

Alienation and Mass Organization

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This essay is the first of a two-part series titled “On the Mass Organization Paradigm in Activism.” It chronicles my mixed experiences and realizations as a member of a mass organization based in UP Diliman. I reflect on the alienation I experienced within the organization’s structure and practices, and how I never manifested as a true “activist” despite my affiliation. Later, concepts in anarchism will be explored as an alternative to the current “mass org paradigm” in PH student activism. This series is a call for the revolutionary space to remember humility and reflect on its inclusiveness going forward.

This piece was heavily inspired by Adrienne Onda’s “Di Ka Naman Tunay Na Aktibista,” which I first read two days before writing this and shook me to the core. I’ve done nothing but eat, sleep, and write this essay ever since. I hope to keep this interesting spark of discussion burning.

How does a sheltered homebody become a tibak recruit?

I wasn’t part of any organization for most of my undergrad life in University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD). If not for specific circumstances, I would never have joined a mass organization in 2018, where I am still active (on-and-off) to this day. I had been open to joining organizations when I entered college, but up close, the arbitrary app processes and the brittle masquerades of interacting with upperclassmen stoked my chronic fear of social rejection. I did try to apply for a few orgs on a whim, mainly from wanting a shared space and community. But with my lack of a network or real passion for many of their activities, I never seemed cut out for org life. My friends were also either not members of orgs or not particularly active in them, so I never saw a pressing need to join any.

I’m from a middle-class household in Quezon City. As a freshman, I almost always went home early right after class ended. There was an uneasy sense of missing out on experiences and friendships, but I knew that forcing myself into org life would have made me unhappier. I was certainly already happy having more free time, more mobility, and more outings with friends than I’d had in high school. Only in my third year did I feel comfortable enough with my batchmates and relative seniority to join our institute’s academic organization. I was not a very proactive member, doing what was assigned to me and nothing more, but I enjoyed the camaraderie and felt secure with that sense of busyness, accomplishment, and belonging.

There was one event during undergrad life in 2016 that awakened me to the idea of organization as something crucial, essential. The College of Science where I resided had often seemed like a bubble in UPD, set apart from the outcries and barrage along Academic Oval. Most of the time you wouldn’t even know when a rally was going on. But that year, the outrage was palpable at Duterte’s presidential decree that the remains of dictator Ferdinand Marcos would be transferred to the Libingan ng Mga Bayani. For the first and only time, our professors unanimously canceled class and urged us to join the march to Luneta. For extra credit, even.

I went to the rally outside Palma Hall by myself. Despite my discomfort at being alone when everyone else in the crowd seemed to be part of a placard-bearing monolith, there was also a sense of relief in solidarity. The rage that was shared and manifested by strong voices all around me yelling and condemning the administration’s crimes. For the first time, I added my voice to that fray. *Duterte, Marcos, Diktador, Tuta.*

Beginning in fourth year, my feelings of malaise and dread for the future intensified, as well as the worry of having wasted years in college working only for myself. I began to think about what else might be fulfilling besides academic achievement, which I had always prioritized, but was increasingly insufficient for my happiness. At the time, my younger sibling was also in UPD and had joined a nationalist organization. My sibling and I were very close, and I saw them becoming passionate and knowledgeable on so many issues, one of them being the *#FreeEdukNow* campaign, which was at its height at the time. I listened in fascination to my sibling’s stories on the campaign front, and thought that I was learning a lot about activism “for free” without the arduous business of actually joining an org.

Then amazingly, seemingly overnight if one wasn’t paying attention, free education won a stunning victory in 2017 with the waiving of undergraduate tuition for state universities under RA 10931. I remember students all over

campus rejoicing the day the bill was approved in Congress. For the first time, I could see a clear connection between organized protests and a positive change in our conditions. I grew in awe of mass organizations then. It strengthened the idea in my mind that joining a mass org was the way to go if you wanted change to happen, if you wanted a community with which to work towards something fulfilling.

Around the same time, I'd already been getting drawn into another ational Democratic Mass Organization (NDMO), where some old high school classmates were senior members. They were familiar, welcoming faces, so I couldn't detach myself as easily as I'd done from orgs in the past. As I joined educational discussions where they discussed the state of Philippine society, the root cause of Filipinos' ills, and concepts of the Philippine Revolution, I felt an increasing moral obligation to join these activists, this organization. I became more and more convinced by their words that only collective effort, through organization, can liberate every one of us from our struggles. '*Pag namulat ka na, kasalanan na ang pumikit.* (When your eyes have been opened, it is a sin to close them.) My usual apprehension in the face of organizational politics was temporarily forgotten.

In 2018, then already a grad student, I officially joined as a member of the org.

To be in a mass organization, but not an activist

It was not long afterward that the apprehensions began to resurface. I acutely felt how unusual my background was for someone in a mass organization. Many members were from middle-class households like me, but most lived independently from their families or had especially relaxed and unintrusive family dynamics. In my household, even not being home for dinner was an extreme exception rather than the rule for the children, even in our college years. Our mother and father always subtly discouraged us three children from extracurricular activities, stressing that we needed to "ask permission" before doing anything outside home after school hours or on weekends. My older sibling and I grew up as homebodies, and even as an undergrad I did not keep the kind of company who went out often. My younger sibling was the first child to flout the conventions of our household, almost always staying out late for org meetings and outings. Secretly, they also went to rallies, picketed at workers' strikes, and joined far-flung environmental missions—mostly without our parents' knowledge, but with much ire whenever they were discovered.

It's possible I would have been allowed to do similar things (or at least tolerated and forgiven) if I made an effort to test the boundaries, but I had nearly paralyzing social anxiety throughout my adolescence and couldn't bring myself to do a lot of the things I wanted to. Even adjusting to the college environment was a struggle which took me more than two years. And my friends and small social circles during undergrad were mostly like myself, as you'd expect. I can't imagine any way I could've gotten *near* a mass organization in UP Diliman, if I weren't close with my sibling and felt a little bit of emotional investment in the things they were doing.

Which means that when I joined a NatDem organization, I was thrust into an environment that was "unnatural" for someone like me. I can't say that the experience was a good one. My social anxiety around strangers and anxiety of conflicting with my family, which I had tried to manage by keeping separate for so long, were now crashing together. For example, way back before the pandemic, the org would usually send out a call to join this or that rally on a holiday. I'd usually have to make up an excuse to leave the house (stressful) so I could help members I hardly knew with prod work (also stressful) and later march on the streets together with even more strangers (also also stressful). These compounding anxieties, and critically, a lack of intimate support within the org (since my sibling couldn't always be with me) meant that I only attended about half of the mobs that I was free and physically and financially capable of going to. *There was a point that I was mechanically going through "activist" motions like attending rallies, not because I felt genuine solidarity with the movement, but because it was something the org prescribed for its members.*

I later confided in my sibling that I joined the mass organization to alleviate my chronic sadness, to find fulfillment in helping others. I already sensed that this was not a major motivation for most activists I knew, who rarely spoke of their personal feelings or issues when it came to criticizing the government. Confirming my worst fears, my sibling was not impressed and called my reasoning "burgis" and self-centered. According to them, the proper reason to get organized is because solidarity with the masses is morally right, and I shouldn't be thinking of myself at all.

Seeing this stance reflected all around me, I started to grow alienated from this approach to activism. Because honestly, *what's wrong with finding a connection between the rotten, disordered social landscape of our nation and*

one's own dysphoria, be we the basic masses, the working-class, or the petit-bourgeois? Surely it is our consistently felt rage, fear, and discontentment which prove oppression and injustice exist, and which come before any ideology. For a long time, I thought it was up to me to unlearn self-centeredness and achieve a truly collective consciousness with the people. I realize now that this stance held by certain activists is terribly counterproductive. Is it so impossible for activism to be grounded in one's own understanding and experiences of the world, rather than based on an external ideology that "trickles down" into a collective?

I teared up while reading Adrienne Onda's "Di Ka Naman Tunay Na Aktibista" recently, and I wish I had stumbled upon it long ago. Adrienne was a UP Diliman student a year ahead of me, who I had not known of until now, but has faced much controversy over the years due to their criticism of student activism in Metro Manila. They profess a middle-class background, and poignantly explained their difficulties (which reflected my own) in joining NDMOs from within UP Diliman. Adrienne has been described by herself and others as an activist because they are outspokenly critical of the government through a radical anticapitalist lens. However, they are also critical of mass orgs and UP political parties in general, resulting in their many clashes with these groups over the years. The core of this conflict is the insistence that Adrienne cannot be an activist if they are not a member of any organization, a claim which Adrienne criticizes brilliantly:

I marveled at the height of the bar I had to measure up to just to become an activist. I also wondered how others who do not and cannot have access to the privileges I did can become activists themselves, in spaces where mass organizations are too far, too few, or unrepresentative of specific sectors, or where the kinds of protests that are considered 'proper' may be ineffective, expensive, or altogether dangerous. Apart from the seeming binary of activism which was organizer/organized, could *anyone else* become an activist? Could anything else be activism?

The short answer, where I stood, was no. At least, not if I'm coming from where these "official, real" activists come from...

(Italicization from the original. Adrienne Onda, "'Di ka naman tunay na aktibista': Reflections on Philippine Leftist Exclusionism")

As Adrienne asserts, an activist can exist outside of a mass organization. We find that the inverse is also true: One can be in a mass organization and *not* be an activist. A position I have unfortunately been in for the past two years. In the first place, I haven't really been *proactive* about any issue since I became a member. I participated in org activities with little agency, as one might work in an office from 8 to 5. There's really only a small core of "leading" members in the mass organizations I've seen (no matter how large), and other members are just expected to follow tasks that were delegated from above. In my experience, the leaders of these mass organizations don't have a practice of asking members what *they want to do* or what *they believe they can do best*; the goals are already set and just require warm bodies to carry them out.

In other words, the organization barely adapts as its membership adds new blood, and the burden is on rank and file members to adjust to organizational activities. I find that suffocating. Even after becoming an officer, I was always just assigned tasks that I had no input in deciding and have no special relevance to me. Can I really say that I am doing activism if I mostly parrot the org's stances, since I lack the self-confidence to even see my words as valid if they did not come from the all-important collective?

At the same time, I knew so many friends and other people without affiliation, good people, who were already behaving radically—speaking up on issues when it didn't give them a direct advantage, treating others who made mistakes with kindness and helping them improve, donating or organizing in their own ways to raise money for a cause. An "individualist" approach to reform, as analysis in the Left might say. But I wondered whether it was such a big problem that these people were not in orgs, if even without them they were proactively helping others and conscious and critical of injustice and oppression. I still believed organization was a powerful force for uniting and consolidating activists, but my experiences were leading me to question whether activism really begins and ends there.

No humility, no integration: the way mass orgs are built to exclude

Leaders of my organization often complain about how difficult it is to get and keep members involved in activities, and I have to bite my tongue whenever this topic comes up. The org was never really a safe space for self-criticism, and if you suggest that many people really don't think the same way organizers do, or respond well to the way activists campaign and recruit, they usually circle back to the line of thinking "But we're right, so why do *we* have to adjust?" The space also breeds not a few self-righteous, confrontational types—those who are impossible to engage with on good faith, because they engage only with the intent of "converting" you (and telegraphing to those in the ingroup that they are Part of the Club) but have no desire to learn *from* you in return. Even the student activist space in UP Diliman frequently falls into the same trap of the neocolonial formal educational system: *treating people just as vessels to be filled with certain ideas so that they will behave in a desired way.*

I first came to the organization with awareness that I knew so little about this space. Though I've always had difficulty voicing out my thoughts to strangers, I've learned to be good at listening to and understanding others. I spoke to the members with an earnest desire to learn, and learn I did. But there didn't seem to be anything *revolutionary* or *radical* about how the org approached "education" of its members—it was still a mostly one-way, alienating process that needed no input from me, just my acceptance of it as truth. And if I accepted it as true (which a lot of it was), then there was no alternative but to join the organization. That is actually more or less exactly how I was recruited. Even having my reservations back then, I used to think that I needed more experience in "organizing" before I deserved to challenge how things were structured.

Eventually, I came to the realization that my own strengths and lived experiences of the world are inherently being overridden. True, my orgmates were always understanding of my limitations, but the only thing they could do about it as an org was give me less of "their" work. Any concerns of membership that falls outside of established theory—like restrictive family dynamics, living with disabilities, bullying and harassment of and by members—are largely reduced to personal issues that the org sees no need to discuss beyond a simple acknowledgement that "OK, it happens." The push for greater inclusivity in the revolutionary space is often taken quite lightly, apparently viewed as a distraction in the grand scheme of things when, after all, *Filipinos are dying in the countryside and in the streets.*

Hearing that final, debate-terminating argument employed so often has convinced me that perhaps mass organizations are really not interested in including many kinds of people, contradicting their teachings that *everyone* subject to the ruling class is a desired ally. They would continue rigidly adhering to outdated or incomplete methods and theories developed decades ago. And they would sooner believe some people are disposable to societal revolution rather than reconsider how their own structure and practices exclude them. This poisonous elitism is something that leaders and movers of mass organizations have to be willing to recognize and address if they truly wish to advance a social revolution in the Philippines.

In Part II of this series, I continue an in-depth criticism of the mass organization structure, and present alternatives to challenge this current paradigm in Philippine activism. I draw from concepts of anarchism to attack a root source of alienation even in the revolutionary space—organizational hierarchy and failure of inclusiveness.

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