

The Plague of Nonprofits and Anarchists by Kathy Emery

If “the revolution will not be funded” and direct action is monopolized by ahistorical and ideologically obsessed leftists, then how can we expect any fundamental change to occur in this country? That is the question I have been preoccupied with for the last year or so. I am writing about it now because of a series of conversations I have been having with Mike Miller. Mike is a member of the Bay Area Civil Rights Veterans (crmvet.org) and has just published a very important book about his experiences as an organizer - *A Community Organizer's Tale, People and Power in San Francisco*.

Mike argues in his *The Plague of Nonprofits (Dissent, submitted)* that the community organizers of the 60s and 70s have, in large part, become executive directors and program staff in today's nonprofits while the members of community organizations have become clients. Authentic community organizations represent people power—dues-paying members democratically making decisions and electing leaders. Many nonprofits are primarily funded by the government or corporations and provide a service to people. Authentic community organizations launch and maintain multi-issue campaigns by creating broad coalitions in order to change the relations of power and create a more democratic public life. But too often create a narrow and unique client base, work within the existing power structures in order to deal with the symptoms of unequal power relations.

Community organizations still exist today, but many are hamstrung by the nonprofit paradigm that severely restricts their use of direct action. Historically, nonviolent direct action is successful if it is designed to achieve either of the following goals: (1) it dramatizes an injustice so that people are moved to join community organizations working to end the injustice or (2) it is used to demonstrate the people power of a community organization that is negotiating with a specific target for concrete, feasible demands. I don't see anyone using direct action for either of these two purposes today. Today's “anarchists” could fill this vacuum if they could develop an understanding of what effective nonviolent direct action actually entails. I use the word “anarchists” loosely to define mostly college students who seem to think that occupying a building is a “demand” in and of itself and who think that their action will make people in power angry, which seems to be an end in itself. These are positions that have not been subjected to much reflection nor do they hold up very well under critical inquiry.

There are over 2,000 progressive organizations in the Bay Area today, all working in their own little niche. Imagine what could be if those organizations were able to work together, were able to build people power in service of affordable housing, fully-funded and locally controlled schools, a living wage for everyone, or rights for immigrants? And imagine if the work of such a coalition had the support of youthful direct activists?

The Southern Freedom Movement ended the reign of terror, and spawned many movements— from the free speech movement at Berkeley to the anti-war movement throughout the nation. It succeeded because dozens of organizations, community-based and not, came together for a common goal— freedom and dignity for every human being. Voter registration and desegregation were the methods by which these groups were able to forge coalitions. Direct action (sit-ins, kneel-ins, coin-ins) led to people joining together in effective boycotts. Alternative institutions were created to replace those that needed to be eliminated. Community and local organizations were the bedrock upon which such a movement was built by everyday people like Amzie Moore, Herbert Lee, Victoria Jackson, Idesha Mae Holland, Wazir Peacock, Sam Block and tens of thousands of others. How did they do it? We would all benefit today from knowing the complex and lengthy answer to this question.k