Anarchist Accountability

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> "*This disease of disorganization has invaded the organism of the anarchist movement like yellow fever and has plagued it for decades...There can be no doubt, however, that this disorganization has its roots in a number of defects of theory, notably in the distorted interpretation of the principle of individuality in anarchism, that principle being too often mistaken for the absence of all accountability.*" – **Delo Truda Group**[1]

> "*...[O]rganization, far from creating authority, is the only cure for it and the only means whereby each one of us will get used to taking an active and conscious part in the collective work, and cease being passive instruments in the hands of leaders.*" – **Errico Malatesta**[2]

The assessment of the Delo Truda Group from 1926 is as true today as it was 84 years ago. But if that's the case; and if, as Malatesta suggested, organization is the only cure for authority, how do we as anarchists differ from others in how we view organization? Or more specifically, how does our view of individuality differ from the common misconception of anarchism as the "absence of all accountability". Perhaps it's best summed up by Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt in their exhaustive account of the history of anarchist ideas, Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism. They explain:

> "*...[G]enuine individual freedom and individuality could only exist in a free society. The anarchists did not therefore identify freedom with the right of everybody to do exactly what one pleased but with a social order in which collective effort and responsibilities- that is to say, obligations- would provide the material basis and social nexus in which individual freedom could exist.*"[3]

This essay will describe anarchist accountability and how it differs from the types of accountability we're trying to replace. Implementing accountability in all of our practices is fundamental

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[1] Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad (The "Delo Truda" group). The Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft). 1926.

[2] Malatesta, Errico. Anarchy and Organization. 1897.

[3] Schmidt, Michael and van der Walt, Lucien. Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism. Counter-Power. Volume 1. AK Press. 2009. P. 48

to our effectiveness now in our practice and how it prefigures the kind of society that we want to replace the existing society.

The first form of accountability that we as anarchists are attempting to combat most of the time is top-down, hierarchical forms of accountability. Since we are against all forms of domination and oppression, it's only natural that we'd be opposed to formal and informal forms of accountability to our employers, landlords, elites or other relations defined by domination. Although certain forms of top-down accountability may be considered legitimate, such as the accountability of a young child to their parent giving loving and reasonable child-rearing directives, the discussion surrounding opposing most other forms of top-down accountability is only a question of strategy and tactics. A key anarchist insight in opposing top-down accountability is that to address the root of the problem the top-down structure and relation must be changed, not the person or group holding it. So unlike some Marxists or other radicals, we don't believe, for example, that a "proletarian" dictatorship, a matriarchy or a people of color ruling elite will address any of the fundamental issues with class oppression, patriarchy or racism. Anarchists believe that it's the structures and relations of hierarchical domination and oppression themselves that must be destroyed and replaced with egalitarian and horizontal structures and relations.

This brings us to anarchist accountability. Horizontal and egalitarian forms of accountability are based in the notion of free association. Free association must be mutual between all its participants if it's to be truly free for each. It would hardly be free if members of an association were forced to be in an association or collective with people they didn't want to associate with. Within a freely associated grouping of people, horizontal and egalitarian forms of decision-making would involve each member having an equal say- no more and no less- than any other member. Some decisions might need consensus; others might be a simple majority according to the type of decision being made and the practices of the group. However, societal influences from oppressive socialization such as racism and sexism to personality differences such as being shy or being talkative are likely to create informal hierarchies that reintroduce domination and hierarchy within the group if clear, explicit, collectively-established democratic practices are not established and followed. Jo Freeman has a variety of useful suggestions in setting up democratic and accountable structures within any grouping in her classic piece The Tyranny of Structurelessness.[4]

Once democratic structures and organizational practices are developed and utilized, then anarchist accountability demands that decisions made collectively must be respected and collectively implemented. If there's disagreement within the organization over a collective decision, there are a few options. Georges Fontenis outlines the basic framework for this in his essay Manifesto of Libertarian Communism[5]:

> *1)* Do Nothing/ Delay It: Decide that there's too much disagreement to come to a decision at this time and either drop it or discuss it further at another time. *For example, a group might decide not to have an official position on whether capitalism is comprised of two or three main classes until more research is done; or might decide just not to have a position as a group at this time.*
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> *2)* Accept More Than One: Decide- if it's possible depending on the type of decision needed to be made- to allow for more than one of the proposed options to be accepted

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[4] Freeman, Jo. The Tyranny of Structurelessness. 1970.
[5] Fontenis, Georges. Manifesto of Libertarian Communism. 1953.

as the group decision with more or less emphasis on either. *For example, a group might decide that although the majority might think that trying to build a militant minority network within their respective workplaces is the best workplace strategy, they also find it acceptable that some members of their group are pursuing a dual unionist strategy with the independent union at their workplace.*

3) Accept the Majority View: Depending on the group practice this might be a simple majority vote or a super-majority. The minority view would be rejected for collective practice; but the minority could continue to argue for their view internally within the organization. *For example, the majority of the group might want to organize a May Day event even though a minority of the group feels that it's taking away time and resources from the anti-eviction organizing the group is working on. But since the majority of the group feels that it would be beneficial to organize a May Day event, the group would do the event.*

4) Split Based on Differing Views: If the issue is fundamental and either the majority or the minority find it unacceptable to do nothing, accept more than one view on the issue or to accept the majority view on the issue. *For example, if the group decides as the basis of their group that structural racism is something that they'd like to combat as an organization, but one or two members feel that it's a waste of time to confront structural racism because they believe it doesn't exist anymore now that Barrack Obama was elected president, there would have to be a split in the organization since having such contradictory views on a fundamental group strategy would give them no room to work together as a group. However, this doesn't mean that they couldn't work together on other issues where the have agreement or continue to try to dialogue between each other on issues where they disagree.*

Fundamental to all of this is that when a decision is made, it should be respected and carried out until a decision is made to overturn it, an exception considered or a member quits- or in extreme cases is expelled- out of disagreement.

Holding each other accountable also means getting used to letting each other know- in a comradely way- when commitments and obligations aren't being fulfilled. This is a practice that must be built through an organizational culture where comradely honesty and constructive criticism replaces competitive and individualistic passive-aggressiveness or talking behind people's backs. The flip side of giving comradely feedback is learning how to receive it, using it to help you and your organization grow and becoming more self-disciplined. This is difficult sometimes since the vast majority of the times we're being called to task for something, it is coming from top-down relations; but the practice of holding others accountable and being held accountable is fundamental to learn, practice and promote if we want to destroy and replace these top-down relations with horizontal and egalitarian relations. And of course, ideally these practices would increase self-discipline in carrying out tasks that group members commit to. When holding each other accountable it's important to come from a place of love and respect that avoids being patronizing, competitive, egotistical or dishonest in any way. And when being held accountable it's similarly important to cultivate an appreciation for comradely criticism and renew our commitment to self-discipline. However, that doesn't mean we should allow our dignity to be trampled on or ourselves to be disrespected. When criticism isn't comradely, we should defend

ourselves and demand respect as an equal even when we've failed to fulfill our obligations. But it is essential that comradely anarchist accountability and self-discipline as a practice needs to be developed, encouraged and cultivated within our organizations. Without self-discipline and horizontal accountability, groups revert back to dominating and oppressive top-down relations and/or involve stagnation, demoralization and ineffectiveness.

What about delegates? Anarchists argue that delegates should replace any necessary functions usually carried out by representatives. Delegates differ from representatives because delegates are mandated with specific views and tasks that are to mirror as close as possible the views of the group that the delegate has been mandated by. Representatives are top-down because they make decisions on behalf of groups that then must obey these decisions; anarchist delegates are bottom-up because they are mandated to bring the views, as expressed, of the organization to the grouping of delegates they've been sent to. Sometimes the group may give delegates some flexibility, but the accountability is always from the bottom-up, not the top-down. Delegates can be over-ruled and recalled at anytime and have no power over the group that they're the delegate for. When compromises between delegates need to be hashed out or new items come up at delegate meetings that are value-laden decisions rather than logistical decisions, the delegate usually has to bring back the compromise to the group before it's finally approved unless the group already mandated the delegate with certain ranges of flexibility on the issue. However there's a difference between, logistical decisions and value-laded decisions. For logistical decisions, a group might mandate a delegate to carry out logistical tasks — such as checking and responding to the group e-mail account — with greater flexibility to act as they see fit. But they still might ask for transparency and regular report backs and the person mandated with the task can always be directed by the group to carry it out in a particular way since it's the group that the delegate is accountable to, not the other way around. In addition, the concepts logistical and value-laden are open for interpretation; so they are more accurately understood as two sides of along a spectrum, rather than easily differentiated, clear-cut concepts.

In conclusion, this essay tried to clarify how anarchist accountability proposes horizontal and egalitarian or bottom-up forms of accountability to replace top-down forms of accountability. Capitalism, the state, imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and all forms of exploitation, domination and oppression aren't going to go away without a fight and without something to replace it. Creating the organizational structure, practice and culture that encourages and takes seriously comradely horizontal accountability, self-discipline and bottom-up mandated delegation is fundamental to the effectiveness of our organizations in building towards and prefiguring the type of society we want to replace the current one. Whether, when and how we implement, develop, encourage and promote these concepts and practices is the responsibility of us all...