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Affinity Groups

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Contents

Step 1	5
Step 2	10
Step 3	11

address concerns until the group reaches consensus or the closest thing to it.

You and your friends already compose an informal organizational structure capable of tremendous achievements. Here's the theory to go with that practice.

You will need (tools or supplies):

- A circle of friends
- Trust
- Consensus
- Secrecy
- A good idea
- Plans for different scenarios
- Structures to respond to unexpected scenarios
- A little courage (may be optional, but should be at hand just in case)
- Action!
- Subsequent discussion

Step 1

Chances are, even if you have never been involved in direct action before, even if this is the first radical website you have ever encountered, that you are already part of an affinity group—the structure proven most effective for guerrilla activities of all kinds. An affinity group is a circle of friends who, knowing each other's strengths, weaknesses, and backgrounds, and having already established a common language and healthy internal dynamics, set out to accomplish a goal or series of goals.

An affinity group is not a permanent arrangement, but a structure of convenience, ever mutable, assembled from the pool of interested and trusted people for the duration of a given project. Once assembled, this group may choose to be “closed,” if security dictates: that is, whatever goes on within the group is never spoken of outside it, even after all its activities are long completed. A particular team can act together over and over as an affinity group, but the members can also participate in other affinity groups, break up into smaller affinity groups, and act outside the affinity group structure.

The size of an affinity group can range from two to, say, fifteen individuals, depending on the action in question; but no group should be so numerous that an informal conversation about pressing matters is impossible. You can always split up into two or more groups, if there are enough of you. In actions that require driving, the easiest system is to have one affinity group to each vehicle.

Affinity groups can be practically invincible. They cannot be infiltrated, because all members share history and intimacy with each other, and no one outside the group need be informed of their plans or activities. They are more efficient than the most professional military force: they are free to adapt to any situation; they need not pass their decisions through any complicated process of ratification; all individuals can act and react instantly without waiting for orders, yet with a clear idea of what to expect from one another. The mutual admiration and inspiration on which they are founded make them very difficult to demoralize. In stark contrast to capitalist, fascist, and communist structures, they function without any need for hierarchy or coercion: participation in an affinity group can be fun as well as effective. Most important of all, they are motivated by shared desire and loyalty, rather than profit, duty, or any other compensation or abstraction: small wonder whole squads of riot police have been held at bay by small affinity groups armed with only the tear gas canisters shot at them.

Step 3

Although one of the rules of thumb for affinity groups is that they should not be so large as to need formal structures for discussions, larger meetings—between clusters of affinity groups, for example—may require them. Be warned: using such protocol unnecessarily will bog down discussions and alienate participants, and can even foster needless antagonism and drama. On the other hand, if an assembly shares good faith in a given approach and works out its details together, such structures can make group decision-making quicker, easier, and more responsive to the needs and interests of everyone involved. No system is better than the people who participate in it; make sure in advance that everyone is comfortable with the format you use.

In one common format, the discussion goes around a circle, each person taking a turn to speak. In another, suited better to larger gatherings, the group begins by agreeing on a facilitator, an individual who will help keep the discussion constructive and on topic. Another individual volunteers to “take stack,” keeping track of the order in which people raise their hands to speak; if people feel it is important to make sure different demographics represented in the group get equal time speaking, this person can take a separate stack for each, and alternate between them. Next, individuals propose items for the agenda of the discussion, then come to consensus on an order for these items and, if time is pressing, a time limit for the discussion of each. During the discussion process, individuals can ask to respond directly to questions, so the group doesn’t have to wait until the stack comes around to them to hear their response. Individuals can also make comments on the process of the discussion, urging people to focus when they are getting distracted, or proposing a break so people can stretch their legs or discuss matters in smaller groups. When it’s time to make a decision on an issue, individuals make proposals, propose amendments, and then

covering how to turn a bicycle into a record player, or forcing a multinational corporation out of business through a carefully orchestrated program of sabotage. Affinity groups have planted and defended community gardens, built and burned down and squatted buildings, organized neighborhood childcare programs and wildcat strikes; individual affinity groups routinely initiate revolutions in the visual arts and popular music. Your favorite band—they were an affinity group. It was an affinity group that invented the airplane. Another, composed of disgruntled Nietzsche enthusiasts, nearly succeeded in assassinating Adolph Hitler during the Second World War. One set up this website.

Step 2

For affinity groups and larger structures similarly based on consensus and cooperation to function, it is essential that everyone involved be able to rely on each other to come through on their commitments. When a plan is agreed upon, each individual in a group and each group in a cluster should choose one or more critical aspects of the preparation and execution of the plan and offer to bottomline them. Bottomlining the supplying of a resource or the completion of a project means guaranteeing that it will be accomplished somehow, no matter what. If you're operating the legal hotline for your group during a demonstration, you owe it to them to handle it even if you get sick; if your group promises to provide the banners for an action, make sure they're ready, even if that means staying up all night the night before because the rest of your affinity group never showed up. Over time you'll learn how to handle crises, and who can be counted on in them—just as others will learn how much they can count on you.

Affinity groups operate on the consensus model: decisions are made collectively, based on the needs and desires of every individual involved. Democratic votes, in which the majority get their way and the minority must hold their tongues, are anathema to affinity groups: if a group is to function smoothly and hold together, every individual involved must be satisfied. In advance of any action, the members of a group establish together what their personal and collective goals are, what their readiness for risk is (as individuals and as a group), and what their expectations of each other are. These matters determined, they formulate a plan.

Since action situations are always unpredictable and plans rarely come off as anticipated, an affinity group usually has a dual approach to preparing for these. On the one hand, plans are made for different scenarios: if A happens, we'll inform each other by X means and switch to plan B; if X means of communication is impossible, we'll reconvene at site Z at Q o'clock. On the other hand, structures are put in place that will be useful even if what happens resembles none of the imagined scenarios: internal roles are divided up, communication systems (such as two-way radios, or coded phrases for conveying secret information or instructions aloud) are established, general strategies (for maintaining composure, keeping sight of one another in confusing environments, or blocking police charges, to name some examples) are prepared, emergency escape routes are charted, legal support is readied in case anyone gets arrested. After an action, a shrewd affinity group will meet (again, if necessary, in a secure location) to discuss what went well, what could have gone better, and what comes next.

An affinity group answers to itself alone—this is one of its great strengths. Affinity groups are not burdened by the procedural protocol of other organizations, the difficulties of reaching accord among strangers or larger numbers of people, or the limitations of answering to a body not immediately involved in the action. At the same time, just as the members of an affinity group strive for consensus with each other, each affinity group should strive

for a similarly considerate relationship with other individuals and groups—or, at the very least, to complement others' approaches wherever possible, even if these others do not recognize the value of their contribution. People should be thrilled about the participation or intervention of affinity groups, not resent or fear them; they should come to recognize the value of the affinity group model, and so come to apply it themselves, from seeing it succeed and from benefiting from that success.

An affinity group can work together with other affinity groups, in what is sometimes called a cluster. The cluster formation enables a larger number of individuals to act with the same advantages a single affinity group has. If speed or secrecy is called for, representatives of each group can meet ahead of time, rather than the entirety of all groups; if coordination is of the essence, the groups or representatives can arrange methods for communicating through the heat of the action. Over years of collaborating together, different affinity groups can come to know each other as well as they know themselves, and become accordingly more comfortable and capable together.

When several clusters of affinity groups need to coordinate especially massive actions—for a big demonstration, for example—they can hold a spokescouncil meeting. In this author's humble experience, the most effective, constructive spokescouncils are those that limit themselves to providing a forum in which different affinity groups and clusters can inform one another (to whatever extent is wise) of their intentions, rather than seeking to direct activity or dictate principles for all. Such an unwieldy format is ill-suited to lengthy discussion, let alone debate; and whatever decisions are made, or limitations imposed, by such a spokescouncil will inevitably fail to represent the wishes of all involved. The independence and spontaneity that decentralization provides are our greatest advantages in combat with an enemy that has all the other advantages, anyway—why sacrifice these?

The affinity group is not only a vehicle for changing the world—like any good anarchist practice, it is also a model for alternative worlds, and a seed from which such worlds can grow. In an anarchist economy, decisions are not made by boards of directors, nor tasks carried out by masses of worker drones: affinity groups decide and act together. Indeed, the affinity group/cluster/spokescouncil model is simply another incarnation of the communes and workers' councils that formed the backbone of earlier successful (however short-lived) anarchist revolutions.

Not only is the affinity group the best format for getting things done, it's practically essential. You should always attend any event that might prove exciting in an affinity group—not to mention the ones that won't be otherwise! Without a structure that encourages ideas to flow into action, without friends with whom to brainstorm and barnstorm and build up momentum, you are paralyzed, cut off from much of your own potential; with them, you are multiplied by ten, or ten thousand! “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world,” as Margaret Mead wrote: “it's the only thing that ever has.” She was referring, whether she knew the jargon or not, to affinity groups. If every individual in every action against the state and status quo participated as part of a tight-knit, dedicated affinity group, this revolution would be over in a few short years.

You don't need to find a revolutionary organization to join to get active—you and your friends already comprise one! Together, you can change the world. Stop wondering what's going to happen, or why nothing's happening, and start deciding what will happen. Don't just show up at the next demonstration, protest, punk show, traffic jam, or day at work in passive spectator mode, waiting to be told what to do. Get in the habit of trading crazy ideas about what should happen at these events—and of making those ideas reality!

An affinity group could be a sewing circle, a bicycle maintenance collective, or a traveling clown troupe; it could come together for the purpose of starting a local chapter of Food Not Bombs, dis-