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Affinity group discussion. Andalucia, Spain

Organizing Chaos

In the days leading up to a mass action, whether in Seattle, London, Washington, Prague, Davos, Québec, Gothenburg, or Genoa, the air is tangibly electric as people arrive in town and prepare themselves and their environment for the demonstrations. Cities are transformed overnight as graffiti and posters mysteriously crowd out corporate advertisements, and billboards are transformed into canvases for radical propaganda. A general framework for the actions at hand has been crafted in advance, in face-to-face meetings, over internet listserves, and on telephone conference calls. Then thousands of people, many of them total strangers, come together in dozens of meetings running late into the night.

The skeletal plan for the direct action to come is made flesh and blood, sometimes outright rejected and turned into something else. These actions will belong to everyone and their success will rely on the level of participation.

To facilitate this vital participation, it's essential that there be a location in which we can gather, and a system through which communication, information sharing, and collective decision-making can happen. Events like the Seattle shut-down owed much of their success to the convergence centre space and the spokescouncil meetings.

Convergence centres
Thousands of people are moving about, clustering in impromptu debates, checking a schedule of workshops on the wall, lining

up for a free meal, painting banners, laughing. There is a frantic energy engulfing the massive warehouse space, and ricocheting off the rafters; it is the energy of too many sleepless nights, the energy of anticipation, the energy of a common vision, the energy of history being made.

You've entered a convergence centre, a gathering site for people to come together, learn new skills, meet new allies, hold incredibly long meetings, and together, make plans for the upcoming actions. A convergence centre can be little more than a space in which to gather, or it can be a highly coordinated community centre, offering information to folks from out of town, helping to find accommodation, hosting cultural events, trainings, spokescouncil meetings (see below), health clinics, free meals, art-, puppet- and banner-making, and so on.

The best convergence centres are temporary autonomous zones, outside of the cash economy, miniature and imperfect versions of the world we wish to create, where everyone can participate in feeding and caring for each other, teaching and learning from each other, and developing tactics and strategies together to achieve common goals.

Spokescouncil meetings

The spokescouncil meeting is the coordinating and networking structure that enables very large numbers of people to discuss and decide things, usually by consensus. It is a form that has similarity to decision-making processes of many different cultures over a large span of time, including many indigenous nations around the world, many Bedouin and tribal Arab cultures, and the Spanish anarchists in the years leading up to and during the Spanish Civil War.

Affinity groups, and clusters of affiliated affinity groups choose spokespersons who are empowered to speak for the group. The spokespersons sit in a circle, with their affinity group behind them. In this way, groups can confer during the meeting and participate via their spokesperson, but only spokespersons address everyone, vastly reducing the amount of time required for inclusivity.

Spokescouncils are responsible for carrying their group's plans, decisions, and opinions to the spokescouncil, as well as relaying information and decisions back to members of their group who aren't present. Power is decentralized – the group retains its autonomy, and yet is able to closely coordinate with others, all of whom have agreed that this model of communication can best maintain their diversity, while at the same time allowing them to create political space.

As with most things, the spokescouncil model works best when the affinity groups have been together for a while and are skilled both at making quick collective decisions, and at being willing to let go of some of their opinions, trusting in the collective intelligence of the group.

Resources:

- » Texts on consensus decision making, facilitation and 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness': <http://www.spunk.org/texts/conse/consu/index.html>
- » Meetings and consensus toolbox: <http://www.uhc-collective.org.uk/toolbox>