Notes on Anarchist Organization

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In this essay I will examine some selections from the *Organizational Platform* together with some of the writings of Nestor Makhno, as a starting point in the question of anarchist organization. So as to avoid lengthy explanations of historical context, I will assume the reader is familiar with most of these materials. For those who are not, I refer as a main source and starting point for research to the work of Alexandre Skirda (*Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968*, with a translation and discussion of the *Platform*) and to *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays* by Makhno. Note that this is not meant as a comprehensive analysis of the *Platform*, so much as a look at certain of its shortcomings or weaknesses which I would like to repair. After going through these I will then conclude with some general propositions as to how we might construct and/or improve our organization, taking off from my discussion of the *Organizational Platform.*

For the reasons stated above, I will avoid a longwinded description of the *Platform*, and simply jump ahead into my analysis. Of

particular interest for the purposes of this essay is the "organizational part" at the end of the *Platform*, given that the principles outlined in it have more or less defined "Platformist" ideas since then. Strange to say, this section is in my view where the *Platform* suffers most of its shortcomings, which is unfortunate for a document of such value and importance. The first two principles of *ideological and tactical unity* (i.e. unity of theory and practice) are rather vaguely defined, with minimal elaboration on what these principles would consist of in practice. In particular, it is unclear as to whether ideology being "common to all the persons and organizations affiliated to the General Union" is a matter of internalized belief or formal accordance. Nor does it present any clear method as to how ideological unity is to be achieved beyond a mere formality along the lines of some "revolutionary catechism."

Tactical unity may in fact be lumped together with the third principle of *collective responsibility*, since neither one means much without the other and the two principles serve more or less the same purpose. Here I believe that Makhno (one of the main authors of the *Platform*) explained the idea rather better in two separate essays. In his essay "Anarchism and Our Times," he writes[1]:

> Personally, I am inclined to accept as the most appropriate and most necessary organizational format … *a Union of anarchists constructed on the basis of the principles of collective discipline and concerted direction of all anarchist forces* …. The activities of local organizers can be adapted, as far as possible, to suit local conditions: however, such activities must, unfailingly, be consonant with the pattern of the Union of anarchists covering the whole country.

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[1] I have underlined some parts of quotations to emphasize those aspects which I am specifically addressing.

Here we find perhaps the best summary of what the *Platform* aims to achieve (although it should be noted that elsewhere the authors specify that the "General Union of Anarchists" would not encompass *all anarchists*, but simply *those in agreement with its basic principles*)—namely, to generalize and coordinate effective patterns and methods of local resistance, otherwise confined to isolated groups and individuals. That is in fact the very essence of revolutionary organization—without it there is no coherent direction and victory is impossible.

Makhno also writes in his essay "On Revolutionary Discipline": "I take revolutionary discipline to mean the self-discipline of the individual, set in the context of a strictly prescribed collective activity equally incumbent upon all." This is an idea of fundamental importance for those who wish to understand the difference between *submission and free self-direction* as proposed by anarchists. Yet this idea is also inconsistent with the definition of "collective responsibility" in the *Platform*, when it states: "Revolutionary social activity … cannot be based upon the personal responsibility of individual militants…," followed by the proposal that "the Union as a body will be answerable for the revolutionary and political activity of its members" and "likewise, each member will be answerable for the … activity of the Union as a whole."

The second part of this principle is not necessarily problematic—it is simply rather vague, much like the definition of "ideological unity." However, to say that revolutionary activity cannot be based on personal responsibility stands in flat contradiction with elementary anarchist principles—principles which Makhno makes perfectly clear throughout his essays (see for instance "The ABC of the Revolutionary Anarchist," where he states that "In anarchism, Right means the responsibility of the individual…" etc.)—and specifically conflicts with his own definition of revolutionary discipline as quoted above. Further in the essay he writes:

That is why I am speaking about a libertarian organization that rests upon the principle of fraternal discipline. Such an organization would lead to the crucial understanding between all of the living forces of revolutionary anarchism and would assist it in taking its rightful place in the struggle of Labor against Capital.

While here it is uncertain what exactly is meant by "fraternal discipline," we might point to Bakuninist line of "ongoing fraternal monitoring of each by all" (mentioned several times by Skirda) as a precedent to this concept. Assuming the word "fraternal" to indicate a spirit of mutual aid and camaraderie, it seems to me that this "principle of fraternal discipline," together with the above definition of *revolutionary* discipline, provides a much better solution to the problem of collective responsibility. In fact, it is in keeping with the statement that "the Union as a body will be answerable for the revolutionary and political activity of its members" and vice versa. However, it clearly stands apart from (and in my view above) the idea that "revolutionary activity cannot be based upon personal responsibility," since it effectively *combines both personal and collective responsibility.*

This brings us to the fourth principle of *federalism.* The first thing to be said here is that we must distinguish between the bourgeois notion of federalism and a conception of anarchist or libertarian federalism which has unfortunately been poorly defined for the most part. In the case of the *Platform*, however, we are provided something of a general definition of (presumably anarchist) federalism, as follows:

> Federalism means free agreement of individuals and organizations upon collective endeavor geared towards a common objective. Now, such agreement and federative union based thereon become reality … only if the essential condition is fulfilled that all parties

explain and elaborate our program in concrete terms for those outside our movement. Not only is this the basis of our program, but it is the key to instilling a revolutionary consciousness that stands above mere individual self-interest. We might also ask how this sort of practice can be systematized beyond the lone research of individuals. To that my answer is, by preparing and putting together study groups to read and discuss the historical movements in which we are rooted, while putting them in a relatable context. Those partaking in such study groups who come to our same conclusions and wish to put them into practice, will find in them an excellent point of departure in forming their own specifically anarchist groups. From there it is only a matter of connecting with the rest of the movement and to the masses by involving ourselves in the struggles of the day.

to the agreement and to the Union fully honor the obligations they assume and abide by the decisions reached in common.

In introducing this concept, it is also stated (a little more typically):

> The system of centralization relies upon the stunting of the spirit of criticism, initiative and independence of every individual and upon the masses' blind obedience to the "center." ... Contrary to centralism, anarchism has always professed ... the principle of *federalism*, which reconciles the individual's or organization's independence ... with service to the common cause.

In regard to the above definition of federalism, there are two things to be said. First is that the idea of free federation (i.e. free association) as essentially put above, is itself fundamental to anarchist principles. Furthermore, this concept is in full agreement with the idea of revolutionary discipline as discussed earlier. On the other hand, there is some confusion between the notion of free federation as *an organizing process*, and "federalism" as *an organizational format*. There is a difference between the two, as there is also a difference between the "individual's independence" and the "organization's independence" (although they are often lumped together). I personally would criticize the orthodox anarchist emphasis on autonomy of organizations within federations—which is merely a technical issue, and no different from bourgeois federalist models—and the simplistic lumping of "centralist" organizations into the authoritarian category (as we can observe in the second quotation). This seems to me something of an inconsistency of logic within the *Platform*, which in one place speaks of "unitary" organization (when discussing tactical unity), and in the next place

denounces all forms of centralism as authoritarian and calls instead for "federalism." The choice of words is confusing, in part because in all other circles and in any standard definition "unitary" would be considered as substantially no different from "centralist," and federalism would be viewed as conflicting with either "unitary" or "centralist" organization.

On a similar note, I would argue that not all forms of centralism stunt "the spirit of criticism, initiative and independence." Theoretically speaking, the Leninist notion of "democratic centralism" achieves exactly what the *Platform* ascribes to federalism: combines individual initiative and freedom with organizational discipline and unity. The problem with Bolshevism (an issue very relevant to the authors of the *Platform*) when it comes to internal organization lay largely in the fact that it did not really practice *democratic* so much as *bureaucratic* centralism. In fact, it must be said that the ideas of "democratic centralism" and "federalism" (as defined in the Platform — "free agreement of individuals and organizations upon collective endeavor"), and for that matter *revolutionary discipline* as described by Makhno, when applied to individual groups, are practically identical except in terminology.

As I see it, the key to an effective revolutionary organization is to combine certain elements of *libertarian federalism* (free federation of individuals and groups) with the theoretical sense of *democratic centralism* (e.g. "freedom of speech, unity of action"). This means that the emphasis must not be placed on the autonomy of component organizations but on the coordination of the whole organization through direct correspondence of groups with each other and with the central organization (including the "Executive Committee" and the "Congress of the General Union"). As far as central organization goes, I am inclined to favor direct election of delegates and membership votes on general policy as a more participatory and democratic method, insofar as we should favor such formal institutions in the first place. While one would think this was a given for a libertarian organization, unfortunately many anarchist feder-

ations have resorted instead to systems of indirect representation said to assure greater autonomy to component organizations. In any case, whatever the intentions of such "federalist" groupings, it seems to me that an organization which at all levels and in its entirety is guided more directly by its base is always superior to one that is controlled and guided by a minority (as is the nature of indirect representation, given the filtering out process that occurs when leadership is separated from the base).

Additionally, I would argue that regional sub-organizations (i.e. component organizations above the local level) ought to be reduced as far as possible (if not outright dismissed) to the intermediary role of channeling local initiative into the central organization. (To put it another way, organizational direction should be "polarized" between the local and central levels, thus minimizing or eliminating the "middle man" level.) In these ways (more direct participation and "polarization" of leadership) the power of local groups will be increased while providing an effective central organization to coordinate and generalize local activities. This will be further aided by devising and elaborating an ideological and practical program to guide the organization in its various actions—all of this in order to reduce bureaucracy while improving cohesion and discipline. All that is needed beyond this for an effective organization is a thorough understanding and internalization of our ideals and methods, and a personalized sense of purpose and commitment by every militant (i.e. revolutionary consciousness).

This raises the question with which I conclude this essay—and which I hope to discuss more thoroughly at some other time—of how we are to go about developing such a program as well as instill a personal understanding of our principles within each militant. This also relates back to my earlier question on "ideological unity" as called for in the *Platform* (see second paragraph). I now propose an answer to all of these questions: through ongoing patient study of revolutionary history, to explain and to compare with our present circumstances. More than that, it will also help us to