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Anarchy and Organization: A letter to the left

Murray Bookchin

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January 15, 1969

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recognition and typing errors, such as commas where there
should be periods, the word “that” where it should say “than”, etc.

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Now, how is it the same? It's the same in the fact that both of us are striving for freedom. They will not be free — the white anarchists will not be free — until we are free so that makes our fight their fight, really. The imperialists and the bourgeois bureaucratic capitalistic system would not give them individual freedom while they keep a whole group of people based upon race or color oppressed as a group. How can they expect to get individual freedom when the imperialists oppress whole nations of people? Until we gain liberation as a group, they won't gain any liberation as individual people. So this makes our fight the same, and we must keep this in perspective and always see the similarities and the differences in it.

There's a tremendous amount of difference in it, and there's a due amount of similarity between the two cases. Both are striving for freedom and both are striving for liberation of their people, only one is advanced to a degree higher than the other. The anarchists are advanced a step higher, but only in theory. As far as actuality of conditions, they shouldn't be advanced higher because they should see the necessity of wiping out the imperialistic structure by organized groups just as we must be organized.

In this country — getting back home to North America now — we can side with the student radicals. We would try to encourage them and persuade them to organize and weld a sharp cutting tool.

In order to do this they would have to be disciplined and they would have at least some philosophical replacement of the system. This is not to say that this itself will free the individual. The individual will not be free until the state does not exist at all, and I think — I don't want to be redundant — this cannot be replaced by the anarchists right away.

As far as the blacks are concerned, we are not hung up on attempting to actualize or express our individual souls because we're oppressed not as individuals but as a whole group of people. Our evolution, or our liberation, is based first on freeing our group, freeing our group to a certain degree. After we gain our liberation, our people will not be free. I can imagine in the future that the blacks will rebel against the organized leadership that the blacks themselves have structured. They will see there will be limitations, limiting their individual selves, and limiting their freedom of expression. But this is only after they become free as a group.

This is what makes our group different from the white anarchists — besides he views his group as already free. Now he's striving for freedom of his individual self. This is the big difference. We're not fighting for freedom of our individual selves, we're fighting for a group freedom. In the future there will probably be a rebellion where blacks will say, "Well, our leadership is limiting our freedom because of the rigid discipline. Now that we've gained our freedom, we will strive for our individualistic freedom that has nothing to do with organized group or state." And the group will be disorganized, and it should be.

But at this point we stress discipline, we stress organization, we do not stress psychedelic drugs and all the other things that have to do with just the individual expansion of the mind. We're trying to gain true liberation of a group of people, and this makes our struggle somewhat different from the whites.

"Anarchy and Organization" originally was written in reply to an attack by Huey Newton on anarchist forms of organization entitled "In Defense Of Self Defense" Exclusive by Huey Newton (Huey on Anarchists and Individualists as related to revolutionary struggle and the Black Liberation Movement) in The Black Panther, November 16, 1968. Page 12.

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There is a hoary myth that anarchists do not believe in organization to promote revolutionary activity. This myth was raised from its resting place by Marcuse in a L'Express interview some months ago and reiterated again by Huey Newton in his In Defence of Self-Defence, which New Left Notes decided to reprint in the recent National Convention issue.

To argue the question of organization versus non-organization is ridiculous; this issue has never been in dispute among serious anarchists, except perhaps for those lonely individualists whose ideology is rooted more in an extreme variant of classical liberalism than anarchy. Yes, anarchists believe in organization — in national organization and international organization. Anarchist organization have ranged from loose, highly decentralized groups to vanguard movements of many thousands, like the Spanish FAI, which functioned in a highly concerted fashion.

The real question at issue is not organization versus non-organization, but rather, what kind of organization. What different kinds of anarchist organizations have in common is that they are developed organically from below, not engineered into existence from above. They are social movements, combining a creative revolutionary life-style with a creative revolutionary theory, not political parties, whose node of life is indistinguishable from the surrounding bourgeois environment and whose ideology is reduced to rigid tried-and-tested programs. They try to reflect as much as is humanly possible the liberated society they seek to achieve, not slavishly duplicate the prevailing system of hierarchy, class, and authority. They are built around intimate groups of

brothers and sisters, whose ability to act in common is based on initiative, convictions freely arrived at, and deep personal involvement, not a bureaucratic apparatus, fleshed out by docile memberships and manipulated from the top by a handful of all-knowing leaders.

I don't know who Huey is arguing with when he speaks of anarchists who believe all they have to do is just express themselves individually in order to achieve freedom. Tim Leary, Allen Ginsberg, The Beatles, Certainly not the revolutionary anarchist communists I know — and I know a large and fairly representative number. Nor is it clear to me where Huey acquired his facts on the May-June revolt in France. The Communist party and the other progressive parties of the French Left hadn't merely lagged behind the people, as Huey seems to believe; these disciplined and centralized organizations tried in every way to obstruct the revolution and re-direct it back into traditional parliamentary channels. Even the disciplined, centralized Trotskyist FER and the Maoist groups opposed the revolutionary students as ultra-leftists, adventurists, and romantics right up to the first street fighting in May. Characteristically, most of the disciplined, centralized organizations of the French Left either lagged outrageously behind the events or, in the case of the Communist Party and progressive parties, shamelessly betrayed the students and workers to the system.

I find it curious that while Huey accuses the French Stalinist hacks of merely having lagged behind the people he holds the anarchists and Danny Cohn-Bendit responsible for the people being forced to turn back to DeGaulle. I visited France shortly after the May-June revolt and I can substantiate with out the least difficulty how resolutely Danny Cohn Bendit, the March 22nd Movement, and the anarchists tried to develop the assembly forms and action committees into a structural program (indeed, it went far beyond mere program) to replace the DeGaulle government. I could show quite clearly how they tried to get the workers to retain their hold on the factories and establish direct economic contacts with the

lower group there ready to strip him of his individual freedom at any moment.

In Cuba they had a revolution, they had a vanguard group that was a disciplined group, and they realized that the state won't disappear until imperialism is completely wiped out, structurally and also philosophically, or the bourgeois thoughts won't be changed. Once imperialism is wiped out they can have their communist state and the state or territorial boundaries will disappear.

In this country the anarchists seem to feel that if they just express themselves individually and tend to ignore the limitations imposed on them, without leadership and without discipline, they can oppose the very disciplined, organized, reactionary state. This is not true. They will be oppressed as long as imperialism exists. You cannot oppose a system such as this without opposing it with organization that's even more extremely disciplined and dedicated than the structure you're opposing.

I can understand the anarchists wanting to go directly from state to non-state, but historically it's incorrect. As far as I'm concerned, thinking of the recent French Revolution, the reason the French uprising failed is simply because the anarchists in the country, who by definition had no organization, had no people that were reliable enough, as far as the mass of the people were concerned, to replace DeGaulle and his government. Now, the people were skeptical about the Communist Party and the other progressive parties because they didn't side with the people of medium living. They lagged behind the people, so they lost the respect of the people and the people looked for guidance from the students and anarchists.

But the anarchists were unable to offer a structural program to replace the DeGaulle government. So the people were forced to turn back to DeGaulle. It wasn't the people's fault; it was Cohn-Bendit's fault and all the other anarchists who felt they could just go from state to non-state.

the soul, freedom of expression, and freedom of movement without the artificial limitations from antique values.

Blacks and colored people in America, confined within the caste system, are discriminated against as a whole group of people. It's not a question of individual freedom as it is for the children of the upper classes. We haven't reached the point of trying to free ourselves individually because we're dominated and oppressed as a group of people.

Part of the people of this country — which is a great part — are part of the youth themselves. But they're not doing this as a group of people because, as a group, they're already free to an extent. Their problem is not a group problem really, because they can easily integrate into the structure. Potentially, they're mobile enough to do this: they're the educated ones, the "future of the country," and so forth. They can really gain a certain amount of power over the society by integrating into the rulership circle.

But they see that even within the rulership circle, there are still antique values that have no respect for individualism. They find themselves subjugated. No matter what class they're in, they find themselves subjugated because of the nature of this class society. So their fight is to free the individual's soul.

This brings about another problem. They're being ruled by an alien source that has nothing to do with freedom of individual expression. They want to escape this, to overturn this, but they see no need to form a structure or a real, disciplined vanguard movement. Their reasoning is that, by setting up a disciplined organization, they feel they'd be replacing the old structure with other limitations. They fear they'd be setting themselves up as directing the people, therefore limiting the individual again.

But what they don't understand, or it seems that they don't understand, is that as long as the military-industrial complex exists, the structure of oppression of the individual will continue. An individual would be threatened even if he were to achieve the freedom he's seeking. He'll be threatened because there will be an organized

peasants in short, how they tried to replace the French political and economic structure by creative, viable revolutionary forms. In this, they met with continual obstruction from the disciplined centralized parties of the French Left including a number of Trotskyist and Maoist sects.

There is another myth that needs to be exploded — the myth that social revolutions are made by tightly disciplined cadres, guided by a highly centralized leadership. All the great social revolutions are the work of deep-seated historic forces and contradictions to which the revolutionary and his organization contributes very little and, in most cases, completely misjudges. The revolutions themselves break out spontaneously. The glorious party usually lags behind these events — and, if the uprising is successful, steps in to commandeer, manipulate, and almost invariably distort it. It is then that the revolution reaches its real period of crises: will the glorious party re-create another system of hierarchy, commination and power in its sacred mission to protect the revolution, or will it be dissolved into the revolution together with the dissolution of hierarchy, domination and power as such? If a revolutionary organization is not structured to dissolve into the popular forms created by the revolution once its function as a catalyst is completed; if its own forms are not similar to the libertarian society it seeks to create, so that it can disappear into the revolutionary forms of the future — then the organization becomes a vehicle for carrying the forms of the past into the revolution. It becomes a self-perpetuating organism, a state machine that, far from withering away, perpetuates all the archaic conditions for its own existence.

There is far more myth than reality to the claim that a tightly centralized and disciplined party promotes the success of a revolution. The Bolsheviks were split, divided, and riddled by factional strife from October, 1917 to March, 1921. Ironically, it was only after the last White armies had been expelled from Russia that Lenin managed to completely centralize and discipline his party. Far more real have been the endless betrayals engineered by the hierarchi-

cal, disciplined, highly centralized parties of the Left, such as the Social Democratic and Communist.

They followed almost inexorably from the fact that every organization (however revolutionary its rhetoric and however well-intentioned its goals) which models itself structurally on the very system it seeks to overthrow becomes assimilated and subverted by bourgeois relations. It's seeming effectiveness becomes the source of its greatest failures.

Undeniably problems arise which can be solved only by committees, by co-ordination, and by a high measure of self-discipline. To the anarchist, committees must be limited to the practical tasks that necessitate their existence, and they must disappear once their functions are completed. Co-ordination and self-discipline must be achieved voluntarily, by virtue of the high moral and intellectual caliber of the revolutionary. To seek less than this is to accept, as a revolutionary, a mindless robot, a creature of authoritarian training, a manipulable agent whose personality and outlook are utterly alien, indeed antithetical, to any society that could be remotely regarded as free.

No serious anarchist will disagree with Huey's plea on the necessity for wiping out the imperialist structure by organized groups. If at all possible we must work together. We must recognize too, that in the United States, the heartland of world imperialism today, an economy and technology has been developed which could remove, almost overnight, all the problems that Marx once believed justified the need for a state. It would be a disastrous error to deal with an economy of potential abundance and cybernated production from a theoretical position which was still rooted in a technological era based on coal, crude machines, long hours of toil, and material scarcity. It is time we stop trying to learn from Mao's China and Castro's Cuba — and see the remarkable economic reality under our very eyes for all men to enjoy once the American bourgeois colossus can be tumbled and its resources brought to the service of humanity.

Murray Bookchin
Anarchos magazine

Appendix: "In Defense of Self Defense"

Exclusive by: Huey Newton
November 16, 1968. Page 12. *The Black Panther*.

(Huey on Anarchists and Individualists as related to revolutionary struggle and the Black Liberation Movement)

We should understand there is a difference between the rebellion of the anarchists and the black revolution or liberation of the black colony.

This is a class society; it always has been. This reactionary class society places its limitation on individuals, not just in terms of their occupation, but also regarding self expression, being mobile, and being free to really be creative and do anything they want to do.

The class society prevents this. This is true not only for the mass of the lower or subjugated class. It is also true within the ruling class, the master class. That class also limits the freedom of the individual souls of the people which comprise it.

In America, we have not only a class society, we also have a caste system and black people are fitted into the lowest caste. They have no mobility for going up the class ladder. They have no privilege to enter the ruling structure at all.

Within the ruling class they're objecting (resisting?), because the people have found that they're completely subjected to the will of the administration and to the manipulators. This brings about a very strange phenomenon in America, that is, many of the rebelling white students and the anarchists are the offspring of this master class. Surely most of them have a middle class background and some even upper class. They see the limitations imposed upon them and now they're striving, as all men strive, to get freedom of