Designing the Agile Party with Socialist Cybernetics

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Summary

- To win in our newly volatile and complex world, we need a party with agility, resilience, and scalability. This does not yet exist in a democratic form.
- A model akin to the Democratic Socialists of America provides a solid start, in particular Max Shanly's proposal for a UK adaptation. I propose innovations in four further areas to surmount the DSA's problems with speed and coordinated action at scale.
- In party democracy, mixing elected delegates with sortition balances political and demographic representation, and stability with fresh perspectives. Along with leadership induction and training programs this would help to spread skills and harmonise culture across the organisation, as well as making entryist tactics less effective.
- In strategy, the party should think at the level of the whole movement ecology, acting as both a social movement articulator and an election vehicle. This should involve significantly more data analysis than typical on the left, both to allocate resources effectively to social movements and to feed community consultation into election strategy.
- In structure, unity can be created without crushing local autonomy by focusing on integration instead of control, particularly in reinforcing feedbacks between the central and local organisation. Cross-party initiatives like working groups are situated in a ‘dual operating system’ of hierarchy and formal network, which could benefit from coordination by a separate network guiding council.
- In local action, our primary regular activity should be participatory community assemblies rather than dull branch meetings. These also function as incubators and accelerators, creating new community campaigns designed with rapid growth mechanisms.

A New Kind of Party

Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous — VUCA, as capitalist management culture has labelled the new normal. For all the important differences in business and political organising, this much is shared. Our opponents have adjusted their organisational models to survive in this environment, but the left seemingly has not. Our organisational structures are still determined by ideology and sect, with little in the way of innovation to move anyone forward. Where the world requires rapid response, our organisations are sluggish. If they’re agile, they lack size and power. If they have the potential for size and power, they create this at the expense of democracy and accountability. Choose your poison: glacial democratic systems, tiny reactive affinity groups, or paranoid and hollowed out parties.

To navigate not only Your Party's own internal conflicts but the world that it will face, *the left needs to innovate.* In line with what the social movement theorist Rodrigo Nunes stresses in his book Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal,[1] we must dispense with our dogmatic insistence on one organisational form over another, and recognise we need a party designed to 'fit' this unique environment: one that is **agile**, **scalable**, and **resilient**.

Innovation doesn't arise from pulling ideas out of the ether, as though by divine inspiration — it comes from combining existing forms into unique combinations[2]. We should draw not only from forms we already use, but also from places we would never have considered. The left has always relied on organisational cross-pollination, whether it realises it or not. Even the structure of the Bolshevik Party was a combination of forms from beyond the communist milieu: not only military discipline and strategy, but also the cell structure of Masonic lodges and other occult secret societies, which earlier proto-communists like Babeuf, Buonarroti, and Blanqui had imitated.[3]

The call to learn from our enemies is heard often on the left, but rarely followed up with action. There's no doubt a fear that this would blunt our radicalism, even turn us reactionary somehow. The other side aren't quite so afraid, and capitalist organisation theory and management practice will happily draw from leftist organising where it works – which doesn't appear to have turned business people into communists.[4] So I'm going to put my money where my mouth is for once, and steal some ideas from our antagonists.

While it's unclear at the time of writing what will happen to Your Party, the feeling among much of the active supporters is that they will organise regardless. We must continue this conversation undisturbed, whether we go forward with the help of Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana or not. Because for all their conflict the two have been unified, at least in words, on one thing: that we need not just a new party, but '*a new kind* of party'.[5]

Viable Systems

The struggle inside Your Party revolves to a large degree around the issue of grassroots democracy, and this is an important question when it comes to agility, scale, and resilience, in both positive and negative ways. Democracy can aid adaptation, membership engagement, and reflects the world we want to create. But as Joe Todd points out in the first episode of the Life of the Party podcast, democracy also has its costs: it can be laborious, resource intensive, and restricts agility.[6] He points to those in the 70,000-member organisation the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) who have reported how

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1 Rodrigo Nunes (2021) *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization*

2 For this perspective on the emergence of innovation in social systems, see Padgett and Powell (2013) *The Emergence of Organizations and Markets.* The framework is summarised here: Orgtheory.net

3 See James Billington (1980) *Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith*

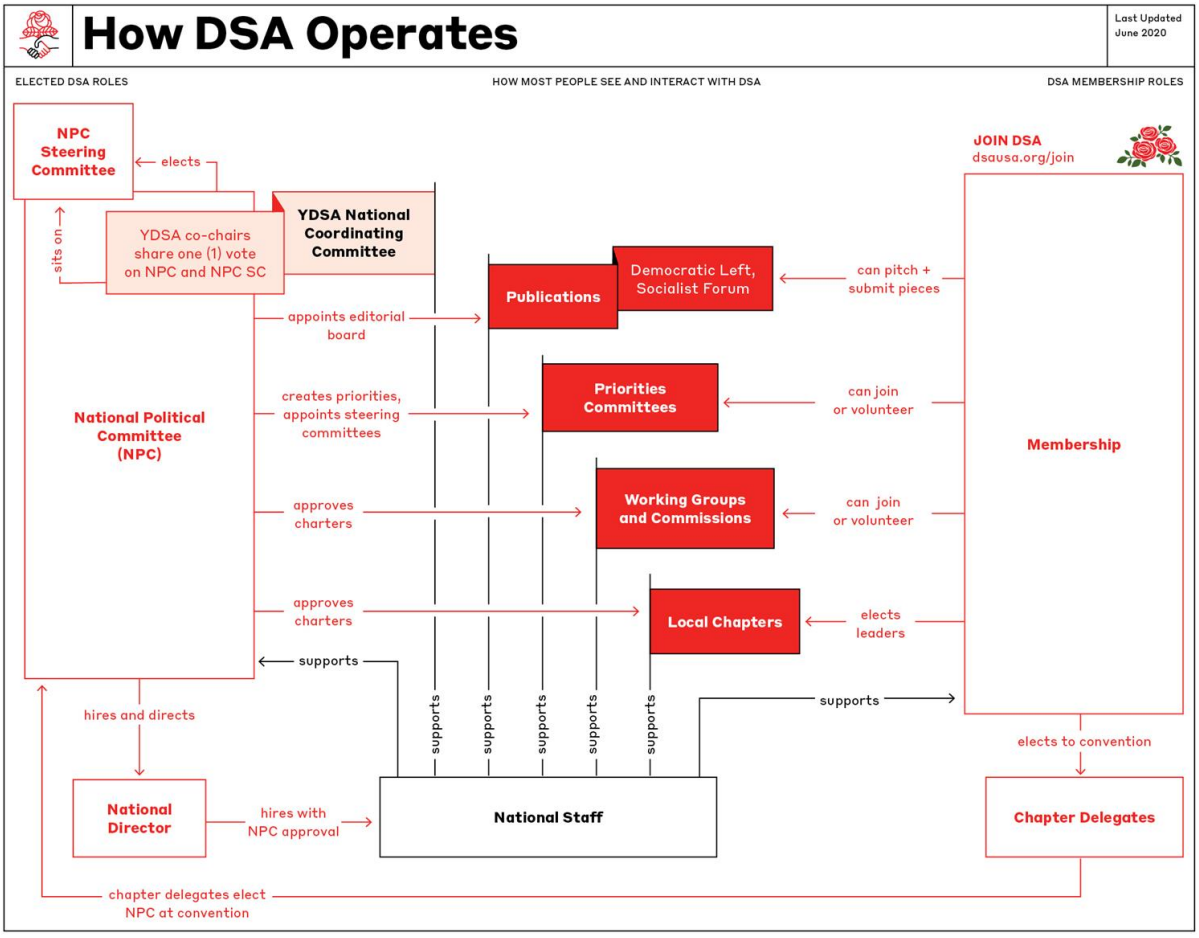
4 A striking example is the 1952 book *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* by Philip Selznick, which became a classic of organisational sociology. While business leaders rarely cited it directly, Selznick's later popular text Leadership in Administration adapted those ideas to a corporate context. On the other hand consultancy firms, the military, and government were less cagey about directly appropriating ideas from the Bolshevik study.

5 Your Party launch statement, conspicuously now removed from the website since Zarah Sultana was sidelined from the organising process

6 The later references to Jonas Marvin and Shanice McBean also relate to this podcast episode: Life of the Party podcast, Episode 1: Our Party? Who Really Has the Power?

challenging it has been to move as a unified force, given the need to balance national strategy with local autonomy. The general relationship between the DSA's local and national levels looks like this:[7]

- Local groups operate in a largely autonomous fashion so long as they follow the DSA's constitution and by-laws. They elect delegates to attend a National Convention every two years, the highest decision making body.
- Delegates to the National Convention vote on cross-organisational issues like policy and strategic orientation, and elect members to the National Political Council (NPC).
- The NPC guides the implementation of policy and strategy, as well as overall management of the organisation, meeting on a quarterly basis. They also elect a Steering Committee accountable to the NPC which handles day-to-day management.



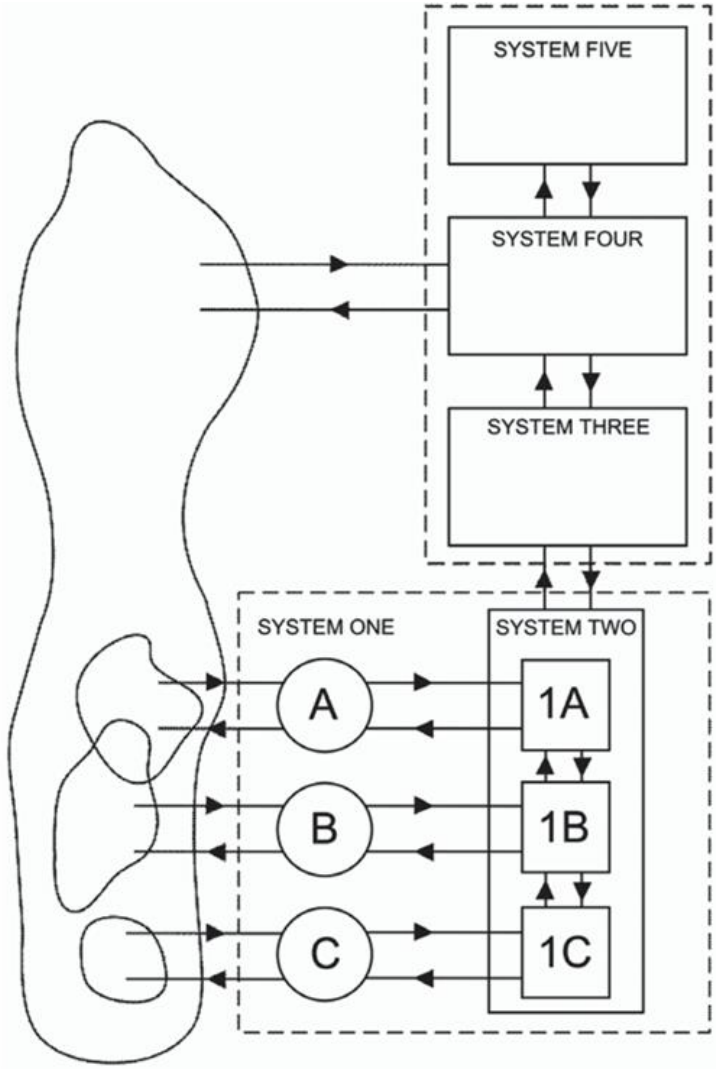
In the UK, Max Shanly has taken inspiration from the DSA to propose a similar structure for Your Party,[8] which is broadly in line with what Zarah Sultana has called for.[9] Beyond necessary changes to comply with UK electoral law and some renaming for cultural reasons (Convention becoming Conference), Shanly has added mechanisms to bolster accountability, transparency, and representation, including term limits, rest periods, recall mechanisms, and mandatory reselection. The changes are all welcome, and would likely

7 Leadership and Structure - Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)
8 Max Shanly — Drafting the Future. A Constitution and Standing Orders for a New Model Left Party
9 Zarah Sultana, The Alternative — Sidecar

break down some internal barriers while maintaining or even increasing resilience, which he highlights with the term ‘rigid flexibility’.

But this might not go far enough. It doesn’t for example seem to deal much with the difficulty of coordinating local and national activity, or of rapidly responding to emergent threats in a way which remains tied to the membership. It should be borne in mind that the DSA is not an electoral vehicle, and their requirements will be different to those of a political party. There is a risk that in the more demanding environment of electoral cut-and-thrust, the organisation becomes forced to concentrate power in the steering committee and NPC, over the Conference and wider membership, in order to maintain necessary agility.[10] The tendency of all organisations to rigidify and centralise power over time — the dreaded Iron Law of Oligarchy — is an ever-present threat.

Aside from the addition of the Socialists in Office committee (SiO), most of the suggested changes are smaller mechanisms, additional roles, more frequent conferences and so on. We need to look for where we could make deeper structural changes to enhance long term agility and scalability, while maintaining resilience and an organic connection to the wider membership. To help us, we can apply some classic tools from management cybernetics.



from Thomas Swann (2020) Anarchist Cybernetics: Control and Communication in Radical Politics

[10] Some would argue this is happening in the DSA already, e.g. All Power To The Members — Groundwork

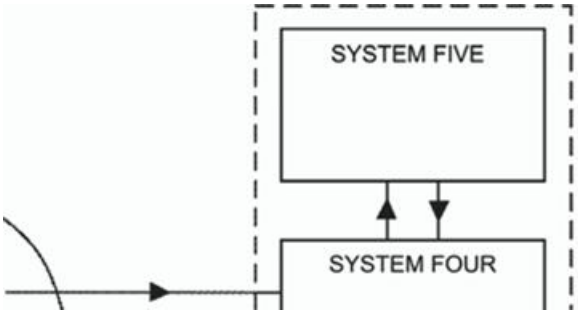
In a project curtailed by the Chilean coup in 1973, President Salvador Allende was working with the British cyberneticist Stafford Beer to apply the latter's ideas to the socialist state.[11] Beer's Viable Systems Model (VSM), a description of the optimum relationships between various functional subsystems of an organisation, was to be used to design a democratic socialist form for the state, one that had the responsiveness of a capitalist state, yet was based on workers' self-management.

The VSM sets out five sub-systems that Beer believed every organisation would need to be responsive and adaptable. At the top, system 5 is the identity, including governance and policy, values and mission. In an organisation like the DSA or in Shanly's model, this would represent the formation of the constitution, the political program, and long term strategy by the membership at Conference. Below in system 4 there are the intelligence functions, where information from the wider world is synthesised with the organisation's goals, along with data of its internal state, to steer it through its environment. While the membership would be helping to shape this via the conference, the more precise ongoing reactions would be carried out by the NPC and Steering Committee, in responding to political threats and opportunities, managing the organisation's resources, and developing its members. System 3 is the coordinating function that creates feedback between those higher level strategic functions and the operating units below. This might correspond to roles such as regional organisers who connect the NPC to the local chapters. System 2 is the communications systems that connect all of the local units. In a political organisation this might be online or offline meeting spaces, forums, Slack channels, WhatsApp groups, and also any kind of shared culture or practice that binds groups together. Finally, system 1 is the many operating units, where the organisation meets the world 'on the ground', which in a party would typically be the local chapters and branches.

By descending through the levels, we can analyse whether any functions are missing or minimised, whether there is any incoherence or inconsistency between them, and whether there is anything that needs redesigning. The metaphor of 'descending' might however be misleading: the VSM represents not a hierarchy of people but a hierarchy of functions, and one person can play a role in various subsystems. Importantly for a democratic socialist party, both the local operations (system 1) and the control of whole-organisation direction and identity (system 5) can be performed by the same people. This was reflected in the Chilean episode, where Beer had assumed that Allende would place himself in ultimate control as system 5; as he reached the top of the VSM diagram the President is instead reported to have exclaimed: 'at last, the people!'

[11] See Eden Medina (2014) *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile*

Membership and Leadership



If the membership are to be in control of the supreme decision making body of the party, then we should begin by looking at how to make such participation possible. This has already been a key point of contention in the Your Party founding process, particularly on the question of which democratic mechanism to base the first conference around. Standard practice in many large left wing groups is to select conference attendees through elections from local chapters — delegation — and there has been very little pushback against this on the contemporary left up till now. But it was recently announced that the Your Party conference attendees would be randomly selected by lottery, known as sortition. This has been polarising, forcing people to take a position on a democratic issue they may not have previously considered.

While there may be good arguments for adopting sortition for the first conference as a purely pragmatic measure, I am more interested here in considering the longer term selection of members not only to conferences but also into year-round decision-making bodies. Is there any reason to disturb the common practice of electing delegates and representatives?

There are many upsides to an election system, like how it confers legitimacy, signals that the leader politically represents those who voted for them, and that they have at least received assent to lead from the organisation as a whole. Successfully winning a campaign takes leadership skills, and if they're someone well respected in the community that assures a minimum standard of political education. In theory, if there is a sufficiently open and accessible system for becoming a candidate, this would allow any member to rise into the leadership if they can get enough votes.

In practice however, electoral systems can produce perverse outcomes.[12] A popularity contest doesn't necessarily tell you much about the person beyond their charisma, depth of social networks, and access to resources. Leading a campaign well doesn't mean you're good at leading a large organisation. People can only vote on the candidates they are presented with, so they may not in reality have any reason to put their trust in this leader, and a lack of good options could make people disengage from the process entirely. Someone who would be ideal for a role may be kept out by their lack of social networks. Even where people are rightly elected based on leadership qualities, this still favours those who have had the resources, networks, and confidence to have been previously nominated and elected into this or other organisations. This tends to reproduce a limited

[12] Some of the following problems are partially mitigated in Max Shanly's proposal given the across-the-board use of Single Transferable Vote with droop quota, but they all still stand, just to a lesser degree.

class of leaders rather than distributing skills across an organisation, and one that skews towards dominant identities: white, straight, male, middle class, non-disabled, neurotypical etc. Election systems not only fail to demographically reflect the membership, but also reinforce a structural imbalance that keeps people out of power, however unintentionally.

This highlights a distinction within the term ‘representation’ that is too rarely made. Demographic representation involves having a leadership that reflects the membership in terms of characteristics like gender, race, and disability. Political representation is about having your beliefs or interests reflected in the leadership. You might find yourself well represented in terms of identity, but completely unrepresented in your political beliefs, or you might have your political beliefs broadly represented while seeing no one reflecting your identity group. Far from demographics being merely a cosmetic issue, a lack of representation increases the likelihood that decisions will be made which fail to consider all necessary nuances of an issue. Consider the choice between a leadership of male feminists on the one hand, or of neoliberal women on the other — a socialist feminist is likely to find neither to be adequate.

Sortition makes up for the demographic problems of delegation. It is quicker and requires fewer resources. It disrupts entryist tactics, works against the formation of cliques and informal power centres, and over time distributes leadership skills more evenly. One further advantage I have not heard raised in this debate is how sortition might actually stimulate the spread of ideas, rather than prevent it. Because now the more people in the room or across the membership that you convince of an argument, the more likely it is that argument will be selected in sortition. With delegation, regardless of how popular an idea is it won’t be represented if it’s not held by any of the candidates, so it’s more strategic to have the ear of a few influential people rather than to spread ideas widely.

Balancing its upsides, sortition brings its own issues and challenges. While sortition creates excellent demographic representation in larger groups, this is less likely in small groups — although for a national political party with a large membership this may not be an issue. Sortition also produces a less experienced leadership, and the greater rotation of leaders disrupts organisational memory, both of which are factors in producing agility and resilience. And as much as this paper is focused on organisational form, this cannot be divorced from political content, which is where perhaps the most compelling argument against sortition lies.

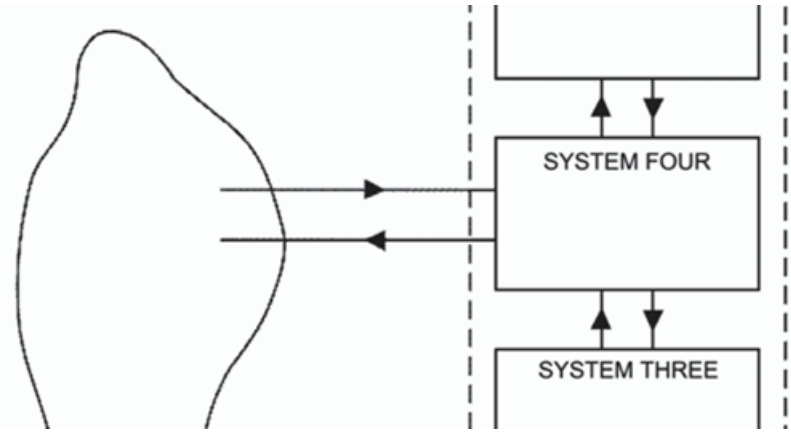
Completely replacing political representation with demographic representation will not necessarily be to the advantage of socialist politics in the immediate term. We may at times want political leaders who are not typical of the public, or even of an organisation’s grassroots, when they represent a vanguard of opinion that we want to generalise. A radical in a position of leadership can help to shift broader opinion in the same direction, where simply mirroring the population would reproduce the kind of unconsciously reactionary positions we often need to overcome. Even if the empirical evidence is convincing that mechanisms like participatory deliberation tend to bring people towards more progressive and egalitarian interpersonal attitudes, this alone is not enough to ensure that support for radical politics will emerge.

The choice of sortition or delegation is a choice between, on the one hand, better demographic representation with broader membership development and less risk of infiltration, or on the other, better political representation with greater legitimacy and stability. But why does it have to be a choice? The obvious answer seems to be to mix the two, opening up a portion of slots in elected bodies to members chosen by sortition. That way we could enjoy both the benefits of leadership consistency and the flexibility that comes with spreading experience more widely through the party. It better utilises the resources latent in otherwise dormant members, increasing capacity without having to increase membership. And the greater circulation of people creates new relationships, breaking up silos of information and knowledge, and diffusing culture throughout the organisation. The stability and flexibility carries across the party.

In mixing however we risk a gap appearing between elected and sortitioned members, with the latter treated as lesser because of their perceived lack of experience or legitimacy, or conversely the former treated with suspicion as domineering forces or unrepresentative cliques. One way to smooth this difference is through induction and training. Rather than drawing applicants for delegate nomination or sortition from the whole membership, they could be drawn instead from a pool of members who have completed training on leadership competence, baseline political education, and knowledge of the organisation. By making this free, online, as short as reasonably possible, accessible to all members, and clearly signposted, it doesn't have to be a barrier. By giving a clear first step to a process that is often opaque, it could even be a motivating factor. If the membership also has input in shaping that training, this confers a further layer of democratic legitimacy. This would close the gap in competence between sortitioned and elected delegates, while also supporting people to run for election who might not otherwise consider it. And in future even those randomly selected, now having gained experience, would be more likely to run for a delegate position.

There is no perfect democratic system, and there are costs and benefits to all approaches. If we want an organisation that is genuinely steered by 'the people', we cannot reduce democracy to voting in elections. But equally, we cannot rely on demographically representing the population and simply expect radical political positions and competent leadership to emerge. As is a common conclusion in building complex systems, the most effective and adaptive form will be one based on mixing a variety of mechanisms, rather than a monoculture.

Sensing, Predicting, Planning



Next we come to System 4 of the VSM, the environmental sensing functions. This is often under-explored in leftist groups. If we want an agile organisation, that means System 4 needs tight feedback loops, where we properly understand what's happening in our external environment, and what our current internal capacities are, to respond rapidly to it. Let's say there's an unexpected growth in fascist activity in a particular city. The sooner you hear about that, and the more accurately you know what your current capacities are across the organisation, then the more effectively you can respond by re-routing resources — funding, training, activists — to help bolster local activity. If your organisation's sensing apparatus is inadequate, it will be slow, it will send inappropriate resources, and it may damage itself by weakening necessary functions elsewhere. It may not even become aware of a problem until it's too late. Think of system 4 like your own sense organs: whether through sight, smell, touch, taste, or hearing, you need sense data to safely navigate dangerous terrain.

In the case of Your Party, social movements are a much more significant part of the environment than for most political parties, and not as an opponent but as an ally. The original launch statement directly mentioned being rooted in social movements, and Zarah Sultana went further in saying the party should create a bridge between movements and electoral work, rather than seeing one as superseding the other. This approach finds theoretical support in Salar Mohandesi's essay Party as Articulator, which also argues the party's relationship to movements should be its primary function.[13]

The party-as-articulator perspective is in line with a whole-movement strategy that I've elsewhere called *the shock doctrine of the left.*[14] This strategy applies not to individual organisations, but to a social movement ecology as a whole, with variegated actors performing different but mutually supportive functions. Where an individual campaign will ask 'what should we do?', from the party's perspective we need to ask 'what should the movement do, and how do we support it?' We approach party activity as a route to increasing movement power even in the stretches between election campaigns, through funnelling resources, activist capacity, skills, and knowledge out into the movements. This in turn can form a conduit for activists beyond the state and party to have greater impact upon parliamentary politics, to train as party candidates and to push for state reforms that

13 Salar Mohandesi - Party As Articulator - Viewpoint Magazine
14 Graham Jones (2018) *The Shock Doctrine of the Left*

would remove barriers to struggle. Parties also play an important role in pushing back against reactionary forces in the popular media, to slow or reverse the rightward drift of everyday discourse.

Using a framework adapted from Erik Olin Wright, I call this the **Taming** function, creating a slow attrition of our enemies both from outside and within. These are joined by **Smashing** actions, where social movement actors create more sudden breakup of opponent systems, which would include anything from strikes and blockades, to riots and vandalism, to disruptive occupations and various forms of 'non-violent direct action'. **Building** actions point in the other direction, creating new alternative institutions which support the movement ecology and can form the basis of a new society. This could be in the form of cooperative housing, workplaces, and food distribution, or democratic council systems that form a dual power to the state. Finally **Healing** actions also look inward, to care for individuals, groups, and the whole ecology, supporting marginalised people, and developing accountability systems that actually transform participants rather than creating further trauma.

This provides a simple but differentiated tool for analysing movements on a system level, without relying on ideological divisions. Smashing for instance can include actions taken by anarchist affinity groups or large trade unions, and dual power Building is a strategy derived from Leninism, a part of the left that typically isn't interested in co-ops. Nor is this merely a list of different domains of activism – different parts of the housing movement for example could involve all four functions. This is useful for getting beyond entrenched divisions in favour of looking at systemic effects, but it does raise the question of where we should be aiming our attacks specifically. All four functions being active within housing struggles would be great for that sub-section of the wider movement, but this alone will not bring down capitalism.

In systems thinking the points at which a system is most susceptible to change are referred to as 'lever points'. David Harvey suggests seven 'activity spheres' in the evolutionary trajectory of capitalism, points at which strategic interventions could push the system onto a different developmental path:[15]

a) technologies and organisational forms

b) the relation to nature

c) social relations

d) mental conceptions

e) labour and production processes

f) institutional, legal, and governmental arrangements

g) the conduct of daily life that underpins social reproduction

These are not to be treated in isolation but as dialectically related, such as how a change in technology can affect mental conceptions, which can then inspire further new

[15] This framework is found in Harvey's 2009 article Organizing for the Anti-Capitalist Transition and reappears in his book *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (2011)

technologies, or new social relations, and so on. Strategy therefore requires constant adaptation and rebalancing with regard to these levers, depending on the geographical and historical context — something which, Harvey argues, the left has previously failed to do. Part of the role of the party-as-articulator would be to monitor the balance of struggle and direct resources to amplify it in certain areas, so that we don't repeat that same failure.

We can't do such monitoring consistently and scalably by relying on intuition alone, nor merely by cross referencing personal experience with theory. We need data. The party needs to bring in and rigorously analyse sufficient data on the state of the movement to accurately assess where it should be applying force and directing resources. This could be in the form of surveys and interviews with movement figures, feedback from local groups on the ground, and systematic scanning of news media. Once analysed and written up into reports this could be fed into the Conference and the NPC for determining strategy, alongside discussion and deliberation by the membership.

Even beyond the party's relationship to social movements, data can also feed into parliamentary work. The Workers' Party of Belgium (PTB) has shown how powerful this can be when adopted by a revolutionary organisation.[16] Over a 15 year period of strategic and structural renewal, and their adoption of what they call 'Socialism 2.0', the PTB have grown from only receiving around 0.8% of the national vote to 10%, and now have 15 seats in the federal parliament, all while remaining a Marxist organisation. They've achieved this in part by reorienting towards a listening-first approach, having reckoned with the failure of the lecture-first approach they had operated with since their founding in 1979. Adapting traditional Maoist techniques to their contemporary context, they use their local base groups to collect the concerns of local residents, through surveys on doorsteps and from members through in-person commissions. These are then translated into a political program, around which campaigns are launched and debates are brought to parliament.

This is empowering for the public who get involved, as it responds to the pervasive lack of listening by the political class and demonstrates the possibility of an alternative. It gives people the sense of collective power that the modern world denies them, and that can make even radical political groups seem appealing.

The network theorist Manuel Castells distinguishes two means of building power in networks: programming and switching.[17] Programming is about communicating ideas and determining the shape of discourse. In the few weeks since his election as leader of the Green Party, Zack Polanski has shown the power even a small political party can wield for disrupting reactionary mainstream discourse. Programming is not only relevant to mainstream and social media however, but any communicative mechanism. That feedback between community and membership consultation, strategy and policy formation, and communicating its impact back to the public has the power to reshape discourse in a domain that is not yet dominated by the right.

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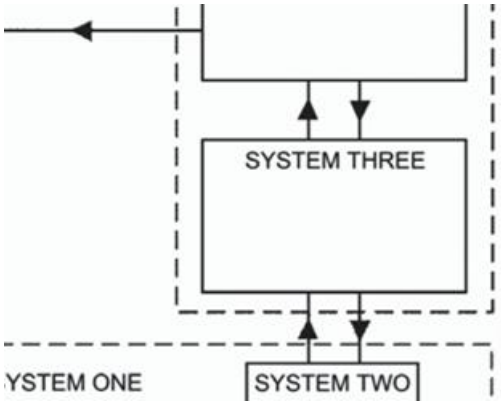
16 There's a wealth of English-language information on the PTB website, including internal reports: About PVDA-PTB | PVDA-PTB International Dept, and interviews with leadership figures What makes the Workers' Party of Belgium tick? 1/2 | PVDA-PTB International Dept

17 See the paper Manuel Castells (2011) A Network Theory of Power and his book *Communication Power* (2009)

Network switching is more directly related to the question of movement articulation, and for Castells is the more powerful of the two. Switching is where previously disconnected networks are linked together, opening up new capacities on both sides. In an activist context, social movement theorists identify a similar fundamental mechanism in 'brokerage', the bringing together of previously disconnected groups.[18] When strung together with other mechanisms like attribution of similarity (creating recognition between actors so they can form bonds of solidarity) and diffusion (the spread of political positions, tactics, organisational forms, or identities), they form broader social movement processes over time. These three mechanisms of brokerage, attribution of similarity, and diffusion are the components of mobilisation, the recruitment into and coordination with a movement.

If we want to stimulate mass mobilisation we should consider how these mechanisms can be performed by the party. Shanly's Socialists in Office committee goes some way to institutionalising the link between the party and elected representatives, but there should equally be a unit tasked with overseeing the articulation with social movements as well, ideally involving representatives from beyond the party. Heuristics like the movement functions and lever points set out above can assist this unit in finding a broad spread of representatives, on top of analysing the movement's resource and capacity needs. And it can also help in identifying structural holes in movement networks that the party can connect together.[19] Resources will help, and representation will help, but it is by brokering those new connections between detached people and groups that the party can most effectively create bonds of solidarity and new collective power.

Neither Centralised Nor Decentralised



Descending to system 3, we are now concerned with the coordination of the 'lower' level operations with the strategic 'top' of the organisation. This is key to the question of how to scale up power from the local and create a unified organisation.

We saw with the DSA that emphasising democracy and local group autonomy could make it difficult to produce organisational unity. On the other side of the coin, the Workers' Party

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18 Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow (2012) *Dynamics of Contention*

19 'Structural holes' comes from yet another framework which identifies the articulator of networks as a position of significant power, see Ronald Stuart Burt (1992): *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*

of Belgium is highly unified, but leaves very little room for local adaptations of central positions once a line has been decided. It would be easy to look at this picture and conflate unification with centralisation, hierarchical authority, and inflexibility. But that is a mistake: it is possible to create unity in the whole while maintaining autonomy in the parts. If we want to create a truly democratic organisation that still has the power to win, this is the core challenge.

To break the simplistic horizontal-hierarchical binary, we can introduce more specific differentiations. We can distinguish first of all between unification through control or through integration.[20] Control involves one part of an organisation constraining the action of another in order to regulate outcomes. This can be exercised through formal rules, responsibilities, and sanctions for non-compliance. Control can also be informal, operating through norms, charisma, and expertise, and being upheld through peer pressure, fear of exclusion, or desire for approval. Integration in contrast refers to the consistency of structures and processes across an organisation, that is, whether a part of a system is only integrated with its local relations or globally integrated into the whole.

If we combine these two variables we can see four ideal types. When we talk about ‘decentralised’ groups, this implies relatively low control and local integration, as with firms in a market economy. The state exercises some control in terms of laws and regulations, but they are otherwise free to act as they wish, and they can be highly differentiated from the rest of the market. ‘Centralisation’ implies high control and global integration, like large businesses which have hierarchical authority but which enable production processes to flow right across the organisation, or which have standardised forms even in outlets across different countries. You can also have high control and local integration, which might be found in large national bureaucracies, where different regions have unique structures but all are strongly controlled from the centre.

That leaves one final possibility: low control and global integration. This would involve the central setting of goals, strategy, and political program, which local groups are mandated to enact, while having the freedom to shape their activity around the needs of the local area. Decision making is always cascaded down to the lowest possible level on any given issue. There would be oversight, assistance, and coordination from the centre, but little control beyond what is necessary for the purposes of accountability.

This is the ideal type for a democratic socialist organisation. Low control, but high integration. Autonomy in the parts, but coherence with the whole. Organisational designers sometimes call this centre-led to distinguish it from centralised, but for our purposes I would prefer a different term: not centralised, not decentralised, but *collectively steered*.

That is the theory, but how do we create this integration without control? We’ve seen a few ways already: standardised induction and training diffuses practices and culture across the organisation; sortition increases the circulation of people in leadership positions; and collective information gathering — when aggregated, used to guide policy and strategy, and fed back to membership and communities — creates a sense of unified purpose, all

[20] Amy Kates, Greg Kesler, Michele Dimartino (2021) *Networked, Scaled, and Agile: A Design Strategy for Complex Organizations*

without requiring control. While each of these involves a formal mechanism, the global integration happens mostly informally, through the resultant spread of ideas and practices.

More formal processes are still necessary however. I mentioned earlier that the coordination functions of system 3 might be performed in the DSA by regional organisers — but in practice this appears to be seriously underdeveloped, with no consistent feedback mechanisms between national and chapter levels.[21] While the DSA constitution requires that certain members of the NPC act as liaisons, this has reportedly broken down since the growth of the organisation.[22] Routing greater resources to these coordinative roles or units and establishing consistent feedback processes should be a priority.

There are also the working groups, commissions, and priority committees, for whom there appears to be inconsistent reporting, a lack of coordination, with work often ending up siloed and duplicated. These function differently to locals, in that they are more focused on things like cross-organisational strategy and internal reform. In that sense they are playing more of a system 4 role – or they would be, if they were better coordinated with the centre.

One organisational design approach to consider for this purpose is something called a 'dual operating system'.[23] This is where alongside a traditional hierarchy, you also have a formal network, made up of the same people as the hierarchy. This network is used to launch more nimble strategic initiatives on a volunteer basis. This is fairly similar to DSA's working groups and other semi-autonomous units, which enable members from across the organisation to collaborate on focused issues in a participatory manner.

However, rather than the top of the hierarchy coordinating these groups, in a dual operating system there is a separate guiding coalition. This is also made up of members from across the organisation, regardless of their level of authority elsewhere. The coalition enables the network to coordinate much more rapidly than it could if restricted by the slower but more stable hierarchy. It is not however intended as a secondary power centre, and it is still ultimately accountable to the NPC, playing only a supportive role. The inclusion of a mix of respected figures from the hierarchy rather than the coalition being completely separate, and it having no role in operations beyond the strategic groups (it would not coordinate the local chapters) further counteracts the possibility of conflict.

Having a mediating unit of a guiding coalition may still however militate against NPC overreach and the limitation of group autonomy. In 2022 the BDS and Palestine Solidarity working group that was previously established by delegates at convention was de-chartered by the NPC, in a move widely criticised by the grassroots.[24] A separate guiding coalition – including representatives from the working groups – could act as an advocate for the network, rebalancing power in favour of the wider membership.

Whatever organisational form is applied, these functions should not be considered an afterthought or a nicety; they are the glue that holds the organisation together. To argue that capacity is too low to fulfil these functions is self-defeating, because a well designed

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21 There have been and continue to be proposals for DSA to implement formal mechanisms of communication between chapters and national, e.g.: https://redstarcaucus.org/leadership-pledge-retro-3

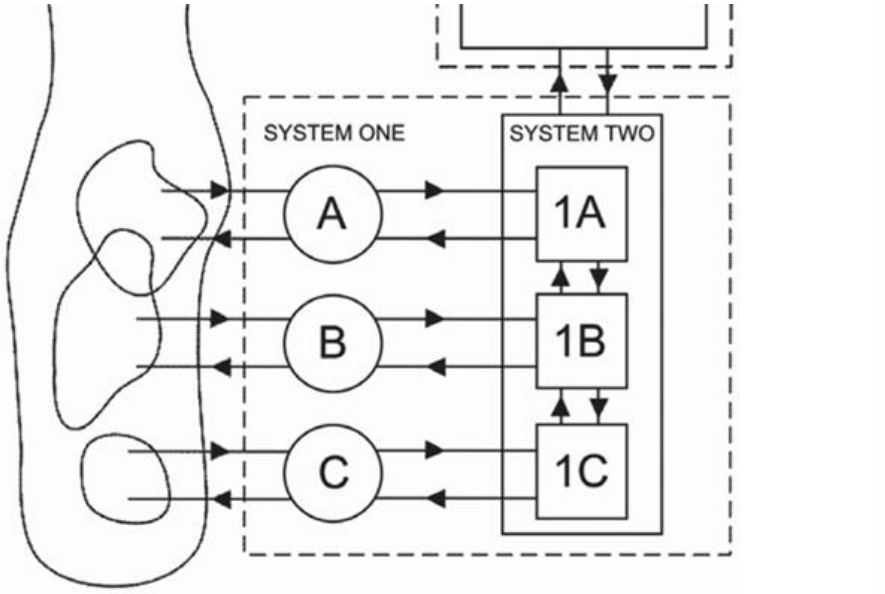
22 It's Time to Expand DSA's National Political Committee – Socialist Forum

23 John Kotter (2014) *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World*, and see also *Change: How Organizations Achieve Hard-to-Imagine Results in Uncertain and Volatile Times* (2021)

24 On the de-chartering of the DSA BDS & Palestine Solidarity Working Group – Madison Area DSA

system 3 *creates* capacity. Without it, you have disconnection between the top and bottom (or central and local parts) of the organisation, which will make it harder to move in unison, will create an increasingly disjoined and conflictual party, and will stifle agility and growth.

Assemblies, Incubators, and Agile Activism



In systems 1 and 2 we have the local units of the organisation and their means of communication. The standard operating unit of a political party is the local branch, where members come together to discuss campaign planning, policy, community outreach, and other organisational issues. While this may involve organising public events, in the model so far there is no standardisation of form or mandated regularity of community-facing activity. This is a mistake. For one, it puts the cart before the horse — you need to be a member and/or identify with the party's goals before even attending a branch meeting, when identity formation comes as a *result* of participation. Facilitating community participation in only an ad-hoc manner, based around strategic requirements at a particular moment of a political campaign, disrupts the potential for building an active membership. And making process-heavy meetings the main entry point and primary activity is also catastrophic for retention — they are often boring, and for new members confusing, both of which discourage participation.

We also have to bear in mind, as Jonas Marvin points out, that the people struggling the most may have little time or energy for political activity. We should design our points of contact so that people *want* to use the precious hours they have on the party. When people are chronically exhausted from work, they are unlikely to prioritise activities which feel like they're back at work — they will prioritise events which make them feel good. That means we need engaging, immediately empowering community events that don't require big commitment, but do reward participation. These should be mandated as the main regular activity of the local organisation, party-wide. Assemblies could fulfil this role.

While assemblies enjoyed their period in vogue they have been sidelined in recent years, following both the failure of Occupy and the turn back towards electoral parties and vertical organisations. There may be good reasons for this shift away from horizontal organising –

like many activists I have experienced the nightmare of being trapped in tortuous consensus processes – but the wholesale dismissal of every aspect of participatory practice is counterproductive. When they are well designed, tightly facilitated, and used in an appropriate context, participatory forms can be powerful tools for mobilisation and consciousness raising.

Assemblies give an accessible opportunity for hundreds of people to come together, form bonds of friendship, create a sense of collective belonging, and make politically purposeful decisions. Compare this to typical left events, where you're either lectured to in speeches and then go home, or get bombarded with – what is for many people – impenetrable and alienating jargon. Assemblies are an effective route to brokerage, attribution of similarity, and identity formation for those not yet mobilised, radicalised, or politically educated, a task for which most leftist events are ill-suited. Plus, using assemblies to draw out the collective feelings of participants can form part of the data gathering that guides both local and national strategy (alongside doorstep and workplace surveys), making the events a real intervention in the community and not just a nice chat.

There may still be a bias towards the time rich, but other means can help to bridge the gap, like partnerships with food co-ops (the co-operative form of food banks, like Cooperation Town)[25], to make assemblies both multi-purpose and to help bring lower income people into the fold. We need to find ways to tie assemblies into daily practices of living — one of Harvey's lever points — while also drawing new members and energy to the wider social movement ecology.

On the other side of the coin, focusing on accessibility does not mean we can't make use of people's capabilities and enthusiasm where that goes beyond the average. There will still be a local organising group to arrange those assemblies and other activities, as well as the functional hierarchy of the party beyond them, with its tiers of training and its elections for defined roles. We don't have to choose between a large, flat and open membership organisation and a small, highly disciplined cadre of militants — the horizontal and the vertical can be articulated.

This goes back again to the Life of the Party podcast and a point Shanice McBean makes around the inclusion of social conservatives in Your Party — yes, we need liberatory principles and we should reject people with exclusionary beliefs taking positions of authority and power. However, it would be a mistake to prevent entry into spaces for people *where they may be transformed.* Incorporating assemblies as the ground-level unit of a larger party could bridge this gap, by providing multiple entry points: an open door that anyone can enter if they remain respectful, but a party behind it with strong and clear political principles.

A regular attendee of a local assembly may never become a full member, and yet the assembly provides a forum in which they can play a part. There they can be introduced not only to new perspectives, but to activist campaigns — they open up a space of brokerage. But as Jacob Stringer from London Renters' Union emphasises in their TWT paper, merely telling people they should do activism is not likely to be enough.[26] Training can help to get

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25 Cooperation Town – A network of community food co-ops

26 The World Transformed 2025 // Assemblies at TWT25 – Read the Submissions

over the initial hill, but even if some people were keen to jump straight in, that presumes there are enough extant local campaigns – or indeed any – to absorb this new wave of activists. And starting a campaign from scratch, having never done it before, is both daunting and unlikely to be as effective as it could be. What we need in those circumstances is a mechanism to help new campaigns form, to be supported by but autonomous from the party.

The question is: how do you design an organisation for designing organisations? Perhaps we can learn from our enemies again, in the use of startup incubators.

Incubators provide advice, training, resources, working spaces, and community to new companies or individual entrepreneurs who do not yet have a functioning product or business model. The aim is to help them get over the first hurdles of starting a business, give them a space to experiment, and eventually develop a sellable product and an organisation capable of carrying them forward. Beyond this stage, startups will sometimes move on to an accelerator, a more selective program focused on helping the business to scale, through help with strategy, funding, and industry connections. Incubators and accelerators can be either private companies or housed inside larger organisations like big businesses, universities, or government departments.

Incubators are not widely used on the left and I've only found a handful of examples in the UK, like at New Economy Organisers' Network (NEON) and the Climate Majority Project.[27] The only place they appear to be used widely outside the startup world is in Brazil, where co-operative incubators were established in the 1990s, growing to around 80 across the country by 2012.[28] There are no doubt other examples, but in general this is not a well known type of organisation. If they were, they could fill a significant niche in the ecology. In *Startup Program Design* by Lombardi and Berk, they make this observation about how incubators and accelerators can connect diverse ecosystems into large organisations:[29]

> Large organizations are complex but not diverse. Entrepreneurial ecosystems and startup communities, on the other hand, are both varied and complex—but complex to a point where no one can manage the chaos. Startup programs are the liaisons that simplify the relationship between these multiple complex systems.

That is, incubators can function as an articulator. There is an aspect of this incubation practice however that is missing from most leftist organising, and a key driver of its agility. To illustrate, allow me a brief autobiographical detour.

Around 2015-2017 I was involved in Radical Think Tank alongside Roger Hallam, before he came to public attention as the founder of Extinction Rebellion (XR). Operating unofficially within Kings College, RTT functioned partly as a kind of incubator, if only for developing Hallam's own ideas at the time for rapidly scalable activist organisations. We came together over a shared interest in complex systems and organisation design, and

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27 New Economy Organisers Network (NEON) — History and Incubator – Climate Majority Project

28 Mariza Almeida, Jose Manoel Carvalho de Mello, Henry Etzkowitz (2012) 'Social innovation in a developing country: invention and diffusion of the Brazilian cooperative incubator'

29 Paolo Lombardi and Adam Berk (2022) *Startup Program Design: A Practical Guide for Creating Corporate Accelerators and Incubators at Any Organization*

agreed on the mechanisms that would work for viral growth. We disagreed on how to relate to the left. I thought it essential, and was already promoting a version of the movement ecology strategy I detailed earlier. He thought the left was too intransigent to adopt new ways of organising and we didn't have enough time given the urgency of the situation. While I began the longer and slower project of education through designing courses, delivering training workshops, and writing books (curtailed first by health issues and then the pandemic), Hallam continued his trial runs and network building, beginning a string of organisations that eventually led to XR.

I say all this to make one thing clear: the organisational design of groups like XR can be positively drawn from without us having to adopt their entire strategy or tactical repertoire. There are design elements which when transferred into other contexts could be of enormous power for the growth of socialist organisations. This was my position in 2015, and it is still my position in 2025.[30] Before we can draw on this influence however we need to better understand its main ingredients and the methodology it comes out of. We will then have a better picture both of what this practice enables, and of how it might lead us astray. I would like to call this *agile activism*.

The approach is adapted from the agile methodology associated, once again, with startups and incubators, which centres around cycles of small scale prototyping, testing, and evaluation.[31] Where traditionally you would start a business (or indeed a leftist organisation) intending for it to be a long-term endeavour for which you will build large elaborate structures, agile is instead based around short feedback cycles, or 'agile sprints'. You start with a minimal model, you test it, and you fail. The failure is part of the process, and not counted as a negative, but as positive data. You return to the ideation stage, incorporating the data generated in the last cycle, and adapt the model. Then you run it again: launch, fail, analyse. Each time to fail, you fail in a new way, helping to guide the development of the model towards something that works. 'Fail fast' is the mantra. This creates an accelerated evolutionary process, producing 'fit' in the same way that it does in nature – through the death of what doesn't survive and by carrying forward the features that work (or that at least don't impede survival). Sometimes you will hit a wall and the whole project will die. Such is evolution. So then you return to the drawing board, and aim in a whole new direction.[32]

In practical terms, that means instead of bringing a huge group of people together under a general idea and then slowly working out what you want to do, instead you gather a small group (even as little as one person), and create an outline, or DNA. The goal is to frontload enough information to stabilise the organisation as it grows, making it clear what it stands

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30 It was also my position in 2019: The DNA of Extinction Rebellion and The life of Extinction Rebellion. Much of this theory appears in *The Shock Doctrine of the Left*, which was published prior to the founding of XR. Brendan Montague from The Ecologist has systematised his own version of the mechanisms underlying XR and similar groups, available at The Commons Library: Movement Power: The Science of Nonviolent Direct Action - The Commons Library

31 Hallam is clear about this method: "Like business start-ups, movements need to experiment, learn from failure, and rapidly iterate." This Climate Activist Has a Plan to Defeat Trumpism. He's in Prison. | The New Republic

32 For a perspective on applying this methodology marginally closer to activist concerns than most business texts (and possibly quite useful for workers' cooperatives), see Michel Gelobter (2015) *Lean Startups for Social Change.*

for, how it envisions creating social change, and how to get involved. At the same time, this should be simple enough that it can be understood and passed on quickly.

Once that iterative process of construction, experimentation, and evaluation has produced an effective local model, you scale through mass training. The simplicity of the DNA allows it to be taught in its entirety very rapidly. As we saw earlier, simplification through standardised frameworks reduces information processing requirements and so can speed up organisational processes — here relating to the speed of growth. And if you incorporate the *training of new trainers*, then as you grow you also increase your capacity to continue growing, enabling exponential growth.

To create an inflow of people for this process, you need some polarising event as a catalyst and a strong funnel to absorb the energy. This is where all those media attention grabbing disruptive actions came in, being the accelerator intending to direct a portion of that attention into induction and training. Creating new activists increases organisational capacity, which allows for more and larger scale actions, which draws in more people to be transformed into activists, and so on, in a positive feedback loop.

Understanding agile activism helps not only to illuminate some of the successes of Hallam and his groups, but also gives context to their failures. Extinction Rebellion was critiqued by many on the left for a variety of good reasons, and I've witnessed a number of people be severely affected by some of the dynamics in and around XR. Among those are the issue of draining resources and creating burnout in the wider movement ecology, such as in the arrestee support group Green and Black Cross, who found themselves suddenly overwhelmed by XR actions. The agile method promotes a kind of 'act now, adjust later' attitude which can, if not done carefully, translate into negative impacts on our comrades and on other communities.

This ethical problem goes back to the disagreement over strategy, which in turn gives us some guidance on how to use agile methods responsibly and sustainably. Insufficient analysis of wider movements and an excessive focus on itself led XR not only to miss the necessity of, for example, disrupting points of production, or co-ordinating with those who could, but also to lose out on the potentials that the ecology has for generating collective power. If you have a healthy and mutually supportive relationship to the wider movement, they will help you, they will provide resources, and they will improve your resilience. If you incorporate the wider ecology into your vision and strategy at the very top of the organisation, ensuring that it reverberates through all your structure, processes, culture, and practices, then you reduce the risk of knock-on harms, maximise resilience, and open up potentials for brokerage, which increases the network power of all actors.

Although this agile approach has been used mainly to create large, national and international-scale campaigns, I am more interested in how this model could be used to create focused community campaigns. Rather than a single group per town linking into a national organisation, you could aim for many small cells to appear in neighbourhoods all across a town or city. This could be used to rapidly spread community anti-racist units to defend against fascist violence, or for housing campaigns to overwhelm targets like developers and councils with distributed direct action. Swarm organising, not for blocking London city centre streets, but for creating intensive local networks far outside the capital.

The design process for these campaigns could also be made participatory, rather than concentrated among a few elite activists, as the minimal nature of the DNA gives scope for standardisation. While DNA development is best handled in small groups, this could be performed by breakout groups in a larger assembly. Imagine an event similar to programming 'hackathons', with a large audience split up into smaller subdivisions of 3-5 people brainstorming and collaborating on DNA outlines. These could make use of local knowledge and prior power analyses to identify areas where there are gaps in campaigning (to avoid negatively impacting other campaigns or duplicating their work). Near the end of the event, each DNA is presented to the whole audience, who then vote on which one to receive the support of the incubator to become a real community group. You then have both the core organisers and a larger pool of people for later accelerating the campaign through mass training. And these are people already invested in the project not just by their locality and agreement with the goals, but by having been involved in its funding, its design, and its launch.[33]

Organisational Design In Practice

Max Shanly's proposal based on the Democratic Socialists of America represents a solid base to begin from. We should then augment this with innovative features like combining delegation and sortition; a data-focused movement ecology strategy; a dual operating model articulating a hierarchy with formalised networks, and coordinated by a guiding coalition; and the adoption of assemblies as a standard practice, with incubators for creating agile community campaigns.

In the actual circumstances that we find ourselves, we are not starting from scratch in an incubator, but joining an existing mass project and riding a wave of anticipation. We are already having to battle even to ensure that Your Party becomes a democratic organisation at all, let alone having the luxury of defining every aspect of it. Nonetheless it is currently indeterminate, and capable of developing in many directions, which brings with it not only huge risks but huge potential.

The arrangement of the system when it launches will have an incalculable effect on its future path, so it is important to fight to get it right. But introducing a whole raft of innovative elements at once would likely be unwise. While most of the proposals in this article have been tested and even become standard in other contexts, many are relatively or entirely untested in socialist organisations. Despite all the similarities across different domains of organisation, each has its own specific dynamics and its own unpredictable emergent properties. The wisest developmental choice would be to start with something proven and secure, and then adapt it piece by piece. That way we can prototype innovations on smaller scales, internally incubating them in parts of the organisation, before expanding when we see them produce desirable results.

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[33] This participatory funding decision making is found in Edge Fund, one of few such organisations who support genuinely radical groups. The proposal for hackathon events resembles Mobilisation Lab's multi-day Campaign Accelerator workshop, albeit abridged and adapted for a large public assembly format rather than aimed at charities.

As we fall further into an uncertain and volatile future, we need organisational innovations like these. Only then we can begin to create to a truly new kind of party – agile, scalable, and resilient – that can survive, thrive, and win.