

Harmony is More Beautiful Than Unison

For a diverse anarchist movement

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I first joined the anarchist movement at the tail-end of the alter-globalization movement, a global uprising against the policies of the “developed” nations that were impoverishing and robbing nations in the global south. We marched alongside unions and indigenous organizations and religious rebels. We shut down global free trade summits sometimes. Other times we got beat to hell for trying.

We were more effective than I’d initially realized—like I said, I joined at the tail-end of the movement, when we didn’t have as many victories. It was after 9/11 and patriotism and islamophobia were all the rage in the United States, so we had a narrower base of support at that point, and more importantly, the police had largely caught onto our tactics. Every set of tactics has diminishing returns. Yet the fact that the uprising had been global, and so thoroughly diverse, meant we had an impact. I didn’t realize just how much of an impact we had until I read an essay by David Graeber called “The Shock of Victory.”

The anarchists formed a lively and confrontational contingent in every alter-globalization demonstration. Of course, the black bloc has always only been the tip of the anarchist iceberg, and anarchists (some even wearing color!) had been involved in every level of organizing. Our politics are uniquely suited to facilitating meetings and decisionmaking between diverse groups of equals, since we ourselves are non-hierarchical and all of our own internal decisions are made between, well, diverse groups of equals.

The black bloc has always been only the tip of the iceberg, but it was still beautiful and I’m still proud I took part. Dozens or hundreds or thousands of people wearing black, so as to make it harder for individuals to be singled out for repression or arrest. And in that sea of black, there were flags. Always flags. Anarchists from Baltimore in the Northeastern Federation of Anarchist Communists with their red and black flags. Anarchists from the woods of Oregon with their green and black. Crust punks and hackers both had a love for the jolly roger. Me, I carried a black flag, a solid black flag. Anarcho-anarchism. Anarchism without adjectives. Big tent anarchism. I didn’t have those words for it yet back then (and anarcho-anarchism is more a joke than anything else). If I’d been asked, I would have told you “I’m just an anarchist.”

A sea of black clothes, worn for solidarity, with groups individuated by their own colors, their own flags. People used the flags tactically, as a way for affinity groups to find one another in the anonymous crowd. Some more ambitious groups used them to communicate through semaphore.

Some flags were used defensively, to hold police at bay. Some were used offensively, to destroy the property of the international corporations we opposed, or small flags were attached to big sticks so as to assault fascists and prevent their organizing.

I don't want to idolize flags, or elevate symbols to some position they don't deserve, but there was a beauty to it. They were a visual representation of how all these diverse tendencies, currents, and factions, all doing something dangerous, brave, and beautiful together.

If two or more people sing the same note at the same time, that's called unison. If two or more people sing multiple notes in the same key, that's called harmony.

I don't mean to disparage unison. Unison gives us the gang vocals that elevate punk songs to lofty heights. In the early middle ages, unison gave us what's called "plainsong." It can be beautiful. It's also limiting. Polyphony and harmony are the tools of most of the musicians we listen to today.

Why, then, do we demand our movements be plainsong, like we belong to the eight century church?

Even individual notes, in music, are not so simple and pure as we might expect. If you look at the spectrogram of a note played on an instrument (a spectrogram being a visual representation of a noise), you will generally see not just a single spike of a single tone, but a whole host of spikes representing other tones, called harmonics. Only a synthesizer, playing a simple wave form, might give you a pure note without harmonics. We almost never use these pure tones in music.

Harmonics (and dynamics, but that's beyond the scope of this essay) are the reason that the note C3 played on an oboe sounds different from the note C3 played on a piano, or sung by two different singers. Some of these harmonics are simply the octave of the root note, but there is complicated harmonic texture that ranges all across the audio spectrum. We instinctively recognize instruments by these subtle harmonics.

I learned more about this than I'd originally intended to when I researched how to build wind chimes. Everything from how the chime is constructed to the distance to the listener influences what harmonics are emphasized—which spikes are highest, or most noticed by the ear. A wind chime could sound like a major chord at one distance and a minor chord at another.

The end result of that particular research rabbit hole was that I gave up trying to produce my own minor key wind chimes. Maybe one day.

Our movements are diverse. Even when we try to act in unison, each of our personalities and each of our movements' tendencies offer their own harmonics. Their own texture.

So then, rather than force ourselves to sing in unison, we ought learn to harmonize. Even our harmony will be imperfect, as individual harmonics ring out in a different key, but it is those very imperfections that define us, make us unique, and make us, like music, effective.

When I first joined the movement, the most prominent internal division was red anarchism versus green anarchism. Class-focused anarchism and environmentally focused anarchism.

At one punk show in New York City, a red anarchist told me: "If you go out west, they all have vasectomies and go scrump in the woods."

I think the person who told me this was trying to be dismissive of these mythical west coast primitivists, but what he said stood out in my mind for two reasons: first, I'd never heard anyone use the word "scrump" before or since, yet I immediately knew by context he meant people were fucking. Second, I realized that I too would like to go scrump in the woods. That sounded lovely.

Both sides of that red versus green debate offered valid points: if the workers owned the machinery of alienation and environmental devastation, we would still be alienated and living on a ruined planet; yet without organization, we are unlikely to accomplish anything of note. To an awful lot of us, probably most of us, it was self-evident that both sides were worth listening to and that the divide was often as semantic as it was anything else.

Over the years, the divide shifted around, from dichotomy to dichotomy. It spent awhile as insurrection versus activism.

The divide was always, at its core, the same tension. A tension between order and chaos, organization and anti-organizationalism.

This divide has always been, like so many dichotomies before it, a false dichotomy.

When I hear people say "anarchy is order!" or "anarchy is chaos!" all I can think is... yes. You're both right.

Imagine, if you will, a triangle. Anyone who knows me knows I was going to bring triangles into the conversation at some point.

Whenever you have a dichotomy you suspect is false, draw it into a triangle. Three equal sides. Draw it inverted, with one side at the top and a corner at the bottom, because it looks coolest that way. Why not.

On one side, let's say the left side, write chaos. On the right hand side, write order.

Let's leave the third side blank for a moment.

When mainstream society imagines "chaos" in this context, they are likely to label it "anarchy." They mean a lack of organization, a lack of teamwork, a lack direction or purpose. When most people imagine "order," in the most extreme sense of the word, people imagine fascism and dictatorship and the subsumption of the individual by the whole. When people imagine this dichotomy as a single line, an axis of chaos versus order, most people's allegiance would naturally gravitate towards somewhere in the middle. A compromise between the two. Democracy, let's call it. The bulwark that protects the individual from authoritarian rule and protects the community from the excesses of individual action, like murder.

But we don't have a single axis. We bent that line 60 degrees, so the middle point is now a corner, down there at the bottom of our drawing (or at the top, if you couldn't resist drawing a pyramid). The compromise position between two extremes is that corner. Democracy, again, we might call it.

What then, is the top line that connects order and chaos, rather than breaks them apart and keeps them distinct?

The top line is, I would propose, and you probably saw this coming, anarchism. In this method of diagramming with triangles, the bottom corner represents the compromise point, while the connecting line at the top represents the synthesis. The best parts of each of the other sides, brought together into a cohesive whole.

The synthesis of chaos and order is, well, chaotic order. Or dynamic organization. Organic structuring. Anarchism. Whatever you want to call it.

Anarchism learns from chaos—the ever-shifting circumstances of the world, our individual and collective passions and excesses—and it learns from order—that only through structure can we build anything.

We build structures when they suit us, and we hold onto them as long as they suit us—whether that be a matter of weeks, a matter of generations, or a matter of eons. We build structures that are designed to adapt and change.

It is the difference between how a tree grows and structures itself versus how most buildings are manufactured. A tree grows in adaptation to its circumstances. A tree in the forest might spare few branches except at its crown, while a tree in a field will grow in every direction to make use of the abundant sunlight. A tree in the forest is insulated from the wind by the collective of its peers, while a tree in a field must serve as its own windbreak. Each time a new limb buds and then branches out, it does so where it best sees fit at that moment in time, rather than according to some predetermined blueprint. Some limbs wither and drop, while others grow thicker and branch out themselves.

Most buildings, in turn, are built from blueprints. Especially in the modern era, most buildings are built according to styles inherited from other places in the world. Nature is defied, rather than accommodated. We build flat-roof stripmalls in the far north, defying the load of snow with overbuilt ceilings rather than the sharp peaks that shed snow naturally. We build with timber and drywall in the desert, heating and cooling houses by burning fossil fuels rather than letting adobe serve as insulation and passive heat storage.

There is no reasonable definition of the word “order” that would exclude the way a tree grows. It is not random. Yet it can also be understood as chaotic, in that it responds to complex stimuli in a way that cannot be immediately and easily described and understood.

The tree is organically structured. So ought to be anarchism.

The diversity of our movement is, and has always been, a strength. Our opponents have a rigid command structure and generally operate on a transparent set of if/then statements. (Oh good, I’ve managed to incorporate triangles, forests, music theory, and now programming into this organically structured mess of metaphors). We can often anticipate the police’s response to any given situation, and we can move and change structures and tactics faster.

We could do with a stronger “order” within our “chaotic order,” at least from my perspective (I’m not really an armchair theorist, more of a futon theorist just now). We need not be afraid to build structures and organizations with set goals and principles. We just need to remember that we will each sing different notes in this chorus. Any organizations we build ought to have, baked into them, consideration for other organizations, individuals, and ideological positions. The tree

is not the forest—it coexists with lichen and fauna, with fern, fungus, and thorn. We cannot build a single anarchist organization, but instead anarchist organizations that welcome the existence of other anarchist—and non-anarchist but like-minded—organizations.

Any strategies we develop must be strategies that play to our strengths. To build a world in which many worlds are possible, we must use strategies that rely on other people having other strategies. If we organize peaceful protests, we must coordinate with the people who desire rowdy ones. If we build mass movements, they must be mass movements that do not sell out the autonomous cells who work at night. If we break windows, we ought to serve as a percussive punctuation to the full chorus, rather than jarring disruptions to the song (which is to say, we ought to break windows in such a way that they cause the police to react in ways we want them to react, drawing police away from rather than towards those we are in solidarity with).

This self-conducted orchestra we're part of, it's beautiful. Its moments of cacophony can be beautiful too, or perhaps are just a price we pay for being part of so large and wonderful an ensemble. But most beautiful of all is when we move from harmony to harmony, finding ourselves free to act as best serves the whole, without anyone commanding us into a specific role.

We will reprise old songs and motifs and we will develop things wholly new. We will branch out like trees. What won't happen, though, is that I won't successfully wrap up all the various tangled metaphors I used throughout this piece.

Some folks still might go scrump in the woods though.

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