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The Trap of Horizontalism

Regue

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The Trap of Horizontalism, within anarchism, has been a burden for nearly half a century. It's time now to shed that weight in order to move forward.

Experiential and activist anarchism has emphasized personal experience, navigating between the individual and the small community. Experimentation as a means to “live anarchism” here and now. And in doing so, it has neglected collective responsibility—anarchist ideology as a committed and militant way of life.

This approach, tending toward individualism, often becomes an end in itself—seeking personal or group well-being in a hostile world. A kind of self-help refuge, full of personal (and collective) deceptions. Since it is disconnected from a revolutionary project, it becomes confined to mere experiences lived within capitalism—or at best, on its margins.

But not only that: revolutionary anarchism has been dragged by these tendencies, elevating the lack of organization and direction as an inherent trait of anarchism. Individuals prioritize their personal experiences over collective action and the historical trajectory of previous militant efforts.

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This trap, as we've said, has led anarchism—especially in many places in the Western Global North—to lose its transformative and revolutionary potential. It's become just another item on the “ideological menu” of social movements and activism. Relegated to a vague ideal, reserved for a future that never arrives, and won't arrive, as long as it remains hijacked by the tactics exposed here.

To overcome this trap, we must move forward and recover a more concise and militant form of anarchism that prioritizes organized, revolutionary social action. This means developing a clear set of objectives and strategies, and working toward planning—both tactical strategies for the present and the development of collective forces capable of managing the complex economy of libertarian socialism in the near future.

Economic planning within a framework of federal political organization is essential to building a free society in harmony with the Earth's metabolism. But this requires a deep understanding of the mechanisms, options, and resources we are likely to have starting now.

As revolutionaries, anarchists must work to create the conditions necessary to reach the social system they advocate for, starting from the development of the collective forces available to them in the reality they inhabit. They must analyze the limits and opportunities on the battlefield of life under capitalism. A sweeping critique, no matter how lucid, is useless if it becomes paralyzing—and if we fail to see or go beyond it.

Communities, organizations, unions, cooperatives, collectives, bookshops, ateneos, etc.—if they are not embedded in a revolutionary project, in a movement—they remain isolated islands floating in a capitalist sea, with no real potential to transform beyond providing temporary “well-being” and fleeting feelings of “doing something” for their participants. Or worse, they serve to feed egos that need their “safe space” in which to grow.

But why are we talking about horizontalism if we're reviewing issues that go beyond how groups democratize decision-making? Because we want to clarify the concepts that surround this trap and give it a fertile context—trying to understand it fully and deeply.

The context of ideas that lead to certain choices. Horizontalism, as we know it, stems from such dynamics. In fact, it originates from the anti-war assemblies of the 1960s–70s (USA vs. Vietnam), heavily influenced by Quaker practices. It was adopted as a democratizing method for decision-making in diverse groups where consensus was prioritized. And consensus is relatively easy to achieve when there's a clear, limited objective (a campaign, a specific platform, etc.).

As in Quaker communities, many groups and collectives operate with a strong informal hierarchy and group cohesion that allows for supposed consensus to be reached easily. Making this strategy the *only* path to democratizing society—or even a broad organization (political, union, etc.)—is to reproduce a tactical tradition without proper analysis or context. Without considering its limitations.

In a complex society, forcing action to fit tools designed for small groups (or activist campaigns) traps our imagination in that same frame. How many times have you heard: “That’s fine, but only for small groups”? Every contemporary anarchist has heard that at least once. This situation is deeply connected to what’s discussed here and raises questions we don’t intend to answer—but want to put on the table.

How did we go from an anarchism that sought to study and transform complex society the very next day, to one stuck in a mindset of “keeping it small”? The answer is multifactorial. Here, we’re focusing on a couple of symptoms—signals of that self-inflicted defeat. Like the belief that there’s only one way to democratize political decisions: through assemblies.

Assembly-based decision-making—or horizontalism—understood as the only “just” form of decision-making,

has significant limitations. These might not be obvious in small or cohesive groups. But if we aim for deep social transformation—a revolution—those limits matter.

Designing just methods that reflect collective sentiment, diverse opinions, and shared, rotating responsibilities means exploring new forms—or recovering old ones. A simple example: political or union organizations with a clearly defined political line don't need to pass every tactical decision through an in-person assembly involving all members.

This might seem obvious to someone who has been active in class unions or political organizations with defined lines. But for many activists or anarchists who avoid these dynamics for fear they lead to “hierarchy”—and who see themselves as “free” by acting in affinity groups—it may sound completely alien. We believe they are the ones most trapped by the self-imposed limits mentioned earlier. They see “dangers” everywhere, but overlook others. Worst of all, they're often unaware of these limitations, simply following a recent tradition of horizontalism without critical analysis.

Horizontalism or chaos. Consensus or chaos. These unspoken mantras hijack serious debate and prevent arguments that explore democratic alternatives. It's not so different from those in power who hijack reality with their brand of “realism”: “tighten your belts,” “it's the economy,” etc.

The liturgy and performance of horizontalism has become part of a kind of micro-spectacle society within political activism.

Have we lost the ability to imagine new forms? To deepen democracy in our spaces? To prefigure a libertarian socialist society?

Maybe we've simply been swept along by the neoliberalism of identity—academic and Anglo-Saxon—that has built an anarchist identity emptied of ideology and revolutionary theory. Easily co-optable, packageable, and “marketable” on an individual or group level.

It's time to rebuild revolutionary theory—as anarchism has historically done: grounded in practice. Without elitist academicism, without hang-ups. Without clinging to tactical traditions. Without fear of breaking from traditionalism. But above all, without fear of making mistakes—and correcting them.

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A provocative nod to a once-infamous book that gained some attention years ago: “The Diversity Trap.” While we don't share its conclusions, we wanted to draw on part of its critique of identity-based political construction.