

# COLLECTIVES

*anarchy against the mass*



***This pamphlet is a compilation of two articles that appeared in Profane Existence #16 (“Smaller is Better: Building a Counter-Cultural Movement Starts from the Bottom” and “Who Cares about Collectives?”). Up the anarchist history punx!***

**We are against dominant culture and against the methods of organizing the dominant culture. The dominant culture is one based on mass. Mass movements, mass political parties, and mass migrations to shopping malls during the holidays.**

It's been said by more than a few ignorant people that "the masses are asses" and while I don't think that's really true, when you think in a mass you lose your individuality and become just another faceless sheep in the flock. Our strength is based upon the individuality of each person and there's no room in a mass movement for individual intuition. Further, this lack of individuality stunts self-worth and motivation. The only thing holding mass movements together is a professional leadership and an ample supply of people to keep it together. Consumers by Coca-Cola and ignorant do-gooders join political movements.

I am profoundly convinced that people are at their creative and productive best when they are left to tackle a problem by themselves or with a small number of like-minded people. The fewer people, the less compromise. However, there are few people in this world who can make sweeping changes on their own and cooperation among individuals is what it's going to take to make an impact. While I believe anarchy means creating chaos in the face of law and order, it's also a fancy term for cooperation, as my friend Doyle pointed out.

## **What is a Collective?**

The basic definition of a collective is people coming together to share resources and skills to get a common task accomplished. This could be anything from growing food, running a shop, or printing punk rock t-shirts. A collective can be just one person if that's all it takes to get the task accomplished. The purpose of the collective is to accomplish tasks and replicate itself instead of gaining members.

A collective is where all the people have involved have control over the decision-making process and reap the direct benefits of collective organization. Control by a small group or minority is the enemy of the collective. So-called collectives like many of the present food co-ops have a board of directors who make the decisions and in many cases the

workers are prohibited from any part of the decision-making process. That makes these so-called “alternatives” just as much a part of the dominant culture as Ronald Reagan.

Hierarchy is the opposite of collective process and will exist as long as we bow down to it or are co-opted into it. The strength of the collective is that it sets its own agenda and can concentrate on completing a task at hand. There are no orders from some boss one rung up on the ladder and the only boss there is is to please the individuals of the collective. Only in a collective situation can decisions on exactly how things should be done and work be based on ability, not on unrealistic demands from someone outside the group doing the work.

Size is of the utmost importance to the collective. The smaller the collective, the more efficiently it will run. Large organizations tend to form an elite who direct the labor and those doing the labor are minimized by becoming only a tiny fish in a large school. As stated so eloquently in the pamphlet *Anti-Mass Methods of Organizing for Collectives*: “The strength of a collective lies in its social organization, not in numbers. Once you think in terms of recruiting, you might as well join the Army.”

A collective must ensure that everyone is involved with the decision-making process. The larger the numbers, the more difficult this will be. The collective should be concerned with replicating itself, not adding to its membership. The strength of the collective is its small size and resiliency when mass movements tend to fall apart easily. Collectives are the localized heart of activity and the smaller the focus of activity the less chances it has of breaking apart.

## **Anarchy in Action**

Unlike any other form of organization, collectives oppose hierarchy. Collectives are groups of people who band together as complete equals, with no leaders or bosses. This does not mean that everyone has to be equally good (or equally mediocre) at all tasks, only that no one in the collective has more political or social power than another. No other form of organization in the Western world opposes hierarchy, which means that all other forms of organization promote and practice inequality, and

therefore coercion and authoritarianism. Secondly, collectives are like a good punk rock project: they are do-it-yourself. Collectives define their own tasks and objectives and they put their own resources to work to complete their tasks, interacting with other collectives or persons outside of the collective as they see fit.

Collectives function according to several key anarchist principles: direct democracy, full participation of all collective members, equality, autonomy, mutual aid, and resolute opposition to hierarchy and domination. This is the kind of world we want in the future, so this is the way we need to organize ourselves now.

Collective membership can be defined in several ways: by workplace or trade, by locality, by politics, by identity, by common interest, or by any combination of the above.

The key to creating an anarchist collective is not the makeup of a collective, or even its goals. The key importance of a collective to an anarchist society is its organization. If a collective is organized in a way opposed to hierarchy and domination and if it balances individual autonomy with accountability (within and outside the collective), then its goals and tasks will almost inevitably work toward the creation of a free society.

## **Mass vs. Class**

We live in a mass society, where our individuality is stifled by the “choice” between regular or decaf and our ability to work with each other cooperatively is hampered by both the myth of the “rugged individual” and the “mass movement.” As the important pamphlet *Anti-Mass Methods of Organization for Collectives* points out, just like you fight fire with water, not fire, you fight mass society not with mass movements but with class consciousness. By class consciousness we don't mean some mythical idealized proletariat or any other purely economic grouping of people. By class we mean that we recognize that we and others like us are relatively powerless – politically and socially – in this system and that the relationship between the powerless and the powerful is antagonistic and utterly irreconcilable: The powerful must be destroyed. Importantly, this kind of class consciousness also means we understand

our relationship with other politically and socially oppressed groups in this society (women, people of color, LGBT, animals, the earth, etc) and recognize that there are big differences in power and privilege among us.

Collectives organize people as a class, not as a mass. The revolutionary object of a collective is its replication, not recruiting new members. We don't want people to join our collective unless we ask them: we want people to form their *own* collectives. Collectives work to create the politicization of people as autonomous, free-thinking, egalitarian people, not as a mass or a vanguard or a party. As Bruce Kala wrote in *Slingshot*, "We can't – and shouldn't try to – create non-hierarchical collectives spanning the cities from ghetto to barrio. We can and should organize ourselves directly, non-hierarchically, on the level we can, beginning with affinity groups and political collectives."

## **Connecting with Others**

If we're going to directly organize our lives, we need to talk to each other. For these reasons, collectives should be small and encourage face-to-face communication. Face-to-face communication encourages collectives to be democratic, non-hierarchical, equal, and (sometimes painfully) honest. Also, a small tight-knit collective of people who trust each other is virtually impossible to infiltrate. Of course, there is always the danger of a collective closing in on itself and becoming parochial – that is why collectives must talk with other collectives.

## **Conclusion**

We want people to form their own collectives of three, four, ten people; whatever. We want collective members to start talking, reading, discussing, and laughing with each other. Examine racism and sexism and homophobia within your collective. Start talking within the collective, then start talking with other collectives. Collective your workplace, start your own collective workplace, or take on a collective project. Most importantly, don't let someone else organize your life for you. Do it yourself.

## **Additional Resources**

We recommend the following sources for folks interested in learning more about collectives.

### **Zines**

*Anti-Mass: Methods of Organization for Collectives*

*Build Those Collectives! A Workshop Pamphlet on How to Build a Collective, and what to do with it Once it's Built*

*Collective Process: Overcoming Power*

### **Books**

Curious George Brigade, *Anarchy in the Age of Dinosaurs*, (Crimethinc, 2003).

Peter Gelderloos, *Consensus: A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political, and Environmental Groups* (Sea Sharp Press, 2006).

Delfina Vannucci and Richard Singer, *Come Hell or High Water: A Handbook on Collective Process Gone Awry*, (AK Press, 2010).

Trapeze Collective, *Do It Yourself: A Handbook for Changing Our World*, (Pluto Press, 2007).

Collectives are small efficient means of organizing that provide practical examples of counter-institutions that are egalitarian, voluntary, and anti-authoritarian. Collectives work and they prove that anarchy works, and that's one of the best weapons we have against both capitalism and the Marxist-Leninoid version of "Revolution." Collectives demonstrate that people can organize their lives together in ways that do not oppress or exploit anyone and that encourage the full and free participation of people in things that affect their everyday lives.



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