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Insurrectionary Clandestinity

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In situations of political conflict, the underground is a name for a social structure that allows political actors (politicized people, from individuals all the way up to mass organizations) to operate secretly – without their methods being publicly known.

This is usually necessary if political actors pose a threat to the status quo, for a very simple reason: it's typically the government's job to protect the status quo. Since the government uses the law and its enforcement to do this, it will make threats to the status quo illegal as they appear – if it has not already done so.

Most governments make it illegal to fight them as a kind of “catch-all” rule for this, but they usually adopt more specific rules depending on both the general context (what kind of status quo do they defend?) and the specific context (who do they believe is – or may soon become – a threat their power?).

If a group which claims to oppose the status quo really means what they say, they will have to take steps to be able to function when they're not allowed to. They will have to develop an underground. Another term for operating within the underground is operating in clandestinity.

Examples of Anti-Oppressive Underground Structures

In the u.s., a well-known example is the Underground Railroad, which helped legally enslaved Black people escape captivity into places where their risk of being caught and punished was much lower. It was, of course, very illegal. For the most part, however, it wasn't insurrectionary; the purpose of the “railroad” was not to organize an armed uprising against the u.s. government.

Another well-studied example is from the russian empire of the late 19th and early 20th century. Up to 1917, basically the entire political left – narodniks, bolsheviks, mensheviks, anarchists, and

so on – was illegal. All their organizations were banned, forbidden from having a public existence within the empire. By necessity, then, the political structures of their organizations were clandestine: to carry out workers' strikes, propagandizing, assassinations, and eventually, a revolution, they had to figure out how to keep functioning when they officially weren't allowed to exist.

In more recent decades, pretty much every significant anti-colonial organization – even the ones dedicated to “peaceful” methods – was made illegal within the colonies they sought to liberate. Communist parties were also illegal in many countries (and still are in some). Simply being LGBTQIA+ is illegal in much of the world, as is creating militant LGBTQIA+ organizations. Yet all of these groupings have existed and continue to exist. Today, right now, nation-states worldwide have banned anti-oppressive organizations and happily seek excuses to ban more. Many of those organizations don't simply stop functioning and wait until the government decides they're allowed again – a “change of heart” that may never come. They move underground.

Practical Questions of Clandestinity

What does your organization do? How would it do that if it became illegal? You can think these questions through by breaking them into smaller ones:

- Does a group need to hold meetings? How would you hold a meeting without anyone you don't want to finding out?
- Do people need to be fed, housed, clothed? Disguised? How do you buy, borrow, make, or take things without unwanted attention? How do you move things around quietly?
- Do things need to be said publicly? How do you spread a message without giving away your location?

Some people can work these things out easier than others; that's where collaboration comes in. You can play to your strengths while others play to theirs. Imagination is as important as expertise; with practice and education, many of us can become pretty good at things we may not be “naturally” good at. Sometimes flexibility helps; sometimes routine does. It depends on the goals and the circumstances.

Accidents, bad decisions, and simple bad luck are all pretty much inevitable. Having backup plans and preparing for “what if” scenarios is crucial. Hardships are guaranteed, but underground organizations can and do win struggles against institutional powers – because the powers that be have at least as many weaknesses as their adversaries do.

Being prepared to expose and take advantage of the weaknesses of established opponents is critical to a successful insurrectionary strategy, and few insurrections survive past their early stages without at least a few secretive conspirators – in other words, without an underground.