

Organization for a Free Society (OFS)

# *An Introduction*



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*This Introduction to Organization for a Free Society was collectively written by our members. Its purpose is to give a broad overview of what we stand for and how we carry that out.*

*May, 2013*

## **I. The Basics**

### ***Organizing for a Free Society***

Organization for a Free Society (OFS) is a participatory socialist organization<sup>i</sup> made up of activists and organizers immersed in different grassroots movements, struggling collectively toward a free society.

OFS is a home for revolutionaries working both to develop holistic politics, vision, and strategy and to strengthen the broader movement.<sup>ii</sup> We study together to deepen our politics, but OFS is not a study group. We hit the streets and organize together, but OFS is not a direct action affinity group, either. We are a united group of committed revolutionaries growing and struggling together, connecting theory and practice, and attempting to embody the seeds of the future in the present. We have political connections to movements in different parts of the world, but our organization is primarily based in the United States, and our analysis and strategy reflect our country and its role in the world.

OFS is committed to a fundamental transformation of the social, political, economic, and environmental values and institutions of society and we draw from a rich history of social movements that came before us.

### ***Our Work***

Internally, we practice an intentional and flexible form of participatory democracy with structures for active decision making and shared leadership. Our organization strives to provide space for the individual growth of our members and for collective action.

In our grassroots work<sup>iii</sup> we have fought budget cuts and tuition hikes at universities, mobilized against war, organized in restaurants, fought “right to work” legislation in the Midwest, fought against the mass incarceration of people of color, and worked with youth from the South Bronx to Palestine to Tibet. We have been active against the foreclosure crisis in New York City as well as the climate crisis in efforts across New York State; we have stood up for reproductive justice and done work to heal the impacts of sexual violence in our own communities.

Our members have helped to found political organizations, educational collectives, training institutions and communal living spaces. In addition to our grassroots organizing, we try to popularize our politics and our work through the media to which we have access. We write articles and pamphlets, produce films and radio shows, perform music and spoken word poetry, and create visual art.

Following the lead of oppressed communities and drawing on the experience of movement elders, our goal is to work with others to grow and deepen the movement and to develop a

revolutionary, participatory socialist tendency within it. In the service of these goals, we carry out internal study and public education to deepen our theory and analysis and we strategize to use our collective energy to support movements and hone our ability to rally in moments of crisis. Working together, we have played an important role in the Occupy movement and served vital relief, recovery and rebuilding functions in the wake of Hurricane Sandy.

We are proud of our work on the ground and we understand that we are one small part of building a movement that is capable of transforming our world into something just, beautiful and sustainable.

## **II. Our Politics**

### ***Methods for Understanding the World Around Us***

As people we are shaped and limited by the institutions around us, and at the same time we are the ones who create and perpetuate these institutions. In order to create a free society, we must use theory to help us overcome both systemic oppression and our own internalized oppression.

First, we must understand the various faces of the system that oppress us in different areas of our lives. In understanding capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy<sup>iv</sup>, environmental destruction, and the violent state that enforces them, we see that each system has distinct characteristics but that they all share a common factor – hierarchy and domination are the values at the root of each of these systems. Second, we see that those systems of oppression are interwoven, and are able to recreate, reinforce and defend one another.

We have all arrived at this holistic analysis by growing and developing in different tendencies, like feminism, anarchism, national liberation, and Marxism, and we bring these paths with us into our work. We can focus on confronting one form of domination or exploitation in a particular moment – for example, we focus on institutional racism when we take the streets to protest the NYPD's murder of yet another young Black man. Likewise, there can be broad political moments in which one form of oppression takes precedence and must be confronted first, but we always remember that other forms of oppression are present as well.

We do not subscribe to a perspective that holds one system as the root of all others. Though we can identify particular aspects of oppression in different areas of social life (our workplaces, relationships, etc.), we see one totality of oppressions. We call this method of analysis *complementary holism*.

It is not enough to understand that one system of oppression is not historically more important than others. We must take all systems of oppression into account in our analysis of society, understanding that different types of oppression can accommodate, define and reproduce one another. If we were to say that we use concepts of feminism to analyze patriarchy, anarchism to analyze state power, Marxism to analyze economics, and so on, we would still only get a two-dimensional picture of each of these systems. We cannot abstract the economy from the rest of the social fabric, analyze it in a vacuum and think that we can arrive at a sufficient strategy to dismantle capitalism. Ultimately, we must confront the totality of oppressions if we are to build a free society.

### ***Totality of Oppressions***

The system in which we live is comprised of interwoven methods of oppression that function differently, but work together to maintain what we experience as the status quo.

White supremacy in the U.S. exists in many complicated forms, beginning with the arrival of Europeans to this continent, the genocide of and theft of land from Native Americans, and African slave labor. Today, Black and Latino men are under- and unemployed, policed, incarcerated, and murdered, a phenomenon that devastates whole communities. Many communities of color suffer from displacement through gentrification, policing on the basis of immigration status, lack of health insurance and denial of care, and chronically low wages. Entire groups of people are invisibilized and exploited based on immigration status and are constantly harassed and threatened with incarceration and deportation. All of this exists in a framework that gives better treatment to people with light skin, who comprise a fictional “white race,” created in comparison to other fictional races. The logic of white supremacy bends and twists to accommodate any situation, always with the goal of maintaining a power structure. Within and across communities of color there also exists discrimination on the basis of skin color, from shadeism to outright exclusion of one group by another group, due to notions of superiority among people of different nationalities, regions within countries, and so on. The experience of white communities in rural Appalachia sheds light on the fact that capitalism always requires an oppressed class and remains loyal to no one. In multiracial regions, whiteness is used as a tool of oppression, but in places that are predominantly white, poor white people become the underclass.

Capitalism is a profit-driven, market-based economic system premised on a division of society into hostile classes, based on the private ownership of the means of production. In order to maximize profit, the capitalist class must maintain a large, exploitable pool of laborers — the working class — who are relegated to conditions of physical and psychological subjugation in order to keep them dependent on their jobs. As modern capitalism evolved and as a result of the rapid technological developments and increased division of labor, the economy developed

a professional-managerial sector, out of which arose a coordinator class<sup>v</sup>, which has class antagonisms to both capitalists and workers.

Today, this system is exported and enforced through neocolonial international relations and global power structures inherited from imperialism. Former colonial countries are able to exploit the labor and resources of former colonies via capital, international banking systems, and threat of force. Further enriching themselves, wealthier nations can pacify larger portions of their citizenry with materialism and notions of cultural supremacy, and they can use the unrest in the “Global South” that this system produces to justify further intervention.

This system is based on the premise of perpetual material growth, which is depleting the natural wealth of our Mother Earth, making her less and less inhabitable for people and for many other animals and plants. We are living in a time of unprecedented loss of species and habitat diversity, as well as deterioration of vital resources such as clean air, clean water, and healthy soil. As we experience these crises of environment and climate, the wisdom of indigenous peoples that helped to sustain humanity for so long continues to be silenced through the marginalization and destruction of indigenous communities and lands.

Through the instruments of patriarchy, we are bound to a rigid gender, sex, and sexual binary.<sup>vi</sup> Historically, patriarchy has centered around the policing and control of wombs and reproduction, which has resulted in the policing and controlling of femininity on all bodies, but its effects are felt everywhere. Cisgender<sup>vii</sup> masculinity is affirmed and privileged, while women, queer people, transgender people, and gender non-conforming people are punished by the threat of rape, violence, shame, and social and economic subordination.

The state – broadly understood as the institutions of organized coercive power of ruling social groups – enforces authoritarianism in many aspects of our lives, from the family and the school to the government and the courts. Power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites (mostly rich, white, straight, Christian men), and most people have little say in the institutions that govern our lives.

We experience these systems as part of a whole, a totality of oppressions, woven together both through society’s institutions and in personal interactions. These systems divide us from each other by giving some relative privileges over others, buying us off in order to obscure the systemic implications of the totality of oppressions.

### ***The Story We Are Told***

In understanding the U.S. experience today, it is important to study the story we are taught about our society. We are socialized not to name oppression as systemic or interconnected. In what boils down to a gendered and racialized class caste system, we are taught in school that we live in a merit-based society. This means that punishment and rewards are presented as

direct results of individuals' behavior. In this framework, oppressed people are blamed for their oppression. We are told that labels like lazy, stupid, dangerous and crazy are inherent in certain groups of people and are the cause of their poverty, rape, incarceration, pillaging or marginalization. A person's position in a system of oppression and privilege is erased behind the façade of a meritocracy, in which anyone can achieve anything if they *only try hard enough*. We are shown individual examples to prove that oppressions are a thing of the past. While President Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey are examples of Black individuals who have power and wealth, their existence is used to demonstrate that racism is over.

Likewise, liberation movements do not go unrecognized by the system. Rather, the system co-opts the language and symbols of revolutionaries and incorporates them. This phenomenon colonizes dissent, maintaining that the system is working – amenable to change but never to revolution.

We learn these stories to justify the oppressive treatment that we experience and witness. These stories are delivered to us daily through sitcoms on television, popular songs on the radio, the nightly news, our churches and schools, our parents and friends.

Using our analysis, we deconstruct aspects of our system to understand its parts, but these parts all comprise one coherent system of oppression. Race is one of the ways in which class is expressed in the U.S., and the state not only enforces patriarchy but is shaped by it. Ultimately, we won't win freedom unless we take on the whole system, with all of its manifestations, and the story that protects it. To that end, we need our own vision, our own story, and a strategy for winning.

### ***Visions of the World We Want***

Vision directs our work and guides what we build; it inspires us to continue working together against all odds. In the words of the Mexican revolutionary Ricardo Flores Magon, "If the revolutionary lacks the guiding idea of their action, they will not be anything other than a ship without a compass."

Vision is essential and it is something that all participants and organizations in a revolutionary movement should evaluate for themselves and continually revise. A vision is not a blueprint, but rather a thoughtfully articulated aspiration that is based consciously on a set of values.

When we imagine a free society, we think of values such as equity, solidarity, and self-management. Based on these values and our vision, we work to build institutions to prefigure

that society to the greatest extent possible – workplace and neighborhood councils, community boards, participatory socialist planning, democratic decision-making structures, and more. We build these institutions because they can make people’s lives materially better and in order to help us learn how to be productive members of a free society. In addition to the immediate benefits, the goal of prefigurative institutions is to build power towards destroying and replacing the oppressive institutions that prevent us from actualizing our vision.

We envision a political system in which people have institutions (e.g. assemblies) that allow them to participate in decision making to the extent that they are affected by the outcomes. We envision a classless and participatory economy where workers and consumers use councils to plan the economy democratically and to meet basic needs collectively. In this economy, workers are compensated for effort, sacrifice, and need. Jobs are balanced so that empowering and undesirable types of work are distributed fairly.

We envision a liberated and egalitarian kinship in which women and transgender people have control over their own bodies, youth have institutions that allow them to practice self-management, and all people have the freedom to define their genders, sexualities, and family relations in ways that are liberating, consensual and healthy. We envision an intercommunalist<sup>viii</sup> framework in which historically oppressed peoples have the space and resources to achieve self-determination and cultural autonomy.

We envision a dynamic in which human civilization and its structures synchronize with nature's diversity, fertility, and creativity. We believe that humans are entirely capable of utilizing the wealth of the earth in a way that leaves intact more than what is needed for the generations to come. With all this in mind, we envision a society that draws on the wisdom and sensible practices of our ancestors who were the original organic farmers, who invented sustainable fishing, and who used creativity to maximize natural resources. At the same time, we understand that it is crucial to continually integrate useful technology that improves quality of life and reduces undesirable work for all people. We envision sustainably run metropolises that rely on smart design: public transportation, green infrastructure, subsistence gardening, and urban-rural partnership.

The vision we put forward is based on our view of history and the needs and potential of human beings. We are committed to an open, participatory, and continual process of discovery and deliberation on the essence of the free society we are struggling to create. Our vision is not dogmatic. We do not know the future and our vision will transform itself through struggle and experimentation.

## ***A Strategy from Here to There***

Revolution is not a singular event, but a process made up of overlapping stages: movement building, counterpower<sup>ix</sup>, confrontation, and transformation.

In the *movement building* stage, the task of revolutionaries is to raise consciousness among large groups of people, challenge the dominant narrative, create channels through which people can join the movement and develop as revolutionaries, and lay the groundwork for collective long-term struggle. To build a movement, we encourage people to grow and transform from allies and supporters to movement leaders and revolutionaries, both through collective action and through participatory educational processes. We fight for concrete victories that meet people's needs and change the narrative about what is possible, and for long-term victories that demonstrate the power of collective action and put us in the position to achieve even more.

We work to build a movement that can eventually become a *counterpower*. A counterpower is a united bloc of institutions that are popularly regarded as viable, functional and legitimate alternatives to the institutions of the status quo, and which actively fight to replace them. It's not enough to create our own alternatives within a corrupt world, nor is it enough to fight exclusively within or against the systems of that corrupt world without creating alternatives. We need to simultaneously fight oppressive systems and prefigure the free society we envision.

We understand that ruling groups do not give up their power without a fight and that revolution also means confrontation. At crucial moments through the course of a struggle, people's movements must confront elites and take power from them, or defend themselves after they achieve power. Such moments of uprising are not "the revolution" in itself, but part of the enormous project of transformation, which takes lifetimes. While it may be necessary, we do not glorify this stage of struggle any more than any other.

At the foundation of our conception of the revolutionary process is a radical transformation of the institutions that govern our lives and of the values that drive them. As we work to build a movement, develop into a counterpower, and topple the institutions of the status quo, we must also work to transform ourselves, so that what we build does not replicate exploitative, oppressive, hierarchical values. Revolutionary communities must engage in the process of healing from the oppressions that we seek to overturn as they inevitably arise in our very own organizer circles, in our friend groups and in our relationships. OFS seeks diverse methods of overcoming internalized oppression and its manifestations within our organization through internal group work.



Revolution is a matter of life and death, a struggle for human life on Earth, and for the enormous amounts of human potential still to be actualized.

### III. Here and Now

#### ***The Political Moment***

We are in a unique period of history, a time of both incredible turmoil and immense possibility.

We are in the midst of an ecological crisis that threatens all living things on the planet through climate change, pollution, corporate agriculture, water shortage and the extinction of many species of plants and animals. We are deep in an economic crisis that takes our homes and jobs while forcing working families and students further into debt. Our criminal justice system promotes racist policing that has swelled the U.S. prison population to an unprecedented size; the system strips its subjects – primarily Black and Latino men – of rights to full participation in society, through incarceration and a stigma that affects access to housing, jobs, child care and voting rights. This system further exploits and polices people on the basis of immigration status, and we have seen ever-increasing threats, harassment and deportation in undocumented and immigrant communities.

We see a dangerous shift to the right in our dysfunctional political system. We face a rising proto-fascist conservative movement that hypocritically uses the Constitution to promote division and deny rights to immigrants, people of color, women, queer and transgender people, and low- and middle-income workers. The new right uses increasingly nationalist rhetoric, eerily reminiscent of 20<sup>th</sup> century fascist movements across the globe, to divide poor and working white people from others in order to promote an ultra-conservative agenda. Meanwhile, their liberal counterparts are unwilling or unable to stop the right from moving policy in their direction.

While the system of oppression works to keep us down, there are moments of heightened crisis that reveal the core characteristics of that system and open up possibilities for revolution and freedom. We may be entering one of these historic moments. In the past few years, we have seen uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Mexico, India, Greece, Spain, Nepal, and countless other places around the world. In North America in 2011, we saw resistance in Madison, Wisconsin to defend collective bargaining rights, worker and student occupations, and the rise of the Occupy Movement across the U.S. Throughout 2012, we have seen the rise of the First

Nation's Idle No More campaign, we've seen workers striking, homeowners resisting foreclosure, communities resisting disaster capitalism, and we've seen countless other examples of a movement being born. All over the world, people are declaring that amidst the crisis, another world is possible.

### ***Today and Tomorrow***

We must confront the acute crises before us and build a movement united in a common analysis, vision and strategy – one that can overcome these crises and push forward, through the deepest layers of oppression in our society and ourselves, for a free society. Our task is to help build this movement. We must popularize the story of people struggling throughout history and the stories of the people struggling today. We must educate ourselves and those around us, deepen our politics and sharpen our skills. We must engage in collective action so that we can grow from it in order to win tangible, significant gains today. We must build institutions that belong to us, enable us to struggle over the long term, and embody the world we are fighting for.

### ***Moving Forward with OFS***

Members of OFS are required to participate in the life and direction of the organization, be involved in grassroots work, attend meetings, and pay monthly dues on a sliding scale.

Our organization values the needs of the movement over growing our own numbers, and we do not recruit “paper members.” We are in touch with prospective members through our work alongside others in the movement and in shared discussion spaces. Because we expect a high degree of unity around values, vision and strategy, and commitment to the organization, when we recruit we ask people to fill out an interest form so that we can know them better, work with them, and make collective decisions about bringing them on. Organizers we bring on are then invited to a three-month trial membership, during which they have a chance to ask questions about our politics and participate in and explore the organization from the inside. This period also gives the rest of the organization time to get to know trial members as we work and learn together. We bring people in as part of a group, or “class,” which offers trial members a support system inside the organization, allows us to balance the class and prioritize oppressed peoples in our internal makeup, and helps us carry out orientation and internal education for new members in a collective process.

We want to continue building branches and forming partnerships with other revolutionaries around the country and the world, and we are committed to building sustainably. We are

committed to building an organization that reflects the realities of the society around us and which is led by oppressed groups, so we actively prioritize people of color, women, queer people, and working-class people in our recruitment. We think it is important to grow, so that more and more of us have this type of framework to build movements, organizations, and political unity.

We want to work with you, whether you are someone new to the struggle and looking for guidance, an experienced organizer looking for partners to work with, a revolutionary looking for an organization to join, another organization seeking to collaborate, or a movement veteran with wisdom to share.

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<sup>i</sup> We use the term *participatory socialism* to describe our political orientation. We do not mean it economically, but as a way to describe liberation in all areas of social life. The concept is discussed further in Section II.

<sup>ii</sup> When we use the term “the movement,” we mean the collection of movements of the oppressed (workers, women, people of color, LGBTQ people, disabled people, etc.), prefigurative institutions (cooperatives, communes, schools, etc.), third-party electoral campaigns and progressive institutions, and organizations of revolutionaries, all pushing together towards a free society. We could also call this “a movement of movements.”

<sup>iii</sup> We use the term *grassroots struggle* to refer to bottom-up struggles that impact oppressed groups and include the participation and leadership of oppressed people.

<sup>iv</sup> While *racism* is the oppressive concept that one racial or ethnic group is superior (or inferior) to others, white supremacy is the type of racism that, due to Western European colonialism, is most prominent in the world. White supremacy is also the dominant form of community oppression in the U.S., from where we are writing.

<sup>v</sup> By *coordinator class*, we mean an economic class – a group of people with a defined collective relationship to the means of production – whose responsibility it is to manage and coordinate work on behalf of the capitalist class and at the expense of the working class. The coordinator class is made up of professionals who play key decision-making roles in the economy, profit materially, manage themselves and large sectors of the working class, and engage in empowering work. Understanding the role of the coordinator class is essential to our analysis of capitalism, our rejection of central planning as a desirable alternative, and our vision for a participatory socialist economy.

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<sup>vi</sup> The gender/sex/sexual binary is an institutionalized ideology that creates a strict binary of woman/man, female/male, gay/straight, and which is enforced through “common-sense” assumptions about nature and biology. This system treats gender and sexuality as fixed and inflicts shame and violence onto those whose bodies and gender performance escape this binary. It restricts their access to resources as well as social recognition and affirmation. In turn, it upholds heterosexual, cisgender, monogamous identities and relationships as natural, legitimate, and the only viable option. We consider this binary to be one of the fundamental building blocks of patriarchy.

<sup>vii</sup> The term *cisgender* refers to someone whose gender identity corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth, someone who isn't transgender.

<sup>viii</sup> We use the term *intercommunalism* to describe our vision for relations within and across communities, nations, and cultural/religious groups. Intercommunalism pushes past multiculturalism or separatism toward a vision of society in which people have the right to communal self-determination and autonomy (as well as the institutional foundations necessary to carry out those various identities and cultures), but in solidarity with one another as part of a whole based on shared principles such as equity, freedom of movement, diversity, and active consent.

<sup>ix</sup> The term *counterpower* can be used to describe both a vehicle of popular power – a new power emerging to embody an alternative and threaten the institutions of the status quo – as well as a situation in which a counterpower confronts the status quo. The term is often used interchangeably with the term *dual power*. As revolutionaries, we seek to transform grassroots organizations and institutions into a network of counterpowers to undermine the hegemony of the oppressors' system, and to topple the institutional power of the old order on the path to revolution and social transformation.