

# Radical Organizing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Today we are witnessing a deepening crisis of representation, affecting not only the political parties but also the traditional organizations of the left. Modern radical organizations striving for social emancipation should therefore adopt new ways of thinking and acting that are more adequate to the current reality.**

Today we see a deepening crisis of representation, reflected by increasing abstention rates during elections even in countries with traditionally high electoral activity, like Greece. Political parties across Europe that win elections rarely gather enough seats to rule alone, and are thus forced to engage in unstable coalitions to form governments. Even the so-called radical parties, that claim to represent the massive social movements of the last years, don't seem to be able to increase noticeably their membership base or to initiate lasting social mobilizations on a large scale.

This crisis of representation also affects the traditional social movements. Traditional ideological organizations fail to increase their membership base too, ceding back instead. Also, the proposals they articulate are rarely more than a reproduction of old patterns of thinking and acting, thus they are unable to interact adequately with contemporary reality.

Modern radical organizations striving for social emancipation should therefore adopt new ways of thinking and acting. The term 'radical' is being used here as signifying radical change of the dominant forms of politics and the replacement of one set of imaginary significations with another one, and not as reference point for torrents of blood or violence as an end in itself. We can distinguish at least three forms of organizing that are more adequate to current reality: a) mapping and strengthening social counter-powers; b) adopting a de-ideologized narrative; c) addressing the difficult question of managing power in a non-hierarchical manner...

## **Mapping and strengthening social counter-power**

In contrast to this, new grassroots movements have adopted a quite innovative approach: they have attempted to skip the capitalist intermediaries and state bureaucracies, opening up, instead, spaces for popular interaction that could give practical solutions to people's everyday problems, like directly connecting producers and consumers in the form of barter markets and solidarity networks. This has led to the emergence of many new structures based on solidarity, participation and creativity. An other example are the deliberative assemblies that emerged in the squares of major cities around the world during the mass mobilizations of 2011–12. Although the momentum was eventually lost, these practices showed a popular creativity that couldn't be encompassed by any traditional ideology based mainly on resistance.

In a system, which is rapidly disintegrating both society as well as itself, the emphasis of the struggles that the social movements are waging should be on building and proposing sustainable alternative structures that can change people's everyday life in practice, rather than merely resisting the policies imposed by the ruling elites (but not completely abandoning resistance as important tactic).

A modern radical organization, while not ceasing to resist unjust policies, would have to emphasize creating and locating structures that emerge from the midst of society and to nurture their direct-democratic character, solidarity and creativity. Furthermore, it should connect these to other popular initiatives, thus preventing them from being crushed in an environment of harsh social cannibalism, while simultaneously building coherent counter-power. With the es-

establishment of such networks of communally managed structures, a growing number of human needs could be met and their radical democratic character and solidarity-based logic would be ensured by the support of a political movement. In this manner, an attempt could be made to radically transform the work time of the participants, blurring the borders between work and free (hobby) time and integrating them into one free public time.

This approach will not alienate these endeavours from society, but on the contrary, since they have emerged from amongst its ranks, strong links between them will remain. This stands in stark contrast with the structures created and managed by ideologically charged traditional organizations, who are viewing society as unenlightened and themselves as “would-be” teachers, thus unconsciously reproducing the existing dichotomy between the “expert” and the “non-expert”.

## **Adoption of a de-ideologized narrative**

Due to their ideological character, traditional radical organizations tend to adopt their own narratives which are incompatible and often even quite hostile towards the rest of society. As I have shown elsewhere, this results in the establishment of a non-contextual way of thinking and acting, which prevents, or at least makes it very difficult, for radical political organizations to interact with the people, leading to their sectarianization.

To avoid this, a new approach is needed. An approach that goes beyond ideology, that is, beyond dogmas and identities. This could be helpful in a two ways: on the one hand, it would allow radical organizations to interact with wider sections of society. On the other, it would enable a better understanding of the modern world, as the traditional ideologies were based on simplistic ‘subject-object’ determinations (proletariat-communism or bourgeois-capitalism), which don’t correspond to the complexities of our time.

Many activists express the fear that without ideological identities their political groups will lose their cohesion, thereby remaining unprotected from efforts at their assimilation by the *status quo*. This could prove right if ideology is being taken out of the equation and nothing takes its place. However this don’t have to be the case: by de-ideologization, I don’t suggest the removal of political principles and ideals, but rather the removal of ideologically enforced identities and dogmas that are erecting imaginary walls between political movements and society. This implies the creation of a radical culture, based on political principles, that is open to a wide range of societal interactions. In the end, if social emancipation is possible at all, it will be so only with the consent of the popular majority. The connection with the wider society should be among the top priorities of every group striving for a radical break with the contemporary order of things. Following this line of thought, a radical organization can’t be anything but direct-democratic.

## **The question of power**

An additional element that has to be taken into consideration by contemporary radical organizations, is the role of power. The traditional radical movements were viewing this question in at least two oversimplified ways: either power must be taken through siezing the state apparatus and establishing dictatorship of the proletariat; or power must be abolished completely, which often results into rejection of all forms of rules and norms. Thus, people willing to engage in

radical political activity are often faced with the option of participating in totalitarian or chaotic types of organization.

Nowadays we see the need for a new type of power that is becoming ever more prominent from different expressions of popular creativity. The paradigm of the commons is a good example of this. While rejecting the bureaucratic centralization of the state and the ruthless barbarity of the capitalist market, the commons are insistently emphasizing the importance of norms, regulations and penal codes that constitute horizontal power, as these can't be overridden by an individual or by a group of people. This type of power flows from the "bottom-up"; it is a different type of power, consciously determined by the involved individuals, through democratic processes such as general assemblies, online forums and platforms. In a sense, it is a form of self-limitation.

Contemporary radical organizations should tackle this aspiration both on a theoretical and a practical level. On the one hand, they should strive for self-instituting; at changing their structures and processes with institutional characteristics. For example, decision-making bodies like general assemblies should have the role of institutions, through which the group expresses its collective will in the form of practical power, and not just as loose, semi-formal coordinational device between free time volunteers. Simultaneously, the question should also be articulated on a more theoretical level in order to generate reflections for solving contemporary issues of crucial importance, which could also contribute to radical organizations overcoming their ideological abstractivism and developing more concrete and up-to-date proposals. For example, different matters, like keeping polluting fossil fuels in the ground, require something more than voluntary consent and wishful thinking. Thus, a difficult challenge for contemporary radical organizations will be to form proposals for how no individual or group of individuals would be able to violate the agreements reached by the majority of society, without losing the participatory element and individual autonomy and descending into totalitarianism.

## **Conclusion**

With mass popular mobilizations in recent years taking place ever more frequently, decentralization of modern technology bringing ever growing number of people in contact with one another and allowing free uncensored (for now) expression of collective and individual creativity, cultural exchange caused by mass migrations and other phenomena of modern contemporality, the question of the role of radical organizations is of crucial importance. Although we have seen popular activity increasing during the last years, it didn't manage to produce solid and lasting forms of counter-power. Therefore, the mass social movements could gain much from experienced radicals, in theory and in practice, if the latter are willing to abandon the 'safety' of ideological traditionality and to bravely dive into public affairs.

If we want to take the maximum of the next wave of public outrage, probably caused by new wave of austerity measures, more broken promises by representative governments, the public dissatisfaction with the contemporary exclusively consumerist lifestyle, or even from the left impotence to overpass its traditional thinking and to tackle adequately the challenges of our contemporality, radical organizations will have to adopt practices that will make their speech and practices more understandable and close to the common people. Even more, it could possibly open horizons for the creation of new sets of significations which could replace the existing system, by which it is difficult to keep society from complete disintegration.

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