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Against Organizationalism: Anarchism as both Theory and Critique of Organization

One of the most annoying and oft repeated clichés of leftist political rhetoric concerns the unquestioned imperative for nonspecific, generic "organization." Whatever else might define the left, it has always and consistently called for the creation and development of formal organizations that are supposed to represent and lead the masses or the working class (or these days often the appropriate identity-group or "minority"). Of course, when leftists leave the realm of rhetoric and enter the realm of practice, it becomes quite evident why the details of organization are usually left unspecified. It's easy to say that unorganized or disorganized people probably won't have much success pursuing large, complex projects. But when the form of organization actually proposed calls for a "transmission-belt" structure with an explicit division between leaders and led, along with provisions to discipline rank and file members while shielding leaders from responsibility to those being led, more than a few people wise up to the con game and reject it. Even the addition of a little democracy these days isn't enough to disguise the stench of power politics.

None of this is surprising to most anarchists, because the mainstream left has been explicitly hierarchical, authoritarian and statist since the time of the Jacobins and the French Revolution. However, even anarchists — or at least the more leftist of anarchists — have not been immune to organizational fetishism. From a genuine concern for helping to create the conditions for the have-nots to take back their world, the leftist organizational imperative is too often mistaken for a healthy underlying strategy which has unfortunately been undermined and discredited by unethical or power-hungry authoritarian leftists.

It's true that the increasingly widespread disillusionment with formal organization amongst genuine radicals is often a direct result of two hundred years of counterproductive leftist practice. But leftist organizational practice isn't just a good strategy corrupted by bad personnel. The same organization-building strategies with more radical theory and values grafted in place would continue to produce the same type of self-defeating practice precisely because the underlying problems are structural and not incidental. The cult of organizationalism — in which the construction and enlargement of formal, mass

political and economic organizations take priority over the encouragement and generalization of anarchist self-organization — directly contradicts anarchist principles and goals. Organizationalism encourages and produces authoritarian, hierarchical, and alienating practices because it is based on the idea that people should be organized by politically-conscious militants rather than the anarchist idea that people must organize themselves for their own liberation.

Historically, the anarchist idea, anarchist theory and the international anarchist movement all originated in large degree in critical response to the problems posed by radical organization. Yet, today, all too many left anarchists are taking on the job of rehabilitating a highly problematic organizationalist rhetoric and practice, relying only on superficial criticisms of the explicitly authoritarian, statist left to preven — they hope — their own projects from duplicating the duplicity of the many leftist disasters that litter revolutionary history.

All anarchists differ from the political left in one central way: anarchists propose individual and communal self-activity, self-direction and self-organization as the only possible method for genuinely taking control of our lives. The political left, on the contrary, proposes organizing people as objects in order to gain the political power necessary to change institutional social conditions. The more radical of leftists will add that such change in institutional conditions can help bring about the possibility that the masses will eventually develop enough self-awareness to directly govern themselves. But this is, of course, relegated to the indefinite future.

Given the ongoing disintegration of the international left, it has become ever more important for anarchists to rediscover and reconsider the foundations of the anarchist movement in the anarchist theory and critique of organization. As more leftists and ex-leftists drift into the anarchist milieu, it becomes increasingly important to remember that anarchism isn't merely a form of leftism without an explicit goal of taking state power. The entire leftist political culture of representation, hierarchical organization, heteronomous discipline and the cult of leadership is contrary to the anarchist culture of autonomy, free association, self-organization, direct action and personal responsibility. The leftist practice of creating formal

mass organizations in order to build political power involves entirely different assumptions and goals than the anarchist practice of encouraging generalized self-initiated, self-directed activity.

All the various forms of left anarchism involve attempted syntheses of aspects of left organizationalism with aspects of anarchist organization. And all of these attempted syntheses require some degree of sacrifice of anarchist theory, practice and values in exchange for an anticipated increase in ideological appeal or practical power. But anarchists will always sacrifice their own principles at great risk. There have been powerful left-anarchist syntheses that have made great practical contributions towards revolt, insurrection and revolution at times in the past: the heyday of anarcho-syndicalism around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century being one. But these have always come at the price of also diluting and confusing the anarchist side of the syntheses, which has ultimately led to their defeat.

In order to prevent further defeats, we can consciously base our practice on consistent principles of self-organization, always with as few compromises as possible, and with a clear eye on our goals.