Summit Protests and Networks

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of the movement has strongly favoured the network form, it's now time to look at also building its more coherent partner. That is to build specific anarchist organisations that will work in and with the networks as they emerge.

With the emergence of the summit protest movement into the public eye after J18 and Seattle, anarchism gained an influence way beyond what the numbers of anarchists and the level of anarchist organisation might have led you to predict. Quite quickly in the English speaking world, anarchism emerged from being a fairly obscure and historical critique of the left to become one of the main poles in the globalisation movement.

It was not the long-existing anarchist organisations that achieved this. For the most part it was a new generation of activists using much more informal methods of organisation and communication. Rather than seeking to build one powerful and united organisation, they built thousands of small, informal and often quite short-lived ones. In fact 'built' is probably too strong a word for a process that in many cases consisted of a few friends coming together to travel to a protest and act together during it.

The Internet and why this form of organisation came to the fore

Revolutionary politics has always been strongly influenced by new technology. The emergence of the mass democratic rebellions in France, American and Ireland in the closing decades of the 18th century were linked to the advent of widespread literacy and access to printing. This allowed the rapid spread of quite complex republican ideas around the world. At the start of the new millennium it was the internet that allowed for a model of organisation of highly decentralised networks. Previously both international communication and one to many communication needed significant resources and so required mass organisation and a centralisation of resources. The web and email meant that for first time huge numbers of people could directly communicate internationally on a day-to-day basis.

This allowed the coming into being of very large and informal networks. In terms of debate and organisation these could be no more formal than an email list. A single mail sent to one list could be picked up and forwarded to many others so the ideas of one individual or small collective could spread rapidly to large numbers of people whom they had never met. This tended to bypass existing organisations many of whom tended to see the internet as a threat rather than an opportunity . For a time it also threw the various state spying and police forces into disarray as they were used to a model where infiltration of one or a small number of centralised organisations could give them a very accurate picture of how many would attend something and what they were likely to do.

Simply put these new methods initially allowed activists to seemingly appear from nowhere and either shut down summits as in Seattle and Prague or, as in Quebec, force the state to imprison itself behind high walls and fences. It was suddenly possible for a small and poorly resourced group to communicate with and seek aid from people all over their continent. It was possible for those thinking of travelling to a protest to get quite detailed local information in advance through web sites and email lists. After a decade where the only thing of significance happening on the left was the Zapatistas the initial success of the summit protests seemed to represent an enormous leap forward.

The advantages of this form of organisation

The major advantage of this form of organisation is that it allowed the rapid development and growth of a movement of tens of thousands from a tiny base without significant resources. Almost without exception groups formed spontaneously, copying what they perceived as the success of what

and then take these ideas into individual networks and argue for them. Anarchist organisations also have the time to enter into the sort of historical and theoretical discussion that are not possible in a broad meeting that seeks to sort out the concrete organisational details of a specific event.

This sort of analysis is needed if we are to move from confronting the worst aspects of capitalism as they arise to building an alternative to capitalism. The creation of an alternative is a long term project that needs to be able to deal with capitalism in all its different phases from social democratic to neo-liberal to fascist. In the past capitalism has been able to disband or suppress protest movements by simply shifting phase and either giving an apparent, if limited, victory (with a new social democratic government) or imposing repression that people are not prepared for (with fascism).

When it comes to doing work in trade unions or in communities where we can expect that many of those we are addressing and seeking to involve will be around for many years there is a real advantage in having a stable formal organisation. This can build up credibility and trust amongst those it wants to work with in a way that an informal network that comes and goes simply cannot sustain in the long term.

There is something of a false debate facing the anti-capitalist movement. At one pole some put forward tight organisation. The Leninists of course want tightly centralized parties but even some libertarians see the answer to increasingly effective policing of protest in a turn towards more disciplined and perhaps semi-clandestine organisation. At the other pole most activists continue to put forward loose organisations as a solution in themselves, with some 'post-leftists' even arguing against any form of more co-ordinated organisation.

Both see the two organisational methods as in competition with each other. This need not be so, in fact for anarchists both forms should be complementary as the strengths of one are the weaknesses of the other and vice versa. The rapid growth

was that there was always another candidate in the wings to fill the president's chair when it became vacant.

This does not prove that the network form or organisation is useless, nor that there is an alternative form of organisation that is better in all circumstances. But it does suggest a need to look at models of organisation beyond networks. Or rather at models intended to complement the network form of organisation and address those areas where it is weak.

The old left often took the attitude that there was one ideal form of organisation that could be scaled down to fill all needs and all circumstances. For the Leninists that was often democratic centralism, the idea that putting a smart leadership in charge was the way forward. For some anarcho-syndicalists it was syndicalism but most anarchists have always favoured a plurality of organisational forms.

From the late 19th century anarchists have advocated a number of forms of organisation. Sometimes given the nature of the debate these were put forward as polarised alternatives to each other. But some, like Bakunin, argued that all these forms of organisation should exist side by side and that anarchists should be involved in all of them.

What is needed is that committed anarchists also organise in anarchist political organisations that seek to provide the continuity, theoretical depth and tactical unity that networks, because of their advantages, lack. The main goal of networks is to organise lots and lots of people around a limited project (e.g. a single day's protest). Trying to develop any agreed theoretical depth in such a project would just limit the number of people who can be involved.

The role of anarchist organisations

Anarchist organisations have the resources to develop theoretical depth out of their experience across a range of networks

others were doing elsewhere. Their knowledge of the process was obtained not from individual contact or even books but from what people were writing on a multitude of web sites and email lists.

In the first years it was also possible for network organised summit protests to have a real impact on the various global capitalist summits. The business of both the 1999 World Trade Organisation (WTO) summit in Seattle and the 2000 World Bank summit in Prague was disrupted, in the case of Prague leading to the abandoning of the entire event as delegates fled the city. This was possible because initially the various state security forces who are used to dealing with top down, centralized organisations didn't know who to watch and what to take seriously. On a more local level the initial Reclaim the Streets events that were held in many cities around the globe also caused confusion amongst police forces unused to such organising methods.

Of course the state has enormous resources at its disposal and after some pretty disastrous experimentation — the Quebec NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) summit, also in 2000 — it adjusted to these new forms of organisation and developed new policing methods to deal with them. These new policing methods included an intense level of repression which saw the shooting of protesters at the Gothenburg and Genoa summits. Many of the Summits were also moved out of the big cities where protesters could easily gather to isolated locations and in the case of the World Bank to Qatar, a dictatorship!

In particular, after the September 11th terrorist attacks, when security became a very plausible excuse in the mind of the general public, the effectiveness of attempts to actually shut down or disrupt the summits of global capitalism plummeted. Protests and confrontations still occur at many summits but the summit delegates now see these on Sky News rather then right outside the buildings in which they meet. As such, the protests

have become purely symbolic even if there are often frequent scuffles with whatever police force has drawn the short straw of protecting the world's elite that month.

The network form of organisation is effective but also rather ruthless when it comes to experimentation with new methods and tactics. Each local group is free to go out and try out new ideas without consulting with anyone else first. If something obviously works then it is reported on and can be rapidly replicated elsewhere. The ruthless element is that this freedom to experiment without consultation also means that obvious failures that would have been spotted at the discussion phase in a more formal organisation slip through and people have to learn the hard way all too frequently. And the hard way can mean jailings or losing all local support for an action that was never going to make any difference anyway. In contrast a formal organisation would first need a formal geographically widespread debate over strategy and tactics before they could be implemented. While this may eliminate repeating the mistakes of the past it may also result in missed opportunities and certainly limits the number of new strategies that can be tried at any one time.

In the 1990's, with the bankruptcy of the old authoritarian left, it was precisely this space for experimentation and replication that allowed the rapid appearance of a new movement with new tactics and a new strategy created through 'walking the road' rather then studying the books.

What are the limitations it faces?

The state may be slow to respond but it is a massive structure of power with billions of dollars of resources and hundreds of thousands of dedicated personnel. So no single form of organisation, unless it is one that involves the majority of workers, will ever be able to take it on in a straight fight. This includes

not only formal organisations but also informal decentralised methods of organisation.

Many of the things that make network forms of organisation useful are also disadvantages in other respects. Their informality means that 'members' have a relatively weak commitment to them so for finance and resources they are often dependant of donations and loans from more formal organisations. The ease of getting involved (perhaps no more then signing up to an email list) also means they are easy for police, journalists and fascists to infiltrate and, if they are smart about it, to disrupt by carrying out provocations in the name of the network or issuing statements from what claims to be a node of a network designed simply to discredit the network as a whole. In the recent past we have an example in this in the letter bombing campaign carried out by an Italian group that nobody had ever heard of but which used the same initials as the largest Italian anarchist network, the FAI. In a network that has no formal structure it can be very hard to even issue a statement pointing out that such actions are not part of the network.

Beyond networks and protests

Network methods of organisation have proved to be very effective at organising one off summit protests. They have also played a vital role in building international solidarity, in particular with the Zapatista struggle in Chiapas in the mid-1990's. But the experience of those organising the summit protests suggests that in the aftermath the networks proved fragile and were unable to sustain a local impact.

In Argentina network forms of organisation proved capable of getting several presidents out of power and were able to help organise the occupations of dozens of factories but appear not to have made much progress towards overthrowing capitalism. The slogan was 'they all must go' but the reality