

Camatte, Collu & On Organization

Letter responses

Various Authors

1977

To the Fifth Estate:

Realizing that he who jumps into the middle of a fight gets shot at from both sides, I must say that both sides in the debate over "On Organization" are wrong: Ed Clark with his impersonal formal organization, and Camatte/Collu, and their defender Maple, with their unorganized formal persons. [See "On Organization: Two Reviews of The Camatte/Collu Pamphlet," FE# 279, December, 1976.] Here are two positions badly in need of dialectic. (I'm more sympathetic to Clark, mostly because I worked with him for a number of years, but also because he's less pretentious and dogmatic than Camatte/Collu.)

Both sides implicitly share four basic assumptions:

1. Capitalism and Domination: Since capitalism has colonized all the classic forms of domination and made them subsidiaries to its rule, therefore overthrowing capital would be sufficient to end all domination.
2. Crisis: Since capital is "self-reproducing value" rooted in the relations of wage labor, the commodity, etc., therefore it can only be overthrown in a mass insurrection where the workers seize control of social life and destroy these relations. Anything less will merely reproduce capital in ever more insidiously "rationalized" forms.
3. Strategy: If the "revolutionary organization" has any purpose, it is to agitate and prepare people for this crisis. Anything less is reformism.
4. Values and Hierarchy: Such organizations will tend to be "led" (whether or not this would constitute domination is another argument) by the most "theoretically developed" persons: those best able to get a grasp on the infinitely complex play of social forces and therefore best able to intervene in crises.

(Note: These points are not intended as a summary of either set of writers, but as a common substructure of belief.) All these propositions follow more or less logically from the first, which is axiomatic for most Marxists. The split between Clark and the others begins at point 3. He, seeing that workers have always tried to organize themselves, argues that organization is necessary. The others, noting that "revolutionary" organizations formed before the crisis have almost invariably acted to restrain it, argue that formal organization now is reactionary and degenerates into a capital-reproducing "racket." [1]

Camatte/Collu then go on to sketch the tortured secret life of domination within these gangs. This is the most vivid part of their essay, although the "mediation" from political economy to psychology is taken for granted.

To examine these assumptions:

1. Capitalism and Domination: Capital is the aegis of all domination in our era, but not its creator. Most current forms of domination have primitive ancestors, and anyone with a modest imagination can figure that their descendants may survive the disappearance of wage labor, etc. What does happen, and what may make the mistaken view plausible, is that all subsidiary forms of domination are exploited by capital and contribute to its rule. But they retain a certain autonomy.

By penetrating all previously “natural” forms of domination, capital has shown their social dimensions to be transparent and overthrowable. But unless the sexist, intellectualist types of domination (to name only a few of those identifiable) can be uprooted in their immediate dimensions between and within persons, then the end of capital will only offer new, possibly progressive, variations.

But how is it possible to go after all these buried monsters, and all of them at once? The answer begins not in any linear strategy, but in the unity of the desire for liberation in those individuals and communities experiencing domination, in all its forms, as an oppressive unity. You don’t just want to end capitalism, though someone may tell you this is all that is possible or necessary. You want to be free.

2. Crisis: That unity of desire intuits the understanding that all forms of domination reinforce each other. Any dissolution of a vassal form releases pressure upon the ruling form, until this freed energy either bursts its rulership or is reintegrated by it. For example, the weakening of racial oppression in the U.S. has “freed” black people, as a whole, to either challenge capitalist institutions or compete more effectively within them, and both kinds of struggle are going on.

But because reintegration always at least partially occurs, and each new specific revolt does not immediately set off the general collapse, does not mean that the system’s co-optive capacities are infinite. Just where capitalism is the most rationalized, it shows itself most naked of “natural” protection; just when it seems strongest, it stands most brittle against the next popular storm.

The great “spontaneous” upheaval against capital makes no sense unless understood as the effect of combining many such releases of popular energy. No one can predict or still less control the final explosion. But unless all the little releases are worked for, revolution can only seem like a thunderbolt from a proletarian Zeus, for which the impotent intellectual can only pray.

3. Strategy: What is needed instead is to foster anti-capitalist communities. The earliest resistance to capital was nurtured by pre-capitalist communal forms, and the popular mobilization against capital is still fiercest in “peripheral” areas. Yet these uprisings have not been able to establish socialism (workers’ democracy). Our problem is to build—on the landscape of capital—communities which are conscious of their opposition to capital and structured (self-managed, anti-hierarchical) adequately for their tasks.

I claim that this is possible, that in fact it is already going on. There exist neighborhood associations, tenants’ unions, independent workers’ groups, cooperatives, groups for self-therapy, theatre, publishing—which have arisen in opposition to capitalist institutions and alienation and are to some degree conscious of this. Of course most such organizations see themselves as merely “alternatives” within capitalism, or else have vague ideas about competing with and replacing existing institutions without seeing the need for a direct assault on capitalist conditions. But this is not surprising—many of the earliest workers’ associations had similar “utopian” illusions.

The closest models for the kind of revolutionary community I have in mind were the early revolutionary unions—what eventually came to be known as anarcho-syndicalism. These have been the only “formal organizations of the workers’ movement (that is not thrown up in a revolutionary situation) which had a structure and “method” which were consistent with a professed revolutionary goal. They were also the only organizations which even came close to a mass revolutionary workers’ movement under western capitalism, independently of an “external” crisis. In Spain both sorts of catalysts—conscious internal development of the proletariat and an unexpected political crisis—combined for the most prolonged explosion of the century.

Although unions have since been co-opted, a similar strategy with broader communal forms, is possible—a synthesis of the utopian and revolutionary traditions. Camatte/Collu are correct in calling all merely political groups “the illusions of community”. But if people are actually working on making their immediate shared lives better, when their anti-capitalist work springs directly from their own selfish interests, when they don’t claim to represent anyone but themselves, then real community begins.

4. Values and Hierarchy: Not all human groups form pecking-orders on the basis of “theoretical development”. This seems like an inescapably hierarchizing principle to Clark and the other writers only because they have difficulty seeing the nucleus of a revolutionary group as anything but a group of intellectuals working on society “out there”. The post-revolutionary reflection of this, as Camatte/Collu perhaps see and fear, is a “meritocracy” ruled by socialist technicians.

But human sociability knows other principles for valuing individual differences, not all of which can be understood as “hierarchical” in the sense of domination, but rather as “central” to group process. The ability to sense and express one’s own emotions, sensitivity to others and the group dynamic (the “feminine” virtues), playfulness, simplicity—these are some.

Even the traditional ordering traits—the capacity for violence, practical-productive skill, and theoretical information-ordering—could be restored to human dimension in a community which gave equal value to the other traits.

Such a community can only be built by profoundly selfish people, ones who want to develop all their human richness, not just to rise in a one-dimensional order. We cannot trust Clark’s “responsibility” of the intellectual to help others “develop” theoretically. The intellectual must realize he needs help himself. This balance of nurturance and effectiveness, this “inside/outside” rhythm, will be found by individuals and groups who want to expand their lives and fight against that which is killing them. This rhythm is the breath of life.

Clark is left breathing only out, calling for a mass organization with extensive constitutional guarantees against the domination of elites. Such constitutions may be necessary, but left by themselves they are a hollow form, ready to be filled with the juices of intrigue.

Camatte/Collu and Maple are left breathing only in, retreating from political groups to cultivate their network of theoretically realized people, but forced, by the logic of their position, to choke on the truth that individuals just as much as groups are bits of capitalist value—at which point they must decide whether or not to have anything further to do with themselves.

I am suffocating, but I would like to learn how to breathe.

Sources for Ideas: “Spontaneity and Organization,” by Murray Bookchin; “The Right to be Greedy” by For Ourselves.

Jim Stodder

New Year’s Eve’s Eve 1976

New Orleans

Notes

1. Camatte/Collu have their theoretical reasons for this assertion—“The passage of value to its complete autonomy”—which Clark is right to find needlessly obscure and Hegelian. One of Hegel’s tricks of intellectual mystification was to abstractly discuss concrete historical events without ever mentioning them. What the authors seem to mean by their phrase is the destruction of pre-capitalist community, the integration of unions, and the colonization of every aspect of daily life. Another curious device is using the same word to mean entirely different things. Camatte/Collu tell us the proletariat has “disappeared”, and then note that it is a “minority” in advanced capitalism (the for-itself/in-itself difference). By “proletariat” they seem to mean only the industrial working class, a completely useless narrowing of the concept today. Thus an “intellectual” school teacher is not a proletarian; thus the unconsciousness of the proletariat, and the impotence of the intellectuals. Despite their sophistication, the religious quality of their Marxism is nauseating, for example, “no assault of the proletariat has succeeded...in re-establishing Marxism.” I think Marxist theory is useful for the proletariat, but for these guys it’s the other way around!

Dear Friends,

I thought the little exchange over the Camatte-Collu pamphlet in the December issue was interesting. There was only one thing I didn’t understand about this concept of “the real domination of capital.”

If it is true that under the “real domination of capital, all human activity” (including human thought) is dominated by capitalist unity, doesn’t this mean that Camatte-Collu’s thesis and the Fifth Estate are also products of capitalist unity?

Yet if FE and Camatte’s activities are not actually dominated by capital, doesn’t it mean that capital’s domination is not total? Please advise.

For the Blood of the Master(s),

Nat Turner
Chicago.

Dear People,

There are several aspects of E.B. Maple's reply to Ed Clark's review of "On Organization" which demand comment.

First and foremost is Maple's misuse of terms. Maple states that Clark's desire to "link up people 'within our tendency' to build a movement..." is "warmed over Leninism." Later she/he declares that the desire "to provide the mechanism to propel the working class towards revolution...is pure and simple Leninism." And in her/his conclusion she/he states that "what Leninism is if it is nothing else—(is) the substitution of activity by restless radical intellectuals for what they think the working class should be doing."

Maple's definition of Leninism is, to say the least, rather bizarre. Webster defines Leninism as "the political, economic and social principles advocated by Lenin; esp.: the theory and practice of communism developed by or associated with Lenin..."

And what are those Leninist principles? To the best of my knowledge Lenin never advocated the formation of non-hierarchical organizations to struggle for the immediate destruction of the State and for direct control of the economy by those involved in the productive process. Rather, Lenin advocated the formation of vanguard political organizations, the sole purpose of which was to be the seizure and retention of State power. The attainment of control of the State is the goal of all Leninist organizations.

It's grotesque to refer to the desires of those anarchists who wish to organize as "Leninism."

Elsewhere Maple refers to "leftist politicians (even those who advocate 'the direct democracy of workers councils')." Webster's defines politician as a "person actively engaged in government or politics," and defines politics as "the art or science of government, of guiding or influencing governmental policy, or of winning and holding control of a government." Thus, we have another example of an inaccurately used term.

Given Maple's misuse of the words Leninism and politician, there are only two possible conclusions to be drawn: one is that Maple is simply ignorant of the true meanings of the terms she/he uses; the other is that Maple is so eager to sling mud at her/his opponents that she/he deliberately misuses terms.

Maple also writes that "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.'" This is just a cheap personal shot. It has nothing to do with the substance of Clark's review and serves to discredit Maple rather than Clark.

Further, Maple chooses not to reply to several salient points made by Clark. Clark asks: 'Meanwhile, 'all groups, structured or not, that wish for the creation of councils' turn into rackets. What is the basis of this astounding assertion?'

Maple never replies directly to this crucial question. Instead she/he merely states the obvious: that political parties and business/politically controlled unions are "self-serving rackets." While true, that statement is totally irrelevant. The question is not whether political parties and AFL-CIA type unions are "self-serving rackets" (a person would have to be suffering massive brain damage to disagree with that proposition); the question is whether or not organizations advocating councils are "rackets." Maple never deals directly with that question.

As regards the question of "the new middle classes," Maple chooses to evade it by simply repeating the contentions of Camatte/Collu, which he/she evidently regards as gospel.

And, if Maple accepts (as she/he very apparently does) the contentions of Camatte/Collu that "we now live in the era...of the real...domination of capital, this means that all (my emphasis) aspects of human activity that once remained outside of the domain of the market had to be absorbed within it," and "there is no such thing as 'revolutionary activity' within capital, that all of it devolves down into gang activity," she/he is caught in a personal contradiction in that she/he works within an organization called the Fifth Estate.

As “all aspects of human activity” have been absorbed by the market economy, and “there is no such thing as ‘revolutionary activity’ within capital...(only) gang activity,” it follows that the Fifth Estate is a “gang activity,” precisely what Maple rails against.

It won't do to maintain that the *Fifth Estate* is not a “gang activity” merely because it's a “propaganda collective” (a strict reading of the Camatte/Collu pamphlet and Maple's interpretation of it leads to the conclusion that, under the present economic system, any organized activity is “gang activity”). If Maple maintains that the *Fifth Estate* is not a “gang activity,” she/he will have to state why it's an exception to the rule, or admit that Camatte/Collu's contentions are invalid.

It's not enough to say that the *Fifth Estate* “has no program or plans for anyone.” The *Fifth Estate* is an organized activity, and hence, by Camatte's/ Collu's definition, a “gang activity.”

If it's argued that the *Fifth Estate* is a non-coercive organization, and thus an exception, it must be shown why other non-coercive organizations, be they anarcho-syndicalist, council-communist, etc., are not exceptions or Camatte's/Collu's/Maple's argument goes up in smoke.

Another contradiction in Maple's reply to Clark involves the statement that “the *Fifth Estate* has no program or plans for anyone else.” Earlier in her/his reply Maple explicitly offers such a program, albeit a rather pathetic one. Maple urges people to engage in such activities as “writing ‘Fuck the Boss’ on the john wall or small acts of sabotage or insubordination.

Finally, Maple's conclusion that “Camatte/Collu see the need for revolution in much more serious terms than Clark...” is simply another manifestation of the more-revolutionary-than-thou attitude frequently encountered in the pages of the *Fifth Estate* (another example in the same issue is the “Dr. HIPocrisy” feature—it's hard to decide whether that article is only a lame attempt at humor or a conscious effort to alienate people previously affiliated with political parties).

I have never, in any anarchist publication, seen anything as intellectually sleazy as E.B. Maple's reply to Ed Clark's review.

For Anarchy,
Chuck Bufe
Boise, Idaho

E.B. Maple responds: Just a few remarks so as to leave more room for readers to hash out this question.

Chuck Bufe's use of the official definitions of the language of capital would be laughable if he wasn't serious about it. Bufe is welcome to run to Webster's for political descriptions, but it seems to make more sense to evaluate people's activity and come up with a definition from there.

People who are involved in the planning and administering of other people's lives are politicians; people who try to -organize others for purposes which are not directly theirs are politicians; people who have plans and programs for others are politicians; people who define the revolution for others are politicians; and this includes even those who say they hate the state and politics and governments. Leninism seems like an apt term to describe the relationships that are really at work.

Both Bufe and Nat Turner make the point that if all human activity has been absorbed within capital during the epoch of its real domination, doesn't that include Camatte/Collu as well as the *Fifth Estate* and similar projects? One answer that often strikes me at very cynical points in my thinking is, very possibly yes. As to the charge that if we accept the C/C contention, all political activity becomes gang activity; again very possibly yes.

The contemporary fountains of revolutionary wisdom will only realize how conservative and totally inadequate is all of their theory and practice when confronted with the actuality of revolution itself. To the extent that C/C state that the proletariat will have to smash all existing organizations in the process of its liberation from capital, this could very easily be extended to the smashing of all existing theory, including theirs.

Historically, all previously radical theory (Marxism, anarcho-syndicalism) has moved into an ideology, becoming yet another fetter of bourgeois society that refuses to permit thinking to go beyond the parameters of capital.

When thinking less cynically (but maybe less clearly since the first view allows no room to operate within capital and demands revolution as a precondition for a human existence) things look a little differently.

Although C/C speak of the absorption of all human activity within capital, they refer to the major social configurations such as the working class as a whole, culture as a whole, language as a whole, etc. To state that every human and every aspect of human activity were absorbed would, of course, mean that no thing exists outside of capital.

Individuals, and often groups of people, break this unity every day and it is mentioned specifically in the C/C pamphlet. Even in Orwell's 1984 there were rebels, but the existence of acts of rebellion in no way contradicts the contention that capital defines the major aspects of human life on the planet—it is when we act outside of this unity that we become human.

So, the big question is, if some activity becomes human and does not fall into a unity with capital, who gets tarred and who doesn't? It would seem that any statement from me on that would be arbitrary (I naturally don't think the FE is a racket or I wouldn't be working on it) and self-serving.

Suffice it to say that I don't think the *Fifth Estate* is involved in "revolutionary activity"—we are a group of friends and comrades working on a project which usually excites us. It involves ideas about revolution, but it would seem pretentious as hell for us to identify ourselves or the newspaper as revolutionary.

On the other hand, there seems to be any number of small libertarian sects which to me appear indistinguishable from those in the leninist tradition, who view their ideas and their practice as crucial to a future revolution—this is a racket and a gang. So, I guess it's just a matter of: if the shoe fits, wear it.

Jim Stodder's contribution to the discussion was good up until the end of his letter. I remain unconvinced that the list of groups he mentioned necessarily have anything to do with "self managed" activity.

With the exception of theater and publishing groups (and not necessarily those) most of the groups he mentions are hopelessly reformist; they take for granted all of the definitions of capital, i.e., tenants' groups which want "fairer" rents rather than their abolition, or food co-ops which provide cheap, healthy food, but are, of course, required to participate in the same commodity relationships as any retail business. People can do acts that are not defined by capital, but few of them within the types of organization he mentions.

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