

DIRECT ACTION

AN ETHNOGRAPHY



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CHAPTER 5  
DIRECT ACTION, ANARCHISM,  
DIRECT DEMOCRACY

Since this is a book about direct action, it might be best to begin by explaining what that is.

I) WHAT IS DIRECT ACTION?

Over the years, hundreds of anarchists have tried to answer this question, in pamphlets and broadsides and speeches. Here's a sampling:

Direct action implies one's acting for one's self, in a fashion in which one may weigh directly the problem with which you are confronted, and without needing the mediation of politicians or bureaucrats. If you see some bulldozers about to wreck your house, you engage in direct action to directly intervene to try to stop them. Direct action places moral conscience up against the official law... It is the expression of the individual's readiness to fight, to take control of his life, and to try, directly, to act on the world that surrounds us, to take responsibility for one's actions.

—*Sans Titres Bulletin*, "What is Direct Action?"

To take a homely example. If the butcher weighs one's meat with his thumb on the scale, one may complain about it and tell him he is a bandit who robs the poor, and if he persists and one does nothing else, this is mere talk; one may call the Department of Weights and Measures, and this is indirect action; or one may, talk failing, insist on weighing one's own meat, bring along a scale to check the butcher's weight, take one's business somewhere else, help open a

cooperative store, etc., and these are direct actions.

—David Wieck, “Habits of Direct Action”

Direct Action aims to achieve our goals through our own activity rather than through the actions of others. It is about people taking power for themselves. In this, it is distinguished from most other forms of political action such as voting, lobbying, attempting to exert political pressure through industrial action or through the media. All of these activities... concede our power to existing institutions which work to prevent us from acting ourselves to change the status quo. Direct Action repudiates such acceptance of the existing order and suggests that we have both the right and the power to change the world. It demonstrates this by doing it. Examples of Direct Action include blockades, pickets, sabotage, squatting, tree spiking, lockouts, occupations, rolling strikes, slow downs, the revolutionary general strike. In the community it involves, amongst other things, establishing our own organizations such as food co-ops and community access radio and TV... Direct Action is not only a method of protest but also a way of “building the future now.” Any situation where people organize to extend control over their own circumstances without recourse to capital or state constitutes Direct Action... Where it succeeds, Direct Action shows that people can control their own lives—in effect, that an Anarchist society is possible.

—Rob Sparrow, “Anarchist Politics and Direct Action”

Every person who ever thought he had a right to assert something, and went boldly and asserted it, himself, or jointly with others that shared his convictions, was a direct actionist... Every person who ever had a plan to do anything, and went and did it, or who laid his plan before others, and won their co-operation to do it with him, without going to external authorities to please do the thing for them, was a direct actionist... Every person who ever in his life had a difference with anyone to settle, and went straight to the other persons involved to settle it, either by a peaceable plan or otherwise, was a direct actionist.

—Voltairine De Cleyre, “Direct Action”

Man has as much liberty as he is willing to take. Anarchism therefore stands for direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, economic, social and moral. But defiance and resistance are illegal. Therein lies the salvation of man. Everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage. In short, it calls for free, independent spirits, for men who are men, and who have a bone in their back which you cannot pass your hand through.

—Emma Goldman, “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For”

It should be easy enough to see why anarchists have always been drawn to the idea of direct action. Anarchists reject states and all those systematic forms of inequality states make possible. They do not seek to pressure the government to institute reforms. Neither do they seek to seize state power for themselves. Rather, they wish to destroy that power, using means that are—so far as possible—consistent with their ends, that embody them. They wish to “build a new society in the shell of the old.” Direct action is perfectly consistent with this, because in its essence direct action is the insistence, when faced with structures of unjust authority, on acting as if one is already free. One does not solicit the state. One does not even necessarily make a grand gesture of defiance. Insofar as one is capable, one proceeds as if the state does not exist.

This is the difference, in principle, between direct action and civil disobedience (though in practice there often is a good deal of overlap between the two). When one burns a draft card, one is withdrawing one’s consent or cooperation from a structure of authority one deems illegitimate, but doing so is still a form of protest, a public act addressed at leastly partly to the authorities themselves. Typically, one practicing civil disobedience is also willing to accept the legal consequences of his actions. Direct action takes matters a step further. The direct actionist does not just refuse to pay taxes to support a militarized school system, she combines with others to try to create a new school system that operates on different principles. She proceeds as she would if the state did not exist and leaves it to the state’s representatives to decide whether to try to send armed men to stop her.

Now, the reader might object: surely direct action does, usually, involve direct confrontation with representatives of the state. Even when it does not start with such a confrontation, everyone is quite aware it will probably lead to one eventually. That would certainly seem to imply recognition of their existence. True enough—but even here matters are more subtle. When confrontations occur, it is typically because those conducting a direct action insist on acting as if the state’s representatives have no more right to impose their view of the rights or wrongs of the situation than anybody else. If a man is driving a truck full of toxic waste to dump in a local river, the direct actionist does not consider whether the corporation he represents is legally permitted to do so; he treats him as he would anyone else trying to dump a vat of poison in a local water source. (By this understanding, the fact that said direct actionist rarely simply attempts to physically overpower the culprit is a remarkable testimony to most activists’ dedication to nonviolence.) Normally, the conclusion is that it is legitimate for any man or woman of conscience in the vicinity to band together to try to dissuade the would-be dumper, and if necessary, stop him—say, by lying down in front of the truck, or by puncturing its tires. If they do so, and twenty armed men in blue costumes then appear and tell them to clear the streets, they do not, in

turn, treat this demand as a legal order, but rather, as morally equivalent to any other demand that a group of men standing on the street might make. Therefore, if police demand that those blocking the truck clear the street because an ambulance is trying to get through, they will almost certainly comply; if police make such demands simply by dint of their legal authority as representatives of the city, blockaders will ignore them; if they threaten to attack, blockaders will consider whether they are willing to take the risks involved in making a stand.<sup>1</sup> The key point though is that one is still acting as if, at least as a moral entity, the state does not exist.<sup>2</sup> At any rate it would be possible to have a secret direct action. It is by definition impossible to conduct a secret act of civil disobedience.

What I have been developing here is what might be called the classical definition of direct action—one developed and elaborated over at least a century and a half of anarchist reflection. Often, nowadays, the term is used in a much looser sense. “Direct action” becomes any form of political resistance that is overt, militant, and confrontational, but that falls short of outright military insurrection (e.g. Carter 1973). In this sense, if one is doing more than marching around with signs, but not yet ready to take to the hills with AK-47s, then one is a direct actionist. The Boston Tea Party, during which a team of colonial revolutionaries dressed as Indians dumped loads of heavily taxed British tea in the Boston harbor, is often invoked as a classic example of a direct action of this sort.<sup>3</sup> Such actions tend to be militant and symbolic at the same time. Used this way, the term “direct action” can cover an enormous range: it can mean anything from insisting on one’s right to sit at a segregated lunch counter to setting fire to one, from placing oneself in the way of bulldozers in an old-growth forest to spiking trees so that loggers who disregard warnings not to cut in certain areas risk killing themselves.

Activists too will often talk as if the difference between direct action and civil disobedience is simply one of militancy. For some, it turns on willingness to accept arrest. Those carrying out a “CD” may willingly surrender themselves to the police; even if they don’t, when they blockade the entrance to a corporate headquarters or lie down in front of a presidential motorcade, they act in the full expectation they will wind up in jail, and when police intent on arresting them

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1 Obviously, in a real direct action situation, such questions are usually worked out in advance by affinity groups. Still, in each case, what level of risk one is willing to undergo should always be an individual decision.

2 One might say in Althusserian terms that direct action involves a systematic refusal of interpellation. If one takes this moral view systematically, it’s hard to see the police as anything but a heavily armed and extremely dangerous street gang; which is precisely the way anarchists often refer to them.

3 Indeed, one popular game among contemporary activists is to imagine how an event like the Boston Tea Party would be reported by the American media, if it had occurred today.

appear, they will not flee and will resist only passively, or not at all. Direct actionists, in contrast, whether they are breaking windows in the night or soldering the doors shut in worker-occupied factories, are trying their best to get away with it. Or, alternately, the distinction might turn on how closely one's tactics come to conventional definitions of "violence." When English suffragettes refused to pay taxes they are usually described as practicing civil disobedience; when they began systematically breaking store windows, they are usually said to have turned to direct action. Of course, by classical anarchist definitions, smashing windows to pressure the government to enact a voting reform is not direct action in any sense at all—it is thoroughly indirect—but the usage demonstrates how much the term has become synonymous with a certain degree of militancy.

All this makes it easy to see why the question of "direct action" has been so often at the center of political debate. During the first half of the twentieth century, for example, there were endless arguments about the role of direct action in the labor movement. Today, it is easy to forget that, when labor unions first appeared, they were seen as extremely radical organizations. They represented, in fact, a kind of claim to revolutionary dual power. To go on strike, to destroy machinery, occupy factories, establish picket lines so as to physically prevent scabs from entering a workplace: all this was a matter of workers seizing for themselves the right to employ coercive force, in direct defiance of the state's claims of holding a monopoly on violence. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one of the earliest nineteenth-century anarchist philosophers, and closely attached to the French labor movement of his day, actually opposed strikes because he believed the movement should limit itself only to explicitly nonviolent forms of direct action. Very quickly, though, states that could not completely repress unions set out to co-opt them. Certain forms of industrial action (such as picket lines) were legalized, but strictly regulated; others (such as workplace sabotage) strictly forbidden. As one might imagine, all this sparked lively debate within the syndicalist movement. Georges Sorel captures something of the flavor of these debates in his essay "Reflections on Violence," published in France in 1908. In it, he argues that even when a strike or labor action really does challenge the state's monopoly on violence, even if one is dealing with an illegal, wildcat strike, strikes are not really revolutionary because ordinarily, a strike aims to win concessions on wages, hours, or conditions that the state will then guarantee and, ultimately, enforce. One is, therefore, not challenging state violence but trying to enlist it for one's own side. Sorel argued that from an anarchist point of view, the only genuinely revolutionary strike would be a general strike that aimed to overthrow the system of state violence as a whole. Labor actions therefore were legitimate only insofar as they were attempts to move in that direction, dress rehearsals, perhaps, or forms of agitprop.

In the United States, too, philosophical differences often ended up being

fought out largely through arguments about tactics. The early part of the twentieth century saw a profound split between mainstream unions like the Knights of Labor, which eventually came to form the backbone of the AFL-CIO, and revolutionary unions like the IWW (the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies). The latter's ultimate aim was "the abolition of the wage system," and they refused to work through the state, which they saw as an illegitimate institution. They were in essence, if not officially, anarcho-syndicalist. Where mainstream unions emphasized higher wages and job security, the Wobblies were—like European anarchist unions—more interested in reducing hours. Still, the main thing they ended up openly arguing about was the Wobbly endorsement of "direct action," which in this context basically came to mean workplace sabotage.

It's important to emphasize here that the *practice* of workplace sabotage was never considered particularly scandalous—at least among workers. The destruction of corporate property, workplace occupations, intentionally shoddy work, slowdowns—all of these have long formed part of the repertoire, the standard tool-kit, one might say, of organized labor for centuries. They remain so to this day. I myself grew up in a building in Manhattan with faulty plumbing because of workplace sabotage tracing back to some labor dispute from the late 1950s. American strikers still regularly puncture tires and even set company equipment on fire. However, none of this is official union policy. Union officials invariably condemn such actions, or else deny they occur. Part of the reason is because they *are* allowed to strike. Unions are, paradoxically, the only organizations in the US legally permitted to engage in direct action; but they can do so only if they do not call it that; and only at the cost of accepting endless and intricate regulations over how and when they can strike, what kinds of pickets they can set up and where, whether they are allowed to engage in other tactics such as secondary boycotts or even publicity campaigns, and so on. Anything that goes beyond these restrictions tends to be defined as "direct action" and officially disallowed. This is the reason, as we will see, that union leaders invariably do everything in their power to ensure that rank-and-file workers do not participate in direct actions like those in Seattle and Québec City. If union members—in their capacity *as* union members—had helped pull down the wall in Québec, for example, they would not just have been engaging in illegal activities, they would have been jeopardizing the very basis of their leadership's special relation with the state.

Those continuing to work within the syndicalist tradition will, unsurprisingly, object to this sort of identification of direct action with mere militancy. They tend to prefer definitions like those with which I began the chapter. A few have gone so far as to argue that large-scale actions like Seattle or Québec were not really direct actions at all, for just this reason. Shortly after the shutdown of the World Trade Organization in Seattle in November 1999, for example, a

Norwegian anarcho-syndicalist named Harald Beyer-Arensen wrote an article intending to show that Seattle wasn't really direct action because it did not involve people acting directly to transform their own immediate situation.

Campaigning for wage-workers to join the Industrial Workers of the World, Eugene V. Debs stated in December 1905: "The capitalists own the tools they do not use, and the workers use the tools they do not own." To this one could add: At times direct action may mean putting the tools we do not own out of action, at times it may mean bringing them into play for our own, self-defined needs and ends. In the final instance, it can only mean acting as if all the tools were in fact our own (Beyer-Arensen 2000:11).

Once again, direct action means insisting on acting as if one is already free. This is why, he goes on to argue, it lies at the heart of the "anarchist, social revolutionary project": it is the means by which the working classes can emancipate themselves by their own efforts, rather than the guidance of any sort of revolutionary vanguard or elite.

From this perspective we can define direct action as being an action carried out on the behalf of nobody else but ourselves, where the means are immediately also the ends, or if not, as in a wage strike, not mediated by any union bureaucracy, where the means (decreasing the bosses' profits by our non-work, and thus also diminishing the bosses' power) stand in an immediate relationship to self-defined ends (increasing our wages and extending our own power). A direct action successfully carried out brings about a direct rearrangement of existing conditions of life through the combined efforts of those directly affected (*ibid.*).

What happened at Seattle? A group of activists tried—and, for a while, succeeded—in shutting down a meeting of trade bureaucrats so as to disrupt negotiations on a new WTO round, and to make a public issue out of the very existence of the World Trade Organization. This, Beyer-Arensen is willing to allow, does in certain ways resemble direct action. Certainly, those who created the "Direct Action Network" to coordinate the proceedings believed that's what they were doing. If one simply applies the criterion of militancy, one might be tempted to agree, because the event did involve a prolonged (if nonviolent) confrontation with the police. But in fact, Beyer-Arensen insists, it was not really direct action, because it was not really "direct." He provides an example. Imagine a town that suffers from a lack of water. What's more, some real estate magnate owns all the surrounding land and has the mayor in his pocket, so townsfolk cannot simply



build new wells. If one were to assemble a group of townsmen to dig a new well anyway, in defiance of the law, then that would be direct action. But if one were to have them blockade the mayor's house until he changed his policy, that would certainly not be. It might be far more militant than writing petitions or letters or lobbying, but it's just another version of the same thing: an appeal to the powers-that-be to change their behavior. It still recognizes the authority a real direct actionist would reject. Beyer-Arensen concludes that the effort to shut down the WTO meetings in Seattle was not an example of direct action because, ultimately, it was simply an attempt to create a media spectacle that would then "influence the powers-that-be by way of some imagined 'public opinion'" (200:12). The WTO meetings themselves were, after all, basically ceremonial. Most real decisions are made elsewhere. Therefore, the real purpose of the protests was to provide a kind of counter-ceremony aimed at winning public attention, since its ostensible aims (to shut down the WTO as an institution) could not possibly be accomplished by the means employed. It was essentially an act of propaganda, of guerilla theater, meant to influence government policy.

Beyer-Arensen ends the piece by admitting that any direct action is to a certain degree an act of "propaganda by the deed," since they are meant to teach through example. The community that defies the law by building its own well is not simply acting for themselves; they are also setting an example of self-organization to other communities. But this is a secondary effect of an otherwise direct action, and anyway, they're not trying to influence the government.

Now, I'm not citing this argument at such length because I find it particularly persuasive. It represents the opinions of one, older, rather curmudgeonly anarcho-syndicalist and I believe the overwhelming majority of contemporary anarchists would certainly disagree with its conclusions. After all, as Sorel pointed out, one could apply this same logic to the very labor actions Beyer-Arensen approves of: since ultimately strikers are seeking binding arbitration by government mediators and even if they are not, any agreements they make with their employers will end up being enforced by the state. If one takes Beyer-Arensen's line of argument to its logical conclusion, no action that occurs under a framework of legality, or in which public opinion is a factor, could possibly be considered direct. After all, if one places one's body in the path of the bulldozer about to destroy one's home, or a community garden, much though one might like to think what one is doing is simply appealing to the moral conscience of the driver, one cannot realistically deny that the driver is also likely to be thinking about the possibility of being brought up on charges of negligent homicide, or of being written up in the papers the next day as a heartless killer. Beyer-Arensen himself is not entirely unaware of this dilemma—at least in the case of strikes. He ends his essay by suggesting that certain strikes are actually better examples of direct action than others. His

favorite example is a strike by transit workers in Melbourne during the 1980s in which, rather than walking off their jobs, bus drivers and train conductors stayed on, but stopped collecting fares—effectively making mass transportation free until the action was over. Imagine, he suggests, what would happen if, for just one day, workers in every branch of industry and service trade did the same. This alone could be a major step in showing how a capitalist economy could be transformed into an economy of freedom.

This is a powerful image, but it bears a remarkable resemblance to acts that Beyer-Arensen would no doubt condemn as pure theater. Take for example a publicity stunt organized by members of the squatter community of Christiana, located on the site of a former army base outside Copenhagen:

In 1974, the community engaged in various forms of street theatre to gain a more favorable public image. “The first Christmas for the poor and lonely was arranged and Solvognen organized an army of Father Christmases who generously handed out presents to both young and old from the city’s department stores. Naturally, they were arrested, but as a consequence, pictures of the Police beating up Father Christmases hit the front pages of the papers worldwide.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, they made almost exactly the same point as the Melbourne strikers, but with hardly any real direct action at all. So then the question becomes: where to draw the line? How direct does it have to be? If providing free goods and services to four or five random kids on the street is not enough to make it real, why should ten thousand commuters, for one day, be any different?

The reason I cited this argument at length is that it provides a window on a certain moral universe. Most American anarchists I know find arguments about whether Seattle was really a direct action a bit silly—at best they might make a mildly diverting topic for discussion over beer, but to take such questions too seriously seems academic, even sectarian. Still, the underlying issues are critical. As we’ll see, most of the objections raised to the idea of border actions in the weeks before Québec City were based on a feeling such actions would be merely symbolic, not genuine direct action. Moreover, the essence of Beyer-Arensen’s critique—that actions like Seattle are largely symbolic, and that the point is to work within real communities in ways that allow people to take power over their own lives—is something anyone involved in the movement would agree with. Even before Naomi Klein (2000) wrote her famous article in the *Nation* warning activists about the dangers of “summit hopping,” of “following trade bureaucrats as if they were the Grateful Dead,” all this was already a major item of debate. Those who defended actions like Seattle not only insisted that it was a direct in-

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ri.xu.org/arbalest/index.html>, accessed 8/17/2000.

tervention, since people put their bodies on the line so as to block delegates from entering the building, but that they did so in just the way that Beyer-Arensen underlines as key: by mobilizing a community of people in a form of self-organization which provides a living alternative to the existing structure of authority.

This was indeed meant as educational. On the one hand, they set out to expose the undemocratic nature of the WTO and similar institutions that, they felt, together formed the backbone of an unaccountable world neoliberal government that sought the power to suppress existing democratic rights in the name of corporate power. On the other hand, they were determined to organize the whole action according to directly democratic principles and thus provide a living example of how genuine egalitarian decision making might work. When dealing with global institutions, this is about as direct as an action can possibly get.

The Direct Action Network, which forms much of the immediate focus of this book, emerged directly from this project. It was meant in part as a way of organizing actions against neoliberal institutions; in part, as a model of consensus-based, decentralized direct democracy. For all its flaws (and we will be learning a good deal about those), it played an important role in doing so.

To sum up, then: direct action represents a certain ideal—in its purest form, probably unattainable. It is a form of action in which means and ends become, effectively, indistinguishable; a way of actively engaging with the world to bring about change, in which the form of the action—or at least, the organization of the action—is itself a model for the change one wishes to bring about. At its most basic, it reflects a very simple anarchist insight: that one cannot create a free society through military discipline, a democratic society by giving orders, or a happy one through joyless self-sacrifice. At its most elaborate, the structure of one's own act becomes a kind of micro-utopia, a concrete model for one's vision of a free society. As Emma Goldman (and others) observed, the fact that the authorities define such acts as crimes is not a problem in this regard—insofar as it serves to constantly remind actors to take responsibility for their actions, and behave with courage and integrity, it can be a great advantage. The problems, rather, come when one moves beyond confrontation to other forms of engagement with a world organized along different lines.

A revolutionary strategy based on direct action can only succeed if the principles of direct action become institutionalized. Temporary bubbles of autonomy must gradually turn into permanent, free communities. However, in order to do so, those communities cannot exist in total isolation; neither can they have a purely confrontational relation with everyone around them. They have to have some way to engage with larger economic, social, or political systems that surround them. This is the trickiest question because it has proved extremely difficult for those organized on radically democratic lines to so integrate themselves in any

meaningful way in larger structures without having to make endless compromises in their founding principles. For direct action-based groups, even working in alliance with radical NGOs or labor unions has often created what seem like insuperable problems. On a more immediate level, the strategy depends on the dissemination of the model: most anarchists, for example, do not see themselves as a vanguard whose historical role is to “organize” other communities, but rather as one community setting an example others can imitate. The approach—it’s often referred to as “contaminationism”—is premised on the assumption that the experience of freedom is infectious, that anyone who takes part in a direct action is likely to be permanently transformed by the experience, and want more. This is quite often the case, but it begs the question of how to make others aware of the idea in the first place. What participants experience as profound and transformative often looks, from the outside, as peculiar at best—at worst cult-like or insane. This, in turn, raises the issue of the media. But in addressing such strategic questions, I am really moving from speaking just of direct action to the more general question of anarchism.

## II) WHAT IS ANARCHISM?

One reason I started the chapter as I did was because I also wanted to convey something of the flavor of anarchist debate, which has always tended to differ from the more familiar, Marxist style in focusing more on these kind of concrete questions of practice. Many have complained that anarchism lacks high theory. Even those who are considered its founding figures—Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin—often seem more pamphleteers and moralists than true philosophers, and the best-known anarchists of more recent times have been more likely to produce witty slogans, wild poetic rants, or science fiction novels than sophisticated political economy or dialectical analysis.<sup>5</sup> There are thousands of Marxist academics but very few Anarchist ones. This is not because anarchism is anti-intellectual so much as because it does not see itself as fundamentally a project of analysis. It is more a moral project.

As I’ve written elsewhere (Graeber 2002, 2004), Marxism has tended to be a theoretical or analytical discourse about revolutionary strategy; anarchism, an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice. The basic principles of anar-

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, anarchists have long taken much of their political economy from Marxists—a tradition which goes back to Bakunin, who though he was a political rival of Marx, also was responsible for the first translation of *Capital* into Russian—rather than feeling obliged to set up some anarchist school of political economy of their own. Though to be fair, early anarchists also tended to point out that almost all the concepts attributed to Marx (or for that matter Proudhon) were really developed within the worker’s movement of the time, and merely systematized and elaborated by the theorists.

chism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid, the opposition to all forms of coercive authority—are essentially moral and organizational.

Admittedly, this flies in the face of the popular image of anarchists as bomb-throwing crazies opposed to all forms of organization—but, if one examines how this reputation came about, it tends to reinforce my point. The period of roughly 1875 to 1925 marked the peak of a certain phase of anarchist organizing: there were hundreds of anarchist unions, confederations, revolutionary leagues, and so on. There was a spurt, towards the beginning, of calls for the assassination of heads of state (Anderson 2006), it was quite brief and anarchist spokesmen and organized groups quickly withdrew support from this strategy as counterproductive. Nonetheless, following decades saw a continual stream of dramatic assassinations by people calling themselves anarchists. I am not aware of any actual assassin during this particular period who actually was a product of those anarchist organizations, much less were their actions planned or sponsored by them; rather they almost invariably turned out to be isolated individuals with no more ongoing ties to anarchist life than the Unabomber, and usually about a roughly equivalent hold on sanity. It was rather as if the existence of anarchism gave lone gunmen something to call themselves.<sup>6</sup> But the situation created endless moral dilemmas for anarchist writers and lecturers like Peter Kropotkin or Emma Goldman. By what right could an anarchist denounce an individual who kills a tyrant, no matter how disastrous the results for the larger movement? The whole issue was the subject of endless intense moral debate: not only about whether such acts were (or could ever be) legitimate, but about whether it was legitimate for anarchists who did not feel such acts were wise or even legitimate to publicly condemn them. It has always been these kinds of practical, moral questions that have tended to stir anarchist passions: What is direct action? What kind of tactics are beyond the pale and what sort of solidarity do we owe to those who employ them? Or: what is the most democratic way to conduct a meeting? At what point does organization stop being empowering and become stifling and bureaucratic? For analyses of the nature of the commodity form or the mechanics of alienation, most have been content to draw on the written work of Marxist intellectuals (which are usually, themselves, drawn from ideas that originally percolated through a broader worker's movement in which anarchists were very much involved). Which also means that, for all the bitter and often violent disagreements anarchists have had with Marxists about how to go about making a revolution, there has always been a kind of complementarity here, at least *in potentia*.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Malatesta made exactly this argument at the time (1913).

7 If existing Marxists were to abandon practical politics entirely and retreat into the academy, producing endless volumes of Marxist analyses on every topic under the sun and overwhelming all other intellectual tendencies, then most anarchists would consider this an altogether positive development.

This is why I think it's deceptive to write the history of anarchism in the same way one would write the history of an intellectual tradition like Marxism. It is not that one cannot tell the story this way if one wants to. Most books on anarchism do. They start with certain founding intellectual figures (Godwin, Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin), explain the radical ideas they developed, tell the story of the larger movements that eventually came to be inspired by those ideas, and then document the political struggles, wars, revolutions, and projects of social reform which ensued. But if one looks at what those supposed founding figures actually said, one finds most of them did not really see themselves as creating some great new theory. They were more likely to see themselves as giving a name and voice to a certain kind of insurgent common sense, one they assumed to be as old as history. While anarchism, as a movement, tended to be very strongly rooted in mass organizing of the industrial proletariat, anarchists (including those who were themselves industrial workers) also tended to draw inspiration from existing modes of practice, notably on the part of peasants, skilled artisans, or even, to some degree, outlaws, hobos, vagabonds, and others who lived by their wits—in other words, those who were to some degree in control of their own lives and conditions of work, who might be considered, at least to some degree, autonomous elements. One might say, in Marxist terms, that they were people with some experience of non-alienated production. Such people had experience of life outside of state or capitalist bureaucracies, salaries and wage labor; they were aware such relations were not inevitable; quite often, they viewed them as intrinsically immoral. They were often themselves more drawn to anarchism as an explicit political philosophy, and at least in some times and places (Spanish peasants, Swiss watchmakers) formed its mass base—what's more, those elements of the industrial proletariat that tended to find the most affinity with anarchism were those who were the least removed from other modes of life. Marx himself tended to dismiss the anarchist base as a particularly inauspicious combination of "petty bourgeoisie" and "lumpen proletariat," and considered the notion that they could in any way stand outside capitalism ridiculous. Capitalism, for Marx, was a totalizing system. It shaped the consciousness of all those who lived under it in the most intimate fashion. The kind of critiques of capitalism one saw in authors like Proudhon or Bakunin, Marx argued, were simply the voice of a petit bourgeois morality, the small-scale merchants and producers railing against the bigger ones. They had nothing to teach revolutionaries. Only the industrial proletariat, who had absolutely no stake in the existing system, could be a genuinely revolutionary class.

Some would no doubt object that this view of Marx's thought is a bit crude and unnuanced and probably they'd be right. But it represents the view that soon became canonical among those who claimed to speak in the name of Marxism.

My purpose here is not to argue the merits of the case but to emphasize the degree to which we have been viewing the entire anarchist project, essentially, through the eyes of its rivals. Even more, that anarchism tends to involve a different relation of theory and practice than what came to be called ‘Marxism’. The latter is—for all the materialist pretensions—profoundly idealist. The history of Marxism is presented to us as a history of great thinkers—there are Leninists, Maoists, Trotskyites, Gramscians, Althusserians—even brutal dictators like Stalin or Enver Hoxha had to pretend to be great philosophers, because the idea was always that one starts with one man’s profound theoretical insight and the political tendency follows from that. Anarchist tendencies, in contrast, never trace back to a single theorist’s insights—we don’t have Proudhonians and Kropotkinites—but Associationalists, Individualists, Syndicalists, and Platformists. In just about every case, divisions are based on a difference of organizational philosophy and revolutionary practice.

How, then, do we think about a political movement in which the practice comes first and theory is essentially, secondary?

It strikes me that it might be helpful, rather than starting from the word “anarchism,” to start from the word “anarchist.” What sorts of people, or ideas or institutions, can this word refer to? Generally speaking, one finds three different ways the term can be employed. First, one can refer to people who endorse an explicit doctrine known as “anarchism” (or sometimes “anarchy”)—or perhaps more precisely, a certain vision of human possibilities. This is more less the conventional definition. Anarchists become the bearers of an intellectual tradition: one whose history can indeed be traced back to founding figures in the nineteenth century, that spread quite rapidly by the turn of the century to the point where anarchist literature was being avidly read in places like China and India well before Marxism or other strains of Western revolutionary thought had made much of an impression (e.g., Dirlik 1991), but over the course of the early twentieth century was largely displaced by it.<sup>8</sup> Any number of prominent figures of the time, from Picasso to Mao, began their political lives as anarchists and ended up Communists. But one can also speak more broadly. It’s certainly not unheard of to hear historians refer to, say, peasant rebels in early China, or religious radicals in medieval Europe as “anarchists”—meaning that they rejected the authority of governments, and believed people would be better off in a world without hierarchies. In this sense, there have always been anarchists, and there is no great intellectual tradition that hasn’t seen the development of anarchist ideas in one form or another. (This is of course why the ideas of nineteenth-century European anarchists

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<sup>8</sup> Even here things are a bit more subtle—many of the founding figures of anarchism were Russians, who did not really identify with what they thought of as “the West”—but this is how the story is normally told.

could make sense to people in other parts of the world to begin with.) Finally, there is a third sense. When an anthropologist like Evans-Pritchard refers to the Nuer as living in an “ordered anarchy” (1940), or Joanna Overing uses the word to describe the Amazonian Piaroa (1986, 1988), they are not referring to either doctrines or, even, quite, to anti-authoritarian rebelliousness. They are referring primarily to institutions, habits, and practices. That is, there are certain societies characterized by egalitarian forms of organization—whether systems of exchange, forms of decision-making, or simply the accustomed ways of going about everyday life—and this tends to inculcate, and be supported by, a broadly egalitarian ethos. Anarchism, in this sense, is a way of living, or at least, a set of practices.

In other words, one can see “anarchism” either as a vision, as an attitude, or as a set of practices. The distinction between the last two is admittedly somewhat fuzzy. Those who go about their daily lives on an egalitarian basis tend to do so because they feel that is what people ought to do; those who find all forms of hierarchy objectionable will, ordinarily, do their best to find ways to live without it. Still, in the first case, an egalitarian ethos may well remain largely inchoate. In theory, at least, one living in an anarchistic society might be entirely unaware that there is any other way to live; anyway, such a person will probably only develop explicit anti-authoritarian attitudes once she encounters someone with very different assumptions—say, for example, a foreign conqueror. Similarly, those indignant about being pushed around by social superiors will often examine their own ways of dealing with friends and neighbors as evidence that hierarchy is not a natural and inevitable feature of human life. They might very well start valuing the equality of those relations, or even try to deal with such people in more self-consciously egalitarian fashion than they had before. The nineteenth-century Spanish peasants and Swiss watchmakers who found the ideas of Proudhon or Bakunin so amenable—and who Marx denounced as *petit bourgeois*—were clearly doing exactly that.

What I would like to argue is that “anarchism” is best thought of, not as any one of these things—not as a vision, but neither quite as an attitude or set of practices. It is, rather, best thought of as that very movement back and forth between these three. After all, the experience of foreign conquest or subordination will not necessarily cause once egalitarian communities to reject the very idea of hierarchy, or to become more assiduously egalitarian in their way of dealing with each other: the effect might well be exactly the opposite. It’s when the three reinforce each other—when a revulsion against oppression causes people to try to live their lives in a more self-consciously egalitarian fashion, when they draw on those experiences to produce visions of a more just society, when those visions, in turn, cause them to see existing social arrangements as even more illegitimate and obnoxious—that one can begin to talk about anarchism. Hence anarchism



is in no sense a doctrine. It's a movement, a relationship, a process of purification, inspiration, and experiment. This is its very substance. All that really changed in the nineteenth century is that some people began to give this process a name.

Looking at it this way does make it much easier to understand some things that would otherwise be extremely puzzling. For example: why what passes as anarchist theory often bears so little relation to what the majority of anarchists say and do? If one were to try to understand North American anarchism simply by reading theoretical or ideological statements in the best known and widely distributed explicitly anarchist periodicals, one would end up with the impression that most anarchists were either Primitivists opposed to all forms of technology, even agriculture, or extreme anti-organizationalists, suspicious of any group of more than six or seven people—and that most of the remainder had declared their allegiance to a document called “The Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists” written by Russian émigrés in Paris in 1924. One might also come to the conclusion that the popular impression of anarchists as wild-eyed, impractical nihilists dedicated to rebellion for its own sake was probably not that far from the truth; or, at least, that anarchists seemed to be divided between nihilists and fervent sectarians whose main form of political practice is mutual denunciation. Examining anarchist discussion pages on the Internet would do little to disabuse them of this impression.<sup>9</sup> When I first became involved in anarchist politics, therefore, I was surprised to discover that not only did the overwhelming majority of activists who considered themselves anarchists not identify with any of these positions, many were not even aware of them. Others, who do read the magazines, read them mainly for entertainment value. Elsewhere, I've referred to these non-sectarians as “small-a” anarchists, to distinguish them from those who identify with any one particular strain: Green Anarchists, Individualists, Anarcho-Syndicalists, post-Leftists, Platformists, and so on. While statistics are unavailable, Chuck Munson, who occasionally surveys those who frequent infoshop.com—probably the most popular anarchist web site in North America—informs me that about 90% of American anarchists would seem to fit into the small-a category, since only about 10% are willing identify themselves with any particular subset.

What's more, even many of those who do identify themselves with one particular strain act in ways that would be impossible to understand if we were dealing with a political ideology in anything like the traditional sense of the term. Let me take one example—Primitivism—perhaps the most obviously *outré*. In America,

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<sup>9</sup> Many anarchist newsgroups, for example, tend to be dominated by right-wing free-market enthusiasts who call themselves “anarcho-capitalists,” who seem to exist only on the Internet; at least, I have been involved in anarchist politics for five or six years now and have yet to actually meet one.

Primitivist ideas first began to take form in circles surrounding a journal called the *Fifth Estate*, in Detroit, in the 1970s and 1980s. The argument began as a synthesis of a certain strain of Marxism with ideas first articulated by socialist heretics such as Jacques Ellul and Jacques Camatte, who came to see the nature of technology itself as lying at the core of most of what Marx saw as alienating and oppressive about capital, and thus rejected the idea that the proletariat, as an essential part of the global “megamachine,” could possibly be the agents of a revolution (Millet 2004). As part of a broader critique developing around that time of the productivist bias in traditional leftist thought, it’s hard to see this as anything but perfectly normal debate. By the 1990s, however, the most aggressive strain of Primitivist thought began to coalesce around the figure of John Zerzan, one time ultra-leftist, who began expressing utter hostility not only to “the Left” but to “civilization” itself. Zerzan basically took the most radical position that it was possible to take, arguing that everything from plant domestication to music, writing, math, art, and ultimately, even speech—basically all forms of symbolic representation, anything other than absolute, direct, unmediated experience—were really forms of alienation that could only be overcome through the destruction of civilization in its entirety, and a return to the stone age. Now, the influence of Zerzan on anarchism has been considerably overstated in the media, but, there are a significant number of Green Anarchists who take his ideas very seriously, and these Green Anarchists produce any number of zines and journals that aggressively tout these ideas, engaging in constant vitriolic debates with anyone willing to cast doubt on any aspect of the ultra-Primitivist position.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of a return to the paleolithic—the rejection of plant domestication, let alone language—is obviously absurd. It would require reducing the earth’s population by at least 99.9%. Nor are Primitivists entirely unaware of this: the *Fifth Estate* people had a long debate about the problem back in the 1970s, the editors coming to the conclusion that, since they didn’t really wish to see a global catastrophe such as a nuclear war, the best one could hope for was a gradual process of negative population growth. Most current Primitivists seem to alternate between openly espousing industrial and demographic collapse—I have heard some argue that humankind is a virus which needs to be largely eradicated—to, in defiance of all logic and common sense, denying that massive population decline would even be necessary (Zerzan often does this before non-anarchist audiences). At the same time, these same authors will regularly denounce anyone who advocates the classic anarchist strategy of “building a new society in the shell of the old.” They ridicule any talk of the slow, painful creation of new institutions

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<sup>10</sup> Zerzan became famous immediately after Seattle in part because journalists all suddenly wanted to speak to an anarchist, and he was the only one most had in their Rolodex, since he was for a while a suspect in the Unabomber case.

as outmoded “Leftism,” arguing that only the complete destruction of all existing structures and institutions, followed by a return to our instinctual “wildness,” could possibly bring about real liberation.

My purpose here is not to critique the Primitivist position: this is obviously pointless. It clearly makes no sense to attack any strategy other than waiting for catastrophe, and then deny one is advocating catastrophe. My real point is: if this were a classic ideological position, one should expect the effects to be utterly de-politicizing. If one were really looking forward to industrial collapse or some similar apocalypse, the most obvious course of action would be that followed by right-wing survivalists in the 1980s: take to the woods, dig a bunker, and begin stockpiling canned food and automatic weapons. Or, alternately, perhaps, find a distant island and try to begin reviving stone-age technologies. To my knowledge no proponent of Green Anarchism has ever done anything of either sort. Instead, they tend to act very much like any other anarchist. Primitivists may be more likely to become involved in ecological or animal rights campaigns than in, say, union-organizing, but in New York, for instance, I know ardent Green Anarchists who’ve worked with the Independent Media Center, in DAN, in video collectives, Food Not Bombs chapters, community gardens, prisoner-support networks, feminist groups, bicycle campaigns, squats, cooperative bookstores, anti-war campaigns, campaigns for the rights of immigrants, housing rights, cop-watch programs, and pretty much every other major manifestation of anarchist organizing. Often, in fact, Primitivists turn out to be amongst the most reliable and dedicated activists around.

Confronted with this sort of contradiction, it’s hard to avoid asking the same question Evans-Pritchard asked about Zande witchcraft: “how can otherwise reasonable people claim to believe this sort of thing?” If one points out some of these contradictions to actual advocates of Primitivism—for instance, asking them to reflect on what would actually happen if the population of, say, Bangladesh were to one day decide to stop practicing agriculture—the usual reply will be “but it’s not a program! It’s a critique.” Alternately, they might challenge the very logical pragmatic terms of the argument, and insists these are poetic, intuitive understandings about the state of a world that is fundamentally dislocated and wrong. Similarly, even the most avid fans of Zerzan will usually admit, if pressed, that they aren’t really in favor of the abolition of language, but instead emphasize the degree to which language can be deceptive, ideological, or mask and occlude more direct forms of experience.

All this, I think, does much to explain the appeal, and the reason Primitivism tends towards such absolutes. It is really an attempt to take absolutely seriously those feelings of utter alienation that drive so many middle-class, white teenagers to anarchism in the first place, and to at least try to imagine a world in which

every aspect of that alienation would be totally extinguished. The result can only be a kind of myth. Primitivists will often admit this too, claiming that widespread myths of apocalypse, and of the garden of Eden, are intuitive understandings of real truths: that we once did live in a kind of paradise, that we lost it, and that through a catastrophic collapse of industrial society, we will get it back again. The myth of apocalypse comes to substitute for the faith in revolution. It is, in a way, the same thing, except more absolute: the traditional anarchist rejection of political representation becomes a rejection of representation in any form, even art or language. For most Primitivists, this is what we are mainly dealing with: a comprehensive critique of alienating institutions, and a kind of impossible dream-vision of total liberation that can, if nothing else, provide inspiration and continually remind one why one is in rebellion to begin with. For many, the fact that this makes no sense whatsoever to outsiders is probably a major element in its appeal.

Let me take an apparently very different example. One of the main forms for the dissemination of anarchist ideas in recent years in America have been feminist science fiction novels: from Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) to Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993). They operate in a similar way. They are crystallizations of certain tendencies of thought, extrapolations from certain forms of practice, experiments in utopian imagining. The main difference is that since the visions developed in novels are not claiming to be anything but fiction, those who enjoy reading (or writing) them do not tend to claim alternative visions are wrong. In the case of Green Anarchism, the vitriolic quality of so much of the writing seems to result from the confluence of two factors. On the one hand, the urgency of the ecological cause, the sense that the planet is being destroyed and we are all doomed anyway if something isn't done very quickly, and a certain habit of extremely contentious argument inherited from the sectarian Marxist origins of so many of the original participants.<sup>11</sup>

In this, they are unusual. As I mentioned, anarchists have long tended to shun high theory. As David Wieck put it back in 1971 (long before anyone had thought of the term 'postmodernism'):

Anarchism has always been anti-ideological: anarchists have always insisted on the priority of life and action to theory and system. Subjection to a theory implies, in practice, subjection to an authority (a party) which interprets the theory authoritatively, and this subjection would fatally undermine the intention of creating a society without central political authority. Thus no anarchist writings are authoritative or definitive in the sense that Marx's writings have been regarded by his followers (1971: ix).

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<sup>11</sup> One might say, in fact, that Zerzan's, or Bob Black's, endless blanket denunciations of "Leftism" are themselves an extreme version of one tendency within the very Leftism they condemn.

In fact, most of what serves the same role as theory in anarchism makes some gesture to subvert any possibility of its being used as an authoritative text. Primitivism perhaps most closely resembles a traditional sectarian ideology in trying to vanquish all opposing positions, but its content is palpably fantastic and for the most part could not possibly be reflected in practice. Some visions take the form of novels. Others read like comedy routines. One of the more popular anarchist authors of the 1990s—the inventor, for instance, of the concept of the “Temporary Autonomous Zone”—writes under the persona of Hakim Bey, an insane Ismaili poet with an erotic obsession with young boys, his writings taking the form of communiqués from a non-existent Moorish Orthodox Church.

Bey’s mystical pretensions typify another tendency: to identify the space that might otherwise be filled by theory, the transcendental position, as it were, with the sacred, but then to make the sacred ridiculous. I’ll be talking about this habit later on when I discuss the role of giant puppets—what might be called the main sacred objects of the movement (but also self-consciously foolish ones). Here, suffice it to say that the relation of anarchism to spirituality has always been complex and ambivalent. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European anarchism always tended to be strongest in countries—Russia, Spain, Italy—with a powerful church, and tended to take on a radically atheist tone, identifying the very notion of God with the principle of hierarchy and unquestioning authority. (So Bakunin’s famous phrase “if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.” There were exceptions—Christian anarchists like Tolstoy—but they were usually not closely related to social movements.) Some have argued that Spanish anarchism, particularly in its rural manifestations, itself took on some of the qualities of a prophetic, millenarian religion (Brenan 1943; cf. Borkenau 1937)—but, if so, it was one whose main rituals involved acts like burning churches, or removing the mummified bodies of nuns from church crypts to reveal the corruption lurking below (Lincoln 1991). In contemporary anarchism this hostility has largely faded away: in part because in many countries, the church has lost so much of its power; in part because so many anarchist allies (indigenous peoples, for example, or in the United States, Quakers, radical priests and ministers) are likely to have come to their politics through religious convictions; in part, too, because of the development of specifically anarchistic forms of spirituality such as feminist paganism. At the same time, specifically anarchist forms of spirituality are—in addition to being inherently pluralistic and open-ended (hence the polytheism)—almost always at least a trifle self-effacing and capable of distance from themselves.<sup>12</sup> Many pagans

12 Barbara Epstein was already puzzling over the phenomenon when discussing the role of feminist spirituality in the direct action movement of the early 1980s—the fact that “many Pagans simultaneously believe in the Goddess as reality and the Goddess as metaphor for the power of human collectivity and human bonds with nature. In the same way, many participants in the direct action movement have simultaneously held naive and sophisticated concepts of

have a striking ability to see their views as profoundly true, and simultaneously, as a kind of whimsical comedy. Often they seem to be engaging at the same time in a ritual and the parody of a ritual; the point where laughter and self-mockery are likeliest to come into the picture is precisely the point where one approaches the most numinous, unknowable, or profound. The same whimsical, playful quality is reflected in a good deal of pagan feminist literature, as in other branches of anarchist theory, and appears to reflect a sensibility that, at its best, sees “theory” as, if anything, a form of creative writing, both profoundly true because it highlights certain otherwise invisible aspects of reality, but at the same time profoundly foolish, in that it does so by being willingly blind to other aspects.<sup>13</sup> Also, one in which imagination, the ability to create new theories, visions, or anything else, is itself the ultimate, unknowable, sacred thing.

All this is perhaps a bit overstated: the reader should probably not take my own theoretical effusions too much more seriously than those about which I’m writing. The main point, though, is that—unlike some of the “classical” works of Proudhon, Kropotkin, Rocker, Malatesta, De Santillan, and others, written in the shadow of Marxism—contemporary anarchist “theory,” such as it is, is most explicitly not intended to provide a comprehensive understanding that will instruct others in the proper conduct of revolution. It is not an ideology, a theory of history. It tends, rather, towards a kind of inspirational, creative play. It is more than anything else an extrapolation from and imaginative projection of certain forms of practice: the experience of working in a small affinity group becomes the model for Primitivist idealizations of the hunter/gatherer band, assumed to be the only social unit for most of human history; the experience of real experiments in worker control becomes the basis for an imaginary planet in a science fiction story; the experience of sisterhood becomes the model for a matriarchal Goddess religion; the experience of a wild moment of collective poetic inspiration or even a particularly good party becomes the basis of a theory of the Temporary Autonomous Zone. Even when contemporary anarchists turn to Marxism, their overwhelming favorite theorists are the Situationists Raoul Vaneigem (1967) and Guy Debord (1967) the Marxist theorists closest to the avant-garde tradition of trying to unify theory, art, and life.

If anarchism is not an attempt to put a certain sort of theoretical vision into practice, but is instead a constant mutual exchange between inspirational visions,

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magical politics” (Epstein 1991:184). By which she means, both the belief that a blockade in itself can shut down a nuclear plant, and that it can raise consciousness and change the public’s frameworks of understanding in such a way that it can contribute to its closing. Actually, I’ve argued elsewhere that this kind of doublethink is typical of magical practice pretty much anywhere, from Madagascar to Nepal (Graeber 2002).

13 As Bob Black puts it in “The Abolition of Work”: “You may be wondering if I’m joking or serious. I’m joking *and* serious.”

anti-authoritarian attitudes, and egalitarian practices, it's easy to see how ethnography could become such an appropriate tool for its analysis. This is precisely what ethnography is supposed to do: tease out the implicit logic in a way of life, along with its related myths and rituals, to grasp the sense of a set of practices. Of course, another way of doing so would be simply to follow anarchist debates, as I did at the beginning, since these have tended to center on ethical and organizational questions. Nowadays, these debates center most of all on how to combat racism and sexism in the movement, about forms of decision-making, and questions of violence and nonviolence. Since the last is most immediately relevant to the question of the relation of anarchism and direct action, let me proceed to a brief consideration of the relation between the two, before moving to a capsule history of the role of direct action and direct democracy in North American social movements in the second half of the twentieth century—starting with the 1960s, and ending in the 1990s, at the point where the two began to definitively merge.

### III) VIOLENCE AND NONVIOLENCE

The question of violence, nonviolence, and property destruction has haunted anarchism from at least the nineteenth century.

There are obvious reasons why it should be a problem. On the one hand, there are any number of reasons why anarchists might be suspicious of violence. For one thing, anarchists start from the principle that one's mode of resistance should embody the world one wishes to create. Almost no one wishes to create a more violent world. Anarchists try to organize on non-hierarchical lines, and argue that this is not only more just, but more efficient. Violence—particularly aggressive violence—is one of the few forms of human activity that does seem to be more efficient if organized on a top-down, command basis. This, and the concomitant need for secrecy, ensure that the more one prepares for war, or something like it, the more difficult it is to organize democratically.

On the other hand, anarchists wish to see a social revolution and it's hard to imagine how that could happen without any violent conflict whatsoever.

Moreover, they also insist on the moral sovereignty of the individual, and tend to be very uncomfortable with codes of conduct. In principle, it should be for each who resists to decide what is a legitimate act of resistance to an intrinsically illegitimate power. Now, it's important not to overstate things here: in practice, tacit agreements do always exist. CLAC's principle of "diversity of tactics," about which we heard so much in earlier chapters, might have sounded like "anything goes" to pacifists like SALAMI, but it was premised on a shared understanding that no one was about to show up with firearms or explosives. That would have been simply unthinkable. If my experience is anything to go by, if anyone had

even suggested doing so, they would immediately have been assumed to be a police infiltrator for that very reason. Nonetheless, such tacit understandings exist only amongst activists. If outsiders join in, one can never be quite sure what they are going to do. In Québec, for instance, there was a scare-story going around the Black Bloc at one point during the actions that “French gangbangers” were going to show up at the wall with firearms (an act which they assumed would be automatically blamed on them). In Seattle, the Black Bloc’s carefully targeted destruction of corporate targets was, in a few cases, followed by episodes of opportunistic looting by local African-American teenagers. In that case, it’s unlikely any in the Bloc objected. To see oppressed communities rise up and join you is, in a way, the whole point. And, as in St. Jean Baptiste, that oppressed community’s standards for acceptable tactics might well be different than your own. However, most large mobilizations (including Québec City) also see at least a few minor episodes of what I call “the drunken frat boy problem”—opportunistic violence, mainly for the fun of it, on the part of young people whose politics are likely to have nothing to do with the activists’, or even be explicitly right wing. In Europe, this can actually be encouraged by police, providing an excuse for repressive measures. The most extreme example of this came in Genoa, when police apparently let it be known they would turn a blind eye to this sort of thing, and fascists and soccer hooligans from all over Europe descended on the place.

Still, Genoa was extreme and this is usually a fairly minor problem. The worst moral dilemma for anarchists tends to come when isolated individuals, claiming anarchist inspiration, do something genuinely violent. Again, the anarchists who assassinated heads of state around the turn of the last century are probably the most dramatic example. The fascinating thing about such cases is that the majority of such assassinations were conducted by isolated individuals, not people active in actual anarchist organizations. Many had only the vaguest idea what anarchist principles were. However, if one takes the principle of moral autonomy seriously, it’s difficult to treat such acts as completely illegitimate. From an anarchist perspective, insofar as it is legitimate to engage in any act of interpersonal violence, heads of state, major capitalists, or high officials are clearly the most legitimate targets. To instead adopt a more conventional guerilla war strategy, form a small army and attack police stations or army posts—thus trying to kill a bunch of ordinary people who are in no sense directly responsible for the policies one objected to—would clearly be far more problematic. (Actually, it’s hard to deny that, by any moral standards, assassination is far superior to war.) On the other hand, since heads of state tend to find this kind of logic highly objectionable, the results are invariably disastrous. Anarchist writers like Peter Kropotkin or Emma Goldman, mainly concerned with disseminating anarchist ideas before a broader public, often struggled painfully with what to do or say about such people. Is it



legitimate to condemn them? What sort of solidarity does one owe them? Does one not at least have the responsibility to explain to the world their point of view? Debates over broken windows and property destruction, or the possibility of molotovs in Québec City, are simply more recent versions of the same thing.

Activists who have been on the scene even only as long as two or three years tend to complain about the need to constantly reinvent the wheel in such matters. Every time there's a major action, everyone has to go through exactly the same debates. Some will argue that confrontational tactics or property destruction will only make activists look bad in the eyes of the public. Others will argue that the corporate media wouldn't make us look good whatever we do. Some will argue that if you smash a Starbucks window, that will be the only story on the news, effectively freezing out any consideration of issues; others will reply that if there's no property destruction, there won't be any story at all. Some will claim confrontational tactics deprive activists of the moral high ground; others will accuse those people of being elitist, and insist that the violence of the system is so overwhelming that to refuse to confront it effectively is itself acquiescence to violence. Some will argue that militant tactics endanger nonviolent protesters; others will insist that unless one creates some sort of peace police to physically threaten anyone who spraypaints or breaks a window, some will probably do so, and if so, coordinating with the militants rather than isolating them is much safer for all concerned. In the end, one almost invariably ends up with the same resolution: that as long as no one is actually attacking another human being, the important thing is to maintain solidarity. The last thing you want is to end up in a situation like Seattle, where you actually had pacifists physically assaulting anarchists trying to break windows, or turning them in to the police. Many remark that the conclusion is so inevitable that one wishes it was possible to simply fast-forward the debate, but, as many will resignedly remark, it seems each time a major action rolls along, those newly brought into the movement have to work all these things out for themselves.

One result though is a kind of constant paradox within anarchism. It's not that one cannot find pacifist anarchists. Quite a number of pacifists do see themselves as anarchists. Those contemporary anarchists who are not pacifists, however, tend to avoid any association with pacifism, and in fact are likely to react to mention of the word with vigorous condemnation—despite the fact that, in the larger perspective, their ideas and practices emerged much more from that tradition than from any other. One would be hard-pressed to find an anarchist whose instinct would not be to place himself more on the side of Malcolm X than with Martin Luther King or Gandhi; however, the fact remains that in terms of overall approach, Gandhi's "become the change you want to see" seems a thousand times more in keeping with the anarchist spirit than Malcolm X's "by

all means necessary”—and Gandhi himself recognized a strong philosophical affinity of his own ideas and anarchism, which Malcolm X certainly did not. “By all means necessary,” in fact, seems an awful lot like the very ends-justifies-the-means logic which anarchism has consistently rejected. Yet practical annoyances with pacifists, combined with the inevitable instinct to identify with the most radical option, tends to ensure that almost invariably, the anarchist will nonetheless identify with Malcolm X.

Most anarchists nowadays, for example, are fond of citing arguments like Native American activist Ward Churchill’s *Pacifism as Pathology* (1998), that pacifism itself is mainly a way for white liberals to feel good about themselves, that genuinely oppressed groups do not have such luxuries, and that apparent exceptions—the victories of Gandhi or King—were really only made possible by their opponent’s fear of more violent alternatives. (The fact that authors like Churchill also tend to reject anarchist critiques of hierarchy in favor of military-style leadership tends to go unremarked, or written off as inessential.)<sup>14</sup> The fact that Churchill is Native American, however, is significant. In fact, very few North American anarchists would themselves go far beyond breaking a window; almost all scrupulously avoid harming others in any way. As I occasionally point out to journalists, it’s hard not to find constant references to Black Bloc anarchists as “violent” amusing when one has spent any time with them, and observes them, for instance, carefully avoiding stepping on worms or debating about whether it’s really justifiable to kill a mosquito. The real point of fracture comes, precisely, when it comes to issues of solidarity. To take a consistently nonviolent position, one would have to, for example, tell the Zapatistas in Chiapas that they shouldn’t really have conducted an armed insurrection—however brief—or the Black Panthers that a bunch of middle-class white anarchists had more authority to tell them what sort of tactics to employ than they did. This dichotomy—between community-building (in which anarchists have everything in common with pacifists) and solidarity with oppressed groups—is a constant dilemma that will come up throughout this book.

It is interesting to observe that historically, anarchism has thrived as a revolutionary movement most of all in times of peace, and in largely demilitarized societies. As Eric Hobsbawm has noted (1973:61), during the latter years of the nineteenth century, when most Marxist parties were rapidly becoming reformist social democrats, it was anarchism that stood at the center of the revolutionary Left.<sup>15</sup>

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14 At least, the author remembers Ward Churchill doing so when questioned by anarchists in a forum in 2002. Others—notably my editor, Charles—tell me he has since moderated his views on such matters.

15 “In 1905–1914, the Marxist Left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a de facto non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or

Things only really changed with World War I and, of course, after the Russian revolution. The conventional historiography assumes it was the creation of the Soviet Union that led to the decline of anarchism and catapulted Communism everywhere to the fore. Still, it seems to me one could look at this another way. In the late nineteenth century most people honestly believed that war between industrialized powers was becoming obsolete. By 1900, even the use of passports was considered an antiquated barbarism. While colonial adventures were always a constant, a war between, say, England and France seemed about as unthinkable as it would today. The “short twentieth century” (which appears to have begun in 1914 and ended sometime around 1989 or 1991) was, by contrast, probably the most violent in human history. It was a century in which major powers were continually preoccupied with either waging world wars or preparing for them. Hardly surprising, then, that anarchism might come to seem unrealistic. The creation and maintenance of huge mechanized killing machines does seem to be the one thing that anarchists can never, by definition, be very good at. Neither is it surprising that Marxist parties (already organized on a command structure, and for whom the organization of huge mechanized killing machines often proved about the only thing they were particularly good at) began to seem eminently practical and realistic in comparison. It makes perfect sense, then, that the moment the Cold War ended and violent conflict between industrialized powers again came to seem unthinkable, anarchism popped right back to where it had been at the end of the nineteenth century: an international movement at the very center of the revolutionary left. The surprising thing was that it happened almost instantly.

What’s more, one could make a case that the effectiveness of more militant anarchist tactics tend to depend on the effective demilitarization of society. Consider here the battles over squats in Germany or Italy, or even the battles surrounding the expansion of Narita airport in Japan, in which anarchists or their local equivalents were able to fight pitched battles with police, defend territory with clubs and stones against tear gas and water cannons, and as often as not, were actually allowed to win. It’s hard to think of anything remotely like this happening in the United States. In America, the police simply will not allow themselves to lose. If they decide to move in on a squat in force, that squat will be lost; the only reason to defend it is to make the police’s job so difficult that they will hesitate before attacking other squats in the future. It’s not just because American society is far more heavily policed; it’s also because Germany, Italy, and Japan—all, significantly, former Axis powers—have been so effectively demilitarized. Stand-up battles with the police are only possible in societies in which everyone, including the public, is aware that almost no one owns firearms, at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism” (Hobsbawm 1973:61).

and therefore, police tactics appropriate to a society where most criminals can be assumed to be heavily armed—for example SWAT teams—seem wildly inappropriate. And certainly, in those parts of Europe where firearms and military know-how is much more broadly available (one thinks of Russia, Albania, the former Yugoslavia, or for that matter Iraq) classical anarchism and anarchist tactics do not find nearly as fertile ground.

Curiously, the real inspiration for the kind of tactics employed in the current wave of globalization protests comes from movements in parts of the Global South which had not, until recently, really been able to engage in nonviolent direct action at all. People's Global Action, which put out the call for Seattle, was founded on the initiative of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas. The Zapatista movement, it seems to me, can best be seen as an attempt by people who have historically been denied the right to nonviolent, civil resistance to seize it; essentially, to call the bluff of neoliberalism and its pretenses to democratization and yielding power to "civil society." It is, as its commanders say, an army that aspires not to be an army any more. Since their initial, three-week insurrection in January 1994, it has also become about the least violent "army" imaginable (it's something of an open secret that, for the last five years at least, they have not even been carrying real guns). The EZLN is the sort of army that organizes "invasions" of Mexican military bases in which hundreds of rebels sweep in entirely unarmed to scream at and try to shame the resident soldiers. The other two key founding members of PGA were the KRRS, a Gandhian peasant movement in India, and the MST, or Landless Peasants Movement, in Brazil. The latter have gained an enormous moral authority in Brazil by nonviolent mass actions aimed at reoccupying unused lands entirely nonviolently. As with the Zapatistas, it's pretty clear that, if the same people had tried the same thing twenty years ago, they would simply have been mowed down. The most radical movements in South America today, in fact, tend to be about as nonviolent as they think they can get away with: most will, like the militants in Québec City, limit themselves to throwing rocks, and then normally against fully armored riot police, but would never dream of using firearms. The situation is complicated because in many parts of Latin America there is, and has long been, a much richer tradition of nonviolent direct action than in either Europe or North America, but the globalization movement's immediate inspiration seems to come primarily from groups that, twenty or thirty years ago, would almost certainly have been forced to resort to guerilla warfare, but who, having watched so many earlier guerilla movements destroy themselves, or degenerate into nihilist gangsters, have chosen instead to take a radically different approach. In moving away from military tactics they often also ended up—often rather despite themselves—moving towards much more anarchistic forms of organization.

#### IV) AN EXTREMELY BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RELATION BETWEEN DIRECT ACTION AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN THE US SINCE 1960

Before World War II, the main locus of direct action in North America was as I mentioned the labor movement. The period since the war has seen a gradual merging of the traditions of direct action and of direct democracy, with the two only really coming together in the late 1970s and early 1980s, ready to be revived by the influence of the Zapatistas. The story is very complicated but a caricature version might run something like this:

The 1960s New Left kicked off with a call for “participatory democracy” in the famous Port Huron Statement of 1962, a founding document of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Its principle author, Tom Hayden, was inspired ultimately by John Dewey and C. Wright Mills and the document was notable for calling for a broad democratization of all aspects of American society, to create a situation where people are making for themselves the “decisions that affect their lives.”<sup>16</sup> One might see this as a very anarchistic vision, but SDS, as its inception, had a very different orientation. Actually, their original political program was to radicalize the Democratic Party (they only abandoned it when placed in an impossible position by the Democrats’ continual pursuit of the Vietnam War). Even more crucially, those who framed the statement seemed to have only the sketchiest ideas of what “participatory democracy” might mean in practice. This is most evident in the contradictory character of SDS’s own structure. As Francesca Polletta (2002) has pointed out, SDS was on paper a quite formal, top-down organization, with a central steering committee and meetings run according to Robert’s Rules of Order. In practice, it was made up of largely autonomous cells that operated by a kind of crude, *de facto* consensus process. The emphasis on consensus, in turn, appears to have been inspired by the example of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the student wing of the civil rights movement. SNCC had originally been created on the initiative of Anita Baker and a number of other activists who had been involved in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), who were hoping to create an alternative to SCLC’s top-down structure and charismatic leadership (embodied, of course, in the figure of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.). Famous for organizing lunch-table sit-ins, freedom rides, and other direct actions, SNCC was organized on a thoroughly decentralized basis, with ideas for new projects expected to emerge from individual chapters, all of which operated by a kind of rough-and-ready consensus.

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<sup>16</sup> Hayden’s more immediate inspiration was his former philosophy teacher Arnold Kaufman at University of Michigan.

This emphasis on consensus is a bit surprising, since at the time there was very little model for it. In both SNCC and SDS, it appears to have emerged from a feeling that, since no one should be expected to do anything against their will, decisions should really be unanimous. However, there doesn't seem to have been anything like what's now called "consensus process" in the formal sense of the term. The problem was there was no obvious model. The only communities in North America with a living tradition of consensus decision-making (the Quakers, and various Native American groups) were either unknown, unavailable, or uninterested in proselytizing. Quakers at the time tended to see consensus essentially as a religious practice; they were, according to Polletta (2002:195), actually fairly resistant to the idea of teaching it to anyone else.

The New Left was, as we all know, essentially a campus movement. Paul Mattick Jr. (1970) has argued that the wave of 1960s activism seems to have emerged from a kind of social bottleneck. The welfare state ideal of the time had been to defuse class tensions by offering a specter of perpetual social mobility (in much the same way the frontier had once done). After the war, there was a very conscious effort on the part of the government to pump resources into the higher education system, which began to expand exponentially, along with the number of working-class children attending university. The problem, of course, is that such growth curves invariably hit their limits, and, as any Third World government that has attempted this strategy has learned, when they do, the results are typically explosive. By the 1960s, this was starting to happen. Millions of students were left without any realistic prospect of finding jobs that bore any relation to their real expectations or capacities—a normal prospect in industrial societies, actually, but suddenly hugely exacerbated. These were the students who first became involved in SDS; people who, as Mattick emphasizes, like their equivalents in the Global South, always saw themselves as a kind of breakaway fragment of the administrative elite. This was, he suggests, crucial to understanding the limits of the New Left—that activists invariably saw themselves as "organizers," social workers:<sup>17</sup>

What united all factions of the left was the conception of their relationship to actual or fantasized communities as organizers—after the example of trade

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<sup>17</sup> Demographic studies (eg, Flacks 1971; Mankoff and Flacks 1971) tended to show that in the early years of SDS, the movement was largely composed of liberal arts students in elite universities, from affluent, Left or Left-leaning professional families: i.e., children of doctors, lawyers, teachers rather than businessmen; children of successful immigrant families rather than members of the old-money elite. However, after SDS expanded in the late 1960s the social base became much broader, and began to include many students of working-class backgrounds as well. As we'll see, this latter pattern is basically the one that always recurs in revolutionary movements: a convergence of alienated and rebellious children of the professional classes with frustrated but upwardly mobile children of the working class with some experience of higher education.

unionists and social workers—rather than as “fellow students” or workers with a particular understanding of a situation shared with others, and ideas of what to do about it. Despite the disagreement over the primary target for organizing—unemployed, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, dropout youth—in each case the “community” was seen as a potential “constituency” (or, in PL’s [Progressive Labor Party] language, “base”). The radicals saw themselves as professional revolutionaries, a force so to speak outside of society, organising those inside on their own behalf. Thus the activist played the part reserved in liberal theory for the state, a point not to be neglected in the attempt to understand the drift of the New Left from an orientation of liberal governmental reform to Leninist-Stalinist concepts of socialism (Mattick 1970: 22).

The contradictions of this situation eventually became apparent as the decade wore on. The crisis was sparked first in groups like SNCC, when demands for civil rights began to give way to calls for Black Power. The radicals in SNCC, who were eventually to found the Black Panthers, called on white activists to stop doing alliance work and return to their own communities, particularly, in order to organize white communities against racism. SDS activists always greeted such calls with great ambivalence (Barber 2001)—in part because they were never quite clear on what their own communities were supposed to be. One could say something along these lines had been attempted in the early 1960s with the Economic Research Areas Project (ERAP), intended as the white equivalent to grassroots civil rights organizing, that brought SDS activists into poor white communities, and tried to mobilize communities around matters of common concern. Some of these projects scored victories in gaining local reforms, but organizers never felt much part of the communities in which they worked, felt isolated from other activists, and few saw the results as worth the sacrifice. The project fell apart in 1965. Instead, as Mattick so keenly observed, many began to realize that if there was a way to overcome the alienation of dead-end jobs, to find work that actually lived up to their imaginative capacities, it was in activism itself. Other activists, in effect, *were* their communities.

The crisis initiated by Black Power ultimately led in two very different directions. Again, at the cost of gross simplification: once their allies in the civil rights movement had abandoned them, white activists were effectively left with two options. They could either try to build countercultural institutions of their own, or they could focus on allying with communities or revolutionary groups in struggle overseas: i.e., the Viet Cong or other Third World revolutionaries, who would take pretty much whatever allies they could get. As SDS began to splinter into squabbling Maoist factions, groups like the Diggers and Yippies (founded in 1968) took the first option. Many were explicitly anarchist, and certainly, the

late 1960s turn towards the creation of autonomous collectives and institution-building was squarely within the anarchist tradition, while the emphasis on free love, psychedelic drugs, and the creation of alternative forms of pleasure was squarely in the bohemian tradition with which Euro-American anarchism has always been at least somewhat aligned. The Yippie slogan, “revolution for the hell of it” could be seen as emerging directly from the realization that activism itself could become the prime means of overcoming alienation. The other option was to see oneself as primarily allying with revolutionary communities overseas: hence the obsession with glorifying revolutionary heroes in Cuba, Vietnam, China, and elsewhere (men who, as Situationist and Autonomist critics pointed out, were essentially icons of the sort of new radical administration elites with which the SDS had always tacitly identified), and the feeling one need strike back against the empire from within the belly of the beast.

Each strategy involved a return to direct action, but, simultaneously, a jettisoning of the whole project of creating egalitarian decision-making structures. Hippies and Yippies might be considered a bit ambivalent in this regard, as small communes and many alternative institutions created in the process generally did operate on democratic principles. Still, the Yippies, with their wild, acid-inspired pranks and media stunts, tended to turn into a platform for charismatic impresarios like Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, in a style that proved notoriously alienating to some members of the white working classes. The Weathermen, in turn, attempted a series of bombings directed at military and corporate targets, meant to inspire spontaneous emulation and drive society towards a revolutionary confrontation—though with the significant limitation that they did not want to kill anyone. They ended up mainly blowing up empty buildings. Interestingly, both had a profound effect on later media policy, since mainstream journalists began to feel complicit, coming to the conclusion that increasingly wild and destructive acts were in fact inspired by a need to constantly escalate in order to make headlines. I have heard persistent rumors from 1960s veterans, for example, that the Weathermen’s bombing campaign was far more extensive and devastating than has ever been recorded, but that there was a conscious decision by the national media to stop reporting on it. I have no idea if this is true. Still, one thing that is clear is that, since this period, the American media has become, more than that of any other industrial democracy I’m aware of, extremely reluctant to report on activist stunts of any sort—or even demonstrations.

This point will become important later on. For now, though, the key point is that none of these groups combined their interest in direct action with an emphasis on decentralized decision-making; to the contrary, whether because the focus turned on the one hand to charismatic figures who were at least potential media stars, or to the kind of cell-like, military structure able to carry out guerilla-style



attacks, the impulse was in the other direction. Moreover, both strategies flared up for a few years and very rapidly faded away (though the alternative institutions created around this time often lasted considerably longer).

It has become a conventional habit in liberal scholarship to contrast the serious activism of the early 1960s New Left with the supposed childish extremism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. I don't want to leave the reader with the impression I agree with this. The standard liberal complaint is that the 1960s counterculture—in effect, the first mass-based, industrial bohemianism—destroyed itself in ultra-radicalism. Moreover, in doing so, the argument goes, it left an opening for right-wing activists to adopt many of the same grassroots organizing techniques developed by SDS to reach out to the very white working-class constituencies SDS had such a difficult time organizing, to mobilize them against that very counterculture. There's certainly an irony here. But it seems to me it is better to see both periods as attempts to work through certain fundamental dilemmas that are still with us today. I myself suspect the real culprit in the rise and eventual hegemony of the New Right is not the excesses of Maoists and Yippies, but, rather, the fact that America stopped using higher education as a means of class mobility. As most of Mattick's frustrated administrative classes were reabsorbed into a new, more flexible capitalism, the white working class was increasingly locked out of any access to the means of cultural production—other than, perhaps, their church. The result was a perhaps predictable resentment against the supposed countercultural excesses of the "liberal elite."<sup>18</sup>

Be this as it may, the second period was far more complex and creative than critics are usually willing to let on. Many of the ideas that came out of it were extraordinarily prescient. Consider, for example, Huey Newton's notion of "intercommunalism," which became the official Black Panther position in 1971, and which held that the nation-state was in the process of breaking down as the main stage of political struggle and that any effective revolutionary politics would have to begin by an alliance between local self-organized communities irrespective of national boundaries. The real problem was *how* they were self-organized: the Black Panthers, as typified by figures like Newton himself, eventually came to embody an era in which macho, chauvinist leadership styles themselves came to seem synonymous with militancy.

It's probably significant that in SNCC, the first move towards rejecting decentralized decision-making was initiated by the emerging Black Power faction. Poletta's (2002) careful analysis of the organizational history of the movement

<sup>18</sup> In fact, those constituencies that most reliably continue to vote Democratic are precisely those who have some hope of mobility through education: immigrants, African-Americans, even women, who are at this point attending university at far higher rates than men. There is certainly no parallel in communities of color to the explicit anti-intellectualism of so much of the radical Right.

shows quite clearly that consensus and decentralization were not challenged because they were actually inefficient. Rather, they were used as wedge issues. By obsessing about democratic process, white activists in SNCC and their allies could be identified with endless talk and fussing about; the more militant, Black Power faction could present itself as the ideal model of the ruthless efficiency appropriate to a truly militant organization. It's probably also significant that Stokely Carmichael, who became the main spokesman for the Black Power position, was fond of saying things like "the only position for women in SNCC is prone."

The fact that, even by the mid 1960s, such things could be said in an organization that was originally founded by a woman as a revolt against charismatic male authority is itself astounding. But it might give a sense of the sexual politics always lying not far below the surface of the old New Left. Militant nationalist movements are of course notorious for providing platforms for the vigorous reassertion of certain types of masculine authority. But sentiments similar to Carmichael's can be found coming from the mouths of white activists of that time as well. The feminist movement, in fact, began largely from within the New Left, as a reaction to precisely this sort of macho leadership style—or simply among those tired of discovering that, even during university occupations, they were still expected to prepare sandwiches and provide free sexual services while male activists posed for the cameras. The revival of interest in creating practical forms of direct democracy, in turn—in fact, the real origin of the current movement—thus trace back less to these male 1960s radicals than to the women's movement that arose largely in reaction to them (for example, Freeman 1971, Evans 1979).

When the feminist movement began, it was organizationally very simple. Its basic units were small consciousness-raising circles; the approach was informal, intimate, and anti-ideological. Most of the first groups emerged directly from New Left circles. Insofar as they placed themselves in relation to a previous radical tradition, it was usually anarchism. While the informal organization proved extremely well suited for consciousness-raising, as groups turned to planning actions, and particularly as they grew larger, problems tended to develop. Almost invariably, such groups came to be dominated by an "inner circle" of women who were, or had become, close friends. The nature of the inner circle would vary, but somehow one would always emerge. As a result, in some groups lesbians would end up feeling excluded, in others the same thing would happen to straight women. Other groups would grow rapidly in size and then see most of the newcomers quickly drop out again as there was no way to integrate them. Endless debates ensued. One result was an essay called "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," written by Mary Jo Freeman in 1970 and first published in 1972—a text still avidly read by organizers of all sorts in the present day. Freeman's argument is fairly

simple. No matter how sincere one's dedication to egalitarian principles, the fact is that in any activist group, different members will have different skills, abilities, experience, personal qualities, and levels of dedication. As a result, some sort of elite or leadership structure will inevitably develop. In a lot of ways, having an unacknowledged leadership structure, she argued, can be a lot more damaging than having a formal one: at least with a formal structure it's possible to establish precisely what's expected of those who are doing the most important, coordinative tasks and hold them accountable.

One reason for the essay's ongoing popularity is that it can be used to support such a wide variety of positions. Liberals and socialists regularly cite "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" as a justification for why any sort of anarchist organization is bound to fail, as a charter for a return to older, top-down styles of organization, replete with executive offices, steering committees, and the like. Egalitarians object that even to the extent this is true, it is far worse to have a leadership that feels fully entitled to its power than one that has to take accusations of hypocrisy seriously. Anarchists, therefore, have usually read Freeman's argument as a call to formalize group process to ensure greater equality, and, in fact, most of her concrete suggestions—clarifying what tasks are assigned to what individuals, finding a way for the group to review those individuals' performance, distributing responsibilities as widely as possible (perhaps by rotation), ensuring all have equal access to information and resources—were clearly meant to precisely that end.

Within the larger feminist movement itself, most of these arguments eventually became moot, because the anarchist moment was brief. Especially after *Roe v. Wade* made it seem strategically wise to rely on government power, the women's movement was to take off in a decisively liberal direction, and to rely increasingly on organizational forms that were anything but egalitarian. But, for those still working in egalitarian collectives, or trying to create them, feminism had effectively framed the terms of debate. If you want to keep decision making to the smallest groups possible, how do those groups coordinate? Within those groups, how to prevent a clique of friends from taking over? How to prevent certain categories of participants (straight women, gay women, older women, students—in mixed groups it soon became, simply, women) from being marginalized? What's more, even if mainstream feminists had abandoned the politics of direct action, there were plenty of radical feminists, not to mention anarchafeminists, around to try to keep such groups honest.

The origins of the current direct-action movement go back precisely to attempts to resolve those dilemmas. The pieces really started coming together in the antinuclear movement of the late 1970s, first with the founding of the Clamshell Alliance and the occupation of the Shoreham nuclear power plant

in Massachusetts in 1977, then followed by the Abalone Alliance and struggles over the Diablo Canyon plant in California a few years later. The main inspiration for antinuclear activists—at least on questions of organization—were ideas propounded by a group called the Movement for a New Society (MNS), based in Philadelphia. MNS was spearheaded by a gay rights activist named George Lakey, who—like several other members of the group—was also an anarchist Quaker. Lakey and his friends proposed a vision of nonviolent revolution. Rather than a cataclysmic seizure of power, they proposed the continual creation and elaboration of new institutions, based on new, non-alienating modes of interaction—institutions that could be considered “prefigurative” insofar as they provided a foretaste of what a truly democratic society might be like. Such prefigurative institutions could gradually replace the existing social order (Lakey 1973). The vision in itself was hardly new. It was a nonviolent version of the standard anarchist idea of building a new society within the shell of the old. What was new was that men like Lakey, having been brought up Quakers, and acquired a great deal of experience with Quaker decision-making processes, had a practical vision of how some of these alternatives might actually work. Many of what have now become standard features of formal consensus process—the principle that the facilitator should never act as an interested party in the debate, the idea of the “block”—were first disseminated by MNS trainings in Philadelphia and Boston.

The antinuclear movement was also the first to make its basic organizational unit the affinity group—a kind of minimal unit of organization first developed by anarchists in early twentieth-century Spain and Latin America—and spokescouncils. As Starhawk pointed out in Chapter 1, all this was very much a learning process, a kind of blind experiment, and things were often extremely rocky. At first, organizers were such consensus purists that they insisted that any one individual had the right to block proposals even on a nationwide level, which proved entirely unworkable. Still, direct action proved spectacularly successful in putting the issue of nuclear power on the map. If anything, the movement fell victim to its own success. Though it rarely won a battle—that is, for a blockade to prevent the construction of any particular new plant—it very quickly won the war. US government plans to build a hundred new generators were scotched after a couple years and no new plans to build nuclear plants have been announced since. Attempts to move from nuclear plants to nuclear missiles and, from there, to a social revolution, however, proved more of a challenge, and the movement itself was never able to jump from the nuclear issue to become the basis of a broader revolutionary campaign. After the early 1980s, it largely disappeared.

This is not to say nothing was going on in the late 1980s and 1990s. Radical AIDS activists working with ACT UP, and radical environmentalists with groups like Earth First!, kept these techniques alive and developed them. In the 1990s,

there was an effort to create a North American anarchist federation around a newspaper called *Love & Rage* that, at its peak, involved hundreds of activists in different cities. Still, it's probably accurate to see this period less as an era of grand mobilizations than as one of molecular dissemination. A typical example is the story of Food Not Bombs, a group originally founded by a few friends from Boston who had been part of an affinity group providing food during the actions at Shoreham. In the early 1980s veterans of the affinity group set up shop in a squatted house in Boston and began dumpster-diving fresh produce cast off by supermarkets and restaurants, and preparing free vegetarian meals to distribute in public places. After a few years, one of the founding members moved to San Francisco and set up a similar operation there. Word spread (in part because of some dramatic, televised arrests) and, by the mid-1990s autonomous chapters of FNB were appearing all over America, and Canada as well. By the turn of the millennium, there were literally hundreds. But Food Not Bombs is not an organization. There is no overarching structure, no membership or annual meetings. It's just an idea—that food should go to those that need it, and in a way that those fed can themselves become part of the process if they want to—plus some basic how-to information (now easily available on the Internet), and a shared commitment to egalitarian decision-making and a do-it-yourself (DIY) spirit. Gradually, cooperatives, anarchist infoshops, clinic defense groups, Anarchist Black Cross prisoner collectives, pirate radio collectives, squats, and chapters of Anti-Racist Action began springing up on a similar molecular basis across the continent. All became workshops for the creation of direct democracy. But, especially since so much of it developed not on campuses, but within countercultural milieus like the punk scene, it remained well below the radar of not only the corporate media, but even of standard progressive journals like *Mother Jones* or the *Nation*. This, in turn, explains how, when such groups suddenly began to coalesce and coordinate in Seattle, it seemed, for the rest of the country, as if a movement had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

By the time we get to Seattle, though, it's impossible to even pretend such matters can be discussed within a national framework. What the press insists on calling the “anti-globalization movement” was, from the very beginning, a self-consciously global movement. The actions against the WTO Ministerial in Seattle were first proposed by PGA, a planetary network that came into being by the initiative of the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas. The emphasis on the WTO reflected the concerns of farmer's groups in India and the tactics employed could equally well be seen as an amalgam of ideas drawn mainly from the Global South than as an indigenous American development. It was the Internet, above all, that made this possible. If nothing else, the Internet has allowed for a qualitative leap in the range and speed of molecular dissemination: there are now Food

Not Bombs chapters, for instance, in Caracas and Bandung. The year or two directly after Seattle also saw the emergence of the network of Independent Media Centers, radical web journalism that has completely transformed the possibilities of information flow about actions and events. Activists who used to struggle for months and years to put on actions that were then entirely ignored by the media now know that anything they do will be picked up and reported instantly in photos, stories, and videos, across the planet—if only in a form accessed largely by other activists. The great problem has been how to translate the flow of information into structures of collective decision making—since decision making is the one thing that is almost impossible to do on the Internet. Or, more precisely, the question is: when and on what level are structures of collective decision making required? The Direct Action Network, and the Continental DAN structure that began to be set up in the months following Seattle, was a first effort to address this problem. Ultimately it foundered. In doing so, however, it also played a key role in disseminating certain models of direct democracy, and making their practice pretty much inextricable from the idea of direct action. It's the conjunction between these two phenomenon, now pretty much irreversibly established in the most radical social movements in America and, increasingly, elsewhere, that's the real subject of this book.