

Proposal: Politics Beyond Obedience

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Proposal

I intend to show why there are so many points at which social movements have made people less free while attempting liberation. My suspicion is that the choice of form and structure taken by political resistance may determine its impact at least as much as the goals in sight. Specifically, that a hierarchy of power or value between members of an organization, or between members and non-members, is no different than the hierarchies being fought. Most importantly, participants become accustomed to following or leading and fail to address the relationship fundamental to all oppression.

It is generally agreed that political resistance needs new forms, and I suspect that the best perspective from which to understand these forms is that of obedience. Most institutionalized visions of liberation involve systemic change, and I would like to address in depth the possibility of stepping outside the dominant system altogether. By studying the points in history at which social movements become institutionalized, I hope to show the alternative paths which activity could have taken. Central to this study are the changes in individual perspectives on obedience and power, especially during the moments of institutionalization. Has the organization (crystallization) of those opposed to the dominant power caused them to become more independent in thought and means, or has it caused its constituents to become more obedient---only to a different power? Can an organization be led by all of its members? Is following necessarily a loss of self-determination, or could it lead to future freedom? In short, can an organizational sense of discipline exist without causing us to become more pliant in absolute terms?

A rough introduction follows which outlines what might be my general strategy. I will focus on autobiographies and histories which describe organization formation during social movements. A preliminary list of movements I would like to study would include:

The Progressive movement gives an example of liberation entirely predicated on control. The liberatory educational style popularized by Dewey contains excellent examples of these contradictions. I will use Dewey's writing ("My Pedagogic Creed", perhaps) and public theoretical debates as evidence.

The contemporary anti-corporate and anti-globalization movement is vocally aware of the potential dangers of organization, yet may suffer from almost the identical defects as older movements. Books by sympathetic sources, like Seven Days That Shook the World and The Battle of Seattle will be used, in addition to my own experience and corporate sources like Globalization and Its Discontents.

I would like to study two aspects of the Black Panther party--the free breakfast program which the FBI thought was their most dangerous success, and the effects of power politics in organization.

Finally, I will consider movements of a more spontaneous nature, such as the unemployed people's marches described by Piven and Cloward.

Piven and Cloward in particular have a thesis similar to my own. They are concerned with the structure of political resistance as a key to its efficacy and effect, but they study the

reasons why movements begin and what determines the course that they take. The central theme in their work is to understand the role of organization in an attempt to understand the real social effect. My research should be complementary, exploring the alternative ways for resistance to be both effective and permanent. However, I will approach the problem through an analysis of ideological social reproduction and obedience.

Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Hakim Bey among others have written about the possibility that the most potent form of resistance and exercise of freedom might be anarchic Being, something as simple as making every decision on one's own, and behaving in accordance with one's decisions while refusing to coerce others. This position is at base a critique of popular conceptions of agreement. I would like to reformulate this idea from my own perspective and place it in a rigorous historical context.

My audience should be captive, and wishing they weren't. Seriously, I am writing for those who need the world to change, but are as conflicted as me about the dilemmas of representative government in miniature and the mythology of the vanguard party, both of which lurk beneath most contemporary movements.

Introduction

Is it possible to lead someone to freedom? If making your own decisions is an aspect of freedom, then this is unlikely. For example, the relief system improves material conditions through a structure of control and surveillance. It is generally agreed that this temporary alleviation of suffering does little good. Alternative programs of bootstrapping and self-uplift through education or literacy campaigns assume a similar helplessness on the part of those being helped. Even in its best incarnations, this strategy assumes that oppression proceeds from within the minds of the oppressed in the form of ignorance or of false consciousness. The tools and strategies of change in this scenario are something the leader possesses, and must impart to the flock.

Will we become free if nobody leads us? Isn't organized resistance the best chance we have? I am writing with the hope that already, all us interact and informally organize in ways which may replace the coercion we now live beneath. In what specific ways can we refuse to accept our prescribed modes of existence, expanding the refusal to follow rather than accepting even temporary, pragmatic arrangements of hierarchy? I believe that any group of people determined to make their own decisions is the greatest possible threat to social structure and its stability.

As the story goes, capitalism has recently vanquished its foes and democracy steals lionlike through the wilderness, liberating us from savage obscurity by offering us a world of *choices*. We may choose to vote or not, choose the more agreeable candidate, the right products, and a decent profession. Good education even allows us to interpret and question in an original fashion, and join the right resistance group when life fails to satisfy us.

A mechanical tradition prevents us from answering ballots with language, rather than the rodentlike chewing of holes: Why is my water brown? I would like the next president of General Motors to be -----. Can we have more teachers in my daughter's school? The obstacle is a simple one: if we all made a unique decision, our answers could never be tabulated by machine.

To agree is to obey.

We are told that agreement is necessary to social functioning. Without it, we would move in billions of separate directions, our actions dissipating in the breeze. However, *cooperation* does not require agreement. Any number of people who believe that all humans such as themselves should have food can act together to make this happen, yet hold wildly different beliefs.

From this possibly outlandish perspective, let us consider politics. As it is, our political system is about selection, not creation. Will I be a Democrat, Marxist, Maoist, anarchist, corporate liberal, environmentalist, or ... This problem is well-known, but the solution is far too dangerous to speak.

Maybe political resistance has failed us because it is thought of as *providing an alternative*. Organizations and leaders occasionally manage to improve the world, but as the movements behind them fade, nothing is left, only a shell to either follow or not. The model of obedience that they impose---the same as society at large---is of constraint and concession.

Even if nothing I have written about agreement is true, it is unarguable that action within any organization can only bring about a miniscule subset of the desires we each have. The nature of consolidation, making infinite demands limited and countable, will always be synonymous with a paradigm of reform.

Does all of this result simply from resistance organizations choosing to specialize, under the pressures of realism? Assuming it was possible to create an organization which would attempt to fix everything that was wrong, could it really work towards the dream of everyone in it? If the organization collapses for some reason, would its members be once again helpless and obedient, or would they have the tools to accomplish what they wanted?

What aspects of life are considered political today? Most commonly, *politics* refers to the working of state power and *political resistance* refers to the struggle between that power and other institutions designed to challenge or reform it. A more general definition, still grounded in the mainstream, is that activity which affects the exercise of state power is political. Therefore, business leaders, police, and teachers are all acting politically by changing, enforcing and embodying, or refusing to obey this power.

We must understand the history of resistance to power with attention to the ways in which those resisting have themselves created and used power. If the form of resistance has been part of the reason for its failure, how can we correct flaws in the form? Should we abandon organized resistance altogether? I will examine the moments in history at which people in social movements create organizations, with attention to the changes that take place in the people and their politics.

No state can exist without *obedience*, and as I stated, a major thesis here is that no resistance which demands or even encourages obedience can succeed. Inculcating obedience into us is a process that we may need to understand to resist. Clearly, it must take place on several levels, and I will at least briefly address all aspects that I recognize. The severe reduction of the variety of ideas to which we are exposed. I will show some of the many steps which have been taken in this direction, and explain the social, personal, and even neurobiological implications of this suffocation.

Do leaders and organizations create social movements, are they only voices riding the crest of a wave? Are social movements begun by the spread of revolutionary ideas, or are these ideas a piece of something else, deeper and larger, that moves through societies? These questions will help us understand the ways in which obedience to leaders has affected movements.

Bibliography

Ward Churchill, Pacifism as Pathology. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 1998.

Voice of dissent against my personally favored resistance (peaceful Being in total disobedience). Churchill uses dialectic dogma to prove that guns are necessary, which will be good to sober me up when I get too touchy-feely.

Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, Five Days That Shook the Work: Seattle and Beyond. New York : Verso, 2000.

Provides autobiographical material to teach us about the desired political forms and goals of some participants.

Collier-Thomas and Franklin ed., Sisters in the Struggle. New York: NYU Press, 2001

History of successful grassroots resistance.

Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle. New York: Zone Books, 1994.

This cheesy book I have only started has some excellent tautologies on how television (and friends) affects thought. An entertaining way in which to understand obedience.

Stewart Ewen, PR!: A Social History of Spin. New York: Basic Books, 1996.

Follows the interaction of psychological theories of human development and the use of media to engineer popular opinion. The basic principle behind advertising and news is an expectation of a dialectic reaction, in which our reality is formed in a polar fashion---the assumption is that our beliefs are roughly proportional to our exposure to ideas. "The Developing Mind" might be a good source as well.

Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The birth of the prison. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

The contrasting and mutually reinforcing concepts of discipline and physical violence will be central to this essay. I believe that my analysis of discipline is significantly different than Foucault's, primarily because I feel that no real qualitative change took place in recent history, but this is an excellent foundation for my rant.

Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. New York: Norton, 1975.

A primary source used in Even's PR!, discusses social formation of thought and is the background for the advertising industry.

Frances Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man. New York: Free Press, 1992.

Lame attempt of the Establishment to consolidate debate about political alternatives into ineffective channels, forced leftists to waste breath arguing that they still exist.

Ulrike Heider, Anarchism: Left, Right, and Green. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994.
Mostly focused on the ideology, but valuable for the small glimpse into different attempts at anarchist organization.

Robert L. Heilbroner, The Nature and Logic of Capitalism. New York: Norton, 1985.
A social reproduction perspective on capitalism. Social movements are not led, but are an expression of shaping influences on the people.

Myles Horton, The Long Haul. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998.
History of the Highlander School, attended by Septima Clark, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks among other success stories. Organization looks like an excellent idea from this perspective.

Joe Martinez, Kesner ed., The Neurobiology of Learning and Memory. San Diego: Academic Press, 1998.
A bit of the old ultraviolence of the masters' tools against themselves. I will try to prove with it that the monoculture of ideas is biologically bad for our brains.

David Nasaw, Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States. New York: Oxford University, 1979.
Schools have always been a site for the creation of complicity, and this book focuses on the component of ideological conditioning.

George Orwell, Homage to Catalonia. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1980.
His experience in the Spanish Civil War which has the raw material about the media's manipulation of reality and ideological control which inspired '1984'. The media techniques that were being perfected at the time were about restriction and restructuring of ideas.

Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.
Historical study of organized and unorganized social movements, a major thesis is that institution formation is encouraged by the power elite and works in their favor. The emphasis is on a later stage in organizations' development than I am focusing on.

Joseph Stiglitz, Globalization and Its Discontents. New York : W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.
A supposedly "renegade" establishment viewpoint, this book reveals that both the anti-corporate and the corporate movement have much in common (as usual), and may unquestioningly support the same forms of oppression.

Leo Tolstoy, Government is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism. London: Phoenix Press, 1991.

Catalyst of mine, causing me to focus on individual actions and thought rather than forming or fighting institutions directly. Seems to be one of the more genuine escapes from the dominant ideology.

Robert M. Young, Mental Space. London: Process Press, 1994.

I have not read this yet, but it appears to be an extremely rigorous attempt to connect ideas of free association, how to keep human experience deep, the ‘history of thought’, and other crazy aspects of culture.

Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States. New York: Perennial Classics, 2001.

A socialish, anarchish perspective on trade unions and a gaggle of attempts at resistance. Identifies military recruitment as one of U.S. capitalism’s weak spots, resting on thin ideological ice.

the current revision will usually be found at
<http://www.ludd.net/essays/misorganization.pdf>