

Vulgar Anarcho-Communism

What Left Unity Conceals

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If you work on any project — political or otherwise — you’re going to be collaborating with folks you don’t agree with. Marxists, democratic socialists, and left-leaning liberals might have your back on a picket line or protest, and in some cases you might be joined by libertarians, conservatives, and even single issue republicans on issues like self defense and gun control. Hell, even within anarchist spaces you’re going to have disagreement between your various adjective havers (individualist, communist, the one token left-libertarian, etc.) that might result in the occasional heated debate. No matter what, people will never agree on everything across the board due to differences in experience, preference, or privilege, and in order to effectively organize we sometimes have to table those discussions for later.

So far, this probably sounds like the typical “left unity” narrative, and as it stands it’s a fairly convincing line of reasoning. Many mainstream social justice issues are predominantly supported by liberals, but we still stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, indigenous liberation projects, and many other campaigns despite our strong political disagreements on specific subjects. Sure, I absolutely despise the numerous tankie groups at my school, but when proud boys and MAGAite pawns invade our campus, I will be there, and I know damn well which side of the fence I’m gonna be on.

This, in my view, is a “tactical union,” a spontaneous association founded on opposition to a given issue (i.e. literal fascists coming to town) that ceases to exist when the immediate threat goes away. Going back to the previous example, when the crowd dispersed, I immediately resumed shit-talking the pseudo-bolshevik hacks I stood next to and they probably went home to spew some Leninist bullshit at unsuspecting freshmen. In participating in a single action with an individual or group, I’m not obligated to validate their beliefs or hold my tongue till we “defeat our common enemy.” In most cases, the only unity required to effectively respond to spontaneous threats and persistent repression is a shared opposition to that specific threat.

Ideological unity, on the other hand, is an entirely separate demand from tactical unity, focused not on direct action or organizational strategies, but movement building. Advocates of ideological unity, in most cases, are intent on creating a broad left-wing coalition between all “opponents of capitalism”; this coalition usually includes democratic socialists, communists, and anarchists. Sometimes, however, this is extended to tankies (leninists, left-accelerationists, dengists, etc.), resulting in the most incredible displays of mental gymnastics the left has to offer. To most of us,

it should be obvious why this is a problem, as a group that includes anti-authoritarians and crypto-stalinists does not a strong coalition make. In attempting to make such a dissonant connection sustainable, small concessions need to be made by the less stubborn side, and in most cases this results in anarchists becoming less anti-state to please state leftists. Notable results of this process include anarchist justifications for prisons, models of non-state police and military forces, and, of course, Chomsky's famous "justified hierarchies." Meanwhile, tankies sit back and watch as self-proclaimed libertarian socialists tread on rhetorical eggshells to avoid losing their coalition.

In my experience, however limited it may be, I've seen no convincing argument that ideological unity is necessary in the struggle against the current system or in the creation of a new society. Tactical unity, on the other hand, is an unavoidable and necessary component of current anti-fascist and insurrectionary activity, transcending the limitations of organized political structures in favor of decentralized, spontaneous responses to threats, both from state and non-state actors. These two things sound deceptively similar, but I would argue they're distinct phenomena that share common rhetorical justifications, rather than extensions of the same premises.

Let's walk through the argument for "left unity" one more time, using the concept of tactical unity and ideological unity respectively. As abolitionists, we have a shared interest in opposing the current system (cops, fascists, militia groups, etc.) and strong disagreements regarding ends (statelessness, luxury communism, democratic confederalism, etc.), aspects that make organization very frustrating. In most cases, however, responding to immediate systemic threats is a higher priority than reconciling a philosophical disagreement, leading to collaboration between a diverse group of individuals against a common danger; this process is not planned, it doesn't have formal membership or rules, and there's no vetting process for who gets to be an anti-fascist for that moment. When danger presents itself, ideology takes a back seat to action, and it works time and time again.

In neglecting to mention ideology at all, it's very easy to warp this logic into a defense of ideological unity. Focusing on the absence of conscious, heated debate on the ground is an easy way to imply that this absence is causally related to anti-fascists' success. This is a shift in framing, as it contextualizes the lack of active disagreement as a deliberate abstinence from debate, rather than a result of the context (i.e. facing off against fascists and cops); though the same thing is being described, the implied cause is different. Sometimes this is further extended by comparisons to Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and many other movements that "ended" due to a lack of ideological unity with only state reforms and "class consciousness" as their lasting legacy. By framing the issue around this form of "left unity," it's implied that non-sectarianism and a roughly defined structure is necessary in order to create a movement with lasting, sustainable effects, possibly serving as the foundation to a new, post-capitalist social order.

Notice the divergence in focus between the two frameworks; in the first example, I'm explaining a largely decentralized strategy for responding to spontaneous threats, and in the second I'm describing the tools for building an organized, explicitly political movement. These are two different subjects, one I'm very deeply invested in, and one in which I'm completely disinterested. Coalitions, movements, and organized masses, in my view, are for politicians, planners, and commissars, all things I generally don't see as particularly redeemable, to say the very least. States and corporations are most susceptible to threats that resemble them least; cops are easily duped by decentralized anti-fascist networks, big businesses are routinely screwed by piracy and worker co-operatives, governments are terrible at dealing with sprawling networks of hacktivists — maybe, just maybe, you can't fight the state with another state.

There are countless other cases I could go into that see decentralization and flexibility winning over movement-building and ideological cohesion, but I think it's appropriate at this point to talk about solutions, things we can do that actually work. Am I suggesting we risk losing some "comrades" by being more honest about our most radical perspectives? As I argued in the first part of this series, I think moderating our own rhetoric in exchange for mainstream approval is a losing battle, but that doesn't mean alienation is my primary goal. In being transparent about tensions between our desired means, ends, and analytical methods, we create more secure spaces that are more conducive to effective cooperation.

My detractors, assuming they read this far, are almost definitely going to claim I'm just being a sectarian "anarcho chauvinist" or whatever. In the spirit of beating them to the punch, I'll just admit right now that I am being sectarian, and though I do appreciate the attention, it's not my primary motive. The most radical implication of my suggestion here is the total rejection of the means-ends framework that defines ideology and embracing the sole pursuit of means, a topic I hope I can explore in a piece all its own. If you're not willing to take that philosophical leap, consider this: if there are conflicting, incompatible sects within a group, it's generally not a good idea to not let those disagreements go unsaid. Pretending that total unity exists in a situation where there exists fundamental disagreements is a recipe for disaster.

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