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Anarchy and Organization: A letter to the left

Murray Bookchin

January 15, 1969

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New Left Notes, January 15, 1969. Lightly edited to fix character recognition and typing errors, such as commas where there should be periods, the word “that” where it should say “than”, etc.

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Anarchy and Organization originally was written in reply to an attack by Huey Newton on anarchist forms of organization.

“In Defense Of Self Defense” Exclusive by Huey Newton
(Huey on Anarchists and Individualists as related to revolutionary struggle and the Black Liberation Movement)

The Black Panther, November 16, 1968. Page 12

<http://www.prisoncensorship.info/archive/etext/bpp/bpp161168.htm>

There is a hoary myth that anarchists do not believe in organization to promote revolutionary activity. This myth was raised from its resting place by Marcuse in a L’Express interview some months ago and reiterated again by Huey Newton in his In Defence of Self-Defence, which New Left Notes decided to reprint in the recent National Convention issue.

To argue the question of organization versus non-organization is ridiculous; this issue has never been in dispute among serious anarchists, except perhaps for those lonely individualists whose ideology is rooted more in an extreme variant of classical liberalism than anarchy. Yes,

anarchists believe in organization—in national organization and international organization. Anarchist organization have ranged from loose, highly decentralized groups to vanguard movements of many thousands, like the Spanish FAI, which functioned in a highly concerted fashion.

The real question at issue is not organization versus non-organization, but rather, what kind of organization. What different kinds of anarchist organizations have in common is that they are developed organically from below, not engineered into existence from above. They are social movements, combining a creative revolutionary life-style with a creative revolutionary theory, not political parties, whose mode of life is indistinguishable from the surrounding bourgeois environment and whose ideology is reduced to rigid tried-and-tested programs. They try to reflect as much as is humanly possible the liberated society they seek to achieve, not slavishly duplicate the prevailing system of hierarchy, class, and authority. They are built around intimate groups of brothers and sisters, whose ability to act in common is based on initiative, convictions freely arrived at, and deep personal involvement, not a bureaucratic apparatus, fleshed out by docile memberships and manipulated from the top by a handful of all-knowing leaders.

I don't know who Huey is arguing with when he speaks of anarchists who believe all they have to do is just express themselves individually in order to achieve freedom. Tim Leary, Allen Ginsberg, The Beatles, Certainly not the revolutionary anarchist communists I know—and I know a large and fairly representative number. Nor is it clear to me where Huey acquired his facts on the May-June revolt in France. The Communist party and the other progressive parties of the French Left hadn't merely lagged behind the people, as Huey seems to believe; these disciplined and centralized organizations tried in every way to obstruct the revolution and re-direct it back into traditional parliamentary channels. Even the disciplined, centralized Trotskyist FER and the Maoist groups opposed the rev-

olutionary students as ultra-leftists, adventurers, and romantics right up to the first street fighting in May. Characteristically, most of the disciplined, centralized organizations of the French Left either lagged outrageously behind the events or, in the case of the Communist Party and progressive parties, shamelessly betrayed the students and workers to the system.

I find it curious that while Huey accuses the French Stalinist hacks of merely having lagged behind the people he holds the anarchists and Danny Cohn-Bendit responsible for the people being forced to turn back to DeGaulle. I visited France shortly after the May-June revolt and I can substantiate with out the least difficulty how resolutely Danny Cohn Bendit, the March 22nd Movement, and the anarchists tried to develop the assembly forms and action committees into a structural program (indeed, it went far beyond mere program) to replace the DeGaulle government. I could show quite clearly how they tried to get the workers to retain their hold on the factories and establish direct economic contacts with the peasants in short, how they tried to replace the French political and economic structure by creative, viable revolutionary forms. In this, they met with continual obstruction from the disciplined centralized parties of the French Left including a number of Trotskyist and Maoist sects.

There is another myth that needs to be exploded—the myth that social revolutions are made by tightly disciplined cadres, guided by a highly centralized leadership. All the great social revolutions are the work of deep-seated historic forces and contradictions to which the revolutionary and his organization contributes very little and, in most cases, completely misjudges. The revolutions themselves break out spontaneously. The glorious party usually lags behind these events—and, if the uprising is successful, steps in to commandeer, manipulate, and almost invariably distort it. It is then that the revolution reaches its real period of crises: will the glorious party re-create another system of hierarchy, commination and power in its sacred mis-

sion to protect the revolution, or will it be dissolved into the revolution together with the dissolution of hierarchy, domination and power as such? If a revolutionary organization is not structured to dissolve into the popular forms created by the revolution once its function as a catalyst is completed; if its own forms are not similar to the libertarian society it seeks to create, so that it can disappear into the revolutionary forms of the future—then the organization becomes a vehicle for carrying the forms of the past into the revolution. It becomes a self-perpetuating organism, a state machine that, far from withering away, perpetuates all the archaic conditions for its own existence.

There is far more myth than reality to the claim that a tightly centralized and disciplined party promotes the success of a revolution. The Bolsheviks were split, divided, and riddled by factional strife from October, 1917 to March, 1921. Ironically, it was only after the last White armies had been expelled from Russia that Lenin managed to completely centralize and discipline his party. Far more real have been the endless betrayals engineered by the hierarchical, disciplined, highly centralized parties of the Left, such as the Social Democratic and Communist.

They followed almost inexorably from the fact that every organization (however revolutionary its rhetoric and however well-intentioned its goals) which models itself structurally on the very system it seeks to overthrow becomes assimilated and subverted by bourgeois relations. It's seeming effectiveness becomes the source of its greatest failures.

Undeniably problems arise which can be solved only by committees, by co-ordination, and by a high measure of self-discipline. To the anarchist, committees must be limited to the practical tasks that necessitate their existence, and they must disappear once their functions are completed. Co-ordination and self-discipline must be achieved voluntarily, by virtue of the high moral and intellectual caliber of the revolutionary. To

seek less than this is to accept, as a revolutionary, a mindless robot, a creature of authoritarian training, a manipulable agent whose personality and outlook are utterly alien, indeed antithetical, to any society that could be remotely regarded as free.

No serious anarchist will disagree with Huey's plea on the necessity for wiping out the imperialist structure by organized groups. If at all possible we must work together. We must recognize too, that in the United States, the heartland of world imperialism today, an economy and technology has been developed which could remove, almost overnight, all the problems that Marx once believed justified the need for a state. It would be a disastrous error to deal with an economy of potential abundance and cybernated production from a theoretical position which was still rooted in a technological era based on coal, crude machines, long hours of toil, and material scarcity. It is time we stop trying to learn from Mao's China and Castro's Cuba—and see the remarkable economic reality under our very eyes for all men to enjoy once the American bourgeois colossus can be tumbled and its resources brought to the service of humanity.

Murray Bookchin

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