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Organisation – General or Specific?

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I have been involved in several anarchist and libertarian socialist organisations with very specific politics and I have always felt that such organisations are genuinely useful. There are certain kinds of concerted action which you can only take if you're willing to take specific positions within the broader theoretical framework of anarchism, and certain kinds of long-term practical work require specific theoretical outlooks. However, I have also felt that the lack of more open and general organising across the anarchist movement in Britain has not only hurt the movement as a whole but has also hindered the ability of organisations with a more specific politics to act effectively.

The first way that the lack of a more general anarchist organisation hurts more specific anarchist groups, is that anarchists with very specific political commitments do not pop into existence fully formed. New anarchists come to anarchism either influenced by other political traditions such as liberalism or social democracy, or

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they come into anarchism without any previous political experience. Often such new anarchists are still in the process of working out their own politics and are not willing to commit to an organisation with a very specific set of stances.

In order to develop their politics to the point that they start to hold specific positions, they need to work with other anarchists on practical projects, develop experience, and deepen their own understanding of theory and practice out of those experiences. This requires a broad anarchist organisation they can get involved in without committing to specific political or strategic ideas. In order for someone to become the kind of committed syndicalist, or communist, or insurrectionary, or whatever, which many groups desire as members, they need time to develop and find out for themselves what they are about.

This is also a problem in developing new anarchist groups. In many places there are simply not enough anarchists of a specific political leaning to form more specific groups. A more general anarchist group in such areas would allow for spreading of anarchist ideas, the recruitment of more anarchists, and the development of the politics of existing anarchists, to the point that more specific groups could be formed. More general groups are also the reactor that can best generate new kinds of specific anarchist groups in reaction to new circumstances.

A more general anarchist organisation is also the connective tissue that allows more specific anarchist groups to share opportunities with each other and send new people to the projects and groups that are most appropriate for them. Often someone will get in contact with a specific anarchist group that is a poor match for their needs, or a specific anarchist group stumbles into a situation which would be better handled by a different group, and without more general networks of communication these individuals and opportunities end up lost in the gaps between specific groups.

Lastly, many of the specific anarchist groups in Britain today are too small and weak to take meaningful action on their own.

Such action requires groups either work together or draw from a wider pool of anarchists who have not yet committed to a specific approach to anarchism. Both of these are best served by a broader and more general form of anarchist organising that specific groups can embed themselves in and use as platforms to advocate for their projects and strategies to other groups and individuals.

I have seen first-hand that more specific groups go down two different paths when we lack this kind of general organisation. They can attempt to remain pure to their specific ideas, but without a more general anarchist organisation which they can propagandise to and recruit from they end up small, isolated, and useless. Secondly, they attempt to fix the lack of a more general organisation by taking on some of the roles of a more general group. This leads to more specific groups having to sacrifice some of their political and strategic clarity in order to fulfil that role, while also not being able to fully commit to the role because of their attempts to avoid entirely losing their specific stances. I have not seen either of these approaches work in the long-term.

Instead, I believe that we need more general forms of anarchist organisation that allow anarchism to build groups where it is too weak to support more specific groups and allow anarchists who are not committed to a specific kind of anarchism to take meaningful action and develop their own ideas and practices. However, attempting to build a general organisation without anyone involved developing more specific approaches to theory and practice will hinder our ability to take decisive action and develop more complex ideas, so we also need more specific groups.

But anarchist groups built around a specific political theory or practical orientation, on their own, tend towards a kind of isolation that leaves them to wither and die or attempt to become more general in nature and abandon the clear commitments that make such groups useful in the first place. So we still need a more general anarchist organisation which more specific groups can push for their ideas and projects within, recruit from, and coordinate

across. More general and specific forms of organising are not necessarily at odds with each other, but support each other.

The exact nature of such a general organisation is not for me to say. It is the kind of thing that can only be decided by individuals and groups coming together across Britain to discuss what we would all find most useful. This is why I think that the Eclipse project is so important. It could be the basis of the kind of general anarchist network that could, both in local areas but also across the country, do the kind of things that I have seen so many specific anarchist groups end up doing to their detriment, and do them far better because it would be more general and open by design. And far from absorbing and infringing on the specific positions of other anarchist groups, it could provide them with a forum to spread their ideas and free them up to really pursue their own projects on their own terms.