of religiosity, the political theology of freedom as freedom from determination as freedom from materialism...but really those are at least substantive issues and not the product of, well, whatever it is that makes Brown write all his crap.

*Sure as his heroes are rebels
Surely as night follows day
Well he sinks too much piss
and he talks with his fist
and right now he’s got a shitload to say.*
Dirt River Radio, ‘The Boys in the Public Bar’

Liz Thompson and Ben Rosenzweig
August 2013

Note by Bill Brown: On 30 August 2013, which was the day I was forwarded this text, the following exchange took place.

Liz and Ben,

Even though you lacked the courage to send me these comments directly, I must say I found them highly amusing.

BB

It isn't about courage, Bill. You're a psychopath, or happy to behave like one, and you should stay the fuck away, because I don't want to play with psychopaths like you. Get it? I have a fucking memory you demented fuckhead.

[Ben]

Aren't you cute!

Thanks for more highly amusing remarks.

You are making my day!

[Bill]

You, on the other hand, are not cute at all. I'm asking you now to stop communicating with me, I have no interest in interacting with you.

[Ben]

[3 September 2013]

Hey Liz, Ben, everyone else.

I am going to try and reply to some of the stuff from the last few days.

First in response to something Liz wrote:

“I just feel that if people are going to randomly post stuff that is so offensive to this list, it demands a response. [...] Its all very well to post articles and say ‘gosh, isn’t this interesting’, with no comment, but when it is as offensive as this, it does make me wonder about why you think it is interesting and in particular, why it is okay to pass over the utterly offensive bits without comment.”

I’m not sure who Liz is having a go at here; I presume it is me. For the record dr.woooo initially posted the link to Bill Brown’s critique of communisation with no comment. I replied to this post in order to direct people to a pdf of the same article on Brown’s website (no doubt I would have sent on a link to Bill’s article if dr.woooo hadn’t beaten me to it). I appended the following comments to my email:

“I am still thinking over my reaction to Bill’s article, which includes an email conversation with him. I so far don’t agree with his comments about *all* of the communising currents (in particular those loosely associated with ‘communisation’, like Dauve and Bruno Astarian). However his comments regarding the fundamentally religious nature of TC’s critique are well taken. I agree that TC tends to accept uncritically the structural critique of Althusser et al, which tends to reduce the subjective element in history to nil meanwhile re-inventing the very Hegelian spirit of history they claim to reject (i.e. historical movement becomes the mysterious operation of interpolated subjects).”

I have now posted the email exchange I mentioned that was then taking place. At the time I didn’t feel the need to engage in an extended defence or critique of Brown’s article. But I certainly didn’t post “random stuff [...] with no comment” to this list.

However there is something more at issue here. I don't believe that Brown's article is "random stuff". Indeed, and as Ben and Liz acknowledge in so many words of criticism, it is non-random stuff that has a particular bearing on many things we are interested in; at the very least on communisation theory and the associated gender critique (associated with the communisation currents that is).

And perhaps more importantly from the outset this list has been a place in which members have and continue to post links to non-random articles, i.e. articles that may be of interest to some or all people on the list, often with no comments appended. And perhaps even a few "random" things too (I am thinking of some of my occasional posts with links to my sf zines). But Brown's article and its posting to the list was most certainly not random.

1. Bill Brown, the proletariat, sexism and self-management

Let me be clear, I am not writing here as a proxy for Brown. While I agree with some of Brown's points in his article, I feel that he is undermined by his tendency to not generously engage with the matter under critique. Unfortunately Liz and Ben have decided to follow the very method they accuse Brown of using. Not only are they ungenerous to Brown's argument, but they manage to extract what can only be seen as a tendentious conclusion: that Brown is a "childish, dishonest, sexist creep". Now it may be the case that they know something about Brown that we don't; but in the absence of this information we need to rely on what is known. And as far as the article upon which they base their claims is concerned, it is far from apparent to me that Brown is either dishonest or sexist.

To recapitulate the main points that Ben and Liz make against Brown:

- "Brown claims that his favoured currents had no such blind spots. Because they simply included women within the proletariat",
- "that there is nothing particular about the gender dynamic within capital, which creates women and necessitates a particular struggle by women against gender",
- and so "his failure to grasp a genuinely materialist analysis of gender",

- seen in particular in is “chivalrous [sic.] defence of [...] women [which is] [y]et another attempt to pretend they don’t actually exist.”

What we are lead to conclude on the basis of Ben’s and Liz’s argument is that not only does Brown not take gender seriously but worse he attempts to actually efface the existence of women by simply collapsing them into the proletariat.

First, it would be churlish of me to deny that there is an argument here. However I do have a few problems with it. And that’s not even to mention the exceedingly hostile **tone** that Liz and Ben maintain throughout their piece, bookended by what can only be seen as quotes intended to humiliate their target rather than further their argument. At a stretch I can see how they can argue that Brown does not take the critique of gender seriously (or at the very least is not carefully engaged with TC’s elaboration of it). However to argue that he pretends that women do not exist is an incredible claim to make (even if it was made against **self-proclaimed** misogynist).

Secondly Brown does not simply collapse women into the proletariat. The reference here is to the Situationist International’s (SI) conception of a ‘new proletariat’ which they opposed to two then dominate conceptions (in the early 1960s): on the one hand the leftist sociological readings of a ‘new working class’ (e.g. by Serge Mallet & Alain Touraine), which theorised the incorporation of the working class into bourgeois society and the amelioration of alienation via technical development. On the other hand the ‘orthodox’ conceptions of the working class that emphasised the industrial proletariat over all other forms of proletarian labour, and indeed more often than not emphasised those types of labour overwhelmingly taken up by men, e.g. so-called ‘blue collar’ work. Indeed both perspectives have a lot in common, for the former conception propagated by the likes of Mallet were founded on the ‘truth’ of the orthodox perspective as the immediate past of their own conception i.e. that the orthodox ‘reality’ of class had given way to a ‘new’ reality. The SI differentiated themselves singularly by arguing that the proletarian condition was more both more complex in its history (and thus never simply about the industrial proletariat), and far more simple in its domination of everyday life (and thus returning to Marx’s conception of the alienation of human powers). Thus they formulated the idea that,

“In the context of the reality presently beginning to take shape, we may consider as proletarians all people who have no

possibility of altering the social space-time that the society allots to them (regardless of variations in their degree of affluence or chances for promotion). The rulers are those who organize this space-time, or who at least have a significant margin of personal choice (even stemming, for example, from a significant survival of older forms of private property).” (from ‘Ideologies, Classes, and the Domination of Nature’, IS no. 8, January 1963, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/8.nature.htm>)

This of course sounds familiar to those who know of the French group Socialism or Barbarism (of which a few members of the SI including Debord were members of in 1960 and 1961). Socialism or Barbarism had already argued that under the new conditions of bureaucratic capitalism that existed in the West and East, the division of capitalist/proletarian had given way to the division of ‘order givers’ and ‘order takers’ (respectively ‘directors’ and ‘executants’ in a literal translation of the French). However there are clear differences between the SI’s position, which they clearly acknowledged was influenced by Socialism or Barbarism’s. For one the SI did not give up on the notion of alienation. However unlike Socialism or Barbarism’s nostalgia for older forms of labour being mixed up with their conception of alienation, the SI put forward a remarkably clear account of alienation being both a growing impediment *and* basis upon which completely new forms of productive activity would be based:

“Because of the fact that in present-day society the domination of nature presents itself both as an increasingly aggravated alienation and as the single great ideological justification for this social alienation, it is criticized in a one-sided, undialectical and insufficiently historical manner by some of the radical groups who are halfway between the old degraded and mystified conception of the workers movement, which they have superseded, and the new form of total contestation which is yet to come. (See, for example, the very significant theories of Cardan and others in the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.) These groups, rightly opposing the increasingly thorough reification of human labor and its modern corollary, the passive consumption of a leisure activity manipulated by the ruling class, often end up unconsciously harboring a sort of nostalgia for earlier forms of work, for the truly “human” relationships that were able to flourish in the societies of the past or even

during the less developed phases of industrial society. As it happens, this attitude fits in quite well with the system's efforts to obtain a higher yield from existing production by doing away with both the waste and the inhumanity that characterize modern industry (in this regard see 'Instructions for an Insurrection' in Internationale Situationniste #6 [<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/6.insurrection.htm>]). But in any case, these conceptions abandon the very core of the revolutionary project, which is nothing less than the suppression of work in the usual present-day sense (and of the proletariat) and of all the justifications of previous forms of work." (ibid, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/8.nature.htm>)

Here we come close to understanding just what being encompassed by the proletarian condition means. It is not conceptualised in terms of a positive condition, such as the orthodox Marxists posed, particularly when they argued that women's access to the public sphere of waged work was equivalent to some type of liberation. Rather they are trying to understand the massive extension of the proletarian condition and thus capitalist social relations more generally, and how this impacts on the necessity of reasserting the need to struggle against work and for its abolition. Not only has this wonderfully *negative* conception of work had a massive effect on communist practice generally (accepted by communisers as different as Dauvé and TC), but it has also exerted its influence further afield, notably in Italy after 1968 and even more radical conceptions of the abolition of gender opposed to Marxist-feminist 'orthodoxy'.

Thirdly, I also believe that it also lies at the heart of the misunderstanding of the SI and its relation to advocating 'workers councils' and 'generalised self-management' (a critique that Ben and Liz rightly point out has a wider currency than just TC). For instance many who argue against the SI's conception of self-management have a tendency to read off many of the *positive* statements regarding self-management and workers councils made by Cornelius Castoriadis and Socialism and Barbarism as simply being taken over by the SI (again I am thinking mostly of Dauvé's criticism here, but it is also made by TC, Aufheben, Endnotes, etc.). Certainly Castoriadis outlined a vision of post-revolutionary self-management in a series of articles in Socialism or Barbarism in the late 1950s that reads a lot like the 'self-management of capitalist production' criticised by Dauvé et al (see Castoriadis' articles 'On the Content of Socialism' Parts 1, 2 and 3, if I

remember correctly). However the section quoted above in which the SI draw attention to their critical difference with Socialism and Barbarism regarding the ‘abolition of work’ should give critics pause to wonder (and it is also important to remember that such an abolition was doggedly elaborated on to the end of the SI’s existence in 1972). I am not simply arguing that the SI secretly overcome the contradiction of, on the one hand calling for the abolition of work, and the other hand calling for workers councils — what Dauvé rightly calls the “the crux” of their contradiction (<http://www.troploin.fr/textes/12-back-to-the-situationist-international>). Rather I am merely trying to point to the problem of lumbering them with such a positive conception of self-management that was indeed outlined by Castoriadis and other ultra-lefts before 1968.

And so we perhaps begin to see that writing, as Brown does, that

“Precisely because they had not been solely preoccupied with the industrial proletariat, these theories were able to include “women, the young, and immigrants” within the ranks of the contemporary proletariat. As a result, women, the young and immigrants found it easy in their turn to embrace left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism.”

is not as contentious or even redolent with sexism as Liz and Ben claim. I can see that we could criticise the *ease* with which “women, the young and immigrants [...] turned to embrace left-communism and anti-Leninist councilism”, but such a claim is hardly the secret bearer of a sexist anti-women agenda.

Finally and very briefly on the question of Brown referring to Margaret Thatcher, Lucy Parsons and Emma Goldman. Liz and Ben make heavy weather of this, but in fact Brown only mentions these three women once in his article. He mentions Thatcher in passing in order to question a critique that apparently cannot encompass *exceptions* to the general rule of gender oppression and exploitation (indeed such exceptions speak to the very real existence of struggles to overcome such determination across classes). No doubt Brown’s implied criticism is too brief, and leaves him open to such attacks as those launched by Ben and Liz. But to argue that his reference to Thatcher is “reminiscent of classic conservative arguments that the “achievements” of a Margaret Thatcher or Julia Gillard demonstrate that women are no longer oppressed” is stunning, simply because he makes no

such argument!

2. A schematic genealogy of gender critique

Of course it is easy to say that communist and other revolutionaries never contemplated the abolition of gender. Strictly speaking such a claim is true, but is only true if we accept the terms of the debate, i.e. that it was ‘gender’ that was being contemplated. Of course we would be hard pressed to find anyone before 1968 contemplating the abolition of gender simply because the term had not entered into the lexicon of significant concepts thrown up in the wake of the post 1968 re-emergence of a revolutionary workers movement. What we find before 1968 is the contemplation of the abolition of the family and the private sphere, which if we cannot simply translate such contemplations into the more recent theorisation of ‘gender’, is at the very least *similar* to the contemplation of the abolition of gender. Indeed such contemplation goes back beyond the 20th century and made up a part of Marx’s critique of the social separations crucial to the production and reproduction of labour-power. Indeed the contemplation of the abolition of the family — i.e. the family as the site of the reproduction of labour-power and in particular the enslavement of women to such tasks — appears repeatedly in socialist and workers currents throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (as well as the advocacy and practice of ‘free love’ and birth control in opposition to the then dominant conceptions of bourgeois sexual morality). To name only some of the more infamous who advocated the abolition of the family (or its radical transformation) there was Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Marx, Engels, August Bebel, Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, Alexandra Kollontai and Wilhelm Reich (this list is neither exhaustive nor without its problems — I’m thinking of Reich’s homophobia in particular). No doubt the strict adherence to pro-family bourgeois morality in the ‘official’ Stalinist workers movement did much to overturn the most radical opinions on the family in its midst after the 1920s, but it was certainly never overturned completely (particularly amongst anarchists and left-communists). It is also interesting to note how relatively ‘mainstream’ such attitudes were in the workers movement prior to the Russian Revolution. For instance August Bebel’s 1879 book ‘Women and Socialism’ exerted a considerable influence in Second International groups and amongst anarchists as well (significantly Lucy Parsons was influenced by Bebel’s work). That’s not to say that Bebel’s work was uncontroversially embraced by the Second International, rather it is to point out that a position of advocating the end of marriage, the family and women’s oppression *as*

women was far from absent or unacknowledged in the workers movement of the late 19th and early 20th century (and indeed was in many ways significantly more advanced than what came to dominate in the workers movement with its wholesale Bolshevisation after 1921).

Thus I would be hesitant to argue, as BL confusedly does, that the abolition of the family/private sphere played *no role* in actual struggles before 1968. Let me explain what I mean by ‘confusedly’. In ‘The Suspended Step of Communisation’ BL wrote:

“In this process of class struggle, which leads to the abolition of classes, individuals were ipso facto posed [by TC et al.] as being beyond gender, since they established a community of immediately social individuals” (p. 158).

I believe this is a similar claim to what I was making above, i.e. that prior to 1968 (in general), and prior to more recent explicit engagements with ‘gender’ (such as the case of TC), the argument against gender was largely implicit, encompassed by such notions as the ‘abolition of the family’ or ‘private sphere’. The confusion arises in the case of BL when they, on the one hand, deny that the “workers’ program” ever contemplated the abolition of gender, and, on the other hand, admit that practically such an abolition was contemplated – albeit negatively – in the Stalinist suppression of women’s participation in the Republican military forces in the Spanish Civil War. The quotes in question:

“The workers’ program never contemplated the abolition of gender, even under the form of an ultimate perspective beyond the famous period of transition [...] because the communism described by the program was only the society of associated producers. But production implies reproduction, the latter taking place on the side as subordinated and dominated” (p. 164).

“Vis-à-vis this political-economic sphere, the private sphere of production persists even if ‘putting women back where they belong’ is difficult in a situation where various aspects of class struggle confront each other (popular power, self-management, wild seizures). When it occurs, it is the sign of a serious defeat, at least locally. In Spain, the withdrawal of women from the

front lines took place during the militarisation of militias, a key element for a complete restoration of the State and the victory of the counter-revolution” (ibid.)

Import for BL’s claim that the communism envisaged by the “workers’ program” would involve reproductive labour being subordinated to the essentially capitalist-like organisation of production by the so-called “freely associated producers”, was the complete absence of the contemplation of the abolition of gender. Well may that be the case, but it is difficult to accept this if we attempt to *generously* understand the contemplation of the abolition of the family as having some bearing on the latter-day contemplation of the abolition of gender. Certainly it is easier to simply claim that such an abolition was never contemplated, and that certainly accords well with the schema of TC’s conception of communisation, but unfortunately it doesn’t sit well with either the sometimes complex reality of the struggles that have actually existed, and the difficult emergence of the critique of gender *as explicitly* the critique of gender.

Nonetheless I want to be absolutely clear that in no way am I equating those theories and attempts to practice the abolition of the family as simply equivalent to the argument for the abolition of gender. I am, though, attempting to argue for historical precedents for such. I certainly do not believe that the theory of gender and the calls for the abolition of gender magically came into being from nowhere sometime shortly after 1968. No doubt there were transitions and ruptures, perhaps many which we will never be particularly clear about because of their failure to leave a record (not that this is in anyway to be considered a “failure” of these attempts, merely the absence of written representations). And this is certainly not a plea to either collapse the critique of gender into earlier critiques of the family, or to sideline the significance of gender as a hierarchical principle of contemporary capitalist organisation.

3. A few final thoughts

I believe that an opportunity to clearly engage with Brown’s argument against the Sic project was missed by Ben and Liz. Instead they risk starting a slanging match, at least if the argument is continued in the fashion they have chosen. This is not to say that I am fully endorsing Brown’s method of argument or all of his arguments against the Sic project — hence my forwarding of the correspondence between he and I. I have also been

motivated to counter some of the more egregious claims of Ben and Liz; in particular the representation of the valuable Situationist notion of the proletarian condition tending to encompass almost everyone, as well as the SI's not completely unambiguous conception of 'self-management.' Indeed it is the latter I would like to continue to argue about for I have been thinking for a while about the insufficiency of those communisers that interpret the SI's perspective as simply the self-management of capitalist production.

And finally if Ben and Liz are serious about defending the usefulness of Louis Althusser, i.e. an *actual* wife-murdering misogynist and infamous Stalinist 'theorist', then perhaps they have inadvertently revealed that their claims against Brown are in fact nothing more than rhetorical bluster.

Regards,

Anthony Hayes

[3 September]

Dear Anthony,

Thank you very much for sending me your response to Liz and Ben. I appreciate both receipt of it, and its contents.

I see that there have been other exchanges where this issue is concerned. Good! That was my primary intent: to stimulate actual discussions, not just continue an endless "amen chorus" or a discussion among "true believers" who do not engage in any real self-critique.

You write:

"While I agree with some of Brown's points in his article, I feel that he is undermined by his tendency to not generously engage with the matter under critique."

Yes, indeed: I did not engage in a "generous" fashion with the matter under critique. I did this quite deliberately. There are some people who are very smug; as one says in an American idiom, they think that their shit doesn't stink. They need – no, they *deserve* – a good slap, a good test of their mettle.

I must point out that, while my friend (the one who originally gave me a copy of *Sic #1*) came out of this “test” with flying colors (he certainly wasn’t offended by what I said, nor by the manner in which I said it), Liz and Ben, well, they certainly showed their true colors. All they did was issue ad hominem attacks and enunciate non sequiturs. As I indicated to Ben, I found their insults to highly amusing: it is funny to see what certain people think is insulting!

As for my “tendency” to do this: yes, I am a punk (as in “punk rock”) and believe that too many people are treated with too much respect. If certain people think they belong on the top of the heap, then they better be prepared to deal with people who want to knock them down. If they don’t get back up again, and return to their place at the top of the heap, well, maybe they didn’t belong there in the first place.

You write:

“At a stretch I can see how they can argue that Brown does not take the critique of gender seriously (or at the very least is not carefully engaged with TC’s elaboration of it).”

Two things. (1) As before, there was my general feeling that pompous nonsense such as that propagated in *Sic #1* – and there is a great deal of pompous nonsense propagated these days where gender and sexuality are concerned: “political correctness” is a real problem, especially in American universities, where it has been steadily pushing out truly free speech for several decades now – doesn’t deserve to be taken seriously. It takes itself way too seriously, but that doesn’t mean that I or anyone else has to follow suit. (2) There is a real difference between the *construction* of gender roles and identities, on the one hand, and the very real existence of gender itself. Like most politically correct people, Liz and Ben (and the *Sic #1* crew) collapse the two (the construction of gender and the biological fact of gender) into a single category. With such a conflation in place, to prattle on about “the abolition of gender” is absolute bullshit. Maybe even dangerous bullshit. There is *nothing* that anyone can do or will do to change the hormonal / biological differences between men and women – and thank god for that.

You write:

“Instead they risk starting a slanging match, at least if the argument is continued in the fashion they have chosen. This is not to say that I am fully endorsing Brown’s method of argument or all of his arguments against the Sic project — hence my forwarding of the correspondence between he and I.”

There is no “argument” here: I made my critique; I acted like a punk; and I have moved on. That is to say, I refuse to engage in a “slanging match” with people who think it is insulting to call me a “psychopath,” a “fuckhead,” a “childish, dishonest, sexist creep,” etc. etc. Too starved an argument for my sword, as one of Shakespeare’s characters say. All that one can do with such people is what I have done: thank them for their amusing antics.

As for forwarding the correspondence, I appreciate it. Thank you. You are obviously a true comrade.

Best wishes,

Bill