

Letter to the Editor

Vic Seidler's fascinating and evocative paper on his personal experience of the history of the New Left (PPI 8:3) and your editorial comments on it raise a number of questions which I think require a response. I believe it is in the spirit of '68 and its aftermath that there should be debate and dispute about these important matters whose interpretation may be central to how, and indeed whether or not, we continue the struggle.

You say in your editorial that the generation of '68 lost a war. I disagree. We lost battles. We may have lost a lot of battles. And we may not have done very well at mourning those losses. Indeed we may well have more mourning to do. But the war continues. At this time, with another alleged crisis of capitalism being used to consolidate the position of the power elites and to intensify patterns of oppression, domination and control, it seems absolutely the wrong moment to think and act as if the war is over. To paraphrase Fred Hampton, they can kill a revolutionary but they can't stop the revolution. Only we can do that.

Much as fighters like Hampton and Che Guevara focussed on political power and the concrete realities of revolutionary war in the pursuit of that power, they also realised that the 'revolution' was equally importantly about a state of mind. Throughout the sixties the possibilities of armed revolution receded in most if not all of the developed world, not least because the increasingly expensive and technologically sophisticated fire-power of modern armies in modern states left revolutionary armies hopelessly outgunned. While Vietnam and Africa remained arenas where wars of liberation could be successfully fought, Latin America had already become too successfully fortified for all but the very small countries such as Nicaragua to be overthrown by force of arms, as Che's unsuccessful Bolivian campaign had already demonstrated. Les Evenments were never going to lead to another French Revolution. Even if de Gaulle had been forced to resign, there was no organised body in a position to replace him. The US state's war on the Black Panthers, including Hampton's assassination, perhaps marked the end of hopes for armed revolution, or even for meaningful armed resistance, and perhaps for any kind of physical revolution.

But May '68 offered a new interpretation of Che's call to challenge US imperialism by creating a hundred more Vietnams. It was a way of challenging the forces of power and oppression wherever they occurred: in universities, in factories, in schools, in psychiatric hospitals, in social service departments and in a whole range of other institutions. Those in authority were no longer to be obeyed or even respected just because they always had been or because they held a position in which a certain authority was vested. We claimed the right to have direct democracy. Not just the right vote once or twice every four or five years, but the right of workers to run the factories, and students the universities and patients the psychiatric institutions.

Most importantly, we established the understanding, later elaborated by Foucault, that knowledge itself, and the structure and processes by which it was taught, embodied and promoted specific ideologies, in most cases the ideology of the ruling elites. Through this critique we created the possibility of freeing our own minds to think our own subversive thoughts. But then, having almost achieved independent minds, we started to give it up.

Vic recycles the idea that Thatcher capitalised on our libertarianism, but that is clearly a myth. True, we had criticised the paternalism of much 'welfarism' for its tendency to disempower those it claimed to help. But central to that critique was our support for grass roots initiatives and rebellions, whether from organised labour or drop-out hippies. Thatcher attacked both; marginalising the former and (more or less) annihilating the latter with police onslaughts on the miners and the 'convoy'. To believe Thatcher promoted liberty in any form is to fall for her government's propaganda. In reality she promoted state intervention to support big business. (See the raft of anti-union legislation for just one example.)

Our real mistakes on the Left were to underestimate the lure of power and control to so many within our own ranks. We failed to anticipate how quickly the revolutionary spirit could give way to the reformist spirit the moment there was the possibility of political power and influence. And we failed to realise how many of our number would relish having status and authority and so readily reproduce the systems of power and domination to which we were supposed to be opposed. At some point, the idea that liberation could be achieved by questioning authority, challenging power and defying the law was replaced by the practice of gaining power, exercising authority and making the laws. Legislation, it seemed, whether by statute or by policy and procedure in the workplace, would deal with racism, sexism and a whole range of other forms of discrimination. Almost overnight, it seemed, political correctness hit the scene, and with it came word-crime and the language police. After years of struggle to establish that 'black was beautiful' there came prohibitions on using the terms 'black coffee' or 'blackboard', henceforth to be referred to 'coffee with milk' and 'chalkboards' respectively. The movement to challenge assumptions about gender relations and the explicit and implicit subordination of women expressed in certain linguistic and terminological habits turned into rules and regulations about how men and women should talk to or about each other. Finally, 'thought crime' and the new thought police emerged. It was no longer a case of how people talked, but what they thought. Men and women were no longer allowed to think about each other in certain ways that were alleged to reflect men's denigration of women or women's false consciousness and internalised oppression. Not only did erotic images have to be policed but so too did erotic fantasies. It is not without significance that what began as Women's Liberation became the Women's Movement, otherwise known as Feminism. What, one might ask, happened to 'liberation'? Looking back, it seems like we should have taken the term 'enemy within' and looked a little more closely at what was happening to our own movement.

Freud of course, warned us about the need for power and control. (In case it was insufficiently clear from his writings, he gave us his personal example.) He also warned us that we too might be susceptible to the desire for authority and authority figures, for symbolic parents to make us feel safe and contained. Vic suggests many of us sought refuge and economic survival in the psychotherapy profession. But the absence of any notable manifestations of student power in most psychotherapy trainings suggests that we became rather more conformist and susceptible to the authority of the institutionalised gurus of the psychotherapy business than we might have

imagined ourselves capable of being. Perhaps we longed for authority even as we challenged and deconstructed it.

So desperate were we for authority and power by 1997 that after the General Election that year I heard previously serious 'lefties' asserting that 'we' had won, and acclaiming Tony Blair as 'our' leader. Clearly, Lenin's observations about the nature of the 'state' and its relation to the bourgeoisie had long been forgotten, if indeed they were ever taken seriously.

Perhaps if we had read Freud, or perhaps Foulkes (the founder of group analysis), differently we might have recognised the extent to which class allegiances were unconscious and ever ready to re-emerge in support of the new statism and institutionalisation of correct thought and practice. The children of the managerial and professional class, whatever their conscious ideology, have found it difficult to give up their historical commitment to management and professionalism.

Then there is their susceptibility to guilt – the other thing we might have been warned of by Freud. The right to free speech, hard won from the ruling class through centuries of struggle, has become ultimately compromised, not by the efforts of the 'right' or the bourgeoisie, who historically had defended censorship into the 1960s, but by the liberal left deferring to the sensibilities of what are called 'ethnic minorities' (and of course 'women'). The failure of the left to mobilise effectively to support and defend Salman Rushdie remains, if we are talking the language of 'lost wars', one of our most significant defeats or perhaps 'surrender' or 'betrayal' are more apposite terms.

Vic is critical of group analysis as a discourse in which group analysts become so used to their own authority which they simultaneously disavow, thereby alienating themselves from the group. But the problem of group analysis is the group analysts' susceptibility to groupthink. Group analysis is arguably the most politically radical psychotherapeutic ideology in so far as it provides for the analysis, deconstruction and overthrow of the therapist's authority within the course of the therapy. The overthrow of the therapist's authority is, in some sense, prescribed. But there is a big gap between subscribing to such an ideology in theory and putting that theory into practice. Therapists hang on to power even when their theory says the patients are supposed to be challenged to wrest it from them. Currently a significant number of group analysts are engaged in proving to the NHS paymasters that group analysis can be as good, if not better, as a technology of social control as CBT. The praxis of liberation is reconstructed as the process of treatment. Far from being disavowed, the power and authority are actively flaunted. That's not so much the failure of the group analysts to 'deal with their own shit' as individuals but their failure collectively to challenge rather than compromise with the globalised hegemony.

Group analysis has, like psychoanalysis, followed the strange route whereby an imaginative liberatory praxis valuing spontaneity and freedom becomes an institutionalised process valuing received wisdom and conformity – which is largely what has happened to the 'New Left' of the 1960s.

Both you Nick, and Vic, make much of the need to mourn. And I agree there is a need to mourn lost comrades. We need also to mourn lost hopes and aspirations, particularly perhaps the defeats in Chile, Nicaragua and Salvador, and the establishment of US domination over so much of Latin America. Africa too has showed us how readily revolutions shift the burden of oppression from one set of shoulders to another and maybe we have to mourn the loss of the hopes we had for 'African Socialism' and other post-colonial projects. And we may need

to mourn the losses inflicted on the trade union movement in the UK. But mourning too easily becomes an alibi for failing to reorganise, for giving up the struggle, accommodating betrayals and failing to recognise and learn from our mistakes. I remain puzzled by your suggestion, Nic, that all the ex-hippies who are now pillars of the establishment should be regarded as political prisoners, rather than as people who have 'sold out' or, if we can be biblical, as 'lost sheep'. Maybe we've all had to sell out to some degree, but shouldn't we have the honesty to own up, and use the recognition and self criticism to resume the struggle?

Much as I enjoyed Vic's article, it leaves an inescapable feeling at the end that he is hanging up his marching boots and putting on his slippers, leaving it to a new generation. I don't think that's good enough. The new generation have begun to find their own way. As I write, campuses are occupied all over the country and there has been fighting with the police in Parliament Square within the last few days. At the same time, unions are becoming a focus for struggle in a way not seen since the defeat of the miners in the eighties. I don't think we can just leave them to do it on their own. Their struggle is our struggle and they deserve our support.

Herbert Marcuse, when asked how he felt about being a leader of our generation, replied, 'This generation doesn't need leaders.' He was right. But we did need his writing and that of others of his generation like Sartre and de Beauvoir, and pioneers like Fidel, Che, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King and Angela Davis. The current generation here and now does not need us as leaders, but they don't need us to declare our war lost and to walk off to do mourning in the approved psychotherapeutic manner. Perhaps, at least we can help them see there is no real revolution except the revolution of the mind (and that's the collective mind not just the individual one.) There is no ultimate victory, no establishment of the fair and just society. But equally, there is no ultimate defeat. The war is never lost. It goes on, not least because we must fight it not only against the power and authority of our enemies, but against all power and authority, and against our own longing to be *given freedom and justice by governments*, and our fantasy that these things can be won for us, or that we can win them for and impose them on others, rather than won by and for ourselves together with others. We owe them a psychotherapy and a social critique that is genuinely revolutionary at both personal and political levels.

Fidel Castro said that when you have power you must struggle every day with yourself against the inclination to abuse it. He may not, according to many of his critics, always have won the struggle, but the insight remains invaluable and may point the way to the most important contribution we as psychotherapists can make.

Dick Blackwell