Communities of Egoists

Joseph Parampathu

2022-02-09

Anarchism and egoism have long shared a tension that follows all anarchist groups: how do we organize in a way that respects individual autonomy while providing the benefits of collective organization? The work of organizing is often the constant answering of this question: how much does this organization benefit me, and why should I provide support for this organization? This tension has been pointed to as the basis for many failures in anarchist organizing, generally with leaders of some sort arguing that their fellows are too unwilling to compromise on ideals, and egoists decrying the organization's inability to meet the needs of its people. Stirner tackled this idea of egoist organization through his idea of the "union of egoists," wherein egoists choose to associate or disassociate based on their desire to organize or not.[1] Put another way, for the egoist, organization is worthwhile as long as it is beneficial, and as soon as it is no longer beneficial, organization should no longer concern the egoist.

Historical anarchist practices such as mutual aid and community organizing find their strength in approaching this tension as a necessary feature of proper anarchist organization. This tension between the organization's desire to maintain itself, even despite the needs or will of its members, and the members' desires to preserve their own autonomy, even at the expense of their collective material benefit, is the same tension which the followers of Bakunin and Marx debated endlessly, resulting in the expulsion of Bakunin from the fifth congress of the International Workingmen's Association. Anarchist organizing should take this split to heart because it was the philosophical dispute that underlies the tension between anarchists and orthodox Marxist socialism.

An organization can manifest in forms that are no longer anarchist, or which threaten the freedom of its members to freely associate with it. This tendency for organizations to manifest their own structural desires — which are separate or wholly divorced from the desires of its members — is the beginning of its devolution into the forms which anarchists fight against, such as the state or corporate form. The organization which has subjected its members to its own will beyond the point at which these members experience a net loss from associating with the organization, but which nonetheless continues to use their membership as a lever for its continued existence, is by any anarchist's measure, no longer serving the needs of its members. This potential for the transformation of an organization from a freely associated union into the state-form or corporation requires that all anarchists resist this process and fight for the dissolution of such organizations.

---

[1] Stirner, M. (1995). Stirner: the ego and its own. Cambridge University Press.

If egoists and anarchists recognize this potential for failure in organization, how do they go about setting up properly anarchist organizations? Anarchist projects of mutual aid and community organizing find their strength in exploring the means by which the organization can serve the individual, even to the expense of the organization's existence. The failure of anarchist organizations to survive is not a failure of organization itself but, in the anarchist sense, a testament to the transient nature of members' desires. Calcifying an organization that does not change to meet its members' needs, or does not dissolve when it no longer meets its current members' needs, is to set forth on the perilous path towards a "transitional" lifelong Politburo. Acknowledging the natural lifespan of anarchist organizations is a necessary fact for anarchist organizers who seek to use mutual aid and community organization as a means of serving communities, as opposed to serving organizations for their own sake. There are clear parallels between this birth and death and rebirth cycle within the collective needs of organizing peoples and the "creative destruction" that Schumpeter expanded from Marx's works.[2]

Anarchist organizing in practice plays out in the forms of interaction between anarchists (self-identified or otherwise) when they participate in protests, labor actions, and group decision making of all forms. Understanding the underlying tensions between anarchist organizing itself and the various desires of individual anarchist actors is necessary to navigate the group dynamics of these organizations. While there may be certain group actions that are so anti-anarchist that no anarchist would rightly support them, and there may be some decisions of an individual anarchist that no group could justify allowing on behalf of the group, there are various penumbra between the black and white of anarchy in theory and organization in practice. One might say that it is in these gray areas that the theory becomes practice and anarchy of the individual meets the anarchy of the group. When we explore these gray areas we find the limits of non-anarchist methods and the benefits (to individuals and to groups) of seeking anarchist solutions to a problem that might otherwise divorce the group's anarchists from their affiliation with the group.

In the years following the global financial crisis of the last decade, the Occupy Wall Street movement attempted to physically occupy the space of Zuccotti Park outside New York City's Wall Street in the financial district. After a few months of severe police action against the protestors, they were eventually forced out of the physical space at Zuccotti Park and continued their organizing mostly through online spaces attempting to target smaller physical spaces at later points. While the original protest lasted, it was both a useful test of anarchist practices in action as well as an opportunity for individuals to learn about their own power to influence group actions. In a space with no centralized authorities and freed from the expectation to do anything more than provide for the existence of the space and its members, the protest thrived for a short time. After being forced into online spaces regulated by the media on which they gathered, the individuals found a decidedly different space. As they transitioned from a space that was free because they had liberated it to a space that was "free" because it sold their data to advertisers, consensus decision making and the free form flexibility for individual members to form their own working teams disappeared. Instead, the movement to a centralized digital space transformed the relation of members to the movement from one of functional hierarchy, where hierarchies existed in temporary forms as needed by individuals and the organization and disappeared when no longer

[2] Joseph, A. (1942). Schumpeter, Capitalism, socialism, and democracy. Nueva York.

needed by both, to one of anatomical hierarchy, where the structure represents organizational hierarchy with the organization above and individuals below serving organizational needs.[3]

We might further expand this description to encompass both an existing functional hierarchy between movement supporters as a whole and the organization (as represented by its various members) and a subgroup consisting of the members interacting through the online digital organizing space and the faction of the movement which those members represent as interacting in an anatomy of hierarchy (existing within the larger functional hierarchy). Thus, even when the larger movement retains its horizontal structure, a pocket of anatomical hierarchy may form and threaten the integrity of the larger movement's non-domination. Regardless of whether or not the larger movement is harmed by the emergence of hierarchical structures within this pocket, anarchist members within that subgroup will find the subsequent lack of autonomy stifling and would rightly dissociate.

As egoists attempt to organize in and through mutual aid or community organizing, they only need to ask the same questions that any egoists ought to ask of any situation. If the mutual aid action is pleasing or otherwise beneficial to one's material or class interests, then an egoist would rationally participate. When an egoist seeks to formulate organization in ways that appeal to other egoists, the same question ought to guide their own thinking. Anarchists form organizations with the basic understanding that they ought to serve the needs of their members or the community they exist to serve. This organizational egoism is necessary to a properly anarchist formulation of organizing and asks the organization a question analogous to that which each egoist asks themselves. Does the organization in its present sense meet the needs of our present community? If this is not the case, the organization must either be changed or disbanded. The organization that seeks to continue to exist despite being unable to answer this question affirmatively, ought to understand that it is continuing for its own sake in spite of its inability to meet its own stated purpose. It has become a zombie organization that typifies the "state" structure. That is to say, even despite failing to meet the needs of its community, it continues to accost them through its needless continued existence. An egoist anarchist faced with this organization, would rightly work to end it and free its members from that yoke, or otherwise, simply remove themselves from it.

An egoist organization, if it is to use that terminology, has a duty to its members to ensure that its continued existence is in each of their best interests, or otherwise remain neutral when those members choose to leave the organization. While it is certainly likely that the interests of the organization and the individual may evolve over time and with changing circumstances, an egoist and an egoist organization ought to be of the mutual understanding that they associate to fulfill mutual needs, and dissociate when these needs are no longer properly served. It is in furtherance of this idea that Malatesta warned of the dangers of accepting the violence of the state through electoral politics and the inability of such systems to work against privileged classes.[4] Power cannot be used to create non-power, because power, in being used, negates the existence of non-power. Anarchy exists not where power is taken by anarchists, but where power is erased.

Organizing as unions of egoists and working to provide mutual aid, we ought to consider the benefits of heeding the complaints of other egoists. If the organization is in danger of alienat-

---

[3] Swann, T., & Husted, E. (2017). Undermining anarchy: Facebook's influence on anarchist principles of organization in Occupy Wall Street. *The Information Society*, *33*(4), 192–204.

[4] Malatesta, E. (1926). Neither Democrats, nor Dictators: Anarchists. *Pensiero e Volontà*.

ing individual members, through an unsavory insistence on subservience, or some other reason, then the organization ought to rightly consider its actions and their consequences. While organizers and "party leaders" have commonly decried these people as unwilling to compromise or be "practical," there is a resilience that the anarchist organization can find in being willing to consider each of these complaints.

Courtney Morris, in covering the FBI informant Brandon Darby's rampant misogyny and alienating aggression towards other members, points out how continuously vetting ourselves and the organizations with which we work is necessary for a conscious security culture.[5] For an anarchist organization to protect itself properly, it should be centered on supporting its members foremost. Calls to unity that jettison members' perspectives, however minority, risk removing anarchism from the organization, leaving nothing worth saving behind.

Conflict within an organization necessarily stress-tests it for future conflicts and ensures that it is resilient to outside pressures while maintaining a focus on providing for its individual members and service communities. The anarchist organization that understands the benefits of healthy conflict as a means of sorting out its organizational structure and providing an open forum for members and service communities to provide feedback on organizational decision-making finds a strength in this conflict which it would otherwise lack. By building conflict into one's organizing as a means of facilitating growth and centering the questions that arise from tensions between individual desires and organizational choices, anarchist organizations build a resilience that makes them ready to adapt to change as needed. This readiness to adapt is necessary for avoiding the calcification which can lead an organization to lose sight of its purpose and continue to exist without meeting the needs of its service community or members.

Direct action movements are considered "prefigurative" in that they prefigure their approaches to current proposed actions based on the future they hope to engender. By organizing horizontally, allowing members to associate or dissociate at will, and rejecting anatomical hierarchies, direct actions can prefigure anarchist ends through the means they employ. In utilizing an affirmatively feminist, anti-speciesist, and anti-classist security culture anarchist organizations protect themselves from state infiltration while providing the proof of work for their proposed futures. Bakunin's colleague James Guillaume considered prefiguration to be the fundamental improvement of anarchist tactics over Marxism.[6] In understanding this prefiguration of ends in means, egoists know that if they take part in an organization that is no longer anarchist, then the end result of that organization's actions will also be non-anarchist. Organizations of anarchists must constantly struggle with this tension between organizational goals and individual desires. The willingness to engage this tension as a necessary function of anarchist organizing can separate the fully calcified anatomy of hierarchy from the anarchist organization. How this tension is resolved becomes the test of whether its members retain their autonomy as individuals acting through an organization, or whether they have become the instruments of the organization's will.

Radicalized by the poverty of the Great Depression, Ella Baker worked to empower communities to utilize their own resources, in common, for their own benefit. In encouraging members of the Black south to protect themselves through organizing in their own defense for themselves

---

[5] Morris, C. D. (2018). Why Misogynists Make Great Informants How Gender Violence on the Left Enables State Violence in Radical Movements. In J. Hoffman & D. Yudacufksi (Eds.), Feminisms In Motion Voices for Justice, Liberation, and Transformation (pp. 43–54). Chico, CA: AK Press.

[6] Franks, B. (2003). Direct action ethic. *Anarchist Studies*, (1), 13–41.

and for each other, the movement for civil rights kept consensus decision making at its core, and organized around affinity groups with the knowledge that individual groups acting in common empower each other while empowering themselves.[7],[8] Individual groups could retain the protection from responsibility or blame for the actions of other groups if they turned out poorly, while ready to provide support in solidarity with them. In the rhizomatic structure of various anarchisms working together, determining the origins and overarching strategies of working towards anarchy is both unimportant and an unnecessary burden. Anarchisms as a family find strength in this milieu where origins cannot be neatly divided and responsibility is shared amongst a diversity of tactics and actors.

It is likely that the differences between Bakunin and Marx's followers were too great for the International to remain a cross-factional organization. Likewise, organizations which are willing to go to the extreme of pushing out or bulldozing over the perspectives of their individual members in favor of organizational dominance will find themselves continuing to alienate egoist members. An egoist in union with these organizations would be right to dissociate from the organization if it no longer suited them. The organization that aims to take an anarchist stance to mutual aid and community organizing ought to rightly consider whether doing so will allow it to meet its stated purpose. The organization that throws out its members' views in the search of unity may find itself united only through isolation. For organizations that caution their members to make practical sacrifices in furtherance of organizational desires, I caution those organizations to consider taking their own advice and making organizational sacrifices in furtherance of continuing their mutually beneficial union with egoists.

---

[7] Crass, C. (2001). Looking to the light of freedom: Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement and thoughts on anarchist organizing. *Collective liberation on my mind*, 43–61.

[8] Mueller, C. (2004). Ella Baker and the origins of "participatory democracy". *The black studies reader*, 1926–1986.

Joseph Parampathu
Communities of Egoists
2022-02-09

theanarchistlibrary.org