

From Movement to Space: the anarchist open assemblies

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The fact that a certain tactic is used by anarchists in a country which is generally seen as having a high level of struggle should not be enough for anarchists in a country with a weaker struggle to adopt that tactic.

An increasing number of US anarchists are talking about anarchist open assemblies, directly influenced by the use of that tactic by the comrades in Greece. The open assemblies in Greece, however, are directly influenced by the contextual existence of an anarchist space *rather than* an anarchist movement. US anarchists on the whole either intentionally or habitually evince a projectuality befitting a movement rather than a space, a fact which may explain the mixed results obtained in San Francisco's recent anarchist assembly, necessary and innovative though it was.

Tactics, of course, can be melted down and recast, and I have no idea how that might pan out with open anarchist assemblies in a North American context. But if US anarchists want to use open assemblies *as they do in Greece*, which may or may not be a valid goal, they will need to realize certain changes in their mode of struggle as well.

Primarily, for the open assembly to work as such, I believe US anarchists would need to accept a belligerent plurality, and a minimization of decision-making complementary to a maximization of initiative-taking.

Before elaborating what this means and deciding whether this is a desirable change, it would help to review the strengths of the open assembly within the Greek practice, which seems to me to bear at least some similarities with certain manifestations of the *encuentro* in Latin America. Traditionally, any particular group of individuals who decide to take it upon themselves releases a call, with a time and a place, for an open anarchist assembly, usually at an occupied park or in a university. Typically, they will also release an initial statement that gives an introductory analysis of the situation but invites debate. Anyone is welcome to attend, but it is made clear that the assembly will run on anarchist lines, which means no political parties, no talk about reforms or participation with the state.

The open assembly allows dozens or hundreds of people to come together and discuss a situation without either restricting the meeting to a select group or surrendering it to liberals, leftists, or wingnuts. It encourages debate and a profound theorizing that comes from and translates back

into practice. People talk as long as they want, but someone who is being boring, repetitive, or irrelevant is interrupted and, on the odd occasion it should be necessary, shouted down. The vulnerability to wingnuts so typical in the US is simply absent. There is no emphasis on time limits, no stack, no facilitator.

The Greek anarchists generally do not talk about an anarchist movement because they do not see a singularity of direction or a shared set of boundaries. The anarchist space has many different clusters and constellations but no center point. It would be infinitely poorer if it were reduced to a single star. The open assemblies reflect this self-understanding.

In the US, on the other hand, the only possible meaning for the term “anarchist space” up till now is a space as a social center, a singular project, within an anarchist movement. A singular project has indisputable limits and needs (e.g. paying rent every month) and the possibility of unanimous goals (e.g. to make anarchist books available to this neighborhood, and equalizing group participation in the process). Certain forms of communication that may make sense within such a situation — facilitated or consensus meetings — are by default transferred to most assemblies US anarchists organize.

In order to adopt an open assembly that is not just a larger meeting, which would inevitably fall into the cycle of diminishing participation as has been witnessed so often in the experiences of anarchists in other countries, US anarchists must choose to be belligerently pluralistic. The notion of one big organization, one platform, one strategy, or one coalition must be thrown out the window. A center point, in politics, is the essence of suppression. We will never all come together, nor do we need to. Just because two people both identify as anarchists, why on earth should they expend energy to come together or synchronize their practices if they never coincide in their daily activities and struggles? Only if they can both grow from the meeting. Certainly not to come to an agreement about how one should do things the same way as the other. If that were the outcome, the anarchist space would become poorer in experiences, and more limited in the range of social trajectories or niches it has a hope of touching. Platformism is all well and good for platformists, but it makes no sense to strategize with resources that are simply not ours to command. “If only all the anarchists pooled their resources on this one campaign...” Your failure to stir up enough people, anarchist or otherwise, to help you accomplish the things you want to accomplish, cannot be blamed on disunity.

At the same time, this pluralism needs to develop a belligerence, to never be content with what it has achieved while always being conscious of its victories and points of strength. Once we hold ourselves to high standards, we can sincerely criticize other anti-authoritarians who have chosen a different practice. The autonomy, or distance, or non-unity of different clusters in the anarchist space allow them to develop different perspectives and experiences from which to criticize one another. This important advantage is lost when anarchists allow positive fragmentation to become silence and dispersal, when they do not communicate despite the distances. Pluralism must not be allowed to become relativism, in which every anti-authoritarian practice is treated as equally valid (the history of struggles in this country should amply show that they’re not). Sensitivity must not atrophy into its worst manifestation: thin skin. Not only the high-strung ideological purists, but also the thin-skinned hypersensitive ones who present themselves as non-ideological are the most likely to counterattack any fundamental critique of their practice with the most vicious and poor faith categorizations.

I’ll remain oblique on this point, because in the anarchist space, unlike its terrestrial equivalent, the anarchist scene (with its heaviest manifestations in two self-important coastal cities), we like

to keep drama and rumorology to a minimum. (By the way, did you hear that my old comrades at Void Network work for the police, adore the media, and aren't real anarchists, according to some riot tourists afraid of losing their monopoly on Greece points?)

Secondly, US anarchists would need to exchange an emphasis on decision-making for one on initiative-taking. The open assembly does not exist to ratify a decision, because it would never dream of stopping its constituents from making all the decisions they wanted. And, I would argue, it does not exist either to impel action, because it is assumed and promoted that its constituents are already taking action, and need the assembly *in order to share*, to challenge or deepen their analysis as well as to gain some practice in articulating that analysis, and also to get a sense of what everyone else is going to be doing, *so as to be able to carry out their actions more intelligently*. The assembly must never be a crutch.

At most, it can endeavor to create spaces to facilitate action, such as by calling for a protest, in which case it is emphatically not organizing an action, but calling for a future manifestation of the assembly on the streets, at which time all its constituent clusters, all the affinity groups that take part in it, can carry out the actions they have planned on their own. The protest, thus, is not a singular project, it is not a step forward for a movement, it is another explosive appearance of the creative chaos that is the anarchist space.

Within the assembly, people can talk for hours about their analysis of the situation, they can begin to weave their own history by describing the present moment of conflict between State and society, market and individual, they can evaluate past actions and dream up new innovations. But they must not call for decisions, or propose actions. How can we take someone seriously who must come to an assembly to look for accomplices, who has no friends to hatch their plans with, who does not know how to act with what's in front of them?

Detailed decisions on how to carry out an action are best done in small groups with a well developed level of affinity, not only for the obvious practical reasons, but also because the larger group should not come to a single decision about what is the right thing to do. What we need to encourage is not unity, patience, and compromise, but taking the initiative to carry out direct actions, whether those be propaganda, attacks, or the meeting of basic needs. Once we face the struggle so earnestly, the sense of solidarity that unity usually stands in for will not be far behind.

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