

Anarchy and the Common Ground Collective

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Intro

This piece is born out a misconception (presumptions?) about the Common Ground Collective and it's overarching philosophies and organizing in New Orleans. This is an excerpt of a larger piece I am working about the work we have done there, are doing now and where we might head in the future.

These are my thoughts and opinions of the work I helped lay down and think about daily—they do not necessarily reflect Common Ground Collective as 'official' statements. This is a rough draft, so apologies for some of the disjointedness to it.

One critique that we at Common Ground Collective have had from some volunteers within 'anarchist'/'anti-authoritarian' communities is that we are 'authoritarian' or 'hierarchical.'

Privilege and Assumptions

I would propose that ALL volunteers that come to Common Ground Collective and NOLA (short for New Orleans) in general; check themselves before they come down. Why are you coming to New Orleans? We must remember that we ALL bring our ideas, privilege as well as ASSUMPTIONS about the way things SHOULD be. A number of people, when they show up bring some sense of 'entitlement' around a few issues : that they should be in power, or in decision making roles simply because they are anarchist and propose to know better. This view in many ways is unrealistic and unhealthy to them, to us as an organization and to the people we serve in the communities. The picture in NOLA is large, complex and Common Ground Collective is one piece in that whole puzzle. Even though our organization has grown large we have many autonomous projects going on simultaneously within a larger framework of many organizations (like the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund Coalition) working on similar as well as separate goals. This is a real life situation, not a theoretical abstract with many varied actors and participants from all political ideologies and disciplines. Mass mobilization organizing, 'free states', temporary autonomous zones and regional gatherings were but brief trial runs for what is going on in NOLA right now. If you have concerns or questions ASK, don't assume you know the ins and outs of the political climate in this region. There are longstanding political feuds, historical oppression, ongoing state repression and plain differences of opinion within the context of rebuilding NOLA.

Leadership within CGC

There are leadership positions within Common Ground Collective(CGC) that are necessary and which we work to be as transparent about as possible. People have been put into positions of responsibility through commitment and dedication to the ongoing work. Many of our projects constantly evolve from new input and the fact that we maintain flexibility in what we do.

A misconception about CGC for example is: that when someone shows up for a few days (which is a righteous thing to do) we are going to automatically let them start deciding what to do with our programs, finances or structures. This has happened often, especially from people that have no track record with us, and are not known to us or to anyone in NOLA. Again I hope they would ask “Why have I come to NOLA?”

But once people establish commitment, a work record and some ACCOUNTABILITY to CGC and the residents then they are welcomed openly to more decision making processes and responsibility. People have been put into positions of responsibility through their commitment and dedication to the ongoing work, not because of cronyism or political maneuvering. Many of our projects and leadership constantly evolve from new input and the fact that we maintain flexibility in what we do. Malik has often said: “it’s what you do, not what you say you will do that matters here..”

Organizing Structures

In brief, the way Common Ground Collective strives to organize is: once a project is started it is autonomous under the umbrella of CGC. The people who ‘bottom line it’ (leadership) can organize their teams and decision making processes the way they need to. They are accountable to their project, CGC and to the people they serve (this is discussed in volunteer orientation on the ground). Some call them ‘affinity groups’ some call them ‘work groups/teams’, that is up to them to decide. Some projects have multiple coordinators and some have just one. Coordinators can and have been removed for a myriad of reasons. They must be accountable on many levels.

That said we don’t have a centralized body that micro manages every detail either. The central collective body works on long term goals, strategies, internal organizing processes and finances with each project maintaining a great amount of autonomy. Is it bureaucratic? Not even close, but it is getting more tightly organized. We are setting up guidelines and processes for the way we function so that we can continue to do so. We don’t set up arbitrary rules that exist for themselves. We set up blueprints to make everything move forward as democratically as possible.

The word ‘collective’ should not imply that everyone who shows up automatically is part of it. Our collective is in transition and growing. We are using that term in it’s broadest sense at this point. The people who are our core organizers (about 40 people +/-) are more or less the amorphous ‘collective’. This is a piece that internally we are working on and developing. We are also working on the transparency around what ‘collective’ means in our work.

The clinics are the one exception; they have more hierarchical elements to them at this point due to their intense scrutiny by the state in just keeping the doors open. The clinics must work with bureaucratic institutions like Center for Disease Control and Health & Human Services (whether they want to or not) to maintain the quality of free services we offers opposed to many of our other programs which are out of sight from state control. See their site (cghc.org/) for more info on this. Still with that, the clinics have many open processes in keeping with our principles and beliefs.

Consistency

One VERY critical component in working with low income or ANY traditionally marginalized communities (devastated or not) is consistency in the work that we do. If we start programs and

drop them then we are not doing our jobs. We, with privilege and relative power in society must recognize this. Historically 'white middle class' or 'folx with privilege' and many good intentions have aligned themselves in good faith to work in communities such as these, only to co-opt the work, abandon the issues when it wasn't a 'hot' anymore or take over the work being done for their own gains. These concerns are some of the 'baggage' that we ALL bring to the table in working in NOLA.

Many well intentioned folx have come through CGC with great ideas, propose programs, start them, then have left us holding the bag. When that volunteer leaves: we as a collective entity are held to it by the communities we serve . Good intentions do not rebuild what 400 years of abandonment and neglect have done.

So we at CGC strive to overcome this by a strong self critique in all the work we potentially engage in which means that every well intentioned person with a 'great idea' does not get to automatically start making decisions or have input. We also ask of our volunteers that they set their preconceived ideas aside and be open to a different experience. But what sometimes happens is that those with privilege and entitlement assume they know better what to do than those who have lived their whole lives there, or have been working there for months through all the conflict, repression, neglect and hard work. So I would ask of these people: Did you come for 'activist points'? To push your ideology? Or to do the arduous hard work of building power with and for people in NOLA without personal glory?

We at CGC walk the tenuous tightrope of 'equilibrio" (from the Modragon Cooperatives in Spain) between horizontal and more centralized organizing, personal experience in balance with the goals and needs of the communities we serve.

As one of our core organizers Kerul Dyer succinctly put it "Common Ground is a largely white activist organization, and most of the coordinators come from an anti-authoritarian political culture. Malik Rahim and some of the core leadership in NOLA, however, come from a radical black political culture with fundamentally different experiences and approaches. The organization incorporates many decentralized characteristics, but at base we are acting in solidarity with local black leadership, and Malik makes many of the final overall long term decisions."

This is where much of our 'solidarity' comes from. Long term and difficult commitments in complex political/socio-economic landscapes within NOLA. We are blending decision making processes and coordinator structures as we go.

Many times I have challenged my beliefs about the way it 'should be' and the practicalities of 'what is' on the ground while still keeping my principles and the working principles of the organization.

Conclusions ?

Anarchism is not rigid, it is flexible and fluid so cast aside your thoughts about the way it 'should' be and help make it what it 'could be'.

CGC doesn't have the answers; actually in many ways we have more questions as we go. Like the Zapatistas (who have informed some of the basic underlying group philosophy) we 'Lead by asking' as much as possible. It doesn't mean that we have it figured out or that we know the answers. What it means is that we are struggling along to make a better world for all of us. Our slice of putting principles into action is through our work in NOLA.

Another critique we have heard about CGC volunteers being only 'jocks', 'christians' etc ;we have cast a wide open net to anyone with honorable intentions to come and do hard work. We don't need just radical subcultures to change society we need people from all walks of life. What

if 'radical' people had conversations with these folx and introduced them to alternative perspectives? What if we shifted the thinking in amerikkkan political culture through this shared experience rather than looking down on them? Kwame Ture once said "White people need to organize in their own communities." What if this was an opportunity?

One of the most beautiful scenes in the early days was when a truck from Islamic Relief showed up with supplies from the Mormons and Catholic charities; which was all unloaded by people from the neighborhood, anarchist, communist and socialist working together in solidarity for a common good. Sectarian ideologies were set aside for the common good.

This doesn't make CGC 'feel good' charity, we have radical analysis of our work but we do mix service programs with our challenges to the oppressive systems. The Black Panther Party used to have "survival programs pending revolution' We are mixing those concepts with modern anarchist interpretation of 'dual power' models ('resisting while building counter institutions'). People need service and even our most benign programs still get heat from many sectors of 'the state'. Homeland Security has been no friend to volunteers or organizers within CGC. We give people HOPE for a better future in which communities have control over what happens in their lives. This fundamentally flies in the face of what many sectors of the corporate-state want. We know who we are politically and where we fit into the complicated structures both historically and presently. There are many reasons to stand up to white militia, defend houses from being bulldozed as well as cleaning up a neighborhood, sharing kind words or any of the less visible things that support people putting their lives back together.

We invite AND encourage those that have issues with the structures, programs or concepts within Common Ground to take direct action and start their own projects. This is not flippant, there is SO much work that needs to be done and there are autonomous groups needed to fulfill this, otherwise it is left to developers, the state and corporations to decide the fate of historically marginalized people in the Gulf Coast region.

We are standing on the edge of potential...so how is it going to look.?

From the Gulf Coast Basin

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www.CommonGroundRelief.org

For further reading please these pieces on privilege and assumptions

Solidarity not Charity: Racism in Katrina Relief Work

by Molly McClure

www.raisethefist.com

and

From the Ground Up: Race and the Left Response to Katrina

by Walidah Imarisha

www.leftturn.org

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