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Anarchist Synthesis

Jeff Shantz

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Synthesist anarchism refers to organizing approaches that attempt to bring together anarchists of varying tendencies and perspectives within a single group, federation, or project. As a form of political action, anarchist synthesis is sometimes referred to as “big tent” or “small-a” anarchism.

The term is drawn from the critical response to the platformist position of the Dielo Trouda Group by a number of Russian anarchists, including notably Voline. The synthesist opponents of platformism argued for an inclusive anarchist organization that could achieve the theoretical and tactical unity advocated by the platformists.

Much of anarchist activity in North America is synthesist, still fitting the description from Dielo Trouda in 1926: “local organizations advocating contradictory theories and practices, having no perspectives for the future, nor of continuity in militant work, and habitually disappearing, hardly leaving the slightest trace behind them.” Many of these short-lived projects are based on the “synthesist” model in which contradictory or incompatible ideas and practices are expected to coexist.

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Many of these ephemeral organizations are built on the synthesist basis that platformists have been and remain critical of. While synthesist approaches can succeed, they do exhibit a tendency to be the “mechanical assembly of individuals” that the platformists suggested. Such groupings work relatively well as long as their level of activity doesn’t rise above running a bookstore, infoshop, or free school. Unfortunately, even in those cases disastrous rifts emerge when meaningful political questions are broached. A consensus based on not wanting to offend other members or declining controversial work because it threatens collective harmony are too often the default positions of synthesist-type groups.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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