

The Role of Structure and Organization in a Revolutionary Movement

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The question, “what is the role of structure and organization in a revolutionary movement?” has two aspects: “What is the role of structure?” and “What is the correct/appropriate structure?” I think that these two questions are really two sides of a more central question: “What are we trying to accomplish in the long run, and how is that affected by our structure?” On the most basic level, we are trying to change the world by building up a new society within the old, hoping that the new society will destroy the old one in the process. The editorial in the last issue of *Love and Rage* discussed why we need a structure/organization to do this. Here, I will try to sketch how we will do this.

Organization in General

In general, I think there are three main functions of organization. Organization is needed, first, to unify with people who are oppressed by, and in opposition to, this society; second, to connect with other people who are already insurgent against this society. Finally, organization can attempt to prefigure the new society by building new social and personal relations that embody, as much as possible, our vision of the new society. To me, the last is the most important function.

The purpose of unifying with people already in opposition is to show the connections among the various structures that oppress us and to see our opposition as part of a broader struggle. The purpose of connecting with people who are actively insurgent is to build coalitions and to become parts of those struggles. In both areas, we should be seeking to argue for our politics — both our analysis and our commitment to democracy, pluralism, and anti-authoritarianism. We should also seek to participate in movements that help us to see ourselves as interested in and capable of taking action to change our lives, so that we move from anger and resentment into opposition and revolt.

But the real core of our politics, I think, and what distinguishes us from other political forces, is in our commitment to building the new society now. This is central for two reasons. It (hopefully) allows us to see our work as part of the revolution instead of being prior to it; at the same time, the process of trying to build something new is what will really be the undoing of the old.

This is the major lesson that I have drawn from the EZLN. They went to Chiapas wanting two things: to make a revolution and to see their political ideas come true. As they struggled along with the people of Chiapas, who were already insurgent against the larger society, the Zapatistas discovered that their two goals were in conflict: the people in Chiapas wanted revolution, but not on the EZLN’s terms. Then something mind-blowing happened: the EZLN effectively decided that it wanted revolution more than it wanted to be right. They began with the idea of descending on Chiapas and transforming it; instead, they were transformed along with it. At some point, the EZLN had to choose between the people and their abstract idea of revolution. They chose the people, only to discover (happily) that the people were the revolution.

Will we be as smart and courageous? I think we will in part, through the process of building revolutionary structures, including the Love and Rage Federation. But this will happen only if we develop a clear understanding of just what it is we are trying to do.

Our political perspective is anti-authoritarian for two reasons: first, we think that authority tends to create and perpetuate rigidly hierarchical social structures. Just as important, we think that authority serves to destroy the very quality that is necessary to make the new society: people’s ability to act. Therefore, we try to structure our organizations to prefigure the new society.

We don't do this because we are hopeless utopian romantics. Rather, as we fight to transform ourselves into people capable of acting, we truly begin to oppose this society and struggle for the new one.

Ultimately, I believe the insurgent social movements will be able to transform society. But this will happen only insofar as the members of those movements have created intentionally prefigurative structures and organizations, through which they themselves have been transformed.

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