

On Organization

Two Reviews of The Camatte/Collu Pamphlet

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)
Ed Clark

1976

Within the small circles that constitute the libertarian movement in the United States, the question of whether to combine in organizations, associations, federations, etc., has become a subject of some debate and much interest. Many feel that the only obstacle to organization is the relative weakness of the small numbers of persons who identify with a libertarian perspective, while still others (probably a smaller number) feel organizations in and of themselves are bureaucratic and are incapable of producing the desired goal.

Several people visiting Detroit recently produced a 40-page pamphlet containing the writings of Jacques Camatte and Gianni Collu entitled "On Organization," which lays out the authors' perspectives on the question. The two had been for years members of the International Communist Party headed by Amadeo Bordiga, a small ultra-left sect comprised of Italian and French militants and operating out of Paris. Camatte and Collu were tremendously influenced by the French and Italian events of 1968 through 1969 and were led to resign from the ICP after deciding that all political organizations were ineffective.

Ed Clark, a west-coast activist, differs greatly with the two authors of the pamphlet and has been a leading voice over the past year for the establishment of a mass libertarian organization. Clark, in turn, is answered by E.B. Maple of the *Fifth Estate* staff, who defends the Camatte/Collu position.

"On Organization" and another work by Camatte, *The Wandering of Humanity*, Black & Red, is available through Ammunition Books for \$.25 and \$.75 respectively.

1. by Ed Clark

It would be less than honest not to reveal my prejudices at the outset: this pamphlet pisses me off! Still, as some of us learned in the days of SDS, bullshit does not disappear upon being accurately labeled.

The pamphlet consists of a letter and an article,—both dating from 1969—and several explanatory footnotes' dating from 1972. This is not as trivial as it might seem: those were the years when the illusions of imminent revolution were shared by all the large quasi-radical student movements in Western Europe and the United States were shattered. This defeat was evidently felt with particular force in France and Italy, the two countries which Camatte and Collu mention most.

As is often the case with defeated movements, a whole body of articles and books is produced to explain the defeat and (sometimes) suggest what ought to be done next. It is unfortunately also the case that the fact of defeat becomes a new illusion, as unrealistic as the earlier illusion of immediate victory.

Instead of a sober, clear-headed examination of the real mistakes and weaknesses of the movements of the 1960s, Camatte and Collu construct an edifice of obscure Hegelianisms...the point of which is that all forms of organized human activity (including the direct democracy of the workers' councils and factory committees—see page 37) turn into authoritarian gangs. The only valid form of revolutionary activity becomes maintaining a network of personal contacts with people who have achieved the highest degree of theoretical knowledge (see page 25).

It is true that Camatte and Collu add a footnote to the effect that there will one day be a good revolutionary organization. But they have nothing to say about how to build it except “reject all the old forms” and wait.

The Hegelian Thickets

Meanwhile, “all groups, structured or not, that wish to work for the creation of councils” turn into rackets (page 39). What is the basis for this astounding assertion?

As best I can penetrate the Hegelian thickets, there are three arguments that Camatte and Collu put forward—only two of which I will deal with (the third, “the passage of value to its complete autonomy” I can find no meaning in, for or against).

The first argument I will deal with is that the proletariat in the Marxist sense of “a class for itself” has become a minority absorbed into “the working population,” also called the “new middle classes” (pages 5 and 35); consequently all working class organizations have disappeared (page 12). Now, when the proletariat rises, it rises without and against all organization, as in the black ghettos of the United States (page 37).

In fact, I would submit that the “class in itself/class for itself” distinction has become outmoded and should be junked. Consider the recent working class actions in Poland: did the Polish workers suddenly become a class for themselves because the Polish bureaucrats raised food prices?

The myth of the “new middle classes” has, by now, been pretty thoroughly debunked as a vulgar creation of bourgeois sociologists (though this was not the case in 1969 when Camatte and Collu were writing).

No one disputes that the working class engages in spontaneous uprisings; the question is will that work? And why is it that when working class rebellions have lasted long enough, they created or tried to create organs of direct democracy like councils and factory committees?

Again, it is true that there are no large working-class organizations—that is, groups actually run by workers (why? what can we do about it?). But there are small working class organizations, probably in every country in the world. The group that publishes this newspaper you are reading is run by people who sell their labor power—by workers.

Of course it is hard, sometimes, to distinguish between small groups of workers seriously trying to build a revolutionary movement and the little gangs of pompous academics with which we've all become too familiar. It's also hard to overthrow a capitalist society, isn't it?

Camatte and Collu believe that the basis of authoritarian relations lies in the different degree of theoretical development among any group of people. The inability of a given person to confront theoretical questions independently leads that person to take refuge behind the authority of another, who then becomes objectively a leader (see page 15).

Confronting Theoretical Problems

This is really their best argument, and it's something I've seen happen in groups. However, I've also seen people develop the ability to confront theoretical problems independently in groups (for example, me). And the argument itself, if extended very far, becomes an argument against the possibility of a classless society at all.

The human race is composed, after all, of human beings who are “unequal.” What we need seems obviously to break the “connection” between what we perceive as “superior” traits and the right to participate in the making of social decisions.

As a first approximation, the revolutionary movement organization must be based on the ‘formal equality of its membership—all must take part in the making of policy. Collective self-management must be the foundation of unity.

As a second and closer approximation, there must be an accepted responsibility on the part of the most articulate, the most active members ("those with the highest degree of theoretical knowledge") to encourage at every step the political development of the less articulate, less active...aiming for (if not ever completely reaching) a real social equality of all humanity. From personal experience, I must say it is quite surprising what the most "unpromising" people manage to achieve with a little encouragement...and we should provide a lot!

Well, enough of Camatte & Collu. Enough, too, of "libertarians" who can only tell us that liberation is either impossible or something that will only happen in the distant future when the whole working class achieves mystical unity.

Perhaps I am a minority of one, but I am sick of wage slavery and alienation now! I am interested in beginning now to build a movement to overthrow this motherfucker! I will certainly agree that there are many problems to be resolved, many difficulties to be overcome.

Rome was not built in a day, yes, but is it not true, brothers and sisters, that some small group of human beings laid the first bricks?

And shall we not build all the better for knowing what we want to build?

Ed Clark

Oakland, Calif.

2. E.B. Maple

Ed Clark's reading of the Camatte/Collu pamphlet so badly misses the point in so many places that a short response is almost impossible. One does not need the two authors' admittedly difficult-to-read theory as the basis for rejecting formal organizations such as the type supported by Clark, but they add several important aspects to the perspective.

Camatte/Collu, as mentioned, are difficult, but certainly not impossible to read. If one prefers to remain with concepts "learned in the days of SDS," you come up with a rather limited view of the world and perhaps having learned nothing more than what Clark tells us he knows about "bullshit." It seems well worth the effort to plow through the "thickets" to avail oneself of new ideas and new ways of evaluating one's own activity.

It's also easy to see why he states, "this pamphlet pisses me off"-it directly confronts and destroys Clark's hobby horse: the revolutionary organization, and does so with much more lucidity than our reviewer admits. Clark misunderstands the authors' point regarding the transformation of all political activity into that of gang activity: The Camatte/Collu contention is that we now live in the era they designate as that of the real, as opposed to the earlier formal domination of capital. This means that all aspects of human activity that once remained outside of the domain of the market economy had to be absorbed within it.

The proletariat itself (the Marxian negation of capital) has itself been absorbed into a unity with capital-a unity which is "destroyed only by a crisis." Class struggle as it has been classically defined-strikes by unions and political activity by leftist parties and organizations-become nothing but the struggle for relative advantage for the spoils of capitalism. The authors state, "gangs confront one another in an obscene competition; veritable rackets rivaling each other in what they peddle, but identical in their essence."

It is doubtful that there is a reader of this newspaper who would object to any socialist or communist party or group on the planet being labeled as a self-serving racket seeking only power for those at its head, and probably only a few readers would object to the labor unions of the world being labeled as gangs whose sole object is to seek a higher selling price for human labor all the while affirming the duality of capital and wage labor.

What Clark Objects To

So, really what Clark objects to is the type of small group of anarchists he envisions, being referred to as a gang. Charging the two authors with a "thicket of Hegelianisms," Clark quotes little from the pamphlet and not usually in complete sentences. He barely mentions their devastating (and easily understood) description of gang life since to Camatte/Collu the mere "formation of the gang is the constitution of an illusory community."

The recent desire of Clark and other U.S. libertarians to link up people "within our tendency," "to build a movement," "to stop the Leninists," etc., all sounds good on the face of it, but despite Clark's rigorous plans for an open

and democratic organization, it's really nothing more than warmed over Leninism. The activity of leftist politicians (even those who advocate "the direct democracy of the workers' councils,") is by definition always separate from those who will destroy capitalism. This is ultimately the perspective Clark cannot swallow because this is precisely what he advocates and this is what is under attack in "On Organization."

Camatte/Collu assert what probably has been the experience of all of us who have participated in organized political activity (including SDS) over the last 15 years: "While one is, on the one hand, theorizing about the existing society, on the other, within the group, under the pretext of negating it, an unbridled emulation is introduced which ends up in a hierarchization even more extreme than in society-at-large."

And, "Once within the gang, the individual is tied to it by all of the psychological dependencies of capitalist society." Somehow, it's hard to believe that the mere adoption of a new set of anarchist principles or good intentions by Clark is going to provide for a different situation now, all of his concerns about hierarchy notwithstanding.

The poverty of life within the gang aside, Camatte/Collu state quite plainly that the very function of the gang ("to overthrow this motherfucker"-Clark) is beyond its grasp. The last gasp of organized anarchism went over to the bourgeoisie of Spain in 1936-7 when the CNT's "leading militants" joined the government and aided the disarming of revolutionary workers. Since that date no organized political movement has seriously contested capitalist society, leaving the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the late 1960s events in France and Italy as the major junctures of disunity that have disrupted the juggernaut of capital.

What Is To Be Done?

However, if you reject the concept of formal organizations, what is one left doing while waiting for the revolution to spontaneously occur? When Clark contemptuously mentions that Camatte/Collu feel "the only valid form of revolutionary activity (is) a network of personal contacts," it is to relegate the authors to a place of obscurity in the process Clark feels a revolutionary organization is central to. Camatte/Collu are not suggesting a "network of personal relationships" as a strategy for revolution, but rather are stating how they intend to function within their daily lives and remain consistent with their perspective.

The nub of the controversy seems to revolve around a definition of "revolutionary activity." Camatte/Collu state that, contrary to Clark's assertions, that there is no such thing as "revolutionary activity" within capital, that all of it devolves down into gang activity. The only activity that can be considered revolutionary are acts of revolution themselves at the point when the unity of capital is smashed and the relationships of capitalism are tossed aside.

Also, contrary to what Clark states, the two authors nowhere state that "there will one day be a good revolutionary organization." Rather, they refer to the "historic party" meaning the self-organized working class itself, that would in the process of revolution destroy all existing organizations.

The authors of the pamphlet and certainly this writer in no way interpret an anti-organizational perspective as a justification for accepting the poverty of daily life while waiting for someone else to bring about the revolution. Rather, all of us, if for no other reason than to affirm our humanity, can take part in acts of rebellion the quality of which depends upon how many others are involved.

It may just mean writing "Fuck the Boss" on the john wall or small acts of sabotage or insubordination if you are alone. Or it may mean the seizure of a whole building if there are that many more persons who also want to engage in rebellion. The qualitative leap from rebellion to revolution is too elusive; to define prior to its actual occurrence and no matter what our level of frustration or desire it cannot be forced.

Clark's contention that groups like he suggests or projects like the Fifth Estate are "run by workers" is self-serving and begs the question. Many small Mao-oid groups are also comprised of "workers," but this is certainly not what defines them; they are politicians, they desire to be the planners and administrators of the lives of others.

They, like Clark (and other anarchists before him) want to provide the mechanism to propel the working class toward revolution (as defined by the party or the anarchist group's most current "minimum basis of association" or whatever). This is pure and simple Leninism with a libertarian wrinkle.

On the other hand, the *Fifth Estate* has no program or plans for anyone else and would steadfastly refuse to organize anyone into anything other than direct work on this paper. Propaganda collectives or groups set up for any activity to be carried out by the members themselves are of a totally different character from those with plans to "organize the workers for anarchism."

Throughout Clark's privately circulated articles and position papers about organization-building (as well as his review printed here), there is the intimation, if not the direct charge that those who do not support the formation of an organization are not quite serious in their intentions about revolution or are somehow being self-indulgent. However, Camatte/Collu see the need for revolution in much more serious terms than Clark poses it.

Clark has as his greatest fear the triumph of a Leninist state-capitalist regime (no small fear, to be sure, since it would be bye-bye for all of us), but the two authors view the situation even more strongly. They state: "the two alternatives we face today (are): communism or the destruction of the species." These are not people unconcerned with the prospects for revolution, but quite the opposite—they see it as a prerequisite for the survival of the human race.

All of us share Clark's enthusiasm for the destruction of capital and his frustration that the future does not appear to be moving in a libertarian direction, but as Camatte/Collu put it, "A group can in no way pretend to realize community without taking the place of the proletariat which alone can do it." That is what Leninism is if it is nothing else—the substitution of activity by restless radical intellectuals for what they think the working class should be doing.

This was the counter-revolution when the Bolsheviks did it and it will be no different if we do it.

Related: see letter responses in "Camatte, Collu & On Organization," FE #280, February 1977.

fifth Estate

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)
Ed Clark
On Organization
Two Reviews of The Camatte/Collu Pamphlet
1976

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/279-december-1976/on-organization>
Fifth Estate #279, December, 1976

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net