

Organization

To think we can establish, even in general terms, a set of objectives/principles which will be a basis for a real “revolutionary organization” is an illusion.

Joe Jacobs

1977

The author of the following article, Joe Jacobs, was an English comrade and one-time member of London Solidarity (one of the two organizations mentioned in the discussion) who, we learned, died shortly after sending us this manuscript. Though we've devoted considerable space to this subject in previous issues we think that Joe's thoughts on the matter after many years of radical activity shed some light on “the organization question” that has too often been ignored.

With some exceptions, what follows was written before I became aware of the discussion/debate “On Organization” contained in the columns of the Fifth Estate. I read the Camatte/Collu text “On organization,” when it appeared in English (1975). I read the *Fifth Estate* interchange (#279, December 1976) with its contending views regarding this text. I also draw attention to the article by Charles Reeve, “The revolt against work, or the fight for the right to be lazy,” in the same issue. I am familiar with John Zerzan's writings. I think these are closely related matters.

The Reeve statement is also part of a discussion among subscribers to *Echanges*. (BP 241, 75866 Paris Cedex 18, France) and another, among members of Solidarity in Britain. In addition there is a discussion between Solidarity and another group, Social Revolution. This arose after some joint activity and suggestion concerning a possible merger.

In relation to the Camatte/Collu text, I need only say that I accept some descriptions of organizations but reject this kind of analysis and the authors' conclusions.

What are the issues? As I see them, that organization in general is necessary/desirable, in relation to a given objective. I am not discussing how to make prisons, all kinds, function more efficiently. I question the assumption that ‘organized’ activity is always more efficient and can be separated from ‘unorganized’ activity. I am referring to attempts to create a nonhierarchical, non-elitist, non-vanguardist, self-defined, self-managed type organization.

The following quotes define the relevant political context, as I see it I don't think it matters who said what. If you know, please don't link me with all the different views of these writers; i.e., guilt by association.

“Constant revolution in production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed fast frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.”

Another writer said:

“We are in a period between the ‘old’ movement (which was partly that of organizations outside the workers) and the ‘new’ movement which will be that of organizations of those who struggle for themselves.”

Another said:

“If Socialism is the full flowering of the autonomous activity of the masses and if the aims of this activity and its forms can only flow from workers’ own experience produced by exploitation and oppression, there can be no question of either inculcating them with a ‘socialist consciousness’ produced by a theory or of substituting ourselves for them for the leadership of the revolution or the construction of Socialism...The second was the contradiction implied in the very idea of organization and revolutionary activity: the contradiction is how, when we know or think we know that the proletariat should arrive at a conception of the revolution and of socialism, which it can only draw from itself, not to sit back and do nothing because of this...”

Final quote:

“As long as people try to do something together, they organize. All the time people are doing something for themselves creating some forms of organization opposed to the capitalist organization in which they are enclosed Everybody manages in one way or another, their daily lives. Doing so, some write statements about their organizations, but most don’t bother to write. They act in different ways and eventually somebody else can write about how they organized or failed to organize their activity.”

That comes from one such writer, and to prove his point, I am writing.

The discussion between Solidarity and Social Revolution (see above) is revealing. The mere existence of the two organizations is not understood as an obvious expression of their differences. There is an illusion that their objectives are the same, but the means for realizing them are different. To some extent this view is shared by both groups. There is a separation of means and ends, despite statements to the contrary, by both groups. Social Revolution criticises Solidarity for attacking the rest of the “left” when they should be attacking capitalism-. Clearly this means they separate the “left” from capitalism, in a way that Solidarity does not. Solidarity often says, the “left” are part of the problem, not the solution. Social Revolution tends to see itself as part of the “left.” Solidarity has the illusion that they are not part of the “left.”

Any serious examination of the changing practice of both groups shows their concern for preserving their separate organizations, as they in common with others, talk about “What differentiates us...” All compete to be even more “unique” and exemplary. They don’t see that this is what makes them similar. Both groups stress the need to create “conscious” revolutionary organization. They regard themselves as participants in activity which will supply a “missing link” in the revolutionary process. Others offer “correct leadership,” they offer “correct ideas.” It should be no surprise that the people they address find it difficult to see the difference.

Far from “raising consciousness”, they make matters worse. They separate what they call “conscious creation” from “unconscious defensive reflex.” It is not a case of one or the other. There is no such thing as conscious activity which is not subject to a mass of individual and collective reflex and vice-versa; i.e., unconscious reflex which often leads to conscious activity.

What people may do in one direction or another is unpredictable. Their actions alter the relationships of social forces and change the potentialities for future action. We cannot say in advance what forms of organization will be possible to meet peoples’ needs. We cannot say as we travel our varied paths, which one leads to the/a revolution.

To think we can establish, even in general terms, a set of objectives/principles which will be a basis for a real “revolutionary organization” is an illusion. We can and do combine for the realization of specific immediate projects, and we are obliged to do so. We can and do have ideas/visions concerning the long-term future; these change according to the results of current and resulting actions and so on. It follows that “revolutionary objectivity” enshrined in an organization is not realisable and cannot be pursued in this way, unless you believe you possess the ultimate “truth.”

For those reasons among others, the relationships between groups like Solidarity and Social Revolution are of little interest outside their respective memberships and a few others. Most people vote with their feet. Like me they also act and think ambiguously, incoherently, consciously, unconsciously, etc., There are moments when all this seemingly contradictory behaviour merges into a movement with profound revolutionary consequences. This movement also produces new forms of organization.

“Facts” are interpreted, empirically, new theories emerge to be tested in practice. The practice reveals new “facts” which demand new theories and so on. It follows that organizations cannot be established and frozen for very long. They change, split or liquidate. As we try to create effective organization, we wonder why “organization” is always on the agenda, and complain about the lack of response to our efforts. We don’t pay due attention to the massive amount of activity arising from the conflicts generated by the divisions in capitalist society, which is not based on any precise theory concerning the long-term direction of a constantly changing society. “Revolutionaries” with their ideas about the kind of society they regard as inevitable or desirable, are critical of all activity not directed to the realization of their aims.

Nevertheless, activity is often described as “spontaneous,” “wildcat,” “unofficial,” “unorganized,” “autonomous,” etc. “Absenteeism,” “go-slow,” “sabotage” and “work-to-rule” requires a fair amount of individual and small group decision-making. While applauding some of this, our “revolutionary theoretical gurus” search for a “socialist content” and fail to find any. They talk about “apathy” and “privatisation” because few people take much notice of their offerings. They say people are behaving “negatively” as though that were some kind of crime. They see the decline of worker participation in all kinds of trade-union and political-party activity as evidence of a deep malaise within the working-class. They can’t see the revolution going on under their noses, because they suffer from “recuperation paranoia,” “Organization fetishism” and “Method mania.” They don’t see the significance of people acting for themselves and rejecting existing political organizations. There is a lot of evidence that the growth of these attitudes, in practice, is undermining the base of existing social relations.

I think there are specific forms of activity which will recognize this so-called unorganized movement as a very important movement, which is frightening the exploiters and manipulators everywhere. We can be part of this movement in many ways. Gathering information about attempts to resist being controlled and dominated, at work and elsewhere. Making this information available to others, is only one form of activity. Of course, the selection of material, its preparation and presentation, etc., will be affected by those who undertake this work. This is already the case as practiced with particular motives, by propagandists, agitators, teachers, leaders, etc., who try to recruit activists for their particular action and organization. There is a difference if you don’t call for the building of a particular organization but highlight the kind of organization created by the participants in their own struggles, and don’t try to tell them how to suck eggs.

The problem of organization which so bedevils “revolutionaries,” can be seen differently if we seek to learn from struggles which have objectives defined by those who try to keep their struggles under their own control, and reject the efforts of “revolutionary interventionists” and their theoretical advice. An offer of genuine practical help with no strings attached, is seldom rejected, and the difference is well understood.

Theories often degenerate and become doctrine or worse, dogma. This binds the adherents who create organizations, which can become ends in themselves, needing to be defended and perpetuated against all opposition, until a changing reality brings about their demise. If an organization realizes its objectives, it follows that new objectives need to be defined and new organizations are needed. In this sense the question of organization is a never ending process of immense complexity. Theory as a guide to action is counter-productive if contending views are ignored or if all who disagree with your theory are dismissed as failing to understand, or lacking consciousness, etc.

Consciousness is a term used, consciously or otherwise, by tyrants to justify their form of domination over others. They presume to know what is good/bad, right/wrong, rational/irrational, coherent/incoherent, progressive/reactionary, revolutionary/counterrevolutionary, etc. We all have to make value judgments but we don’t need to force others to accept them against their will, because we think it is in their interests which we understand better than they do themselves.

We use terms like Freedom, Liberty, Equality, Democracy, which cannot be defined outside a precise context, and for only a relatively short period, after which the terms take on new meanings. These terms can only be applied

in varying degrees of their form and content. They are not only definable in contrast with their direct opposites. They are a ratio of their opposites.

Organization is another such term. It cannot be opposed to absence or lack of organization, since they are only degrees of the same thing. They are part of a process through which activity is expressed. Organization is not only a means for resolving problems, it also creates problems. Especially the way decisions are made. What kind of differences can be tolerated, and how to deal with dissidents, to say nothing of the personal relationships between members, which can be decisive. And many other problems too numerous to mention.

Organized or not, we all support certain ideas and values and find ourselves acting according to opposing ideas and values. Conditioning cannot be totally effective, otherwise there could be no change opposed to the objectives of the rulers. We can and do disrupt organized exploitation. Developing technology and management techniques provide more opportunities for individual and small group struggle which have their limitations, but can be unlimited as with other forms of struggle. Praxis includes discovery/invention through all forms of exploration into the unknown. This reveals much more than we set out to discover. We live and act in a bewildering, complex, ambiguous, contradictory, indefinable reality. There are no "crystal balls" to reveal the course of future events. No way to total comprehension. This is no excuse for not trying to understand and acting within existing human limitations.

I am painfully aware that I can only scratch the surface of this vast subject. Don't be too hard on me if I have left out some aspect which you consider more important than those I have included. You may be right. I am more interested in looking at movements which no one consciously created, and advocated in some kind of manifesto; e.g. Hungary '56, France May '68, Poland '71-'72, '76. New relations between children/parents, pupils/teachers, women/men, etc. The changing attitude to work—absenteeism, sabotage, work itself. So-called apathy, "opting out," some experimental new life-styles, social and community activity. Revolution is the result of human activity and day one is today. What happened before may be revealed as having revolutionary consequences which can be developed. We can also shed some illusions concerning what we previously regarded as "revolutionary activity," including the way we think about organization.

'Nuff said. "Most people don't write." They do act, think and talk. Listen to them.

fifth Estate

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