

Ethical Codes as Strategic Developments

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Never again a politics of the what without the how, nor of the how without the what

In 2001, the autonomist collective Tiquun published its popular text *How to Do?* This text is a clear example of its time and perfectly condenses the spirit of defeat that permeated the libertarian movement for far too long. With their particular poetic and cryptic style, they argue that emancipatory political practice must abandon the revolutionary “what is to be done?” in order to focus on the “how to do?”, materializing the common sense of the era: the abandonment of any mass emancipatory project in favor of particular lifestyle experiences.

This article aims to mount a defense—within social and organized anarchism, and also within the milieu of Especifist or Platformist organizations—of ethical codes for political intervention from a strategic, and not a moral, perspective. Faced with positions that understand these documents as guides designed for a politics centered on “forms,” which places the “how to do” ahead of the “what to do,” here we propose understanding these theoretical developments as central pieces of our strategic toolkit.

At the same time, we believe that a strategic reading of these ethical codes is necessary in order to distance ourselves from individualist dynamics with which we have not yet decisively broken and which drive us toward identitarian, self-referential politics completely detached from mass movements.

What is a militant ethical code?

It is a charter, established within a militant organization as a fundamental text, that explains how the political activity of the organization’s militants is carried out in the different spaces in which they intervene. It states which practices and attitudes are acceptable and promoted by the organization and which are not accepted or are even sanctioned. This allows us to identify and question those attitudes that harm assembly-based practice internally and in the spaces where we intervene.

In turn, it is a practical tool that guarantees the organization’s good representation in the spaces in which its militants intervene; likewise, it provides guidelines to the organization itself for holding internal debates in an ethical and honest manner.

An example of this can be found here in Liza’s ethical code.

What needs do militant ethical codes respond to?

They respond to the shortcomings we have experienced as militants in other organizations that prioritized personal affinity over political objectives. They serve to guide our political intervention and our militant conduct in the organization’s own spaces, but also in broad and shared spaces. That is, they enable us to deploy our main objective: the development of class self-organization spaces.

But—and here is the problem we want to point out—they often try to fulfill the function, common among many libertarian militants, of explaining and justifying their political activity before the libertarian movement, which claims to be critical and protective toward those who attack the autonomy of self-organization spaces.

And thus we go from thinking of a document that helps us achieve our political objectives, to a text that serves as a shield to defend ourselves from “anarchist” critiques, prioritizing the need to have a declaration of agreed-upon principles in order to differentiate ourselves from ideologies that defend the co-optation of spaces as a valid tool to achieve their ends, and also to guarantee our good conduct in the face of libertarian comrades who maintain a constant suspicion toward our organizations.

What is this anti-authoritarian alert that is being appeased?

Part of the libertarian movement has for years defended positions that prioritized individual participation over collective participation in mass movements. Group and organized participation has become synonymous with a threat due to its potential to bureaucratize and replicate authoritarian dynamics. This has led to a critique of any political organization that seeks to participate in broad and plural spaces, under the accusation of co-optation and authoritarianism.

The limits of libertarian individualist critique

However, years of militant experience have made it very clear that individual participation in broad spaces is no more justified than collective participation. What is more, collective forms of participation allow spaces to be more representative and to have more support than what can directly be achieved on an individual basis.

Individual participation does not free us from dishonest methods and practices, from actions aimed at limiting the autonomy of spaces, or from processes of co-optation carried out by individuals. And certainly, participation on an individual basis has not been able to confront co-optation processes—neither those carried out by authoritarian or reformist parties, nor those perpetrated by more or less charismatic individuals.

Nor have spaces made up of individuals been safer from bureaucratizing dynamics. Individual participation does not ensure that spaces develop with fairer, more horizontal, or more politically combative dynamics.

We all know how broad spaces of self-organization are frequented by informal organizations that operate opaquely. These individualist dynamics turn the informal conversation after the assembly, among people with a certain ideological affinity, into the true decision-making spaces, displacing the center of decision-making into the private sphere of a few.

Critique of moralistic understandings of ethical codes

As long as we continue to understand and explain the ethical codes we adopt as a response to these dynamics of co-optation, we will be playing along with individualist common sense. These critiques are, for the most part, completely removed from our political practice and only seek to wear down our forces with sterile debates. It is a waste of time and energy to feed a ghetto that is not representative of the working class we want to address.

Our practice is demonstrated by facts and not by words or codes. We must show ourselves on mass fronts as revolutionary militants who contribute to spaces of self-organization. Only in this

way will we earn their respect. Ideas become hegemonic through militant work that is useful to our class, not through empty, self-referential speeches.

We do not have to justify ourselves to people who have no willingness to participate in strategic debates in an honest and committed way. Instead of dedicating our time to tearing down liberal discourse, which perpetuates individualist dynamics, we choose to distance ourselves more and more from society by debating issues that have no real weight in the reality we want to transform. If we intend to combat cultural hegemony, we must review the extent to which liberal discourse has materialized in our movement, under the premise that defending individual freedom is more necessary than generating solid structures capable of confronting the State and capital.

Let us stop centering our politics and devoting an important part of our time to a self-destructive and condescending political environment. With that practice, the only thing we achieve is to perpetuate an egotistical and self-referential politics that prioritizes the “how” over the “what,” without generating a relationship between the two.

From the politics of the how to the politics of the what: a “how” for a “what”

Anarchism has made a great effort to show how certain paths—the authoritarian, the dirigiste, the assistentialist—do not lead to generalized emancipation. Tools such as direct action, self-management, and autonomy are essential for the development of revolutionary processes.

But the necessary coherence between means and ends has become a coherence between means and “principles.” Lifestyle anarchism, which subordinates any final objective to immediate satisfaction and group confirmation, has led us to accept some premises that are very harmful to any politics that aims to be revolutionary or simply transformative.

Using ethical codes to justify our political practice implies that we accept that individual participation is less dangerous than collective participation, or that collective participation is potentially more dangerous than individual participation; and while organizations equip themselves with ethical codes, lone wolves and “free riders”—those who answer only to themselves—continue imposing their liberal dynamic on the spaces.

Understanding ethical codes as internal canons of behavior instead of applying and sharing them with broad spaces and deploying their full strategic potential limits them to mere internal protocols. We must be able to bring these codes down into the various organizations, assemblies, and unions in which we participate; the real usefulness of these codes must be to generate a militant culture in the spaces where we intervene. Only then will they go from being closed internal documents to being a potential tool of transformation.

This moral understanding of ethical codes implies a shift from the “what” to the “how” without generating an articulation between the two. It implies a renunciation of building spaces endowed with well-grounded strategic objectives in favor of the autonomist logic of creating supposedly alternative spaces. And without realizing it, we have returned to the fold of political impotence.

By failing to draw the necessary strategic conclusions, our energy once again feeds a self-satisfied political ghetto, subordinated to “looking good” and to informal dynamics; under the ghetto logic that prioritizes the appearance of rebellion over the real transformation of society, we see our capacity to generate a politically valid strategy and tactic for our struggle nullified. The

inability to act outside the ghetto leads us to a political impotence that benefits our class enemies and makes us abandon our historical duty as anarchists, turning us into a political caricature without offensive capacity.

Ethical codes as first-order strategic developments

The logic of platformism starts from the socialist logic that the working class will only be liberated by itself, in a conscious action of taking power. That is why we reject endogamic and niche politics and bet on mass politics: we do not think that revolution can be made by revolutionaries, but rather that it is the working class as a whole that is the revolutionary subject when it decides to change everything from top to bottom. For that reason, our understanding of revolutionary politics is mass-based.

But far from a simplistic understanding of this maxim, and thanks to the application of tools of social, political, and historical analysis, it is concluded that this process is neither mechanical nor automatic. For the working class to be a participant in its own struggle, it must develop class consciousness[1] and build the organization capable of ending the bourgeois system of capitalist exploitation.[2]

This political process contains within itself a revolutionary and transformative potential that makes it a real threat to the bourgeois system, which is why historically it has been persecuted and massacred, with the ultimate objective of nullifying workers' capacity to carry out the economic and social revolution.

We anarchists must organize with strategic and action unity, to be an agent that can foster this process of self-construction and the development of an emancipatory trajectory. One of the main tasks is to defend class movements, in their construction, from social-democratic and bourgeois drifts, and from the agents who attack this development by depriving them of the tools and understanding needed to develop their own struggles.

Ethical codes serve to explain what these drifts and threats are that processes of self-organization face, and how to combat them. To focus on a self-referential reading, which does not seek the applicability of the ethical code in working-class spaces, is to renounce their strategic potential.

Ethical codes aim to help us evaluate and safeguard the development of self-organization spaces. We have no interest in co-opting political spaces because we understand that co-optation eliminates their revolutionary potential. We do not need to justify ourselves: it is our own conviction in the platformist idea and our will to make it real that guides—and will always guide—our political action. There is no accusation capable of undermining our honest intention to achieve our class's total emancipation.

For more information, we recommend reading the article *Co-optation is not hegemonizing* <https://regeneracionlibertaria.org/2024/02/24/cooptacion-no-es-hegemonizar> here.

A space co-opted by an organization stops producing revolutionary subjectivity—class consciousness—in those who participate in it. It does not allow its members to develop analytically, strategically, or in action, since all those activities come to be directed. We do not defend the autonomy of spaces because we are pure of heart. We defend spaces of autonomy because

without them revolution cannot be produced, or because once carried out it will be degenerated and defeated by itself.

The only way to develop our class's revolutionary potential and to achieve workers' consciousness is the tireless defense of workers' self-organization spaces, because these spaces are the only ones that represent our fundamental interests[3] as a class.

The motto "The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves" must be understood at a strategic level; it is not an empty slogan. It means that only when the working class as a whole takes control of all social activity, directly, will a change of system have taken place. Conquering hegemony and regaining control over our lives is a fundamental task of our movement; only then will we move from turning the desire for social transformation and the hope for a new world into a revolutionary reality.

We carry a new world in our hearts, and that world is growing at this very moment.

Liza, Anarchist Platform of Granada.

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