

Autonomism for the People?

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Issue: [December 2003](#) (280)

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The demands of the movement require organisation.

'We need new ways of thinking and new ways of organising. We have to break with old ideological formulae of the old left.' You hear such talk repeatedly in the anti-capitalist and anti-war movements today. And for many people it represents a welcome attempt to break from the jaded parliamentarianism of New Labour and the manipulative methods of the Stalinism that collapsed in 1989.

But often those who talk of 'new ideas' and 'new methods of organising' embrace ideas and methods easily as old as those they criticise. This is true of the various forms of 'autonomism' in the movement today. The autonomists hold, essentially, that each individual or group should protest in their own way, without bowing down to any centralised, still less hierarchical, structure. Any form of self activity is as valid as any other and if they are allowed to develop freely can constitute a 'swarm' or 'multitude' of different challenges to the present system that can destroy its hold.

Such views do not differ essentially from the arguments used by anarchists during the time of Marx and Engels. They have been resurrected repeatedly since, most recently in the movements of the late 1960s.

A good description of the dominant attitude in the American radical student movement SDS is to be found in an article from 1969 by two San Francisco socialists, Jack Weinberg and Jack Gerson:

'Until only a few years ago SDS in its overwhelming majority was anti-centralist and anti-ideological. Action was all that really counted. Marxism was rejected as "old left". The working class was seen as non-existent, irrelevant or bought off. Community organising and participatory democracy were the key phrases which defined the organisation.'

A massive radicalisation in 1967 saw the flowering of the 'Yippies' and the 'Motherfuckers', which preached confrontation with the authorities but still rejected organisation and 'ideology'. In the student movements of Germany, France and Italy there was the same stress on 'spontaneity'. Such 'structurelessness' fitted situations of sudden, explosive involvement of very large numbers of students - and in Italy workers as well - for the first time. As they took to the streets and occupied buildings they unbalanced the authorities and did not worry

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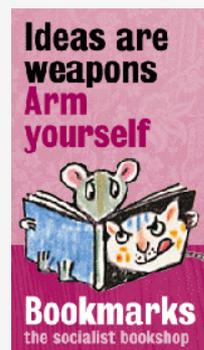
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unduly about strategy, tactics and organisation.

But none of the 'swarms' succeeded in going beyond shaking the established power structure to destroying it. And it was not long before it was hitting back.

So the year in which the movement in the US reached its highest pitch, 1968, was when it began to suffer its first serious setbacks. Police battered protesters outside the Democratic convention in Chicago, while the FBI orchestrated a campaign of frame-ups and murder against the leaders of the Black Panthers.

Suddenly people began to feel the need for structures and for some understanding of the forces at work in society - for an 'ideology'. As Weinberg and Gerson wrote:

'The struggle against the Vietnam War and the struggle for black liberation exposed the nature of the American capitalist state, and led to the understanding that it must be overthrown.

'What began as a movement in many ways resembling a super-idealistic children's crusade to save the world was becoming increasingly grim and increasingly serious. The stakes had been raised. This forced the radical movement to take itself - and as a result its ideas - more seriously.'

A hardline Maoist organisation, Progressive Labour (PL), had entered the American SDS. It was incredibly authoritarian, hierarchical and Stalinist: 'The initial reaction to PL among indigenous SDSers was extremely hostile.' But soon, Weinberg and Gerson noted, 'PL's at least nominal possession of a coherent worldview was an important advantage.' The established SDS leadership - and thousands of followers - responded by adopting hard, supposedly Marxist, positions of their own, based on slightly different interpretations of what it meant to be a Maoist. A movement that had once had what we would now describe as 'autonomist' politics was embracing one or other version of Stalinism.

The situation was very similar in Germany and Italy. Very large numbers of those who had spoken of 'anti-authoritarianism' and 'spontaneity' in 1967 were turning to Maoism by the early 1970s. The most significant of the Italian 'spontaneist' organisations, Lotta Continua, was by 1974 trying to model itself on the Chinese Communist Party. The 'new' had transmuted into the old almost overnight.

People had discovered the hard way some very important things. The class war is a war, with the other side continually trying to take advantage of weak points on our side, to encourage division and fragmentation. And in any movement some people tend to break more quickly with the established ideas of existing society than others. Those who break first need to organise themselves, to win others to their ideas and to counter the manoeuvres of the ruling class and state.

The mistake was not to turn from spontaneism to organisation. It was to turn to authoritarian, top-down organisation which could not possibly relate to the ups and downs of living movements. This became very clear once the major capitalist governments had succeeded in restabilising themselves in the mid-1970s. Within a couple of years all the big Maoist organisations in Europe and North America had

fragmented and collapsed. Many activists began to glorify this fragmentation as 'autonomy'.

But each of the fragments was too weak to really win 'space' for itself by its own efforts. It was not long before most of those who worshipped the 'autonomy' of the movements were putting their faith in parliamentarianism to achieve it.

Yet there were always alternatives. There are ways of clarifying ideas and developing organisation to coordinate struggle that do not involve an authoritarian Stalinist structure. That means elements of centralisation, to create conditions in which our side is able to advance and retreat as necessary. But the centralism has to always relate to the movement, learning and generalising from it, being an organic expression of the most active elements.

The idea of any such central organisation is unpalatable to some people. But the harsh lesson from the past is that if you do not have democratic centralisation your eventual reaction to centralised attacks on the movement will be the embracing of undemocratic, authoritarian forms of centralisation.