

Of Whirlwinds and Wind Chimes (or ways of listening): Movement Building & Militant Research in the United States

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An article appearing in issue #39 of [Arranca!](#) (FeIS; Germany)

Team Colors, a militant research collective operating in the United States, recently utilized the 2008 Democratic and Republican National Convention protests as an opportunity to begin a strategic conversation in regards to movement building and class composition. To accomplish this, Team Colors coordinated and edited a collection of essays by, and interviews with radical organizers, intellectuals and public figures in regards to their organizational processes and strategies. This collection, entitled *In the Middle of a Whirlwind: 2008 Convention Protests, Movement and Movements* has been available online at www.inthemiddleofawhirlwind.info as of May 25. Since its release we have held nearly a dozen events throughout the U.S. under the title “Of Friends and Whirlwinds.” These events have included presentations by contributors like Philly’s Pissed / Philly Stands Up, George Caffentzis, Ben Shepard, Silvia Federici and others.

What follows is a process of digestion, in which we review our experiences of attempting to engage in militant research, discuss what results there are to discuss, and decide what we will do in the future. Principally, this will be useful to the Team Colors Collective itself. It is our hope that others will find it useful as well.

As stated above, the *Whirlwinds* project was conceived in January of 2008 by a group of alter-globalization radicals discussing the opportunities presented by the first significant national mobilizations since the massive *!Si Se Puede!* immigrant rights demonstrations of May Day 2006. The primacy placed on the RNC/DNC demonstrations by some of our colleagues worried us-- we felt that attempts to recreate Seattle as a way of galvanizing a culture of protest were misguided. The events of September 11th, 2001 were less to blame for the downturn in the 'alter-globalization' movement than the activities and politics of that movement in itself. Where others seemed to sense an opportunity to breathe new life into what had seemed like 'another world' being born alongside another millennium, we felt that this would be a time to look at the experiences of the anti-capitalist currents in the American left between 1999 and today in order to examine the strategies utilized and assess the gains made. Rather than writing our own analysis we decided to solicit articles and interviews from over forty organizations and individuals, asking that they provide us with a discussion of *how* their organizations works, *what* work they do, and their experiences of setbacks and successes.

Articles were solicited from organizations that 1) were engaged in the construction of 'counter-institutions,' 2) had been involved in long-term community organizing projects, or 3) were playing a significant role in organizing against the conventions. We felt that by pursuing analysis from organizations involved in the above work, we would engage with three broad categories of activity undertaken by the radical left since November of 1999: alternatives to capital, community organizing, and summit mobilization.

It is difficult to separate results and analysis- to report 'facts' without scenting them with one's own opinion. While we'd argue against even the possibility of research results being 'objective,' there is something to be said for letting people's statements remain *their* statements. For us, this was an attempt at research both into our own organizational processes and the status of the movements themselves-- so there are our "results" and *our* results.

Our "results"

Many of the organizations and individuals we interacted with did not situate themselves in a continuity of activity from Seattle on, nor did they reference themselves temporally. Frequently, they were quick to discuss the (temporal) progress of related issues (the changing demographics of a city, the dwindling numbers of family farms in the US), however they did not situate themselves in that time line.

It was unclear to us if those contributors who were involved in the creation of 'alternative' institutions viewed their work as the provision of services or as the creation of processes. For instance, Philly's Pissed / Philly Stands Up seemed to be engaged in work that seemed to be 'normalizing' a harm reduction process.

In discussing the planned RNC/DNC mobilizations, people tended to regard them as a useful event. There was little said as to the value of these demonstrations for advancing positions or realizing demands-- rather, their strategic value was seen to lie in their ability to 'build capacity.' That is to say, that the ability to act nationally would be bolstered by these events through development of communications infrastructure and the establishment of relationships amongst activists. As well, the value of these events as a way of 'raising consciousness' was emphasized.

In contrast to many of the pieces by organizations, academics placed their analysis in relation to past and possible events, as well as towards the understanding of current composition. However, there was little discussion of actual organizational processes as they relate to the class composition under discussion.

We found most interesting the way that our European contributors dealt with their work. There was an engagement with continuity of struggle, tracing the development of concepts concurrent with the development of national movements. There was an air of cautious optimism over a critical analysis of the development of particular struggles into the present.

Our results

As a collective, this was the most ambitious piece of work we've engaged in. While not the principal goal of our research, the object of study for us has become the mechanics of research-- the collection didn't accomplish the goals we'd established: the purpose of the collection seems to have been lost in the volume of work and the medium of communication.

Our thoughts towards a methodology largely revolve around the way in which the radical left communicates, both in terms of discourse and infrastructure. Many times, the articles we received didn't address the questions we'd posed to contributors: where we were seeking case studies, oftentimes we received what amounted to press releases. The material we were seeking

was more subjective. We wanted organizers to marry their analysis to its historical context, something we could learn from and relate to. A discussion of what an organization does can be summarized in a paragraph. Notably, our European contributors did not communicate in this way. As far as we can surmise, this is a discursive norm for European social movements and is utilized as a matter of course.

Secondly, the communications infrastructure available (both technological and organizational) are architecturally unsuitable for a continuity of communication within the left on any scales larger than the municipal level. Over the last several years, we've seen many 'movement' publications go under due to financial problems. While we are saddened to see the projects of so many friends give way, in the absence of functioning organizations and discourse, there is no base of support for these publications. As well, the architecture of these publications had been erected on a failed organizational approach-- the 'conversion' of people to a particular political identity through an awareness of 'issues.' As we've seen over the past ten years, the chief 'sin of omission' for the alter-globalization movement was a failure to engage with a multiplicity of 'everyday lives.' This was reflected in movement media, with a focus on struggles as documentation. The avenues of communication that remain are still constructed around this process of 'raising awareness,' precluding other sorts of encounters.

Even while Team Colors was attempting to call attention to this, we were ignoring our own role in perpetuating it. The manner in which we organized the distribution of the journal and the encounters around its content were confined to a limited conception of 'outreach' consisting of mass emails and other electronic communication, and the advertisement of the publication via postcards distributed through the mail towards 'activist' spaces. For all the money and time spent attempting to 'get the word out' about *Whirlwinds*, we did not involve our contributors, who have their own extensive networks of comrades, family and friends, in bringing people into the discussion. We had failed to encourage ownership of the project by all those involved. Additionally, the 'process' we sought to set in motion became a goal-- to finish and promote the journal.

This failure to move outside the model we criticized was also evident in the sites chosen for *Whirlwinds* events. Rather than attempting to work through the constituencies of our contributors in their locales, we targeted locations, and indeed people, who were 'safe.' Events took place almost exclusively at Anarchist and other Anti-capitalist spaces, and were pitched directly towards individuals who were involved in the culture of these spaces. Where we'd been declaring a certain suite of activities 'useless' we'd certainly not distanced ourselves from that suite of activities' infrastructure.

Conclusion

As we've departed from one phase of this project, it is clear to us that our approach needs to change. The way we envision *site* and *scale* requires discussion. When we speak of site, we are not talking about the workplace, the meeting hall, the picket line...certainly these are sites, and valuable ones. But conceptually, it becomes necessary to conceive of sites not as places but as networks. This does not refer to the internet, but rather to the existing and immanent ties between communication, identification, struggle and labor. As stated earlier, our engagement with our

contributors was limited to exchanges around the articles solicited. Had we approached this project as collaboration between ourselves and our contributors, would something else have been produced?

The way that we distributed information and attempted to generate conversation did not work. We utilized structures that are not adequate for our purposes. Where the internet has been hailed as the fundamental tool of the new anti-capitalist left, we feel that its value cannot be universalized. In fact, the same goes for all media, electronic and otherwise. We should not mistake a piece of the flow of information for a completed act of communicating. We feel that the communication that results is as alienating as any other newscast. As stated earlier, the failure on the part of Team Colors to attempt to engage with our contributors and their constituencies was a missed opportunity. An evaluation of priorities would have allowed us to engage with this-- the goals we had established centered on ongoing encounter between projects that we found interesting. As this work played out, that goal could only have been accomplished incidentally... any encounter produced by our strategy was more forced by the publication than anything else. This stands in contrast to the possibilities presented by a shifting of *site*.