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The Brown Paper Bag Theory of Affinity Groups

Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers

late 1960s

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This leaflet dates from the late sixties and is a clear and cogent assessment of affinity groups – the model of organisation used by the FAI.

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The poverty of present forms of organization consists in their limitations – men work study & sometimes love & die together – but they do not any longer know how to *live* together – to share the wholeness of their lives... But despite them, the forces which bring men together constantly assume new forms.

In the present struggle forms of organization must soon come into being that are appropriate to the changed conditions that are the real content of our times. Not least of all they must be forms that are tenacious enough to resist repression; forms which can grow secretly, learning to manifest themselves in a large variety of ways, lest their mode of operation be co-opted by the opposition, or they be simply smashed.

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The affinity group has qualities of both the pre-organized form & the post-organized form. & it is because of these qualities that it will fulfil our needs. In fact it is absolutely necessary

that we transcend all bourgeois forms of organization — including the so-called “revolutionary” party. The political revolution can only serve to change the form in which hierarchical power is distributed — while our task must be to form a new cultural whole in which social control is returned to the people — a social revolution that will change the content of everyday life, as well as its structure.

For us socialism & its forms of hierarchical organization must be abolished along with bourgeois parliaments & democracies, so that no mere political *form* be allowed to impose itself on the *content* of a much more complex & multifarious life.

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The affinity group is the seed/ germ/ essence of organization. It is coming-together out of mutual Need or Desire. Cohesive historical groups united out the shared necessities of the struggle for survival, while dreaming of the possibility of love. For man’s nature is not bounded by necessity alone — Desire appears in all its forms & man desires to desire — he seeks to fulfil himself on every level of his complex life. & it is in this psychological sense that the affinity group is a pre-organizational force, it represents the drive out of which organization is formed & in so far as it fulfills men’s desires it becomes the post-revolutionary form, the organization of satisfaction. But the immediate need is for mutual desire to manifest itself as the organization for revolutionary struggle, for a new technological organization of resources, a new distribution of wealth, re-establishment of ecological principles (to recreate harmony in a disrupted nature), to create a whole new complex of free relations between people, that can satisfy all our complex needs for change & our consuming desire to be new & to be whole.

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What we have called the de-structuring of SDS¹ is not merely a proposal to create a particular structure for this period of pre-revolutionary activity, but is designed to show the relation of all organization to its base & to insure control at the bottom by forcing all structures back on the affinity groups that are at their core.

In the pre-revolutionary period affinity groups, must assemble to project a revolutionary consciousness & to develop forms for particular struggles. In the revolutionary period itself, they will emerge as armed cadres at the centers of conflict. & in the post-revolutionary period they become models for the new everyday life.

In this way the organization transcends the historical problem of centralism vs. de-centralism, by making all structures a dynamic inter-relation of centralist & de-centralized elements: affinity groups coalesce to form large organizations/ simultaneously engaging in public struggles for consciousness & maintaining an active underground.

In so-called “primitive” unitary societies the affinity group attempts to balance a complexity so thorough that it approaches totality. But the division of labor that arises from the struggle for survival causes a fragmentation & unevenness in the distribution of material as well as psychological & cultural wealth. But now with the development of an automated-cybernated technology the material problem can be substantially solved — freeing man from labor as well as scarcity — liberating his time, his energy & his Desire, simultaneously, generating the possibility for an entirely new coherence, of becoming whole, Total.

¹ SDS= Students for a Democratic Society