

Demise of the Beehive Collective

Infoshops Ain't the Revolution

brad

1995

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In April, 1995 the Beehive Community Space & Infoshop in Washington, DC shut its doors. The Beehive Autonomous Collective, which started and operated the infoshop, had started meeting in July 1993, and opened the infoshop in October, 1993. This article will analyze some of what happened at Beehive and attempt to draw some lessons that might be useful for the Infoshop movement and the anarchist movement in general. I was involved with Beehive for the entire life span of the group. In this article I am only speaking for myself as one member of the project.

What is an Infoshop?

An infoshop is a space where people involved with radical movements and countercultures can trade information, meet and network with other people & groups, and hold meetings and/or events. They often house “free schools” and educational workshops. Infoshops have existed in Europe for decades. The Spanish revolutionary infoshops of the 1930s, and the current European infoshops provided some of the inspiration for the newer North American infoshops.

The North American Infoshop Movement

While a few bookstores/infoshops existed in the 1980s, the current wave of infoshops basically started in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991. Their growth seems to have in some ways been a direct response to frustrations some anarchists felt trying to organize a movement against the Gulf War without any institutions to draw upon or sustain day-to-day activism in our communities. The Long Haul infoshop in the Bay Area and the Emma Center in Minneapolis served as inspirations and models for some of the other infoshops. The more punk music oriented spaces like Epicenter in San Francisco and Reconstruction Records in New York were also inspirations for some people.

Origins of Beehive & Drawing Lessons

Like many of today’s infoshops, Beehive’s origins are in the punk-rock counterculture. It developed out of the contradictions facing the DC punk community in 1993. Many people in the DC punk scene had been politically active since the mid-1980s, and many of the more popular DC punk bands had political lyrics and had played many benefit concerts during that time. While the benefit concerts have continued, by 1993 the tendency toward activism in the punk scene was fading. A few of us who had been involved in punk- oriented activist groups, such as Positive Force, Riot Grrrl and Food Not Bombs, were feeling more isolated from the rest of the punk scene. We came together out of the experiences we had in these other groups, in a mostly unarticulated attempt to move beyond the confines of the “punk scene” to become more involved with and relevant to other DC communities. Others who hadn’t been previously involved in DC punk/political groups also got involved, attracted to the concept of either a “free space,” a record store or a hangout space.

Little Participation from Local Community

One of the most noticeable things about Beehive's beginning was that almost all of the people who got involved were not from DC—and even further, many people had just recently moved to DC. Only a few people who were ever involved with Beehive actually grew up in the DC area or had lived here more than a couple of years. This helped produce a larger problem—none of the people in the collective were from the particular neighborhood where we opened our infoshop, and we never succeeded in attracting neighborhood residents to the project.

When Beehive was starting out, the fact that so many people were from out of town was refreshing, as it strengthened the waning “political” tendency in the DC punk scene. But in retrospect it was a weakness which caused a continual shortsightedness, and contributed to the group's end.

This “transient” tendency isn't surprising considering the social base Beehive came out of. The punk scene is generally young, politically inexperienced and has very high turnover. There is a strong commitment to individual and/or spontaneous acts of creativity (bands, fanzines, fashion, etc.) but a non-committal or skeptical attitude toward organized movements or organizations. To start a community-based organization such as an infoshop, however, requires long-term thinking and commitment. This basic tension—between the attention span and commitment level of our social base, and the commitment necessary to do what we said we wanted to do—was a problem in Beehive from beginning to end.

Dominance of Punk-Rock Culture

The fact that Beehive came out of the punk-rock community isn't inherently bad by any means. But we need to recognize the limitations of the punk scene, and how those limitations make a community organizing project very difficult, if not impossible.

At Beehive we also experienced the strange tendency for punk to dominate all that it comes in contact with. While Beehive was started by punks, some non-punk anarchists and other activists were attracted to it at first. But none of the non-punk activists stayed involved, and it wasn't until the last few months of the group that a few more non-punk anarchists got involved. While the non-punks who left had their individual reasons for leaving the group, I think in most cases it was partly related to the dominance of punk in the group.

Since the visible activities happening at Beehive were punk-related, more middle-class punks continued to be attracted to the project, mostly from outside of DC. So we were continually treading water, always saying we wanted to “get beyond” the punk community and interact with and involve people from the neighborhood around us, but continually attracting more and more punks (with varying degrees of commitment to community organizing). This further strengthened the association of Beehive with the punk scene, and made it increasingly more difficult to attract other communities to the project.

The answer to this question is not easy, as punk has probably done more than anything else in the last 20 years to popularize anarchism and to articulate the anti-authoritarianism of alienated white youth. Punk culture should exist, and thrive, in radical spaces, but it shouldn't dominate.

There is an underlying strain of arrogance and elitism to much of punk culture, a belief that “the masses are asses” or that everyone else is just stupid and conforms to society's expectations.

Also the fact that punks tend to come from white, middle- class backgrounds means that many punks have more resources and money at their disposal to develop their projects than do people from more working- class countercultures. This factor makes it easy for punk to unintentionally dominate a space—many punks receive “hidden” support from parents and middle- class jobs, which allow more punk bands to buy nicer equipment, put out their own records, tour more easily, etc.

Gentrification

When we started looking for a building to move our community space into, we were immediately confronted with the high cost of rent in DC. The cheapest rent we were able to find—somewhat near a subway station and somewhat near where some of us lived—was in a neighborhood that is in the process of gentrification.

Gentrification is the process by which a working- class or poor urban neighborhood starts to become desirable to middle-class or yuppie people (“gentry”) from outside of that neighborhood. One of the main desirable factors is the cheap rent. Once middle-class people move in, they start to make “improvements,” demand more police presence to protect their property, and businesses start to appear to cater to their middle-class and yuppie tastes. As the neighborhood becomes more “desirable” for people with more money, property values start to rise, and the original poor or working-class residents of the neighborhood can’t keep up with the rising costs and have to move out. It is a process of colonization on a smaller level.

Some of us repeatedly raised the issue of gentrification in the group while we were deciding where to locate our infoshop. We were conscious of our role as outsiders to the U Street neighborhood we were considering, and we were weary of the “revitalization” going on a few blocks down the street. The U Street & 14th Street corridors were burned out in April 1968 in the urban uprisings after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

Until the early 90s, the commercial corridors remained partly vacant while surrounding neighborhoods suffered from the violence and decay that has wreaked havoc on inner cities over the past 30 years.

Around when we were looking at the neighborhood, a group of new “hip” businesses had joined together to market the concept of “The New U,” which was used in ads in citywide papers to try to attract outsiders to come shop the new U Street businesses. The “New U” businesses down the street hit a nerve with us because many of them were started by people from our community—punks and alternative types. Since they were from our community, we wanted to differentiate from them, but in reality we didn’t really know how.

We didn’t want to contribute to the gentrification process, although none of us had a clear idea of how to oppose it. We agreed that we would try to be different than the stores of “The New U” down the street. We would be different because we would try to serve needs of people who lived in the neighborhood (through free clothing, free food, and free daycare programs, for example) rather than trying to bring in yuppies from outside with money. We knew we would make mistakes, but we didn’t see ourselves as contributing to gentrification as long as we were actively struggling against it politically.

Gentrification turned out to be one of the two major divisive issues in Beehive, and it seems to be that way at most infoshops around the US.

Internal Group Dynamics: Race, Class & Gender

Other than gentrification, it was internal group dynamics centering on race, class and gender that were the most pressing and most divisive issues that Beehive faced. This also seems to mirror the experience of other infoshops around the US. We had a series of internal conflicts which escalated in intensity, until May 1994 when two members and two non-members of the group confronted the rest of the group in a very abrasive way for what they saw as sexism, classism and racism in the way the group operated. Those of us involved in Beehive learned a lot from these internal struggles. It forced us to confront many of our personal motivations and approaches, to try to figure out which of our actions come out of our genuinely progressive aspirations, and which come from our culturally brainwashed upbringing in a white-supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist society.

Unfortunately, some who supported Beehive but weren't directly involved seemed turned off or intimidated by the perceived hostile infighting. This further isolated us from the community that we originally emerged from.

More importantly, I think these internal struggles happened in a way that was disconnected to any practice of trying to change oppressive institutions in society, and without seeing that our mistakes were not just due to our individual shortcomings, but were being replicated by many other groups at the same time. Although it wasn't easy to see at the time, the struggles over internal dynamics in the group escalated precisely when it had become clear that Beehive wasn't accomplishing the political goals that we claimed to aspire to. The free daycare never happened. A proposal for a community organizing project was passed but then never acted on. Anti-gentrification discussion and efforts had been pushed into the background. Other activist groups weren't using Beehive as a meeting space or resource center. The lending library was falling apart.

This wasn't because we didn't care about these things anymore. We just hadn't realized how much work it would take just to maintain and staff the infoshop, let alone actually using it as a base from which to launch activist projects. Once we had rented a building and moved in, it took all our energy (and then some!) to just staff and open the infoshop three days a week (we would have liked to have been open every day). Repairs to the building were never made. Bureaucratic paperwork with the government to make our infoshop "legal" was never filled out—partly because we decided not to, but even if we had wanted to we just weren't organized enough to handle it.

Among the people who were consistently involved with the group, many of us traveled for weeks or months at a time and our involvement varied accordingly. Core people moved away from DC at a few key moments in the group's history. There was never a clear sense that people would be around very long. This "come and go" situation among core members and the high turnover among others made it impossible to progress on internal group dynamics.

For example, at a meeting one week, a woman would confront the group about sexism, and we would agree to spend the next meeting discussing the situation in depth. Then at the next meeting there would only be a few people there who were at the previous meeting. Everyone else there missed "the incident" and had no idea what was happening or why it was suddenly so urgent to spend the whole meeting talking about our sexism. The discussions on internal dynamics would mostly consist of uncomfortable silence. The people who brought the issue up in the first place would say what they thought, and there would be some hesitant discussion, but

real group dialogue on these issues almost never happened. We just weren't able to handle it as a group.

Transience makes it impossible to deal with internal dynamics. To get anywhere on such issues, I think a group needs to have a somewhat stable membership who can work out interpersonal dynamics over time, and the group also needs to be actively struggling to bring about change outside of itself. Otherwise, dealing with internal dynamics becomes all-consuming, and becomes more like group therapy than struggling to change the society we live in. (This is not to degrade therapy for those who want or need it to deal with life in a fucked up society; It is just to say that political organizing and therapy are different things, and we should be clear which one we want to be doing at what times.)

Some people attracted to counter-institutions, like many other political projects, like this act in oppressive ways (intentionally or not) and take up more than their share of the group's time in dealing with their personal problems or idiosyncrasies. I don't think we should be afraid of criticizing or "alienating" people who are detracting from the focus of the group or making others feel uncomfortable. I think we need to commit ourselves to finding ways to deal seriously with oppressive aspects of our group dynamics in a way that encourages people to speak, grow, and learn to become better activists through experience and comradely criticism.

No Unifying Vision, No Clear Goals, No Strategy

The other missing link in dealing with internal dynamics is a clear sense of vision in the group. If everyone involved is clear about the purpose of the group (i.e. if the purpose and goals are worked out at the beginning, and clarified into a written statement) then the group can always refer back to that to see if its outward activities and internal dynamics are actually helping to fulfill those goals or not. But with Beehive, and I think at many other infoshops too, we never truly had political agreement on what our goals or purpose were.

We did have a statement of purpose, but it was crafted in a carefully vague way to basically allow for anything and avoid making choices about a specific course of action. We defined Beehive as, "an all volunteer collective promoting communication through books, records, 'zines, performance, meetings, and social/political networking. In our attempt to break the cycle of an historically classist, sexist, racist, heterosexist and authoritarian social system, we feel it is imperative to oppose capitalist oppression. It has denied us self-realization and free association. Beehive intends to bridge the ever increasing gap between privilege and underdevelopment by providing access to space and information at low cost or free. We will: be organic, radical, wild, and revolutionary; creative and critical locally and internationally."

When you take away what we are abstractly for & against, that leaves only promoting communication and providing a space for other people to "do their own thing." While this is a good thing to do, it does not differ fundamentally from the mission of a public library, for example. And I would argue in the current context, at least in DC, it is not the most valuable use of our energies in building a revolutionary anti-authoritarian movement.

While our statement took some political stands (against capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism), we did not have a political focus of our own to fight against those things. By coming out against those things politically while having no program to work against them, we were setting ourselves up to be torn apart by struggles over those oppressions in the internal dynamics of

the group—and that’s what happened. This shows why it is important to have an agreed upon purpose for the group, as well as an attempt to create a strategy to realize those goals.

Having no agreed upon purpose creates one set of problems that will probably lead to misunderstandings and frustration, factionalism, and people leaving the group confused or frustrated about what the group is supposed to be doing. Having a unified purpose but no strategy creates another similar set of problems, which will also often cause people to become frustrated and look to each others’ individual shortcomings for the source of the problem, rather than trying to create a strategy to have an effect on the world around us. Most infoshops seem to be stuck in one or the other of these problems; Beehive was usually somewhere in between.

The Unstated (Dis)Ideology of Infoshops

While Beehive’s political statement avoided articulating a specific strategy or focus, we were still following an unspoken strategy. The failure to articulate a strategy doesn’t mean that you don’t have one, it just means that you haven’t consciously worked through it as a group. I think most infoshops try to take the easy way out of developing and implementing a strategy to reach our stated ideals, by stating our purpose simply as sharing information and providing a space for people to use. This creates a big gap between our stated goals (against capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism) and our actual activities (educational and logistical support work). We had revolutionary ideas but little strategy to work toward realizing them.

Counter-Institutions as “The Revolution”?

As you can probably tell by now, I don’t see infoshops or counter-institutions as “the answer” or “the strategy” for building a revolutionary anarchist movement. I do, however, think that they can be an important part of a strategy, if there is a mass movement to support and sustain them. Some people (though probably not many in the anarchist infoshop movement) do see counter-institutions as “the revolution.” Their strategy basically says that through creating non-profit cooperatives (food co-ops, free medical clinics, housing co-ops, etc.) we will set examples of a different type of society and serve the needs of our communities, which others will then copy. The counter-institutions will continue to gain power and will be able to serve the needs of the people, making the current power structures irrelevant without having to struggle directly against them.

What this strategy leaves out is that the institutions in power now have an interest in staying in power, and will fight to preserve and expand their power. They will struggle directly against our counter-institutions whether we fight them or not. So without a means to directly confront them, our counter-institutions will be crushed when they are perceived as enough of a threat to the status quo.

However, in the current political context without strong mass movements, the greater danger to counter-institutions is being co-opted into a harmless “alternative” without revolutionary content. We can see this in many food co-ops that started in the co-op upsurge of the early 1970s which are now catering increasingly to a yuppie clientele and adopting more of a capitalist approach. I think this shows that counter-institutions are not inherently revolutionary—they can go in many directions.

Counter-Institutions as a Foundation for Revolutionary Growth?

A more developed analysis sees infoshops not as inherently revolutionary but as one part of a revolutionary strategy. As Jacinto from Chicago's Autonomous Zone Infoshop wrote in the first issue of (dis)connection, "the revolution is not in the formation of these counter-institutions, but in the revolutionary potential of the collectives which can use the resources provided by liberated spaces." Jacinto argues that building sustainable radical counter-institutions now will provide a launching pad for all sorts of radical projects and collectives. This strategy makes sense—it sees the need for building ongoing institutions to sustain radical activism, and it also sees the limitations of those counter-institutions by themselves. This strategy says that the missing ingredient—the reason there are not more radical projects and collectives—is that there is not a base of support, information, and resources for such projects to develop. According to this strategy, if we build infoshops as that base, then the amount of activist projects in our communities should grow.

This was the unstated strategy that I was pursuing through Beehive, and I think it's the unstated strategy of a lot of people who are involved in infoshops. While this strategy sounds good, it did not work in practice for us, and I don't see much evidence of it working elsewhere. One possibility is that Beehive did not survive long enough to "bear fruit" in the form of new projects and collectives. But as it was, our whole group was drained just keeping the Beehive infoshop afloat and staffed from week to week. The anarchist and radical communities are just too small in DC to sustain an anarchist infoshop and to also develop other projects. Rather than building the basis for further growth of radical projects, my experience is that infoshops will burn out the core group of activists and thus prevent them from developing or contributing to new projects.

Where To From Here: Revolutionary Pluralism & Infoshops as a Part of a Revolutionary Strategy

This is the situation we find ourselves in—in North America in 1995 we are trying to build a revolutionary anti-authoritarian movement on almost no solid foundation. Many young anarchists realize that we need ongoing institutions to sustain our work during the high points and low points of mass movements. Over the past few years, many of us have tried to build local infoshops and community centers to fulfill that function.

At best, the results have been mixed. Most of the infoshop collectives have attracted new people to anarchist politics, and have given anarchists an ongoing project to work on that at least has the potential to deal with the issues faced by oppressed and alienated people in our daily lives. Some of the infoshops have improved the reputation of anarchists in their cities by having a visible example of their politics, while a couple have also taken militant direct action on neighborhood issues such as gentrification.

At the same time, every infoshop I know of has experienced severe internal problems, with serious factional fights and with many people leaving infoshops frustrated, angry, or burnt out. The factional fights and splits have escalated to vandalism or threats of violence at places like Emma Center in Minneapolis, Beehive in DC, and Epicenter in San Francisco.

While much of the initial point of starting infoshops was to create a stable, ongoing presence in a particular city or community, some infoshops which opened with lofty expectations are already closed, such as Croatan in Baltimore and Beehive in DC Other infoshops which are still open have

already had to move once or twice, like Chicago's A-Zone. And of all the infoshops I'm familiar with, I can't think of any that have helped facilitate the starting of new projects or collectives except as hostile splits from the infoshop collective! Other projects that have developed probably would have formed anyway without the existence of the infoshops.

In cities where active anarchist projects and collectives already exist, it might make sense to set up an infoshop. But generally infoshops haven't been very successful at supporting and helping develop new projects. I think this is because of a lack of open discussion about our politics, vision, and strategy. While skills-sharing is crucial to helping disempowered and alienated people take control over our lives, I think the "missing ingredient" in the lack of new anarchist projects is our lack of a political vision for the future, and our lack of developing realistic strategies to move toward that vision. Can we really consider infoshops a cornerstone of a revolutionary movement if we can't have a discussion about anything deeper than what color to paint the room without causing a major split in the collective?

To deal with these questions, I think we need to take a step back from the specific political projects, such as infoshops, that we've chosen to work on. I don't mean to say that we should abandon such projects, but that they are bound to fail unless we simultaneously take a step back and build stable, ongoing political collectives, organizations, or other forums as a political infrastructure for our movement. The focus of such organizations should be specifically to develop political vision and strategy, and then work to implement that strategy. These can be local, regional, national or international groupings. Love and Rage is one example of such a group, but there are many such organizations with varying visions and strategies that will be part of any revolutionary movement. This is what I think of when I think of "revolutionary pluralism."

Infoshops may be one aspect of a political strategy that such political groupings could develop. But infoshops aren't a strategy in themselves, and are failing as a shortcut for working through our political differences and coming up with coherent visions and strategies to realize an anarchist future. I don't think that it's a mistake to work on infoshops, and I wouldn't say that the two years working on Beehive were a waste of time, as long as we are willing to admit our shortcomings and honestly sum up that experience to learn from it and move forward. This article is my attempt to do that, and my view is that it's time to work on other projects instead of starting another infoshop.

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