Reimagining Revolutionary Organizing

A Vision for Dual Power

Co-Founders of Symbiosis

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ing committee of which includes John, Michael, Mason, and Katie. Further information at symbiosis-revolution.org.

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I. Power and Social Change

Today's political situation is a crisis, in which nothing fundamentally changes despite a seemingly endless series of catastrophes. Even in allegedly democratic nations, the institutions that channel national decision-making are structurally incapable of staving off ecological and economic collapse, and securing a decent life for everyone. What we face is a colossal collective action problem.

The German-American political philosopher Hannah Arendt argued that intolerable situations such as ours could be cast aside by the public's revolutionary withdrawal of support from governing institutions. As a prominent theorist of totalitarianism, political violence, and direct democracy, Arendt developed important concepts that help disentangle the problems humanity currently faces and indicate a way forward.[1]

Power is conventionally understood in politics as the ability to make others do things, often through violence or coercion to enforce obedience and domination. In *On Violence*, however, Arendt demonstrates that power works quite differently in actual human societies. She defines "power" as people's ability to act in concert—the capacity for collective action, and thus a property of groups, not individuals. Leaders possess their power only because their constituents have empowered them to direct the group's collective action.

Arendt argues that all power, in every political system from dictatorships to participatory democracies, emerges from public support. No dictator can carry out his or her will without obedience from subjects; nor can any project requiring collective action be achieved without the support, begrudging or enthusiastic, of the group. When people begin to withdraw their support and refuse to obey, a government may turn to violence, but its control lasts only

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[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1951).

as long as the army or police choose to obey. "Where commands are no longer obeyed," Arendt writes, "the means of violence are of no use…. Everything depends on the power behind the violence."[2] The understanding that power emerges from collective action, rather than from force, is a key component of our transitional vision.

As a revolutionary political strategy, however (rather than a mere description of certain past political events), Arendt's theory of power requires several modifications. First, without preexisting mass organization, the public has no way to collectively withdraw its support. Individuals acting alone have no impact on the state's power. This is why Arendtian revolutions (Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1989, Tunisia in 2011) occur only in exceedingly rare moments of crisis.

Second, most people will never even consider retracting support for governing institutions if they don't see viable alternatives. As Antonio Gramsci explained a century ago, the ruling class's cultural hegemony can be undermined only by what he called a "war of position:" developing a material and cultural base within the working class to craft an oppositional narrative and to organize oppositional institutions.[3] The organization of unions, worker-owned firms, and housing cooperatives is what makes socialism a real lived possibility around which greater movement-building can occur.

Third, withdrawal has serious costs. Even absent violent repression (a feature of even today's most liberal democracies), we are made dependent on capitalist and state institutions for access to basic survival needs and avenues for collective action. Transcending capitalism and the state thus requires having alternative institutions in place to meet those needs and organize people to act powerfully in concert with one another. Retracting support with-

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[2] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Books, 1970), 48–49.

[3] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey N. Smith (New York: International Publishers Company, 1971).

ecological crisis, transitioning us into a libertarian ecosocialist society.

The path and the system described above are a framework, a way to ensure that the systems to come can represent and respond to the needs and desires of the people who inhabit them. Actually building that world, then, is up to all of us.

For a full blueprint of what building dual power and transitioning to democratic community control might look like in a city today, read the full essay, "Community, Democracy, and Mutual Aid: Toward Dual Power and Beyond"[18] available at www.symbiosis-revolution.org

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The authors are co-founders of Symbiosis, an organization working to lay the groundwork for the sort of revolutionary confederation laid out above in communities across North America, the steer-

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[18] John Michael Colón, Mason Herson-Hord, Katie Horvath, Dayton Martindale, and Matthew Porges, "Community, Democracy, and Mutual Aid: Toward Dual Power and Beyond, *The Next System Project*, April 2017.

nizational conditions necessary for this ideal to be truly realized in a practical and powerful way.

Eventually, the scale of repression became too much for even this highly resilient model to bear. The imprisonment of most experienced organizers and the paranoia about the wide network of paid or coerced informants in Palestinian society eventually fractured and then crumbled the Intifada's organizational capacity, and the movement collapsed. How the Palestinian liberation movement could have done better to overthrow the occupation regime is another discussion. The movement nonetheless illustrates how this form of grassroots democratic institution-building can channel collective action on an incredible scale and empower participatory democracy and mutual aid as the guiding forces of a society. The end-goal of the First Intifada was not to build libertarian socialism or radical democracy, but to replace the occupation with a democratic Palestinian state. Even so, a similarly structured movement with different goals could trace an analogous path, with greater success in a freer society like the United States.

IV. A Possible Path Forward

That path would look something like the following: movements would assemble direct-democratic and socialistic institutions in civil society; coordinate these through a system of decentralized and confederated democratic assemblies, such as neighborhood councils, with a dual power relationship to existing state structures; transform systems of local governance to place these popular confederations in control of the public sphere to encourage the further development of the socialist civil society that made such reform possible in the first place; and further confederate these municipal democracies to create first regional and then eventually global decision-making bodies rooted in bottom-up democracy capable of addressing problems such as globalization and the

out engaging in such oppositional institutions is rarely distinguishable from apathy.

Fourth, we cannot neglect the preformation of the postrevolutionary society—the need to actively create institutions to replace the ones we have now. Arendt has somewhat romantic notions about the forms of organic democratic politics that will emerge in the vacuum following a mass retraction of public support for governing institutions. To a certain extent, history is on her side. The Syrian Kurds' democratic confederalism in Rojava, the workers' councils of revolutionary Russia and Germany and Hungary, the Paris Commune, Argentina's factory takeovers, and Catalonia's anarchist revolution all exemplify community-rooted participatory politics emerging out of revolutionary crisis. More complex institutional arrangements, necessary to manage and coordinate society as a whole, however, are beyond the reach of spontaneous face-to-face democracy. Far from expressing public will, such institutions are usually seized or assembled by whichever party or faction is best positioned to capitalize on the conditions of uncertainty (as Arendt herself notes).[4] A revolutionary transfer of authority to popular organs of radical democracy requires the *pre-existence* of such participatory institutions, not a naive faith that they will be conjured into being out of a general strike, mass retraction of public support, or insurrectionary upheaval.

Arendt's analysis of the sources of state power, we contend, generally applies to capitalist institutions, too. These can be supplanted only by creating sustainable egalitarian alternatives which sap the public's dependency on and acceptance of the status quo. An effective political strategy for the present must combine the best of Arendt's intuitions about the workings of power in society and pos-

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[4] Some examples: the political opportunism of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini's faction in the Iranian Revolution, and the Muslim Brothers in the Egyptian Revolution.

sibilities for popular revolution with an organizing vision of community institution-building.

In early stages, crafting the political infrastructure of radical democracy and libertarian socialism will be mainly local, through outgrowths and codifications of existing social processes that can be expanded into mainstream practice and incorporated into a broader strategy. The community institutions proposed here are modular. They can stand alone as individual projects, fine-tuned to solve specific problems created by the current system's failures, but they are designed to be organized as a network. By working together and mutually reinforcing one another, these institutions can qualitatively change the power relations of a city or neighborhood and lay the groundwork for new macrostructures of self-governance and civil society. Through engineering and managing new institutions of their own, communities can cultivate a creative and communal spirit that will empower them to take control of their lives, connect to one another across cultural and geographic distances, and develop the egalitarian foundations of a new society. Only such a process serves as the basis of a *truly* democratic ecosocialism.

Over time, confederations of directly democratic councils governing society in parallel to the state could come to challenge it. This situation is what Left-Green theorist Murray Bookchin called "dual power."[5] The section below explores how to build dual power in the here and now by modifying and transcending current approaches to community and labor organizing to create radically democratic community institutions.

UNLU first began distributing pamphlets in January 1988 detailing strike dates, boycotts of Israeli goods, marches, and other guidance for individual popular committees, such as calls to develop the "home economy,"[16] to withhold taxes from the occupying regime, and to resign from posts in the occupation government.

This structure acted as a democratic confederalist shadow-state, parallel and in opposition to the repressive and undemocratic military government, with enthusiastic nationalist legitimacy and organizational effectiveness to make up for its lack of monopoly on violence. It carried out a three-part strategy of resistance to the occupation: undermining the hegemony exercised by the occupation and its institutions; out-administering the occupation with parallel institutions to meet human needs; and creating a new nationalist hegemony to supplant the occupation.

This organizational structure also proved essential for coordinating local actions into territory-wide coherence. It gave ordinary Palestinians a voice in the direction of the struggle and the formation of their new society.[17] Building dual power from the ground up is what enabled the mobilization of the entire Palestinian public against its collective disenfranchisement and dispossession. For those of us inspired by the rise of horizontalism in today's social movements, the First Intifada has much to teach us about the orga-

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[5] Murray Bookchin, "Thoughts on Libertarian Municipalism," *Left Green Perspectives*, no. 41 (January 2000).

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[16] Community gardens, cottage industry cooperatives, food and medicine distribution networks, and other forms of economic self-sufficiency provided subsistence for neighborhoods so they could both provide for all members of the community and participate fully in strikes and boycotts.

[17] One First Intifada veteran interviewed in Beit Sahour in 2014 said that he was jokingly accused of being in the UNLU because the suggestions his popular committee had given him to present to Beit Sahour's town-wide committee appeared in a UNLU leaflet two weeks later. This model was extremely effective at disseminating strategies for popular resistance. The idea of a tax strike, deployed so effectively by the people of Beit Sahour, was actually first proposed by the popular committee of a small village near Nablus and ended up in a communiqué printed and distributed by popular committees throughout occupied Palestine. See Herson-Hord, "Sumud to Intifada."

cal parties helped link different labor groups together. The labor, student, and women's movements eventually coalesced in the Intifada's most important political institution—*al-lijan al-sha'abiyya*, the popular committee[14]—and gave birth to radically democratic council management of the community.

When an Israeli military truck killed four Palestinians in the Jabalia refugee camp on December 8, 1987, a mass protest movement rapidly ignited across the territories. Huge demonstrations sprang up in every camp and city, demanding justice for the victims and an end to the occupation. By January 1988, popular committees had formed out of the social infrastructure of local unions, women's committees, student associations, political party organizing, and friendly neighbors across the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Committees carried out tasks for an extraordinary array of social functions: collecting garbage, determining local strike dates, collecting donations through an "alternative taxation system," distributing food and medical aid, repairing damaged buildings, organizing barricade building, developing local economic self-sufficiency, and more.

Like the women's committees, the popular committees coordinated with one another through a confederated structure. Local committees nominated delegates to represent them at area/municipal committees, which coordinated resistance activities among neighborhoods, camps, and nearby villages. These committees in turn elected representatives to a district committee, and district committees sent representatives to *al-Qiyada al-Muwhhada*, the secret Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU).[15] The

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[14] Also called "neighborhood councils" (or, in rural areas, "village councils").

[15] In older sources, the UNLU is commonly mischaracterized as a command structure with political parties at the center. More recent interviews with veteran organizers in the popular committees provide little to no evidence for this framing. Rather, the UNLU was dependent on and democratically embedded in the popular committee network. See Mazin B. Qumsiyeh, *Popular Resistance in Palestine: A History of Hope and Empowerment*(London: Pluto Press, 2011); Mason Herson-Hord, "Sumud to Intifada: Community Struggle in Palestine and the Western Sahara" (undergraduate thesis, Princeton University, 2015).

II. Rules for Radicals Are Made to Be Broken

To bring this vision to life in our own neighborhoods, we need to learn from the successes and failures of existing modes of organizing.

Community organizing in the United States has historically been dominated by a model known as "institution-based community organizing" (or "broad-based community organizing"). This model evolved mid-century out of Saul Alinsky's work in Chicago neighborhoods and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's civil rights organizing across the South. The legacy of the Civil Rights Movement is obviously central in the progressive political imagination, and Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals* is still used as a foundational handbook for organizing.[6] The central idea of this model is that such community institutions as labor unions and religious congregations are already internally organized and already have community buy-in, making them the perfect vehicle for more powerful organizing in the community's interest. The Civil Rights Movement, for example, was organized through the existing strength of the Black church. Major organizing networks based on this legacy continue to use the methodology of institution-based, largely faith-based organizing across the US, and public interest advocacy organizations draw upon the Alinskyist tradition in their campaigns on many issues.

Institution-based organizing relies on two premises that we question, however. One is that community institutions already exist, ripe for organizing. The other is that representative democracy can still be made to work for the people if only they are engaged and apply enough pressure.

In recent decades, community institutions in America have crumbled under the advance of the neoliberal state, the disman-

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[6] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971).

tling of organized labor, the privatization of public space and public schools, the closing of recreation and community centers, and the waning importance of organized religion, especially for younger generations. Simply put, working through today's community institutions does not get us very far if there is a dearth of them and if the surviving ones are less important than they once were.

Using existing institutions to demand concessions from power also violates the influential "iron rule" of the Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation: "never do for people what they can do for themselves." In institution-based organizing, the iron rule means that professional organizers should emphasize training and leadership development in the community, rather than running campaigns *on behalf* of the community. The former method builds power and grows the organization or movement; the latter stifles it. Although the philosophy behind the iron rule is sound, institution-based organizing does not take it far enough. Training people to apply pressure to the levers of power in a (barely) representative democracy still means ultimately relying on others—mostly unresponsive "elected" officials and undemocratic institutions—to make changes on behalf of a community, rather than initiating those changes themselves.

Institution-based organizing networks and the sprawling ecosystem of public interest advocacy groups also subscribe to another core Alinskyist principle: that the issues they take up must be concrete, immediate, and winnable. In our experience, these strictures have limited the scope of what such organizations consider possible and the extent to which they can change the basic structures of society. Our model likewise emphasizes the concrete practices of meeting community interests and does involve taking immediate winnable steps—but the focus is always on a larger vision of systemic transformation.

Although it should draw upon this legacy of community organizing, the transition beyond capitalism and statism must prior-

with one vote for each worker-member) for women looking to generate supplementary income.[12] Organizers went door-to-door in the poorer villages and refugee camps to reach women who were illiterate, economically dependent on men, and largely confined to private domesticity. Free cooperative childcare allowed these poorer women to join the co-ops, take literacy and vocational classes, and participate in women's committee politics.[13]

The women's committees were a confederal system, with webs of individual committees democratically operating local projects. Each women's committee nominated a member to represent its members at a district/area committee, which in turn nominated representatives for the national body. These national women's committees built strong ties with labor unions, expanded mutual aid supply lines, and developed community leaders.

Such activities served multiple purposes. They made the conditions of military occupation more livable, sustaining Palestinian families in the face of relentless colonization. They provided individual women with greater economic independence, allowing them to slowly stretch the boundaries of patriarchal control and participate more actively in public life and the national movement. They laid the early foundations of the "home economy," which fostered Palestinian self-sufficiency and later provided the sustaining material support for economic resistance against the Israeli occupation, in forms such as boycotts and strikes. Finally, these women built up the community's organizational capacity to wage a broad-based social struggle drawing on all segments of Palestinian society.

These various local community institutions overlapped with one another cooperatively. Women's committees and voluntary work committees joined forces for many of their charitable projects; feminist organizers ran labor unions for garment workers; and politi-

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[12] Hiltermann, *Behind the Intifada*, 52; Philippa Strum, *The Women are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992), 74–78.

[13] Strum, *The Women are Marching*, 53.

Central to this new world of community organizing was the Palestinian labor movement. Unions were formed out of workers' places of residence rather than workplaces because migrant labor was prevalent and Palestinian unionism within Israel had been criminalized. Unions then formed strong alliances with local organizations in the national movement. With rapid growth in the early 1980s, labor unions found it necessary to decentralize and democratize their structure to become more resilient as Israeli repression intensified against union leaders and organizers.[10] These local unions were networked together through the Palestinian Communist Party and the Workers' Unity Bloc, creating a web of labor organizers and community groups that linked their class struggle to the larger project of national liberation.

Young people also played a vital role. They organized student associations at high schools and universities. There, they assembled demonstrations, set up volunteer committees serving refugee camps and poorer villages, and funneled youth into the national movement. Youth cultivated solidarity practices that were crucial during the uprising, including the formation of a largely student-run national mutual aid network.

The Palestinian women's movement was perhaps the most important of all in laying the groundwork for the First Intifada.[11] These feminist organizers started by addressing their members' real material needs, but deliberately oriented these projects toward the higher goals of women's liberation and Palestinian national liberation. The women's committees they formed brought together housewives and working women in cities and towns throughout the occupied territories. They set up classes and cottage industry cooperatives (managed along roughly anarcho-syndicalist lines,

itize building up new communal institutions of democratic self-governance and self-sufficiency rather than working through the traditional organizing model that eschews service provision. Creating and organizing these institutions are means for building the community's power, preparing it to wage more traditional organizing campaigns when needed to force the government or private sector to act in the community's interest. At the same time, these democratic cooperatives can be ends in themselves, filling in the gaps of the shrinking welfare state through networks of mutual aid and direct action where and when the state and private sector fail to respond to citizen needs or demands.

The best US precursor to this is the Black Panther Party. Even so, the full radical potential of its organizing model was left unrealized. Founded in 1966, the Black Panthers articulated a vision of Black Power and revolutionary socialism in opposition to American militarism, the impoverishment of Black communities, and police violence. Their "Serve the People" programs included free breakfasts for hungry schoolchildren, a cooperative shoe factory, community health clinics and education centers, and cooperative housing for low-income people.[7] They often illustrated the programs' function with the metaphor of being stranded on a life raft—the community must take practical steps to stay alive in the present, but never forget that the real goal is to make it to shore, to revolution. The Panthers understood these programs as "survival pending revolution"—a means of sustaining their communities until they could achieve liberation.

Survival programs proved to the community that the Black Panthers were serious about improving Black people's lives. This approach let the Panthers build power where revolutionary rhetoric alone would have failed, and membership swelled. Even so, such

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[10] Joost R. Hiltermann, ed., *Behind the Intifada: Labor and Women's Movements in the Occupied Territories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 7, 34, 57, 64.

[11] Joost R. Hiltermann, "The Women's Movement During the Uprising," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 20, no. 3 (spring 1991), 48–57.

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[7] David Hilliard, ed., *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

programs could have been structured toward building power even more than they did. If they address more than mere survival, by building the structures of a society autonomous from and in opposition to the state and capital, survival programs can become liberation programs as well. By meeting basic community needs, such institutions rupture capitalism's control over people's lives, allowing oppressed people to carve out space within capitalism, defend and expand that space, and thus transform the world around them.

III. Revolutionary Institution-Building in Practice: The First Intifada

To see how institutions of mutual aid and participatory democracy can mobilize society into a powerful resistance movement, we can look to the legacy of struggle in Palestine.

The First Intifada broke out in late 1987 as a mass uprising against the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. It was one of the most powerful popular mobilizations in recent history, largely responsible for the Oslo Accords and the formation of the Palestinian Authority as a framework for achieving Palestinian independence. The flaws of this framework notwithstanding, this popular struggle upended the previous consensus around the *de facto* annexation of the occupied territories and the impossibility of a Palestinian state, changing the course of the conflict forever.

Most discussion of the First Intifada focuses on the role of mass protest in making Palestinian society ungovernable for Israeli occupying forces. Less discussed is the role of community organizations of mutual aid and confederated participatory democracy in making such mass protest possible. The brief overview below shows how these institutions laid the groundwork for and sustained a revolutionary upheaval against one of the most totalitarian political orders of that time.

The prison system became a political incubator of the Palestinian resistance movement and offers a microcosmic example of the development of dual power in the much larger prison of the occupation. With hunger strikes, political prisoners eventually won concessions for their own self-administration within the prisons. They assembled structures of political organization and representation, forced prison authorities to recognize those representatives, and developed a division of labor to attend to hygiene, education, and other daily tasks. Palestinian prisoners described this arrangement as *tanthim dakhili* ("internal organization"), similar to the concept of dual power. Even in the least free of circumstances, these prisoners carved out space for self-governance and created the preconditions for revolutionary struggle.

Prisoners taught and studied everything from Palestinian history to Marxist political economy, often for eight to fourteen hours per day.[8] As these freshly educated and trained political activists were released back into society, the resistance movement was galvanized. Illiterate teenage boys arrested for throwing stones reentered the fray months later as committed, competent organizers who had studied movement building, strategic civil resistance, and dialectical materialism.

Meanwhile, the organizing context outside of prison transformed dramatically. Saleh Abu-Laban, a Palestinian political prisoner from 1970 until 1985, stated, "When I entered prison there wasn't a 'national movement;' there were only underground cells that performed clandestinely. When I got out I found a world full of organizations, committees, and community institutions."[9]

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[8] Maya Rosenfeld, *Confronting the Occupation: Work, Education, and Political Activism of Palestinian Families in a Refugee Camp* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 252; Avram Bornstein, "Ethnography and the Politics of Prisoners in Palestine-Israel," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 30, no. 5 (2001), 546 – 574.

[9] Rosenfeld, *Confronting the Occupation*, 218.