An anarchist guide to ... organisation

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Organisation: is the order of the disordered. The distinction made between the order of authoritarianism and the disorder of non-authoritarianism is often discussed in terms of organisational principles. Authoritarian organisations are centralised apparatuses for decision-making which require members to follow command, compliance-monitoring and sanctions. Decisions are made by minorities and communicated vertically to members. Non-authoritarian organisations are constituted as non-hierarchical and leaderless. Decisions are made collectively and horizontally. Their ethos is egalitarian and non-dominating. But it’s also possible to think about this distinction abstractly. Authoritarian organisations try to fix the relationships and behaviours that somebody or some group want to be good, for some reason or another. Proposals for change are discouraged, difficult to make and easily resisted from those at the top of the hierarchy. Non-authoritarian organisations are designed to be flexible and open to resistance. Disorderly beings are not squeezed into the boxes others have built, but allowed to cohere and arrange themselves freely, according to needs, desires, collective purposes, local conditions, gravitational forces. There might be a close overlap between the organisational features and the abstract idea, but the openness of anarchists to anarchy provides latitude in anarchist organising.

Rules: are not the same as rulers. Rulers try to monopolise rules to colonise as many forms of activity or organisation as possible. Rules which aren’t intended to apply in this way make non-authoritarian organisations open to difference, diversity and pluralism. Rules might be informal or formal. Some non-authoritarian organisations support particular aesthetics or principles which members are expected or assumed to adopt. Some have written rule books. There’s an argument about whether the internalisation of informal rules is preferable to the adoption of formal ones. Maybe non-authoritarian organising requires a bit of both, together with an awareness of the risks that come from habituating established norms and practices. Feminists have unravelled as a flimsy deceit the claim that organisations labelled anarchist are anarchistic by default. Hallmarks are rules. Safe space policies are rules. And sanctions apply to those who flout them. In non-authoritarian organisations, it’s up to the members to determine the rules. It might be that this takes up a lot of time – but efficiency is not a top priority for anarchist organising.

Solidarity: is the glue that helps multiple groups, operating by different rules and networked in complex ways, support each other. Because solidarity does not involve the surrender of individual judgment or the transcendence of particular identities by some material or supernatural process, it’s often faulty. Lack of time, information or plain dislike, rivalry and mistrust means that solidarity can break down or fail to take root. It’s a particular kind of solidarity, one which doesn’t demand individuals confess to crimes that they haven’t committed or engage in self-censorship ‘for the sake of the party’. That’s the solidarity of democratic centralism, linked to vanguardism and the communism of the Comintern (Lenin’s International) and Cominform (Stalin’s successor).

Networking: the dynamic of inter-group activism which supports sustained, mass action. Virtual and face-to-face networking brings non-authoritarian groups and organisations in contact with each other without compromising autonomy. Networking is consistent with decentralised commitment of historical anarchism. The commune-modal of organisation envisaged by the geographer Élisée Reclus was inspired by both ideas. Groups and individuals living in local communes would interact through fluid networks, coming together to achieve particular goals and dissolving once these were realised. Networked interaction by-passed the need to established lots of permanent bodies and replicated the organic patterning Reclus observed in the natural world.

Affinity: groups are one model for anarchist organising: small organisations formed through personal association and/or shared concern which sometimes work independently to develop their own thing (for example, guerilla gardening, with or without the gardening) and sometimes operate within other organisations, in order to inject a bit of anarchist colour.

Individualists: sometimes worry about organisation. Bob Black associates organisation with compliance. He says: ‘organisation makes inevitable the crushing of an individual who is right by a machine which is wrong’. His concern is about the bureaucratising and moralising tendencies of organisation. Even if organisations are set up by virtuous people (perhaps especially so), and do not intend to oppress others, they nonetheless end up coercing members because they begin to think that the organisation’s aims can only be met by the unity of the membership. Disagreement becomes dissent. But not even individualists reject organisation. They just adopt different tests for non-authoritarianism. Black argues that Stone’s Union of Equites (which rejects obligations and binding commitments) is a form of organisation: ‘for mutual self-help for just so long (and no longer) as it suited any egoist to deal with it’.

Initiative: is a necessary part of anarchist organising. Nestor Mahno’s organisational platform of revolutionary anarchists, regarded as one of the most influential (right?) non-authoritarian organisations, included the commitment ‘against centralism’ and the defence of federalism, which recognises the independence and initiative of individuals and the organisation with service to the common cause.

Oligarchy: is said to be an iron law of organisation. This was Robert Michels’s view, presented some 60 years before Freeman’s critique of structurelessness. At the heart of the analysis is an observation about the bureaucratising tendencies of modern states. Michels joined Musсолini’s fascists and embraced it. Authoritarian organisations accept the tendency towards oligarchy in order to struggle against it.

Self-organising is not an option. Malatesta said that organisation was a fact, a natural condition: ‘cooperation and solidarity in practice’. This demystifying approach treats organisation as something that happens, not something that has been arranged by a higher power, committee or intelligence. It means that organisations are patterned by the practical that people decide to adopt and by the goals they want to realise. Organising is what creatures do.

The tyranny of structurelessness, an essay written by Jo Freeman, describes how informal hierarchies emerge in horizontal, egalitarian anarchist organisations, and how these hierarchies enable elites to perpetuate their advantages within organisations. Her solution is to adopt formal structures so that everyone can participate in the elite’s empowerment. Cathy Levine’s The Tyranny of Tyranny is one reply. In practice, acknowledgment of the cultural and moral constraints active in all social situations helps non-authoritarian devise strategies for non-dominion and discuss rules and behaviours that address prevailing power disadvantages. Humility and compassion are their tools. It’s difficult to see how the acceptance of elitism better addresses the pitfalls of the hierarchies that structurelessness apparently spawns.

Augustin: Souchy visited an anarchist anarchosyndicalist collective in 1951, organised by exiles from Franco’s Spain. He described brilliantly the transformative aspiration and utopian vision of anarchist organisation. His picture is Ike Paul Signac’s ‘The Time of Harmony’. ‘The good-sized rooms, equipped with central heating and warm water, were very comfortable. Wheat was grown, as well as potatoes and vegetables – and tobacco for sale. Under trees of sweet chestnuts, pigs were grazing, as well as cows and about 100 sheep. Meats were served in a special communal dining room, laundry and clothing were allotted according to need. No by-laws were needed. Every six months a chairman, treasurer and secretary were elected. It was an economic and cultural commune based on voluntaryism.’

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