

Dual power and climate breakdown

Jack Murray

6th November 2024

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While this article addresses the “revolutionary” turn in Roger Hallam’s rhetoric, it is more intended as a broader comment on anarchist organisational strategy in the time of climate breakdown. For context, Roger Hallam is the co-founder of the mass climate movement, Extinction Rebellion and the direct action groups Insulate Britain and Just Stop Oil. He is a very influential and problematic figure in the UK climate movement but has recently started to advocate a more revolutionary approach to the ecological struggle. Despite this shift, his politics still seem to be riddled with certain liberal conceptions. This piece aims to separate out the ideas we think are worth echoing, from those that aren’t – in doing so making the case for a “dual power” approach to the crisis that are now coming thick and fast.

This article was originally published on The Ecologist

We are interested in participating in the conversation about strategy that is ongoing in the broader ecological movement. We are here responding particularly to Roger Hallam views as outlined in the piece ‘XR XL’ published in The Ecologist.

In broad terms, we agree with Hallam’s understanding of the scale of horror that is in store for us over the next century.

On top of hundreds of thousands of human lives that have already been lost to crises caused by ecological collapse, we expect this century to be characterised by billions more lives ruined or prematurely ended.

Revolution

At this stage, it is beyond question that the blame for both the destruction of the biosphere, and the inability of the majority of the worlds population to respond to it, should be laid at the feet of a social system based on domination and exploitation.

Capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy and the state are responsible for our current situation, something he appears to tacitly acknowledge in his calls for ‘revolution’ rather than protest.

Likelihood of state collapse

If by the inevitability of “system collapse”, Hallam means that states will increasingly lose administrative control over their territories, then we also agree with this.

Just to confine ourselves to the imperial core – Europe and the United States – as logics of collapse will look/are looking very different in other parts of the world, we think that the following are likely to put a level of strain on state’s administrative capacities that they may not be able to deal with:

- Shocks to the global economic system (for example, crop failure)
- Localised natural disaster (for example, in the uk – flooding)
- The horrifyingly rapid deterioration of the living conditions experienced by the majority of the world’s population (I.e. billions of deaths and billions more forced to leave their homes)

Although it extremely difficult to predict these things exactly, its clear that housing crises, food-shortages, energy black-outs, flooding and collapses in key services like healthcare are only a matter of decades or perhaps just years away in places like the UK.

Dynamic

When combined, as he says, with the increasing likelihood of war and the move towards more draconian methods of state repression, dissent is likely to spiral, and states, like the UK, may start to lose control of their populations.

While we agree in broad-brushstrokes with him on this, we do think that the process will not be as linear as he suggests.

For example, we can't rule out a protracted situation akin to Huxley's Brave New World, or as depicted in the film Children of Men, in which imperial elites are able to pacify their domestic populations through a combination of ideological control and material comfort, while letting the rest of the global population die — robbing them of their final access to resources.

While a situation like this obviously couldn't last indefinitely, it could certainly last a quite a long while. From our historical knowledge, we are persuaded by Bookchin's claim that "capitalism is unquestionably the most dynamic society ever to appear in history".

Underestimating its capacity to deal with and respond to seemingly-existential crises has been a mistake many of those on the left have made before us.

Moments of crisis

Regardless of the broad historical sweep that this century will take, he is absolutely right that it will be punctured by moments of heightened crisis.

Again keeping our analysis to the imperial core, we know that both material crises (shortage in the necessities of life) and moral crises (such as the mass deaths/murders of innocent people in other parts of the world), will create moments in which the previous psychological restraints fall away, and people will act — for want of a better word — differently. Solnit's A Paradise Built in Hell is perhaps a testament to this.

Whether people turn to each other with solidarity, or to fascist strong men with brutality and racism, will largely be determined by which ideas and social structures have been built up and shared beforehand.

Fascism

We are happy Hallam has identified the far-right menace. That these moments of crisis will be captured by fascists, is perhaps the biggest threat we face. It is dangerous both in and of itself, and because of the power this will give them over the teetering political establishment.

As things stand, the far-right have been far more effective at spreading their narratives about the crises people are experiencing than we have.

This is perhaps attributable to their much greater overlap with corporate interests; meaning that the mainstream media, and the conservative political class have been useful allies to them, regardless of their claims to the contrary.

How exactly the far-right unfolds, and what its relationship is to the political establishment is difficult to predict. As Alexander Reid Ross's book, *Against Fascist Creep* points out, fascism is perhaps better understood as a process than a clearly definable end product.

The need for ideological leadership and a revolutionary organisation

We agree that "leadership, ideology and discipline" are necessary components of the struggle, and that an organisation focussed on longer-term strategy is a crucial part of the movement ecology.

But are curious why he has identified Leninism as the inspiration of these, given the spectacular and well-documented failures of Leninist projects all over the world to maintain an emancipatory horizon.

We cannot afford to repeat mistakes. Not only are the stakes just too high at this moment in history, but our ready access to information and analysis from almost 200 hundred years of attempts to defeat capitalism and the state, makes these mistakes inexcusable. No one has ever been in a better position to get it right and never has it been more important.

There are alternative conceptions of these fundamental ideas that leave the power in the hands of the people whilst maintaining the strength and coordination necessary to seriously challenge the state. The libertarian communist tradition, both in and out of Europe, is full of such experiments and ideas.

Alternative

While we think that the organisational dualist tendency of anarchist communism (platformism and especifismo) is the sharpest set of ideas about how to organise ourselves, council communism, communalism, Zapatismo and Democratic Confederalism all contain ideas on how to balance revolutionary leadership with popular protagonism (mass movements) — with greater sophistication and foresight than most Leninist projects.

These could be understood to constitute a middle way between the structureless dysfunction of movements like Occupy Wall Street and the centralised bureaucracy that Hallam seems to be drawn towards.

Without wishing to go into it here, we advocate the leadership of ideas in which militants participate in popular movements, attempting to encourage their latent revolutionary and democratic tendencies.

For the clearest rendition of these ideas, see the 2008 text *Social Anarchism and Organisation*, written by Brazilian comrades then organised in the FARJ.

Assembly-based democratic structure

We have established that crisis will happen and that in these moments the state will be naked and confused, we have established that these crises will lead to large upsurges in popular energy,

we have established that this will present both us and our enemies (the far-right) with serious opportunities, and we have established that the outcome of these battles will largely be determined by the efficiency of prior organisational efforts.

So far, so good.

But what about the actual content of this organising? His proposal seems largely based on the construction of people's assemblies in neighbourhoods. Depending on what exactly he means by this, we agree that this is good and important work.

When coupled with other class-struggle organising projects (defined holistically, rather than in a narrow, marxian sense), in workplaces and neighbourhoods, people's assemblies have played an extremely important part in revolutionary upheavals all over the world.

Unlike some who share our politics (and in fact there is a range of perspectives even within our collective about this), most of us think that actively building up these sorts of assemblies ahead of crises rather than encouraging them to spawn spontaneously in these moments, is a good idea.

Power

As long as there is a material advantage to these assemblies (i.e. the capacity to act on collective decisions in a way that improves peoples lives) we think that they develop the skills of self-management, not to mention the self-confidence that is an important psychological dimension of a 'strong people' – capable of defending their interests and looking after each other.

People's assemblies then, have the capacity to be key organs of a wider "dual power" strategy.

According to Kristin Ross in *The Commune Form*: "Dual power refers to the situation that arose when workers' councils in Russia competed with the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky in 1917, offering assistance and practical help on a daily basis—and the everydayness of the services is essential—to workers and their families. The workers' networks coexisted with, and formed a kind of alternative to, the provisional government. This created an unstable and temporary situation that, from the state's perspective, had to be resolved in its favor.

"More recently, the term has been taken up to refer to a conceivably longer-term practice of working alongside state structures and, in effect, substituting for the state in cases where the state has failed to respond to the general interest. Through the provision of alternative services, reliance on the state is reduced, and over time the state's structures and services are gradually rendered redundant."

We are inspired by the contemporary example of Cooperation Jackson, and happy to see Cooperation Hull attempting similar things here. One of the most important sources of inspiration for this model though, is the Black Panther's "community survival programmes".

As Ross puts it: "The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense went about taking charge of the management of Black neighborhoods. With their school breakfasts, bakeries, and other grassroots community organizations, the Panthers, for all intents and purposes, as former Panther Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin suggests, turned their communities and neighborhoods into dual-power communes."

"Revolution was anchored in everyday life. Ideological purity mattered less than a transformation at the level of daily rhythms, everyday needs and pleasures. By taking collective respon-

sibility for meeting people's daily needs, by reclaiming the everyday by and through political struggle, they were making revolution on a scale that people could recognise."

Liberal understanding of change

It seems though, unless we are mistaken, that his interest in peoples assemblies is not as units of popular power, capable of coordinating local affairs (in other words, real democratic and revolutionary bodies, posing as a counter-power to the state), but as feeders for a civil disobedience protest movement not so much preoccupied with building a free and equal society for all, and more with throwing a spanner in the capacity of the state to continue funding the fossil fuel economy.

Admirable, understandable, but not revolutionary.

Protests can be useful at key moments, however they are largely built on the logic of asking power structures (like the state) for change, and so often miss the point that maintaining the status quo is not just a partial function of these structures, but their very reason for existence.

It's important to add however, that rejecting 'protest' does not mean rejecting the fight for concessions.

As Black Rose / Rosa Negra put it in *Turning the Tide*: "Struggling for reforms is essential—when they are won from below instead of granted from on high by landlords, bosses, or politicians. Winning reforms through independent collective action, for better living and working conditions, builds our capacity, solidarity, initiative, and will to fight. The struggle for reforms is critical for building popular power."

Hallam's strategy then, is still fundamentally hemmed in by a liberal understanding of change. Unless of course he understands the ecological crisis to be a logical consequence of a society based on domination and exploitation, in other words a society ruled by the state, maintained by imperialism, based on patriarchy and under capitalism.

Maybe this is his understanding, but if so, then we are confused why he continues to advocate methods of change that have never come close to toppling these structures.

Militant protest is useless, unless it is coupled with a sustained mass movement of people struggling against their daily oppressive conditions. The task as revolutionaries, is to build these mass movements, otherwise, at best, we have the tip of the spear without a shaft.

The nature of the "attitudinal" problem

Hallam's characterisation of the contemporary social atmosphere as being rife with "egoist postmodernism", a dynamic that is relatively hostile to moral/political responsibility and therefore unfavourable for longer-term organising, is a worry that we share. At the very least, it's a tendency that is worthy of serious analysis.

But that he understands its primary issue to be the sentiment "I don't have to get arrested if I don't want to", is where we part ways.

Leaving aside the legitimate critiques that have been made time and time again about the structural privilege implicit in this relationship with the carceral system, it doesn't take much experience to see the extremely detrimental effect cult-like tendencies have had on the emancipatory horizon of the left over the years.

Cultivating the dynamics of obedience and sacrifice rather than free-thinking individuals, is exactly what invites these dynamics in — especially in cultures like ours in which people are so divorced from society.

Confrontation

To be clear, we don't see all risk-taking as a symptom of privilege and therefore 'inaccessible' to any oppressed group — an idea that can be countered by even the most basic look at the history of militant class struggle.

Given that our objectives run directly counter to those of the state (and violent, non-state actors — fascists, the bourgeoisie etc.), its likely that we will be forced to take risks over the course of our lives.

Direct and insurrectionary confrontation has played a serious part in all major uprisings and it would be naive to assume it isn't going to be a part of our struggle. But these risks should be undertaken seriously, with two things borne in mind.

Firstly, they should be woven into a broader strategy of popular power, and only done in service of that strategy. And secondly, to the greatest extent possible, avoid falling down an existing power dynamic, i.e. those with more power (understanding/eloquence/clout etc.) convincing those with less power to take on self-sacrificing roles.

Having said this, we know that everything big is also messy and so also don't align ourselves with the purity politics of complete horizontalism that is so present in contemporary anarchism.

Commitment

Ultimately though, we don't want more canon-fodder, we want more comrades — people produced by their own willing participation in the struggle and not by being told what to do while in a state of fear and shame (not that these emotions have no place in the attempt to bring more folks into the struggle, but they should not be our sole mechanism).

Apart from the obvious moral objections, there is an important strategic point here. We lose so many people from radical/revolutionary politics. Finding comrades who have been seriously engaged in the struggle for more than a decade or two, is painfully rare. This is a very serious problem, and almost certainly one of the most significant reasons radical/revolutionary projects struggle to get off the ground.

We have to understand why this is, and do what we can to change the conditions that bring it about.

In our opinion, the brittleness that follows from the fear-obedience dynamic that seems so central to his approach, is a step in the wrong direction, and frankly, has a lot to answer for.

Ultimately, the first task of a revolutionary is to stay a revolutionary. Being able to reproduce oneself materially (i.e. having access to a degree of financial stability) in a way that isn't too exhausting, and developing through the struggle as a human being rather than as a two-dimensional unit seem to be two pre-requisites to a life-long commitment. We can't afford to keep burning through people, there's few enough of us as it is.

Creating openings for people to join the struggle, and treating them with respect, is the only way that people really mature their critical understanding and develop a willingness to throw off

the straightjacket of a purposeless life. It is through this process that they really become a threat to the systems of domination.

The international dimension

Building solid, mutually beneficial relationships of solidarity with comrades from other parts of the world has always been an important part of the revolutionary project, and will be particularly important over the next century as imperial states lash out in an attempt to retain their power, and much of the world becomes uninhabitable.

That the vast bulk of the the violence will continue to be perpetrated against the peoples of the majority world (so called global south), is not a reason to solely focus on their victimhood.

The majority of militant resistance efforts and attempts to cultivate a free and ecological society are happening in other parts of the world. Not only do we have a lot to learn from these struggles (both in inspiration and strategy), but their assault on the imperial machine, has concrete ramifications for struggles here.

Recognising this does not mean attempting to seed protest movements conceived here, in other countries, but building connections with existing struggles, with a view to understanding what we can offer each other.

The answer to this though, will be almost nothing from our side, unless we have built sustained and powerful mass movements here.

Exactly where the balance lies between the slow meticulous work of building/participating in these mass movements versus sowing internationalist values into them and making connections with other struggles — is something we don't have a clear position on, and would be very curious for the perspectives of others engaged in the struggle.

The clock is ticking

The sentiment we appreciate most in Hallam's article is that: "While we wait for that moment [of crisis] — six months or six years away — there's plenty to do".

The crucial part of every revolutionary rupture, is the quality and the quantity of the organising that precede it. As things stand, our organisational capacity and influence in mass struggles, as the libertarian left, is miles behind those on the far-right, the authoritarian left, not to mention the teetering, but still powerful, liberal establishment.

We have a lot of work to do.

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retrieved on November 16th, 2024 from
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