

Insurrection vs. Organization

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Reflections from Greece on a Pointless Schism

“I consider it terrible that our movement, everywhere, is degenerating into a swamp of petty personal quarrels, accusations, and recriminations. There is too much of this rotten thing going on, particularly in the last couple of years.”

— out of a letter from Alexander Berkman to Senya Fleshin and Mollie Steimer, in 1928. Emma Goldman adds the postscript: “Dear children. I agree entirely with Sasha. I am sick at heart over the poison of insinuations, charges, accusations in our ranks. If that will not stop there is no hope for a revival of our movement.”

Fortunately, most anarchists in the US avoid any ideological orthodoxy and shun sectarian divides. Unfortunately, most of us also seem to avoid serious strategizing. Those who do take this on tend more towards one or another orthodoxy, and reading the pages of the country’s anarchist journals an outsider would get the impression that the movement here is indeed sectarian. In fact there are many controversies, and no clear tectonic splits, but one divide that is growing more sharp is the same one that runs through much of Europe, the debate between insurrection and organization. The former overlap with post-Leftist anarchists, the latter are often anarchist-communists. Here in Greece, where I’ve spent the past couple weeks, the divide is very strong between insurrectionary anarchists associated with the Black Bloc, and the heavily organized Antiauthoritarian Movement (AK, in Greek).

In this and most other controversies I see anarchists becoming embroiled in, there seems to be a lingering affinity for certain Western values that are at the heart of the state and capitalism: a worldview based on dichotomies, and a logical structure that is startlingly monotheistic. For example, when there are two different strategies for revolution, many of us do not see this as two paths for different groups of people to walk, taking their own while also trying to understand the path of the Other, but as evidence that somebody must be Wrong (and it is almost certainly the Other).

Those of us who were raised with white privilege were trained to be very bad listeners, and it’s a damn shame that we still haven’t absorbed the emphasis on pluralism taught by the Magonistas and indigenous anarchists. I would love to blame our current disputes on the internet, because clearly it’s so easy to be an asshole to somebody and sabotage any healthy, two-way conversation of differences if you’ve already abstracted them to words on a glowing screen, but schisms are much older than telecommunications (though no doubt our heavy reliance on the internet makes it more likely that disagreements will turn into counterproductive squabbles).

Call me naive but I think that a large part of the infighting can be chalked up to bad communication and a fundamentally monotheistic worldview more than to the actual substance of the differing strategies. No doubt, the substance is important. There are for example some necessary critiques of how the Left manages rebellion that have been circulated by (I hesitate to use easy labels but for convenience sake I’ll call them:) insurrectionary anarchists, but even if certain people have figured out all the right answers nothing will stop them from going the way of the first anarchist movement if we don’t all learn better ways of communicating, and understanding, our differences.

In Greece, the schism between insurrectionists and the Antiauthoritarian Movement has even led to physical fighting. There are people on both sides who have done fucked up things. The Black Bloc threw some molotovs at police in the middle of a melee, burning some of the protestors. People with AK bullied and beat up anarchists whom they suspected of stealing some computers from the university during an event AK organized, getting them in trouble. In response, some insurrectionists burned down the Antiauthoritarian Movement's offices in Thessaloniki. If we generalize, the stereotypes quickly step in to assure us that the other side is the enemy: "those disorganized insurrectionists are even throwing molotovs at other protestors!" or "those organizationalists are acting like the police of the movement." In each case, we can quickly see a preconstructed image of the lazy, chaotic insurrectionist, or the practically Marxist authoritarian so-called anarchist, and what we're doing is abstracting the actual people involved.

I don't want to suggest that certain or all of these groups don't have serious flaws they need to work on. I don't even believe both sides are equally to blame. In fact I tend to get into pretty nasty throw-downs myself with people who prefer some bullshit, hippy "I'm okay, you're okay, everyone's okay" form of conflict resolution that avoids criticism in favour of an appearance of peace. But in Thessaloniki and Athena I met people from both sides, and most of them were very nice, people whom I would love to have as neighbors after we smashed the state together. Some of them badmouthed the other group, some of them were really trying to make peace, also talking critically to members of their own group who had wronged someone from the other side. On the whole, though, they are a minority, and the divide grows. Posters for a presentation I was giving in Athena got ripped down because the social center hosting me was associated with AK (though the people actually organizing the event and putting me up were not members, and tried to stay in the middle). The squat I stayed at in Thessaloniki was occupied by people aligned with the insurrectionists, and several of them told me not to mix with the AK people in Athena.

I might classify those problems as peculiar to Greece if I had not seen similar divides in Germany and Bulgaria, heard invective from the same kind of infighting in France spill over into the Montreal Anarchist Bookfair, and read plenty of these arguments in the anarchist press of the UK and US. Since the US is where I'm from and where I'll return, I will focus on the schism as it appears there. Because most US anarchists seem to focus on their day to day activities, I think many have not taken sides in this schism, are not even aware of it. So to a certain extent it exists as a theoretical disagreement, without yet the improbable weight of strident personalities thrown into the fray (well, some people from Anarchy magazine or NEFAC might say otherwise), fixing intransigent frontlines by virtue of the fact that an ideology personified is all the more stubborn. So we have a greater opportunity, for now, to deal with the problem theoretically.

As a sort of appendix, I've included critiques of four essays from the two sides of the debate, but first I will generalize what I see as the strengths and weaknesses of each. Insurrectionists make a number of vital contributions, perhaps the most important being that the time is now, that the distinction between building alternatives and attacking capitalism is a false one. The critique of leftist bureaucracy as a recuperating force, the state within the movement that constantly brings rebellion back into the fold and preserves capitalism,

is also right-on, though often the word “organization” is used instead of bureaucracy, which can confuse things because to many people even an affinity group is also a type of organization. Or it can lead to a certain fundamentalism, as some people do intend to excommunicate all formal organizations, even if they are understood by the participants as a temporary tool and not a “one big union.”

The insurrectionists also nurture a number of weaknesses. Their frequent criticisms of “activism” tend to be superficial and vague, reflecting more an inability to come to terms with their personal failures (or observed failures) in other modes of action, than any improved theoretical understanding, practically guaranteeing that the faults they encountered in activism will be replicated or simply inverted in whatever they end up doing as insurrectionists. (This point will be developed more in the appendix). There is also a certain lack of clarity in insurrectionist suggestions for action. Insurrectionists tend to do a good job in making a point of learning from people who are not anarchists, drawing on recent struggles in Mexico, Argentina, Algeria, and so on. However this also allows them to blur the difference between what is insurrectionary and what is insurrectionist. Much as most of them forswear ideology, by mining historical examples of insurrection to extract and distill a common theory and prescription for action, they earn that “ist” and distinguish what is insurrectionary from what is insurrectionist. They have perceptively grasped that what is insurrectionary in a social struggle is often the most effective, most honest, and most anarchist element of the struggle; but by seeing through an insurrectionist lens they discount or ignore all the other elements of the struggle to which the insurrectionary is tied, even, in many cases, on which it is based. In this instance the “ist” carries with it that monotheistic insistence that any elements reducible to another “ism” must be incorrect. So we are told to open our eyes when the people in Oaxaca burn buses and defend autonomous spaces, but close our eyes when the strikes carried out by the teachers’ union give birth in large part to the insurrection, when the rebels choose to organize themselves formally or above ground for a certain purpose.

Insurrectionists call for action inside or outside social movements, which I agree with. People should fight for themselves, for their own reasons and own lives, even if they have to fight alone. This is, after all, how many social movements exist at the beginning, before they are recognized as social movements. To contradict a criticism I have seen from some more organizationally minded anarchists, it is not at all vanguardist to take action first or even attempt to escalate actions, because fighting for your own reasons or attempting to inspire other people to action by example is quite the opposite of vanguardism. In fact a common sign of a vanguardist is one who objects to other people running ahead of the flock (and consequently ahead of the flock’s vanguard). However this insurrectionist stance is sometimes accompanied by a disparaging view of social movements, as though any movement is inherently authoritarian, inherently bureaucratic, inherently recuperative (in Green Anarchy I even read one fairly silly call for “momentum” instead of movements, though if the author of this piece was doing anything besides redefining “movement” as “the bad sort of movement” and defining everything else as “momentum” it wasn’t very clear, because of that preference for words instead of meanings fashionable among many [anti]political writers). But we should not underestimate the importance of social movements. I recently had the opportunity to spend five months among anarchists in the former Soviet bloc, primarily

in Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria. Unanimously, the anarchists I met told me that the socialist dictatorships had destroyed and subsequently prevented any social movements, and left a legacy of people who hate and distrust the government (many of them are also dissatisfied with capitalism) but who also have no tradition or inclination to trust and participate in social movements, or even cooperate with their neighbors. The anarchist situation there is far bleaker than it is in the US: the anarchists are alone, isolated, without any clear starting point for action, much less insurrection. One Romanian anarchist said organizing in his home country was like going to a foreign country where you don't speak the language and trying to build anarchy. (In Poland and Czech [Republic], the anarchist movement is much stronger, and these are also the countries that developed dissident social movements in the '80s. Incidentally the dictatorship in Romania was toppled not by a movement but by an insurrection that was largely stage-managed — these too can be recuperated). In light of this, it seems a glaring absence that insurrectionists tend to avoid actions or analysis focused on building up social movement (if by movement we only mean a large informal network or population, that may include formal organizations, and that constitutes itself as a social force in response to perceived problems, initially acting outside the scope of previously routinized and institutionalized forms of social activity).

Insurrectionist suggestions for action tend to revolve around creating autonomous spaces that support us, allow us to practice communal, anarchist living now, and serve as a base for waging war against the state. This is as good as any other singular anarchist strategy, in fact it's a good deal better than a few, but also like the other strategies in circulation it has already been defeated by the state. Insurrectionists in the US don't even need to use that typical American excuse of amnesia; in this case, isolationism is to blame. The largely anarchist squatters' movement that thrived across Western Europe in the '70s and '80s (and shadows of which still survive), including the German Autonomes, already attempted — in a very serious way — the same strategy that US insurrectionists are now circulating without any differences serious enough to be considered a revision or lesson from past failures. And they are likely, if they ever get a half of the momentum the Europeans had, which under present circumstances is improbable, to end up exactly the same way: an isolated, drug-addicted wasteland of ghettoized subculture frozen in a self-parodying gesture of defiance (yes, this is a pessimistic view, and one that discounts the several wonderful squats and social centers that are still hanging on, but I think insurrectionists would agree there's no point in looking for the bright side of a movement that has come to accommodate capitalism). It goes something like this: the state and the culture industry isolate them (operating almost like Daoist martial artists, pushing them in the direction they're already going, only harder than they intended), by many accounts flood in addictive drugs, which come to fill a new need as the stress mounts from the prolonged state of siege brought about by frequent attacks from police; not everyone can live under those conditions, especially older folks and those with children [who] drop out or turn to more escapist, less combative forms. The militants stay within their circle of barricades for so long that in-crowd aesthetics and mentalities entrench, they are, after all, at war with the rest of the world by now. Eventually the rebels lose any real connections with the outside world, and any possibility to spread the struggle. Thus weakened and lacking external

solidarity, half the squats are evicted, one by one, and the others become exhausted and give up the fight.

Because of their proximity to that history, a particular group of French anarchists could not just ignore the weaknesses of the strategy. This group, the authors of Appel (Call), the most intelligent and insightful insurrectionist (if I can give it a label it has not claimed for itself) tract I have come across, hit the nail on the head when, advancing a more developed and lively form of this strategy, they pointed out that the squatters' movement died because it stopped strategizing (and thus stopped growing and changing, stagnated). However, more than one nail is needed to hold the strategy together. Stagnation was the likely outcome of the squatters' movement due to its very structure, and the consequent structure of state repression. The falling off of strategizing was a probable result of the strategy itself.

And what about the organizationalists? First I should note that this is a rather amorphous group, and few people actually identify themselves as organizationalists. A good part of them are the old or classical anarchists — anarchist-communists whose strategy rests in part on creating a strong federation of anarchists, or syndicalists building anarchist labor unions, or otherwise working in the labor movement. Some in this camp are social anarchists who prefer an involvement in mainstream society to waging anything that resembles war (class or insurrectionary). More than a few are anarchist activists working above ground with some organization around a particular issue, perhaps without a clear long-term strategy, who have been swept in with the others by insurrectionist criticisms. I will focus on the classical anarchists, because they have more clearly articulated strategies (this is not at all to criticize the others, after all no strategy can be better than a simplistic, dogmatic one). Hopefully the criticisms I make there will be informative for all anarchists who consider the use of formal organizations.

On the one hand, the emphasis of these anarchists on building social movements and being accessible to outsiders is well placed. Clearly a major problem of US anarchists is isolation, and organizing in above-ground groups around problems that are apparent to broader populations can help overcome this isolation. It is extremely helpful when there are types of anarchist action people can get involved in that are relatively easy, that don't require a plunge straight from mainstream life into uncompromising war against the system (to go off on a tangent, insurrectionists often praise the replicability of certain actions, but I wonder how many started off as activism-oriented anarchists and how many were insurrectionists from the beginning. In other words, how replicable is insurrectionist anarchism for most people?)

The communication and coordination that, say, a federation can provide can be helpful in certain instances. In Europe many of the prisoner support organizations that anarchists of all kinds rely on are organized as federations. Organizations can also build and escalate the struggle. For example, the actions of an anarchist labor union can make anarchism accessible to more people, by providing an immediately apprehendable way to get involved, a forum for spreading ideas, and a demonstration of the sincerity and practicality of anarchists winning improvements in the short-term. I would also wager that people who have gotten some practice in a union, and learned first-hand about strikes for example, are more likely to launch a wildcat strike than people who have never been part of a union.

An approach that relies heavily on formal organizations also has a number of weaknesses. Since these weaknesses have appeared and reappeared in no uncertain terms for over a century, it's a damn shame to have to repeat them, but unfortunately there seems to be the need. Democratic organizations with any form of representation can quickly become bureaucratic and authoritarian. Direct democratic organizations still run the risk of being dominated by political animals (as Bob Black pointed out in more detail in *Anarchy After Leftism*). And there is something problematic in the first instance [when] a society separates the economic from the political and creates a limited space for decision-making wherein decisions have more authority than those decisions and communications enacted elsewhere in social life. Organizations should be temporary, tied to the need they were formed to address, and they should be overlapping and pluralistic. Otherwise, they develop interests of their own survival and growth that can easily conflict with the needs of people. This organizational self-interest has been used time and time again to control and recuperate radical social movements. It should long ago have become obvious that using formal organizations is risky, something best done with caution. Yet some organizational anarchists even persist in believing that all anarchists should join a single organization. I have never seen an argument for how this could possibly be effective, and the question is irrelevant since it is neither possible nor would it be liberating. Voluntary association is a meaningless principle if you expect everyone to join a particular organization, even if it is perfect. But I've still heard a number of anarchist-communists use that obnoxious line, "they're not real anarchists," on the basis that these not-anarchists did not want to work with them. The interest of working together in an effective organization, especially if it is singular (as in, *The Only Anarchist Group You'll Ever Need to Join!*), encourages conformity of ideas among members, which can cause them to waste a great deal of time coming up with the Correct Line and can make them a pain in the ass for other folks to work with. (The 1995 pamphlet "The Role of the Revolutionary Organization" by the Anarchist Communist Federation is very clear that they see theirs as only a single one of many organizations working in the movement, and they renounce the aim of any kind of organizational hegemony; perhaps the problem is the lack of a deep recognition that these many organizations may approach, relate to, or conceive of the movement in entirely different ways).

Hopefully by now it is clear how these two tendencies can cooperate for greater effect. First of all, by abandoning that horrible pretension that just because the Other disagrees with our point of view, they have nothing valid to offer. It follows from this that we recognize different people will prefer to be active in different ways, and in fact different temperaments draw people towards different anarchist tendencies before theory ever comes into it. Some people will never want to go to your boring meetings or organize in their workplace (they won't even want to have a workplace). Some people will never want to set foot in your nasty-assed squat or live in fear that the state will take away their kids because of the lifestyle of the parents (or they won't even want to subject their kids to the stress of a life of constant warfare). And guess what? That's fine and natural. If. If we can cover each other's backs. Above ground organizers who build support for the insurrectionists, who stand by those masked terrorists instead of denouncing them, will create a stronger movement. Insurrectionists who carry out the waves of sabotage the organizers are too exposed to call for, who

keep in touch with the outside world and also keep the organizers honest and aware of the broader picture, the horizon of possibility, will create a stronger movement. Organization-
alists who exclude the insurrectionists help them isolate themselves. Insurrectionists who see the organizers as the enemy help them recuperate the struggle. These are self-fulfilling prophecies. Insurrectionists can be helped by the movement-building and social resources of the organizationalists, who in turn can be helped by the more radical perspective and sometimes stronger tactics, the dreams put into practice, of the insurrectionists.

Because the US anarchist movement often looks to Greece for inspiration, especially the insurrectionists, I find it interesting that the Greek experience seems to show the two approaches to be complementary, even if the organizations involved are bitter enemies. In the [U.S.] we usually hear about the Greeks when they attack a police station or burn surveillance cameras; basically every week. But we do not hear about the foundation that makes this possible. For starters Greece enjoys a more anarchic culture. Family ties are stronger than state loyalties (Greek anarchists were shocked to learn that a number of prisoners in the US were turned in by relatives), there is widespread distrust of authority, and many people still remember the military dictatorship and understand the potential necessity of fighting with cops. US culture is not nearly so supportive of our efforts, so we need to figure out how to influence the broader culture so it will be more fertile for anarchy.

The state has been doing the opposite for centuries. I couldn't tell how much the anarchists in Greece influenced the surrounding culture and how much they just took advantage of it, but there were many clearly conscious attempts to influence the social situation. A great deal of activism goes into opposing the European Union immigration regime, working with and supporting immigrants, and the squatted social centers play a role in this. Such work also helps make the anarchist movement more diverse. Labor organizing plays a role in Greece, though I learned much less about this while I was there. In Athena the foundation that keeps much of the local anarchist movement alive and kicking is a neighbourhood — Exarchia. This entire quarter, located in the center of the capital, has the feel of a semi-autonomous zone. You can spraypaint on the walls in broad daylight with little risk (wheat-pasting is even safer), you see more anarchist propaganda than commercial advertising, and you rarely encounter cops. In fact you're likely to find nervous squads of riot police standing guard along the neighbourhood's borders (nervous because it's not uncommon for them to be attacked). The autonomous spaces, the destruction of surveillance cameras, the Molotov attacks on cops are all characteristic of the insurrectionary approach. But also important to the rebellious makeup of Exarchia are the language classes for immigrants organized by social centers, the friendly relationships with neighbors (something the Black Bloc types don't always excel at cultivating) and even, curiously, some anarchist-owned businesses. In the US, the phrase "anarchist business" would be scoffed at contemptuously, though one would also avoid applying it to anarchist bookstores, which are recognized as legitimate. But in Exarchia (and this was also the case in Berlin and Hamburg) the anarchist movement was bolstered by a number of anarchist-owned establishments, particularly bars. I think the rationale is fairly solid. If some anarchists need to get jobs in the meantime, and this is certainly more the case in the US than in most of Europe, it can be better to own your own bar that you open as a resource to the movement than to work at a Starbucks.

Likewise, if anarchists are going to gather at a bar every Friday night (and this could also apply to movie theaters and a number of other things), why not go to one that supports a friend, and supports the movement (as an event space and even a source of donations)? It can also provide experience building collectives, and edge out the local bourgeoisie who would otherwise be a reactionary force in a semi-autonomous neighbourhood. I sure as hell ain't advocating "buying out the capitalists" as a revolutionary strategy, but in Exarchia and elsewhere anarchist businesses, in this strictly limited sense, have played a role in creating a stronger movement.

Most important, if we want to consider the strength of Greek anarchists, has been the student movement. For a year, university students (along with professors and even many high school students) have been on strike, protesting a neoliberal education reform that would corporatize universities, privatize some of them, and end the official tradition of asylum that forbids police to set foot on Greek campuses. At the most superficial level, this student movement has allowed the anarchists many more opportunities to fight with the police. Getting a little deeper, it is perhaps the social conflict in Greece with the most potential to lead to an insurrectionary situation, similar in some regards to Paris in 1968. A strictly organizational strategy, whether of the typical syndicalist or anarchist-communist varieties, will be too weak, and too tame. Another organization will just be a competitor with the communist parties, and will have a conservative effect on the passions of the students, who show the tendency to blow up and act out quite ahead of the plans and predictions of the organizations, which are the ones getting the heat from the authorities. A strictly insurrectionary approach will isolate the anarchists from the student movement, who will increasingly view them as parasites who only come to fight with the cops. Without the involvement of an anarchist perspective, nothing will stop the political parties from controlling the movement. And anarchists are unlikely to gain much respect in the student movement if they disdain working for the short-term goal of defeating this education law. Putting aside the dogma about reformism, everyone should be able to see the tragic tactical loss anarchists would suffer if the universities had their asylum privilege revoked (right now, people can attack a group of cops and then run back into the university and be safe), and of course a fierce movement using direct action is much more likely to dissuade the government from putting this education reform into effect than a passive movement dominated by party politics.

By fighting the police, taking over the streets, and squatting the universities, anarchists can inspire people, ignite passions, capture the national attention and raise the fear, which everyone immediately smells and is intoxicated by, that things can change. By spreading anarchist ideas, turning the universities into free schools, setting up occupation committees, organizing strikes, and preventing the domination of the student assemblies by the political parties, other anarchists can provide a bridge for more people to be involved, make overtures for solidarity to other sectors of society, and strengthen the movement that has provided a basis for the possibility of change. If these two types of anarchists work together, the insurrectionary ones are less likely to be disowned as outsiders and isolated, thrown to the police, because they have allies in the very middle of the movement. And when the state approaches the organized anarchists in the movement in an attempt to negotiate, they

are less likely to give in because they have friends outside the organization holding them accountable and reminding them that power is in the streets.

Similar lessons on the potential compatibility of these two approaches can be drawn from anarchist history in Spain of '36 or France of '68. Both of these episodes ultimately showed that insurrection is a higher form of struggle, that waiting for the right moment is reactionary, that bureaucratic organizations such as the CNT or the French students' union end up collaborating with power and recuperating the movement. But what is easier to miss is that insurrectionary tactics were not the major force in creating the necessary foundation. The CNT and the French students' union were both instrumental in building the revolution (the former by spreading anarchist ideas, launching strikes and insurrections, building connections of solidarity, preparing workers to take over the economy, and defeating the fascist coup in much of Spain; the latter by disseminating radical critiques [at least by certain branches], organizing the student strike and occupation, and organizing assemblies for collective decision making). The failing was when they did not recognize that their usefulness had passed, that as vital as they were those organizations were not the revolution. (This is not at all to say there should be a preparatory period, during which insurrectionary tactics are premature. Clandestine attacks at any stage can help build a fierce movement. Waiting to attack until the movement is large leaves you with a large, weak movement, with no experience in the tactics that will be necessary to grow or even survive the mounting repression. It might even leave you with a large, pacifist movement, which would just be awful.)

Between living in a squat or living in an apartment and organizing a tenants' association, there are inevitably going to be people who strongly prefer one or the other, whether or not we bring theory into the picture. This should be a good thing, because both of these actions can help bring about an anarchist world. When anarchists give up our narrow dogmatism and embrace the complexity that exists in any revolutionary process, we will [be] closer.

Because I guess I'm not really happy with a happy ending, I'll conclude by pointing out some problems that I think are common to both tendencies. I've already mentioned the monotheistic mentality that leads to schisms within the movement, but especially in the US this exists on a larger scale as an inability of most anarchists to work in a healthy way with those outside the movement. This has been a failure to figure out what makes other Americans tick, what they are passionate about, what sphere of their lives is illegal, under what circumstances they will rebel, and how to engage them on this. There is no simple answer, and the complex answers will differ between regions, communities, and individuals, but I think most anarchists of all stripes have stuck to self-referential and repetitive actions rather than plunging into this tedious work. Granted, people in the US aren't the easiest population for anarchists to engage; our culture encourages conformity, isolation, and the Protestant work ethic more strongly than most others. But we should take this as a challenge and get on with it.

The inability to work well with others is also the manifestation of another Western value that contradicts anarchism more blatantly than monotheism, and it is the Risk board mentality, that ingrained view of the world from above, with ourselves positioned as the architect or general. It is the understanding that you change society by forcing people to organize themselves in a certain way. The more classical anarchists put themselves at one extreme,

thus occasioning many of the criticisms that they are authoritarian or Marxist, by pushing a program or insisting that revolution only occurs when people see the world through the narrow lens of class consciousness. The insurrectionists have caught a whiff of this and they go to the other extreme by forswearing activism and to a large extent avoiding contact with people who are much different from them. That way they don't have to worry about forcing their views on anyone. It should be apparent that both of these approaches rest on the assumption that contact between people who are different must result in a missionary relationship, with one converting the other. The idea of mutual influence, of organizing as building relationships with people rather than organizing as recruiting people, is generally absent.

In my view, the largest problem shared by both the insurrectionary and organizational camp, and most other anarchists, is whiteness: and even more than the failure of white anarchists to solve the mystifying problem of checking our white privilege, I mean intentionally preserving a movement narrative that tells the stories and contains the values of white people, and refusing to recognize the importance of white supremacy as a system of oppression every bit as important as the state, capitalism, or patriarchy.

Different white anarchists find different ways of minimizing race, depending on their analysis. But a common thread seems to be that perennial colonial belief that for salvation — or hell, just for us to get along, the Other must become like me. On the one hand, this could be the insistence that white supremacy is nothing but a tool and invention of capitalism, perfectly explainable in economic terms, and that for people of color to liberate themselves, they must surrender whatever particular experience and history the world's ever present reaction to their skin color may have given them, and identify primarily as workers, with nothing but fictive barriers standing between them and the white anarchists sitting in their union halls waiting for a little diversity to wander in. The minimization of race can also mask itself behind a misuse of the recognition that race is an invention without physiological justification. I've heard many anarchists take this further to say that race does not exist. I imagine this could come as a slap in the face to a great many of the world's people, it certainly contradicts my own lived experiences, and it is also a supremely idiotic statement. By definition something that does not exist cannot cause results in the real world. I think most anarchists who make this statement would be horrified by someone who denied the existence of racism, but they must be using another kind of denial, that which accompanies abusive relations, to not see this is exactly what they have just done. (Other anarchists take a more dishonest but unassailable route by simple denouncing as "identity politics" any excessive preoccupation with race). Race is a harmful categorization that must be abolished, and like capitalism or the state it cannot be wished away or solved by exclusion from one's analysis any more than AIDS or the scars of a beating can be wished away. The liberal "color blind" mentality to which so many anarchists adhere can only be a way of prolonging white supremacy.

Until white anarchists of all stripes allow — no, encourage — anarchism to adapt to non-white stories, anarchism is likely to remain about as relevant to most people of color as voting is to immigrants. And as long as anarchists continue to view differences in the same way the state and civilization we oppose has taught us to, we will never encompass the breadth of perspective and participation we need to win.

Comments on a couple articles from each side of the schism

The two insurrectionist essays I'll touch on are "Rogues Against the State" by crudo (anarchistnews.org) from Modesto Anarchist (California), and "Fire at Midnight, Destruction at Dawn: Sabotage and Social War" (www.geocities.com) from A Murder of Crows, out of Seattle. Both of these are well written, thoughtful pieces, and neither in itself is terribly sectarian. But they both contain weaknesses, and I think they both could have been more useful if they had not set themselves in opposition to another way of doing things.

"Fire at Midnight" advocates sabotage carried out inside of or outside of social struggles, without spending much time criticizing other methods. However, the article makes it clear that "We must be willing to examine and scrutinize the methods and strategies of the past so that we do not follow in the footsteps of history's failed attempts at revolution. To this end we will focus on a method that is as powerful as it is easy to put into practice: sabotage." However, it does not really discuss how to build the social struggles they acknowledge are necessary for the total abolition of capitalism, and I think most readers would get the impression that sabotage itself is meant to build up such a struggle. Towards the end the article does criticize more organized forms of resistance, though it chooses its targets carefully, in a way that borders on setting up a strawman argument because the effect is that one must either be part of a vanguard party, an institutionalized group that always counsels waiting, or one must take part in autonomous and anonymous, insurrectionary tactics like sabotage. To the author, nothing in the middle is worth mentioning.

The effectiveness of sabotage is exaggerated. In fact, in most of the examples mentioned in the article, the people using sabotage lose (though it almost seems they are celebrated for maintaining a sort of purity throughout the process). Let's look at two of the cases where people won. One is the campaign against Shell Oil and its involvement with South African apartheid. The article points out that anonymous acts of sabotage throughout Europe and North America against Shell cost them much more money than the boycott did. This is an important fact that demonstrates the effectiveness of sabotage and the silliness of those people who still claim violence (property destruction) hurts the movement, but not when it is presented as a substitute for the boycott. Generally, I am averse to boycotts because they reinforce our role as consumers, but they go along well with education campaigns about, in this case, the need to oppose Shell Oil. They are easy for everyone to do, and harmless to the movement as long as pacifists don't try to hold them up as an effective alternative to violence. This article certainly appreciates the easiness and replicability of tactics, when it comes to sabotage. The same should apply to the education/boycott campaign because in many ways this campaign provided a foundation for the wave of sabotage. Of course sabotage is more effective, but destroying Shell Oil's infrastructure and kidnapping their executives would have been more effective still. That's a moot point, because the movement wasn't strong enough to do this. Its strength needed to be built up, just as it needed to be built up before a large wave of sabotage could occur. By disdaining this building process, insurrectionists would be destroying their own base. By embracing a building process, anarchists could influence the creation of an education campaign based not on values of liberal

citizenship but on anticapitalist rage, surely a more supportive foundation for sabotage and other forceful tactics.

The second example comes from the Mohawk (sic) who resisted Canadian government encroachments at Oka in 1990. Sabotage was a strong tactic in this struggle, but far more important was that resistance was carried out by a well organized group united by a common culture (and also willing and able to escalate well beyond sabotage), and many of the external, non-Mohawk groups giving solidarity were also formally organized. Additionally, in such circumstances, the anonymous and spontaneous form of organization favored by insurrectionists really disadvantages the type of communication and accountability that are needed for effective, responsible solidarity actions that don't end up hurting the people you're trying to help. Once again, an exclusively insurrectionary approach would have been less effective and probably self-isolating (especially given the inescapable reality that right now most insurrectionary anarchists — most anarchists — are white, so a strong, exclusively insurrectionist tendency at Oka would have come off as yet another example of white people exploiting the struggles of people of color).

“Rogues Against the State” also comes close to building a strawman in its critique of activism. Again, it's a bit vague as to who are the targets of the criticism, and in this haze a dichotomy is entrenched between insurrection, which is advocated as the path anarchists should take, and forms of activism that are inevitably reformist and based on getting people to join a specific organization. The essay contains a number of good points — about the problems with building “one monolithic anarchist organization,” that certain technologies such as cellphones and computers require the intensive exploitation of global sacrifice zones so anarchy cannot result from worker control of the present infrastructure — and the section on “Creating Autonomous Spaces” is especially valuable.

But there are also serious flaws. As I pointed out earlier, this strategy does not address the fatal shortcomings that became apparent when it was put into practice in Western Europe. Point 9 contains the important point that anarchists can, do, and should learn from non-anarchist struggles, and that “the masses” do not need to be taught how to act. Yet a number of examples are misleading. In Oaxaca, much of the struggle grew from the strike of the teachers' union, and was helped along by APPO, the popular assembly (much as this organization may later have had a pacifying effect, organizationalists take note). In the countryside, a large, organized anarchist influence was CIPO-RFM, the association of autonomous anarchist communities, with whom I understand NEFAC (the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist-Communists) works. And as for “rent-strikes,” another spontaneous occurrence praised in the article, is the author aware of how many of these come out of tenants groups, organized quite often by activists (inside or outside the buildings)? In other words, the inspiring examples of insurrection do not bear out the strategy of insurrectionism.

But a great part of the essay is a criticism of activism, and here is one of the weakest parts. The author says much of her/his personal experience was with an activist group the principal activity of which was to dole out charity and try to get other people to join the group. Yeah, that sounds pretty shitty. The assumption that everyone engaged in activism, community organizing, whatever the hell you want to call it, is doing the same thing, is equally lacking in depth. Instead of taking their failures as a sign that they were doing a bad job in their

chosen activities, 'crudo' instead jumps ship and denounces activism wholesale. "Activism" is never defined, and it's too easy a term to use disparagingly — many articulate, not-so-active anarchists do. But the author gives the example of Copwatch and Food Not Bombs. I've seen examples of these groups that have been effective, examples that have been ineffective, some that have been charity and some that have been empowering. It depends a great deal, not surprisingly, in how you go about it, whether your goals, strategy, and tactics line up, or if you're just mimicking something anarchists habitually do elsewhere. If it's done well and in spite of its weaknesses, activism can teach us how to talk to mainstream people without hiding, or scaring them away with, our anarchist politics, it can help us learn how other people see common problems and thus how we can better communicate a radical critique of these problems, and sometimes even motivate people to get off the couch and respond to their problems with direct action. It can allow us to influence other people's realities, when they see that there are anarchists out there, and therefore the possibility of anarchy, and that by working together and using direct action we can change the situations most people are used to only watching on television. It's a fucking tedious process that rarely brings results quickly, and this has the advantage of teaching us that in the concrete details of people's everyday lives revolution is neither quick nor easy, that simply overcoming this stifling alienation in a single neighbourhood could take years. The built-in disadvantages are that it's too easy to burn out, lose hope, compromise your dreams, or fall into a holding pattern of habitual, uninspired actions to spare oneself the energy it takes to be constantly creative and effective, to keep attacking these walls of alienation by leaving one's comfort zone and talking to strangers. 'crudo' seems to have an unrealistic view of this process, though since s/he mentions years of experience in an activist group, it may just be the failing of a mistakenly simplistic paragraph. But it's amazing that in an otherwise intelligent article, the author would suggest wheatpasting flyers around town calling for a general strike as an alternative to talking with AFL-CIO leaders, as though these are the two logical options, as though either one of them could actually accomplish anything. If it's unrealistic to say that a union will usher in the revolution, what is it to suggest that reading a flyer will get people to launch an insurrection? In both cases, a whole lot more creativity and patience are called for.

Point number 8 also displays an unrealistic understanding of the insurrectionist strategy (along with the obnoxious suggestion, based on who knows what, that anarchists who are activists seek compromise with authority instead of complete social transformation). "To be against activism and for a complete social transformation means that we desire the destruction of hierarchal [sic] society and openly desire it's [sic] abolition. We seek anti-politics, meaning the rejection of representative forms of struggle and a praxis of insurrectionary attack, or the use of actions which seek to destroy any existence of the state and capital and allows for the self-organization of revolt and life. This does not mean that people shouldn't use activist approaches from time to time (for instance organizing events to fundraise for political prisoners). But in general we need to find a strategy that exists outside of going from protest to protest and from issue to issue. We are in the middle of a social war, not a disagreement between various sides that can reach a compromise."

Activism is a vague method, or a set of tactics, things like giving away free food or organizing a fundraiser for prisoners. How does this at all suggest activists must believe in compromise with the government? And how exactly does the author imagine setting up autonomous spaces or fighting the state, if activist approaches like fundraising for prisoners are only a part of the picture “from time to time” (has the author ever been to an autonomous space like those he advocates? In Greece and Spain for example, organizing informational events and doing fundraisers are a large part of what they do). Ultimately, crudo’s call for war is meaninglessly abstract, because it lacks the understanding of what, practically, war entails.

Then there is the question of privilege. ‘crudo’ says “We need to act along side and with the oppressed for we are of them...” This is another mixed bag of nuts. For those of us anarchists who were born with racial, economic, or other privilege, it is vital to recognize that this system is still poisonous for us, we don’t want it, and we’re not fighting to save other people but for ourselves, in solidarity with others. ‘crudo’ is clear about this. But there is also a certain sleight of hand occurring in this article, and that is the conflation of all oppressions. For the most part, crudo only mentions class: “As those of the oppressed and excluded we must abolish class society and work. This is our project.” ‘crudo’ subsequently identifies “we” as “proles”. Near the end of the article, ‘crudo’ briefly acknowledges problems of gender and race, and concedes that whites and blacks are not “in the exact same boat” but this afterthought really does not contradict the overall minimization of race contained in the article (in fact the very brief analysis of racism is basically the complaint that race divides the working class, “pitting racial groups against one another”). The author is surprisingly honest about the problem with this perspective, but fails to correct it: “In the ‘glory days’ of anarchism, everyone was only oppressed by class (or at least, that’s mostly what the white men tell us). The negatives of class society was simply that of a physically impoverished existence (poverty, hunger, etc). However, modern life is much more complicated than that. We have become alienated beyond (or on top of) class.” It’s telling (hell it’s down right disturbing) that ‘crudo’ acknowledges the white supremacist nature of this analysis, and then carries on with it anyway. We should be grateful, though, because most anarchists who discourage any emphasis on race are more sophisticated at hiding their true motivations.

The result of this is that ‘crudo’ has to remind readers, and presumably him/herself, that we are oppressed too, and therefore we have license to intervene in the struggles of all other oppressed people. I think the effect on readers will be to encourage a kind of solidarity even worse than we have been guilty of in the past, approaching the movements of people far more oppressed than us (with more at stake and graver consequences for action) with a strong sense of entitlement, seeing their struggles as our opportunities.

As for the organizationalists...

“An Anarchist Communist Strategy for Rural, Southern Appalachia,” (anarchistnews.org) by Randy Lowens, written for Anarkismo.net. This article seems to come from a sincere desire to increase the effectiveness of the movement against mountaintop removal (MTR) coal-mining in Appalachia. The author points out how eco-anarchists are an important part of this struggle but says they intentionally isolate themselves from other Appalachians, and moreover their strategy, centered around dramatic direct actions taken by people who oper-

ate outside of the community groups also opposing MTR, isolates them further. Randy suggests overcoming that isolation by increasing contact with and spreading an anti-capitalist analysis among Appalachians, and joining the organizations formed to oppose MTR, in order to subvert liberal leadership. Many of those are decent ideas, but given the tone of the essay, I have to say I strongly sympathized with a comment, counterproductive as it was, posted below the article that read simply: “Stay the fuck out of the dirty south, ideologues!” The author dusts off a strategy that seems not to have changed in the hundred odd years of its existence — the stated purpose of the essay is to “construct an analogy between the historical strategy of bringing a revolutionary perspective into mass organizations, and doing so in the particulars of the given place and time, Southern Appalachia in the early 21st century.” The tone with which he talks about anarcho-primitivists in one section is reminiscent of a liberal Catholic Church official during the Inquisition. Essentially: despite their heresy, many of them are good people and must be saved. The suggestion that the masses “are in dire need of a revolutionary voice” also sounds missionary.

“Over time it became apparent to me, that our direct action scenarios were not building links with the community at large.” Similar to ‘crudo’, Randy Lowens suggests changing strategic tracks entirely, again in a way that doesn’t leave one very hopeful about the results. His suggested strategy basically sounds like infiltrating (“penetration” of) the reformist environmentalist and community groups and turning them against the liberal leadership, as though that will build better links with the community. As an indication of that friendly anarchist-communist outlook just destined to win hearts in Appalachia, the author refers to the membership in these organizations as “more attractive terrain” for anarchists. And once again, the locals will be required to adopt the imported analysis and identify their experiences strictly with the class struggle. Remember, I have this image of someone shouting over the bullhorn at the next protest, you are not fighting for your homes, your mountains, or your personal well being: you are fighting for your class! I’m not sure what Randy Lowens means by “fellow workers,” but many of the people in the coal-mining regions of Appalachia are unemployed, many of the most active anti-MTR organizers are grandmothers who rarely or never worked a wage job, and those who jealously hold one of the few jobs actually involved with destroying the mountains and getting the coal can be among the most strident supporters of MTR.

But the greatest weakness of this essay by far is its preference for a vague affiliation with the tried-n-true anarchist-communist strategy over any actual strategizing itself. After the analysis of the situation, the reader finally gets to the section entitled “A Strategy for Rural, Southern Appalachian Anarchists” hoping to find some intelligent or at least provocative suggestions for how to radicalize the anti-MTR movement and better connect with (other) Appalachians, only to find that this section is basically the conclusion of the article, with a one line overview of what Malatesta said a hundred years ago, little else of substance, and no details. Need it be said that strategies are best derived from the specific situation one faces? A problem with anarchist-communism, or insurrectionism for that matter, is that at least in their usage by many people these come with pre-packaged strategies that spare their affiliates from any hard thinking about what might actually work in the conditions one is dealing with.

Notes on the article “Anarchism, Insurrections, and Insurrectionism” (www.infoshop.org) by José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

This article is a response to, and something of an expansion on Joe Black’s “Anarchism, Insurrections, and Insurrectionism” (www.wsm.ie) posted on the website of the Workers’ Solidarity Movement, an anarchist-communist group in Ireland. José praises Joe Black’s article, which is a respectful criticism of insurrectionists, but says the latter only deals with the tactics and organizational forms of the insurrectionists and ignores the “basic political differences”. (Accordingly I will also bring up a few points Joe Black makes about organization, since this article seems to accept those points).

After the necessary introductions, the article starts out: “To understand the problem at the root of insurrectionalism’s political conceptions (fundamentally wrong, in my opinion) we have to take into account that they are the offspring of a certain historical moment...” This seems to be a typical anarchist-communist approach, and while obviously history can be elucidating, it can also be obfuscating, and in the course of this article it is primarily the latter. Quite unfairly, the author doesn’t deal with actual insurrectionists today, but talks mostly about times in the past when an insurrectionary tendency has reared its ugly head, and he doesn’t even do much to convince the reader the insurrectionists of today and yesterday have anything in common besides the name, which in many cases they hardly do. I’d say it’s a manipulative argument but I think the author is sincerely wrapped up in the narrow and dogmatic historicism common to the dialectical and reductively materialist. It seems to me that many anarchist-communists compulsively go to the past to understand, or avoid, present situations, and I guess this has to do with their Marxist heritage and their particular subculture, which seems to favor debates and documents long since dead over innovation or theoretical flexibility.

That said, it also doesn’t help that the historical analysis of this article, and the facts it pretends to be based on, are flawed (though because of the obscurantism that goes along with treating history like gospel, most people would probably be fooled, and this is another point in favor of the “emotional” insurrectionist “immediatism” that the author criticizes).

The historical rule the author is intent on constructing is that insurrectionism is a peculiar product of historical periods with high levels of repression and low levels of popular struggle. This assertion does not stand up to the facts. The first example given, “propaganda by the deed,” may or may not have arisen out of the repression of the Paris Commune as he says, but it was carried out across Europe and in North and South America throughout the next decades, at times of low or high repression, low or high popular struggle. In the US for example, the Galleanists carried out their bombing campaigns during a period of high repression, but they had started these bombings while the popular struggles were still at a high level. Terrorism in Russia did not follow the 1905 revolution (the author’s second example), it was a major part of that revolution, and it was well developed before the repression began, when there was a high level of popular struggle. This insurrectionary activity was part of the struggle, largely carried out by workers. Industrial workers, peasants, poor people, and many Jewish people formed Byeznachalie and Chernoznamets groups that stole from the rich, bombed police stations and bourgeois meeting points, and so on (and nearly all of these were anarchist-communists, opposed primarily by the Kropotkinist anarchist-communists in

exile or by the anarcho-syndicalists). José leaves out insurrectionism in Spain in the 1930s, at the very height of the popular struggle and occurring in periods of high and low repression — in Spain most clearly, the insurrectionists proved themselves to be more insightful than the CNT bureaucrats who always advised waiting and negotiation. And he mentions insurrectionism in Greece in the '60s, but ignores its much more important incarnations today, where it is quite at home in the high popular struggle of the student movement, and set against a state repression that cannot be characterized as particularly high.

Gutiérrez provides a good criticism that an increased reliance on insurrectionary tactics can come as a response to isolation. This is very true, but trying to make a historical rule out of it is sophomoric. Another humorous example of reductionism: “the social-democracy consolidated in the moment of low level of struggles after the Paris Commune, renouncing to revolution and putting forward a reform by stages approach as their strategy. For them, the moment of low confrontation was the historical rule — this is the main reason to their opportunism.” Oh, so that’s why!

Elsewhere in the article the author strikes another low blow: “Also, the moments of a low level of popular struggle generally happen after high levels of class confrontation, so the militants still have lingering memories of the ‘barricade days’. These moments are frozen in the minds of the militants and it is often that they try to capture them again by trying hard, by an exercise of will alone, by carrying on actions in order to ‘awaken the masses’... most of the times, these actions have the opposite result to the one expected and end up, against the will of its perpetrators, serving in the hands of repression.” Saying clandestine actions serve the repression sounds like pacifism and it completely misunderstands the nature of the state, which will manufacture excuses for repression as needed (e.g. the Dog Soldier Teletypes used against AIM). The only thing that justifies repression is other radicals who backstab those using different tactics rather than helping to explain those tactics to the masses with whom they’re supposedly in touch. If a population is pacified enough, indoctrinated enough by state propaganda, going on strike or even joining a union can be popularly seen as justification for repression. Anarchists should recognize there is no natural threshold of action beyond which people will automatically see repression as justified.

Gutiérrez also makes a point about insurrectionists doing the work of provocateurs, but this point is overplayed and ultimately pacifying. Provocateurs encourage stupid actions to hurt a movement or allow them to neutralize some key organizers, but they never wait for such excuses (for example they assassinated Black Panther Fred Hampton even though he never took the bait suggested by the infiltrator). And more often, the government encourages passivity, waiting, issuing demands, negotiating, operating in formal, above-ground organizations that are basically like a snatch-squad’s goody bag if heavy repression is ever needed (I discuss this at greater length in ‘How Nonviolence Protects the State’). But insurrectionists in small affinity groups are better prepared to discuss, evaluate and plan clandestine and aggressive direct actions in an intelligent manner (i.e. one that does not at all serve state interests) than are organizationalists, because the former tend to take better security precautions and their structures are far more intelligently designed when it comes to surviving repression. José Antonio Gutiérrez not only misses the mark, he presents his point in an exceedingly disgusting fashion, that “irresponsible or untimely action of sincere

comrades” is more dangerous than the conniving of government provocateurs. This divisive, heavy-handed denunciation is tantamount to the backstabbing obstructionist vanguardist groups always bring to bear on those who act without their permission (for example, the Trotskyists who always said the actions of the Red Brigades, or the Angry Brigade, were the work of fascist/state provocateurs, or the similar people who said the same thing about the recent rocket attack on the US Embassy in Greece). It’s even worse that the article provides no examples of such “irresponsible” action. By being vague, the author covers himself from criticisms of “blanket” denunciations like the same kind he faults insurrectionists for using, but the result of his caution is to feed into an abstracted, stereotypical image of irresponsible insurrectionists that is neither respectful, productive, nor, it would seem, with much factual basis.

José dismisses the potentially useful criticism coming from insurrectionists, saying instead that insurrectionism is useful because it mirrors all the weaknesses in the anarchist movement, so it’s like a clear illness to be cured. Little if any insurrectionist criticism is dealt with fairly (instead of quoting insurrectionist criticisms, the author tends to rely on generalized notions of such criticisms).

Here’s a related example: “Another huge problem in discussion among anarchists is the use of blanket concepts, as demonstrated by comrade Black, that in fact help more to obscure than to clarify debate. For instance, it is too often that “unions” are criticised as if all of them were exactly the same thing... ignoring the world of difference between, let’s say, the IWW, the maquilas unions or the AFL-CIO in the US. To group them all under the same category not only doesn’t help the debate, but it is also a gross mistake that reveals an appalling political and conceptual weakness.”

Well, it’s interesting to note that in the “Aims and Principles” of the Anarchist-Communist Federation (1995 edition), point number seven begins “Unions by their very nature cannot be the vehicles for the revolutionary transformation of society” and later clarifies that “even syndicalist unions” are also subject to this “fundamental” nature.

Elsewhere, Gutiérrez says “the very criticism made by insurrectionalists can work as a godsend for [the] State to justify repression.” The example the author uses is of a Mexican anarchist group that apparently criticized APPO and CIPO-RFM in Oaxaca, during the state repression. The suggestion that insurrectionist criticism helps the state is heavy-handed and, no matter what the author may say or intend, fosters an air of silence and, ultimately, exactly the kind of authoritarianism insurrectionists have validly warned against. I have not read the criticism put out by the Informal Anarchist Coordination of Mexico that is referred to, and I don’t know if it is respectful and accurate or not (though I have read a few other criticisms of APPO developing a reformist, conciliatory character towards the end), but the argument that it was untimely creates an attitude against criticism when criticism is needed most. I suppose in the autumn of 1936 in Catalonia, to beat a dead horse, criticism was also untimely, but that was when the CNT-FAI really needed to be set straight, the point of high pressure when mass organizations and representative organizations are most likely to sell out.

He makes a sometimes fair point that insurrectionists are constructing an ideology around a preference for a single tactic (though if the author has read any of the better

insurrectionary writings he must not have understood [perhaps they didn't mention class enough] that they were very insightfully creating ideologies or theories out of analysis and contact with reality far more than I think any anarchist-communist has done since before World War II). But the author says insurrectionists are ineffective because they are functionally incapable of evaluating tactics due to their informal organization. The suggestion that you need a "programme" "to measure the effectiveness of the actions" comes out of left field without any justification (similar to the assumption that you need to identify with your class in order to understand your oppression), and I'm left with the image of a particularly dogmatic third-grader who insists all solemn-eyed that without your multiplication table in hand it is impossible to know what two times seven equals.

I've saved his best point for last: "Revolutionaries, above all, have to learn the art of perseverance. Impatience is not a good adviser as taught by revolutionary experience. This does not mean to wait, but to know how to choose the type of actions to perpetrate in certain moments." As boring and wooden as organizationalists may sometimes be, I think many insurrectionists overplay the liberatory potential of fun. Granted, you can't really describe how liberating play can be if you write in as boring a way as, for example, I do, weighing the pros and cons and blabbering away for, Christ, sixteen pages already?? I don't have a problem with "Armed Joy," to name one, but if this is the only thing you read your strategy and expectations of revolution will be sorely handicapped. I agree with the insurrectionist caution against sacrifice insofar as the Chairman Mao figures typically advocating it have all been frauds in the past, but as much as we can empower ourselves here and now we really can't totally determine the character of the revolution, and the state sure as hell has the power to make sure it won't be fun. A preference for fun too easily becomes a preference for comfort, and revolution is not comfortable. It occurs to me that an exclusive emphasis on attack, on action now, and the impatience that sometimes goes with that, leads to revolutionaries who cannot swallow the consequences of their actions. As an example I would name the ELF, and how quickly most of them rolled over and began to cooperate with the state once they were caught.

There are a few points from Joe Black's original article that also need addressing, and most relevant is his defense of formal organization. "Far from developing hierarchy, our constitutions not only forbid formal hierarchy but contain provisions designed to prevent the development of informal hierarchy as well. For instance considerable informal power can fall to someone who is the only one who can do a particular task and who manages to hold onto this role for many years. So the WSM constitution says no member can hold any particular position for more than three years. After that time they have to step down." However, constitutions are not power. The paradox is that what's written on paper actually means nothing to the functioning of bureaucratic organizations, and if some people haven't digested that fact yet it's about as safe for them to work in a large, formal organization as it is to put a seeing-impaired two-year-old behind the wheel of a five-ton tractor. The CNT joined the government in Spain in 1936 in a procedure that violated its constitution, to refer again to that sacred font of historical anarchist examples. Structure is only part of the equation, and power-sharing structures can easily be subverted if the group culture is not also fervently anti-hierarchical. A criticism by insurrectionists which is valid in at least

some instances is that organizations with formal constitutions and elected, specialized positions tend towards a rigidity and stagnation that invites the development of hierarchy. I personally don't think such groups should be off limits. It's clear that both suggested forms of organization have their weaknesses, and informal organizations are certainly vulnerable to informal hierarchies, but I think Joe Black has missed the substance of the criticism that, when apprehended, could hold the weaknesses of formal organizations in check.

I also want to point out the falsehood in the following: "Anarchist communism was clarified in 1926 by a group of revolutionary exiles analysing why their efforts to date had failed. This resulted in the publication of the document known in English as the 'Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists' which we have analysed at length elsewhere." This is misleading — most anarchist-communists opposed the Platform. I honestly don't have an absolute problem with folks who want a platform to clarify their efforts and basic beliefs, although I don't think I could ever limit myself to a few points on paper, but this suppression of disagreement evident in Joe Black's historical cherry picking certainly mirrors the conformity that will accompany a platform unless its authors are careful, conscious, and well meaning.

Since it looks like that time to slop together some kind of conclusion, I'll say that I suppose I don't believe the structures or forms of voluntary organization we adopt act deterministically to control our outcomes (though they have a strong influence, as all tools do, on the wielder) but all the structures and strategies developed by anarchists so far have serious weaknesses, and these flaws will be fatal unless we are more honest, flexible, receptive to criticism, and energetic than we have been to date.

find each other.



Peter Gelderloos
Insurrection vs. Organization
2007

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