

Self-organization, self-emancipation and identity: What can we learn from indigenous peoples, blacks and lesbigays?

Tuesday 7 August 2007, by [DRUCKER Peter](#) (Date first published: November 1999).

Whenever we as Marxists talk about self-organization and self-emancipation, we must remind ourselves and others that Marx and Engels invented self-organization and self-emancipation as the central element of a strategy for human liberation. The tragedy of 20th-century Marxism is that Marxism became identified with movements that had hardly anything to do with self-emancipation. The most important task for Marxists at this start of the 21st century is to reinvent the concepts and tools for self-organization and democratic control. [1]

I'll begin with a citation from Lenin, that I want to use as a sort of motto for my presentation. The citation is of course from a polemic, in this case a polemic against Dutch and Polish revolutionary leftists. The piece is called 'The discussion on self-determination summed up'; the year is 1916; and the occasion for it is the Irish Easter Rising that took place that year. Lenin says:

*To imagine that social revolution is **conceivable** without revolts by small nations in the colonies and in Europe, without revolutionary outbursts by a section of the petty bourgeoisie **with all its prejudices**, without a movement of the politically non-conscious proletarian and semi-proletarian masses against oppression by the landowners, the church, and the monarchy, against national oppression, etc.-to imagine all this is to **repudiate social revolution**.*

Here we see an essential aspect of Lenin's thought. Lenin was definitely a Marxist, and he saw the strategic role of the working class in a socialist revolution as central and indispensable. But he was the first major Marxist who also saw semi-proletarian and non-proletarian movements as indispensable to a revolutionary strategy. This evening I want to examine the issues of self-organization and democratic control from that point of view, to talk about self-organization of movements other than the workers' movement and democratic control by social groups other than the working class. The question is then, What relationship can the workers' movement and must the workers' movement in general, and revolutionary organizations in particular, have to these other movements? In our time as in Lenin's time, I think, this is a central strategic question.

As examples I will cite movements in three different categories: movements of Indians, indigenous peoples, in Latin America, with the Chiapas uprising as a major recent case; movements of blacks and immigrants in the United States and Western Europe; and movements of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, also in the US and Western Europe. These examples sometimes bring us very close to the present. This means that we often lack the advantage of historical distance, so that my conclusions necessarily have a provisional character. I do have some ideas about how we should approach these movements, but I also have doubts. My main goal here is to help stimulate discussion.

My argument is in any case that specific forms of self-organization and democratic control can never be set in stone for us, but rather must continually be reinvented. Our goal is to build a bridge between the forms taken spontaneously by actually existing movements and the overarching institutions of grassroots democracy that must become the centres of power of a new, socialist

society. The closer we get to a moment of revolutionary crisis, the more cohesive these structures can become, the more closely they can be linked to each other, and the more they can be centralized.

In this historical period, unfortunately — I hope that we agree on this — we are still very far from a moment of revolutionary crisis of this kind. This means that the forms of self-organization of different movements are very different, very diverse, and very distinct. We need to pay attention to the many specificities and the unique — though sometimes very young — traditions of the various movements. This means that the content of a concept like 'democratic control' is rather different right now than it would be in a period with a very strong and dynamic workers' movement. The question that people ask in many movements right now is not so much, 'How can we control those powerful workers' institutions?' as, 'How can we safeguard the forms, the places, and even the atmosphere in which we feel comfortable as a specific oppressed group?' In other words, at this historical moment democratic control is often seen less as a matter of power and effectiveness, and more as a matter of identity. We need to be sensitive to this.

I think it will be easier to understand what I'm getting at if I talk concretely about particular examples. I'll begin with indigenous peoples in Latin America. This example shows how important Lenin and the Bolsheviks' influence was. Only pressure from the Third International made socialists in many parts of the world begin to think about the role of oppressed nationalities in revolutions in colonial and semi-colonial countries. Lenin and the Bolsheviks often had to swim against the current: in Russia itself, where the first soviets in Central Asia in 1918 and '19 for example were virtual apartheid soviets, from which Muslims were excluded; in South Africa, where even whites who considered themselves communists chanted the workers must 'unite and fight to keep South Africa white'; and in the US, where even a left-wing socialist like Eugene V. Debs considered that African-American oppression was not a topic of special interest for socialists. In Latin America, also in the 1920s, a founder of revolutionary Marxism like José Carlos Mariáteguí had to swim against the current in order to maintain that Indians would be a crucial force for revolution in a country like Peru.

The rise of Stalinism ensured that Mariáteguí's lesson would not be fully learned for a long time. In countries like Bolivia and Guatemala, countries with Indian majorities where major revolutionary processes unfolded in the 1950s and later, indigenous people were often marginalized within those processes and on the left. There were honourable exceptions, such as the Peruvian peasant movement under the leadership of our comrade Hugo Blanco, but they were only exceptions.

Only in the 1980s and '90s did this situation really begin to change, mainly I think because of three major experiences. The first was the trouble that the Sandinistas went through on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, from which they and the whole Latin American left learned a lot. Unlike in Russia, in Nicaragua taken as a whole self-emancipation did to a large extent remain a central aspect of the Sandinista revolution throughout its brief course. But in that one particular region and among some indigenous peoples, the revolution was not experienced in that way. The *contras* benefited considerably from that failing.

The second major experience was the upsurge of Indian movements around 1992, when 500 years of indigenous oppression were commemorated. As a rule the Latin American left sees itself as the defender of its nations against the US, imperialism, the IMF, etc. So it was a hard adjustment for the Latin American left to get used to the idea that all these nations are themselves based on five centuries of genocide and oppression. The consequences of this experience, in organizational as well as ideological terms, have sometimes gone very deep. Our comrades in Ecuador for example have taken part in a regroupment, Pachakutik/Nuevo País, which began as a federation of left parties *alongside* social movements and independent Indian organizations. That was something new. The

model in which *the* revolutionary party or even *the* revolutionary front plays a leading role in all progressive movements apparently did not carry enough conviction, at least not in this particular country in that particular period in these particular circumstances.

The third major experience of Indian self-organization was of course the Zapatista uprising. The Zapatistas were the first leftist movement in Latin America in which indigenous people have played an absolutely central role. They have a self-image as defenders of the Mexican nation and simultaneously as champions of Indian autonomy. At the same time the Zapatista movement has had significant limitations: the dire poverty of the Indians in Chiapas, among whom a civil society barely exists; the fact that the working class in Mexico was still almost entirely under the thumb of the ruling single party, which made formulating a national strategy much more difficult; and the international conjuncture, which made the idea of taking power seem implausible.

For these reasons we need to view the EZLN consistently from two different angles. On the one hand it is an ideological current that has had a great power of attraction on a world scale. For us as the Fourth International it has been very important to carry on a dialogue with this current. I think comrades like Daniel Bensaïd have done that well. But on the other hand the Chiapas revolutionary committee is a form of self-organization of oppressed people in a specific region. For their grassroots base in Chiapas, showing respect for their traditions and their achievements means more than strategic debates. One might even think that the Indian communities' struggle to survive might be hard to reconcile at some moments with developing a national or international strategy. Perhaps there has sometimes just been more to lose with manoeuvres in Mexico City with the various tendencies of the PRD and the rest of the Mexican left, or in Madrid or Paris with all those European anarchists or Trotskyists, than the people in Chiapas have had to gain from them. One can hardly reproach the EZLN leadership for thinking of this aspect of things. Perhaps we should consider some of the Zapatistas' statements about 'power' and 'parties' not *only* as theoretical arguments, but also as a way of *avoiding* certain debates and certain risks, so as to safeguard Indian autonomy. We also need to be able to respect that.

The second category of self-organization that I would like to discuss is the self-organization of blacks and immigrants. In this respect too a certain continuity can be seen between the Third International in the 1920s and Marxists today. In the US for example the CP managed to link up in the early 1920s with the revolutionary nationalists of the African Blood Brotherhood. African-Americans' involvement with revolutionary Marxism continued with Malcolm X's relationship with the Socialist Workers Party [then the US section of the Fourth International] in the early 1960s. But unfortunately the negative role of the left was even more important for the development of African-American movements. In the early 1960s social democrats, and in particular the circle around Max Shachtman [earlier a leading figure of the Fourth International in the 1930s] and Bayard Rustin had substantial influence on leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the radical wing of the civil rights movement. These African-American student leaders became the founders of Black Power after 1964, after having been betrayed by white social democrats whose highest priority was ensuring Lyndon Johnson's victory in the 1964 presidential election. The US left is still suffering the consequences of the divisions between white and black that go back to the 1960s. But there were also some positive lessons learned in those years. The key concept of Black Power still holds true for the US, I think: blacks need to organize their own community first, and only afterwards look for allies. Otherwise they can never ally on an equal footing with whites.

Today in Western Europe the forms of black and immigrant self-organization have not yet entirely crystallized. But it is important to note that while *continuity* has been central to the experience of Indian communities in Latin America, *discontinuity* has been central for black and immigrant communities in Western Europe. This means that specifically African, Arab, Turkish or Caribbean elements take on a different meaning and function in a Western European context. The specifically

European experience of racism becomes more important than a particular national origin to a European black or immigrant identity. This is visible in the spread of a cultural form like rap music, which does not come from Africa or the Middle East, which is sung more and more often in French or Dutch [as well as English], and which has been borrowed from another racially oppressed people in another imperialist country. Politically this may mean that immigrant youth in the Netherlands or Belgium will organize, not together with youth in general or as Moroccan or Turkish or Muslim youth, but as immigrant youth. Or perhaps a genuinely multicultural youth culture will develop; today for example many immigrant high school students in big Dutch cities speak a kind of 'smurf language', which incorporates many Turkish, Berber and Surinamese expressions. But this youth culture would then have to become an explicitly, actively anti-racist culture; otherwise it cannot really be multicultural. [2]

In any event, these developments are still not very much reflected inside our organizations in Europe. We must be aware that immigrants are severely under-represented in our ranks. In a city like Amsterdam, where a majority of public school students consists of immigrants, we do not have a single immigrant in our youth organization. Evidently the solutions to this problem cannot be primarily organizational. But I am convinced that the solutions will be partly related to democracy, in the broadest sense of the word: in the sense that people see their experience reflected in an organization and see the organization as their own. I pose the question: could it be that young immigrants will not be won over to the revolutionary movement purely as individuals, but rather as *immigrants*, as such, organized autonomously in immigrant groups? Or at least organized in youth groups in which a very substantial minority consists of immigrants? These are important questions — we are talking about a big part of the new generation of the working class.

I can give more organizational examples from a third category of autonomous organizations, of 'lesbigays': lesbians, bisexuals and gay men. We cannot say as much about Lenin and the Bolsheviks' opinions about this category — though we can say more than you might think. The Bolsheviks played an important role in the 1920s in the congresses of the World League for Sexual Reform, which German and Dutch gay groups took part in. But this history is only very indirectly relevant to contemporary lesbian/gay movements. Thanks to Stalinism, fascism and further waves of anti-gay repression in the 1950s and '60s, the discontinuity in lesbian/gay movements has been particularly pronounced. This discontinuity is in fact even more characteristic of lesbian/gay movements than of immigrant movements, because almost no one is born into a lesbian/gay community. Lesbian/gay communities are only a product of the development of capitalism since the late 19th century, and in their contemporary form since the 1960s. This makes it all the more remarkable that strong movements, in which self-organization and a distinctive lesbian/gay identity play a central role, have emerged from these communities.

The turnouts for lesbian/gay pride marches can even seem improbable to people on the left who are unfamiliar with the lesbian/gay world. In the US, for example, between half a million and a million people turned out each time for lesbian/gay demonstrations in 1987, 1993 and 1994. In Paris in 1998, there were 150,000 participants; in Berlin in 1998, 200,000; in Paris for Europride in 1997, 350,000. [3] Nor can they be seen entirely as apolitical parades, although every big political demonstration takes on this character to some extent. In general they are organized by political associations, in some cases with quite radical political programmes. The organization has always been done independently, without any significant support from existing labour or left organizations. In this way independent lesbian/gay organizations have arisen.

The left can sometimes learn things from the forms of democratic control that the lesbian/gay movement: positive lessons as well as negative ones. One positive example is the organizational structure of the three national demonstrations in the US [in 1979, 1987 and 1993]. The structure showed how essential it was that all elements of the community felt themselves fully represented.

The most important decisions were made each time by big national conferences, in which representation was carefully allocated in advance: each time 50 per cent women, 25 per cent people of colour, fixed quotas for each region, and so on. And the structure worked, because all parts of the community mobilized for these marches. [4]

The downside of this positive example is that a political culture has developed, above all in the US but also I think increasingly in Europe, in where people who do *not* feel represented in a particular organization can very quickly lose patience with it and adopt very confrontational tactics. The forms of action that have given the French *sans papiers* for example such a great success in the media can sometimes be used when differences of opinion arise within progressive movements. That happened for example at a Labor Notes conference in the US. These conferences, which are always the most important gatherings of the class struggle wing of the North American trade unions, are to a large extent organized under the leadership of members of the Marxist organization Solidarity. [5] Nonetheless a conflict broke out at the 1992 Labor Notes conference between the organizers and the lesbian caucus. The details are of secondary importance. The important point is that the lesbian caucus, which did not feel represented by the organizers, at a certain point simply ignored the decisions that the organizers had taken, seized the microphone, and explained its point of view to the roughly thousand participants — who incidentally responded quite positively. All this took place inside the framework of the labour movement: the members of the lesbian caucus were all union activists or even staffers.

This is only one example of the kind of tactic that has become more common, in organizations like Act Up in (for example) Paris, among immigrant youth, etc. Marxists cannot take comfort in the assumption that we would never be targeted by this kind of tactic, because we're on the left and everyone understands that. If class struggle enters a new ascendant period, if the labour movement recognizes its responsibility to defend all oppressed people, and if everyone gets to know each other better in the framework of a broad movement, *then* people will be able to see more clearly who is trustworthy, who is on the left and who isn't. But for the new generations that are now emerging nothing can be assumed; everything must be demonstrated in practice at *each* decisive moment. For us Marxists much will depend on what we look like, who our spokespeople are, and how much we have learned from the organizational forms that have been developing around us. [6]

All of us have to learn this in order to be able to intervene effectively — as revolutionary Marxists, of course — in the independent organizations of oppressed people. To the extent we manage to educate ourselves, our own organizational forms in our own organizations will inevitably change. This process has been under way for 30 years now. I haven't mentioned the women's movement yet in this talk, but feminism provides the best examples of how we have had to change. Well into the 1970s we held to the tradition (which incidentally was Lenin's tradition and the tradition of the whole Marxist current) that we were not feminists, that there were no central contradictions between men and women, and that fully independent organization of women was not appropriate within Leninist organizations. You can still find that position in the Fourth International's resolution on women's liberation from 1979, which in many other respects was a crucial moment of cultural transformation for us. Fortunately we've changed our position since then, and we are continuing to change.

In order to create organizations that are truly welcoming to and inclusive of women, lesbians, blacks and immigrants, we will have to continue to change our organizations. The process will not always be easy. But as Lenin observed over 80 years ago, if you really want a social revolution, you have to learn how to intervene in all sorts of movements and earn a leading role in them. By means of this process the workers' movement itself can be rebuilt, and the revolutionary current within it can be rebuilt. What's at stake is building the organizations that we would all like to see: organizations that can lead the revolutions of the 21st century.

Footnotes

[1] This article originated in August 1998 as a presentation to the summer school of the Belgian Socialist Workers Party, and was published in the Dutch-language journal *De Internationale* no. 67, Winter 1999. A later version of this paper, more developed, exists in French: [Auto-émancipation et identités à l'heure de la mondialisation](#)

[2] Today, after 9/11 and the rise of Islamophobia, I would add that Muslim identity, which has clearly become more important to many immigrants in Europe, should not be seen simply as an aspect of the culture that immigrants brought with them to Europe, but primarily as a reaction to the particular form that European racism has taken.

[3] Since this article was written larger European pride marches have occurred in Paris and Berlin, while an estimated half million people attended Europride in Rome in 2000 and an estimated 600,000 the US national lesbian demonstration that same year.

[4] Unfortunately the fourth national march, in 2000, was a top-down operation, dominated politically by the conservative Human Rights Campaign Fund and Metropolitan Community Churches, and had none of the democratic representation characteristic of the three earlier marches. In this case the high turnout came largely from more conservative lesbians from areas of the southern and western US whom the earlier marches had not mobilized to the same extent. The 1994 march mentioned earlier was strictly speaking an international lesbian march on the UN.

[5] The predominance of Solidarity members among Labor Notes organizers has gradually decreased since this article was written, though without any particular conflict or break.

[6] Arguably the rise of the global justice movement since 1999 has created a framework in which many young activists in different movements have gotten to know each other better. To what extent indigenous peoples, blacks, immigrants and lesbians feel included in and represented by the global justice movement today is a different question.