

The End of Arrogance: Decentralization and Anarchist Organizing

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For too long, anarchist projects have been mismanaged by arrogant fantasies of mass. We have unconsciously adopted the Statist, Capitalist and Authoritarian belief that “bigger equals better” and that we must tailor our actions and groups towards this end. Despite our intuitive understandings that large organizations rarely accomplish more than small, tight groups working together, the desire for mass remains strong. We must re-examine how we organize projects in order to awake from the nightmare of over-structure that inevitably leads to bureaucracy, centralization and ineffective anarchist work. This article suggests a few ideas on how anarchists can reject the trap of mass and reinvent ourselves, our groups and our work: from local community activities to large revolutionary mobilizations. The rejection of mass organizations as the be-all, end-all of organizing is vital for the creation and rediscovery of possibilities for empowerment and effective anarchist work.

The Tyranny of Structure

Most mass structures are a result of habit, inertia and the lack of creative critique. Desire for mass is accepted as common sense in the same way it is ‘common sense’ that groups must have leaders, or that they must make decisions by voting. Even anarchists have been tricked into accepting the necessity of super structures and large organizations for the sake of efficiency, mass, or unity. These super structures have become a badge of legitimacy and they are often the only conduits by which outsiders, whether the media, the police or other leftists, can understand us. The result is an alphabet soup of mega-groups which largely exist to propagate themselves and, sadly, do little else. Unfortunately, we haven’t just been tricked into accepting superstructures as the overriding venue of our work: many of us have gone along willingly, because the promise of mass is a seductive one.

Large coalitions and super-structures have become the coin of the realm not only for leftist groups in general but also for anarchist enterprises. They appeal to activists’ arrogant fantasies of mass: the authoritarian impulse to be leading (or at least be part of) a large group of people that reinforce and legitimize our deeply held ideologies and beliefs. Even our best intentions and wildest dreams are often crowded out by visions of the black clad mob storming the Bastille or the IMF headquarters.

The price of the arrogant dream of mass is appallingly high and the promised returns never come. Super-structures, which include federations, centralized networks and mass organizations, demand energy and resources to survive. They are not perpetual motion machines which produce more energy than what is poured into them. In a community of limited resources and energy like ours, a super-structure can consume most of these available resources and energies, rendering the group ineffective. Mainstream non-profits have recently illustrated this tendency. Large organizations like the Salvation Army commonly spend 2/3 of their monies (and even larger amounts of its labor) on simply maintaining its existence: officers, outreach, meetings and public appearance. At best, only 1/3 of their output actually goes to their stated goals. The same trend is replicated in our political organizations.

We all know that most large coalitions and super-structures have exceedingly long meetings. Here’s a valuable exercise: The next time you find yourself bored by an overlong meeting, count the number of people in attendance. Then multiply that number by how long the meeting lasts: this will give you the number of person-hours devoted to keeping the organization alive. Factor

in travel time, outreach time and the propaganda involved in promoting the meeting and that will give you a rough estimate of the amount of activist hours consumed by greedy maw of the superstructure. After that nightmarish vision, stop and visualize how much actual work could be accomplished if this immense amount of time and energy were actually spent on the project at hand instead of what is so innocently referred to as ‘organizing’.

Affinity or Bust

Not only are super-structures wasteful and inefficient, but they also require that we mortgage our ideals and affinities. By definition, coalitions seek to create and enforce agendas. These are not merely agendas for a particular meeting but larger priorities for what type of work is important. Within non-anarchist groups, this prioritization often leads to an organizational hierarchy to ensure that all members of the group promote the overall agenda.

A common example is the role of the media person or ‘spokesman’ (and it is almost always a man) whose comments are accepted as the opinion for dozens, hundreds or sometimes thousands of people. In groups without a party line or platform, we certainly shouldn’t accept any other person speaking for us — as individuals, affinity groups or collectives. While the delusions of media stars and spokespeople are merely annoying, superstructures can lead to scenarios with much graver consequences. In mass mobilizations or actions, the tactics of an entire coalition are often decided by a handful of people. Many of the disasters of particular recent mobilizations can be squarely blamed on the centralization of information and tactical decisions on a tiny cadre of individuals within the larger coalition/organization (which might include dozens of collectives and affinity groups). For anarchists, such a concentration of influence and power in the hands of a few is simply unacceptable.

It has long been a guiding principle of anarchist philosophy that people should engage in activities based on their affinities and that our work should be meaningful, productive and enjoyable. This is the hidden benefit of voluntary association. It is arrogant to believe that members in a large structure, which again can number in the hundreds or thousands of people, should all have identical affinities and ideals. It is arrogant to believe that through discussion and debate, any one group should convince all the others that their particular agenda will be meaningful, productive and enjoyable for all. Due to this nearly impossible situation, organizations rely on coercion to get their agendas accepted by their membership. The coercion is not necessarily physical (like the State) or based on deprivation (like Capitalism) but based on some sense of loyalty or solidarity or unity. This type of coercion is the stock and trade of the vanguard.

Organizations spend a significant amount of their time at meetings trying to convince you that your affinities are disloyal to the greater organization and that your desires and interests obstruct or remove you from solidarity with some group or another. When these appeals fail, the organization will label your differences as obstructionist or breaking ‘unity’ — the hobgoblin of efficiency. Unity is an arrogant ideal which is too often used against groups who refuse to cede their autonomy to a larger super-structure.

Many anarchists whose primary work is done in large organizations often never develop their own affinities or skills and instead, do work based on the needs of super-structures. Without affinity groups or collective work of their own, activists become tied to the mass abstract political goals of the organization, which leads to even greater inefficiency and the ever present “burn-out”

that is so epidemic in large coalitions and super-structures.

Liberty, Trust and True Solidarity

“All Liberty is based on Mutual Trust” — Sam Adams

If we seek a truly liberated society in which to flourish, we must also create a trusting society. Cops, armies, laws, governments, religious specialists and all other hierarchies are essentially based on mistrust. Super-structures and coalitions mimic this basic distrust that is so rampant and detrimental in the wider society. In the grand tradition of the Left, large organizations today feel that due to their size or mission, they have a right to micromanage the decisions and actions of all its members. For many activists, this feeling of being something larger than themselves fosters an allegiance to the organization above all. These are the same principles that foster nationalism and patriotism. Instead of working through and building initiatives and groups that we ourselves have created and are based in our own communities, we work for a larger organization with diluted goals, hoping to convince others to join us. This is the trap of the Party, the three letter acronym group and the large coalition.

In large groups, power is centralized, controlled by officers (or certain working groups) and divvied out, as it would be done by any bureaucratic organization. In fact a great deal of its energies are devoted to guarding this power from others in the coalition. In groups which attempt to attract anarchists (such as anti-globalization coalitions) this centralization of power is transferred to certain high profile working groups such as ‘media’ or ‘tactical’. Regardless of how it appears on the outside, superstructures foster a climate in which tiny minorities have disproportionate influence over others in the organization.

As anarchists, we should reject all notions of centralized power and power hoarding. We should be critical of anything that demands the realignment of our affinities and passions for the good of an organization or abstract principle. We should guard our autonomy with the same ferocity with which the super-structure wishes to strip us of it.

Mutual aid has long been the guiding principle by which anarchists work together. The paradox of mutual aid is that we can only protect our own autonomy by trusting others to be autonomous. Super-structures do the opposite and seek to limit autonomy and work based on affinity in exchange for playing on our arrogant fantasies and the doling out power. Decentralization is the basis of not only autonomy (which is the hallmark of liberty), but also of trust. To have genuine freedom, we have to allow others to engage in their work based on their desires and skills while we do the same. We can hold no power from them or try to coerce them into accepting our agenda. The successes that we have in the streets and in our local communities almost always come from groups working together: not because they are coerced and feel duty-bound, but out of genuine mutual aid and solidarity.

We should continue to encourage others to do their work in coordination with ours. In our anarchist work, we should come together as equals: deciding for ourselves with whom we wish to form affinity groups or collectives. In accordance with that principle, each affinity group would be able to work individually with other groups. These alliances might last for weeks or for years, for a single action or for a sustained campaign, with two groups or two hundred. Our downfall is when the larger organization becomes our focus, not the work which it was created for. We should work together, but only with equal status and with no outside force, neither the state,

god nor some coalition, determining the direction or shape of the work we do. Mutual trust allows us to be generous with mutual aid. Trust promotes relationships where bureaucracies, formal procedures and large meetings promote alienation and atomization. We can afford to be generous with our limited energies and resources while working with others because these relationships are voluntary and based on a principle of equality. No group should sacrifice their affinity, autonomy or passions for the privilege to work with others. Just as we are very careful with whom we would work within affinity group, we should not offer to join in coalition with groups with whom we do not share mutual trust.

We can and should work with other groups and collectives, but only on the basis of autonomy and trust. It is unwise and undesirable to demand that particular group must agree with the decisions of every other group. During demonstrations, this principle is the foundation of the philosophy of “diversity of tactics”. It is bizarre that anarchists demand diversity of tactics in the streets but then are coerced by calls for ‘unity’ in these large coalitions. Can’t we do better? Fortunately, we can.

Radical Decentralization: A New Beginning

So let us begin our work not in large coalitions and super structures but in small affinity groups. Within the context of our communities, the radical decentralization of work, projects and responsibility strengthens the ability of anarchist groups to thrive and do work which best suits them. We must reject the default of ineffective, tyrannical super structures as the only means to get work done and must strengthen and support existing affinity groups and collectives. Let us be as critical of the need for large federations, coalitions and other super-structures as we are of the State, religion, bureaucracies and corporations. Our recent successes have defied the belief that we must be part of some giant organization “to get anything done”. We should take to heart the thousands of anarchist DIY projects being done around the world outside super structures. Let us come to meetings as equals and work based on our passions and ideals, and then find others with whom we share these ideals. Let us protect our autonomy and continue to fight for liberty, trust and true solidarity.

Anarchy works!

All power to the affinity groups!

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