

Anarchist Organisation not Leninist Vanguardism

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Why an Anarchist Organization is Needed... But Not a “Vanguard Party”

Right now only a few people are revolutionary anarchists. The big majority of people reject anarchism and any kind of radicalism (if they think about it at all). For those of us who are anarchists, a key question concerns the relationship between the revolutionary minority (us) and the moderate and (as-yet) nonrevolutionary majority. Shall the revolutionary minority wait for the laws of the Historical Process to cause the majority (at least of the working class) to become revolutionary, as some propose? In that case, the minority really does not have to do anything. Or does the minority of radicals have to organize itself in order to spread its liberatory ideas, in cooperation with the historical process? If so, should the revolutionary minority organize itself in a top-down, centralized, fashion, or can it organize itself as a radically democratic federation, consistent with its goal of freedom?

Perhaps the most exciting tendency on the left today is the growth of pro-organizational, class struggle, anarchism. This includes international Platformism, Latin American especificismo, and other elements (Platformism is inspired by the 1926 Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists; in Skirda, 2002). Even some Trotskyists have noticed, “*Platformism’ [is] one of the more left-wing currents within contemporary anarchism...*” (International Bolshevik Tendency, 2002; p. 1)

Central to pro-organizational/class struggle anarchism is the belief that anarchists should organize themselves according to their beliefs. This particularly applies to those who agree on a program of antiauthoritarian social revolution to be carried out by the international working class and all oppressed people. They should organize a specifically anarchist voluntary association. It would be structured as a democratic federation of smaller groups. Such an organization would put out political literature and work to spread its ideas. With programmatic and tactical unity, members would participate in broader, more heterogeneous, associations, such as labor unions, community organizations, antiwar groups, and — when they arise in a revolutionary period — workers’ and community councils. Such anarchist organizations would not be “parties,” because they would not aim at achieving power for themselves. They would seek to lead by ideas and by example, not by taking over and ruling the popular organizations, let alone by taking state power.

This approach (which I have just summarized in a very condensed fashion) has been attacked from two sides. On one side are anti-organizational anarchists (including individualists, primitivists, and “post-leftists,” among others). At most these accept local collectives, with, perhaps, only the loosest of associations among them (a “network”). They have denounced pro-organizational anarchism as an attempt to build new authoritarian, essentially Leninist, parties. Real Leninists have also denounced it because it is not Leninist. The only extended work by Leninists on the subject (Platformism & Bolshevism, by the Trotskyist I.B.T., 2002) declares that there is “*a political chasm between the 1926 Platform and Bolshevism.*” (p. 2) Platformists, it says, are “*too anarchist for Bolsheviks, too ‘Bolshevik’ for anarchists*” even though “*the extent of the Platformists’ break from their libertarian heritage is often overestimated by their anarchist critics...*” (p. 3) The only solution, the authors claim, is to embrace the Leninist centralized vanguard party and the dictatorial workers’ state. Anti-organizational anarchists and Leninists are both agreed

that a radically-democratic, nonauthoritarian, and federated revolutionary organization is not possible.

Trotskyists point out that anarchist movements have consistently failed to achieve a free society. The only successful revolutions, they claim, has been those led by Leninist-type parties. The obvious anarchist rejoinder is that such Leninist “successes” have resulted in monstrous totalitarian states which have murdered tens of millions of workers and peasants. Anarchists wish to overthrow capitalism without ending up with such “success.” (Also, all varieties of Leninism have completely failed to achieve Marx’s and Lenin’s main goal of working class revolutions in the industrialized, imperialist, countries.) Still, this raises a valid question: how can anarchism avoid repeating its history of failure and defeat? How can we, without creating Stalinist-type states, overthrow world capitalism? Pro-organizational anarchism was developed precisely to deal with this problem.

There are similar disputes about forming organizations among libertarian (or autonomist) Marxists as there are among anarchists. It was apparently an issue in the split between C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya. It has been an issue in the Council Communist movement, with different theorists having different views. In the Socialisme ou Barbarie grouping in France after World War II, there was a split between Cornelius Castoriadis, taking a pro-organizational position, and Claude Lefort, who took the anti-organizational position. S. ou B.’s British co-thinkers in Solidarity, such as Maurice Brinton, took a pro-organizational stance.

In the rest of this essay, I will review the anarchist arguments for some sort of political organization, including the historical debate between the anarchist-syndicalists and the anarchist-communists. I will then review an anarchist critique of the Leninist party. I will go over the Russian revolution to demonstrate that the necessity of Leninist centralization is a myth. The Bolshevik Party led the Russian revolution when the Bolsheviks were most like an anarchist federation.

The Anarchist Revolutionary Political Organization

Many anarchists seem to think that the day will come when most people will see the worthlessness of authoritarian society. All together, like one person, at one moment, they will open their eyes to their alienation, stand up, and take back their society. This view is sometimes called “spontaneism.” Unfortunately things do not work that way. In general, over the long haul, people become radicalized heterogeneously. In conservative times, people become revolutionary by ones and twos. As things become more radicalized, by groups and clusters. Then, as things move into a period of radicalization, layers become revolutionary. Finally, in periods of upheaval, whole populations rise up. But many or most newly radicalized people have not thought out their goals or strategies. They tend to be full of energy but to be confused and uncertain until they can sort out their ideas through experience. It is easy in these periods for reformists to mislead them back to the old ways, or for authoritarian groups to set up new rulers. This has been demonstrated by the whole dismal history of post World War II revolutions in Europe and the “Third World.” More recently we have seen the unhappy results of the Iranian revolution which put the ayatollahs in power, or the case of Argentina, in which mass upheavals only produced a slightly more left capitalist regime (but the struggles in Argentina and the rest of Latin America are not over).

As groupings and layers of working people and others become radicalized, they have the chance to organize themselves to effectively spread their ideas among the rest of the (not-yet-radicalized) population. This does not contradict the self-organization of the whole oppressed population. It is an integral part of that self-organization.

Many groups will organize along authoritarian lines (either reformist or for a revolutionary new rulership). That is bound to happen, since authoritarianism is what we know. But there is a chance that some will organize themselves in libertarian, equalitarian, and cooperative directions – that is, become anarchists or other antiauthoritarians. This is vitally important if we are not to repeat the disastrous history of defeat of workers' revolutions.

A political organization will help antiauthoritarians to talk with each other, educate each other, develop their theory, their tactics and strategy, their analysis of what is going on and what to do about it, and their vision of what a socialist society could look like. They can discuss what they have learned from other people and what they can offer to teach others. Being part of an organization can help them resist the conservatizing and demoralizing influence of the rest of society. Something like what the anarchist Paul Goodman meant, "*It is enough to find-and-make a band, two hundred, of the like-minded, to know that oneself is sane though the rest of the city is batty.*" (1962; p. 17)

The issue here is the relationship between the minority which has come to revolutionary conclusions, and the majority which, most of the time, is nonrevolutionary – except in revolutionary periods. (That the majority has become revolutionary is what, by definition, makes a period revolutionary!) Spontaneist and anti-organizational anarchists do not see this as an issue; they deny that it exists. To them, even talking about a revolutionary minority means being authoritarian. They live in a world of denial. It is only possible to counter dangers of authoritarianism if we admit that it may arise out of the split between a revolutionary minority and the majority. Pro-organizational anarchism is a way of dealing with this split, of overcoming it through practical politics, a way which is distinct from Leninism.

A revolutionary anarchist federation will have two interwoven tasks, within the larger popular organizations. One is to fight against all the authoritarian organizations that will inevitably arise: Stalinists, social democrats, liberals, fascists, etc. All these will try to undermine the workers' self-confidence, the people's initiative. We will argue against these groupings, fight against them, and encourage the workers, women, racial and national minorities, etc. to have confidence in themselves, to take power for themselves, to rely on themselves and not on any saviors from above.

The other, intertwined, task is to make alliances with whatever individuals and groups we can – with anyone going in our direction. No one has all the answers. For example, in the huge society of North America, it is unlikely that just one ("vanguard") organization will have all the best militants and all the right ideas. Revolutionary anarchists should be prepared to make united fronts with whatever groups develop in an antiauthoritarian direction.

Many of these issues were raised during the 1907 International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam. About 80 anarchists attended from all over Europe, North and South America and elsewhere, including most of the best-known figures of the time, such as Emma Goldman. Among other topics discussed, Pierre Monatte, a French anarchist-syndicalist, urged anarchists to go into the unions [syndicates], to help to organize and build them. He argued that this was the way for anarchists to break out of their small-circle isolation, their participation in pointless rebellions and

(for a few) in terrorism. It was a way, he declared, for anarchists to make contact with workers and to participate in their lives and struggles.

Speaking against him was the Italian anarchist-communist Errico Malatesta. (These labels are misleading, since the anarchist-syndicalists agreed that their goal was anarchist-communism, while the anarchist-communists agreed that unions were valuable.) He agreed that it was important for anarchists to participate in unions. But he objected to the implicit notion that anarchists should, in effect, dissolve themselves into the unions. This was dangerous, he warned, because the unions, by their very nature, had to attract workers with a wide variety of levels of consciousness, conservatives and state-socialists as well as anarchists. Meanwhile the job of the unions was to negotiate better working conditions and pay under capitalism, so long as there was not a revolutionary situation. That is, the unions had to adapt both to the more conservative consciousness of the majority of its members and to the practical necessities of the capitalist marketplace. Therefore, Malatesta and others concluded, anarchist workers needed to also organize themselves into specifically anarchist organizations, to fight for anarchist ideas. They would work inside and outside of unions, dealing not only with union issues but with every struggle against oppression in every class.

(Remarkably, many leftists know in detail about Lenin's debate with the "Economists" — Marxists who wanted to focus only on labor union organizing — as summarized in Lenin's *What is to be Done?* But they know nothing about the Malatesta-Monatte debate which covered much of the same ground. Thus the I.B.T. Trotskyists note, with apparent surprise, "*...Platformists have a record of participating in struggles to extend and defend democratic rights...This demonstrates a relatively sophisticated understanding of the operation of the capitalist state and is congruent with Lenin's [What is to be Done?].*" [2002, p. 14])

Monatte was correct about the value of anarchists joining the unions. By this approach, anarchists broke out of their isolation and achieved a large influence among workers and others. But Malatesta was also right. The once-militant French syndicates (the C.G.T.) became more and more conservatized. All that the top union bosses kept of their original anarchism was a desire to keep the unions separate from the socialist parties. When World War I broke out, the French syndicates endorsed the war and the government. Monatte went into opposition to the union bureaucracy and its pro-imperialism.

Spanish anarchist-syndicalists were aware of what happened in France and saw similar tendencies in the Spanish syndicates (the C.N.T.). Unlike the French anarchist-syndicalists, the Spaniards organized themselves into a specifically anarchist federation, the F.A.I., within the C.N.T. They were able to beat back the reformist bureaucratic trend (and later the Communists). Whatever its eventual mistakes, in this area the F.A.I. remains an example for pro-organizational anarchists.

The Leninist Party

As is well known, the concept of the party is key to Leninism. It has been put in various terms. The central document of Trotskyism (a variant of Leninism) is Trotsky's 1938 "Transitional Program." Its first sentence — and fundamental concept — is, "*The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat.*" (1977, p. 111) That is, the main problem is not the conservatism of the mass of working people, because from time to time in this era workers and oppressed people have risen up against capitalism.

The problem is that the social democrats, liberals, Stalinists, and nationalists, are the respected, established, leaders. These elitists lead the workers into some version of the same old oppression. What is needed, then, is to build a new leadership, a party committed to a revolutionary program in word and deed, which can win the support of the majority of the workers and oppressed.

The advantage of this conception is that it tells the revolutionary minority to not blame the workers for the failure of the revolution. This does not deny that the nonrevolutionary consciousness of most workers is a problem. But there is no point in bemoaning the “backwardness” of the majority, any more than there is in romanticizing the workers. The decay of capitalism will repeatedly push the working class to rebel. The job of the revolutionary minority is to develop its own theory, analysis, strategy, tactics, and actual practice.

The disadvantage of this conception of leadership is that it lends itself to seeing the leadership as the all-important thing. The task becomes to replace the bad leaders with the good leaders, the bad parties with the good party: the party with the right ideas. Instead of focusing on arousing the people, encouraging their independence and self-reliance, the implication is that all they need is to put the right leadership in power. At its worst, the party becomes a substitute for the working class.

Leninists conceive of their party as a centralized organization — under “democratic centralism.” This is based on their vision of socialism, which they understand to be a centralized economy managed by a centralized state. A centralized party is necessary to achieve this and, once achieved, to run the centralized stratified economy. In theory the state and party are to “wither away” (someday), but the economy will remain centralized — and on a world scale, no less. The very idea is a bureaucratic nightmare.

“Centralization” is not just coordination, unification, or cooperation. Centralization (“democratic” or otherwise) means that everything is run from a center. A minority is in charge. As Paul Goodman put it, “*In a centralized enterprise...authority is topdown. Information is gathered from below in the field and is processed to be usable by those above; decisions are made in headquarters; and policy, schedule, and standard procedure are transmitted downward by chain of command...The system was devised to discipline armies; to keep records, collect taxes, and perform bureaucratic functions; and for...mass production.*” (1977, p. 3, 4) This is the basic model of capitalist society, and the Leninist party maintains it. This is the capitalist state in embryo, the capital/labor relationship in practice.

To be sure, an anarchist federation also has a degree of “centralization,” that is, specific bodies and individuals are assigned specific tasks by the whole membership. These central groupings are elected and are recallable at any time, with a rotation of tasks among members. By definition, a federation balances centralization with decentralization, with — among anarchists — only as much centralization as is absolutely needed, and as much decentralization as is maximally possible.

Among Leninists, the centralized party is justified philosophically. The party supposedly knows the Truth, knows “scientific socialism.” The party is considered the embodiment of Proletarian Consciousness. Proletarian consciousness is not what the proletariat actually believes but what it should believe, what it must believe, which only the party knows for sure. Therefore the party has nothing to learn from anyone outside the party. The leadership of the party is presumably the most knowledgeable about the truth. Therefore the party must be centralized, with a stable central leadership. It takes up “*the bright man’s burden*” (Landy, 1990, p. 5). The party — or its top leadership — is the “vanguard.”

I do not wish to quibble about definitions of words, when it is the concepts which matter. There have been anarchists who have used the word “vanguard” to describe themselves. They used the term to signify that they were on the cutting-edge of political thinking, the most extreme revolutionaries, the left of the left. They used “vanguard” as artists use the French term “avant-garde,” those in the forefront of new ideas. But “vanguard” has come to mean not only a group which has its own ideas, the revolutionary minority. It has come to mean those who think they have all the answers and therefore have the right to rule over others. This is what anarchists reject.

For example, the I.B.T. pamphlet argues that the Bolsheviks were right to maintain a one-party dictatorship in the early Soviet Union (when Lenin and Trotsky were in power). This is true, they say, even though the majority of the workers (let alone most peasants) no longer supported them. If they had permitted free votes to the soviets, the workers and peasants would have voted them out, electing Left Social Revolutionaries (populists), Mensheviks (reform socialists), or anarchists. These would have, they claim, capitulated to capitalism and permitted the rise of a proto-fascism. Whether or not this was true, the Trotskyists justify the rule of a minority party dictatorship, because the party knew what was best for the people. However, this approach did not lead to socialism, but to Stalinism, the counterrevolution through the party. Stalinism was almost as brutal a totalitarianism as was Nazism. According to the I.B.T. pamphlet, the Bolshevik party was no longer revolutionary by 1924, not that long after the 1917 revolution. Therefore, I conclude, it would have been better for the Bolsheviks to have stuck to the revolutionary democracy of the original soviets, even if they were voted out of power. Nothing could have been worse than what happened.

The Myth of the Bolshevik Revolution

It is widely believed that the Russian revolution proves the need for a centralized, topdown, Bolshevik-type of vanguard party. Without that sort of party, it is said, there would not have been a socialist revolution. Therefore we need to build that kind of party today. This argument is mostly mythological.

Lenin, in exile in Europe, had built a centralized body of professional cadre, but they did not at all control the actual rank-and-file of the Marxist movement in the Russian Empire. The socialist movement was affected by Czarist repression plus internal factionalism, of which the Bolshevik-Menshevik split is only the best known. Murray Bookchin summarized, *“The Bolshevik Party...was an illegal organization during most of the years leading up to the revolution. The party was continually being shattered and reconstituted, with the result that until it took power it never really hardened into a fully centralized, bureaucratic, hierarchical machine. Moreover, it was riddled by factions...into the civil war.”* (1986, p. 220)

Similar points were made by Hal Draper, an authority on Marx and Lenin, *“...The preliminaries for a mass party had taken shape in Russia in the form not of sects but of local workers circles, which remained loose and founded loose regional associations...The membership organizations in Russia were local and regional party groups which might be part Bolshevik and part Menshevik in sympathy, or might shift support from one to the other from time to time, etc. Every time a ‘party congress’ or conference was held, each party group had to decide whether to attend this one or that one, or both....Individual party members in Russia, or party groups, might decide to distribute Lenin’s*

paper or the Menshevik organ or neither — many preferred a ‘non-faction’ organ such as Trotsky put out in Vienna; or they might use in their work those publications of the Bolsheviks which they liked plus those of the Mensheviks and others, on a freewheeling basis.” (1971, pp 7–8)

The role of the Bolsheviks in the actual overthrow of the capitalist Provisional Government has been carefully studied by Alexander Radinowitch (1976, 1991). By studying the early memoirs of Bolshevik activists and reading the Bolshevik newspapers of the time, he concluded that “...*the near-monolithic unity and ‘iron discipline’ of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 were largely myth...*” (1991, pp. viii-ix) The party’s Central Committee was unable to control the many regional and local organizations, and usually did not try to. Even in the central locations of the two main cities of Petrograd and Moscow, there were relatively autonomous Bolshevik bodies which put out their own papers and made their own immediate policies. On the Central Committee there were strong-willed militants who fought for their views, sometimes ignoring party discipline. Meanwhile the party had opened itself to tens of thousands of new worker members, who shook things up considerably. When Lenin returned to Russia, he relied on these new rank-and-file members to overrule the conservative policies of the Old Bolsheviks. Rabinowitz concluded that these “decentralized and undisciplined” (p. ix) divisions caused some difficulties, but overall they were vitally useful. “...*The Bolsheviks’ organizational flexibility, their relative openness and responsiveness...were to be an important source of the party’s strength and ability to take power.*” (1991, p. xi)

The creation of the centralized, monolithic, party came after the Revolution, during the civil war against the counterrevolutionary Whites. When the civil war was over, in 1921, they put down the revolt at the Kronstadt naval fortress and defeated internal party oppositions — both of which had called for more working class democracy. Lenin persuaded the Bolsheviks (now renamed the Communist Party) to ban all internal caucuses and factions (Trotsky agreed). “...*The Bolsheviks tended to centralize their party to the degree that they became isolated from the working class.*” (Bookchin, 1986, p. 221) The party became even more bureaucratic and internally repressive with the victory of Stalin in 1924 and thereafter.

The Bolshevik Party made the Russian revolution when the party was most like an anarchist federation! The centralized, monolithic, party was not the party of the revolution but the party of counterrevolution. The authoritarian Leninist parties which made the Chinese, Vietnamese, Yugoslavian, and North Korean revolutions were modeled on the party of the Stalinist Soviet Union. Mao and others wanted a party that would create a similar, state capitalist, totalitarian, regime.

There is another mythological aspect of the usual image of the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik Party. This is the concept that it is the Bolsheviks on their own who overthrew the Provisional Government. This is not true. The original seizure of power was carried out by a united front of the Bolshevik Party, the Left Social Revolutionary Party, and the anarchists. The Bolsheviks played a leading role because of the weaknesses of the other two groupings, but they could not have done it alone. The Left Social Revolutionaries (or Left SRs) were the heirs of Russian peasant populism, with a libertarian socialist program. Unlike the Bolsheviks, they had support among the peasants. Their weakness was their entanglement with the right wing of the SR party, which they were only then (1917) splitting from. The anarchists were active in the main cities and in many industries. The anarchist-syndicalists were important in building the factory councils. Unfortunately the anarchists were divided into various tendencies and were out-organized by the political parties. (The anarchist-syndicalists seem to have been better organized

than the anarchist-communists, in terms of putting out a distinct paper and making their views popularly known.)

The Left SRs and the anarchists agreed with the Bolsheviks on the need to overthrow the bourgeois Provisional Government and to replace it with the soviets. They all cooperated in the military committee, led by Trotsky, which overturned the Provisional Government. The Left SRs then made a joint government with the Bolsheviks in the soviets. The anarchists participated in the soviets and generally supported the Left SR-Bolshevik policies. The end of this united front was a major step toward one-party dictatorship by the Communists. (How this developed is too messy to go into here.) In 1921, besides outlawing internal caucuses inside the Communist Party, Lenin and Trotsky also demanded the final outlawry of all other parties, no matter how much they might be willing to support socialism. The monolithic, one-party, centralized dictatorship had been created, even though it went through a few more stages before Stalin had it completely nailed down. But that was not how the revolution had been made.

Conclusion

Whatever its achievements, anarchism has repeatedly failed to create a free cooperative society. Revolutions influenced by anarchists have been defeated, or “succeeded” by being taken over by the statist. Now there is a new upsurge of anarchism on a world scale. A large section of militants look to the pro-organizational/class struggle trend within historic anarchism, as expressed by Malatesta, the Platformists, the F.A.I., and the especificistas. Some of us also look to the pro-organizational trend in autonomist Marxism. We advocate democratic federations organized around a program of international revolution by the working class and all oppressed. Anti-organizational anarchists denounce this as creating Leninist-type parties. Whatever their desires, in practice anti-organizationalists abandon effective anarchist organizing against capitalism and the state. Meanwhile, Leninists build parties which re-create the centralized, leader/led split of stratified capitalism. They propagate a false, authoritarian, image of how the Russian revolution was achieved. We, however, still believe that the emancipation of the working class and oppressed is the task of the workers and oppressed themselves. We believe that the formation of revolutionary anarchist federations is part of the self-organization of those oppressed and exploited by capitalism. That self-organization remains the key to human liberation.

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