

The Continuing Appeal of Authoritarianism

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The Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation broke up in 1998. The Fire by Night Organizing Committee formed from the feuds that broke it up. This was the only formal organization that emerged directly from Love and Rage at that time, although it is not the only political direction that came out of its end.

Anarchist organizations in the US hold many theories about anarchism and revolution. Love and Rage was one piece of this in its eight year existence. The organization took seriously the development of a strategy for revolution. During this process, some members decided that some basic tenets of anarchism were untenable.

Fire by Night is not an anarchist organization, but in the statement announcing the break-up of Love and Rage and the formation of Fire by Night, founding members said that several of them were still anarchists and committed to anti-authoritarian and anti-statist strategies. In August 1999, however, Fire by Night published their Points of Unity in which they state that as an organization they “no longer believe that anarchism offers an adequate framework for answering the real problems that confront the revolutionary project.”

Further explanation of Fire by Night’s critiques of anarchism are in their pamphlet *After Winter Must Come Spring: a Self-Critical Evaluation of the Life and Death of the Love and Rage Revolutionary anarchist Federation*. According to Fire by Night’s analysis, some major points of contention in the split were attitudes toward white supremacy, anti-statism, and anarchism’s lack of theoretical development in terms of organizing and revolutionary strategy. In *After Winter* Fire by Night states its intention to study revolutionary and radical movements in order to draw conclusions about the possibilities for revolution in the US. *Points of Unity* is the result of these studies.

As an organization containing many former anarchists, what did Fire by Night offer that could not be found in anarchist organizations?

What They Have to Say

Many groups have complained that the anarchist movement is white, male-dominated, and largely middle class. In *After Winter*, Fire by Night cites this as a problem in Love and Rage and discusses their efforts to change this. Fire by Night sees lack of clarity and theoretical unity as the major culprit.

In *Points of Unity*, they put forward an analysis of the functioning of white supremacy in the US. Fire by Night makes clear that they view the struggle against white supremacy as primary in the struggle for revolutionary change. They do not discuss how they plan to put this into practice other than by “participating in mass struggles.”

In *After Winter* Fire by Night cites Love and Rage’s lack of clear analysis of white supremacy and white skin privilege and lack of an organizational strategy as the barrier to the development of a “genuinely multi-racial revolutionary anarchist organization.” The “clear analysis” presented in *Points of Unity* would presumably clear up this blockage in their path. The examples in *After Winter* are concerning ideas printed in Love and Rage’s newspaper. They do not include an in depth critique of Love and Rage’s actions and have not proposed an organizational strategy or any clear course of action for making the work of the organization anti-racist except that they will “support the liberation struggles of oppressed nationalities.”

Anarchist organizations besides Love and Rage have shown emphasis on anti-racist issues in their work. At the time of Love and Rage's break-up another grouping within the organization put out a document entitled Towards a Fresh Revolutionary Anarchist Group which shows a similar emphasis and proposed that groups focus their work in Anti-Racist Action collectives as a means of putting that into practice. Some Anarchist Black Cross collectives have focused work on prisons and political prisoners based on an analysis of prisons as part of the machinery of institutionalized white supremacy. These specific projects and others can raise issues and questions about how one goes about challenging white supremacy and the effectiveness of various methods, but this is not unique to anarchism and is not addressed in Points of Unity.

Fire by Night's analysis in Points of Unity does not offer anything new. In After Winter, Fire by Night complains that anarchists of color were marginalized in Love and Rage. They do not include those voices or any critiques in their analysis. We do not even hear about why they were marginalized. Fire by Night has chosen to leave behind real struggles and experience in favor of creating a new idealized theory.

The critique of white supremacy offers no plan of action other than removed "support." What Fire by Night seems to miss in its criticism is the power of action. Love and Rage, the Network of Anarchist Collectives, Anarchist Black Cross, and other anarchist organizations and organizing projects that anarchists have been involved in have led to concrete if unarticulated strategic developments towards building an anarchism that can defeat white supremacy. We need more mechanisms that can draw out and document the voices and ideas of these projects and organizers so we can build on them, not reject them if we do not see clear strategic intentions.

Not Anarchist Enough

Fire by Night diverges strongly from anarchist groups in how it proposes to change our current society into one that can build freedom. In After Winter, Fire by Night complains of Love and Rage's and anarchism in general's lack of organizing method and theory. Fire by Night offers a debt to anarchism's "vision of radical participatory democracy," but how to make this real has become very different in their development of an organizing strategy.

There are themes in anarchist organizing efforts. In almost any anarchist mission statement/points of unity, primary elements are mutual aid, anti-statism and social self-organization. Mutual aid and communication among anarchists and as a means of putting out anarchist ideas are present in the mission statements of the Network of Anarchist Collectives and the Atlantic Anarchist Circle.

Collectives or local groups are the main focus of political development and work. Organizing strategies and revolutionary goals are expected to develop within these collectives. Whether the strategies and goals actually get developed is another question, and anarchists could certainly stand to explore this further, pushing ourselves to document and build together working theories that are our own and that confront authoritarianism. Some attempts have been made such as NAC's Dis/Connection magazine, and the Community Organizing Core that developed out of the Active Resistance conference in 1996.

Fire by Night's alternative is to find the path to revolution "through direct participation in mass struggles...revolutionary theory must continuously be tested in practice and modified in the light of new experiences." In After Winter they say that their organizing strategy developed

from a combination of what they call “the Zapatista theory of Mandar Obedeciendo or ‘leading by obeying,’ which shares much in common with Paolo Friere’s ideas on pedagogy and the Maoist theory of Mass Line,” although in their description it bears much more similarity to Mass Line theory than either of the others: Fire by Night states that “revolutionaries should, in struggle with the people, draw out the revolutionary content in how they already understand their conditions... Through the constant repetition of this process a more fully developed revolutionary consciousness emerges.”

Mandar Obedeciendo is a principle that has long been used by Mayan communities. Leaders are elected to fulfill a role and if they do not obey that mandate they are immediately recallable by the communities. Friere’s ideas on pedagogy do bear many similarities to Mao’s Mass line, but he also includes concepts which critique the roles of leader and teacher. Many anarchists have also been inspired by the Zapatistas and Friere, but they have drawn different lessons than reinforcement of Maoist organizing strategies.

Fire by Night is presumably attempting to fill holes that are left by anarchism’s “lack of method.” The organizing theory that they put forward is not new or very well developed. The theory put forward in *After Winter* cites very few organizing concepts, none of which were developed in contexts similar to the US. *Points of Unity* repeats what Fire by Night sees as one of the failures of anarchism by not putting forward a developed method for revolutionary organizing or a defined strategy for developing one.

The Final Section

The most glaring and obvious differences between anarchists and Fire by Night emerge in the final section of *Points of Unity*, “Civil Society and the Revolutionary State.” They critique the state, asserting that it is “above all else an instrument of class rule...(it is) alienated from and operates above civil society...(and) it makes self-preservation its highest priority,” yet in the same section assert that in overthrowing the existing class rule we need to create a socialist state which can create a more egalitarian society. How this state will finally be done away with is through a second revolution which happens after the socialist state somehow allows the “creation of a vibrant civil society of autonomous organization.”

Fire by Night does not even attempt to deal with any of the challenges that anarchism poses to such theories in these points of unity. How the transition from bad state to good state to no state happens is not addressed except that each will be a violent revolution. Questions of developing critical consciousness and participation among “the masses” are not addressed except in the mention of needing a “vibrant civil society.” There is only a vague description of how civil society will participate. In history, transitional governments established in communist revolutions have been no better than capitalist states. They have suppressed or controlled the rebellions and organizing efforts of civil society, rather than allowing it to become “vibrant.” Fire by Night offers no explanation as to why the socialist state they imagine would be any different. Although in *After Winter* they state an intention to “ruthlessly attack the flaws in all existing revolutionary theory and search for the ideas that can be used,” they do not seem to have searched very far, or attacked very hard.

Work for Anarchists

I admire Fire by Night's stated goals of anti-sectarianism and working to develop a strategy that learns from past struggles and current realities. Yet they do not offer anything that is well developed or very new in *Points of Unity*.

In *After Winter*, Fire by Night packages eight years of experience into a neat analysis critiquing Love and Rage's and anarchism's lack of theoretical and strategic development. They have taken the path that many authoritarian communist parties have taken upon seizing state power—history has been retold through their eyes and to serve their purposes. The action and vitality of the anarchist movement disappears when they attempt to remove the messiness of it. In dismissing anarchism, Fire by Night has also dismissed complex lessons and the thoughtful and innovative thinking and work that can be created by anti-authoritarian processes.

Issues of revolutionary strategy need to be addressed by anarchists, but I believe we can find anti-authoritarian answers. Fire by Night is right that we need to find ways to draw out these discussion in our work through collective process and struggle. Let's make sure that our discussions are deeper and more thoughtful than Fire by Night's.

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