An anarchist guide to ... organisation

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ORGANISATION

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

**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 decentralisation and commitment of historical anarchism. The commune-model of organisation envisaged by the geographer Elisée Reclus was inspired by both ideas: Groups and individuals living in local communities would interact through fluid networks, coming together to achieve particular goals and dissolving once these were realised. Networked interaction by-passed the need to establish lots of permanent bodies and replicated the organic patterning Reclus observed in the natural world.

**Individualists:** sometimes worry about organisation. Rob 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 bureaucratisation 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 Storzer’s Unions of Estates (which rejects obligations and binding commitments) is a form of organisation: ‘for mutual self-help for just as long (and no longer) as it suited any egoist to deal with it.’

**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 different aesthetic principles or principles which members are expected or assumed to adopt. Some have written rules. There’s an argument about whether the internalisation of informal rules is preferable to the adoption of formal ones. Maybe non-authoritarian organisations require a bit of both, together with an awareness of the risks that come from habituating established norms and practices. Feminists have unveiled as a blind spot 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 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 judgement 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).

**Oligarchy:** is said to be an iron law of organisation. This was Robert Michels’s view, presented some 60 years before Mussolini’s fascists and embraced it. Anarchist organising accepts the tendency towards oligarchy in order to struggle against it.

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

**Initiative:** is a necessary part of anarchist organising. Malatesta said that organisation was ‘a defect, a natural condition – “cooperation and solidarity in practice.” This demystifying approach treats organisations 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 practices that people decide to adopt and by the goals they want to realise. Organising is what creates.