

Intercollectivism

A Critical View of NAC

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At last December's More Fun Than Santa conference, I wound up in the position of agreeing to compile a Network of Anarchist Collectives mission statement or statements to propose at the Toledo conference this summer. So far, perhaps largely due to the disorganization of our organization (NAC), since MFTS I have not received so much as one word of ; suggestion as to what our mission statement should look like or contain. But this is understandable, because as my cohort in this effort, Sprite of Chicago's A-Zone, so deftly wrote in the MFTS "After Words" booklet, "It's pointless to describe our politics when we haven't even discussed strategy among *ourselves*." (emphasis added)

So I have taken it upon myself to jot down some ideas on what NAC should and should not be, as well as to propose a mission. statement based on the discussion of "Political Direction and Strategy" in which I participated during MFTS. On the pages of (Dis)Co and at the Toledo convention in June, these ideas can and should be discussed/disputed/ adjusted, or even. tossed out the window. Nevertheless, I am answering the call to analyze our network's politics, and vs) perhaps to help incite further discourse,

Solidarity

The Network of Anarchist Collectives needs to remain just that: a network of autonomous collectives. I see no need for us to come up with some all-encompassing statement of politics, beliefs or perspectives to which each individual member should be able to consense. Surely we are networking for a common objective, but we are not an Establishment-toppling movement. Let Love and Rage and all the other *federations* fulfill that role. Our concern, as I perceive it, is in networking for *communication* and *mutual aid*. When a federation speaks of "solidarity," it implies methodological or ideological uniformity. It is referring to some outward goal, based on an abstraction. In that case, solidarity is necessary in achieving a common objective the federation, including all member groups, seeks.

In our case, solidarity takes the form of mutual aid. We do not *all* have to prescribe to the same specific set of politics, That's for federations. In a network like ours, we merely need to subscribe to a common method and structure of organization, i.e. collectivism (and this only because it helps guarantee that our over-arching association will remain nonhierarchical and as decentralized as possible, and because we want to promote collectives).

Our Anarchism

I personally do not know why the word "Anarchist" is included in our title, but I was never consulted during the naming . process. It occurs to me that the word "autonomous" — not "autonomist" — would be better for our purposes. How do we define "anarchist," anyway? I mean, do you have to believe in smashing the state to smithereens to be an anarchist? Or can you just be someone who has little or no interest in such far-reaching vision but who, nonetheless, understands that nonhierarchical, face-to-face, decentralized organizing is the optimal method of working for social change, or merely living one's life? For instance, Syracuse's on the Rise bakery, a women's economic collective, would never refer, to itself as "anarchist" in ideology (or as anything, really); still, I can't think of a better example of sustainable, nonauthoritarian , organizing. But why would they want to be part of NAC? They are not (all) anarchists, and perhaps

a few of them don't even understand what "anarchism" means (do we?). But the involvement of such successful collectives would improve NAC in countless ways.

So by what criteria do we judge who's "anarchist" and who is not?

If we use the word "Autonomous," we will not be ideology-specific. "Collectives," however we decide to define the term, can encompass the points that member groups must be nonauthoritarian (ie, anarchist) in structure, but not necessarily in vision, "Autonomous," then, can refer to the relationship between the collective and the Network — each collective is, autonomous *from* the Network and its other members. (*Autonomism* implies individualism, which is an issue I don't even want to touch here.)

Autonomy

NAC needs to guarantee and preserve the autonomy of all individual collectives. As soon as we say we are committed to "fighting this" or "creating that," we risk (a) alienating potential member collectives which do not share that specific goal in their own operations or (b) infringing upon the autonomy of any such collective which is already a member of NAC. Indeed, if we are to achieve a mission statement via consensus process, we will never come to one which describes our specific politics, visions, strategies and tactics and remains consistent with those of all member collectives.

So why bother? Why exact conformity and ideological homogeneity?

The main problem with having NAC generally agree on a "politics" is that NAC doesn't, as an entity, need a strategy. We need to function — we need to get things done — but we don't need to be sure that NAC itself will change the world. That's up to its members, NAC will hopefully facilitate world change brought about by member collectives, but that's different. (I will add a qualifier. It is important that all member collectives state and discuss their own goals, tactics, etc (ie, perspectives, visions and methods) in an open manner. We need to know who we're working in association with. Further, if — a neo-nazi collective were to exist and want to join NAC, for instance, I should hope there would be ample opposition.)

If NAC has any "strategy," it is providing a means by which member collectives can better achieve their own strategies and objectives. Through communication and mutual aid, between and amongst member collectives, each can further itself along the lines it sets for itself. For NAC, "progress" towards goals will be determined by how well mutual aid and communication are facilitated.

If one NAC member collective repeats mistakes previously made by three other collectives in different cities, then NAC either has not done its job or said collectives have not used NAC the way it is intended to be used. It's that simple.

There is an intercollective dynamic with which we need to concern ourselves in deciding the perspective and function of NAC. Do we want the collective to relate with the Network, or do we want the collective to relate with the other collectives? Do we want some sort of tangible entity in NAC, or do we want it to be a general affiliation, itself not manned by anyone (except to carry out certain activities of maintenance, such as publishing *(Dis)Co* and other resources). Love and Rage Federation is a tangible entity. It is an organization which supposedly joins the forces of autonomous groups toward a common agenda other than mutual support. It is in and

of itself a counter institution, There's nothing wrong with that, but it doesn't seem that's what NAC is intended to be.

Collectivity

Many of us believe that in our social change organizing, we must create microcosmic models of the society we wish them to foster. All collectivists believe that face-to-face, nonhierarchical, leaderless, decentralized, small group structure and participatory, egalitarian processes are the optimal methods of organization, whether their vision is of world revolution or more immediate reclamation of communities, workplaces, households, schools, and so forth.

But if NAC wants to become part of a collectivist movement, it must have some way of aiding and abetting the creation of such organizations. Part of our outward focus needs to be a dedication to filling the gaps in society where Collectives do not exist — ie, almost all of society! How do we, as a network, respond when a 16 year-old high school student in Kansas writes to say she would like help in establishing a collective on her campus? Are we prepared to offer that kind of assistance? Do we just mail her a few pamphlets and a copy of our journal and wish her luck? We need to do something, and that means we need collectivization apparatus in place which will send as much help as we can possibly muster, in as many forms as we can conjure, as soon as possible — without acting as anarcho-missionaries. This won't be easy. It will require thought and practice. As I see it, we aren't even close to being able to accomplish such a task.

Counter-*what?*

We also need to recognize that NAC and most of its member collectives are *not* counter institutions (Xs herein). That's a term that has been tossed around very loosely by "dual powerists" in NAC circles to describe infoshops and the like. But (at least most) infoshops are not XIs. They are solely alternative institutions (AIs herein). There is a difference. Xs must, by definition, actually counter the Establishment they oppose. But infoshops and publishing houses and community centers do not do this, and they don't need to. AIs exist to provide alternative space (be it in the form of actual physical space, services, resources, or whatever) to activists; space in which they can work to develop themselves to better *counter* the establishment. An alternative book store provides resources to other AIs and to protest and direct action organizations (real Xs), but it does not itself actually counter the Establishment. It seems those who insist that infoshops are counter institutions might be suffering from an acute case of vanguard envy. If you want to counter the Establishment, you need to leave the relative security of your infoshop and actually do some countering. If you don't want to do that, fine — but don't call your infoshop an XI.

This is what the dual power concept misses. In his short essay on "The Logic of Alternative Institutions," Howard J. Ehrlich stated that "An alternative institution must always be a counter-institution." (*Reinventing Anarchy*, B.J. Ehrlich, et al, eds, p346) Other than that insistence, Howard's description of the AI is outstanding, claiming that it "must provide its community with a genuine service," and "do so in an openly-politicized context." But why should a collective bookstore or youth center, which no doubt provide genuine services and are often politicized, be engaged in direct confrontation with the Establishment? Can we really expect every AI to also be an XI?

Certainly we can demand the reverse. That is, all counter institutions should also be alternative institutions. They should not be purely outward-focused, always trying to accomplish objectives and ignoring the *subjective* development of their members. The XI collective should provide alternative space and simultaneously counter the status quo.

In order for dual power strategy to make sense, a second duality must be recognized. First, in the classical sense of the term, there is the building of an alternative society “in the shell of the old.” But that “shell” is not as inanimate and decrepit as the metaphorical cliché implies — the “old” society will remain a threat until it is destroyed. So, without falling into the trap of nihilistic adventurism, we need to recognize the constructive/destructive duality which Howard alludes to, without going so far as to demand that every actor and organization simultaneously create and destroy.

Dual power is a sensible strategy only when we look at the actors as being possibly separate in which aspect/s of the second duality they wish to participate in: building alternatives and/or tearing down the norms. If dual power means that every collective, or even every activist, must somehow participate in countering the Establishment, we will fall on our faces.

Community

Howard Ehrlich’s point about community service must not be overlooked. The collective should, first and foremost, serve the community in which it exists. This is the second intercollective dynamic with which we must grapple. Do we want collectives to be looking inward, toward the Network, or should they be expending the vast majority of their energy doing work for their own communities? If we get to a point when we are thinking more about the Network than about the communities in which we live, something has gone wrong. The activism must take place locally.

Conventions and Network-wide events like Active Resistance definitely have their place. But as we have begun to realize in Syracuse, the real stuff of sustainability is found in our immediate surroundings. Sure, I got a lot out of the Antioch gathering last summer, and much more out of MFTS last winter. But since then I have noticed that I don’t need to travel 8 or 13 hours to the Midwest to find that kind of radical community feeling. There is plenty of it right here, waiting to be fed and harvested.

For example, a handful of local radicals — people we hardly knew six months ago, and totally without the assistance of anyone in the EWAY or Pet Roach Press collectives — have started an anarchist artists’ group. At their last meeting, 21 people were in attendance. A month ago, I would hardly have believed there were 21 politically conscious artists in Upstate New York, much less that many anarchist ones in Syracuse alone who want to work together!

There is so much radical potential in this small community. And, to be honest (if there weren’t so damn many cute people in NAC), it would be insane for me to put any more effort than I am into working on continental organizing when the local seeds, as fertile as they are, will grow miraculously with just a little nourishment.

Networking

Let’s take a look at Active Resistance. This is a project that was first conceived by folks at the Chicago A-Zone. The event itself is huge, though, and the A-Zone realized from the beginning

that in order to pull it off right, they'd have to network with many other collectives with various specialties. Several collectives and individuals from around the country are participating in a variety of ways, to varying degrees of involvement, in making AR happen. So while we can and should all claim a portion of ownership and agency for AR, we also need to realize that it is a perfect example of large scale network activity, but remains the baby of Chicago's A-Zone.

Not all NAC collectives have to participate to the same degree in making AR happen. We won't all have to bear the same amount of burden on *any* NAC projects. Actually, not all member collectives will have to be involved in (or even supportive of) every project that comes along. It wouldn't make any sense. For instance, the Syracuse collectives have taken on a significant amount of work in support of AR. But how could we possibly put in as much work, even proportional to our membership numbers, as the A-Zone crew is? After all, they are the ones in Chicago, a thousand miles away, and they are the primary hosts of the event. At risk of sounding marxian, we should offer what we can to NAC, and take from it what we need.

The problem with the current perception of NAC and AR happens to be that Chicago doesn't see themselves as "inside the loop," while many of us on the outside are wondering why the loop isn't bigger. I think we all need to realize that there is a loop, that no amount of pretending is going to change that fact, but also that it's okay — so long as the loop is temporary. How do we ensure it's only temporary? By wresting management of NAC away from Chicago. This won't be a war or factional fight; it will be a big relief for the A-Zone folks come this summer. It will take the same kind of initiative on our parts, and on the parts of the many new member collectives we'll hopefully accumulate this year, as it took Midwest/ Chicago-based folks to get the ball rolling in the first place.

Active Resistance is a great example of how, in the process of working in support of the A-Zone, the rest of us can achieve substantial amounts of personal and collective fulfillment. As August approaches, I think AR will demonstrate to us that the line between "our" projects and "their" projects (whoever we and they may be) becomes very much blurred when we act as a network.

Nor does the fact that most collectives in NAC are participating in AR mean we are a federation. AR is largely an objective event, having effects (more than ripples) outside the Network. And it is something we are doing largely as NAC. But there are no real demands on any of the collectives except the A-Zone, without whose involvement AR wouldn't happen. With federations, on the other hand, out of necessity to avoid centralization, member collectives have to share equal or at least proportional amounts of work, and all must participate in everything the federation does — after all, the federation's solidarity depends on service of the federation's objective goals.

None of this is a critique of federation organizing. I think federations have their place in revolutionary strategy, and that place will actually grow as we move further along the road to revolution. But NAC is being confused with a federation. For those who think NAC needs an overall vision and strategy for revolution, perhaps the discussion should turn to whether NAC should become FAC.

If all this seems like a matter of semantics, I think you've missed my point: There are fundamental differences between what some people appear to want and what a network of autonomous alternative institutions can actually be.

Mission Statement

So I've babbled on long enough. Here's the suggestion of yet another white boy. This is as simple as I can make it, but I I tend to complicate everything. Some of the vocabulary is heavy and left mostly undefined – but I wanted to keep it short and still cover all-bases (sports metaphor – 20 points!), Please do with it what you will. No need to be gentle:

“The Network of Anarchist Collectives (NAC) is a decentralized, nonhierarchical, continent-wide affiliation of in(ter)dependent alternative institutions. All member organizations are community-based and collectively structured. In the interests of autonémy and solidarity, the purpose of NAC is to ‘provide a means of mutual aid and communication between and among its members without confining them to always working in the shadow of the Network at large. It is our mission to aid in the creation and maintenance of collectively organized social change institutions of all kinds by providing, not imposing, support.”

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