Thinking About Strategy

The Eclipse Committee

2026-02-18

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Developing strategy can be very intimidating: it requires thinking about a lot of different things and how they interlink, taking a stand on certain issues and committing to courses of action based on imperfect information. Anarchists face an additional barrier to developing strategy in that we cannot simply hand off thinking about it to leaders – we must all be strategists on top of whatever else we are doing, and often we are doing many other things already. A framework to think about strategy, which both breaks it down into a set of smaller questions and also ensures that nothing key is missed, is often useful. So, lets go through developing a strategy in four steps.

Step One: The World You Want

The first part of developing a strategy is to define your end goals. This means first thinking about what an anarchist society might look like. Modern anarchists have often rejected this kind of theorising, but if we want to think about strategy in depth, there is no way around developing a vision of a future society that is detailed enough that we can use it as something to work towards.

When thinking about this future world, you should conceptualise at least two different things: institutions and culture. You must ask yourself both how the economy might work, how infrastructure might be run, the general organisational structure of an anarchist society, and what cultural norms are necessary to maintain those institutions. You should then tease out the ways in which anarchist institutions can encourage anarchist culture, and vice versa. This does not necessarily need to be very detailed, and you could list a range of different potential solutions. However, there are limits to how a society can be structured and still be "anarchist", and you need to have some idea of the structures you are aiming for in order to start working towards them.

This can be done as a form of brainstorming on paper or on a digital device, on your own or with others. Put ideas down and draw links between them where they rely on each other or affect each other. Circle things together when they are alternative organisational or cultural solutions to the same problem. When you have what you know down, ask yourself what is missing and what social problems you do not have solutions for.

Step Two: The World You Have

Now you need to develop an idea of how the current system is structured and how it maintains itself. What are the formal institutions of state and capital? What are the cultural norms that maintain them? What other forms of oppression and exploitation, like patriarchy or racial supremacy, exist within society? How do these all interlink and support each other? Are there tensions between any of them? What are their vulnerabilities and failures? Again, this can be done as a brainstorm, and working out what you don't know is just as important as developing what you do know.

If done as a brainstorm, this should be on the same piece of paper or document as step one, either below it or next to it. Then you can mark out where existing institutions and cultural norms directly contradict or prevent the creation of the anarchist institutions and cultural norms you have listed in step one. Your aim is not just to understand the structure of our current society, but how that structure prevents the development of an anarchist society and where institutions or

cultural norms need to be abolished or changed, and what specifically they need to be changed into.

Step Three: From Here to There

Now you can start to think about the *tactics* you will use to overcome barriers and build the world you want. These tactics could be, for example, building radical unions, or community organisations, or mutual aid groups, or various kinds of cultural or propaganda work. Again, if brainstorming, this should be the next part down or along from step two. You should link tactics to the institutions and norms identified in step two that they are supposed to undermine or change. Circle alternative tactics that solve the same problems.

However, you should not just think about how tactics undermine existing institutions and norms, but how they build the world you want. In this case, you may draw a link through step two and all the way back to institutions and norms from step one. Some tactics will undermine the existing world, some will build a new world, and some will do both. Again, work out what tactical problems you do not have answers for, along with those you can solve.

Step Four: Inevitable Reaction

The final step is working out how existing society will react to your tactics. The system of state and capital, the wider culture of authority and privilege, and competing political movements are not static and unchanging. They react to threats, and one of the ways that radical movements have failed is in not anticipating these reactions, and continuing to do the same thing long after state and capital have adapted to our tactics.

As a brainstorming session, put this step below or next to step three, and put down tactics that might be used to undermine your own tactics for change. Link them to the radical tactics they undermine. Circle them when there are multiple possible reactionary tactics that could be used in a given context. You can also draw lines through step three into step two when reactionary tactics reinforce or adapt a specific existing institution or norm.

When you have completed these four steps, regardless of if you have written them down, typed them up, or simply run through them in your head, you should know what your objectives are, what stands in your way, the tactics you will use to overcome those barriers and achieve your objectives, and the ways that your tactics might be countered, and you should know where the holes in your understanding are. You will have a provisional strategy and an idea of how to improve it.

The Limitations of Strategy

With all this said, it is also important to understand the limitations of this kind of framework. It is a starting point, not an end point. It parcels up the act of thinking about strategy into four simple stages in order to make that thinking easier, but any framework is going help illuminate some things at the cost of obscuring others. If, having used this framework, you find that certain issues do not fit easily into it, then it is time to modify it to suit your needs.

Any strategic thinking that you do is also not something you can impose on others, but the basis for conversations with them. An organisation or movement-wide strategy must be built from people comparing and contrasting their own understanding and coming to a compromise or synthesis. Hopefully this framework makes it easier to think about and articulate not only how you think about strategy, but where specifically your differences are with others. Are they at the level of the end objectives? Your understanding of the current system? The tactics you prefer? The ways you believe that the current system will react to those tactics?

Lastly, strategy must remain flexible. Any strategy is going to have flaws in it that will only be discovered by trying to put it into practice, and the point of developing a strategy is not to build a perfect idea of how to create anarchism, but to work out a direction of travel to start following, with the expectation that you will encounter problems you did not expect and will need to adapt to. Strategy is a tool that you modify and refine as you use it, not an absolute to be worshipped. But you need to start using that tool in order to discover how it needs to be adapted.