Society is Not a Machine

Reflections on Radical Social Organising

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Introduction

Our world is on fire. In a sense, it always has been—there hasn't ever been a time when there *weren't* some systems of oppression in place, causing harm to *someone*. But this is a personal essay, and I have to admit that, through the entirety of my adult life, things have typically felt like they've been getting consistently *worse*, not better. And, not to put too fine a point on it, but it increasingly feels like we're on borrowed time, as we hurtle towards a world where more and more of the Earth is functionally uninhabitable. This is undoubtedly a dire sentiment, but I bring it up for a point—and it's not to elicit desperation or despair or to play up guilt. I bring it up because, in my experience, it's a common sentiment, particularly among those deeply involved in forms of radical organising, and it's one that plays a fundamental role in how we engage socially, politically, and ecologically with the world around us and shaping our analysis and approach to organising.

I have engaged in political organising, in fits and stops, for the past fifteen years or so. This isn't exceptional; there are those who have spent decades on end in pursuit of building a better world, but I have engaged in a lot of different contexts and have spent a lot of time thinking about these things. And, having experienced these varying contexts and noticed some recurrent trends, I've increasingly been feeling a sense of frustration with the organising and activism I've been involved with and feel the need to work through it. Unfortunately for everyone reading this, I usually go about that through writing. The purpose of this piece isn't just to gripe, though; it's really more about presenting alternatives. I want to reflect on my experiences organising, share observations about tendencies and patterns, put forward a few critiques, and talk about some relevant theory, but then, ultimately, make some general but concrete suggestions. It's terrible to see people exhausted and burnt out; a significant reason for writing something like this is to illustrate how changing the way we approach organising can make us simultaneously more effective *and* more healthy, happy, and fulfilled.

So yes, this piece comes, in part, from a place of frustration, and this genesis will probably be noticeable throughout the essay. There are definitely significant criticisms here that I want to voice, but I want to be clear that this is not directed at any individuals in particular—on the contrary, I have a massive amount of love and respect for the people I've organised with, the kind of people who have strong principles and actually put them into practice. We can all only work within the context in which we exist, and I know that most of us are genuinely doing the absolute best we can. I don't mean for this piece to be an unproductive screed; there will be parts where it's obvious I'm writing to work through my frustrations, but ultimately I want this to be a constructive provocation towards reflection, introspection and deepening critical analysis.

Before we begin, I want to clarify a few things. First: who is this for? I am trying to write this for a general left/radical audience, but within that category I want it to appeal as broadly as possible. This piece is essentially meant to elicit a rethinking of what constitutes 'organising' across a large and often fragmented movement, and so it's quite general. There's a lot here that would benefit from additional detail and specificity and I think there's a lot of value in analysing

specific scenarios and suggesting concrete alternatives, or digging more deeply and rigorously into conceptual framings, but that's beyond the scope of this essay. I may explore some of these ideas in more detail in future pieces but for now just be aware that this is mainly here to get as many people as possible thinking about how we organise in new and different ways.

Secondly, it'll become pretty obvious that I am coming at this from an anarchist perspective, and am advocating for more anarchic modes of analysis and organising. It may even be fairly clear that I align with specific viewpoints within the anarchist tradition. But I am going out of my way to avoid talking in terms of specific tendencies or ideologies, "-isms" and especially specific individual theorists. Not that there isn't value in naming, critiquing, and teasing out notable differences, but I find those frameworks somewhat constraining, and I especially want to encourage people to consider the ideas I bring up within the context of their own organising and personal experiences, and not attempt to engage with this piece through the filter of trying to figure out what kind of leftism this aligns with and whether they are for or against it. To that end, I also want to make the point that this is no way a scholarly piece—it really is my thoughts and reflections. But, of course, my perspective and analysis didn't evolve in a vacuum; there will be a few direct references sprinkled throughout this piece and then a general 'further reading' section at the end.

Finally, I tend to apply a particular framework in my analysis that employs a bunch of words that are pretty jargony, so I'll take the time to explain what I mean when I say certain things, with the hope that this will make the rest of the piece more comprehensible. Generally speaking, I think of movements for radical change as ideally being prefigurative, heterogeneous, diffuse, non-hierarchical, autonomous, and cooperative/mutualistic. Prefiguration refers to the practice of embodying our ideals in our organising—essentially, unifying the means and the ends—and makes organising both effective in that we're practicing and producing the social relations we wish to see, as well as theoretically more pleasant, because we're not waiting for some arbitrary point in time to live and interact in a manner consistent with our principles. Heterogeneity refers to the mixed and differentiated nature of a movement, allowing for the idea that people can have different methods, arrangements, and focuses and still benefit from interconnection. Diffuse and non-hierarchical have to do with power relations: diffuse refers to distributions of power that are dispersed, while non-hierarchical indicates arrangements in which no one has the ability to coerce others. The principle of autonomy—the idea that a person has full and final control over their own activity, free from coercion and prescriptive processes—is a direct follow-on from this sort of horizontal and distributed power arrangement. Finally, while we all as individuals are autonomous, we are not fully independent—we are engaged in shared struggle, and as such the principles of cooperation and mutualism are key: we (inter)act with solidarity, and cooperate when and where we can to everyone's benefit.

There are three main parts to this essay. In the first, I'll discuss some of my experiences in a general way, noting some of the strengths and weaknesses of the organising and movements I've been involved with, and present some patterns of organisational activity that I think are hindering us from making as much of an impact as we potentially could. Next, I'll switch to a more abstract lens in attempting to elucidate some of the underlying theoretical perspectives that might produce these organisational issues. Finally, I'll return to a more concrete discussion of organising in presenting some thoughts about other ways in which we could think about how we organise.

Observations

Over the time I've spent engaging in various forms of (radical) political organising, I've noticed that certain dynamics come up frequently—there are definitely patterns worth recognising and evaluating. The overarching trend is that much of the movement is increasingly strong on the micro, but sometimes limited when it comes to the macro. I think that organisers are increasingly very good at mapping out specific contexts or issues, thinking tactically, and organising concretely towards specific short and medium-term goals. However, for a variety of reasons, people are less used to thinking in terms of the big picture, articulating long-term visions for broad systemic and social change, and, more to the point, understanding the underlying social dynamics of those visions in a way that shapes *all* organising such that it will produce that future.

Scope

Perhaps the most evident aspect of these observations pertains to the question of scope. Over my time in left organising spaces, I've noticed that people tend to be quite skilled in thinking about how to address specific issues—defining a particular goal or target, mapping the context, developing a concrete campaign, and planning and mobilising for relevant actions tends to be something that is done quite well. In other words, tactical thinking and planning is strong. Somewhat ironically, this is a skillset that transfers over quite neatly from neoliberal, productivity-and-efficiency-oriented capitalist spaces. It is quite common in mainstream organisational theory, and so it's something a lot of people have already been exposed to in some sense. There's undoubtedly utility in this, but learning to think beyond that paradigm is crucial insofar as we want to avoid reproducing the mindsets that often come with those methods.

I think people tend to struggle with envisioning big picture societal changes and the pathways that might lead to them. There are three main components to this, as I see it. Firstly, there's a relative lack of organising of persistent infrastructures that would support growing, interconnected movements. It's hard not to notice that we've seen repeated surges of radical and popular organisational energy around political flashpoints that mobilise huge numbers of people, but then crest and fade without leaving behind much in the way of long-lasting political organisation on which future surges may build. There's an understandable drive to fight gross harms as they present themselves, but less drive to build foundations for future fights, let alone build alternatives to the systems that originate those harms. As a result, there tends to be a lot of siloing of projects within movements, even if they originate in the same community circles, which in turn creates inequitable distributions of labour and general inefficiency from redundancy.

Secondly, when there is interest in long-term organising, it quite often takes a fairly non- or even counter-radical form, embracing a "build the party" or "build the organisation" mentality that typically seeks to reproduces the revolutionary methodologies of the past century—methodologies that, a) notably *did not work* (Gelderloos 2023), and b) more to the point, rest on and recreate the same exact social formations and principles that are central to contemporary

statist neoliberal capitalism. In a more practical sense, they also have the problem of creating the exact opposite problem of the siloing mentioned above: they typically incentivize the massive expenditure of time and energy on trying to force people into a rigid and simplistic interconnectedness that attempts to build prescriptive programmatic unity. Ultimately, these approaches are *structurally* limited in their ability to deliver meaningful liberatory change.

Finally, and relatedly, there's a difficulty in figuring out how to organise the more narrowly issue-specific and reactive work in a way that integrates into and prefiguratively builds towards a big picture vision. This is an issue that gets at a deeper problem of analysis, particularly with regard to the value of embodying our principles in the here-and-now, but also at a more basic level, there often seems to be a lack of thinking about how the specific thing we might be working on now connects to other projects, and how, taken together, these narrower projects could produce broader systemic changes. Working through that question and then putting in the effort to foster accordant persistent connections is a crucial element of movement-building, and necessary if we ever wish to build toward something instead of continuously acting in reaction to harm. Ultimately, what I am always wondering about (and working on) is how to foster that interconnection in a way that doesn't sap capacity but builds it, doesn't restrict organisers, but empowers them, and fosters coordination and the sharing of ideas without forcing an artificial homogeneity.

Practice

Much of the problem discussed above translates directly in the concrete organising practices that are employed; typically what's used is some variation on the same basic heavily structure-and-process oriented approach. I mentioned above how much of the form leftist organising takes draws heavily from fairly mainstream conceptions of how to run an effective campaign or how to efficiently manage a project, and I think there is some utility to that. I think a problem arises, however, when we are uncritical about when and where that sort of approach is appropriate and when and where it is not. There are certain organisational characteristics and relational dynamics that these methodologies inherently entail. Typically, they involve some combination of universalisation and an eye towards reproducibility, rigidity of decision-making, formalisation and legibility of structure and process, and a particular kind of planner/organiser vs participant social dynamic. In a practical sense, this approach may be acceptable in some organising settings, but decidedly not in others—notably, this is a really bad way to organise any kind of militant direct action or antifascist work. At a more abstract and theoretical level, we really should think deeply about how employing these approaches may perpetuate the sorts of social relations we ostensibly seek to abolish.

Much of this, I think, simply comes down to a lack of experience and exposure to alternative ways of organising. One of the things I have noticed is that there does seem to be a (very welcome) increase in interest towards more autonomous and horizontal forms of organising, but because that style of organising is so radically outside the norms of contemporary society, there's a lack of concrete understanding of what it entails, which seems to often result in a genuine theoretical interest and a sort of vague gesturing towards autonomy, but in practice manifests as just a slightly looser version of traditional left organising. One of the issues with the orthodox organising methods discussed above is the way in which they act as blinders, limiting both our understanding of

how we might organise (particularly as they cut off fuzzier, more relationally-based approaches) as well as our visions for what we're organising *towards*. Ultimately, I think there's a lot to be gained from questioning why certain organising practices are seen as the natural default, why they may be the dominant approach both within and outside of radical spaces, and how we might organise differently (with an eye towards understanding how different organising methods may intrinsically shape outcomes).

Analysis

All of the above has its roots in what I think tends to be something of a limited theoretical framework. To give credit where it's due, any recognition that the problems we are fighting against have a systemic and structural basis is worthy of appreciation, especially given how ubiquitous and deep-rooted hegemonic narratives about the way society should be organised are. But coming to that realization should be seen as a starting point, a place from which to keep digging and asking questions, not a prompt that one now has the answers and just needs to focus on enacting solutions. In my mind, there are three elements to this that need to be addressed: changing how we engage with traditional leftist theory, engaging more with other relevant analyses, and putting more effort into sharpening our analysis by engaging in and reflecting on actual organising work rather than allowing it to be subordinate to abstract reading and discussion.

In my experience, the typical 'radicalisation' process goes something like this: notice that there are fundamental problems with the way society is organised, recognise that a lot of these problems are structural in nature and relate back generally to capitalist economic relations, be introduced to and read a few basic orthodox left texts, and finally try to organise according to the principles and methodologies put forth by a set of Great Men. This pathway is, in a sense, entirely understandable; being exposed to a perspective on and analysis of contemporary society that is substantially different from what one comes across in basically any mainstream context is, in a way, kind of a rush. It can feel like a revelation; you feel like you suddenly have a much better understanding of the way things work. It's easy at that point to fall back into a theoretical and intellectual comfort zone when in fact this is the time when it is most important to keep questioning. There's a reason some of these ideologies are the next most prominent, accessible, promoted after the dominant hegemonic ones, and it's not because they're best positioned to topple the existing system. It's because the social formations they embody are those most tolerable to existing power. You've come this far; keep thinking critically, dig deeper, and continue to search for the root of societal harms.

Despite my methodological and analytical disagreements with them, one thing I will readily credit orthodox party/org/state-oriented socialists for, particularly those of the previous centuries, is the willingness to think about what the big picture goal is and how to grow a movement towards achieving that goal. I don't think their approach was (or could be) effective, but having the ambition to organise towards a radically different world and possessing the confidence that allows one to think concretely about what that entails, is admirable. It feels like in the majority of cases lately, the broad left has been perpetually on the back foot, reacting to a continuous onslaught of horror. This is in part due of course to the overwhelming amount of things that absolutely demand an immediate response, but I think it also stems partially from a disconnection from previous generations of leftists—it does seem that there is a disjunction between organis-

ers who were primarily active prior to the long modern era of extreme neoliberal austerity and atomisation, and those organising today. Somewhere along the way that belief in the potential for a liberated future seems to have been suffocated. It needs to come back. It need not take the same form, but we need that broader, if not universal, vision.

Next, I think it's crucial that organisers engage more deeply with parallel bodies of knowledge and analysis, particularly social science, but also history, ecology, and other fields. This would be both complementary to, and in support of, a more critical engagement with orthodox leftist (revolutionary) political theory. There are a couple reasons for this. Firstly, as insightful as any political theorist may be, every person is a product of their time and context, and so will have blindspots, biases, etc; any claim or advocacy towards a highly universalized or generalizable analysis or, more to the point, revolutionary methodology, should be treated with suspicion and engaged with critically. In particular, many late 19th and early 20th century political theorists had a tendency towards simplistic teleological revolutionary approaches shaped by the high-modernist technocracy and vulgar scientism of the time, embodying a rather poor understanding of social dynamics. Overall, it is evident that much of contemporary leftist theory originates within and in reaction to capitalist contexts as it targets specific mechanisms and relationships while ignoring or even inheriting others. I think it's worth learning about societies in other geographic and temporal contexts that, while not explicitly socialist, or communist, or anarchist (and in fact, predating those terms), have practiced more communal ways of living so as to more fully gain outside perspectives on the social dynamics that have been the foundation of contemporary society. This, taken together, is why I think engaging with social science is immensely beneficial; if your aim is to fundamentally reorganise society you must have a solid analysis of social relations, and idealised revolutionary programs must be reconciled with an understanding of the complex, uneven, heterogeneous nature of actual social formations.

Being more nuanced in the way we engage with theory, including engaging more with relevant fields of knowledge, represents one level of this question, specifically how we use theory to inform practice. But there is a deeper, meta-level question here as well, that has less to do with the specific content being analysed and more to do with our relation to theory in general. It appears to me that significant segments of the left have adopted a very 'by-the-book' approach—one that positions theory as the element from which all other elements of an organising approach flow, as the primary determinant in how we pursue radical social change. The result is a frequent dogmatism that is fundamentally at odds with the flexibility, adaptability, and context-sensitivity that is a crucial factor in engaging meaningfully with a wide variety of communities, demographics, and situations. Ultimately this becomes a question of how theory and practice relate to each other, and it seems to me that there needs to be a more active and equal interchange there than there typically is. One of the best ways to develop and sharpen your analysis is to engage in actual organising in a variety of different contexts and then evaluate your understanding: does your experience support your theory? If not, then change your theory! Too often, the result of there being a mismatch is the conclusion that either we didn't adequately follow the organising methodology, or else that the people we are trying to organise with are unorganisable or beyond our reach.

Theory

So, having now hopefully made the point that not everything need be so rigidly theory driven, I'm going to promptly turn around and take the time to talk at length about what I see as some of the ways in which various theoretical framings and concepts have limited our organising and movements. There are two broad components to this discussion. The first is a look at the various simplistic dichotomies, binaries, and separations that seem to define a lot of popular contemporary left political theory, and a suggestion of how to think about these questions in a more nuanced and comprehensive way. The second is a general discussion of 'organisation'; what it means, how it's primarily used, critiques of mainstream conceptions, and some ideas of what other ways of thinking about it might entail.

Unproductive & Reductive Framings

In the course of engaging in any kind of radical organising, you'll come across a lot of debates that split ideas, methods, or concepts into simplistic binaries that are then frequently used to label, judge, and/or dismiss certain approaches. Most of these, in my opinion, are simplistic to the point of being counterproductive, in part because they tend to produce an incredible amount of unnecessary, or at least poorly-articulated and therefore unproductive, conflict. I think these are important questions to consider because how we discuss the characteristics and principles of our ideal world should be very relevant to our discussions about how we organise towards that ideal. I may also, admittedly, be using this as a space to rant about things that have been on my mind, but if it prompts anyone to think more deeply about any of these concepts, particularly as they pertain to concrete organising, then I will consider it worthwhile. In no particular order, these are some of the framings I've come across that I think would benefit from a more nuanced analysis:

Left vs Right

I'm going to start with a controversial one. This is obviously the fundamental basis of most peoples' understanding of political ideology (and categorisation thereof), and I'm not saying it's completely useless, but I would contend that it misses a lot. I've been struggling recently to really get a grip on what the "left" is, because, while there are commonalities across the broad left, there's also some very fundamental differences when it comes to values and principles. Is the opposition to capitalism the defining feature of the "left?" If so, how deep does that go? Because while there is a broad agreement that the mechanisms of capitalism are harmful in a variety of ways, there's far less consensus on analysis of the underlying causes and associated social relations. I personally see capitalism as a horrifically violent and unjust system that must be abolished, but not as the root of all societal problems. Instead, I view it as a manifestation of a widespread form of social relationship, specifically hierarchy, which underpins a variety of

domination-based, coercive, and extractive social formations, including not just capitalism but also statism, patriarchy, racialisation, anthropocentrism, etc.

Sometimes this left vs right schema is refined through the addition of a second axis, that of one's perspective on authority (authoritarian vs libertarian), and this maybe starts to get at some of the differences within an extremely vaguely-defined category, but I still don't think it's sufficient. For example, take the concept of 'libertarian socialism/communism,' or even more narrowly, anarchism, and you'll still find significant ideological debates and divides. However, one thing I think the authoritarian/libertarian divide does begin to point to, which I'll discuss in more depth at the end of this section, is that there is also a noticeable division, not just within the left but overall, along the lines of how one responds to complexity, mutability, and illegibility. In general, much of contemporary society has a strong preference for simplistic social organisation and conceptualisations for social change that employ predictable and repeatable mechanisms to shape easily understood socio-economic formations. This contrasts with the inherently complex, entangled, dynamic forms that social formations typically take, echoing the structures and processes of natural ecosystems, which grant them resilience. This ties back to the authoritarian/libertarian divide, because the legibility of the former is much more amenable to centralised, hierarchical control, but it goes beyond that.

Order vs Chaos

This one's typically brought out when a proposed approach to organising is not rigidly planned and structured, lacking in clearly delineated lines of communication and management, or just generally built more on adaptive spontaneity and trust-based relations than on formal arrangements, or conversely, when organising relies too heavily on these norms. I don't think this binary is particularly useful, because I don't think perfect order is possible, let alone valuable, while simultaneously it seems to me that true chaos (in the colloquial sense) isn't really a thing in human social formations. Human relations (not to mention the ecological networks they resemble and are a part of) are messy and often difficult to understand from the outside but are fully possessed of their own internal (non-logical) logic; this reality doesn't really align neatly into ideas of order or chaos as they're frequently articulated, and trying to force people and communities into forms and structures of organisation that *do* align is a recipe for weak, ineffective movements via either a lack of interconnection or a lack of resilience.

This dichotomy often manifests more concretely and practically in the distinction that's frequently made between 'organised' and 'disorganised' action. What is and is not considered organised in this context, though, is heavily dependent on adoption of a pretty narrow orthodoxy of what it means *to* organise—an orthodoxy that's heavily derived from a particular sociocultural tradition, specifically that of statism, colonialism, and capitalism, and the social values associated with it: productivism, efficiency, measurability, generalisability, specialization of roles, etc. But this is quite a narrow and limiting understanding, and in a sense, *all* human interaction is organised in *some* way, and the actually important question is which kinds of organisation are most appropriate in which organising contexts. This division is also a manifestation of the differences in approach to complexity mentioned above, and another example of the ways in which a preference for clean, simplistic, and legible forms of interrelation limits us.

Social/Collective vs Individual

The misuse of the term 'individual' and accordant disdain for 'individualism' as incompatible with solidarity and coordination on the left is one of the most frequent and frustrating theoretical issues I've come across in my experience. There are a couple elements to this. Firstly, a lot of leftists seem to take conservatives at their word when they say capitalism is about empowering the individual. (Neoliberal) capitalism is in reality far more about atomisation—breaking the social bonds that foster collective care—than it is about individualism. The only people who are empowered to express individualism are the wealthy, the capitalist class, and they get to do this regardless of its impacts on broader society because they don't care about anyone else's individual needs. Capitalism absolutely incentivises selfishness, but this is because it turns us all into homogenized, replaceable cogs in a machine, competing for crumbs, discouraged from acting in solidarity, not because it values individual self-actualisation. Capitalism seeks to destroy that which makes us unique human beings. The alternative, then, are arrangements where collective action is undertaken only with the blessings of those within the organising circle that might be involved or impacted.

Therefore, actual individual self-actualisation, autonomy, and agency is not only compatible with solidarity and collective organisation, but encourages it. What allows for coercive, domination-based relationships that bypass the need for mutualistic collaboration is the disregard for individual autonomy. If one is respectful of the individual's right to self-determination and unable to coerce others into a desired action, then one is necessarily compelled to engage with others in the spirit of cooperation—to reach mutually-beneficial outcomes—if one wants to accomplish one's own goals. This is obviously putting things in quite stark theoretical terms, but it's worth thinking about it in the context of your personal relationships as well as more general organisation. How do you come to decisions with people you're close to? Presumably, this means doing whatever it is that all involved want, or at least consent to; this should also be the case in broader organising. It is worth pointing out that this becomes much more difficult the larger the scale is, but I would suggest that the conclusion that should be drawn from this is that we should organise as autonomous but interconnected small-to-medium scale formations rather than abandon respect for autonomy.

Freedom vs Responsibility

This framing is sort of an outflow of the above, in that it's fundamentally about how the individual relates to broader society, and where priorities lay. Significant segments of the left seem to have become quite suspicious of the word 'freedom,' which is in my mind very justifiable, given how it's typically used in mainstream discourse, driven as it is by rightwing narratives. There's no doubt that there's something of an epidemic of selfishness, exacerbated by the breaking of social bonds that comes with the neoliberal, purely competitive, "every man, woman, and child for themselves" social arrangement. It is clear that this pattern needs to be reversed, dramatically, in favour of a more communal, cooperative, and solidaristic culture. The question is: how? Unfortunately, the 'solution' that is often presented by parts of the left, particularly orthodox statist communist types, is a generally coercive one: people must be *forced*, directly or indirectly, to contribute to society (often in, ironically, the exact same ways a capitalist system demands contributions via productivity). I think this view fundamentally misses the point of communism,

which is, in my mind, at its core, a liberatory ideology. We don't desire to abolish capitalism simply because it's inefficient or even just unfair, but because it's a system based on domination, extraction, violence, the denial of agency and autonomy, and ultimately, gross dehumanisation. Attempting to "fix" the problem using methods that embody essentially the same social relations as those that cause it will not work.

We should want freedom and liberation—an escape from the coercive social systems that dominate our lives, whether that be capitalism, patriarchy, racialisation, whatever—but we must do so with the understanding of how freedom and responsibility can be synergistic. This, I think, is embodied in the idea of solidarity—the notion that my struggle for liberation is inextricably tied in with yours, and we will only ever achieve our freedom if we support each other and work together as equals. This is a *cultural* transformation, not an institutional one; it's not a matter of changing systems of governance but of fostering, here and now, different ways of relating to each other. It's a sense of collective responsibility that's not enforced from above through law and force, but built prefiguratively from below through cooperative and solidaristic living based on trust and intersubjective agreements. I will admit off the bat that this is by no means a quick or easy change to make—practicing ways of relating and acting that are so fundamentally foreign to us under existing hegemonic social ideals is incredibly difficult. But while forcing collective responsibility may be straightforward, it will not be resilient; only through actually practicing it and fostering cultural changes can we hope for it to last.

Systems vs Agents

I'll preface this by saying that yes, the issues society faces are absolutely of a systemic nature, and it is crucial to analyze them as such. And I would say that, at a basic level, presenting this type of analysis is one of the most valuable contributions of the broad left. However, I think there are a couple of issues with the way in which we sometimes understand the idea of systems. Firstly, we seem to often think of systems as singular and universalised, rather than layered, fractal, and contextually differentiated. As a result, there appears to be a limit to more fundamental analysis because we identify one system (for example, capitalism), and then think that *a* solution to the problems associated with that system is *the* solution to social problems in general. Our movements would benefit from a more nuanced analysis that understands that systems (including capitalism) are often manifestations of other systems that are adapted to different contexts which thus require a variegated response. This goes beyond seeing systems as intersecting (though that's an important start) to asking how a given system might be an extension or instantiation of a more fundamental system or social relation, and how it might present differently in different settings whilst having consistent core mechanisms and characteristics.

Secondly, we often go so deep into systemic analysis that we disregard individual agency, which ironically, in turn, limits our systemic analysis. There is no doubt that there is extremely heavy propaganda supporting the continuation of a variety of systems to the point that most of these systems are essentially invisible despite being hegemonic, and this certainly influences our decision-making. However, we are not automatons, and do in fact have choices to make. Sure, people are *much* more likely to make decisions that reinforce the systems they benefit from, and these are not always conscious and malicious actions, but pretending that an action is solely a result of the systems we seek to abolish is not just useless, it's actively counterproductive. A key element of dismantling systems is identifying the actors they benefit and then figuring out how to

concretely address those actors. In other words, systems are (re)produced by individuals acting in their own interest and halting that reproduction is a crucial element of destroying those systems, in part because systems are abstract while people are concrete. Patriarchy is a good example here: men are, consciously or otherwise, more likely to act in ways that perpetuate it, and we gain nothing by not acknowledging that, and we won't dismantle patriarchy without challenging those who reproduce it, intentionally or otherwise, through their actions.

While understanding how agents perpetuate existing systems is crucial, the counterpart to this is existing how we as individuals participate in abolishing and replacing them. While it's true that individual changes in behavior will not on their own precipitate systemic change and thus we absolutely need collective action, it's also true that the changes we desire are social changes, and changes in behaviors do propagate socially—we are influenced by those around us. In other words, social systems are created and reproduced *through the actions of agents,* and we as organisers should seek to be agents of change—through our explicit efforts at organising, as well as through our everyday actions and interactions. Furthermore, while individual actions alone won't precipitate systemic change, different systems require different behaviors, so we might as well get used to living in radically different ways!

The Organiser vs the Organised

Following on from the idea that we are all individuals with agency and autonomy who are engaged in shared, collective struggle, we desperately need to rethink our organising mindsets with regard to how we view and treat those we organise with. In my experience, much of contemporary left organising falls into a thoroughly orthodox format in which there is a class of organisers whose purpose it is to evaluate, shape, and guide an 'unorganised' mass. To a certain extent, right now this is inevitable: the radical movement is somewhat concentrated at the moment, with a particular subset of people being extremely engaged, and, to an extent, treating revolution as their job (a problem I'll return to later). But this is not an ideal or sustainable model, and we should be organising in such a way so as to move away from this arrangement as quickly as possible—because this 'organise the unorganised' approach, which, to various degrees, manifests a vanguardist mindset, has several major flaws which severely limit the long term efficacy of our organising.

First, even if the relationship isn't institutionalised, it creates informal power hierarchies. These hierarchical relationships create the potential for, at best, a sort of pseudo-bureaucracy wherein people continuously seek leadership and approval from the 'organisers' before taking any action, and at worst, abuse and coercive behaviour. Secondly, and relatedly, it perpetuates the sense of lack of agency that is already a defining characteristic of people struggling under capitalist, statist, and other coercive hierarchical systems. This is ultimately a disempowering outcome, where we could instead facilitate practice in self-organisation. Finally, it makes for incredibly fragile movements, as a small subset of the population is burdened with the vast majority of revolutionary labour and institutional memory, and so become indispensable. Distributing power and agency, expanding and spreading the work over a growing number of people, and allowing for a complex network of relationships makes for much greater resilience and longevity.

Revolution, Reform, Gradualism

This is, admittedly, a tricky triangle of concepts to navigate, and to be honest I'm still puzzling through these ideas myself. In my mind, they all refer to different approaches to societal change, but focus on different aspects of it. As far as I can tell, revolution vs reform is sort of the primary dichotomy at play, and it refers to how we relate to existing dominant systems, particularly the state; reform typically involves the utilisation of existing pathways for enacting change whereas revolution is more external, focusing on capturing and reformulating that apparatus or bypassing it entirely. Gradualism, on the other hand, is more concerned, as the name implies, with pace, but more fundamentally in my opinion relates to the question of what to focus one's organising on: institutions, or culture (not that they're unrelated or that you can't do both). In this way, gradualist approaches can be reformist but need not be, while revolution, as typically conceived, is generally not gradual, though gradualist approaches can be in a sense revolutionary, in that they create fundamentally different forms of social organisation, but in in a heterogeneous cultural rather than universalist institutional way.

As an anarchist, I'm very much not a believer in reform, as I don't think the state as it exists (or indeed, any state) can be liberatory, but I also think that the way a lot of leftists conceive of revolution is often quite reductive. In the context of the above, a lot of conceptualisations of revolution I've come across in organising spaces are somewhat simplistic, based on an approach that focuses on institutional (and specifically state-oriented) change and treats revolution as what is essentially a step-wise industrial process to be designed such that it is predictable, generalizable, and reproducible. Overall it's more a technocratic approach than a scientific one, and would benefit from some deeper social analysis, because this is not typically the type of process by which significant social change occurs. To be fair, there is sometimes a mention of the need for cultural change to go along with the institutional and structural change, but explanations for how that change might come about are typically quite vague, and are still often built on the paternalistic assumption that there is an enlightened segment of the population that's fit and positioned to lead that change. Revolutionary change that's conceptualised as an amalgam of various processes of radical social change is typically not discussed.

Ultimately, I think it would be useful to consider what revolution would look like as an uneven, diverse, disjointed, and prefigurative patchwork of radical organising, and more to the point, living. Can there be a 'revolution' (or revolutions) that consists not of a universalized process of change towards a universal utopian future, but rather interconnected radical experiments in social organisation that bypass existing structures entirely in favour of building a wide variety of novel societies in the here and now as is appropriate to a given context? I don't know, but I'd contend that the only realistic path towards a liberatory future lies in this approach. Firstly because the uneven nature of capitalism and all other oppressive systems requires a heterogeneous response, and secondly because only processes built contextually and organically—that emerge from the active practice of different social relations—will produce the substantial cultural change that a lasting revolution must be built on.

Complexity

There's one more element that I want to mention here that has come up a bit in discussing these framings at both the subject and meta levels, and that is the concept of complexity. In my

experience, I would say that one of the most informative indicators of a person's (approach to) politics is the degree to which they are comfortable with complexity—uncertainty, mutability, heterogeneity, and, overall, illegibility. It's illuminating because it is not well correlated to the left-right spectrum, though it is a bit more aligned with the authoritarian-libertarian axis, as simplicity favors the centralised, hierarchical authoritarian approach. Whatever the case, though, I think this is something the broad left has to discuss and come to terms with—why are we so often uncomfortable with forms of organising that appear to be 'messy,' that don't have a central point of decision making or clear-cut programs, where we can't easily step in and understand (and influence) modes of organisation without engaging in actual relationship- and trust-building? If the answer to that is that we can't guide or control them, that's a bad answer and brings up deeper questions about our epistemological perspective. If the answer is just that we don't think it's effective, well, then, we have to have a discussion about efficacy. In any case, organising spaces are ecosystems, and so as natural ecosystems are made weaker when they are simplified, homogenized, and structured by external forces, so too does that apply to our movements. For more on the incentives and repercussions of legibility, I'd highly recommend reading James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998).

Considering 'Organisation'

All of this points to the necessity of a more nuanced discussion about 'organisation'—figuring out what it actually is, engaging in a deeper analysis of what outcomes different forms or methods of organisations might produce (both explicitly and implicitly, intentionally and unintentionally), while exploring different ways of engaging concretely in organising. This section will expand on and hopefully tie together a lot of the themes and concepts that have been touched on briefly in this essay so far, by trying to come to a broader understanding of organising, performing an analysis on colloquial or orthodox conceptualisations of organisation, and then applying that broader understanding to suggest frameworks for alternatives.

What is Organisation?

Generally speaking, there seems to be a widespread conflation of organisation as a general concept with the form factor of *an* organisation—a vehicle for collective action with a highly formal structure, or at least a set of easily definable, visible, and reproducible relationships and processes. This is definitely a *type* or *style* of organisation, but it's not the only one. Generally speaking, I see organisation as any ecosystem of relationships between people that serves to foster some sort of cooperation or mutual support. In a sense there is no such thing as 'disorganisation,' because organisation emerges organically and any group of people who interact on a consistent basis are exhibiting some form of organisation, but there is certainly an important question to ask about what kinds of relational formations are most appropriate for a given purpose.

As I see it, the question of organis*ing* is one of determining what sorts of organisation are most appropriate for a given context, and then fostering relationships accordingly. A major part of this is understanding that there is always *existing* organisation present in any context, because, as much as neoliberal culture discourages it, the organic emergence of social groupings—whether

that's family, or friend groups, communities, or something else—is a pretty consistent characteristic of human society. Understanding the dynamics of these existing instances of organising, accepting their often complex, messy, and unruly nature, and building out from there is, in my opinion, crucial to effective and resilient organising.

Finally, to the extent that we are organising with a certain vision and set of goals in mind, the form and methods of organisation we utilise is crucial insofar as social systems tend to reproduce themselves. Whether it's stated explicitly or not, organisation typically has a goal, or at least a purpose. This can range from something as simple as organising a social event or a rideshare, to organising towards a radically different society, but in any case there's something we're looking to do—and recognising that (and thinking about it) is important.

Reassessing Orthodox Organisation

While they're not necessarily dominant, orthodox organising practices are worth discussing and critiquing in more detail, as they constitute a very visible style of organisation and are thus what many newly-radicalised folks will first come into contact with. So, without naming specific people or organisations, I want to briefly explain what I generally associate with a sort of mainstream approach to organising. This is not universal, but broadly speaking, the typical approach to organising is defined by a few overarching principles. Below, I will lay out some of these principles, as well as the concrete ways in which they manifest.

The first of these is a focus on building a mass-scale movement. The theory here generally seems to be that in order for a movement to be effective it must be massive and popular. From here it is assumed that for a *mass* movement to be effective, it must be disciplined and structured. To that end, what's typically sought is to encapsulate a mass movement within a mass organisation. In practice, how this theory typically manifests is in the creation of a discrete and formal organisation, with a significant amount of effort directed at building, maintaining, and administering an official membership as well as the structures and processes used by that membership. Accordingly, there's an emphasis on recruitment, name recognition, and 'mobilisation' and as a result, organisational self-evaluation based on the success thereof. From the perspective of the organiser, this ideally results in a large (formal) scale, with a large number of people associated with a singular organisational structure.

Secondly, there's a drive for a simplistic unity, through the process of (formal and informal) ideological homogenization. The purpose of this often quite specific ideological narrowness, generally speaking, is to create broad agreement on an approach to politics so as to facilitate the application of mass popular power in a way that is impactful and can be brought to bear quickly and decisively. From my experience, the logic here is that if we are all ideologically on the same page, we can spend less time debating how to engage in any given context and instead move directly into working on whatever organising approach we've previously agreed upon, which allows us all to react more quickly and forcefully. In essence, it allows for us to present a more unified front.

As part of this push for unity, organisers often turn towards the development of programs or platforms to be adopted formally by the organisation as a whole. Typically, this is in pursuit of a quite specific framework that lays out in some detail an organising body's approach, including everything from broad political orientation, through theory of change and strategy, sometimes all the way down to granular tactics. In my experience, this is an internal process for which its own

committee or working group is typically set up, with drafts and versions presented periodically to a wider membership to vote on. Once some agreement has been reached, the program or platform is formalised, and can be used to ensure all involved in the organisation are working towards a shared overarching vision and attendant goals.

Finally, there's a tendency to embrace organisational simplicity and, ostensibly, efficiency. My general understanding is that this instinct is in pursuit of making what might otherwise be an unwieldy popular mass into a more precise and efficient vehicle for change. There's a need to create mechanisms for ensuring that people involved in the larger organising cohort are in fact acting in line with a program, often through the direction of resource allocation (for example, by cutting off support for organising that doesn't fall in line) or management of capacity growth (internally and externally publicising the work of certain organisers more or less depending on how aligned the work they're engaged in is deemed to be). Ultimately, the underlying desire for this principle is *manageability* – the organisational structure must be able to be controlled, ostensibly through democratic processes, but whether that is ever actually meaningfully the case is highly debatable.

In practice, this entails the creation of often rigid and typically quite basic organisational structures. The specific nature of these elements varies, but there are commonalities. The most obvious one, as mentioned, is the creation of a formal and discrete organisation. Within that organisation, this approach is embodied by few typical elements. Firstly, membership: in order to manage a large population and maintain a unified front, who 'counts' as part of the org (and thus who might be seen to speak for it) must be tightly monitored and controlled. Secondly, a simple, legible, and fairly rigid structure: this could be its own essay, but a very common structure includes working groups, some sort of organisation-wide decision making body and practice, and a persistent central committee of sorts to oversee the overarching work of the organisation. Thirdly, some sort of decision-making framework that allows all members to have some degree of input into the functioning and direction of the organisation. There's more to this, but those are three fairly ubiquitous elements of orthodox approaches to organisation.

I'll be honest here, while I understand where a lot of this comes from, I have many contentions with this approach to organising. Firstly, drawing again on Scott's ecological analogy, the sort of monoculture movement this approach produces—ideologically homogeneous and structurally simplistic and legible—tends to be very fragile. The parallel runs deeper, too: much of what we take for granted as organisation is really just an embodiment of statist and colonialist ideals of managerial governance, focused on easily overseeable processes that produce concrete (and usually quantifiable) outcomes—the same sort of approach to socio-ecological organisation that obliterates natural ecosystems. The ideological homogeneity in effect means less adaptability to different contexts and provocations, while the structural simplicity (and particularly hierarchical formations) makes an organisation—and the movement it's a part of—much easier to disrupt, by agents both external and internal. Furthermore, the capacity that goes into enforcing a program (the development of which is already a capacity-intensive process) is a poor use of peoples' time and energy that frequently just serves to create unnecessary and unproductive ill will. People will focus on what they care about, what impacts them, and do it according to their principles, and that's okay; interaction and cooperation is important but prescription is pointless.

I have no issue with the general focus on a mass scale movement—I agree that a mass movement is necessary to create meaningful radical socio-political change; the aggregate power of the mass has to be sufficient to threaten existing social structures and build new ones. But the

nature of the composition of the mass is a crucial question, and what I take issue with is a mass movement that has a power topography with obvious peaks and clear paths to individual power within the movement. Again, the aggregate power must be high, but the distribution of it within the boundaries of the movement ecosystem must be distributed, diffuse, with no obvious sub-aggregations of power—which are obvious points of failure. Furthermore, a lot of emergent social organisation already exists somewhat along these lines—trying to corral that into a heavily structured, hierarchical formal organisation is counterproductive, and spends a lot of energy that could otherwise be used to do more specific and concrete work.

The mass formal organisation approach has a lot of organisational inefficiencies, and can even be counterproductive. With regard to inefficiency, far more capacity is expended on building and maintaining the organisation than I've ever seen justified. The larger a singular organisation becomes, the more capacity goes into what is essentially bureaucracy. As I've mentioned previously and will elaborate more on later, I don't think there's any real utility (and in fact, several downsides) to trying to wrangle a large populace into agreeing on a specific program, maintaining a large membership roster, or creating formal processes for every decision or type of labour that must be performed; these things just take a lot of capacity, make organisations impenetrable, and create unproductive conflict. But more insidious than these inefficiencies is the way in which this approach perpetuates a lot of values that are at the root of the social and economic systems we're seeking to uproot. Much of this approach comes out of a productivist, workerist, "efficiency"-oriented and predominantly technocratic, mechanistic mindset that is ultimately deeply ingrained in capitalist hegemonic narratives. It makes organising a job and the organisation a workplace. Applying this in our organising is actively anti-prefigurative; it will, despite our superficial goals, perpetuate the forms of relationships that underpin all harmful social systems.

Beyond an inefficient application of capacity and perpetuation of anti-liberatory social relations, this approach can be actively harmful. These kinds of organisations typically create obvious paths to power of the kind noted above, either formally through hierarchical structures, or informally through knowledge about how organisational structures and processes work and can potentially be manipulated. I'll add the caveat that no structure or lack thereof will fully prevent the rise of power imbalances, and certainly informal friend groups can become subject to hierarchical interpersonal relationships; ultimately a constant awareness is required to combat power aggregations and abuse. However, the harm that a person with power can do is related to the organisation context: an abusive person can do much more harm in a singular, large organisation than they can in an ecosystem consisting of a loose network of people, affinity groups, projects, and smaller, more focused organisations.

One of my overarching concerns with this orthodox approach is the ways in which it can shape our view of those we organise with. In particular, I worry about the way, as exemplified by the practice of membership, people can become instrumentalised, transforming from individuals with particular interests, needs, and capacities, into generic, quantifiable resources to be measured and directed. Overall, the perspective is one of society as a machine that must be redesigned, reconfigured, and rebuilt through a process of (social) engineering and a (vulgar) scientific approach. I understand where that perspective comes from; my early education was in engineering and I get the mindset, and the analogy at a superficial level makes sense to me. It's one that pervades a great deal of thinking about the nature of society. But, while machines might be complex at a certain level—they may contain a massive number of interconnected mov-

ing parts—at another they're quite simple: so long as you understand the laws of physics, the behavior of the individual components is predictable. Humans, however, are not like this because, notably, we have agency. Any methodology of change that treats us as interchangeable cogs in a (revolutionary) machine is bound to fail, as it rests on the invalid assumption that the behavior of people is neatly predictable and universalisable.

All these elements, taken together, make for a very artificial-feeling style of organisation. They feel forced, often literally built by the book, in a way that neglects to consider existing relationships. In part this seems to be in pursuit of expediency—it is easier to drop pre-designed, dogmatically-driven instances of organising into and atop existing communities than it is to build the deep and meaningful relations—but the tradeoff for this is a lack of resiliency as well as missing out on context-specific knowledge and methodological specificity. A deeper concern, however, is the way in which it perpetuates epistemic hierarchy and violence. I cannot state how often I've come across the general perspective, even within anarchist milieus, that we as organisers are experts; more knowledgeable and experienced in the process of revolutionary organising than those we seek to work with, and so we must evaluate the revolutionary potential of those we wish to engage with, and in some form or another, enlighten them. This is not to say there's no place for political education or critique (or expertise), but if we are to be truly prefigurative in our pursuit of liberatory futures, that means engaging with others in egalitarian ways. We must treat the experience and knowledge of those we organise with as valuable and potentially novel, meet people where they are, and engage with others in a bidirectional way that embodies epistemic humility. A movement that integrates and builds on context-specific knowledge through a process of anarchic synthesis is far more likely to be effective, in no small part because it's less likely to alienate people most involved in struggle.

An Alternative Vision

I hope the critiques above made sense and were of some value, but I don't want this to just be a critical piece. On the contrary, if there's one takeaway I would love for people to come away with, it is that there are a variety of ways to think about and engage in organisation, and that it can (and should) look different in different contexts. To that end, I'd like to briefly outline a broad alternative vision for radical change here, starting with general purpose, strategy, and theory of change, before getting into some more specific organising suggestions in the next section. To begin with, I think it's important to state a general theoretical perspective, and at this high level I think I align pretty closely with the mainstream left/radical thought: we need a mass movement to enact radical change. However, the form this mass movement takes matters. I don't think that a mass organisation and a mass movement are intrinsically interchangeable, and so my focus is on facilitating a mass movement without the drawbacks that are associated with the form, processes, and social incentives of a formal mass organisation.

My starting point for this vision lies in the desire to have a more forward-thinking and wide-ranging approach, while rejecting those methods that seek to aggregate power in 'new' hands through reforming or seizing the state and other linked institutions and systems; instead I'm interested in strategy that wholy replaces those constructs, at various scales, in the here-and-now. To that end, I've recently started thinking about radical change as a sort of three-pronged process. The central prong is the prefigurative building of alternative social and political formations,

including everything from the interpersonal level up to more concrete and narrowly-purpose driven but larger-scale projects. The former involves fundamentally reconfiguring how we relate to others and building new (types of) connections: this might entail making changes to how we engage with family, friends, romantic partners, and beyond, or building new relational arrangements and affinity groups, moving where possible from transactional and hierarchical relations to ones built on solidarity and egalitarian, trust-based interactions. Simultaneously, we should be working on more specific socio-political endeavours built on these radically different relationships – things like mutual aid networks, community forums, cooperative housing and work spaces, social centres, etc, which embody our visions for our ideal society.

This component of revolutionary change must be supported by two others. On the one hand, such work benefits from ever-growing engagement, and so to that end I believe that a significant amount of capacity should be dedicated to movement-building and social engagement. As mentioned above, this doesn't really need to take the form of a singular unified front, but the more people who are actively engaged in some way, building relationships, identifying needs and working on context-appropriate means to meet them, etc, the better off we'll all be—especially insofar as all these efforts are in some way connected. For this to happen, effort needs to be made to grow this project as a movement—given the overwhelming presence of a hegemonic culture that downplays our agency and interconnection, I don't think we can count solely on the spontaneous emergence of radical organising. We don't need to (and shouldn't) condescendingly try to 'lead' people into what we'd consider radical organising, but we can facilitate connections and spaces that foster useful conversations, worthwhile cooperation, and a welcoming entry point for those interested.

Finally, it should be noted that the state's efficacy *depends* on us remaining atomised and dependent; efforts at building communal and individual autonomy will eventually fall under scrutiny and potentially attack. It is in the state's interest to make this sort of organising as difficult as possible, and so in order for our projects to flourish, we must make the *state's* job as difficult as possible. To that end, the third prong is insurrectionary resistance and attack. This is not something to be planned and executed (or co-opted), at least at a large collective scale, but rather encouraged and supported (and participated in!). Insurrectionary activity typically occurs as spontaneous uprisings and other forms of militant attack in response to instances of overt systemic violence and injustice; it's no one's place to tell people how and when to do this—these are expressions of societal anger, and should not be corralled—but we can try to normalise this sort of activity, helping it to become more common, and facilitate the spread of knowledge on how to be as safe and solidaristic as possible in these moments. Ultimately, the point here is to distract the state and make its job untenable, not to capture or replace it, and so the organisation and structure of insurrection should not be state-like.

Values for such an overall strategy are fundamentally different from the ones prevalent in orthodox organising. This is where those ideas of autonomy, horizontality, and diffusion, of heterogeneity and mutuality, of prefiguration that I've talked about sporadically and defined roughly in the introduction come into play. In the next section I'll get into a more concrete discussion of what all this looks like in practice, but in general the idea is to foster the growth of complex and dynamic socio-political networks. In particular, I'd advocate for networks wherein all nodes may be independently and uniquely interconnected and in which no node is central (as opposed to hub-and-spoke or coordinating committee models), indispensable, or has power over others; as mentioned previously, these sorts of 'rhizomatic' arrangements are typically far more resilient,

expandable, and effective than the very simplistic and legible centralized and hierarchical aggregations that are so commonly the form contemporary organisations take. More specifically, what this means is less effort put into creating and developing overarching organisations, and more effort put into the building of concrete (inter)connections between people, projects, and other more narrowly-focused organisations. Capacity put into creating consistent and regular spaces in which a variety of people can meet others, find projects to plug into, discuss the political landscape, and find opportunities for collaboration can have impact.

A Different Approach

All of this so far has been pretty abstract and theoretical, but I really want to condense some of these ideas into at least somewhat practical suggestions about how to think about and actually *do* organising. Obviously, this is all just based on my experience and what I've learned in my time organising, so take it all with a very large grain of salt, but hopefully some of this will be useful or at least thought-provoking. Now, it is neither within the scope of the piece nor in its spirit to try to present a very specific and in-depth 'how-to' on organising; afterall, the larger point I'm trying to make is that organising cannot be universalised and instead must be adaptive, dynamic, and context-sensitive. Still, having critiqued a significant portion of prevalent organising theory and practice, I think it's worth trying to begin to concretely outline alternatives.

To that end, I do want to share some general conclusions I've come to about how to *approach* organising. Even within the realm of orthodox organising, there is a lot of variation in the specifics of organisation, but it's also obvious that there are patterns—organising rules of thumb that are borne out of hegemonic ideas of what it means to organise. As I've mentioned, I think a lot of the received wisdom underlying these approaches is flawed, so I'd like to present an alternative methodological framework. To that end, what I'm sharing is more of a heuristic framework: a general set of organising principles that should not be taken as absolute rules but rather as simplified guidelines that should only be adopted and expanded on with a critical eye. These are, admittedly, not all particularly novel ideas and indeed some of the more efficacy-oriented ones are pretty obvious. But I thought it worthwhile to get them all down in one place, as a way to start thinking about as many elements of organising as possible in more expansive and radical ways.

Organise Relationally, then Structurally – Not Institutionally

In a neoliberal world hellbent on social atomisation, the radical foundation of all organisation is the building of strong and supportive personal and community relationships. I sometimes feel that in the drive to meet hegemonic ideals of productivity and efficiency, that basic truth gets lost in the haste to establish a lot of organisational structures and processes. In that context, I've found it useful, in any given space, to focus first on seeing *who's in the room*. Who, individually, is there? What groupings are represented? What needs do different people have, and what skills and capacity are available? What specific issues or projects are people involved in? What's the ideological makeup? How do those present relate to the space in question? Obviously, the context of that space will answer some or many of those questions—most spaces I've been in have been 'called' in a sense for a specific purpose—but in any case it's always good to start by getting to know who's around, even if the only outcome in any particular context may be meeting new people or strengthening connections. A critical component of organising is identifying and empowering existing relationships and formations and that begins with getting to know the movement ecosystem, starting with concrete organising spaces.

Only once there is some general understanding of who and what you're working with is it really appropriate to start thinking collectively in terms of structure and process; it's helpful to resist the urge to immediately form a dozen committees or working groups. Not to say working groups aren't appropriate in some contexts, but we shouldn't treat them as part of the default approach—we don't want the structure to become the focus, or to create unnecessary subdivisions that limit input on decisions. Ultimately, the methods utilised in any given organising context are dependent on the purpose—different approaches are more or less appropriate for different purposes—and is additionally informed by the nature of the organising community. As a concrete example, think about what kind of organisational structures and processes would make sense for developing a mutual aid network, versus a goal-oriented campaign, versus militant antifascism. These are very different endeavours; the first might entail broad network-building; the second a more traditional working groups style approach; and the third, a highly secure, decentralised, and illegible affinity group model. Actualising any of these approaches is heavily dependent on having a thorough understanding of what connections, groupings, initiatives, skills, etc. already exist and/or are present. And, finally, while it is necessary to consider how to format our organising, I think it's important to stay away from institutional thinking—a focus on the vehicle over the people and project—and be comfortable with a mutable, adaptable methodology that spins up structure *as needed* and is ready to shut it down when it's no longer necessary. Ideally we'd have, as stated in an article in L'Adunata dei Refrattari from 1954 translated by Michael Gouldhawke, "…forms of cooperation, satisfying needs felt by all who participate, at the same time open to the influence of their will and respectful of their freedom. And such forms can be realized only in narrow fields for varied purposes, or in vast fields for precise, well-defined and limited purposes. (Gouldhawke)"

Organise Granularly, Not (Only) Broadly

While I myself generally align with broad leftist views and envision worlds arranged along anarchic and communistic lines, and am writing to an audience who probably have largely similar views, I do not think it's particularly useful to frame our organising as simply in pursuit of building Anarchy or Communism, or towards some sort of generic Revolution. I believe it's much more useful to organise primarily around specific issues and purposes, in part because it makes it easier to collaborate with others as we can better meet people where they are, rather than trying to get people on board with a broad conceptual goal, but also because it encourages more precise and focused organising, which in my experience has more tangible impacts. I've found it very useful to frame one's (a person individually, or a group of people) engagement in a movement by first assessing oneself as well as the ecosystem—mapping out what's already happening, seeing what resources are available and where, identifying gaps or projects that would benefit from more capacity, and, last but not least, being honest about your own skills and capacity—and then coming up with a quite narrow and specific purpose. Focus your organising around that purpose, while also keeping an eye out for opportunities for broader impact via connection and cooperation with others.

This is not to say that we shouldn't express broader aspirational visions—it is very useful to have an idea of what we are working towards. However, the way we express and enact these visions matters. Firstly, it's important to ground those visions in material realities, and in partic-

ular, the extreme unevenness and variation that exists across people's experiences, contexts, and circumstances. Secondly, we shouldn't treat these imaginaries as far-off, abstract ideals of how society could one day be organised, but rather as a framework for how we relate to and interact with each other; in other words these visions aren't purely of the structure of society but of its culture and values, and as such is something we can and should put into practice now, whenever and wherever we can, in the course of our organising. In other words, the vision isn't just the end; it's also the means—the means produce the ends, as social systems reproduce themselves, and so, ultimately there must be a unity between means and ends.

Organise Prefiguratively, Not Teleologically

It's critical to embrace this notion of prefiguration—the idea that we should embody in our organising the type of social relations and organisation that we seek to develop—because the opposite, a sort of stepwise "first a, then b, then c, then revolution, then bad systems will disappear", ends-justify-the means approach has, as mentioned prior, several problems which range from being inefficient to being counterproductive. What prefiguration means in practice, however, is not always obvious, and even when it is, acting accordingly is often quite difficult. We live in a word fundamentally different from that which we want to see, and so acting in accordance with our ideals typically involves behaving in ways that are far different from the norm; most existing social arrangements obstruct or disincentivize prefigurative liberatory practices, and even when they don't, training ourselves to behave in these radically novel ways takes a lot of conscious effort and practice. There are ultimately two intertwined aspects to this: first, a structural/procedural one, and second, a cultural/behavioral one. We can use organisational methods that embody our ideals—for example, utilising decision making processes that emphasize autonomy through consent/consensus rather than those that incentivise a competitive attitude through majoritarianism—but we also need to more organically develop alternative cultural norms by intentionally practicing our principles in our everyday interactions.

In concrete terms, there are some notable and impactful ways to act prefiguratively. Since this piece is largely about organising, one that comes immediately to mind is the practice of autonomous self-organisation, and more generally the recognition and application of agency. I cannot overstate how common (and dispiriting) it is to see people in organising spaces constantly waiting for instruction or approval (usually from a subset of perceived 'leaders') before taking any sort of action. It's not surprising, because that style of organisation is the norm; we are constantly told that there is a (usually hierarchical / power-laden) process to follow. But if we want a society where each of our agency and autonomy is respected, we need to practice that—by adopting structures and processes that allow for it, and, more importantly, fostering a culture where each individual's agency and worth is recognised. This has the beneficial side effect of strengthening our organising overall, as people are typically more effective and invested when they're self-motivated and supported rather than directed.

This is obviously quite an organising-specific example, but there are others that are arguably of greater importance (or at least ubiquity). The struggle against all interlocking systems of oppression—capitalism and statism, cisheteronormative patriarchy, racism, anthropocentrism, etc—rests in part on replacing them with other forms of relationships. This replacement is most effectively brought about through everyday practice of those alternatives, because, again, social

practices reproduce themselves. This means ideals like feminism, anti-racism, etc can't just be abstract principles—they have to be embedded in our everyday activity, and this integration cannot be seen as secondary, or as a distraction from the "real" work. Ultimately, we need to understand that this prefigurative approach isn't just a tactic to make organising spaces more pleasant and inclusive, but a key principle in bringing about the futures we want to see.

Organise Around Principles, Not Programs or Platforms

Finally, there's the question of how, while being thorough and militant in applying these ideals in our organising, we still go about developing a movement that is in aggregate expansive enough to be effective across a wide variety of contexts. This is made even more difficult given that we might each have a specific purpose, goal, or issue that we focus our capacity on, and given that we employ different tactics and approaches based on our own capacities, strengths, and political analysis. There's every chance that there will be people with whom we align broadly, but just don't have any particular reason to cooperate closely with, or even disagree with on certain things. This is where questions about the nature and form of modes of association arise. It is extremely difficult to get a movement of the scale we need fully on the same page with regard to narrow ideology or tactics, and trying to do so is frankly a waste of time and energy. Which is not to say we should force ourselves to interact with everyone we come across or avoid advocating for our own beliefs; there is value in setting boundaries for our movement ecosystem and expanding it by engaging in political discussion. It's just that those boundaries should be based on broad principles, not the need for a unified program.

So, in a general sense, organising around a set of principles allows for cooperation (or at least solidarity) across a larger movement. But to think about this more concretely, it's also important to look at it from the perspective of the individual or small group. In that context, it is worthwhile to take the time to determine a core set of principles and try to establish ahead of time some idea of how to apply those principles when it comes to engagement with others. In a sense, this is also a significant part of finding a niche in a movement ecosystem as it, alongside a more concrete purpose and set of goals, helps determine who you're likely to build the strongest relationships and cooperate most closely with. This needn't (and shouldn't) be a hard and rigid set of rules, but I've found it is useful to have a sense of who you really align with and trust (and may thus work closely with). Beyond that, who is within the boundaries of the ecosystem and worth engaging with in some form, perhaps as part of larger efforts that don't require a high degree of trust or alignment? And who may not be worth the effort of engaging with? This will shift based on circumstances, but a rough idea is useful.

Determine Purpose

It's very useful to spend a little bit of time thinking, both individually as well as as a group, what one's organising purpose and focus is. This is probably a fairly obvious point, but I've been in a number of organising spaces where this hasn't really occurred, let alone any consideration of granular strategy, tactics, or theory of change. This often resulted in much of the work being done in a rather unfocused way, often consisting of a kind of hap-hazard engagement with whatever's going on in the moment. That's not to say you shouldn't engage with whatever demands

engagement at any given moment—we absolutely should have the flexibility to do so. In fact, when I say purpose I'm not referring to focus on a specific issue so much as a role. We should have some idea of how—given our capacities, skill sets,connections, and analysis of the socio-political landscape—we fit into a movement ecosystem, and thus how we might best contribute to any given issue-specific organising. Any given specific organising project is composed of a lot of different components, and understanding our role generally makes fitting usefully into particular endeavours a much simpler prospect.

This requires some degree of introspection and self-critique; if our purpose is our role then we have to develop an understanding of what role we are best able to fill. As an example, I have personally realised that I have a terrible brain for in-the-moment decision-making and tactical thinking generally, but am fairly adept at broad, systems-level analysis and planning., Despite being an introvert, I also love meeting, getting to know, and connecting with people. As a result, I've moved away somewhat from involvement in direct action, and have shifted my focus towards support and movement-building work. This is another aspect of organising that benefits from comparison to natural ecosystems: we each have our niche. We should recognize that we as humans are dynamic and as such may change, our roles changing alongside ourselves as we grow, but ultimately we do need to understand that we need not try to be involved in every aspect and step of organising, and that the benefit of organising in general is that cooperation allows us to focus on what we want and are best suited to do, with the understanding that what we aren't involved in will be covered by other people in the movement ecosystem. A lot of motivation for organising seems to come from fear, anger, and guilt, and while those things are very understandable, they are not always healthy. Adding a bit more conscientiousness and intentionality to one's involvement always makes for more healthy organising.

Build Up and Out, not Down

It's quite a common instinct in organising spaces to get together with a group of people who have some experience with, or at least inclination towards, organising, and begin the organising process by asking "Where is the radical potential located in society / a given context, and how can we shape or harness it?" Or, less provocatively, "How do we organise people [we haven't met]?" This is quite understandable, given how natural it is to think of yourself and those you know well as a separate category from a general popular mass, but this mindset is at best limiting, perpetuating the disempowering organiser-organised divide that limits capacity, and at worst is the epistemic nucleation point for the sorts of social hierarchies that can lead to harmful relationships. Engagements with others outside your immediate circle should ideally be based on a vision of them not as a faceless mass to be sculpted and wielded (formally or informally), but rather as various existing groupings that already have some degree of purpose and organisation (though those things may be organic and implicit and not yet fully thought through). When thought of this way, the possibility for egalitarian discussion and exchange of ideas and perspectives arises, and along with it, the potential for mutualistic cooperation.

In a practical sense, this means engaging in styles of organising that grow up and out non-hierarchically. This begins by building on existing social relations to develop a close-knit affinity group that's core function is mutual support and care amongst the people in the group. An affinity group can then reach out to build connections with similar groupings (or, help to foster their

formation); as more and more groups do this, two important things happen: first, the reach of mutual support is extended, and second, capacity is expanded in a way that's more than just linear. Affinity groups, then, alone or with others, can identify and work on more specific and concrete projects. This is, as I see it, how resilient movement growth occurs—it's the expansion and strengthening of a network through the continual addition of new nodes and increasing interconnection between nodes. This approach does take some humility—it's a result of decentering yourself and your immediate grouping of friends, and instead understanding your place as just one component of a much larger ecosystem, all parts of which have value and agency—but I do believe it leads to a stronger movement.

Develop Commonality, Embrace Difference

I've found that it's usually beneficial to tailor the specificity and focus of one's organising to the specific space or context one is currently in, which in turn helps with some degree of movement building. Generally, at any given level/scale of organising, it's a good idea to focus on the things that are relevant and actionable to that group—minimizing specificity and granularity at broad gatherings (especially when it comes to prescribing specific organising), while focusing on specific project organising in issue-specific and affinity group spaces. This creates a dynamic where there are some broader spaces in which we can identify, nurture, and build on commonalities, while also signposting to a variety of different and more specific projects and formations. This balance between broad, solidaristic connection and more narrowly focused work is what makes movements effective—we enable each other to work on our particular projects, embracing differences in interest, skills, and strategy/tactics, while also reinforcing commonalities.

It's worth noting that this sometimes entails creating and facilitating different kinds of spaces. In my experience, broad organising spaces, where people can engage in general political discussion, learn about and connect to ongoing projects, share and develop skills, etc., are pretty rare. On top of this, if there's some specific issue you care about that isn't being given attention, there are almost always some other people who are also interested. In general, ecosystems develop through the process of different people identifying and filling gaps, so if there's something you think is missing, think about how you can help address it! Of course, it's important to do so in a sensitive and appropriate manner—first, making sure there isn't already something being done to address the gap, then if that's the case, suggesting options for doing so that don't come in the form of demands on peoples' time and capacity—but in general I've found people are pretty open to at least discussing ideas of how to make movements stronger.

Conclusions

There's quite a bit here that would benefit from greater nuance and a general expansion to do proper justice to, but I hope that what I've brought is stated well enough to prompt some further thinking. In summary, from what I've observed in my experience in organising spaces, there are two primary issues when it comes to radical organising. Firstly, there is a great deal of siloing of projects, most of which already tend to be quite narrow and reactive in scope. This makes for a very disjointed and limited movement, which, while very good at organising around specific, urgent issues, ultimately burns through capacity while struggling to make any kind of impact that is broader in scope and longer-term in duration. More effort could be put towards expanding the movement and building up capacity in various ways.

Secondly, there's a wide, uncritical adherence to orthodox organising approaches. This manifests both in the organising around specific projects as well as the big-picture theory and practice when it's present. There are times when some of these practices are appropriate, but that needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis, not as a general methodology. In some cases this style of organising is due to ideology, and in other cases it's simply a utilisation of broadly normalised practices resulting from a lack of experience in other ways of organising, but either way it's both prevalent and detrimental. All too often, I've seen the structure of (the) organisation become the point and focus of organising, rather than a tool used to amplify work that's utilised on an as-needed basis.

There are a few responses to this. First, at a more abstract theoretical level, I would prompt people to think critically about the methods they're using and the reasoning behind certain ways of doing things. Explore and expose yourself to other perspectives—as far as 'theory' goes, expand your horizons to include relevant analysis beyond the typical sphere of political economy and 'revolutionary' politics, but perhaps more importantly, engage more meaningfully with a wide range of actual people. As you organise, self-reflect, both individually and collectively, and continuously evaluate your practice. One of the most impactful theoretical realisations is that complexity and uncertainty are okay and even, from the point of the view of the movement as a whole, a strength. There's no benefit to any single person being able to immediately see and understand how an entire movement 'works.' This is a shift in perspective that has very clear implications on organising methods.

As far as actual concrete practice goes, then, there are several specific things worth considering. With regard to that willingness to embrace a degree of complexity and illegibility, it's important to accept that people have different interests, capacities, needs, preferred tactics, and ways of relating to others which push them to organise around a variety of different issues through a wide range of different approaches, and so seeking a unified (and unifying) overarching structure and set of processes is not likely to be fruitful. Understanding this and focusing on the facilitation of interconnection, solidarity, and mutuality based on a set of shared principles instead of spending capacity to bring about artificial unity is something that would benefit all of us. The other component of this is the application of prefigurative practice. Instead of thinking of change as a

universalizable, teleological process, recognize that the world is messy, and so are the people in it, so we have to organise accordingly. There's no assurance that any given plan will work, but we can always act in accordance with our principles in the here and now, and in doing so build and (re)produce the sort of world we want to inhabit.

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