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Affinity Identity Tactics

Bonfire Collective

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movements worth pursuing today are identity-based, and that questions about Affinity and Tactics can be avoided until the “right people” hold power. In practice, this idea mainly serves to steamroll important disagreements from within the ranks of identity-based movements. Should feminism and the LGBTQ movement reject capitalism? Is it a good idea for racial justice groups to be hierarchical or should they be direct democracies? These are essential issues that aren’t going away. Identity-based movements need to know where they are going and how they intend to get there.

Finally, what happens when we join together as Tactical allies without thinking of Affinity and Identity? In a word, you’ll have strange bedfellows. There are many groups who want to delegitimize the government, expand access to birth control, or demand more ecological ways of living - and we promise that some of them have really terrible views. Focusing only on the immediate objective may seem like “pragmatic” politics, but take a look to make sure that you are truly in the presence of allies. When you win fights alongside people who differ with you on fundamental issues, remember that they will also claim victory, that their reputations will be elevated, and that other groups will begin to associate you with them. Some differences of opinion are probably healthy, but here’s a rule of thumb: never collaborate with people who think you shouldn’t have rights, shouldn’t be safe, or shouldn’t be listened to. Not all groups deserve to be included as part of “Left unity.”

We hope what we have said about the relationship between Affinity, Identity, and Tactics will help bring some nuance to our talk about organizing. Our theory that when we lose sight of any one of these three elements we are vulnerable to avoidable mistakes, co-optation, and self-destruction. When we create organizations that know how to make these Affinity, Identity, and Tactics work harmoniously, we can win the big victories of moving together and the small victory of respecting current comrades and winning new ones to the struggle.

or parole status, or because they are undercover in enemy territory (e.g. an informant in a corporation). Assuming that everyone is ready and willing to take the same risks will likely push out valuable members of your group who might otherwise be able to support your actions. When working within your Affinity group, you will still need to talk through issues of Identity and Tactics, and you may need to get creative to accommodate everyone. Remember that it is usually better to split your group into allied factions that have clarity about their Affinity and Tactics than to stay together and accomplish nothing because of infighting. Another way of saying that we can't just organize around Affinity is that we need to remember to put Affinity in context.

Next, what happens when we pay attention to Identity while ignoring Affinity and Tactics? As Zora Neale Hurston once said, "All my skinfolk ain't kinfolk." People within the same Identity group are almost always divided about both Affinity and Tactics. It is very difficult for people to work within the same groups when they want radically different worlds and are not willing to use similar methods to further their cause. Those who believe that capitalism is not responsible for their oppression may oppose shutting down a busy street in protest because of the harm done to businesses. Those who believe that all protests should be peaceful may give information to the police when a window gets broken. Huey Newton was murdered in his sleep by the FBI because one of his friends put sleeping medication in his dinner, trusting the agents when they said they wanted to take him alive. Failures like this happen because we don't pay attention to forming groups around Affinities and Tactics, and they have certainly happened within Identity-based movements.

Milo Yiannopoulos is not an ally of the LGBTQ community, Ben Carson is not an ally to Black folks, Marco Rubio is not an ally to Latinx people, and Condoleeza Rice is not an intersectional hero. There is a common misconception that the only

When movements for social and political change gather to work together, there are always three essential elements that movements should keep in mind: Affinity, Identity, and Tactics. Affinity refers to your political goals, that is, your vision of a what a good society looks like. Communism, anarchism, and mainstream liberalism are all different Affinities with different political projects. Identity is created by your position in your society, and is made up of facts about you that affect your experience of life. Your race, gender, (dis)ability, and socioeconomic status are all parts of your Identity in a political sense. Tactics are the methods that you are willing to use to bring about the political goals set by your Affinity. Boycotts, public educational campaigns, voting in elections, and black bloc are all Tactics. Planning successful political campaigns and actions requires that we pay attention to all three of these elements without leaving any of them out. How and why should we address each one?

Affinity

Do you want to live in a society in which everyone can get medical care without having to worry about whether they will go bankrupt? What about a society in which police aren't just another kind of predator? A society that seriously works protect the future of this planet and the beings that inhabit it? Your answers to these questions and others like them define your Affinity. As people learn more about the history and current reality of movements, they tend to define their Affinity more precisely and start to use words like "anarchist" and "socialist" to refer to themselves and their comrades. Sometimes we combine terms to emphasize what we think is important, such as "eco-socialist" or "anarcho-communist." We choose these Affinities because we share the goals of larger movements. Consider some choices of Affinity within the Left:

If you oppose capitalism but not the State, then your Affinity is authoritarian communism. If you believe that the State can limit the worst parts of capitalism and that both can coexist in a reformed version of our current society, then you are a liberal. If you oppose both capitalism and the State, then you are an anarchist. These are just some of the choices of Affinity available to you. While activism can work by just being reactive, that is, by seeing that some problem needs fixing and working on it together, it is hard to broaden and sustain our movements without a clear idea of where we are going together. For example, if we are working together to fight the spread of dangerous opiates around our community, will it be a good solution for the local police to promise to arrest more people who sell drugs? An activist group built entirely around “solving” this problem will likely split on this issue. Liberals and authoritarian communists may be satisfied, while anarchists will not be, because anarchists believe that police don’t solve problems at their root. Understanding the big picture of what you and others in your group believe will help you explain your disagreements, find common ground, and reject inadequate solutions.

We want to see the big picture, not just the little issues. If you haven’t yet, begin the work to understand your Affinity. Read about diverse political movements, follow politically active people on Twitter, watch historical documentaries and go to university lectures. Revolutionary Left Radio is a podcast with a big archive of people having smart conversations about their political Affinity. Remember that the Left has more commonalities than differences, but that the differences are still very important. Most people change their Affinity as they learn more, and that’s alright too. Political traditions offer rich lessons, ideas, and inspiration. The work and sacrifice of others in the struggle for justice was meant to nourish us, and when we understand our political beliefs, it does.

and the black bloc communicated about, for instance, the timing of their very different Tactical moves, people could have done a better job at taking care of each other. Coordination should not be confused with unanimity here. If the peaceful marchers and the black bloc tried to arrive at a single consensus regarding their tactics, it is likely that neither group would have gotten what they wanted. When communicating about Tactics, be firm in your commitment while remaining flexible to the requests of others. Start these planning sessions with a commitment to help your allies carry out their ideas while not giving up on your own. A diversity of Tactics makes your movement harder to outmaneuver and makes it more likely to gain traction.

Affinity, Identity, Tactics

Up until this point, we have argued for the importance of Affinity, Identity, and Tactics separately, but the key insight is that we should not consider any of these three elements in isolation. Let’s explore the practical consequences of doing this for each one of the three elements in order to understand why this is true.

First, paying attention to Affinity to the exclusion of Identity and Tactics may seem like a logical way to assert the unity of your group, but it’s ultimately too narrow. People from different Identities bring different knowledge to the group. When Identity issues are ignored, communication differences can turn into problems that reproduce oppressive power relationships found in society, or failing that, simply breed confusion and hurt. Within your Affinity, you will also find that people who fly the same flag are fond of different Tactics. There are more pacifist and more confrontational flavors of every Affinity. Some members of your group may be able to take more risks than others because of privilege, immigration

action, you can amplify its reach by preparing a statement for the media or anonymously uploading pictures to Twitter.

Tactics are most effective they are tailored to the political climate, time, and place. During the Nazi occupation, it was appropriate for the French resistance to assassinate enemies, set off bombs in public places where innocent people were hurt, kill informants within their ranks, and fight to the death rather than be captured. Such Tactics would be ineffective and ruinous for movements in the US and Europe today. Consider what one of us saw at a demonstration for climate justice in Paris in 2015:

When we arrived at the Place de la Republique, there were hundreds of pairs of shoes littering the plaza with no owners. Parents with strollers and old pacifists hunched and clutching purses with concern, well-meaning, were taking pictures. One man had climbed the statue at the center of the square with a Lebanese flag and was draping it over a shrine of votive candles. The gendarmes were still in their vans, though their ranks were silently growing. An hour later I was rushing an elderly woman toward the sidelines as a tear gas canister landed three paces away. The appearance of the black bloc in no way justified the violence exhibited on the crowd by the French police, but they had escalated the demonstration, and in the news reports and hostel lobbies the following day, they would be blamed for getting a bunch of peaceful protestors mixed up in a lot of violence for no good reason. It should be clear that baby strollers and black blocks don't mix. On the other hand, the idea that resistance must sink to the lowest common denominator of polite inaction surely gets us nowhere. The lesson here is this: to make sure that Tactics are well-suited to the situation, we will need to join in solidarity across tactical differences. To facilitate better collaboration, groups should be explicit about their level of commitment and ability to take risks, refrain from making simplistic judgements about the relative morality of different tactics, and implement a variety of complimentary tactics. Had the passive marchers

Identity

Our Identities are produced by the interaction of individuals with positive and negative aspects of our society. In society, individuals are seen as members of groups, and this group membership affects us whether or not we want it to or not. Privileges flow from being seen as part of a dominant group (Whites, men, colonizers, wealthy, first-world, citizen, straight, cisgender) and oppression flows from being a member of an oppressed group (people of color, women, colonized, poor, third-world, undocumented, queer, transgender). Experiences of solidarity within identity groups come from shared worldviews, literature, art, and history, and are not reducible to shared experiences of oppression and hardship. This is true of the solidarity of people of color, queer folks, women, and other identity groups. People with privileged identities, such as men, white people, and middle-class and rich people are also members of identity groups, even if they do not feel solidarity with other members of those groups.

Consider the negative and positive experiences of being a person with a disability. On one hand, the life of a person with a physical disability may be negatively defined by the way in which buildings are constructed - there are social spaces that cannot be entered, extra assistance that may be needed from other people, and forms of discrimination faced in seeking work. On the other hand, physically disabled people form communities based on their shared experiences and have positive experiences of solidarity - there is a deaf community, a physically disabled community, and non-neurotypical community. This mixture of positive and negative experiences creates the common ground needed for communities to form, and these communities become Identity groups.

Because culture comes from close social interaction between people in group settings, it shouldn't be surprising that people who belong to identity groups have specific knowledge that

comes from their community. People with hearing really don't know the daily reality of what it is like to be deaf. White people really don't know the daily reality of what it is like to be Black. Especially relevant for political organizing is knowledge about how a group's social position has affected their struggles for freedom and self-determination within dominant cultures. Oppressed people often know more about how their community has been affected by police, laws, corporations, and powerful individuals. Although it is possible for outsiders to learn about these things through patient study, it is still very hard to see the big picture from the perspective of the insiders.

There is a misconception among some Leftist circles that all "identity politics" is counterproductive and doomed to fail because it emphasizes difference over shared interests. Our view is that identity-based movements have historically succeeded or failed by virtue of how clearly they send also messages about Affinity and Tactics. In identity movements these messages are often recoded into specific and relevant terms, such as the disability-rights slogans "You do not exist to be used" and "Nothing about us, without us" - messages which point to anticapitalism and representation. Although Identity movements are not always Left-aligned, historically most have been, and the work they have accomplished has significantly advanced the goals of the Left at large.

Tactics

Tactics are the methods by which we strive to achieve our political goals. Mainstream Tactics include running political candidates, voting, signing petitions, media appearances, and the occasional well-mannered demonstration. More radical political Tactics include highjacking time and space on mainstream media, closing down essential services like airports and highways, attacking dangerous enemy politicians, hacking and ex-

posing incriminating information about opponents, or destroying property for symbolic or practical reasons. When Tactics include intervening directly to stop an objectionable event or to alleviate an evil, these Tactics are known as "direct action." Direct Actions include personally feeding the hungry or destroying the offices of a military recruiter.

When choosing Tactics, consider the three R's: reward, risk, and reach. The rewards for using a particular Tactic should be clear. For example, publicizing personally embarrassing information about a political opponent has the obvious reward of damaging his reputation and making his job a little harder. At the same time, you should do everything you reasonably can to reduce the risks of your actions. While some older activists still seem to think that getting mass-arrested to "overload the system" is a good tactic, the criminal punishment system has grown so much in recent years that it can handle mass arrests without difficulty. When you plan to get arrested, you risk thousands of dollars that will have to be raised by you and your community for your defense - all of which will go to rich lawyers or to the State. Even if you end up being released quickly, the police will use the opportunity of having you in custody to fingerprint you, document who you were with, search your phone, perhaps sexually assault you, and generally waste your day. It should be a red flag when rewards and risks seem to balance out. Publicly attacking a political opponent for taking a position with which many reactionaries agree may actually help his reputation to grow among your enemies. Watch out for these expensive victories. Finally, consider the reach of your Tactics, that is, how many people will find out about your actions. Even an action with a small reward for those involved, such as temporarily stopping the construction of a pipeline, can have a huge reach if it is expertly timed, executed, and publicized. Actions long in reach multiply the rewards for the movement as a whole. When you undertake an