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The Insurrectionary Act and the Self-Organization of Struggle

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4. Organization grows out of struggle, struggle doesn't grow out of organization

Most formal organizations first attempt to build the organization then organize the struggle or “movement.” Insurrectionary anarchists see this as backwards. Informal organization, based on the affinity group, grows out of struggle. Affinity groups come to build links in struggle and then often coordinate actions; but, the level of organization depends on the level of struggle, not on the demands of a formal organization.

5. Autonomous action and solidarity

Insurrectionary anarchists recognize that the actions of individuals and affinity groups are autonomous, that no organization should be in a position to discipline the action of others. But autonomous action becomes strong when we act in revolutionary solidarity with others in struggle. Revolutionary solidarity is active and in conflict with the structures of domination; it is direct action that communicates a link between one's struggle and that of others.

2. Against mediation with power

As organizations become more permanent and worry about recruiting, they often begin to worry about their image, and attempt to limit the actions of others within the struggle who might give the movement a bad name. The more they institute power within their organization the more they tend to limit direct confrontational action and to encourage dialogue and mediation. Naively, they come to want to harness the power of a mass of bodies in order to get a seat at the table of power. This process is heavily at work in the anti-globalization movement; larger organizations are increasingly attempting to mediate with power. It is also the role unions take in society. For anarchists, of course, being against capitalism and the state in their entirety, there can be no dialogue with instituted power. The willingness of those in power to initiate a dialogue may be a sign of their weakness, but it is also the beginning of our defeat when we limit our active power to join them in discussion.

3. Formality and informality

Formal organizations separate the people into formal roles of organizer and organized. The roles of organizer and organized, of course, mirror the very social roles necessary to the operation of the society that we as anarchists are trying to overcome. In addition, formal organization tends to separate decision from the moment and situation of the act itself, separating decision from its execution, and thus limiting the autonomy of action. Both of these tendencies rigidify the social relationships that are vital to those in struggle. Formal organizations often also take on the role of the representation of the “movement,” shifting the struggle from social in nature to political. Insurrectionary anarchists tend to promote informal organization because they recognize that we, as anarchists, are part of those struggling, and don’t stand outside and above the exploited and excluded politically organizing them.

For anarchists the questions of how to act and how to organize are intimately linked. And it is these two questions, not the question of the desired form of a future society, that provide us with the most useful method for understanding the various forms of anarchism that exist. Insurrectionary anarchism is one such form, although it is important to stress that insurrectionary anarchists don’t form one unified block, but are extremely varied in their perspectives. Insurrectionary anarchism is not an ideological solution to social problems, a commodity on the capitalist market of ideologies and opinions, but an on-going practice aimed at putting an end to the domination of the state and the continuance of capitalism, which requires analysis and discussion to advance. Historically, most anarchists, except those who believed that society would evolve to the point that it would leave the state behind, have believed that some sort of insurrectionary activity would be necessary to radically transform society. Most simply, this means that the state has to be knocked out of existence by the exploited and excluded, thus anarchists must attack: waiting for the state to disappear is defeat.

I will spell out some implications that some insurrectionary anarchists have drawn from this general problem: if the state will not disappear on its own, how then do we end its existence? Insurrectionary anarchism is primarily a practice, and focuses on the organization of attack (insurrectionary anarchists aren’t against organization, but are critical of forms of organization that can impede actions that attack the state and capital). Thus, the adjective “insurrectionary” does not indicate a specific model of the future.

Anarchists who believe we must go through an insurrectionary period to rid the world of the institutions of domination and exploitation, moreover, take a variety of positions on the shape of a future society—they could be anarcho-communist, individualist or even primitivist, for example. Many refuse to offer a specific, singular model of the future at all, believing that people will choose a variety of social forms to organize themselves when given the chance.

They are critical of groups or tendencies that believe they are “carriers of the truth” and try to impose their ideological and formal solution to the problem of social organization. Instead, many insurrectionary anarchists believe that it is through self-organized struggle that people will learn to live without institutions of domination.

While insurrectionary anarchists are active in many parts of the world at the moment, the points in this article are particularly influenced by the activities and writings of those in Italy and Greece, which are also the countries where insurrectionary anarchists are the most active. The current, extremely varied Italian insurrectionary anarchist scene, which centers around a number of occupied spaces and publications, exists as an informal network carrying on their struggle outside of all formal organizations. This tendency has taken on the “insurrectionary anarchist” label to distinguish itself from the Italian Anarchist Federation, a platformist organization which officially reject individual acts of revolt, favoring only mass action and an educational and evangelistic practice centering around propaganda in “non-revolutionary periods,” and from the Italian libertarian municipalists who take a largely reformist approach to “anarchist” activity.

Insurrectionary anarchists are not historical determinists; that is, they don’t see history as following one set path, as something with which we need to move in tune. On the contrary, history is an open book, and the path that it will take depends on our actions. In this sense, a true act does not happen within context, but to context. To break with the present we must act against context, and not wait for a historically determined time to act, for it will never come. The act does not grow out of context, it happens to context and completely changes the context, turning the impossible of one moment into the possible of the next. And this is the heart of the insurrectionary event. As the insurrectionary event transforms the context of possibility, it also transforms the human and human social relations.

Yet, for an insurrectionary event to occur that opens a break with the present we need to pay attention to the question of organization. Anarchists must do what they can to open and develop the potential of insurrection. Certain forms of organization, however, stifle our potential to truly act against the present and for a new future, to move towards insurrection and a permanent break with the state and capital. Permanent organizations, organizations that attempt to synthesize those struggling into a single, unified organization, and organizations that attempt to mediate struggle are all forms of organization that tend to close the potential of insurrection. These ways of organization formalize and rigidify the relationships of those struggling in ways that limit the flexible combination of our power to act. Our active power, our power to create and transform, is our only weapon, and that which limits such power from within the movement of the exploited and excluded is our greatest weakness. This does not mean that we should remain unorganized (an impossibility—we always have some level of organization no matter how informal); in fact, it poses the very question of organization: how do we combine in a way that promotes our active powers?

1. Against permanent organizations

Permanent organizations tend to take on a logic of their own—a logic that supercedes that of insurrection. One just needs to look at the operations of authoritarian, Leninist groups or leftist, activist organizations to see this at work. It is usually all about building the group, recruiting above all else—permanence becomes the primary goal. Power is separated from those active in struggle and becomes instituted in the organization. The organizer becomes separated from the organized, and tends to take on the role of disciplining and speaking for the struggle.