

From Love and Rage

A Look at the Legacy

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For close to ten years Love and Rage, in one form or another, existed as an organized expression of revolutionary anarchism, representing many of the best and worst aspects of the left. The Love and Rage project involved hundreds of people over many years who took the role of revolutionary opposition seriously while confronting forms of domination in their own work and daily lives. Those involved were committed to ideas and education, to democratic process and organization, to street militancy, and towards the end, to long-term community organizing.

On the down side Love & Rage also had elements of a guilt-based, middle-class politics of self-sacrifice and, among some, a moralism better suited to Christian missionaries. There were those who sought a more “pure” membership, purged of the sins of the dominant society. This took the form of an inward looking examination of each person’s background and preferences that began to lose perspective. A principled, self-reflective commitment to anti-sexism, for example, turned into a bizarre attempt to break down ego-boundaries and reshape character, in a small group setting. There were also attempts to utilize guilt to get people to do more, to contribute more money, or not voice their opinions. These tendencies were derided by others, however, limiting their contagion and rendering them effective only on those already susceptible.

Love and Rage was made up of many different groups and individuals representing a variety of tendencies and with varying backgrounds within anarchism, making generalizations difficult. What they all had in common was an activist orientation and a generally left politics (as opposed to the neo-primitivist, anti-civilization perspectives of Anarchy Magazine and John Zerzan, for example) They were also primarily young. Love and Rage members shared a sense of urgency, of the immediacy of various struggles and of the need to get organized and act, and a general willingness to participate in coalition with other left and liberal groups to pursue similar objectives. For instance, Love and Rage participated in stopping Operation Rescue’s attempts to shut down abortion clinics, while arguing for direct forms of democracy within meetings and extra-legal forms of militancy and direct action in demonstrations.

The various Love and Rage local groups which existed over the years, notably in places like Minneapolis, New York, and Detroit, were constituted by extremely dedicated activists who sustained an interest and involvement in political issues and organizing that continues to be rare. The local groups often combined a consciousness of group dynamics and internal hierarchies with an unbelievable ability to put on public forums discussing current events, while also participating in various coalitions and organizing efforts and demonstrations.

It has been two years since Love and Rage dissolved and it seems appropriate to assess some of the organization’s contributions in light of what is going on today. This account will be partial and necessarily incomplete, hopefully being one of the first of many written reflections.

Ideas and Theory

One of Love and Rage’s positive contributions was that it took ideas and theory seriously in the effort to democratically develop a political statement for the organization. This commitment was also reflected in discussions, leaflet writing, and forums. Similarly, despite some tendencies toward sensationalism, the organization’s newspaper, also called Love and Rage, demonstrated the group’s seriousness about ideas.

Many heated and protracted debates took place between various factions on a variety of issues, mostly within the context of the ongoing process of developing a common political statement for the organization. One of the first debates was actually over whether to even have one.

There was a strong faction, mostly grouped around the Anarchist Youth Federation, which took an anti-theory position, advocating unity through action. The relation between ideas and action, of theory and practice, were hotly debated. This faction argued that theoretical discussion was a waste of time and the working class would better respond to simple language. Their proposed model for Love and Rage was the British paper *Class War*. Despite the obstinacy of the anti-theory faction, and their condescending assumptions concerning the intelligence of the working class, the project of democratically developing a common political statement went forward.

Although the organization voted to develop a statement, the time devoted to it was filled with ongoing discussion that never resulted in a finished document. Nonetheless, the discussions created a lively forum for radical ideas and competing revolutionary strategies. This allowed a relatively large number of radicals to collectively think through what was going on in the world. At the same time, it involved a variety of people in this process through participation in working groups, writing draft statements, and debating positions at plenaries and in the pages of the paper.

This kind of anarchist intellectual culture does not exist today. The great thing about Love and Rage's attempt to develop a political statement, in addition to its participatory character, was the way the discussion of ideas took place in the context of an organized attempt to change the world. Thus the ideas, although sometimes abstract or theoretical, were part of an engagement with society.

Too often today, discussions of radical ideas are purely abstract, with little or no relation to organizing work or a larger public. Intellectual work goes on in isolation, or is perverted in service to academic requirements. And on the other hand, as is so often the case, organizing work goes on in a rather rote fashion, with little room to explore theoretical dimensions or argue how tactics are part of a long-term revolutionary strategy or theory of the world.

One current organization which promotes anarchist scholarship, The Institute for Anarchist Studies, funds individual writers, not collective writing projects, because the applications for funding it receives are from individuals. A majority of these applications can be divided into two categories: anarchists involved in academics, and activist anarchists struggling to theorize their practical work. Both could benefit from engagement with a more participatory intellectual culture; on the one hand so their work is less abstract and academic, and on the other to help sharpen and develop their ideas.

With the demise of Love and Rage and other organizations engaged in collective, democratic writing processes, like the Youth Greens, the anarchist intellectual scene has become atomized and fragmented. It is rare to find collective writing projects or popular forums for discussing radical ideas. Without them, people often drift away, or begin to regurgitate mainstream thought about the inevitability of the market, or the state, or about how people are fundamentally greedy and will never change. The dominant ideological, economic, and social realities in America are strong and well entrenched, taking their toll on even the most stubborn militant. Without a vibrant anarchist public sphere to create and maintain an alternative worldview, it is harder for individuals to maintain a commitment to radical politics. And without an anarchist organization, it is impossible to change society.

Anti-Racism and Anti-Imperialism

Perhaps most significantly, Love and Rage brought the issue of race into North American anarchist concerns in a way that was not previously present, at least among white anarchists. This occurred as self-education on race issues, learning about the key role of race relations in unlocking historical forms of oppression in the US context. Simultaneously, Love and Rage prioritized an anti-racist agenda within anarchist organizing.

Anti-Police brutality work, and in cities like Minneapolis, neighborhood cop-watches became a cornerstone of Love and Rage members' work. Love and Rage members played central roles in Anti-Racist Action, where today many former members continue to be active.

A further aspect of Love and Rage's anti-racism involved the commitment to organizing across borders to work with comrades in Mexico City, while also making Chiapas and Zapatista solidarity work a high priority. More generally the anti-imperialist orientation of the organization implied an understanding of the privileged and exploitative position of the majority of the West vis-a-vis the rest of the world, a relation based in race and also class.

Some in the organization advocated a more uncritical anti-imperialism. But many others saw that it is possible both to support people in their resistance, by opposing US military and economic domination, and to maintain a principled engagement with opposition movements that does not abdicate our responsibility to be critical of authoritarian practices and tendencies. The central question here is what place North American anti-imperialists have in criticizing aspects of nationalist struggles we disagree with, such as statism or the attempt to forge a national identity by suppressing diversity within a people. Those maintaining a position of critical solidarity won an early debate on the "national question" against those who advocated an unqualified solidarity.

Black Bloc

Early on writers and organizers for Love and Rage emphasized the need to develop a "fighting movement." This was a provocative way of describing a movement which takes the political offensive while being willing to defend itself against the police in the streets.

The German autonomist movement was a significant influence on Love and Rage and other young radicals in the late 1980s and early '90s. There were successive waves of autonomist movement in Germany, but the anti-imperialist, street fighting, black bloc version made the biggest impression. In addition to squatting housing and social and cultural spaces for themselves, the autonomen, as they are known, formed large blocs at demonstrations to provide for their own safety against police attacks and to allow more latitude in the streets. The blocs involve people dressing alike and covering their faces with masks to prevent the police from identifying individuals.

Protesters link arms and move together, preventing the police from dispersing people or grabbing individuals.

A black bloc was called for at one of the two big marches in D.C. against the Gulf War. Roughly three hundred black-clad anarchists showed up for the contingent. Being in a bloc demonstrated a large, well-organized anarchist presence in the anti-war effort. It also allowed for more militant action than shuffling down the street chanting tired slogans. For instance, windows were

smashed at the Treasury Department building and a break-away march towards the World Bank building took place. Along the way bank windows were smashed and the World Bank building itself was spraypainted. Because of the security of the bloc, only one comrade was grabbed by the police, and that person was unarrested from the police by others. All involved ran to the safety of the bloc, which effectively prevented the police from arresting anyone.

A line of development runs from the 1988 Pentagon Action, where anarchists had an organized contingent and distributed RAGE!, a precursor of Love and Rage, right through to the Seattle Black Bloc. The contemporary idea of a non-pacifist, extra-legal national contingent got started at that 1988 protest against the US wars in Central America. One of the main organizing groups for that contingent, and for organizing Love and Rage, was RABL, the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League. RABL held several successful, and some not-so- successful, actions in the mid-to-late 1980s in Minneapolis and published their own occasional paper, the RABL Rouser.

The Black Bloc in Seattle is the most successful use yet of this style of street organization. It helped create a visible and formidable anarchist presence, while enabling highly effective offensive action against corporate property. Combined with the violence of the police against the largely non-violent demonstrators, the Black Bloc is the main reason Seattle became a household word around the world. The Black Bloc anarchists struck a chord, and anarchism, in however simplified a form, seemed to be everywhere.

The Seattle Black Bloc shows there is a potential for developing a far more organized and effective form of street protest. In addition, the larger anti-globalization movement involves many anarchists. For example, anarchist principles are informing much of the organizing of the Direct Action Network, the main organizing group of the Seattle demonstrations and the anti-IMF/World Bank protests in DC.

Love and Rage did a lot to help develop an anti-authoritarian understanding of globalization, sometimes referred to as neoliberalism. In part this was done in conjunction with the perspective put forward by the Zapatistas and Chiapas solidarity activists. Another aspect was simply extending the traditional anarchist critique of capitalism, hierarchy and social domination to contemporary trends. It is good to see this type of work partly pay off in the form of a renewed popular and radical movement which, at least implicitly, is against capital and has an anarchist and ecological dimension.

Defining Anarchism

With the decline of Love and Rage, anarchists in the Pacific Northwest have taken the lead in defining anarchism. The positive contributions they bring are a no compromise, militant attitude, a direct action approach, and an attempt to pre-figure the new society in collective living, counter-institutions and sustainable practices like intensive, organic gardening.

An organization like Love and Rage could help coordinate activity and provide a forum for presenting revolutionary anarchist ideas to a larger public through its newspaper. Unfortunately the only national anarchist publications we have now are Anarchy and Fifth Estate. While occasionally publishing something interesting, these publications generally put their own regressive anti-civilization spin on anarchist actions and ideas. They present their rather warped neo-primitivist version of anarchism as being the only one while caricaturing the politics represented by Love and Rage (and Murray Bookchin) as Leninist Old Left.

Love and Rage had its own problems, but at least it brought a social and left perspective to anarchism that saw the way out of capitalism and statism through social movements and direct forms of democracy, not simply smashing technology and returning to a hunter-gatherer existence. The organization maintained a healthy insurrectionary perspective which held out the necessity of social revolution. It recognized that anarchists need to be an organized force for social change, and that day-to-day activist work is an important part of this process. And it maintained the importance of ideas, debate and popular education.

In the future any new revolutionary anarchist organization would need to be a bottom-up, grass-roots confederation of existing local groups. The emphasis in Love and Rage should have been (and our focus now should be) promoting and assisting in the formation of new local groups, affinity groups, and political collectives. Love and Rage erred in not putting more effort in this direction. There definitely was a strong centralizing faction in the organization that successfully took the group in the direction of federation, rather than confederation, arguing against those who advocated a more decentralized approach. It should come as little surprise that those folks no longer call themselves anarchists.

It may be a while before we again see a continental anarchist organization on the scale of Love and Rage. Despite this anarchism seems to be in pretty good shape as we head into the twenty-first century. If we do things right, we can create new organizational forms while learning from the mistakes of the past, as well as from the promising contributions of a group like Love and Rage.

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