

Taking it OFF the streets!

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From Ritual to Resistance – A new world can't be built in the streets. Making resistance real means creating an alternate social structure.

The Occupy mobilizations of the last year have offered to many some hope for a renewal of popular movements and alternatives to state capitalist arrangements. Yet, perhaps few recurring events show the great disparity that exists between activist subcultures and broader working class and poor communities in North America than the privileging of street protests and demonstrations within activist practices.

There is a rote ritualism that gives street demos and public expressions of dissent priority over other strategies and tactics. Yet mass demos that bring together atomized individuals without a real base or infrastructures supporting the mobilizations have minimal real impact.

We need to build lasting infrastructures rather than being sitting ducks in the streets.

It seems highly likely, indeed almost certain, that the spectacular waves of alternative globalization struggles from the summit protests since Seattle in 1999 to the ongoing Occupy movements launched in 2011, will lose momentum and subside or drift into reformism in the absence of building real connections and moving toward struggles for control in workplaces and neighborhoods.

The realms of workplaces, neighborhoods, and households have largely been ignored or abandoned as sites of transformative struggle by current activist movements. Workplace struggles, where they exist at all, are dominated by bureaucratic mainstream unions focused on bargaining compromises with employers.

Household organizing has been largely overlooked by radical activists—apart from those who retreat into their own (privatized and detached) collective houses. Issues of mental health and well-being have been given too little attention in movements focused on economics and politics in a more traditional and limited fashion.

BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURES OF RESISTANCE

Anarchists recognize (or should) that struggles for a better world beyond state capitalism must occur on two simultaneous levels. They must be capable of defeating states and capital and must, at the same time, provide infrastructures or foundations of the future society in the present day. Indeed, this latter process will be a fundamental part of the work of defeating states and capital.

Through infrastructures of resistance, movements will build alternatives but, as importantly, have capacities to defend the new social formations. These infrastructures of resistance will directly confront state capitalist power. Thus, they will need to be defended from often savage attack. The key impulse is to shift the terrain of anti-capitalist struggle from a defensive position—reacting to elite policies and practices or merely offering dissent—to an offensive one—contesting ruling structures and offering workable alternatives. Movements need to shift from a position of resistance to one of active transformation.

This would serve to meet practical needs—of shelter, education, health, and well-being—while also raising visions for broader alternatives and stoking the capacity to imagine or see new possibilities.

Building infrastructures of resistance will directly affect movements in practical and visionary ways. It will also challenge ruling elites by pushing them into reactive, rather than purely offensive, and confident, positions.

Such infrastructures of resistance would shift possibilities for strategizing and mobilization. They might render demonstrations unnecessary by offering a base for refusing or countering institutions and practices of states and capital. At the same time, more than simply opposing authoritarian institutions we might develop our own means for living the lives we desire.

Transformation must focus on controlling means of reproduction as well as means of production. Focus on worker control alone leaves communities unable to allocate resources effectively and efficiently to meet broader needs (social or ecological).

At the same time, community control without control of means of production would be futile, a fantasy.

A new social world cannot be built from scratch. Nor does it need to be.

The mutual aid relationships and already existing associations that people have organized around work and personal interests (clubs, groups, informal workplace networks, even subcultures) can provide possible resources.

At the same time, many infrastructures are needed. Even today, in working class and poor neighborhoods and households, many workers have only loose informal connections in their workplaces. In apartment complexes, households can link up in direct assemblies to organize shared resources. Some might include cooking, maintenance, laundry, health care, education, birthing rooms, and recreational facilities.

Building infrastructures of resistance encourages novel ways of thinking about revolutionary transformation. Rather than the familiar form of street organization or protest action, within constructive anarchist approaches, the action is in the organizing. There needs to be already existing infrastructures or else a radical or revolutionary transformation will be impossible (or disastrous).

On the need for pre-existing revolutionary infrastructures, larger mobilizations such as general strikes cannot have a meaningful impact in the absence of infrastructures of resistance. Under general strike conditions essential goods and services would be absent. Water, energy, food, and medical services would not be available without alternative associations or capacities to occupy and run workplaces to meet human social needs. These sorts of takeover themselves require pre-existing infrastructures.

UNIONS

One of the infrastructures that requires a real alternative are labor unions, institutions that have been at the heart of working class (workplace and community) struggles but which have long been conservatizing forces. For most anarchists, unions have lost any emancipatory capacities they might have once held. Indeed, for many anarchists, unions were never geared toward emancipation from capitalism, apart from the examples posed by a few syndicalist unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World in North America or the Confédération National de Trabajo (CNT).

Unions manage the labor and wage relationship. They do not oppose it. They represent a bureaucratic structure outside of the workplace rather than a democratic free association of workers within it. In fact, mainstream unions often work to stamp out or disband such associations where they do emerge in workplaces and challenge management and ownership

In some ways the role of radical capacity of unions is a moot point since unionization rates have declined to minuscule proportions in industries in the United States and Canada. There is presently an eight percent unionization rate in non-governmental workplaces in the United States. It is likely that the union movement will not recover, at least in its previously understood and recognized forms. Of course, the point is in no way to rebuild unions, since why would we expect them to perform differently than they have under previous conditions. The point is to build the strength of rank-and-file working class movements within broad struggles.

So, the door is wide open, the floor cleared for new forms of working class workplace association or organization. Yet, there have been only halting, experimental attempts to fill the void. Some have been false starts while others hold some promise. Those that are most promising suggest a coming together of rank and file activists and militants.

There can be no meaningful workplace strike without some workplace organizing. Militant organizing in the workplace requires rank and file alternatives, such as flying squads, working groups, and direct action groups. Some of these alternatives have developed with varying degrees of success.

CONCLUSION

Anarchist organizers should radically shift the terrain of anti-capitalist struggles, moving to new battlegrounds rather than staying in the streets of protest and the town squares of Occupy movements.

For constructive anarchists there are three primary sites of struggle with which anarchists must be engaged. These are the neighborhoods, workplaces, and households. Successful organizing in these areas should provide means to defeat states and capital, while also making the new world in the present—rather than waiting for a post-capitalist future. This shift must involve offensive as well as defensive strategies.

Movements have too often, for too long, been caught up in defensive or reactive struggles—responding to pieces of harmful legislation or damaging public policy, or opposing specific corporate or government practices. Such pursuits have dominated the vision of movements and activists in the global North. It has led to a staleness of approach that fails to inspire people while leading instead to frustration and demoralization as rote repetitions of rituals are played out in response to external decisions by others rather than asserting internal or organic needs and desires of the people directly involved. Instead, movements need to affirm their own wishes and visions of a better world.

Even more, the rituals of street protest, disconnected from a prior organized community base, do little to actually challenge power or structures of inequality. Typically, they simply serve to reinforce the notion that liberal democracies allow spaces for dissent and divergent views. One might question the amount of energy, resources, and time put into single issue campaigns, street demonstrations, and camps on public lands.

Spectacular ritual events like demonstrations, protests, and public occupations dominate activist imaginations and organizational visions. This demonstration fixation has hindered social movements in liberal democracies for generations.

The present period offers some new and encouraging openings—windows of opportunity for radical perspectives and movements against and beyond states and capital. To take advantage

of this moment it is necessary to take a hard look at the ingrained rituals that have come to dominate movements, particularly those holdovers from periods of lesser mobilization.

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