

RISE UP!

Introducing a New Column

The aspiration of this column is to provide an opportunity for organizers on the front lines of struggle to reflect on their experiences and to formulate fresh ideas and strategies for an academic audience. Hopefully this can help to invigorate the readers of this journal towards organized collective action, and also help this journal to be more relevant to the movements it aspires to support. Not limited to ecosocialist struggles per se, this column solicits articles, interviews, and other contributions from organizers engaged in struggles for political, economic, and environmental justice from all over the world.

A word of clarification is necessary: organizers are not activists. About the difference, we might quote Bertold Brecht's famous poem: activists are those who "struggle for a day, and they are good." Organizers, on the other hand, "are the indispensable ones." Lenin famously wrote that there can be no revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory. But there cannot be either without organizers, who know how to forge revolutionary practice and theory together into a life's work. In these times of upheaval, economic chaos, and climate catastrophe, more than anything we need organizers, who can rise to this world-historic occasion in practice and theory. We hope in this space to give organizers the credit and the attention that they so rarely receive.

We are very proud to launch the first CNS organizer's column with an article by Ivan Marovic. Ivan was one of the founding members of Otpor, a Serbian organization that in only a few years grew from a group of eleven friends to a social movement of hundreds of thousands. Since then he has been traveling all over the world speaking with all kinds of social movements, inspiring audiences everywhere with his unique and imaginative thinking. It is difficult to capture his character, but in her article about him in Narco News, Kanya D'Almeida has come closest: "Marovic's twin personalities—that of a brilliant political strategist and a natural comedian—hammer down all insipid strategies, offering a new path paved in tar-black comedy. . . .he [is] not only a visionary organizer, but also a warrior in possession of earnest endurance and full knowledge of the lives at stake in any people's movement."

—Quincy Saul*

The Movement of *Homo Sapiens* Against *Homo Sapiens* to Save *Homo Sapiens*

Ivan Marovic†

In the year that is behind us (2011), we have witnessed an unprecedented upheaval around the world: Arab Spring in the Middle East, the rise of Indignados in Spain, and protests in Wisconsin followed by Occupy Wall Street in the United States, just to name a few. In each of these cases, people took to the streets to express their grievances and protest the current order of things. Some of these uprisings made significant progress, overthrowing decades-old dictatorships, while others had limited results, at least so far. They have little in common to begin with, and it is very difficult to use a single analytical tool to predict what kind of long-term impact each of them might have. This is why, when I examine these events (and remembering my own experience as an

* quincy@email.com

† ivanmarovic@gmail.com

organizer in the resistance movement against Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in the 1990s), I use the following rule-of-thumb: the chances of a success in a struggle increase rapidly if a protest transforms into a movement.

This transformation from a protest into a movement is important because a political struggle usually takes time, and protests do not last long enough to create the necessary impact. The energy of a protest, although captivating, dissipates rather quickly, its momentum slows down, and the protest ends, sometimes achieving short-term objectives, but rarely long-term goals. This doesn't mean that one needs to abandon protest as a method of political struggle and choose some "long march through the institutions" instead. On the contrary, one should better understand protest as a phenomenon and utilize its strengths while trying to avoid its weaknesses. What one should work on is a transformation of a protest into a movement—a momentum-driven organization, which has the energy and strength of a protest and the longevity of an organization.

The question here, at least for an observer, is: how can we tell when a protest becomes a movement? We will recognize a movement *when we are moved by one*. Although that is a tautology, it says a lot about the transformational power of social movements to change not just policies, but people's attitudes, values, and behaviors. In the end, everybody notices that we have a movement, not a mere protest. But to spot this transition from a protest to a movement as it is happening, there are a number of things we should check: if the observed group of protesters initiates events rather than just reacting to them; if it plans long term; and if it reaches out and forms alliances. If the observed group is doing these things, it has passed the most important first step in the transition from the tactical level of thinking, which is characteristic of protests, to a strategic level of thinking, which can be seen in a movement.

But why is this strategic level of thinking needed? Italian author Curzio Malaparte concluded his book *Coup D'état: The Technique of Revolution* by saying that "the problem of the conquest and defense of the State is not a political one, . . . it is a technical problem" (Malaparte 1932, last paragraph of epilogue). As an organizer and educator in the field of civil resistance, I am also more focused on the technical rather than political aspects of movement building. I've seen many times how good politics can lose because of poor strategy (or no strategy). We also know of sinister, even evil, political forces winning the fight because of their superior strategies.

Let us for a moment examine the process of designing a strategy for a mass movement. How does this process differ from that in a classic organization, where strategy design is determined by the organization's procedures and bylaws and created and implemented by its structures? The movement is different from a political organization because it is momentum driven (it doesn't exist when idle—it needs to move to be a movement) and because it is organized outside its structure (people don't need to join the movement to be part of it). There are no written procedures, no committees, no working groups, nothing where a complex strategic plan can be formulated, implemented, and examined. If this is so, can a movement ever be strategic?

The grand strategy of a movement is not a master plan, which is designed, executed, evaluated, and revised. The strategy of a mass movement is more like a culture, a set of goals and methods, guidelines for the movement supporters to use on their own, independently from the movement leadership. The mass nature of a movement makes coordination difficult, and centralized decision-making impossible. Every branch and every individual must be enabled to make decisions and act without getting the approval or even guidance from the leadership. This is especially true

when a movement employs strikes, boycotts, and other forms of civil resistance and when uncertainty, chaos, and disrupted communications prevent classic hierarchical organizations from operating. In such circumstances, movement supporters armed with their strategy in the form of the movement's culture, compiled in a set of norms and convictions, make decisions on their own which are within the boundaries of what the rest of the movement is doing. They have enough autonomy to act, but also clear boundaries defined by the strategy for their actions to be an integral part of a broader endeavor.

This is why the movement strategy needs to be front-loaded, in other words it needs to be relatively well defined before the movement becomes broad based and popular. This is because it will be impossible to agree on a common strategy in a mass movement, when the structure does not represent all the movement supporters, which then number in tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands. A movement's front-loaded strategy is in essence an offer to the potential supporter and member—by accepting it, one joins the movement and is bound by the guidelines the strategy determines. However, this strategy needs to leave enough room for local autonomy and initiative, because only a federalized movement will prevent the possible alienation of its supporters in a situation when the movement is so big that direct involvement of supporters in decision-making becomes impossible and when the introduction of representation would add new layers of organizational clutter.

An important element of a movement's strategy is its ideology. Every social movement is ideological by definition, since it needs to be organized around set goals and methods. In other words, ideology is a fundamental part of a movement's grand strategy and plays an important role once the movement is recognized as a societal force. But the question is what should the role of ideology in movement building be, especially in that critical first phase of the transformation from a protest into a movement? I would suggest that a movement should build its ideology slowly, as it grows and gains support. Today ideologies are often seen as given, as predefined, sometimes even written in stone. Ideologist is almost a synonym for dogmatist, and even the word ideology is often used in a pejorative sense. But the most striking impression is how ideologies look outdated. This is best seen in their 19th century names: liberal, socialist, nationalist, communist etc. The Green movement is a notable exception, as an ideology not formulated before the 1970s. But even here, the common misconception among ordinary people is that green politics is just a modification of existing ideological propositions, a modification which just adds the prefix "eco" to a 19th century name, and that, for example, eco-socialism is just socialism painted green instead of red.

Nothing is more misleading than portraying eco-socialism as yet another form of socialism, because it deals not only with an ideological question of making a better society, but a practical question of the survival of *Homo sapiens*. And *Homo sapiens* need to recognize this practical question as the most important. To undertake this difficult task, we need a movement with a front-loaded strategy accompanied by a living and evolving ideology. The front-loading of the strategy will ensure that we are on the same page when it comes to the long-term goals and a set of methods, but it should allow a high degree of freedom of operation for groups and individuals within a federalized structure of the movement and outside of it. The movement leadership here is not some committee that leads the movement, it is a loose group of diverse individuals which can formulate the grand strategy, front-load it, and ensure it stays within the agreed boundaries, allowing members and supporters, even newcomers, to take the lead and grow the ideology of the movement through personal involvement and action.

In order to see how this can be done, let us take another look at the uprisings around the world over the last year, which I mentioned earlier. Despite their obvious differences, there was one thing they had in common—they took the struggle outside the existing institutions. When people lose confidence in the institutions that constitute the system, when the system itself loses legitimacy, and when people join the movement to engage in extra institutional political activity, the time is ripe for a revolution, which fundamentally changes and alters existing institutions and practices. Thus the goal of the movement is to create a disruption that will disturb existing current institutions and practices, transforming or replacing them with new ones.

In the case of a movement dealing with the practical problem of the survival of *Homo sapiens*, this disruption is not an easy one, because the movement is not faced with political coercion that needs to be exposed, but with the cultural hegemony of consumerism. Cultural hegemony, as defined by Antonio Gramsci, is artificial “common sense,” a set of norms that are perceived as natural and inevitable. In order to fight and defeat this cultural hegemony, the movement needs to transform the lifestyles and worldviews of individuals, help them go through the personal transformation, which will later ensure the political transformation. Because of the nature of the problem it deals with—the survival of *Homo sapiens*—this movement needs to be truly global. It needs to transform individuals living under different circumstances and create a whole set of alternative lifestyles for people to embrace. These lifestyles need to be alternative and disruptive, unlike the existing “recycling” lifestyle, which is not at all disruptive; on the contrary, it is compatible with consumerism.

This transformation leading to disruption will differ from country to country, from community to community, even from generation to generation. The movement needs to be seen and accepted as a vehicle for this transformation, as a venue where people can express themselves in action and get appreciation from their communities for their work. This will help them rediscover themselves in their communities, and the whole experience will accelerate both their transformation and that of their communities. The personal and communal transformation would be followed by political transformation, which should lay the ground for the solution to the practical problem of our survival and that of our fellow organisms stuck with us on this lovely planet.

References

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