Re-Building Infrastructures of Resistance

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2009

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It is sometimes said that while anti-capitalist and alternative globalization movements are clear on what we do not want, we are less clear on what we do want (socialism, anarchism, specifics). Certainly, recent movements have not been as effective as their predecessors (labor in the 1910s and '30s; the social movements of the '60s and '70s) in sustaining the sorts of practices – intellectual and material – that put into effect aspects of the alternative world we seek. My colleague Alan Sears attributes this current inability to a decline in what he calls "infrastructures of dissent" or what I prefer to call "infrastructures of resistance." As anti-capitalist movements face possibilities of growth, as happened after Seattle in 1999, questions of organization and the relation of various activities to each other and to broader movements for social change can only become more urgent. Yet, the absence of durable organizations or institutions, formal or informal, rooted in working-class organizations and communities, makes for demoralization or a retreat into subculturalism, as has happened to many of the alternative globalization groups. We now face a pressing need to rebuild "infrastructures of resistance" that might sustain not only activists and organizers, but especially the poor and working-class people who are being disastrously impacted by the current crisis.

The notion of "infrastructures of dissent" is drawn from the literature on social movements as developed by resource mobilization theorists such as Mayer Zald and John McCarthy (1990); it refers to the accumulated resources available to social movements in going beyond spontaneous expressions of protest to build sustained mobilization and dissent. Infrastructures of dissent often include the resources of mainstream or reformist groups, like NGOs or unions, which can be used by more radical groups for their own purposes. Writers coming from anarchist and socialist movements, such as Howard Ehrlich and Alan Sears, have developed this notion in a more accessible fashion. Sears (2007) adapts it to refer to a variety of practices by which movements develop their capacities to sustain common memories, build collective visions, voice alternatives, and engage in debate and analysis. As examples, he mentions left caucuses within unions and socialist party organizations. As he notes: "The projects of rebuilding the infrastructure of dissent and revitalizing socialism are integrally connected." These are clearly limited and problematic.

While such an approach emphasizes formal political organizations, I would argue that more priority should be given to social institutions, informal as well as formal, based on addressing the needs of poor and working-class communities. These contemporary infrastructures of resistance might include community centers, housing and shelter, food shares, transportation, community media, free schools, bookstores, cafes, taverns and clubs.

Large-scale civil non-cooperation and/or militant confrontation with the State and Capital obviously require previous successes in organization and experience. Thus, as Ehrlich (1996b) notes, these are necessarily the outward, and dramatic, manifestations of ongoing experiments in overcoming authoritarian societies. Directing his discussion at anarchists, he encourages them to first develop alternative institutions. These are the building blocks of what he refers to as the transfer culture, an approximation of the new society within the context of the old (Ehrlich 1996a). Within them organizers might try to meet the basic demands of building sustainable communities. At the present time, as Sears notes, this infrastructure of dissent is quite weak, its development having been cut short by the political counter-offensive following September 11, 2001.

Infrastructures of resistance, operating in the shadows of the dominant institutions, provide frameworks for the radical re-organization of social relations in a miniature, pre-insurrectionary form. It is the rudimentary infrastructure of alternative ways of being, an alternative future in the present. It is decidedly not a millenarian project in which hopes for liberation or freedom are

deferred or projected into some imagined future. Rather than utopian longings, these infrastructures of resistance, or transfer cultures, express real world practices in which utopian desires – the hopes and dreams of the grassroots mobilizations behind Obama – are given life in the here and now.

Libertarian socialists and anarchists have always emphasized people's capacities for spontaneous organization, but they also recognize that what appears to be "spontaneous" develops from an often extensive groundwork of pre-existing radical practices. Without such pre-existing practices and relationships, people are left to patch things together in the heat of social upheaval or to defer to previously organized and disciplined vanguards. Pre-existing infrastructures, or transfer cultures, are necessary components of popular, participatory and liberatory social reorganization. A liberatory social transformation requires experiences of active involvement in radical change, prior to any insurrection, and the development of prior structures for constructing a new society within the shell of the old society.

Various alternative institutions, whether free schools or squats or counter-media, form networks as means for developing alternative social infrastructures. Where free schools join up with worker co-operatives and collective social centres, alternative social infrastructures become visible at least at the community level. Contemporary projects are still quite new. None have approached the scale that would suggest they pose practical alternatives, except perhaps in the case of new media activities and Internet networks. Yet all are putting together the building blocks that might promote practical alternatives extending well beyond the projects from which they originated.

Possibilities

Of course each community, neighbourhood or region will have specific issues that have to be addressed right away. People will decide what their needs are. I can illustrate this from my own experience in efforts to build infrastructures of resistance in Toronto. In order to most effectively direct our limited resources, we decided to focus on a few primary areas of community struggle such as anti-racism and anti-fascism, anti-poverty struggles, and workplace organizing. Regarding the first area, we are involved not in street scraps with fascists, but in trying to work against the US/Canada border enforcement, and in stopping the increased detention of migrants. Our anti-poverty work in several neighbourhoods has strengthened tenants' unions and other community-based organizations, as well as contributing to campaigns aimed at winning what we realize to be very limited demands from the state, such as the Raise the Rates campaign spearheaded by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty.

It is in labour struggles that alternative globalization organizers might contribute to some interesting developments, doing things that are quite atypical for many North American anti-globalization organizations and unions alike. Indeed the goal of developing anti-capitalist perspectives within unions and other workplace organizations is one that contemporary alternative globalization activists have generally neglected. While many Left groups have focused their energies on running opposition slates in union elections or forming opposition caucuses, much work needs to be done in developing rank-and-file organization and militance. Those of us who are union members take the position that regardless of the union leadership, until we build a

militant and mobilized rank-and-file movement, across locals and workplaces, the real power of organized labour will remain unrealized.

A few of the efforts I have been involved in include flying squads –- rapid-response networks of union members prepared to take direct solidarity actions in support of non-union members in poor and working-class communities (see Shantz 2005). In Toronto, a flying squad was formed to co-ordinate strike support and help build workers' self-organization and solidarity among employed and unemployed workers, unionized and non-unionized. The flying squad is autonomous from all official union structures and is open to rank-and-file workers or workers in unorganized workplaces or who are unemployed. The flying squad supports direct action against bosses of all types. In a Canadian context, flying squads have offered crucial support to direct actions around immigration defense, tenant protection, squatters' rights, and welfare support by mobilizing sizeable numbers of rank-and-file unionists who are prepared for actions without regard to legality. Not limited in their scope of action by specific collective agreements or workplaces, flying squads mobilize for community as well as workplace defense. By deploying flying squads, workers in Ontario alone have successfully worked to stop deportations, halt evictions, helped win strikes and win social assistance for people that had been denied. Based on these examples, workers in Peterborough and Montreal have recently taken part in developing flying squad networks in their cities. The Precarious Workers Network coalescing in Montreal is primarily organizing among unorganized and unemployed workers.

In my previous union I helped to form an anti-poverty working group. The union gave the working group (whose members came from outside as well as inside the union) an office, phone line and other resources, providing a useful space for union members and community members to come together to organize and discuss political strategies more broadly. The working group acts beyond the expectations of traditional unionism to assist people (members and non-members) experiencing problems with collection agencies, landlords, bosses and police and to help anyone having difficulties with welfare or other government bureaucracies. Assistance is offered for anything from filling out government forms properly to taking direct action against an employer or landlord who is ripping someone off. Those affected decide the best approach to deal with their situation, and the working group helps with resources and people to get it done. Recognizing that "established channels" rarely work in favour of poor people, the working group is committed to taking whatever action is necessary to get people what they need. It is a recognition, expressed by the union's membership, that union resources are working-class community resources, part of an infrastructure of resistance, rather than simply bargaining resources.

These are simply beginning, limited examples from first-hand involvement. Community centers, food shares, shelters and housing are yet to come.

Reflections

We need to be prepared not just intellectually but organizationally for radical struggles and transformation. Infrastructures of resistance serve as means by which people can sustain radical social change before, during and after insurrectionary periods.

As a child growing up in a union family I can remember many occasions in which members came together to share good times, discussion, play, and friendship — parties at the union hall, picnics, sports clubs, etc. These events provided spaces in which members and their families

could benefit culturally and materially from a shared community and culture, from mutual aid in practice. By the time I went to work in the plant and became a member of the local myself, most of these activities and spaces were things of the past. My fellow workers on the line were finding support and solidarity not within the shared spaces of the local, but often, instead, in born-again religions and reactionary clubs.

Indeed this is perhaps one of the lessons to be learned from the successful organizing done by the Right in the 1980s and 1990s. In times of need and crisis, the evangelical churches provided institutional support and emotional defence against capitalist alienation (though not necessarily in ways that the Left should emulate). Many evangelical communities provide food, clothing and shelter for members. Many can mobilize hundreds to build a house for someone in their community. The Left has been less active in developing these infrastructural capacities, though these are things we could be doing in our own neighbourhoods.

Infrastructures of resistance encourage people to create alternative social spaces within which liberatory institutions, practices and relationships can be nurtured. They include the beginnings of economic and political self-management through the creation of institutions which can encourage a broader social transformation while also providing some of the conditions for personal and collective sustenance and growth in the present. This is about changing the world, not by taking control of the state, but by creating opportunities for people to develop their personal and collective power.

Infrastructures of resistance create situations in which specific communities build economic and social systems that operate, as much as possible, as working alternatives to the dominant state capitalist structures. They are organized around alternative institutions that offer at least a starting point for meeting community needs such as food, housing, communications, energy, transportation, child care, education and so on. These institutions are autonomous from, and indeed opposed to, dominant relations and institutions of the state and capital. They may also contest "official" organs of the working class such as bureaucratic unions or political parties. In the short term these institutions contest official structures, with an eye towards, in the longer term, replacing them.

A problem for any hopeful politics remains that the present imposes itself relentlessly upon the future. It is always necessary to remember that these activities are marked by their emergence within the shell of capitalism. The history of this birth scars them. It also presses in against them to limit their range and scope and to corrode their capacities to be sustained. At same time, since there is no way to know whether an insurrection will occur, or if it will be successful, it is worthwhile to create situations in the present that approximate the sorts of relations in which we would like to live. The creation of alternative institutions and relationships, which express our more far-reaching visions, is desirable in and of itself. It is important to liberate or create space within which we might live more free and secure lives today, as we work to build a new society.

There are of course limits to this approach and many would disagree vehemently with the idea that alternative forms of organization gradually replacing current forms of power is somehow enough. Many would suggest that if at any point these alternatives actually come to pose a threat to existing forms of power they will be met with, likely extreme, acts of military violence. Such spaces will need to be defended. Indeed the conflict over their continued existence may well produce the very forms of sudden radical upheaval that have been seen in other periods.

It is not enough to ignore the hegemonic institutions, as some might hope. Their capacities and strengths must also be corroded and diminished. Past experiences also teach that any movement that exists primarily as a counter-cultural expression faces the well known threats of co-optation, as elements of the counter culture are commodified and corralled by the logic of capitalist exchange, or marginalization, as the counter-cultures are simply ignored or tolerated, left to "do their own thing."

How long these infrastructures of resistance might endure is an open question. Some have collapsed already; others continue and thrive. Unfortunately some have been overcome by sectarianism or competing visions. Others have folded due to lack of resources, funds or labor. Many wrap up as specific needs are met. Still others have evolved or transformed into something different than that from which they originated as new issues and concerns emerge. Almost all have given birth to other new projects. Most have encouraged some participation in previously existing projects –- around anti-poverty, immigrant defence or housing. Overall, however, the freedom experienced and nurtured in such spaces is often quite fragile and tenuous.

Superseding the status quo requires, in part, a refusal to participate in dominant social relations. Communities might seek to re-organize social institutions in such a way as to reclaim social and economic power and exercise it in their own collective interests. They might seek an alternative social infrastructure that is responsive to people's needs because it is developed and controlled directly by them. Such an approach takes a firm stand against the authority vested in politicians and their corporate masters. It might also speak against the hierarchical arrangements that exemplify major institutions such as workplaces, schools, churches and even the family. It is important to develop the skills and resources, some forgotten or overlooked, that might contribute to this.

The perspectives and practices of our movements, in addressing immediate day-to-day concerns, remind us that we must offer examples that resonate with people's experiences and needs. Additionally, any movement that fails to offer alternative and reliable organizational spaces and practices will be doomed to marginalization and failure. Or as Herzen has remarked: "A goal which is infinitely remote is not a goal at all, it is a deception" (quoted in Ward, 2004: 32).

These subsistence practices could point the way towards the development of real world alternatives to capitalism. The challenge remains how such subsistence activities might allow for the creation of greater spaces for their autonomous development and extension. There is an ongoing push and pull between forces driving towards dis/valorization into capitalism and forces working for autonomous development.

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Socialism and Democracy