

ORGANIZING FOR AUTONOMY: HISTORY, THEORY, AND STRATEGY FOR COLLECTIVE LIBERATION

excerpts from the book written by CounterPower

The Specter That Haunts Us

How can we get free? How can we free ourselves, our communities, our environments, our societies? And what will this freedom look like? While the present moment holds incredible possibilities to organize for our collective liberation, there are powerful forces readily willing and able to summon all available weapons of repression to contain and suppress revolutionary movements. Our present civilization, argued Herbert Marcuse, always must defend itself “against the specter of a world which could be free.” It is our task to give this specter an earthly form.

The question of freedom is central to all revolutionary movements. It is at the root of everyday struggles against white supremacist colonialism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, the authoritarian state, and every other form of systemic oppression. But we have to ask, again, what will freedom look like? Often, the realities we each face constrain the ways we can answer this question, so we ask it in pieces: How do we provide for each other? How do we protect, nurture, care, love, and create? How do we liberate ourselves from the hardships of enclosure, exploitation, and dependency that are imposed on our minds, bodies, communities, and environments? How do we free our sense of freedom, so that it is not a set of individual and extractive privileges, but is instead the grounding for a communal form of abundance?

Where we stand today is the result of centuries of struggle between forces of liberation and forces of domination. Governments and corporations pour toxins into bodies, minds, and environments, creating an unsustainable world of individualism, disposability, and extraction that festers with antiblack, heteropatriarchal, and settler-colonial violence. The powers that structure our “civilization” have brought the entire planetary system to the precipice of ecological collapse, while at the same time preparing the ground for resurgent forms of fascism that exploit ordinary people’s frustrations by fragmenting the oppressed with xenophobic and antiblack sentiments. Imperialism—justified under the guise of multiculturalism and sustainable development—now increasingly must contend with forms of right-wing nationalism and white supremacy promoting a vision of the future in which outsiders of any sort are walled off by frightened and insecure attempts to recreate a mythic past of white, heteropatriarchal bliss.

As an individual, it can seem almost impossible to confront such massive forces of global devastation and reactionary violence. In isolation from one another, as individualized consumers, workers, voters, and families, it is easy for avoidance and apathy to close in and keep us from seeing that, together, side-by-side, we can turn our faces toward the storm.

“Revolutions are made not to get more (or, of course, less) of what we already have,” André Gorz reminds us, “but to get something altogether different which will put an end to conditions that are felt to be unbearable.” The aim of social revolution is to succeed in creating a different way of life, one that can liberate the immense creative potential of a humanity united in its diversity. Social revolution aims to nurture new sensibilities about how life can and should be lived, and to establish the conditions for their flourishing. Social revolution is not just seizing power or tearing down the system, it is a passage between worlds. We need analyses, visions, and strategies to guide us from this world to the next, based on an honest assessment of the material realities we face. Our values—freedom, equality, autonomy, solidarity—and the histories of struggle past and present, can help us chart a path toward liberation.

The Dangers of Assimilation

Given the crisis-prone tendencies of imperialism, the metropolitan core states have constructed a loyal base of supporters at home to protect it from uprisings launched by the oppressed masses of the global peripheries, to perform domestic policing duties and serve as cannon fodder in imperialist wars, and to function as a domestic consumer market. According to Zak Cope, the ruling class of the metropolitan core attempts “to incorporate the core-nation working class into the imperialist system by means of granting it political, cultural, and material benefits. These can take the form of extensive enfranchisement, increased leisure time, higher wages, legal pay arbitration, the right to organize, public welfare services, and relative cultural esteem.” Historically, this process of differential integration of a gendered and racialized ‘worker elite’ or ‘labor aristocracy’ through social imperialism has entailed an active approach to cultivating loyalty via the ideological state apparatuses, especially mass media, and a proliferation of heteropatriarchal brotherhoods, pro-business associations, corporatist labor unions, and racist community associations and civic institutions.

The forces of liberal inclusion attempt to contain and suppress mass unrest through various modes of incorporation into the prevailing order, such as pulling organizers away from the people’s liberation struggle into the non-profit industrial complex. While the communist movement fights to achieve victories for all oppressed people, the ruling class attempts to defuse insurgent social antagonisms through differential concessions, which often requires the neutralization of grassroots militancy through cooptation and repression as a prerequisite for implementation. They respond to a movement such as Black Lives Matter—which calls for defunding and abolishing the police—with calls instead to spend money on “cultural sensitivity training” and other such palliatives meant to keep the underlying structures of systemic oppression intact. Imperialism makes token concessions such as these in order to disarm and defuse our movements, to shift popular support in favor of the imperialist system, and to prevent movements from gaining further ground (let alone winning collective liberation). Through the selective expansion of social welfare programs by corporations and the state, the worker elite and its professional, managerial, and small business allies are able to accumulate a degree of socioeconomic stability and status in the form of home ownership, job and income

security, financial savings, healthcare, and education. “Above all else,” writes Bromma, “a worker elite is defined by its preferential social contract with the bourgeoisie.” Thus, social imperialist welfare policies serve as the material basis of privilege and a mechanism for the containment and suppression of metropolitan class struggle, while also ensuring the internal fragmentation and disunity of the proletariat.

These policies have deepened an ideology of Social Darwinism among certain classes, sectors, and strata within the metropolitan core populations, rooted in “the Malthusian premise that you had better line up behind your own imperialist power in order to grab as much as possible of the (finite) resources, which can then be shared out within that particular national society.”⁵⁶ To maintain hegemony, imperialism alternates between assimilationist and exclusionary modes according to context, balance of forces, ideological line, and the depth of world-systemic crisis. While obscured for a time by the neoliberal ideology of “multiculturalism,” ecological crises and neo-fascism have made it abundantly clear that the metropolitan core intends to reap the material benefits of cheap labor-power and cheap nature for itself, while leaving the global peripheries—both internal and external to the core—to bear the consequences. The social chauvinism produced by imperialism in its various forms emerges as a major obstacle to the development of revolutionary consciousness, self-organization, and self-activity among sections of the metropolitan population, who accrue psychological and material benefits from the ongoing super-exploitation of the global peripheries. The task of communists concentrated within the metropolitan core is to agitate, educate, and organize to break the hold of social chauvinist ideologies; to learn and build alliances with liberation movements emerging from the global peripheries; and to work to structurally undermine imperialism at the base through the construction of a metropolitan communist movement among the multitude of proletarian and popular social groups.

A Path to Liberation

The revolutionary struggle is protracted. It will likely span multiple historical eras and integrate asymmetrical and nonlinear processes of building the organized autonomy of the people. A successful protracted revolutionary struggle must combine three levels of political praxis: strategic, operational, and tactical. A strategy is a plan of action for the achievement of political objectives, within a specified historical time and geographical space, utilizing limited resources and personnel, in the context of uncertain, changing, and potentially hostile conditions. The strategic level encompasses the articulation and implementation of a grand strategy for the overthrow of imperialism and construction of the world commune as well as a programmatic strategy, or an immediate plan of action to advance the movement in the direction of the grand strategy within a particular territory.

With the general framework established by a grand strategy and program, the operational level of political praxis is concerned with the planning and conduct of campaigns for the immediate phase of struggle and deals with the planned cooperation among revolutionary forces within

one or more fronts of struggle. A campaign is a series of operations undertaken to achieve specific objectives within a determinate time-space, whereas an operation consists of the selective deployment of a set of tactics to achieve one or more campaign objectives. According to T. Derbent, "the operation is the means of strategy, operational art is the material of strategy; the battle is the means of the operation, the tactics are the material of the operational art."

Operational plans should therefore correspond to the goals and projects selected at the strategic level through militant social investigation. Based on further inquiries conducted locally, specific objectives that correspond to a given operational area can be selected and synchronized with the local conditions encountered. Each operational plan should be developed with specific, actionable goals and timetables. It should anticipate the availability of personnel and resources and include contingency plans based on an assessment of the balance of forces and possible outcomes. Operational plans are developed to manage the use of organizational resources in pursuit of campaign objectives. Operational plans can be revised or abandoned as the struggle advances or retreats and as the operational context changes. For revolutionaries, operational plans clarify our tasks and responsibilities. Following the completion of an operational plan, it is our responsibility to assess its effectiveness in achieving strategic objectives and to summarize lessons accordingly. As plans are completed, the initial results should be recorded and summarized, becoming part of the organization's memory and serving as material for future political education. Evaluations of the plan's successes and drawbacks should also be made available to the broader movement. This can serve the movement by clarifying our position within the overall development of the revolutionary struggle. It can also aid the process of making adjustments when confronted with new developments.

Finally, the tactical level of political praxis is concerned with the planning and conduct of engagements or battles. This level is characterized by the application of concentrated force, consisting of offensive actions to gain objectives and defensive actions to hold objectives or create space for regroupment and counteroffensive. From protests and pickets to strikes and occupations, tactics are devices for accomplishing operational objectives. Parameters for the deployment of specific tactics should be determined by the engagement in question and by the overall political objectives and ethical criteria set at the strategic and operational levels.