Organizations Versus Getting Shit Done

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infinite of ways a platform can be structured and presented to facilitate the various levels of communication in a specific type of work. And ultimately instead of flat live discussion we can build on voip to create software capable of organically forking conversations, keeping tabs on others, suggesting others take part in one subconversation, recording, even live upvoting/downvoting what being talked about and who talking should be be given attention. The potential is infinite and yet we've defaulted on the few inane protozoic tools (taking stack, breakout groups, etc) provided to us.

Of course, more organic approaches to communication would be useful not just in projects but also in those few situations where a group with some permanence is truly required as with the maintenance of physical clearinghouses like maker spaces or community centers. Closed groups don't have to share all the failings of the organizational model but they are obviously still bound by many of them such as collective decision-making. As such a clearheaded understanding of the dangers prescribes limiting the license and mandate of those collectives as narrowly as possible, taking care of only what can't be turned into one-off projects and judged primarily on their ability to facilitate or interact with projects without domineering or seeking to determine them. Persistent groups should be confined to janitorial service. We must make a point to fight our ingrained instinct towards organizationalist modes–and actively reject the mission creep, coagulation, sedentary provincialism and fetishism of mass that gives rise to them.

Organizations are basically monsters from a bygone era. Useful in some limited ways once, but cut with a number of vicious streaks and rapidly becoming obsolete. From Tahrir Square to the Port of Oakland activists are slowly learning through practice that *we don't need them to get shit done.* In fact, aside from a few limited tactical contexts (either as a consequence of the state or immature technology), forming an organization is basically like shooting yourself in the foot. Can yall please stop doing it?

Organizations have a lot of downsides. Anyone who's ever attended a meeting recognizes this on some level. And yet most folks persist in an either instinctive or confused idealization of forming and participating in organizations.

Part of this is semantic. The term "*organization*" is so loose as to be either universally trivial or—more often—a substantive but hazy jumble of associations. Often such bundling acts to disingenuously assert a premise from the get-go and it's worth picking apart exactly what is meant by an "*organization.*" "*Anarchy,*" for instance, directly means "*without rulership*" but the broader associations of violence, chaos and dog-eat-dog famously imply an inherent casual connection without bothering to enunciate it. Of course this is a flat contradiction in terms, obvious on the slightest examination; the spectre of everyone attempting to dominate everyone else is simply a change in the flavor of power relations, of relevant archies, not their total abolition. Yet such conflation has had huge impact because unspoken, unexamined ideas bundled as common sense have a pressure greater than the spoken.

"*Organization*" can stand for literally all modes of human interaction, but in common use "*being organized*" signifies effective and intentional structures of collaboration. Something anarchists defensively jump to assert we're capable of! But as such the term is almost meaningless; no one on earth would argue against the utility of deliberative and rational approaches to collaboration – one might as well say "*being intelligent*". The substance of the matter is of course how we chose to arrange and structure our collaboration. It is here that "*organization*" smuggles in assumptions through double-meanings. Because in practice the noun of "*an organization*" usually refers to a highly particular beast, requiring highly particular structures.

Specifically, "*an organization*" is:

Represented by a discrete concept.

An organization is a pact to simplify otherwise complex social dynamics into a single mental touchpoint. Not just in identification,

but in the ways people approach it. Utilizing an umbrella name/brand/identity creates high value real-estate; if something is perceived as being done *by* the organization as opposed to an individual it carries additional contextual weight, usually because so many people subscribe to the simplification.

Defined by discrete sets of people.

An organization has members. It may have tiers or degrees of membership and specific internal roles, but at the very least it has to have a basic inside-outside hierarchy. And this must be policed in some way in order for the brand/name to carry any weight.

Legitimized by formal processes

More than a banner, ideal or any such static descriptor—an organization is a concept built to change and be redefined over time. Organizations *do things*, and thus there has to be some kind of specific procedure or conditions by which actions can be certified or accepted as legitimately representative.

In short, more than a shifting passive category like a type of people or group, An Organization is an adopted narrative that conceptually simplifies a set of individual actions (and interactions) into that of a single, albeit mythical, agent. This interpretation is at least partially shared and participated in by the individuals involved.

Some organizations follow hierarchical and/or specialized methods of decision-making. Others assume for one reason or another that their participants will almost always cede their intentions/opinions if outnumbered by contrary members of the organization's voting body. Still others focus on trying to build some level of universal tolerance for a decision (again, within a select set of people and assuming a general stickiness, that is to say a tendency for folks of dissenting opinions/preferences to cede rather than associating themselves on a case-by-case basis). Lastly, of course the situational particulars of what constitutes legitimate authorities, majorities or consensus for an organization can be codified formally or informally, implicitly or explicitly to any degree–but they are codified.

in common used by Anonymous–but even a single key isn't requisite, it's possible to set up schemes with forkable and combinable keys to avoid creating a single high-value object and allow groups a lot of latitude in both association *and* narrative construction. Just as it's possible to use encryption to build timing mechanisms to certify actions. All that's really necessary to get such out there would be some simple user-friendly design.

And that speaks to information presentation more broadly. These days in principle anyone can throw up fork of a repository online or distributively host copies of a website. Of course—as with secure lines of attribution—there hasn't been much effort to develop intuitive, widely adoptable software to accomplish this for activists, nor do we have anything close to a culture facilitative of sharing skills, contacts and pertinent information, but it's nevertheless obviously quite possible. With the right software separate yet interrelated projects would be able to intermingle and keep tabs on one another in a fluid and productive fashion. Right now things like this are done awkwardly with wikis or shared documents (interfaces essentially built to be printed on paper!), but the potential for services explicitly tailored to providing more ways to structure, present and manage information for collaborators is relatively untapped. Instead of a single organizational body managing the entirety of a convergence through tons of subcommittees devoted to different tasks, a properly structured web program could act as clearinghouse for separate projects to collaborate, debate and even compete.

Beyond access, communication itself can be improved immeasurably once we free ourselves from the assumption that preserving some collective solidity is paramount. Why not for example just let things heat up in places or let side debates continue as long as they need to? Discussions and arguments can oft be better presented in text, but listservs (and Facebook) do a *horrible* job of this. Why on earth should things be linear rather than modular, clustered around relevant points like multidimensional notes? There's

that could perfectly well be done outside the framework of the organization—or drama and busywork is invented so that individual activists can compete in activeness or simply to fill weekly meetings, an organization can become a flag of identity. It's easy to defensively blind ourselves to the dangers and limitations of projects we've invested a lot into and so the more permanence, license and loyalty we give our organizations the worse their effects will be.

No one is saying 'only do easy things' or claiming we should focus on immediate gratification. Real struggle is long, hard and may never end up being rewarding. But nothing is more demoralizing than getting nowhere because some people are wedded to entirely unnecessary shackles.

As with the world we'd like to see, we need to build a movement where the overall focus is on discrete projects of limited lifespan– only sometimes augmented or assisted in small, defined ways by persistent groups, themselves with starkly limited license. With people fluidly overlapping and transitioning between such projects as need be rather than building identities and/or territories in relation to them. Where what few collectives exist don't take a front and center role as a motivators and shapers of individual projects, but instead specialize in tiny realms of janitorial assistance.

A change so radical obliges us to reevaluate those tools built with the organizationist framework in mind. This means new cultures and new technologies.

The current populace is used to the language of organizations— and there's no denying that they can make for powerful narratives by coalescing something solid to talk about. But encryption technologies are capable of proving connections between actions and declarations directly. Rather than a bunch of different affinity groups all tagging ELF while an above-ground front office defends and determines what counts as actually an ELF action–get rid of the front offices! With basic encryption it's possible to sign communiques and thus prove mutual authorship–this much is already

So why on earth would anyone do this? There are, after all, many other possible ways to facilitate collective cooperation.

Like proponents of the state, proponents of organizations rarely do more than loosely *imply* arguments. Those that they do make can be broken into two categories: those appealing to the particulars of human psychology and those appealing to more mathematical realities.

The first realm is more abstract, but also highly tangible:

Organizations cater to existing intellectual laziness and then direct it to ostensibly positive ends. As a shared conceptual simplification, participation in an organization often functions as a pact to not really have to bother ourselves with the complexity of the underlying social realities. Of course we *can* still expand our awareness in situations of conflict, crisis or Machiavellian politicking. But the fact that everyone else is likely to think largely in terms of the ostensibly static organization means that deviation from the simplified perception is usually superfluous.

Additionally organizations tend to enhance perceptions of strength. Human beings are social creatures and prone to degrees of passive selection bias — the opinions contained in a room of twenty people ring far more viscerally than abstract knowledge of those outside. Our biology and our sociopolitical conditioning has hammered into us the notion that social mass is the definition of potency (which army/electorate is bigger rather than the best exploit or vector of attack), so organizations orchestrate a spectacle of mass. This helps in maintaining the organization and its direction, as well as drawing people in.

Through pressure to maintain this sense of community, strength and general simplicity the particulars of an organization are able to assert themselves, ideally motivating us to act where we otherwise might slack as well as holding us accountable when we do not. Implicit in many a defense of organizations is the notion that people are inherently too lazy or unmotivated to undertake the effort required towards some goal under entirely their own volition,

but that if they have enough to show up to a meeting and put their name on an organization's roster they can be passively pressured into more action. Organizations can thus be seen as the construction of social environments where it's psychologically easier to act than not act.

The second realm is more mathematical:

Centralization has historically been about contact and access. And a lot of our operating assumptions are still based on the notion that information has to be scarce. In such context one of the main utilities of an organization is as a platform for connection. In the past anarchist organizations were practically synonymous with their newspapers; today it's listservs. Centralization doesn't just facilitate raw access through central repositories of contacts, skills, and tools–it can structure that access to be useful. The latter property is of particular relevance today. While information technologies are starting to live up to their potential to spread raw access far and wide, comparatively very little has been done to decentralize or autonomize means of filtering and presenting information.

That same centralization can facilitate resolutions of strategic dissonances that would otherwise be at odds. Different means and different short term goals can conflict and interfere with one another. As such it can behoove those working towards the same ultimate goal to voluntarily surrender their preferred approach in order to maximize the number of people working towards *any* approach. The conceptual space of an organization applies social pressure to discussions, but it also alters the potential payoffs to make submission to a single decision in the short term more acceptable. Most of the time the implicit goal in such conversations is to take advantage of the potency of an organization's simplified brand or narrative in terms of propaganda; as such it can be in the interest of dissenters to maintain that for different uses in the future.

Finally at least in theory an organization can help suppress the strength of informal power dynamics. Through achieving a sort of hegemony among those pursuing a goal and suppressing the effect

mentum and peer pressure are ethically corrosive tools in that they appeal to and build *habits* rather than active vigilance.

In summary:

- Organizations require modes of interaction dramatically inefficient at processing information.

- They're largely worthless at building large numbers of people acting in harmony.

- They stoke formal and informal power dynamics.

- And they're predicated on mental sloth and alienation from one's agency.

These are hardly unknown. Just being anarchists most of us are usually pretty good at sensing and partially negotiating the downsides of our organizations. Few of the tensions I've brought up are unfamiliar to longtime activists. Innumerable workshops and booklets on facilitation and consensus process provide boatloads of half-hearted advice and tools. But what proponent of organizations miss is that these dangers and limitations derive fundamentally from the core concept of an organization. Workarounds are ultimately just not enough.

Of course it must be said that the world we live in isn't perfect and in some rare contexts there can be benefits to dabbling in organizations that might partially outweigh the form's profound limitations. Given the state's predilection to only deal with people through the language of organization things like legally recognized unions can occasionally provide quite useful exploits. But in all such situations it's critical that we remain fully mindful of the dangers and explicit in our evaluation of the costs lest we promote or slide into naivety.

When such work is all consuming, when mission creep overburdens an organization with a variety of projects—including those

decision-making there's simply no way to avoid imbalances in representation or voice. Structures built to counteract personalities, drift or informal lines of influence will themselves have to be argued, constructed, championed and finally navigated. Institutional mechanisms designed to suppress informal power ultimately just shift it around, opening new opportunities for increased influence and thus continuing to promote power games, albeit in different forms.

Matched with an environment of subservience to social momentum and peer pressure this is disastrous enough, but centralized access to resources creates further incentive. Even in the absence of preexisting informal power dynamics, organizations by their very nature create high-value real estate. Why do maoist entryists for example target organizations they don't consider in any way potent? To seize the social capital. After all as the saying goes, activism is 90% having contacts.

Failure #4: Mental Laziness

We all use conceptual shorthands, but entering into a pact to rigidly use one can be quite dangerous. Partaking in a shared illusion that obtains usefulness to others insofar those who deviate from that illusion are punished is obviously reckless in the extreme.

Anarchism is about embracing our agency. Asking others to remind us of something we want to do is one thing, but when internal tensions or dissonances impede our motivation to undertake a task applying blunt external pressure to ourselves is a terrible workaround. It doesn't resolve the tensions or contradictions leaving them capable of coming to bear later on at possibly unexpected times/contexts in unprepared for ways. Further, momentum and peer pressure are not particularly strong compared to true motivation, they're often driven by loose biological instincts and can be randomly overridden by other base instincts. Worse, at core mo-

of all collaboration besides that done internally, an organization can force a degree of openness in such interactions, even impose formal structures to counterbalance certain influences.

In short, organizations are a mental tool we adopt collectively to simplify the complexity of human interactions. The resulting social context leaves certain actions and thoughts psychologically easier and provides a mechanism for further structuring to direct that ease. The resulting centralization and standardization can have functional advantages in terms of information access, filtering and processing. And these objective advantages can, in turn, be applied to deepen and direct the psychological ease of participation.

However all of this comes with stark limitations and dangers.

Failure #1: Collective Decision-making

There are many tiers of failure to organization, but the calculational catastrophe of collective decision-making is the best known. The stickiness of organizations derives in large part from a profound overestimation of the utility and efficiency of resolving decisions as a single unit. In the absence of hierarchical coercion one is stuck forcing some degree of flat collective discussions–as organic clustering and individually driven association can't always be trusted to prioritize securing an emergent consensus. But flat collective discussions are extremely inefficient at processing information.

It's a problem of subjectivity and bandwidth. Every individual is going to have incredibly complex preferences, recognize different patterns, and be uniquely familiar with certain particulars such as their own personal context. The human language is pretty damn limited in descriptive power and it can take an incredibly long time to sufficiently convey the relevant basic realities of our individual thoughts and contexts. When one person talks the rest of the room must to some significant degree quiet their own thoughts to listen. This may suffice when it comes to presenting a set of

pre-constructed views in an open forum, but when attempting to actively synthesize and critically analyze between those different views the complexity of subjectivities in relation to one another grows and the amount of time and brain space left each participant decreases. Being rushed in turn pushes people to focus on things they fear will be overlooked and neglect attention to other issues or contentions.

Sometimes a rough approximation of the best resolution can be reached, but in order to achieve that people's preferences and contributions will still get stomped down to some degree–often a quite significant degree. Mediating and translating between sharp differences of assumptions, perspective, language or culture on the fly can be a huge time sink–while excluding or organizing along strict common lines is both balkanizing and risks excluding needed critiques. Further some folks are going to be differently abled in different arenas of thought and catching everyone up isn't always feasible–collective conversation faces a pull towards the lowest common denominator.

Obliging people to make decisions uniformly in collective is profoundly inefficient compared to individuals organically associating and convincing each other as best as they can. As the number of participants or the complexity of topics increases organizations face inescapable diminishing returns. Either an organization won't function, or it'll be forced to gravitate towards dangerously simple solutions.

Failure #2: Forcing Coherence

Sometimes we're going to work against one another. There's no getting around that. Differing experiences can lead to differing tactical prescriptions and they're not always going to be reconcilable in a reasonable period of time. While it's important to note that there are situations in which differing approaches go hand in hand, in other situations they won't. Further while sometimes we are

going to be able to debate something to an objective conclusion–pointing out a logical fallacy for example–other times a contention will be a matter of differing data interpretations on differing sets of data, too vast and complicated to be talked out. And it's often impossible to know ahead of time whether something can be conceptually resolved or not.

Obviously when the issue is truly tectonic *any* group of folks is going to end up splitting ways; barring the occasional explicitly totalitarian organization gunning down their deviants all an organization can hope to accomplish is to force or pressure some degree of coherence in the less dramatic situations. However, the price paid for suppressing less intense breaks is the dysfunction attendant to large breaks. Applying internal tension to keep an organization together means that when things build up to the point that that tension is overcome all the energy that was spent on either side of that tension internally has been wasted.

Given that breaks are likely to occur, the focus on preserving organizations and securing coherence inside them comes at the expense of work that might create coherence broader than the ranks of an organization. Groups that differ too much on one issue to work in a single organization can still be persuaded to great effect on other issues. Organizations often act as insular tumors within a movement, stealing time, energy and thought that would be otherwise spent in wider engagement. In short, when it comes to discussion rather than wasting our time building different *platforms* we should be working to create better *protocols*–cultural norms predicated on engagement, openmindedness, and vigilance.

Failure #3: Informal Power

We all understand is that centralization is dangerous. Putting all our eggs in one basket makes sabotage and hijacking easier for infiltrators and entryists. But it also has a corrupting influence on the sincere. Given the inherent bandwidth limitations of collective