

The North American Anarchist Primer

First Grade: Organizational Dualism

Center for Especifismo Studies

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The work that went into producing this collective writing began with the organization of the Militant Kindergarten by the Center for Especifismo Studies. To continue our own militant formation by developing our skills of analysis, comparison, dialogue, note-taking, mutating, transforming, writing, and editing, we decided to endeavor on a new group project. These 8 write-ups chronicle our weekly discussions and form the “First Grade” of a long-term project that we call “The North American Anarchist Primer”. We aim to articulate a relevant political theory and ideology in a North American context, using the collective voice of those who participated in the discussions, of the Center for Especifismo Studies, and of our international political current of especifismo.

1

In bourgeois society, alienation has economic, cultural/ ideological, and political effects. In addition to this, in a system of representative democracy, there is a fabricated distance preventing us from influencing the decisions that are closest to our own lives. In social movements, we have seen how manufactured and controlled exclusion facilitates co-optation (i.e., green or pink washing), allowing the bourgeoisie to claim ownership over popular struggles and demands. So, the popular masses are not only subordinated by systematic alienation; they are also rendered irrelevant through their methodical removal from political participation.

Today, agency in society is controlled and hoarded by a ruling class which propagates a synthetic, false sovereignty of the people. The bourgeoisie owns the “brand” of the people, promoting it through means of advertising and nationalism, as well as through their political parties. For example, in a public debate the topic, the limits, the venue, and the audience are determined by bourgeois interests. The bourgeoisie exercises power over all the institutions of society so that the “real problems” are always already determined for us. And yet, we are expected to be content to choose which company or politician will decide on our behalf. But direct participation involves making real decisions that have real consequences and effects, not symbolic choices between representatives or brands.

In the US, the two-party system makes it clear that the bourgeoisie controls both parties and that our electoral choices are insignificant. Even on the local level, this plays out through the disproportionate influence of bourgeois interests, such as that of affluent cyclists vs. the influence of people living on the street. When popular struggles become separated into “interest groups”, class dynamics are obscured.

Because this form of alienation affects our sense of agency regarding real problems, real decision making, and real solutions, we experience exclusion subjectively. Not everyone believes they are being excluded or that exclusion is a problem; someone may be excluded from some things and not others; or they may be totally excluded and more or less aware of this, resigned to their position in class society. This has created a situation where “inclusion” can effectively be used to lessen our sense of exclusion, inviting us to symbolically participate as long as we pose no real threat to the ruling class. So, mediating exclusion and inclusion is an essential tactic for preserving class society.

2

The political level is important in the ways in which it does and does not overlap with the social level, that is to say we think it is important to differentiate one from the other in order to better understand how they relate.

But who makes this differentiation and for whom is the political organization “still valid”?

Revolutionary militants need both political organization and direct engagement in real-life class struggle. Organizational principles like these aim to prevent a problem known as “the loss of the social vector”. Simply put, anarchist unity is useless if it is absent from the social level.

What we call organizational dualism is a theory of two levels of engagement. Distinguishing between levels highlights the difference between the most unified organization, on the political level, and the terrain of struggle (a workplace, a neighborhood, a social movement, etc.), on the social level. Social work is done, even in spaces that are organized in the interest of the ruling class, with the goals of stimulating the social organization of the oppressed and achieving social insertion, meaning “a certain degree” of influence. Because many questions still remain around social insertion “and since it is “the main activity of the specific anarchist organization”, at this time, continuing to clarify this concept is political work” [See: “Contributions to especificismo”]

In the especificismo current of anarchism, the political organization aims to model its ideological coherence through work on the social level. However, the deepening of ideology occurs on the political level. For us, more engagement on the social level requires more organization on the political level, for developing both strategy and coherent ideology. It involves interrogating what we want together, over and over again, in order to refine and reinforce it.

Relevant political strategy must be concerned with the relationship between place and intentional, collective action. So, rather than only moving conceptually from the abstract to the specific, anarchist politics should always be in dialogue with their terrain of struggle because truly revolutionary politics are contextual, not idealistic. They do, however, have the objective of connecting actions to both anarchist ideology and theory in a way that produces better, more effective strategy. This process of improving strategy over time by testing it in practice serves as a way of problematizing and challenging dogmatic ideological assumptions.

So, is there ever a time when we don’t want this distinction to be so well defined?

Not all anarchists support political organization, and not all political organizations distinguish their own work from the broader movement. For example, syndicalists and communalists tend to think that the terrain of struggle can also serve as a space for ideological production. Additionally, not all specific anarchist organizations seek unity of ideology, theory, and strategy (i.e. synthesist orgs). Nevertheless, we think that political organization is still valid with or without the presence of a union, a community assembly, or any other form of formal organization.

Anarchists are just as guilty as Marxists of thinking that all of their political work progresses the class struggle. And while groupings of tendency can function as well-organized intermediate-level orgs, they lack ideological, theoretical, and strategic unity. Organizations easily plateau in this form, without strategically deciding whether the objective is to develop more affinity or popularize their struggle. It’s not always clear how political these spaces actually are. So, we need to recognize the strategic value of groupings of tendency without getting over-excited, making ideological assumptions, and overstating their actual degree of unity.

3

Representative democracy offers false forms of freedom modeled for us by the nationalist refrain that “voting is freedom”. On top of that, US imperialism is often justified by the idea of *taking freedom to*. It consists of coercively forcing “other people”, somewhere else, to be free. This is not what we call freedom, but without a counter definition, this misinterpretation continues to spread unchallenged.

We think anarchism has no use for interpretations of history as the passive, spontaneous encounter of disconnected individuals driven by forces beyond themselves. We see freedom as the real motor of history, though it does require specific elements for its production and reproduction. Following from our own theory, today, one of these elements is a “model of performance” in a “theater of struggle”. For us, the “daily drama of the people” is a rich theoretical idea because it points back to Militant Kindergarten and our studies of “Social Anarchism and Organisation”, specifically our discussions about “revolutionary gymnastics in a revolutionary gymnasium”. It is important to point out that this drama is complicated, multi-layered, and isn’t guaranteed to develop in revolutionary directions.

Political activity relates the exploited and oppressed with the decisions that affect their lives. In our own anarchist current of *especificismo*, the political organization aims at achieving “the greatest possible socialization in all spheres of collective activity” [See: Some quick general considerations about who we are and what we want to do today, from “Text on Structures”]. During the struggle for their own material needs, the people themselves will need to define, in context, what is meant by this. In our own studies and discussions, socialization refers to the growth of grassroots movements, meaning an increase in the influence of the dominated in the course of their own lives.

An intentional process of socialization implies an organized and ideologically specific political practice. Nevertheless, the freedom necessary for emancipatory socialization requires not only learning how to experiment in the ideologically specific space of the political organization, but also learning how to move strategically and collaboratively in ideologically blurry spaces on the social level. The kind of grassroots and popular organizations that have a revolutionary character grow out of social-level struggles, and for political practice to be situationally specific, it too must develop out of these specific struggles. So, articulating the political organization, through the class struggle for libertarian socialism, is only one intentional effort, one moment, in an ongoing process of learning through participation, intention, and responsibility. Commitment to this process is what we call revolutionary militancy, and it depends entirely on freedom.

In the fight against the ruling class, our understanding of revolutionary political practice positions us on the side of the exploited, dominated, and oppressed. Additionally, we consider all pre-formed, ready-made templates for parties to be the political practices of “self-chosen vanguards”. We criticize their rigid organizational forms and ideological orthodoxy for not being dynamic enough to learn and move with social struggles. In context, their political practice mostly consists of rhetorical persuasion rather than creative collaboration, but you can’t tell people to be free! They have to want it for themselves. A free world will be the result of people working to create it, so revolutionary political practice is about being involved in this popular effort.

Since our practices are only as relevant as they are useful, we cannot just decide that we want to be an essential part of the struggle. Only our actions, in solidarity, over time, will determine our relevance. In *especificismo*, we refer to a small engine, in contrast to a vanguard, because we

see militancy as a kind of yeast in the rising struggle, keeping in mind that it is one ingredient among many. While we absolutely believe freedom is the basis of a new society, we also firmly believe that we have to work toward that society in the here and now, side by side with others who struggle *against* forces beyond themselves.

To put it another way: since a small engine's relevance is determined by what it's connected to, the political organization must always stay connected to social-level struggles. So, while it does define and maintain its own organizational unity on the political level, because it aims to continue to learn about freedom, the specific anarchist organization must remain open to change as well as outside influence. This is so that, in context, revolutionary political practice will reveal a clear contrast and an alternative vision to reactionary, conservative, liberal, and reformist political practices, as well as a counter definition to their conception of freedom.

4

As we have said before, anarchism needs to be an organized presence in the real struggles happening today. This requires drilling down into the details of the present moment while practically and theoretically connecting the present to the future. By contrast, staying too committed to one set of blueprints leads to a different kind of political practice where theory, ideology, and political action are not contextually defined.

Because theory connects us to our reality (our time and place), and ideology connects our values to the ends we want to realize, the international militant flow is diverse in character. For this reason, we believe that anarchist militants, on the political level, should strive for unity, not uniformity. In practice, this means that the words for certain fundamental concepts may vary from place to place. For example, in some *especificismo* orgs, the term "sphere" is used instead of "level". Speaking for ourselves, we want to be consistent in our own usage of the terms "political level" and "social level", and we assume that other organizations are doing the same as they articulate their own theory. Nevertheless, we should always expect the possibility of an org using a different word to refer to the same theoretical concept. It is our responsibility to read their theory closely if we want to better understand the nuances of their political practice.

Destructuring the system could happen in an ideal way or not. Regardless, doing so will certainly produce new possibilities, creating a new situation that we can't anticipate until it appears on the horizon. We can't know the possibilities of a future situation until its demands become recognizable to us. This is why, in order to bring about a libertarian socialist society, anarchist political practice requires staying present in the necessary struggles of the specific historical context. "Necessary", in this case, is defined from the perspective of the movement to liberate the oppressed classes. Since certain possibilities might not be immediately apparent to a single person or organization, theorizing about a constantly changing world requires us to frequent the sites of possible work on the social level, terrains of struggle where the dominated and oppressed classes are defending themselves and their interests against the consequences of this collapsing system.

Today, in North America, some bourgeois and idealistic anarchists don't think it's worth it to subject themselves to the dynamics of the class struggle due to its obviously disciplining culture. To that we reply: yes, the current system increases the density of the terrain of struggle making the project of social transformation more and more complicated; yes, it has its own interests which are contrary to ours; and yes, it does perpetuate the current organization of society which we are fighting to replace. Nevertheless, we think this reveals new, more specific points of vulnerability for the system, sites for "destructuring advances" and struggling against these oppressive forms of social life.

Since societies are organized around particular modes of production, social forces reproduce particular kinds of social actors, and because the organization of capitalist society is so complex, we have no choice but to acknowledge its underlying order which we have all been conditioned to maintain. Complexity is used by the ruling class to obscure the class struggle and discipline us through means of fragmentation and isolation. So, niche subcultures, long commutes, gig work, and food deserts are all examples of what, in our discussions, we have referred to as atomization. It is an oppressive force that prevents the development of Popular Power by conditioning us to work on isolated projects.

Those who defend this society of atomized, self-interested "individuals" reject the uncomfortable fact that dominant social systems rely on discipline, completely ignoring the class dynamics of oppression (i.e. racism, sexism, patriarchy, etc.). For example, some economists think that society can be simplified, quantified, and precisely modeled. However, the combination of complexity, discipline, and atomization forms a social fabric that produces unanticipated openings for resistance which cannot be revealed beforehand by preconceived models of "market" forces. Still, that does not mean that there is no use for theoretical modeling. The narrow window for effective resistance is depicted in the diagrams at the beginning of the FAU's "Text on Structures". Their model is made up of three overlapping spheres: the economic, the political, and the ideological. They also imply the likelihood of increasing complexity over time by proposing an alternative model with a fourth sphere: technology.

So, economic emancipation is only one facet of Popular Power; it is also essential that the organization and discipline of popular culture be liberating, not coercive or homogenizing. If a libertarian socialist society must be "rigidly organized" and "disciplining", it must always be toward the reproduction of egalitarian values and free subjects. This is the only way to produce a new social fabric capable of defending the interests of the masses, instead of those of the ruling class. Popular Power will need to protect society from dominating and exploitative practices, but we will have to be disciplined enough to responsibly exercise our own freedom as the self-managers of society. In other words, for a successful social revolution to develop into the society that we want, libertarian socialism must become the dominant system. By this, we are referring to something that would be completely different from, and opposed to, a system that is oppressive and atomizing. Instead, we think that Popular Power needs to take a dominant position in order to combat reactionary forces.

6

A successful social revolution will require movements strong enough to respond to reactionary forces and dominating forms of organization. So, despite the fact that, in the context of North American radicalism, strength is sometimes rejected as culturally undesirable, we do not think that strength is the result of exploiting and oppressing people. We see strength as the result of coordination and solidarity. It is an essential trait of effective action in the fight for liberation from the ruling class. But what strengths are needed in the here and now, and how can we work together to develop them?

Strategically speaking, we think that building Popular Power is the best way to stay focused on our final objective: a libertarian socialist society. This requires more than personal strength; it requires strong communities, strong unions, strong social movements. This means solidarity between people at different sites of struggle, with different motivations, coming from different ideological backgrounds.

Today, the project of building Popular Power in North America is often conflated either with organizing around national politics or around subcultural values. This lack of clarity tends to result in cultural uniformity posing as a faux form of political unity. In the socialist movement, this happens in campaigns for progressive politicians, projects to build a party, or generally just being a “leftist.” In the libertarian movement, there are additional challenges such as anti-organizationalism, anti-intellectualism, and cultural radicalism.

The organizational theory of *especificismo* clarifies the concept of political unity as a collective form of strength rather than a symbolic gesture. It follows from the FAU who understand “the social and the political as two simultaneous and duly articulated planes of action. But each with its relative independence, with its own specificity” [See: *When the shortest roads are the longest and most deceptive ones building a strong People is politically the most important thing, from “Text on Structures”*]. So, political unity is something that must be struggled for on the political level, and this does not at all contradict the need to act intentionally with others on the social level. To build Popular Power, social and political work need to happen at the same time. Strength must be developed in both areas, without prioritizing one over the other. Of course, the necessary strengths on the political level might be different from those needed on the social level, but since Popular Power is a single project with two dual planes of action, political organization and social work are NEVER in competition with each other. Our revolutionary movements need to be strong enough to do both.

7

Though we have found certain political insights from Latin America to be especially important, the ideas cannot be quickly or easily imported. We have to work to interpret them together. For example, thanks to patriotic American culture, we are very familiar with “independence” but the concept of “independent social movements” seems foreign. Translating this meaningfully to the North American context requires rigorous analysis and theoretical production. So, we consider this militant writing to be a regional effort to progress the international political movement.

Since the independence of social movements is a necessary condition for transforming society, the oppressed classes must maintain their independence at all times. The problem is that

today, in North America, most social movements lack independence. Cooptation is the norm. Obviously, the Democratic Party successfully does this, but it is also a common tactic of leftist and “progressive” organizations, not to mention opportunistic politicians. Even though political organization has a definite role to play, the real power is ALWAYS with the people. Additionally, we think that the active minority should take care to respect the peculiarities of different situations with different demands and different organizational forms. The political organization’s task is to be in-tune with its specific context in order to continue to articulate relevant political practice, the kind of political practice capable of defending the independent character of mass movements.

In the class struggle, independent social movements are threatened by political parties that try to brand their organizations as either the one true form of socialism or as a necessary station for all kinds of movements to pass through. Their political practices aim to funnel social force into a single vehicle, but these parties cannot possibly contain the full plurality of the class struggle. Nevertheless, they insist on trying to put social movements inside of their ideology. This is why we criticize democratic socialist and vanguard parties: they see their own political efforts as a form of protagonism of the socialist movement, attempting to stand in place of a variety of political tendencies.

As we have said, in *especificismo* theory, the active minority has a role to play, but it is not as the protagonist of class struggle or of the socialist movement because the people themselves and their grassroots political activity are what drive movements towards revolution. Nevertheless, when revolution is not immediately possible, the political organization should work to “affect the conjuncture” toward its development. This requires a militant political practice capable of conditioning social movements to defend themselves in the face of resistance. Cultivating this kind of independence allows movements to continue down a path that allows for multiple possible political actions, as opposed to the “dead ends” of localism, reformism, and activism. So, while it remains to be determined whether something as popular as internet hashtags promotes the independence of social movements or helps to consolidate and co-opt them, if revolutionaries want to affect conjunctures, social movements must be an undeniably popular and independent force.

8

A rupture on the social level capable of producing libertarian socialism will require the simultaneous double articulation of popular organization and political organization. At the Center for *Especificismo* Studies, we understand libertarian socialism as the beginning of another process on a different basis. Following from the anarchist theory of means and ends, this long-term objective is related to the gestation of revolutionary culture, ideas, and practices already occurring today. If the dominated classes are successful, the class struggle will be a process leading to the birth of something new that we don’t know the details of yet.

Still, the fact remains that social life is messy, and localized conflicts cannot be avoided or done away with. For this reason, we think that anarchists should propagate a vision of libertarian socialism in which people can see the manifestation of their own values and desires, regardless of their race, gender, language, place of birth, etc. This is why the political organization must articulate libertarian socialism as a popular objective of the masses. It has to be a possible horizon that is visible from the social level.

While we should, on the social level, prioritize the popular and the massive over the ideologically specific, this does not at all mean that we are in favor of a simple rejection of ideology in popular spaces. We are critical of the weak defense of pluralism and diversity offered by anti-ideological practices. In social movements, a-political tendencies stifle open discussion and allow no space for practical disputes. Without political-level struggle, political practice is often reduced to a form of common sense.

In our North American context, there aren't a lot of current examples of political organization. It is common for a space deemed "political" to be totally void of ideological unity. On top of that, theoretical and strategic unity are essentially unheard of. As a consequence, and in an attempt to preemptively avoid ideological "messiness", purity often substitutes for unity in anarchist politics.

We think that revolutionary political practice needs to be effective, not idealistic. To begin with, the political organization should be concerned with how to do things collectively. Additionally, it has to participate in the popular conception of immediate solutions. And finally, the political organization must defend itself as an essential base camp in the fight against capitalism, a space for strategizing about the defense of the social revolution.

Social-level struggle pits us against the ruling class, but political-level struggle aims to refine and articulate the anarchist opposition as a unified force. To reiterate: the political organization should serve as a small engine which is only effective if it is actively connected to the development of legitimate solutions in real people's lives, in the struggle for a real future that is actually possible. This process is active because political action is refined in dialogue between the political and popular organizations, not apart or isolated from each other. Nothing is passively shared or absorbed in this interaction.

It is clear that effective solutions are defined in a certain context and setting. Latin America is not North America, and it has been important for us to repeatedly refer back to this point. Especificismo comes out of a Latin American context and was initially articulated in Spanish. So for us, connecting especificismo to our own, real-life experiences, from our North American context, is an important step in the development of our own contextualized body of knowledge. It is a method of incorporating it into our regional toolkit, while acknowledging its source and its historical lineage, connecting our struggles to the international political movement of anarchism.

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