

Logistical Anarchism

Organizing against the Idiocene

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Social resistance has reached a certain impasse, a conundrum as nation states impose austerity as an extended regime of governance throughout social life.

In North America, movements still race from crisis (response) to crisis (response), while organizing often occurs around rather narrow issues.

The alternative globalization politics of the last two decades, Occupy and the street protests against the IMF, World Bank, and G20, are posed as having emerged spontaneously as resistance to the state and capital.

This implies that society holds the seeds of its own downfall which simply need to sprout, and will when presented with a hopeful or inspirational example. But, certainly there will be a struggle as power holders will do anything to retain their rule.

Two perspectives have framed this understanding: an insurrectionist one that seeks a spark (a riot, perhaps) to jump start an uprising, tapping into pre-existing anger, or, a prefigurative one that seeks to inspire people by showing them, modeling, a “better way,” in small scale alternatives.

Both of these are matched with movement-based activities, routines of protest and dissent. Both are, and have been, ill suited to the challenges posed by the aggressively active and well resourced rulers.

Movement-based approaches, activism, are not sufficient. There is a real difference between social movements and social mobilizations which are spread more broadly throughout communities. There is a connection, yet current movements in North America are struggling to get past oppositional activism (movementism) toward resistance–social mobilization.

There is a need to move from the public squares to the neighborhoods. In the current context where official social institutions have collapsed, as in Greece and Spain, they have been replaced in part by larger scale, but localized projects of mutual aid. The ground had been prepared by the building of infrastructures of resistance before recent mass uprisings occurred and acted as a basis for them.

Preparation is Key

The broad appeal and support of movements comes through meeting needs and securing victories, not through a proper perspective, recognizable activism, or insurrectionary sparks. Many who join movements do so out of the desire to find community or security, and to win tangible gains, rather than primarily adherence to the general principles or goals, i.e., to end capitalism or abolish the state.

Organized alternatives must, in part, be able to offer a sense of belonging and community and meet immediate community needs while also advocating the idea of getting beyond statist and capitalist social relations. They need to develop strategies and tactics that move that aim (of getting beyond state and capital) closer.

As the anarchist writer Paul Goodman insisted in the context of 1960s movements, there must be clear functional solutions developed. Health clinics, schools, clothing and food provision, and community facilities and youth recreation are some of the essential resources movements have effectively secured (from the Black Panther projects of the 1960s, through workers centers and anarchist created post-Katrina and Sandy hurricane initiatives more recently).

But these have to come from within the community. Infrastructures of resistance provide a logistical base for building broad support. Many of these infrastructures were destroyed and/or demobilized following the state repression against the upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The “war on crime/ war on drugs” played a part in this as targeted police repression struck precisely at those infrastructures and the people involved, and as communities lost and/or had to care for members harmed by the state.

As neighborhood infrastructures crumble across North America today, there is no shortage of places for us to start meeting our own needs, collectively in our own neighborhoods and workplaces; remember, this is not activism. Actions are taken because they address specific needs, not to spark people.

As Goodman suggests: “It is inauthentic to do community development in order to ‘politicize’ people, or to use a good do-it-yourself project as a means of ‘Bringing people into the Movement.’ Everything should be done for its own sake.”

The emphasis on elites, experts and professionals in advanced capitalist societies, and the dominance of administrative bureaucracies discourage people from asserting their own capacities for decision making. People are conditioned to seek expert advice and opinions. This is illustrated by the popularity of daytime talk shows like Oprah, Dr. Phil, and in the profusion of self help literature in which experts tell people how to pursue basic life tasks.

Critics such as sociologist Heidi Rimke note that this is also a form of governance or self-regulation in neo-liberal political regimes. As Goodman noted, this leaves people unprepared to taste freedom when opportunities arise.

Once people see that establishment structures are unwilling or unable to meet basic needs—and alternatives become available—they will struggle to break from those structures.

Battles are won or lost before they are even fought. Preparation is key. There must be a material capacity (resources, skills, experiences, etc.) to achieve tangible victories; we need to be realistic in assessing our capacities. People must see results and have reason to believe that their own organizing and active participation within social struggles will improve their lives in meaningful ways. Ritualized movement activity cannot do this; if we organize for protests we’ll only get protests.

Anarchists must be able to help people and our communities develop capacities to provide now for material needs that the state or market cannot or will not provide (and we don’t want them to provide), while also offering spaces in which new ways of relating to one another can be practiced, and in which perspectives on getting beyond statist, capitalist, or authoritarian religious structures can be developed/debated/ discussed.

Indeed, it is partly in supporting people in their communities and providing needed social resources that the religious Right and churches have out-organized the Left in parts of North America, as much as we might deplore their activities.

Striving to meet substantial needs, and more, on an everyday basis, in a context in which these are denied or confined within capitalist market or statist service frameworks can certainly be radical (getting to the roots); curiously we have reached a point where atypical, discontinuous moments (such as a street protest or clash with cops) are viewed as radical, at least by activists. The latter have come to dominate movement strategy and action.

Anarchist ideas and practices are important in moving beyond survival within current conditions, particularly as the gap between our needs and meeting them continues to be felt. Anarchist spaces could provide both needed resources and perspectives for more thoroughgoing change but must broaden their base.

Members of non-elite groups, the working classes and the oppressed, need opportunities to change our interpersonal economic interactions. Thus, we require spaces to practice being cooperative with one another, rather than being compelled by economic circumstances or our socialization to act in ways that are competitive or manipulative.

These practices, and establishing spaces and venues to pursue and extend them, are part of processes of revolutionizing how we relate to each other (on smaller and larger scales). These on-the-ground efforts which function in contrast to official capitalist relations are what Hakim Bey calls Permanent Autonomous Zones or what the socialists of Europe in the 1920s and 30s referred to as dual power. To survive and be effective they must expand from marginal or subcultural terrain, reaching a broader base and offering real alternatives, rather than serving as getaways or escapes.

Small groups cannot, despite the best wishes of insurrectionists, provoke mass uprisings or manufacture revolution, or construct the conditions that will lead to mass rebellion. Insurrection implies armed struggle and this would, in reality, prove fatal for our movements right now. There is a pressing need to develop and organize bases of logistical support that can mobilize, support, and sustain what might become revolutionary struggle rather than seeing discontent dissipate in ineffectual, but cathartic, insurrections or riots. Uprisings and rebellions could then be extended and given lengthier duration with more positive impacts beyond personal transformation.

Logistical Anarchy

It has been said that logistics determine strategy. We require necessary resources to make strategies meaningful. For radical movements there is much logistical work to be done. Building infrastructures of resistance is about preparing a logistical capacity to expand struggles against state and capital which can sustain the effects of individual and disconnected acts of dissent or protest.

Significant examples come from indigenous land reclamations and blockades, such as Six Nations at Caledonia and Mohawks in Tyendinaga in Ontario I observed while doing solidarity work. In the face of armed police assaults, people of Six Nations mobilized large numbers of community members to retake their land and houses and feed an ongoing reclamation over the course of several years, building onsite infrastructures to hold and build a communal space.

They rely on the skills and resources of people rooted in the community who have shared these as part of the struggle there. At Tyendinaga, community gardens and teaching and practice in food provision have helped fuel efforts to blockade resource extraction projects.

The need for preparation and reliable infrastructures is pressing. So, too, are coordinated work and venues to bring together often isolated organizers. As Paul Goodman has argued, programs—economic, political, cultural, logistical, are needed that can displace the state and capital rather than merely oppose. In his view, the shift from program to protest among “activism” is doomed to lose. Many broader infrastructures are needed within the oppressed sections of the working class especially. It is not enough to engage in agitational work, as it might appear in periods of low struggle or demobilization.

Insurrection without preparation, a solid base, is mere fantasy.

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