

A Review of The “Tyranny of Structurelessness”: An organizationalist repudiation of anarchism

Jason McQuinn

The Tyranny of Structurelessness by Jo Freeman (Workers’ Solidarity Movement, POB 1528, Dublin 8, Ireland, 1989; Also available from the web site: flag.blackened.net) 5 pp., no price listed, pamphlet.

Not too surprisingly, whenever organizationalist, leftist anarchist tendencies cast about for justification for their amalgamations of anarchist theory with leftist politics, they invariably seem to latch on to Jo Freeman’s now quite dated essay titled *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*. In fact, the recently spreading infatuation with the *Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* by Peter Arshinov, Nestor Makhno *et al* amongst some less self-critical and more leftist anarchists has led to quite a proliferation of anarchist web sites featuring Freeman’s not-too-veiled attack on anarchist theories of organization.

The avowedly platformist Workers Solidarity Movement in Ireland has both released yet another edition of the essay as a pamphlet, along with making this edition available for .pdf download from its web site. A quick Google internet search netted 322 hits for the essay, where it appears to be by far most popular on anarchist web sites, primarily leftist sites — like the “International Anarchism web pages,” the NEFAC web site, the *Onward* web site — and archives like the Spunk Library site. It’s also still popular as a more explicitly anarchist-bashing reference — on web sites like Ken Knabb’s Bureau of Public Secrets, the World Socialists site, reformist/statist Green sites, the International Socialist Organization (ISO) web site, and a few sundry authoritarian or reformist pacifist sites. While it may still ultimately be cited the most as a now somewhat curious historical document from the early days of the feminist movement revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since the essay is really an attack on the “structureless groups” of the consciousness-raising stage of the feminist movement, these latter citations obviously make the most sense, especially if one actually reads the document.

A nutshell description of Freeman’s essay on one anarchist web site (www.anarchism.ws/) is given as: “Why organisations need some structure to ensure they are democratic.” But — at least since the demise of the consciousness-raising stage of the feminist movement — everyone already agrees with Freeman that the whole issue of structure vs. structurelessness was always a red herring. All social groups, whether they’re formal or informal, have some sort of structure. The actual argument of the essay would more accurately be stated as “Why formal political

organizations are better than anarchistic forms of organization.” For this reason alone when self-described anarchists uncritically cite this essay or load it onto their web sites it is somewhat akin to uncritically citing Marxist-Leninist or Stalinist tracts on the necessity for political parties. This is confused and nonsensical at the best; at worst it is simply a betrayal of anarchist principles.

As the bizarre title, *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, hints, the essay reads like a closely argued, but incomprehensibly unreal and illogical stab at sociology by a paranoid schizophrenic. The fear of freedom, friendship and community, as well as the fetish for sterile, reified, rule-bound relationships (drained of all spontaneity and vitality) oozes from almost every page. It goes without saying that the author is not, nor has she ever been, an anarchist. From the text, one gets the impression that she doesn't think anarchy could ever be a possible social goal for any rational person, much less that it could ever actually come to pass. She *did* participate in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement long ago. But, as a biographical sketch indicates, she did so *as a critic* of the radicals. She also participated in the civil rights movement and the rebirth of the feminist movement, but again, never as any kind of radical libertarian. She is now a political scientist and lawyer with an ongoing interest in the highly reified world of political parties, where “tyranny” is no longer such a problem for her since there are no insidious “structureless groups” to worry about!

From some of the author's autobiographical comments and from the type of people typically attracted to her arguments, it becomes clear that *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* primarily appeals to bookish, socially-incompetent — or anti-social — people interested in politics, but unsure of themselves or unwilling (or unable) to negotiate social relationships which aren't based on written rules of order with formal roles. The ambiguities, spontaneity and informality of mutual friendships and communal relationships tend to provoke anxieties in such people that the security, hierarchy, leadership and discipline of authoritarian organizations are designed to relieve.

Freeman's fundamental insight in the essay is that informal groups are susceptible to power struggles involving many of the pitfalls more commonly and easily observed in large, formal organizations. And, of course, not many people would disagree. But in her mind the ever-present, looming dangers of small, informal groups always dwarf the minimal problems that so rarely pop up in formal organizations like political parties! You see, the latter have explicit rules, formal leaders and agreed-upon membership roles that maximize effectiveness while minimizing the irresponsible, elitist, undemocratic excesses to which informal groups are so defenseless.

For any genuine anarchists these arguments will appear as paranoid, schizoid and nauseatingly opportunistic as they do when they are parroted in authoritarian leftist publications (and web sites like that of the ISO), where they are used like clubs to bash those nasty, undisciplined, but dictatorial anarchists who don't ever give authoritarian socialists a fair chance to be elected into leadership positions in the anarchist movement.

In actuality, the potential problems Freeman is most worried about in informal groups, are much more prevalent, virulent and destructive in large, formal organizations. However, the believers in and proponents of such groups simply don't bother to worry about them there, partly because other problems particular to formal organizations are more obvious, and partly since such people are and were never really worried about the fundamental problems of personal and social freedom in the first place — only in their reified, political representation (and thus falsification).

Freeman specifically focuses her Kafkaesque critique on four problems.

1. She alleges that “structureless” or — for our purposes here — small, informal libertarian groups function as a “smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others.” This is because “As long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules.” And “For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved in a given group...the structure must be explicit, not implicit.” Obviously, the problem alleged can potentially happen — once in a *great* while. It is equally obvious that it’s much more common (because it’s probably a hell of a lot easier) for “the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others” by starting or taking over formal organizations. After all why bother with blowing “smokescreens” to hide a shaky hegemony over a small, informal group when it’s easier to insinuate yourself into powerful roles in formal organizations? Freeman’s claim that the reason why some people allow themselves to be dominated by others is that only those doing the dominating know the informal group structures is ridiculous on its face. Informal group structure isn’t occult. It’s a function of intersubjective negotiation and mutual expectations. People who allow themselves to be dominated in informal groups will also allow themselves to be dominated in formal groups — and probably more easily and often in the latter simply because a structure for domination is going to be much more often present from the outset!
2. Freeman alleges that elitism is much more of a problem in small, informal groups than it is in formal organizations. Her reason for this is essentially the ludicrous definition she gives to elitism: “Elites are nothing more, and nothing less, than groups of friends who also happen to participate in the same political activities.” For this reason, “An individual, as an individual, can never be an elitist” (because an individual isn’t a *group of friends!*). And thus, there must not be any great problem with capitalist elites, political elites or international elites, unless there really *are* groups of friends involved “who also happen [my emphasis] to participate in the same political activities.” And this stupidity was written by a then future political scientist! Talk about blowing “smokescreens” to hide hegemony! For Freeman we only need to worry about elites made up of friends in informal groups. Everything else in more “democratic” formal organizations like political parties is so egalitarian that it doesn’t even need to be mentioned.
3. Freeman argues that the “‘Star’ system” [her strange quotes around ‘Star’] was created by “the idea of structurelessness.” Even assuming that she is restricting her analysis to the feminist milieu, such an argument makes little or no sense in a spectacular-commodity society in which star systems abound in just about every sphere of public life, and yet none of the other spheres are so terribly burdened with informal organizations as was the feminist milieu of the 1960s and 1970s. Once again, many of the potential problems she describes with the star system are just as prevalent or more prevalent where formal organizations are the rule. But that doesn’t concern her. For Freeman, only stars created in the context of informal groups are really bad.
4. Freeman thinks that informal groups are politically impotent. Obviously, in the sense of participation in the formal, statist political system this is going to be true. Forming political parties and mass organizations, or raising millions of dollars in corporate contributions are never going to be what informal groups are good at. However, as any anarchist knows,

libertarian organizations can and have accomplished everything necessary for individuals and communities to live in free, egalitarian, convivial societies — both long-term in hunting and gathering communities and more transitorily in modern revolutionary periods. Just because anarchist groups are often small and informal, it doesn't follow that they can't or haven't employed elements of formal organization whenever and wherever they've been appropriate and necessary.

Finally, Freeman recommends a short list of “principles of democratic structuring.” Here, at last she actually has something to say, although most of her suggestions are just as appropriate (or moreso) for informal groups as for formal ones and will work with either. She suggests the lot system, which has been used by informal anarchist groups many times historically. Then there is “delegation” of “specific tasks,” “rotation of tasks,” “allocation of tasks along rational criteria,” “diffusion of information to everyone as frequently as possible,” and “equal access to resources needed by the group.” Each of these suggestions are far more commonly accomplished by informal libertarian groups than by any but a small number of the most radical of the formal organizations of the world, including formal anarchist organizations. And they can be recommended for any organization, whether it's formal or informal.

The two suggestions Freeman makes that I don't list above are explicitly based on authoritarian assumptions — “distribution of authority among as many people as is reasonably possible” (anathema to anarchists in the sense of political authority that she apparently includes in her meaning) and “requiring all those to whom authority has been delegated to be responsible to those who selected them.” Tell that to the politicians you elect, suckers! Given her decades of work within the Democratic Party Freeman remains oblivious to the much more widespread and devastating tyrannies of capitalism, statism and organizationalism.

As a critique of informal anarchist organization, it should be obvious that *The Tyranny of Structurelessness* is a complete dud. As an anti-anarchist rant it will always have its uses for anti-anarchist politicians of all stripes, but for genuine anarchists it will remain a useless document functioning as a “smokescreen” for the multitude of potential abuses inherent in formal organizations of all kinds (including anarchist organizations), and especially in intentionally authoritarian formal organizations. We need to be on guard for authoritarian, hierarchical, dominating and exploitative relationships in every sphere of society. Just don't expect to find many of these in informal organizations.

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