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An anarchist critique of horizontalism

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Occupy Wall Street the intention to block the Brooklyn Bridge was one key flash point, as were the attempts to block Wall Street itself. As long as the numbers can be sustained these can be powerful tactics but they are tactics of protest and not of transformation.

What anarchism offers as an alternative to Horizontalism is a vision and method that doesn't have simply repeat the endless pattern of government following government. We have a sense of what it might feel like to win even if the route from where we are to that point has yet to be discovered.

Reform by riot & electoralism

Paul Mason writes that *“the power of the horizontalist movements is, first, their replicability by people who know nothing about theory, and secondly, their success in breaking down the hierarchies that seek to contain them. They are exposed to a montage of ideas, in a way that the structured, difficult-to-conquer knowledge of the 1970s and 1980s did not allow (...) The big question for horizontalist movements is that as long as you don’t articulate against power, you’re basically doing what somebody has called “reform by riot” a guy in a hoodie goes to jail for a year so that a guy in a suit can get his law through parliament”*

Now Mason wants to deploy that argument for the creation of a new syndicalist party somewhat crudely in the tradition of De Leon or James Connolly. That is for a broad electoral formation that would provide Horizontalism with the vision of a new society and the electoral method it needs to bring that about. Not something we’d agree with. But he still has a point about ‘reform by riot’. Horizontalism without a vision and method for revolution simply provides then protest fodder behind which once one government can be replaced with another. That indeed is one of the lessons of the experiences of Argentina in 2001, the slogan ‘they all must go’ meant government after government went but after a while stability was reimposed and new stable governments came into power and stayed there.

A key way of understanding this is to understand that Horizontalism as constructed lacks power except the power of the individual bodies putting themselves in harm’s way. Perhaps that is why nudity commonly spontaneously arises as a tactic. Anarchism has expressions of power in the form of the general strike or the people armed. Horizontalisms power consists of mobilising numbers to occupy spaces and block routes. In Argentina the power of the unemployed assemblies rested only in the power derived from blocking motorways and bringing the flow of commerce to a halt. With

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build mass movements for change. Once individuals who wanted such movements to emerge had to co-operate with revolutionary organisations because they needed access to their organisation resources, their press and their communication networks.

Parties knew this and thus didn't have to modify their behavior on the basis of accumulated negative experience; some organisations like the SWP instead turned isolating those who refused to tolerate negative behavior into an advanced art form. But that period appears to be over as the various tools of the Internet and mobile communications greatly weaken the link between mass organisations before mass communication. The old style party form has been spending its accumulated capital to resist that process, and as a result is starting to disintegrate as recruitment dries up and funds are exhausted. In extreme cases it faces hostility from without and rebellion from within as its own membership use these new technologies to route communications around the formal leadership.

Anarchism has a different approach to both horizontalism and the party form. Anarchist organisation was of course also about finding a way to fill a need for mass communication, but it also arose as recognition of a need to transmit lessons across time and space in a way that they would arrive and be trusted. And the need for a common platform around which solidarity could be built across distances and different experience and cultures. In the period since Occupy I've probably had conversations with anarchists who were involved in the region of twenty Occupies and are broadly share the WSM's politics. All of these conversations quickly went to quite a deep level of critique because it was simple for us to quickly establish our own political and organisational common ground.

have the shorthand of the historic tradition of the left as a common point of origin under which they can quickly be dismissed as the latest manifestation of old and frequently anti-Semitic conspiracy theories.

The question of winning

Horizontalism also differs from anarchism in that it doesn't have either a vision of what a free society might look like or a process to move us from here to there. I don't mean some sort of detailed blueprint, I'm skeptical enough of the value of tiny number of people devoting time to planning a future for the entire world at that level of detail. I mean at the level of the picture anarchists share of a world where workplace assemblies take over the workplaces and neighbor assemblies take over and manage communities. It need not be detailed for it to be clearly enormously different to the world we live in today.

Anarchist processes to get from here to there tend to involve a process of mass participation (e.g. syndicalist unions) followed by a moment of insurrection, sometimes pictured as a general strike, sometimes as an armed populace on the streets but actually most often a blend of the two. While there is much that can be discussed around this, are armed insurrections even viable in the age of the helicopter gunship, it clearly is a transformative moment that can be imagined. What does that moment look like for Horizontalism? What would it look like to win?

Horizontalism also dispenses with and is often hostile to the idea of formal revolutionary organisation. Having seen how revolutionary movements tend to interact with social movements over many years we can sympathise with the reasons for this and around Occupy we decided to respect the bans on political organisation banners and paper sales at Occupy events. Technology has made this approach feasible to hold alongside trying to

Horizontalism is an emerging term used to describe the key common characteristics of the waves of rebellion of the last decade. Occupy in 2011 was the peak to date but the term Horizontalism itself appears to originate the rebellion in Argentina after the 2001 banking crisis there. Marina Sitrin in her book on that rebellion says the term (in Spanish obviously) was used to describe the neighborhood, workplace & unemployed assemblies that emerged to form "*social movements seeking self-management, autonomy and direct democracy.*"

Horizontalism is a practice rather than a theory, which is to say in the various writings that use the term it has been described in practice rather than theorised as an ideal. It's easiest to see the practice in the context of the assembly-based movements that have come and gone since the rebellion in Argentina. Particularly of course the wave that built up from 2010 on in North Africa, Southern Europe and then went global in late 2011 with Occupy. What these movements had in common was not a single theoretical underlay but a set of developed common practices and to some extent common ways of looking at the world. I'm using the past tense there but of course they all still have some existence, with Gezi park this summer being a fresh blossoming somewhat along that common theme – although it lacked a single assembly. But because these are not formal organisations or even theoretical themes they largely exist in the moment even if in between such moments relatively small groups continue to organise under their various banners between those moments. This is both strength and a weakness.

Key point of Horizontalism

In writing about Occupy Sitrin listed the following characteristics which also apply generally across horizontalist movements

“To open spaces for people to voice their concerns and desires—and to do so in a directly democratic way.”

“People do not feel represented by the governments that claim to speak in their name”

“Attempting to prefigure that future society in their present social relationships.”

“They want the power of corporations contained and even broken, access to housing and education expanded, and austerity programs and war ended”

“Food, legal support, and medical care”

In a more critical look at Horizontalism, partially replying to Sitrin, David Marcus defined it as *“part of a much larger shift in the scale and plane of Western politics: a turn toward more local and horizontal patterns of life, a growing skepticism toward the institutions of the state, and an increasing desire to seek out greater realms of personal freedom”*

The qualification ‘western’ is probably unneeded as the movements in Egypt & Turkey share many of these same characteristics. Marxists and neo-reformists are increasingly inclined to see all these tendencies as a problem in challenging capitalism; anarchists on the other hand would broadly welcome them.

Horizontalism & Anarchism

Horizontalism includes aspects that are in parallel with anarchist methodology, in particular the emphasis on direct democracy and direct action. It also includes aspects of what are sometimes incorrectly described as anarchist methods, in particular consensus decision making, which actually entered radical politics via Quaker influence on the peace movement of the 60’s. But most participants at least start off unaware of those historical links and WSM members involved in Occupy found that participants often imagined

that these methods are entirely new concepts that were being invented by them on the spot. That is they were unaware of the very long history of experimentation through the anarchist and other movements that preceded their experiments

At least in the context of the Occupies we had some involvement in this was a significant weakness. A certain amount of skill and knowledge is required to make assembly processes effective. The inventing it from scratch approach resulted in the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ problems of the loudest voices tending to dominate assemblies and dynamics of bullying, in group formation and various power games filling in the vacuum. Inevitably these reproduce the patterns of our patriarchal, racist society — if left unchecked conversations will tend to be almost completely dominated by white men who are comfortable in playing out their expected gender role. In places this produced such unhealthy dynamics that Post Occupy this has allowed authoritarian outfits like the SWP to claim that horizontal decision making in general always leads to such outcomes and so is ‘not really democratic’.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of these horizontalist movements is that they either lack a class analysis, as was the case with Gezi Park, or replace it with a pretty crude wealth/corruption/corporations concept that lends itself a little too easily to conspiratorial and reformist approaches to fighting for change. This tends to reduce what is wrong to ‘evil people making evil decisions’ and the idea that if this is exposed to the light of day change will come about.

The whole 1% meme could be a useful starting point to explain capitalism & class from and to move people away from seeing the posh/poor neighborhood down the road as the problem (a grim example of all politics being local). But it can also be a starting point for a conversation about how the Rothschild’s controls the world via secret meetings at Bilderberg and spraying us all with fluoride from jet planes. As was found at Occupy challenging these and the associated Freeman ideas becomes quite frustrating once you don’t