

Coordinating a Gift Economy

Gathering of Libertarian Infrastructures in Catalunya

PG

2016

On October 17 and 18, 2015, anarchists in the small Catalan city of Manresa held the first Gathering of Libertarian Infrastructures. Outside of English speaking North America, libertarian is a synonym for anarchist. The event was the result of over a year of informal debates and longer collective processes in which comrades sought the ideal forms of coordination and organization, and the best methods for spreading anarchist ideas and practices.

Specifically, the initiative reflects a sentiment that there is a lack of creative or constructive projects that put anarchist relations in practice, support and amplify the struggle, and utilize anarchist methods to respond to the needs of daily life. In fact, as the call-out for the gathering states, Catalunya boasts an unusually high number of projects that embark in such a direction, but such projects quickly become divorced from other aspects of the struggle.

We know what often happens. Cooperatives and projects for a solidaristic economy end up in self-exploitation or even transform into capitalist businesses with an alternative character. Projects that fail due to exhaustion fall into a productivist logic, or collapse under the imposed need to pay rent.

Projects that little by little distance themselves from the struggle as they come to inhabit a reality different from that of those comrades who remain “in the streets.” Projects that limit themselves to a legalistic path in order to avoid repression and the significant loss of energy and material that such repression brings. Or, projects that, even as they evade capitalist dynamics, condemn themselves to self-isolation in their search for self-sufficiency.

Other comrades, often the youngest and most active, develop an idea of struggle centered on abstract and combative activities, such as writing and debating, protest, and sabotage, all of which are vital, but are by themselves incomplete. Thus, the constructive part of the struggle is divorced and distanced from practices of collective self-defense, propaganda, and theorization. In the end, all of us are weakened.

This is a predictable dynamic. Capitalism always offers us tools for “achieving our dreams” and realizing any and all creative projects, but they are tools that recondit us towards mercantile and productive relations. Democracy will also give us permission for nearly any initiative, but with regulations and conditions that will not allow us to step out of the game that the powerful control so easily.

The past few years in Catalunya, and across the Spanish state in general, have seen a number of organizational initiatives. This initiative is different insofar as it does not pretend to create a political organization or a space that serves as people’s primary political affiliation.

On the contrary, the proposal is for a practical organization with a minimalist structure. In terms of its practicality, the initiative rejects the “if you build it, they will come” approach, arguing instead that all proposals for organization should be met with the question, “organize what?” to ensure they are “based on a concrete need to foment more coordination among projects that already exist, that have already developed their practices and chosen their paths.”

In terms of its minimalism, the gathering was first proposed as La Coordinadora de Infraestructures Llibertaries, or Coordinating Body of Libertarian Infrastructures, but at the first gathering the name was changed to

“Trobada” (Gathering, Encounter), to reflect that it is primarily a space of encounter in which both formal and informal networks, structures, and initiatives can arise.

As the call-out states, “No group or individual will have to participate in structures that do not directly respond to their own organizational needs.”

In English as well as in Catalan, “infrastructure” usually refers to typically state-organized structures such as highways or powerlines that serve as a necessary foundation to the means of production and the apparatuses of state authority

In recent years in Catalunya, it has come to take on a different meaning in relation to the anarchist movement, as can be witnessed in the inclusion of such projects as radios, clinics, and gardens in the category of infrastructure.

Perhaps the new usage is in fact close to the literal meaning, given that anarchy is, in a way, the World Turned Upside Down. A radical take on anarchism, at least, does not seek to manage the preexisting means of production and apparatuses of authority

Our infrastructures are those projects that constitute a necessary foundation for the social relations we wish to create, and a support for our struggle, which, if successful, would radically transform or destroy what for capitalism is considered to be infrastructure.

Given that the recent proliferation of new organizations in Catalunya, and new failures, has led to a climate of cynicism, the level of participation in the gathering came as a surprise.

Around 70 people from 45 different projects turned out, from all the provinces of Catalunya and beyond, from city, town, and countryside. The projects came from the fields of free education, rural self-sufficiency and ecological farming, pirate radios and propaganda, printers and publishers, self-organized medicine and healthcare, artisanal crafts, carpentry and metal workshops, liberated and open-source technology workshops, internet platforms, and more.

One of the objectives of the gathering was to transform the dominant mode of meetings and encounters in a way that reflects the social relations we want to foster. Aside from debates (on the concept of the gift economy and on the idea of using our projects to counter the results of austerity), people also came together in diverse spaces: a decentralized and informal space for weaving networks, a space for workshops of artisanal and other skills, moments for communal work and moments for play and games. The activities of care—the kitchen and the children’s space—were in central, visible locations and were staffed collectively.

Money was not present during the gathering; on the contrary everything was shared as a gift, and the few costs for the preparation were assumed by everyone via a donation jar and a visible list of expenses, which were removed as soon as the minor debts were repaid. There was a gifts table where people from varied projects left samples of what they make, from books and pamphlets to homemade remedies to vegetables from the garden.

After a night of healthy partying, on Sunday morning thirty people worked shoulder to shoulder to fix up new spaces in La Ruda (the anarchist athenium in Manresa where the gathering was held). The purpose of putting aside time for communal labor was to take advantage of the collective force of all the people present and to get to know one another in a non-intellectual space.

Emphasis was also placed on the question of reskilling and artisanal techniques. The pertinent analysis holds that capitalism currently trains us only in the skills necessary for increasingly absurd jobs, skills that are useless for the self-organization of survival, whereas useful skills and artisanal crafts are disappearing.

New technologies make us progressively stupider and more dependent, meaning that our values of mutual aid, solidarity, and self-organization rarely go beyond a superficial, abstract plane. As such, the gathering constitutes an attempt to visibilize and encourage those projects that recover skills such as healing, carpentry, agriculture, and more.

And perhaps most centrally, the initiative marks a strategic decision to encourage a gift economy, so that such projects will not perpetually have to support themselves within a capitalist market or with alternative currencies that still perpetuate a quantitative and productivist logic.

As one text distributed at the gathering states, the gift economy is that which most closely approaches anarchist ideals, and it is one we still practice in our intimate spaces. Yet in general anarchists have not made a concerted effort to spread the relationships and practices based in reciprocity and a true communal feeling, necessary to

enable such an economy, meaning that the only alternatives are the cooperatives and alternative currencies that never seem to leave the capitalist orbit.

Participants set themselves the objective of holding a gathering twice a year. Now, the main question is whether the contacts that were made will be used to strengthen individual projects in the intervening months, whether the initiative will be able to continue despite the repression that has fallen, again, upon the anarchist movement in Catalunya, or whether it will fall victim to the exhaustion, the immediacy, and the loss of strategic perspective that such repression often causes.

Will this space of coordination be able to overcome the divide between the constructive and the destructive, the practical and the abstract, and enable these projects to serve as seeds of anarchy that support people in their daily life, amplify the struggle, and spread anarchist practices at a time when new political parties are again trying to seduce people with easy solutions?

PG is an anarchist living in Catalunya.

See an English translation of the call-out at: "The First Gathering of Libertarian Infrastructures"

<http://www.anarchistnews.org/content/first-gathering-libertarian-infrastructures>



PG
Coordinating a Gift Economy
Gathering of Libertarian Infrastructures in Catalunya
2016

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/395-winter-2016-50th-anniversary/coordinates-a-gift-economy
Fifth Estate #395, Winter 2016 — 50th Anniversary

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net