

## CHAPTER 6

### SOME NOTES ON “ACTIVIST CULTURE”

I started this book with the first CLAC tour that passed through New York in early 2000. Let me flash forward about a year and talk about the second CLAC tour to do so: one held prior to their “Take the Capital” action in Ottawa during the 2002 G8 meetings in Kananaskis.

The audience for such tours tended to consist mostly of white anarchists, but this time the CLAC people made a point of bringing in at least one speaker from a local community-based group in each city they passed through. In New York, this turned out to be an organizer named Ranjanit from a radical South Asian group called Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM). At that time, DRUM had earned enormous respect in New York activist circles for its work on immigration detention issues—of special interest there in the immediate wake of September 11, when hundreds of people of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent had been swept up and effectively disappeared.

The speakers from Canada described campaigns they’d been involved with, and talked about organizing dilemmas of one sort or another. Ranjanit’s talk was different. It consisted mainly of a condemnation of “activist culture.” He himself, he kept emphasizing, was not only of Indian descent but a working-class kid from Queens. He knew something about the communities with which he was working. Since Seattle, all anarchists have been talking about has been how to move away from “summit hopping” to working more closely with communities in struggle. The problem, he emphasized, was that they had developed their own styles of dress, mannerisms, ways of talking, tastes in music and food—a kind of hybrid mishmash of hippie, punk, and mainstream middle-class white culture, with incorporated chunks of more exotic revolutionary traditions—and this made it almost impossible for them to communicate with anyone outside their own little charmed circle. Some elements of this activist culture—the rejection of

personal hygiene standards, for instance—were considered downright offensive by most of those with whom they wished to form alliances. Others, like the vegan diets, made it impossible to sit down at the table with almost anyone who was not already an activist. Activist culture was choking the promise of the movement, and anarchists had to make up their mind what they really wanted to do: create a (tiny, relatively privileged) community of their own, show up at IMF meetings and make grand declarations about the evils of global capitalism, or make a serious effort to work with real communities who were actually bearing the brunt of capitalist globalization.

You can't be an anarchist in a big city in America without hearing some version of this critique on a fairly regular basis. In part, this is because it's a critique that needs to be made. Much like the SDS activists described in the last chapter, few white participants in the direct action movement see themselves as coming from "cultures"; most see themselves simply as generic ("unmarked") Americans, the kind whose issues and concerns are treated as universal, even if at the same time, they feel there is something about that generic American way of life that is deeply inhuman, unsustainable, and wrong. As anarchists and revolutionaries, therefore, they are faced with the same dilemma: whether to try to create an alternative culture of their own, or to concentrate on alliance work, supporting the struggles of those who suffer most under the existing system, but who are also willing to work with them as allies. To put it crudely: they have to choose between whether to focus on their own alienation or others' oppression.

Certainly, in reality, almost everyone ends up doing a little of both. But this is precisely what leads to exactly the contradictions Ranjanit was pointing to. The more one creates one's own, alternative culture, the more bizarre and outlandish one seems to outsiders, including those with whom one ostensibly wishes to ally. Many people of color see anarchist culture itself as a badge of white privilege being waved in their faces (as one African-American anarchist remarked, in regard to punk styles of dress and comportment, "If I went out on the street looking like that I'd be dragged down to the cop shop in fifteen minutes"). On the other hand, it seems unreasonable to ask anarchists to abandon all attempts to build an alternative culture, to fall back on a way of life they hate, just so as not to put others off.

But can one really be *against* a culture?

This is the question I want to explore in this chapter. "Culture" is a term with such universally positive associations nowadays, it's already slightly odd to hear that the fact that certain people have a culture is treated as a problem. All the more so, when the culture in question is born from a conscious effort to create a less hierarchical, less alienated, and more democratic and ecologically sustainable form of life—to create the kind of culture that might befit a genuinely free

society. It seems to me unraveling this paradox will bring us to the core of the fundamental dilemmas of the anarchist project.

### DILEMMAS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

Most often, activist culture is seen as problematic—as it was for Ranjanit—because it is seen as a form of white privilege, and arguments about activist culture are framed in terms of race. America's racial divisions have, of course, been the scourge of radical politics in the United States for centuries. Historically, they have made the maintenance of ongoing class-based alliances extraordinarily difficult. Arguments like these regularly rip direct-action groups apart.

Let me consider one particularly well-documented example. In the 1990s, the Love & Rage Federation (Filipo 1993) dissolved over issues of white privilege. Love & Rage had begun as an initiative to create a continental anarchist network around a newspaper of the same name. In many ways it was quite successful. After ten years, however, they found themselves stubbornly unable to expand beyond their original core of middle-class white activists or include significant numbers of people of color.<sup>1</sup> Furious arguments ultimately broke out over the reasons for this: which also became theoretical debates about the nature of white privilege and ways of overcoming white supremacy.

Some argued that the problem was cultural. The vast majority of white anarchists first discovered anarchism through punk rock and its DIY culture. Walk into a typical anarchist infoshop, they pointed out, and you will almost inevitably be greeted by people with green hair and facial piercings. It doesn't matter how welcoming they were: their very appearance obviously limited the appeal of such places to members of the white working class, let alone poor people of color. Others argued that the problem lay much deeper. The US, they argued, is a nation built on white supremacy, and whiteness is not a culture. When white people talk about their cultural heritage they talk about being German, or Irish, or Lithuanian, but never about whiteness. That's because whiteness is a category of privilege, a tacit agreement with others categorized as "white"—from home loan associations or police superintendents—to provide aid and protection that is not provided to those not so classified. The only way to destroy the system of privilege is to subvert the category of whiteness, so as to ultimately destroy it.

This was a position being developed in circles surrounding the journal *Race Traitor*, which was launched around this time and avidly read in activist circles. Its motto was "Treason to Whiteness Is Loyalty to Humanity." This was a very appealing notion, but the obvious question then became: how does one actually do that? How does one become an effective race traitor? Who might be an

---

<sup>1</sup> They did acquire a Mexican chapter, Amor y Rabia. But its members were also largely middle-class in origin.

example of an effective role model? Many in Love & Rage found inspiration in the example of Subcomandante Marcos, the famous masked spokesman of the Mexican Zapatistas. Marcos was originally a middle-class Mexican who led a group of mostly privileged urban revolutionaries to organize indigenous communities in Chiapas and, after ten years in the jungle, came to abandon his vanguardist ideology in order to become an agent carrying out decisions made by the indigenous communities. In his willingness to step back and accept the leadership of oppressed communities, he could be considered an example of a genuine race traitor. But Marcos, for his part, had the advantage of being able to ally with indigenous communities that already acted very much like anarchists, with their own style of consensus-based direct democracy. What did this mean for anarchists in the United States, where most revolutionary groups based in communities of color were far more hierarchically organized—where, in fact, many saw emphases on direct democracy as itself a form of white privilege? Would all this mean having to abandon any idea of building a new society in the shell of the old? Or, at least, of white anarchists playing any significant role in the process of doing so? Within a year or two, Love & Rage split into feuding factions over racial issues, and the entire project ultimately foundered.

Similar debates erupted in the early days of the globalization movement. In this case the kick-off was a piece called “Where Was the Color in Seattle?” (Martinez 2000), that sparked continual arguments about the nature of racial privilege, outreach versus alliance models, about how to accept the leadership of communities of color, and about the stifling effects of white guilt. The overwhelmingly white make-up of the emerging movement was felt to be a continual crisis. Certainly this was true of New York City Direct Action Network, originally founded to help coordinate the actions against the IMF and World Bank in Washington on April 16, 2000. DAN’s second major initiative was to help organize actions against the Republican Convention in Philadelphia that summer. In order to do so, a group of DAN organizers proposed to ally with SLAM,<sup>2</sup> a radical student group based at Hunter College with a much more diverse membership, and several other POC-based organizations. In those days in the immediate wake of Seattle, everyone was eager to learn DAN’s tactics and forms of organization, so the latter were not averse; but they also insisted that the actions themselves focus on the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal (the Black activist and journalist then on death row in Philadelphia) and more broadly on the US Prison Industrial Complex, and racist nature of the criminal justice system. These demands isolated a significant faction in DAN who had seen the convention protests as a chance to move from issues of global trade to a broader challenge to the existing political system as a whole; to juxtapose their own model of direct democracy to the kind of cor-

---

<sup>2</sup> Student Liberation Activist Movement.

porate-dominated representative democracy embodied by the conventions. Some felt the two were reconcilable: that prison and death penalties issues could be used, ultimately, to raise the same broader questions. Others felt the compromise was worth the opportunity to create an ongoing alliance. In the end, the effort did not, in fact, lead to an ongoing alliance, and resulting recriminations caused quite a number of activists to give up on DAN entirely. However, the alliance, however temporary, was quite helpful in disseminating DAN-like tactics and styles of decision making, and even anarchist ideas themselves, in wider activist circles. Shortly after NYC DAN effectively dissolved in 2003, a new "Anarchist People of Color" network (APOC) was in the process of taking shape, based on almost identical organizational principles.

The early experience of APOC, however, already provides an excellent illustration of why direct-action-oriented groups had tended to be dominated by people classified as "white." When those who lack white privilege began to adopt such politics, they found they faced completely different levels of police repression. As one particularly startling incident in Brooklyn revealed, APOC couldn't even throw a benefit party in their own offices without having to worry about local police sweeping in to beat and arrest partygoers talking on the street.

All this was, perhaps, predictable. It is a notorious thing that during large-scale actions, police seem to target people of color for particular violence. As a result, many (non-anarchist) POC activist groups see direct action as itself a form of racial privilege, and made a great point of trying to keep those likely to engage in militant tactics away from their events. The short-lived Los Angeles DAN, which organized the protests against the Democratic convention in 2000, took the need to ally with community groups so seriously that they refused to allow their spaces to be used for anarchist meetings at all, and even employed marshals to exclude Black Bloc anarchists from their marches.

New York DAN was very different. To all intents and purposes it was itself an anarchist group. Still, it quickly found itself in trouble for its refusal take the same path as LA DAN. Immediately after A16, for instance, NYC DAN and an allied group—New York Reclaim the Streets—joined with several Mexican immigrant groups to organize a May Day march through lower Manhattan. It was to be an entirely peaceful—indeed, permitted—event, replete with musical bands and giant puppets. Still, as the marchers first assembled at Union Square, a tiny cluster of perhaps sixteen anarchists in Black Bloc appeared, simply intending to show the flag, as it were, and establish an overtly anarchist presence at the event. Before the march even started, police swooped in and arrested about a dozen of them.<sup>3</sup> The Mexican organizers were outraged, but less at the police than at their

---

<sup>3</sup> They were held on the basis of an obscure, early nineteenth century "mask law" originally passed to suppress Irish highwaymen, which made it illegal for any members of a group of more

DAN fellow organizers, accusing them of putting their people—many of them undocumented workers—at risk by allowing a Black Bloc to assemble to begin with. They swore never to work with DAN again.

It's pretty obvious that when police launch preemptive strikes like this, fomenting divisions of this sort is half the point. The NYPD has actually proved remarkably adept at playing this sort of game, and has in fact made a habit, during particularly sensitive marches organized by POC groups, of nabbing one or two white anarchists on trumped-up charges. A year after the May Day March, during a march appealing for clemency for Native American activist Leonard Peltier in December 2000, for instance, an NYPD snatch squad suddenly broke into the middle of the march to tackle and drag away four (unmasked) anarchists. One was charged with possession of a battery-operated megaphone without a sound permit, the others with "resisting arrest." This was a very delicate issue, and everyone was making strenuous efforts to avoid anything that could be interpreted as a provocation: none of the anarchists were wearing masks, the woman with the megaphone had not in fact been using it but simply carrying it from one permitted rally point to another (and anyway, as many pointed out, there's no such thing as a moving sound permit). Still, the fact that everyone knew the arrests were a pretext and consciously intended to sow dissension didn't really matter. Afterwards, many activists who based their strategy on building alliances with POC groups (including, in this case, several former members of Love & Rage, now turned Maoists) argued that the very presence of black-clad anarchists could itself be considered a provocation. As a result, such activists often ended up challenging the very principle of direct action.

Whatever the underlying reasons, though, there's one thing that it's crucial to emphasize. Groups like DAN were largely white. Particularly striking was the absence of African Americans. For most of its history, NYC DAN had a single Black member, in an active core group of about fifty. This is not to say it was anything like exclusively white. There were always a fair number of Latinos (though more likely to be from countries like Brazil or Argentina than, say Mexico or Puerto Rico), and even larger numbers of activists of South or East Asian (Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean) or Middle Eastern (Turkish, Egyptian, Iranian) descent. Still, their numbers all put together rarely came to more than a third of the active membership. As for the rest, if they had any self-conscious ethnic identity, it was most likely to be Jewish or Irish. While DAN was certainly more diverse than, say, early SDS, in a city as diverse as New York, this was considered a matter of scandal.

---

than three people assembled in public to disguise their faces. The Bloc had actually been warned of this but been falsely advised that if there were slogans written on their masks they could not be held accountable.

## DILEMMAS OF PRIVILEGE THAT ARE NOT NECESSARILY RACIAL

I will be returning to the specifically racial issues periodically. They are the bane of all radical politics in North America. What I want to emphasize here is that these dilemmas are not simply effects of racism. Similar dilemmas crop up whenever one has a movement trying to combat situations of extreme social inequality. Always, those on the bottom, who have the most reason to want to challenge such inequalities, will also tend to have the most restricted range of weapons at their disposal with which to do so. Inevitably, this causes endless moral dilemmas for those whose privilege actually allows them to rebel.

This is not a new phenomenon. There is a vast literature on the subject. Eric Wolf (1969), for example, pointed out that in every peasant revolt we know about, the backbone of guerilla armies is always the middle peasantry; since the poorest stratum lacks the means to carry out a sustained insurrection, and the wealthiest lacks motivation. Similarly, E. P. Thompson (1971) and others have demonstrated that the mainstays of Early Modern "bread riots"—in reality, events very like what we would now call direct actions—tended to hail from the more prosperous among the laboring classes: neither bourgeois nor paupers, but members of the respectable working class. In fact, much of the early literature on radical movements seemed to argue that it was impossible for the truly oppressed to become genuine revolutionaries. Karl Mannheim (1929, also Norman Cohen 1957), for example, argued that not only do the truly oppressed tend not to engage in sustained revolt, their mode of imagining social alternatives tends to be absolute and millenarian. While the middle stratum "was disciplining itself through a conscious self-cultivation which regarded ethics and intellectual culture as its principle self-justification" (1929:73), and were developing rational utopias, the truly marginal tended to favor a kind of ecstatic vision of sudden and total rupture. Mannheim called this "chiliasm"—"a mental structure peculiar to oppressed peasants, journeymen, and incipient 'Lumpenproletariat,' [and] fanatically emotional preachers" (1929:204).<sup>4</sup> Hence, when the poorest elements did rise up, they tended to do so in the name of some great millenarian vision, in the belief that the world as we know it would soon come to an end in one blow and existing hierarchies be swept away. Now, while few nowadays would give much credence to the idea that the poor live in an eternal present or are incapable of long-term planning, Mannheim does have something of a point. Revolutionary movements have always tended to take on much of their temper and direction from those very "middle strata." At the very least, there has always been something of a gap in this respect between those who suffered the most in an unequal society and those most able to organize effective sustained opposition. In other words, those "most affected"—as the current activist catchphrase puts it—by

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, it's the latter constituencies who have traditionally been written off as "anarchists."

feudal or capitalist structures rarely, if ever, organized openly against it. One can argue, like Jim Scott (1985, 1992), that the hidden resistance of the lowly is a great unrecognized force in world history—and surely one would be right. But rarely does this resistance take the form of overt rebellion.

When those disjunctions are superimposed over more profound ascriptions of difference—like race, culture, ethnicity—they become far more visible. But it seems to me they are always going to be there in some form or another. They are simply one of the inevitable side effects of social inequality.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, in the case of the globalization movement one common popular perception is that we are not even talking about members of a middle stratum, but about members of the elite. This idea has become so deeply entrenched, in fact, that it has become common wisdom not only among conservative commentators, but to some degree, to the public more generally. Before going on, then, let me briefly take on this perception: one which is, of course, a social phenomenon in its own right.

### THE MYTH OF TRUST FUNDS

The stereotype runs something like this. The core of the “anti-globalization movement” is made up of rich or upper-middle-class teenagers, “trust fund babies” who can afford to spend their lives traveling from summit to summit making trouble. In a way, the accusation was predictable enough. Right-wing populism in the US is largely based on the accusation that liberals are part of an upper-middle-class elite whose values are deeply alien to that of working-class Americans. It would be hardly surprising that, faced with leftist radicals, the first instinct of a right-wing talk-radio host would be to assume that if liberals were drawn from the prosperous, revolutionaries would have to be drawn from the actual rich. On the other hand, if one examines the record, one finds that some of the first figures to make such claims—this was around the time of the Republican and Democratic conventions in the summer of 2000<sup>6</sup>—were figures of authority

---

<sup>5</sup> All of this sounds a little like the famous political science notion of the “middle third” of the population, which can either identify its interests with the wealthy third above them, creating a conservative majority, or with the poor third below, creating a progressive one. I think the tendency to reduce social stratification to simply a matter of wealth (or even power) is a bit deceptive, and that it makes more sense to start from terms I began to develop above, to look at the relation between those who are revolting mainly against oppression, and those revolting mainly against alienation. I’ll develop this argument further in a bit. For now, though, before turning to activist culture in more detail, I had better address the frequent accusation that activists themselves—and those in the globalization movement in particular—are in general the scions of a privileged class.

<sup>6</sup> R2K and D2K in activist parlance, or, in their combined form, R2D2. Unfortunately I have been unable to track the actual names of most of those who made such claims, and am therefore forced to rely on my own (no doubt imperfect) memory from the time.



in the cities expecting protests (for example, the mayor of LA and Philadelphia police chief John Timoney), in a tone that certainly implied access to some kind of actual sociological information they could not possibly have had. These were in fact the very political figures who immediately afterwards ordered police to attack what even by conventional definitions were largely nonviolent protesters. It certainly gives one reason to wonder: especially, since so many police in Seattle had at first balked when given similar orders. Given the fact that a whole series of other rumors seemed to mysteriously appear around the same time about activists attacking police with acid and urine, one can only wonder whether this was part of a more calculated campaign to appeal to the class prejudices of the police themselves. The message, at the conventions and similar mobilizations, seemed to be: "Do not think of yourself as a working-class guy being paid to protect a bunch of bankers, politicians and trade bureaucrats who have contempt for you; think of this, rather, as an opportunity to beat up on their snotty children"—an understanding which would be, for the politicians' purposes, perfect, since they also did not want the police to actually maim or kill the protesters. Whether this sort of imagery emerges from police intelligence sources—which tend to draw heavily on research units from private security firms and conservative think tanks, and often, to reproduce very odd forms of right-wing propaganda—or whether police were actually listening to conservative radio hosts, is, at this juncture, impossible to say.<sup>7</sup> If nothing else, activists at major summits ever since have regularly reported more or less the same accusations on the part of police—as one friend summarized it to me: "You're all just a bunch of rich kids who put on masks so your daddies can't see your faces on the news when you go smash things up, and then go back home to your mansions and watch it all on TV and laugh at us."

If nothing else, the rumors became remarkably consistent.

## SO: WHO ARE ACTIVISTS REALLY?

### I) Work and Education

What follows is not based on statistical methodology of any sort, but having spent over seven years now among anarchists and others involved in direct action and I think I am in a position to make some initial generalizations. The first is that activists from truly wealthy backgrounds are exceedingly rare. In terms of economic background, in fact, anarchists tend to be extremely diverse. If there's anything that does set them off from the bulk of Americans it is that they are disproportionately likely to have attended college. Many, of course, are themselves students, but the activist core seems to be made up of what might even be called post-students: young women and men who have completed college, but are still living something like students, at least insofar as they are not mostly in regular,

<sup>7</sup> We will be considering some of these questions further in Chapter 9.

career-oriented nine-to-five jobs or child-rearing households.

I should emphasize while this is the core, it's certainly not the overwhelming majority. In New York, for instance, there is now an anarchist mothers' group. The average meeting of NYC DAN would normally include high school students and retirees as well, along with, say, forty-year-old squatters, many of whom had never attended an institution of higher learning. And NYC DAN was considered by many other activists decidedly upscale. The closer to the squatter scene one gets, the more one encounters activists without formal schooling, and this becomes almost universally the case when one gets to the level of the "travelers"—mostly teens and men and women in their twenties, runaways or living lives of voluntarily homelessness, moving from city to city. Just as, in the heyday of the IWW in the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a rich culture of hobos and hoppers of freight trains, so there is still today. And then as now, most do consider themselves anarchists. Many are orphans, escapees, or runaways of very modest backgrounds, with little access to educational institutions, though many are avid readers, and many versed in radical theory—in my own experience, most often, some variation on French Situationism. While the "travelers" may be numerically a relatively minor element in the movement, and somewhat marginal (most hate meetings), there are likely to be significantly more of them at any major mobilization than anyone who actually has a trust fund. They are also extremely important symbolically, because they set a kind of romantic standard for autonomous existence—dumpster-diving food, refusing paid employment—that represents one possible ideal for those wishing to establish an existence outside the logic of capitalism.

There are also those who join such a world voluntarily: they normally are college-educated, or sometimes college dropouts of a far more exalted social class. This is the sort of universe celebrated in popular anarchist books like CrimethInc's novel *Evasion* (2001), a semi-fantasy of middle-class, white, punk kids who drop out to join this world, living off trash and the left-overs of industrial society.<sup>8</sup> Such a life can represent a kind of vision of moral purity, a total rejection of an industrial society seen as an engine for the production of enormous quantities of waste. Insofar as it is assumed to be no longer possible to simply leave the system,

---

8 Consider here the following paean to dumpster diving: "Preaching salvation through trash, I was up against a lifetime of upper-middle-class conditioning. 'You'll die from eating that food!' they said. The living dead of the 'workforce' giving health advice. By what logic is the food deadly the moment it entered the trash bag, or passed through the back door? Food that had been on the shelf moments prior. It was a naive faith in the purity of store-bought food, and a staunch sureness of trash as poison. Almost funny. Well, I couldn't be sure where they learned their garbage superstition, but they paid for it each day from 9–5. It was sad, deeply rooted conditioning. Conditioning of benefit to the corporations only, at the expense of millions of broken backs and wasted lives of those who work to eat" (CrimethInc 2001:26).

to establish an autonomous existence in the woods<sup>9</sup>, the best one can do is to live off its flotsam and jetsam. Many dumpster divers are quite proud of the fact that, despite the fact that they live off trash, they manage to maintain rigorous vegetarian diets. Many younger anarchists, the more "hardcore" sorts, follow suit to varying degrees. In New York, there is a young man named Thaddeus who claims he manages to get by on roughly five dollars a month, occupying empty buildings until the police expel him, dumpster-diving food, and all the while producing, with some friends, a monthly guide to free events in New York. Thaddeus is a regular of the direct action scene. He's something of an extreme case, and considered rather a heroic figure as a result, but many see this as really "living the life" in a way that most do not. While few resort to, say, street hustling or theft, for those who do there is a strong ethic of shoplifting, that insists that it is only legitimate to steal from large corporate outlets, never "mom and pop" stores<sup>10</sup>) if they can avoid it. Practices like dumpster diving are considered entirely ordinary in anarchist circles. In the kitchen of the New York offices of the Independent Media Center (IMC) there was posted, for many years, the schedule indicating at what times local restaurants were legally obliged to throw away their sushi. Activists on bicycles would regularly make the rounds to pick up piles of sushi rolls, all still neatly shrink-wrapped in plastic trays and containers, and deposit them in the IMC refrigerator. At another stop one can regularly find perfectly edible breadrolls and bagels. As Food Not Bombs activists often point out before major mobilizations, there's absolutely no problem scrounging up free food for, say, ten thousand people in a city like New York, if one wants to put in the effort—though coming up with the utensils can often be more difficult.

There is, I should also note, a counter-discourse here. The majority of activists, who are trying to come to some kind of compromise with the mainstream economy can just as easily dismiss the travelers and squatters and dumpster divers as "crusties," "cruddies," "gutter-punks" coasting on their white privilege, or as middle-class kids playing at poverty in a way insulting to the real hardships of the homeless or dispossessed.<sup>11</sup> But often the critique is mixed with a sort of ambivalent respect, too.

Most activists—and again, I am using the term "activist" here mainly as a short-hand for "anarchist or others involved in anarchist-inspired direct action

---

9 Though a few anarchists are interested in those who carry out rural experiments in this direction.

10 I know a number of young men having admitted to—even boasted of—having been street hustlers at one time or another—but fewer young women, though a certain validation of the role of sex worker has become more common since the middle of the decade.

11 Some of them certainly are—including all the characters in the *CrimethInc* novel. Often, those who make such accusations are unaware of the existence of genuinely homeless or dispossessed anarchists.

politics”—do feel they have to make some compromise with the existing economic order. Most feel that how one does so is very much a personal call. It is rather rare, in my experience, to hear the same sort of accusations of “selling out,” of compromise as treason, that were so common in the 1960s and 1970s. Obviously, if one became a publicity agent for Monsanto, or a stockbroker, it would certainly be felt to compromise one’s activist credentials. But it would have to be something almost that extreme.<sup>12</sup> Obviously, here too there are exceptions. The more hardcore one’s own choices, the more likely one is to write off those who live a more comfortable or compromised style of life.

Older activists (over thirty, or especially, over forty) who are most likely to have full-time jobs often work in industries centering on the dissemination of knowledge and ideas. In the New York scene I know a handful of writers and journalists, a large number of teachers (especially grade school through high school), librarians, even one high school guidance counselor, and many tied in one way or another to the printing industry (a very traditional radical occupation). Some are theater managers, playwrights, choreographers, or otherwise adjacent to the arts. A surprisingly small number, in my own experience, work full time for NGOs (at least this is true in the specifically direct action end of things). Younger activists—the majority, living that kind of extended quasi-adolescence that I’ve called “post-student”—tend towards the sort of part-time jobs that allow very flexible times and hours. This is partly because the changing nature of the job market in the US has made full-time work harder to come by—many end up temping—but also because flexibility is so important to them. Some pick up a specific translatable skill: they learn bartending or web design, become lighting or sound technicians, acquire skills in catering. All are skills that make it fairly easy to pick up work for a week or a month and then move on. (Working as a musician also gives flexibility, but it pays so little one really can’t support oneself without working full time.) Some work in activist-friendly enterprises: most often vegan kitchens or health-food stores. Others become civil engineers.<sup>13</sup> There are also a handful of full-time organizers who work for activist groups like the Rainforest Action Network, Ruckus Society, various peace groups, or labor unions, or needle-exchange programs, though these jobs pay notoriously little and activists of more modest means often can’t afford to take them. Many such jobs pay nothing at all, but activists will still do them on a part-time volunteer basis.

In what follows, I’ll try to outline an ideal-typical activist life-course, generalizing from people I knew in DAN, CLAC, the ACC, IMC and similar groups in

---

12 During the time that I was a professor at Yale, I was surprisingly rarely challenged on this account: when I was, it was invariably on email, by people I didn’t know and was not actually working with. Obviously at Yale it was a slightly different story.

13 There is an interesting tendency for anarchists to be drawn to urban planning.

the Northeast around 2000–2003. Doing so is necessarily a hypothetical exercise, since it assumes history will remain constant (which is unlikely) but projecting current patterns one might come up with something like this:

Our ideal-typical direct actionist is likely to either become politicized in high school, especially through the punk scene, or in college, becoming active in campus organizations. After either graduating or dropping out of college, they are likely to spend anywhere between one and ten years of intense involvement in activist groups. During the first few years, they will attend meetings regularly, perhaps, three, four or five a week (in the days right before action, sometimes four or five a day), usually in a variety of different groups, while supporting themselves through casual or part-time labor. This first phase is very intense and almost impossible to sustain continuously. Most break it up in one way or another. For example, one might spend six months doing activist work in one's home town, then spend a few months intensely working for money; then, once one has saved enough for an airplane ticket, take off to some distant locale: to help set up IMCs in South America, do solidarity work on the West Bank or Chiapas, absorb the squatter scene in Europe, or participate in a tree-sit. Many at this stage are on the road around half the time. Or one might keep oneself sane by occasionally plunging into a completely different sort of project—an artistic one, for example, an intense romance—only to reappear a few months later. One might run off for a few months to work on an organic farm—a habit so common there's actually an acronym for it: to woof (Work on an Organic Farm).<sup>14</sup> Those who concentrate all their energies on one place often tend to burn out completely after a year or two, and quit in exasperation; or else, find some specific, international or community-related project to concentrate their energies on and withdraw from everything else. As a result, groups like NYC DAN soon came to be made up of an active core and a kind of penumbra of semi-retired activists who were never really seen at meetings any more, but did often show up at actions or parties, and whose knowledge, contacts, and experience were available for those who still had personal contact with them.

Younger anarchists who don't live in squats—again, the majority don't—often live in collective houses or apartments, frequently in poor or artsy, gentrifying neighborhoods. Some live in activist spaces: there were several people living in the New York IMC during the years 2000 to 2003, and others in Walker Space, a kind of IMC adjunct that housed a performance space and

---

<sup>14</sup> I am informed that technically, this acronym is actually WWOOF for World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms and derives from a formal network in Canada. But it can also be used as a verb more informally.

television studios. Those prosperous enough to be able to afford a reasonable-size apartment often allowed at least some space in the apartment to be used for larger collective purposes.

Eventually, almost everyone ends up in a kind of semi-retirement. Those who become professional, paid activists usually end up in a different social milieu. Some go to grad school: grad students typically remain involved for a few years, then, as they become overwhelmed with work and experience the pressures of professionalization, drop out of activism entirely.<sup>15</sup> Others have children, or settle down—frequently with non-activists—or finally take on full-time, career employment. There are, certainly, those who maintain an ongoing presence nonetheless, but this is typically either because they find some career that keeps them close to the activist universe—become a labor lawyer and still do legal work for anarchists as well, for example; or manage a radical bookstore; or because they continue to live in a collective house, or squat, or intentional community; or else, because they learn how to carefully limit their involvement to a single, manageable project. The latter is difficult, since demands on an activist's time are potentially infinite. The trick to staying involved over the long term is to find a way to resist the temptation to overcommit. Relatively few, in my experience, successfully manage to do this.

One's later thirties, or certainly forties and fifties, then, are typically a period of complete or near-complete withdrawal. But if historical patterns hold, there is, for a certain number, a period even later in life of reengagement. After one's children are in college, one breaks up with a long-term partner, or retires, one might very well find oneself drawn back into the world of activism again, occasionally, at least for a little while, on as intense basis as at the beginning.

## II) Class Backgrounds and Trajectories

I've mentioned that the only sense in which those involved in direct action could be said to be part of an elite is educational: the large majority have had some access to higher education, despite the fact that most Americans (slightly over half) have not.

Otherwise, if one looks at class backgrounds and trajectories, one encounters endless variation. Again, I have not conducted surveys. Still, I can say from my own personal experience that in the Northeast, the actual number of activists with trust funds can be counted on one hand. There are far fewer, in fact, than, say, the number of activists whose parents are career military officers—which is actually surprisingly high. But we are dealing with relatively small numbers in either case.

Speaking broadly, it seems to me activist milieus can best be seen as a junc-

---

15 There are exceptions of course, but surprisingly few.

ture, a kind of meeting place, between downwardly mobile elements of the professional classes and upwardly mobile children of the working class. The first consist of children of white-collar backgrounds who reject their parents' way of life: the daughter of a tax accountant who chooses to work as a carpenter, the daughter of veterinarian who chose to live as a graphic artist, the son of a middle manager who chooses to become a civil engineer or professional activist. The other consisted of children from blue-collar backgrounds who go to college.

In historical terms, both correspond to a classic stereotype. The first represents the classic recruitment base for artistic bohemia; if not children of the bourgeoisie, as they were often assumed to be in 1850s Paris, where the term was first coined, then children born to members of administrative or professional elites, living in voluntary poverty, experimenting with more pleasurable, artistic, less alienated forms of life. The second represents the classic stereotype of the revolutionary, particularly in the Global South: children of the laboring classes (workers, peasants, small shop-owners even) whose parents strived all their life to get their sons or daughters into college, or even who managed to get themselves bourgeois levels of education by their own efforts, only to discover that bourgeois levels of education do not actually allow entry into the bourgeoisie, or often, any sort of regular work at all. One can compile endless examples among the ranks of the last century's revolutionary heroes: from Mao (child of peasants turned librarian), to Fidel Castro (unemployed lawyer from Cuba), and so on. In fact, both bohemia and revolutionary circles have historically tended to be a meeting place of both.

Obviously this is a highly schematized picture. First of all, it leaves out some significant groups entirely: for example, those who adopted bohemian lifestyles because their parents were bohemian, or the children of professional activists. One should not underestimate the degree of self-reproduction in such sub-classes. Also: while the stereotype of the bohemian as rich kid—secretly supporting his absinthe habits with money from home, eventually either to die of dissipation or go back to the board of daddy's company—is strikingly similar to the stereotype of the activist as trust-fund baby, it is probably no more accurate. Certainly there have always been scions of the bourgeoisie in both milieus, all the more influential for their money, social skills, and connections. But bohemian milieus of the last 150 years never really consisted primarily of children of the upper, or even professional, classes. As Pierre Bourdieu (1993) has recently shown, the social base for nineteenth century bohemian culture in Europe emerged, in part, through exactly the same processes that shaped social revolutionaries in the Global South: among talented children of peasants, for example, who had taken advantage of France's new educational system, and then found themselves excluded from conventional elite culture anyway. What's more, these milieus

tended to overlap. Bohemia was full not only of working-class intellectuals and self-taught eccentrics, but outright revolutionaries. The friendship between Oscar Wilde and Peter Kropotkin was not atypical; actually, it could be taken as emblematic. Similarly, revolutionary circles have always been filled with children of privilege who have rejected their natal values: Karl Marx (lawyer's son turned penniless journalist) being the archetypical example. Every Mao had his Chou En-lai, even Castro had his Ché. The constitution of both milieus, then, is really quite similar. Which probably helps explain why artists have felt so consistently drawn to revolutionary politics.

All this is important to bear in mind, especially because there are those who have consistently tried to keep the two apart. In the 1990s, for example, social ecologist Murray Bookchin threw down the gauntlet in an essay called "Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Divide," in which he argues that anarchist theory has always had two sources: the individualist tradition tracing back to bourgeois bohemian figures like Stirner, and the social anarchism that emerged from the labor movement, with Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin:

Hardly any anarcho-individualists exercised an influence on the emerging working class. They expressed their opposition in uniquely personal forms, especially in fiery tracts, outrageous behavior, and aberrant lifestyles in the cultural ghettos of fin de siècle New York, Paris, and London. As a credo, individualist anarchism remained largely a bohemian lifestyle, most conspicuous in its demands for sexual freedom ("free love") and enamored of innovations in art, behavior, and clothing (Bookchin 1997).

Even the bomb-throwers of the 1890s, assassins of heads of state, Bookchin suggests, were not social anarchists (and it's true that they almost never seemed to be part of organized groups), but extreme individualists acting out their personal rage. While Bookchin doesn't really pursue the argument—the article is mainly a platform for an attack on John Zerzan, Bob Black, and Hakim Bey—the practical implications seem to lead in much the same place as Ranjanit's: a rejection of any existing "activist culture" as a product of bourgeois privilege, as setting one apart from the genuinely oppressed.

The essay as one might imagine has drawn almost endless attacks and made Bookchin's name anathema for whole sections of the anarchist movement. In fact, it seems to me the premise is simply wrong. This is not an unbridgeable divide. There was never anything remotely unbridgeable about it. Instead, I would argue the main problem for would-be revolutionary coalitions is that they always combine those primarily in rebellion against alienation, and those primarily in rebellion against oppression, and that the dilemma is always how to synthesize the two.



## ART AND ALIENATION

One of my most striking memories of the NYC Direct Action Network was a very early meeting at which we were discussing a potential fundraiser. Someone announced they had booked a space for a benefit show and asked if anyone in the room had any particular skills or talents to contribute. Just about every single hand in the room went up. In the end, the facilitator asked everyone to go around in a circle and announce what they could do: there were poets, scene painters, fire jugglers, members of a cappella singing groups, shadow dancers, performance artists, flamenco guitarists, punk singers, magicians... Of forty-two people in the room, it turned out there were precisely five who could not come up with anything they might be able to contribute. It was all the more remarkable because DAN—unlike say, Reclaim the Streets, an allied New York group—was not even considered, by activist standards, a particularly artsy group. The direct-action scene in general is overwhelmingly dominated by people who were also engaged in some kind of creative self-expression. Musicians. Puppeteers. Drama people. Cartoonists. Artists. Much of this could be said to emerge just as much from the DIY (Do It Yourself) ethos of punk culture as the craftsperson-oriented small-scale creativity of hippie culture.<sup>16</sup>

### **Just one telling case study:**

Glass' father is a policeman, her mother an aerobics and yoga instructor. In high school she was a punk who made her own clothes, designing elaborate creations from cast-off and dumpster-dived clothing. She tells me she has keen memories of being laughed at by the "fashion punks," rich kids who bought their clothes pre-ripped at expensive boutiques, and how ridiculous they were, unaware they were proving themselves frauds to the whole spirit of what they were doing. She put herself through college largely by winning writing contests. After graduating she worked briefly for a glossy ecological magazine, lost her job when the magazine went bankrupt (she was never paid for most of her work) and now, in her mid-twenties, alternates between bartending and activist adventures, living in squats everywhere from Cleveland to Buenos Aires to Honolulu, occasionally publishing pieces in national magazines. Her aim she says is to buy land and spend at least half her time on a collectively managed, permaculture farm.

Characters like this could be seen, as I say, as trapped in a kind of suspended

---

16 Most 1960s hippies who did not entirely abandon their lifestyle tended to move into small-scale craft production, if not farming, then leatherwork, jewelry; they in effect became the people who had once been anarchism's strongest "natural" constituencies, the independent artisans and small-scale farmers who Marx ridiculed as a "petit bourgeoisie."

social adolescence. After all, in America, everyone engages in creative activities as a child (indeed one is forced to in school, from finger-painting to school plays). Normally, as one leaves adolescence one is expected to give most of this up. Adults, unless they are lucky enough to find a career involving creative work, are expected to express themselves largely through consumerism, or perhaps some kind of hobby—the latter especially when they retire. To my mind, though, this helps explain one of the great paradoxes of radical politics. One might say: adolescence is for most Americans the stage when one is simultaneously most alienated, and least alienated. This is why revolution can sometimes be pictured as a final overcoming of the adolescence of humanity—the break with the past that will finally rescue us from our perennial alienated state—or as the dawn of a kind of eternal adolescence, “the beginning of history.” For most of us who are not living within the confines of a caste or guild society, adolescence is a period of potential: one could do, or be, almost anything. Maturity, social adulthood, is not even so much a matter of accepting one’s particular role (as secretary, security guard, fund manager, mechanic) but even more, of coming to accept all those things that one is never going to be: rock star, olympic ski jumper, globe-trotting investigate reporter, first woman president, etc. If one looks at Marx’s one famous (and notoriously minimal) attempt to define communism, it’s almost completely defined around not having to do this: one can go fishing in the morning, herd sheep in the afternoon, and criticize over dinner, all without ever becoming a fisherman, shepherd, or critic. One is a generic human, undefined by one’s current role. In contemporary terms, a perpetual adolescent.

This is not to say activists are immature—unless, that is, one assumes maturity necessarily has to be a matter of renouncing one’s creativity and sense of possibility, and accepting a life of mind-numbing boredom and daily subservience. Neither, though, do I find it useful to see all this simply in terms of “resistance”—at least, in the conventional academic sense that assumes that, since power is the ultimate reality, any form of practice can only be seen as either reproducing or resisting it.<sup>17</sup> This is why it seems to me more useful to return to the alternative intellectual traditions that activists largely prefer, and to see the operative terms here as a balance between the revolt against alienation and the revolt against oppression.

### STYLES OF BOHEMIANISM

The hippies of the 1960s, and then the punk movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, have been seen as the first movements of mass bohemianism<sup>18</sup>: a broad popularization of the bohemian ideal of the sacrifice of bourgeois comforts for the pursuit of spontaneity, creativity, and pleasure. Or one might see them as points

17 For a good critique of the logic of resistance, see the introduction to Fletcher 2007.

18 The term seems to derive from rock critic Robert Christgau (e.g., Christgau 2000).

where forms of bohemianism themselves took on the aspect of mass movements. There is of course an endless debate about the significance of all this: to what degree is this all a form of resistance (i.e., Hebdige 1979), to what extent are these movements really the avant garde of consumerism, exploring domains of experience that can be effectively commodified in the next generation (Campbell 1987). For me, though, one of the interesting things is the degree to which these historically constituted categories become, effectively, permanent. They are seen as modes of being. The sense today is that there will always be punks and hippies:

**Extract from notebooks, Winter 2001**

***Brief excursus on the terms "punk" and "hippie"***

No one would ever use these terms to describe themselves. I've never heard anyone say "I am a punk" or "I am a hippie." They are terms you use to describe someone else. In East Coast circles, to call someone a hippie is always to make fun of them, at least slightly: this despite the fact that half the time, the speaker herself might so be considered from another point of view—i.e., Brooke's comment about the new Santa Cruz chapter of DAN, "probably a bunch of hippies and deadheads but we love them anyway." Or: "when you're proposing we organize a drum circle, are we talking *good* drumming, or just bad hippie drumming?" The term "punk" in contrast is almost never pejorative. It tends to be used in a more simply descriptive fashion: i.e., "I'm talking about Laura. You know, that kind of punky girl with the green hair?"

Still, there are very few who can be easily and clearly categorized as either one or the other. Some exist. Ariston with her mohawk is pretty obviously very punk; Neala is hard to see as anything but a hippie (even if her partner is about as Goth as one can be). But these are extreme cases. Most are more like, say, Wacry, who wears dirty hooded sweatshirts and patches as she arranges leaves and flowers all over the Independent Media Center walls—an idiosyncratic mix of both.

Often the terms are contrasted generationally, with the hippies always being the stodgy older generation. Brad talks about the striking contrast between the old fashioned, 1960s-style, hippie forest blockades in Oregon and Northern California and the new energy and militant tactics introduced when the punk kids got involved. This coming from a forest activist who, though instrumental in bringing the punks to the forest in the first place, is, by New York standards, nothing if not a hippie. "Hippie" in fact regularly becomes a synonym for "pacifist," and "punk" for "younger, militant anarchist." Thus, in Seattle when self-appointed "peace cops" in some cases physically assaulted Black Bloc anarchists to stop them from breaking windows (the Black Bloc anarchists re-

fused to hit back, since they were nonviolent) it's almost always described as a case of "punks getting beaten up by hippies."

Of course, these are hardly the only terms evoked (I am not even entering into the influence of the rave scene, for example, or radical hip-hop), but I don't think it's illegitimate to focus on the centrality of punk, if only because so many of the most active white anarchists seem to have been drawn in from an early experience of the punk scene.

A lot has been written about punk as a subculture, but what I want to emphasize here is the role of punk as a venue for the dissemination of a kind of pop Situationism. This Situationist legacy is probably the single most important theoretical influence on contemporary anarchism in America, and it means that—much though many anarchists are familiar with academic terminologies—they are using a very different theoretical vocabulary.

The Situationist International was originally a group of radical artists who, over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, transformed themselves into a political movement. One can see them as the culmination of a certain trend. From at least the time of the Dadaists and Futurists, avant-garde artistic movements had begun acting like vanguardist parties, putting out manifestos, purging one another, and the like. The Situationists were the first that made the transition entirely, ultimately making no original art of their own at all. As a group, they behaved like a kind of caricature send-up of Marxist sectarians, constantly purging and condemning one another.<sup>19</sup> Guy Debord (1967) laid out an elaborate dialectical theory of "the society of the spectacle," arguing that under capitalism, the relentless logic of the commodity—which renders us passive consumers—gradually extends itself to every aspect of our existence. In the end, we are rendered a mere audience to our own lives. Mass media is just one technological embodiment of this process. The only remedy is to create "situations," improvised moments of spontaneous, unalienated creativity, largely by turning aside the imposed meanings of the spectacle, breaking apart the pieces and putting them together in subversive ways. (Hence the most enduringly popular Situationist product, called "Can the Dialectic Break Bricks?," often shown at fundraisers, is a Hong Kong kung fu film, resubtitled.) Raoul Vaneigem (1967, 1979) elaborated a theory of revolution built around a destruction of all relations built on the principle of exchange, on "survival" as opposed to "life," with an often odd, jangly, but still somehow exhilarating, mix of ultraleft Marxism—a glorification of spontaneous worker's councils and the insurrectionary wildcat strike—and the pursuit of unmediated forms of pleasure, an unleashing of desire and the collapse of art into life.

---

19 In fact they purged one member, an architect, just because he was associated with someone who had actually designed a building.

There's actually a concrete, genealogical connection between punk and Situationism. Malcolm McLaren, the English producer who effectively invented the Sex Pistols, and hence the punk movement, had been involved in a Situationist splinter group and Sex Pistols' artist Jamie Reid used Situationist principles to design their cover art and general aesthetic (Savage 1991). Whether McLaren was serious or not (some—e.g., Elliot 2001—claim he was just talking out of his hat), Situationist principles have become firmly ensconced in the punk philosophy—particularly among the hundreds of smaller, explicitly anarchist punk bands that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Crass, Conflict, the Exploited, the Dead Kennedys). Catchy lines from Vaneigem endlessly recur in song lyrics, and Situationist literature is widely available in any anarchist infoshop or bookstore, along with their contemporary, Cornelius Castoriadis and other members of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, and historical material on the French near revolution of '68. Notably missing in most such bookstores is any significant space for most of what in France has come to be referred to as "'68 thought": Deleuze, Foucault, or Baudrillard—those authors seen as representing radical French thought in the academy. Essentially, punks and revolutionaries are still reading French theory from immediately before '68, the academics are mainly reading theory from immediately afterwards, much of which consists of a prolonged reflection on what went wrong, most often, concluding that revolutionary dreams are impossible (Starr 1995).

Punk, of course, is designed to be somewhat off-putting for the uninitiated. This makes it difficult for the outsider to notice that—despite the violent, angry, over-amplified aesthetic—it effectively played the same cultural role for white urban youth of the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, as folk music did in the 1950s and 1960s—as a kind of stripped down, anyone-can-do-it music of the people. It also played a similar political role. The spirit is best summed up in the late 1970s punk zine cited by Dick Hebdige (1979:123), which provided a little finger chart of three chords and the caption, "now go form a band and do it yourself." DIY became the basic punk credo. Make your own fashion. Form your own band. Refuse to be a consumer. If possible, become a dumpster diver and don't buy anything. If possible, refuse wage labor. Do not submit to the logic of exchange. Reuse and redeploy fragments of the spectacle and commodity system to fashion artistic weapons to subvert it.

One might say, in fact, that there are two intellectual streams that emerged from the period of May '68 in France that are still alive in the US and English-speaking world: the pre-1968 revolutionary strain, kept alive in zines, anarchist infoshops, and the Internet, and the post-1968 strain, largely despairing of the possibility of a mass-based, organized revolution, kept alive in graduate seminars, academic conferences, and scholarly journals. The first tends to recognize capital-

ism as an all-encompassing symbolic system that creates extreme forms of human alienation, but sees it as possible to rebel against it in the name of pleasure, desire, and the potential autonomy of the human subject. The second tends to see the system (whether it is now labeled capitalism, power, discourse, etc.) as so all-encompassing that it is constitutive of the desiring subject him- or herself, rendering any critique of alienation, or possibility of a revolution against the system itself, effectively impossible. At the risk of editorializing (though in this context, it would be dishonest to pretend I could possibly do anything else), the situation is full of endless ironies. The Situationists argued that the system renders us passive consumers, but issued a call to actively resist. The current radical academic orthodoxy seems to either reject either the first part or the second: that is, either it argues that there is no system imposed on consumers, or that resistance is impossible. The first has long been most popular: since the early 1980s, in fact, anyone who makes a Situationist-style argument in an academic forum can expect to be instantly condemned as puritanical and elitist for suggesting consumers are allowing themselves to be passively manipulated. Rather, consumers are creatively reinterpreting consumer styles, fashions, and products in all sorts of subversive ways (e.g., Miller 1987, 1995). In other words, ordinary folks are already practicing detournment.

The great irony here is that this emerging orthodoxy, which quickly became the mainstay of cultural studies (and later, anthropology), it was strictly confined to the academy. Cultural studies tracts were rarely, if ever, read by the ‘ordinary folk’ in question, while Situationist literature, which by these standards was the most elitist position possible, actually does have a certain popular audience. *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Vaneigem 1967), for example, is almost never assigned in courses or cited in academic texts, but it’s just as regularly read by college-age radicals now as it was thirty years ago. It all rather confirms that, as my friend Eric Laursen once suggested to me, the reason Situationism can’t be integrated in the academy is simply because “it cannot be read as anything but a call to action.” This is, of course, precisely what makes it so popular with activists. Situationism, with its total rejection of the system, its call for militant artistic interventions, its faith that these might ultimately contribute to social revolution, is the perfect philosophy for an activist first drawn to punk by a feeling of profound alienation from mass society, and determined to do something about it.

Another effect of this rift is that the academy has, starting with the post-1968 thinkers in France, largely jettisoned the idea of “alienation.” Without either a unified subject, or any notion of more natural or authentic relation of that subject with the world and other people, older theories seemed naïve and indefensible. The term disappeared in much social theory. Insofar as it was retained, it was in certain branches of sociology where alienation became something that could

be statistically formalized and measured in questionnaires: leading quickly to the conclusion that the most alienated (isolated, angry) members of society were the most marginal (undocumented aliens, for example, or members of oppressed minorities). Partly as a result, alienation has come to be seen as the psychological experience of oppression: modern studies of the subject speak of "racial alienation," "gender alienation," alienation based on sexual identity or poverty, and so on (Schmidt & Moody 1994, Geyer & Heinz 1992, Geyer 1996). This in itself helps explain the continuing appeal of '60s theorists: everything now is cast in terms of exclusion from mainstream society. Alienation is a measure of this exclusion. This is, however, essentially a liberal conception. The power of the older view of alienation was to insist that it is not just a matter of exclusion, but that there is something profoundly, fundamentally wrong with the mainstream itself. That even the winners are ultimately miserable, at least, compared with what they could be in a free, egalitarian society. Anarchists—at least, those who cannot claim to come from some oppressed group—are left with a visceral feeling of rage and rejection against a system that seems both all-encompassing and monstrous, and an official intellectual culture which can offer no theoretical explanation of why they should feel that way.

I've taken up some of the questions elsewhere. In an earlier essay on anarchism (Graeber 2003:337), for example, I asked why it was that even when there is next to no other constituency for revolutionary politics, one still finds revolutionary artists, writers, and musicians. My conclusion: that there must be some kind of link between the experience of non-alienated labor, of imagining things and then bringing them into being, and the ability to imagine social alternatives. I concluded by suggesting that revolutionary coalitions might always be said to rely on a kind of alliance between society's least alienated and its most oppressed (and that revolutions actually happen when these two categories largely coincide). This would, at least, help explain why it almost always seems to be peasants and craftsmen—or even more, newly proletarianized former peasants and craftsmen—who actually overthrow capitalist regimes, and not those inured to generations of wage labor—or, alternately, the otherwise puzzling fact that so many teenagers can be led from the experience of moshing in punk clubs to conclude that their own freedom is intimately tied to the fate of impoverished Tzeltal-speaking farmers in Chiapas.

Still, this formulation remains more than a little crude. Probably, the real opposition should be between those brought to radical politics in a revolt against alienation, and those who are revolting against oppression. Obviously, it's not as if there are many for whom it is simply one or the other. Still, from the activist's perspective, there are very good reasons not to abandon the distinction entirely. Without it, it would be impossible to argue that revolutionary change would be

in the interest of everyone, even those who cannot be said to be in any way oppressed. On the other hand, one would hardly wish to argue that the despair of a wealthy suburban teenager in the US, faced with a life of soulless consumerism, has quite the same moral weight as, say, the despair of a poor Mozambiquan teenager slowly dying of a preventable disease. It is precisely this dilemma, I think, that leads to the endless tensions and recriminations that haunt activist life.

## RANDOM OBSERVATIONS ON ACTIVIST CULTURE

A society that denies us every adventure makes its own abolition the only possible adventure.

—Reclaim the Streets slogan

If one sees capitalism as a gigantic meaningless engine of endless expansion that reduces the majority of the planet's inhabitants to hopeless poverty, that reduces even its beneficiaries to lonely isolated atoms doomed by fear and insecurity to lives of mind-numbing work and meaningless consumerism, even as it threatens the destruction of the planet—but if at the same time, one does not wish to, or does not believe it possible to simply flee the system, but rather wishes to stay and fight—then what precisely can one do? What sort of social relations is it possible to create among those who wish to make their lives a refusal of the very logic of capitalism, even as they necessarily remain inside it?

The logic of bohemian life has always been an attempt to answer this. It has always tended towards both the cultivation of adventure, danger, and extreme forms of experience, but at the same time, of relations of mutual aid and trust between those pursuing it—even, often, those who might otherwise be strangers. This is precisely the sensibility one encounters in direct actions too.

Consider again the idea of a mosh pit, in which dancers hurl themselves into one another, or stage-dive into the crowd. It's a matter of both creating dangerous, even violent situations, but at the same time, placing an almost blind faith in surrounding strangers—for help and support—since, after all, if they did not catch or buffer you, you might well end up with a broken neck. In principle, the logic of play aggression and ultimate trust has much in common with the sado-masochism that is constantly alluded to (though rarely practiced) in the punk aesthetic. It's the kind of pleasure that arises from adventure: excitement, unpredictability, faith, and reliance on one's companions—which can only be real with the endless possibility of betrayal. At the same time, though, it is anything but an ethos of machismo. One thing that struck me very quickly in becoming involved in anarchist circles was the acceptance of physical frailty.



**Notebook extracts: June 2000, with some later jotted additions***Frailty:*

Most activists do not seem incredibly physically fit—certainly not athletes. They tend to be wiry, occasionally fat, but almost never muscular. “Scrawny vegans” as the stereotype goes. (Famous LA newspaper comment during the DNC protests in 2000: “There were twice as many police as demonstrators; or if you count by weight, four times as many.” Similarly from the other side in the “anarchist guide to LA,” published at the same time: “the athletic-looking guy dressed like a Hollywood version of a punk rocker who’s urging you to attack the cops—he *is* a cop.” In other words, one way to detect an infiltrator is sheer physical fitness. This despite the fact that many have, as one might expect, plenty of outdoorsy skills and experience, climbing trees and walls and that sort of thing. Hippies with their hiking boots and trail mixes tend to be more fit than punks: they are at least wiry and resilient. This is especially surprising at first when you first get to know Black Bloc kids, who in the press are supposed to be the “violent” ones and who, even among activists, have been called “the marines of our movement,” and discover they’re mostly a bunch of shy, ectomorphic teenagers. They, of course, are also the most likely to be vegans. I suspect this is one thing that must really complicate relations with the police, since they are probably exactly the kind of kids that those grade school kids who were later to become cops used to bully.<sup>20</sup>

The curious emphasis on weakness seems echoed by the marked concern for people with disabilities and medical conditions taking part in actions that I—like most newcomers, I think—at first found rather disconcerting. There were endless discussions in legal trainings of what to expect if arrested and in need of insulin, or AIDS medication, or a host of other conditions. “Will the police let you keep your medicine? No. They are supposed to supply you with medicine from a police medic, but usually don’t. What about hypoglycemics?” (There was a widely circulated story about a hypoglycemic woman at A16 who went into a sugar-fit and ended up arrested when she grabbed someone’s cell phone thinking it was her own.) The obvious first reaction, which most neophytes have to suppress, is what is a diabetic AIDS patient even doing putting him- or herself in the way of tear gas, truncheons, and arrest in the first place? But it’s a combination of the obvious desire to be maximally open with, I suspect, a covert sense that, if one is engaged in a moral contest with police, weakness can be strength. We must force them to be humanitarians!

Combined with the endless food taboos, all this makes for a kind of maze of barriers: some people are vegetarian, some are vegan, others are allergic to

---

<sup>20</sup> Obviously there’s some class element too, on which the authorities like to play... as there is in junior high school.

nightshades or suffer from environmental illness, many seem very close to hypochondria with endless real or imaginary ailments. Yet these same people often live some of the most adventurous lives imaginable.

Then we can get into the phenomenology of backrubs, like the chain backrubs in the break from facilitation training. Holding hands or linking arms in human chains. General patterns of touching: ordinary Americans almost never touch each other. Anarchists seem especially fond of hugs (though some, Crusty Canadians from CLAC have been known to bemusedly ask us New Yorkers whether we've been corrupted by California Starhawk types with all this touchy-feely nonsense), people leaning on each other, holding hands. From very early on, at the legal training in DC, I noticed how much of this: all the trainings involved physical contact, from carrying people off limp, to just sitting pressed up against others in overcrowded rooms.

I wonder if one reason for the touchy/food finicky/embracing weakness aspects is the prominence of women in the movement—though this is slightly confusing, since women are almost never a majority in large meetings and often make up at best a third of the people in the room. On the other hand, they often include the most prominent organizers and participants. Is it better to say that feminine sensibilities pervade, or, that the style of interaction consensus process tends to encourage draws on sensibilities that have, in the United States, historically been associated with the way women interact with one another than with the way men do; or, for that matter, with the way men interact with women? It is largely, but not strictly, desexualized. Often the feeling, at least if one is not part of some sexual identity group, is that one should act (at least in public) as if sex is not particularly important, just one possible aspect of a more general common physicality.

Obviously, all of this varies from one subculture to another. For many years at ABC No Rio, an anarchist social center in the Lower East Side, there was—aside from the usual zine magazine, computers, and the like—a weight room used by members of a group called RASH, the “Red Anarchist Skinheads.” But subcultural groups are always defining themselves against one another.

The play of desire and mutual dependence reappears on all sorts of subtle levels. Here's an extract from the same notebook, not long after:

**Notebook extract, July 2000**

***Cigarettes:***

A lot of activists smoke. Most older ones seem to have smoked at some time in their lives. I always found it a bit incongruous, at A16, to see all these idealistic kids blockading the streets with cigarettes hanging out of their mouths;

especially, teenage girls sitting around bumming cigarettes from each other. But this is actually rather appropriate, because it creates a constant mobilization of feelings of need, discipline, sharing, and desire (the "community of addiction," as I used to call it, that binds all smokers). Usually for every three or four activists who smoke, or might, there's one who actually has a pack. Kevin was cast in this role with Scully et al. last week. The distribution of cigarettes, lighting them off others, etc., becomes a constant willed collapse of autonomy—me, when I used to smoke, it was a matter of principle *never* to allow myself to be trapped in a situation where I'd run out and wasn't in a position to buy more, but here it's the opposite. One is dependent on communal good will and sharing for what one *really* desires most urgently in the world, at least at that moment.

Especially large proportions of vegans smoke.

It rather reminds me of a story I heard about Martin Luther King. He was actually a chain smoker, but was convinced early on it would convey the wrong lesson to the nation's youth to ever be seen smoking in public. Endless discipline, but with endless desire lurking behind the public facade. Needless to say, no one smokes in meetings, or indoors at all. Thus, the end of a meeting is usually followed by clusters of people immediately running out to smoke, sitting on the concrete to roll tobacco, bumming butts from one another, people just taking a few puffs off someone else's or passing individual cigarettes around.

Other drugs seem to play a less prominent role because they aren't so addictive. Therefore, the whole dynamic of desire and community doesn't enter in. My notes in this case continued:

***Other drugs:***

This varies by scene. Pot is occasional, but surprisingly infrequent. It's used roughly to the degree one would expect from any young people of the same class or socioeconomic background. Beer is quite a bit, often at bars. Ecstasy is popular among the raver types with which there's a definite overlap with certain parts of the activist scene. Of course, during street actions, drugs are totally bad news and you're always reminded not to bring any: "Even if you ditch a joint the moment the cops appear, someone's going to get it pinned on them." So bringing drugs to an action would be an act of total lack of solidarity. For an activist to show up completely drunk, or completely stoned, at an action is taken as either a sign no one would possibly want to be in an affinity group with them or, in my experience, most often, as a sign that activist in question is personally falling apart and needs help. As for drug paranoia, there are all sorts of levels of context and historical experience: I am reminded of the time I made a beverage

run while showing a film with some former Black Panthers. When I suggested I pick up some Coke, one startled woman immediately corrected me: “Please! Say ‘Coca Cola!’” These were, obviously people used to constant surveillance at a time when drug busts commonly landed activists in jail. I’ve never heard anything like that amongst anarchists nowadays: paranoia is directed at other things. In fact, at minor events, or street party-style actions that are halfway to raves anyway, attitudes towards drugs can be very relaxed. One friend told me a long story about being searched and locked in jail overnight after the RTS Times Square event only to discover, after he got out, that he’d forgotten he’d had a joint in his shoe the whole time. But these are “Temporary Autonomous Zones” of a rather different sort.

The one theme that recurs endlessly in all of this is “autonomy”: simultaneously the greatest anarchist value, and the greatest dilemma. Certain forms of autonomy—the isolated individualism of mainstream American society, with its solitary pleasures—are precisely that against which one is rebelling. Or, perhaps, one might say, the question is how to balance autonomy, solidarity, and freedom. Cornelius Castoriadis (1987, 1991), for example, defined “autonomy” as the ability of a community to live only under rules they had themselves collectively created, and had the right to reexamine constantly. For many anarchists, freedom appears to mean the ability to create new communities, and ties of mutual dependence, more or less on the spot, and to move back and forth between them as one wishes. An action, a party, a picnic, a dance, can all be temporary autonomous zones where desires coalesce and the leap of faith involved in trusting strangers itself becomes a large part of the adventure—even when police are not present, which, as we shall see, is rarely, since police have a notable tendency to show up whenever anarchists get together. The dilemmas, though, become much more acute when attempts are made—as they regularly are—to turn TAZs into PAZs, to move from temporary to more permanent zones of autonomy.

In the next section then let me talk a little about more permanent activist spaces. As we’ll see, these are almost never quite, entirely, permanent. Every space has to be, to some degree, conquered, and most are almost instantly besieged.

### ACTIVIST LANDSCAPES

In a city like New York, anarchist spaces often have the quality of an archipelago. Certain neighborhoods contain relatively dense clusters of squats, community gardens, social or community centers, radical bookstores/infoshops, and other more-or-less friendly institutions: co-ops, vegetarian restaurants, second-hand bike shops, avant-garde theaters, friendly churches, or even cafés and bars where activists are likely to be found hanging out.

Sometimes there's a center to them; sometimes they're more diffuse. Between the beginning of 2000 and the end of 2001, the heyday of New York City DAN, there was a very much a center for the activist scene in New York's Lower East Side. This was a local community center called Charas El Bohio, located inside a former schoolhouse. Charas El Bohio stood at the center of a nexus of institutions almost all of which had been won by prolonged community struggle.

The story of Charas is quite interesting. Technically, "Charas" was the name of a community group—"El Bohio" referred to the building. The community group had been founded in 1965 by a group of Puerto Rican former gang members. When they first created it, they were working with Buckminster Fuller on building geodesic dome housing for the poor, but they soon became a sponsor of cultural festivals. El Bohio in turn came into being when, in 1979, some of them, working with some former Panthers, squatted the Christadora, a beautiful but then abandoned settlement house located directly east of Tompkins Square Park, and towering over the surrounding neighborhood. This eventually led to a stand-off with the city government, who were ultimately willing to resolve the matter by offering the squatters the abandoned schoolhouse down the street, the former P.S. 64. The building had been empty since 1975, was by that time in a state of near-collapse, and inhabited mainly by heroin addicts. The deal was formalized with a gentlemen's agreement of sorts: the Christadora was sold to a private developer and eventually became an expensive condominium, and Charas quickly began rebuilding the newly dubbed El Bohio, offering free space to artists and craftspeople in exchange for work restoring windows and roofs. Before long, the place had become a center for artists, theater and dance groups (who rented rehearsal spaces for negligible fees), and hosted every sort of political group and event. Charas also became the effective political center of the network of squats and community gardens in the area surrounding Tompkins Square, mostly also created in the same period—the 1970s and early 1980s—when much of the neighborhood lay abandoned.

This story has been told many times (Abu-Lughod 1994; Mele 2000; Tobocman 1999). There were points in the 1970s when three-quarters of the area's housing stock was abandoned by landlords, seized by the city for non-payment of taxes. The New York punk scene in fact really emerged from precisely this time and place, and its aura of urban apocalypse and despair had everything to do with the feeling of a city that was literally being allowed to fall into ruin, abandoned to rats, junkies, and arsonists. In reaction, a host of artists, squatters, activists, and new immigrants reclaimed buildings and green spaces, and these, in turn, soon became the object of intense struggles—near-warfare, at times—during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the area started to be gentrified again. The most famous incidents, of course, were the "Tompkins Square Riots" of 1988 and

1989, fought over police efforts to clear out homeless encampments from the park itself. Equally grueling, though, were the battles over the surrounding squats. There were mysterious fires that the fire department refused to put out, sudden dawn raids by riot cops backed by helicopters and armored personnel carriers. In some cases, there were protracted sieges so bitter that it was years before police attempted to move on a squat again. The final result was that by 2002, twenty-two squats had been reduced to eleven, though, in that year, the city finally gave in and allowed the remaining squatters to gain title to their homes.

The story of the community gardens was similar: an archipelago of green spaces reclaimed from what were originally deserted lots full of rats and garbage. They were planted and maintained by local collectives or neighborhood organizations; then, came under siege as the area began to be gentrified. More Gardens!, an activist group dedicated to defending them, met regularly in Charas, and community gardeners also used the large downstairs rooms in Charas to plan pageants. The neighborhood was famous for its beautiful spring and winter festivals, with their elaborate costumes, puppets, light shows, music and dramatic performances—just as, before actions and marches, the same rooms were used for painting banners and assembling puppets. The building itself was always full of art—huge painted sculptures or floats would mysteriously appear in the hall and disappear a few days later—there was an auditorium one could use for performances and rooms one could rent for meetings, always for minimal fees, and the whole building could be rented for parties, provided they didn't go too late at night. For activists, it was an inestimable resource.

Charas stood directly east of the park, on Eighth Street between Avenues B and C. If one set out from Charas and proceeded south along Avenue B, one passed a series of activist landmarks: several popular vegetarian restaurants, one very large and elaborate community garden marked by a towering sculpture made of a kind of staged pyramid decorated with every sort of discarded stuffed animal and similar bric-a-brac, and then, Blackout Books, an anarchist infoshop located in a storefront shop next to a Hare Krishna center, across the street from a credit union and series of thrift shops. Blackout was the sort of place one could drop by pretty much any time of the day and find an interesting conversation. Across Houston Street, one entered a rapidly gentrifying area full of trendy hipster joints, emerging from a largely poor Latino neighborhood, spotted with a few ancient Jewish synagogues and businesses, to reach ABC No Rio. ABC had been named after a squat that was the site of a famous battle, and it had started as both squat and art space. Later it had been legalized as a social center—that is, the squatters got to keep the building on condition they no longer live there—though always, it seemed, under complex conditions that made their occupancy rather tentative. Downstairs, ABC hosted art shows, but especially, it became a

center for the local punk and hardcore scene. Upstairs, it sported a zine library, a free computer space, darkrooms, a silkscreening studio, and a kitchen that was used, several times a week, by the New York chapter of Food Not Bombs. FNB would dumpster-dive food—mostly fresh food, often still in plastic or wrappers that had been thrown away by large institutions—and produce vegetarian meals that they would then distribute free back in Tompkins Square park.

There were a series of other friendly institutions as well: Bluestockings Womyn's Bookstore on Allen Street, the War Resisters League on Sullivan and Lafayette—a pacifist center which had existed since the 1920s and had a whole building of its own (the "Peace Pentagon," it was sometimes called)—the Sixth Street community center, radical theater spaces, St. Mark's Church (where a squatter was one of the priests). But the key institutions, the ones that activists knew they could always rely on, were all, to some degree tenuous. Like the squats, they had been won by struggle, usually by direct action, maintained under great pressure from state institutions, and all were in constant danger of being taken away. Almost every one of them seemed surrounded by a sense of desperate drama; if they were dependable in the sense of being clearly friendly to anarchists, they were not dependable in the sense that one could be sure they would still be there in six months or a year. And, indeed, by 2002, only a couple years after the foundation of DAN, the whole network largely fell apart.

The community gardens were a prime example. The Guiliani administration, on coming to office in 1994, almost immediately launched a broad offensive against the whole network of community gardens, redefining them as vacant lots and introducing a plan to auction off 741 of them throughout the city for the development of "affordable housing." (In one weekly radio address, Guiliani made it clear this was an attack on the very principle of common property: "This is a free-market economy," he said. "The age of Communism is over.") A prolonged struggle ensued, peaking in 1998 and 1999 with numerous direct actions in which More Gardens! activists locked down in front of bulldozers, as well as one Reclaim the Streets action that closed down Avenue A for several hours and another that led to the arrest of sixty-two people at a lockdown on the West Side Highway. Several gardens were destroyed, but in the end, Guiliani suffered one of his administration's few major defeats when a coalition of wealthy patrons intervened to buy up several of the targeted gardens in order to preserve them—and the state attorney general shortly thereafter sued the city to prevent any more auctions, on the grounds that doing so violated the city's own regulations that there should be at least two acres of green space for every thousand inhabitants.

This was a great victory, but an activist soon learns that no victory is irreversible. Also, that every victory tends to be accompanied by terrible, tragic losses. Another Guiliani target was Charas itself. In fact, destroying it soon seemed to

have become a kind of obsession of his administration. At least, that was how it seemed to local housing activists. During the entire period of DAN's existence, the building was under legal siege. Since its status rested on what was, effectively, a gentlemen's agreement with the government—the building being leased from the government for a dollar a year—it was perfectly legal for Giuliani's administration to break the deal and auction it off which it did—at the same auction, on July 20, 1998, as several of the largest community gardens. The auction itself has become something of a legend among Lower East Side activists, who used every means possible to disrupt it, ranging from protests outside, to phony buyers trying to bid up the price inside, to the release of ten thousand crickets on the auction house floor—which did manage to clear the house, but only temporarily. Eventually the title was passed to an anonymous purchaser who—despite the city's efforts to protect his identity—was soon revealed to be one Gregg Singer, a small-time property developer from the Upper West Side. Singer was now technically the owner of the building (El Bohio), and Charas merely his tenant. He immediately moved to evict, but this was difficult: his hands were tied by a restricted-use covenant that allowed the building only to be used for “community facility use.” As a result, in order to expel Charas, he had to demonstrate that he had lined up new tenants who were also going to use the building for cultural or public-service related purposes. The legal problem from his perspective, then—at least, until a prolonged process of appeals and legal skirmishes was finished—was to find a legitimate cultural institution willing to lease the building, even if they knew that doing so would mean evicting a neighborhood community center. This was almost impossible, but it meant that the entire activist community that used Charas was subject to instantaneous “Singer alerts”: the new landlord was obliged to announce visits with prospective tenants three hours in advance, so Charas would then send a message immediately over activist listservs, as well as their own phone trees, calling everyone available to dash down to the yard in front of Charas for an instant demo, grabbing signs left for the purpose in the Charas lobby, explaining to the visitors—say, the pastor of some Harlem church needing a space for choir practice, or some charitable group looking for office space—what was actually going on.

This approach was certainly effective. Singer never did find a legitimate tenant willing to displace Charas. But eventually he succeeded in driving Charas out by other means. After a trial in which a jury ruled unanimously in favor of Charas and against Singer, another judge (who we all assumed must have been bribed, though, of course, we cannot prove it) voided the results on the grounds that the matter should never have been brought before a jury to begin with, and simply handed the property over to Singer. Local squatters were prepared to launch a major occupation and defense—arguing that every building given



up without a fight emboldens the city to move on another one—but the Charas people ended up vetoing the plan, on the grounds that, as a community organization, their only chance of acquiring another space depended on maintaining some kind of relations with the city, and that a pitched battle would certainly make this impossible. Therefore, after a (largely ceremonial) lockdown, the building was boarded up, and—at time of writing five years later—remains empty, since its new landlord has still been unable to find anyone willing to rent it, and has not yet acquired legal authorization to tear it down. Charas, the organization, remains homeless.

In a real estate market like New York, the only alternative to occupation is to be dependent on the whim of some wealthy patron—a fate typified by the story of Blackout Books. Blackout was a collective; everyone who worked there was a volunteer. It was administered democratically and was quite successful in providing a friendly and welcoming environment for those interested in anarchism in the neighborhood. The problem was that the storefront itself was paid for by a wealthy older woman from the neighborhood, who paid the entire monthly rent. One day in 2000, the owner doubled the rent and the patron suddenly announced that she had always been a bit ambivalent about the project, since it made her, in her own way, complicit in the gentrification of the Lower East Side, and pulled out her support. Blackout had a month to create an entirely new funding base. Members of the collective tell me they probably would have been able to do so, despite the fact that the store itself certainly didn't make a profit. However, since this happened at a time of great internal dissension anyway over the relation of Blackout and the surrounding community, the effort ultimately fell apart. After about a year, Blackout reemerged, in attenuated form, as Mayday Books, in the lobby of an avant-garde theatrical space called Theater for a New City on First Avenue: largely, again, because the woman who owns the theater was willing to indulge them with an only nominal rent. However, it is an institution, again, very much dependent on one person's whim. Their patron periodically becomes irritated by the way the bookstore functions as an activist hang-out—there's pretty much always someone dropping by, reading, chatting, looking for events or information—and on several occasions has told them to pack their bags. So far, at least, such crises are usually resolved after a week or two, and those who had begun a panicked search for a new location feel they can settle down again.<sup>21</sup>

Alternately, one can create one's own funding base. But this in itself tends to absorb a huge amount of activists' time and energies. The Independent Media Center that opened over an Oriental rug importer on Twenty-ninth Street between Madison and Park in 2000, was, like Blackout, at first dependent on a

---

21 By the time of the final edit (2008) Blackout was, in fact, expelled, and now no longer exists.

wealthy patron—in this case the publisher of a hacker magazine who had previously been using it as a hacker space and continued to pay the rent after the IMC moved in. Eventually, as always seems to happen, the owner doubled the rent and the patron withdrew his support. The collective managed to keep the space, but only at the cost of spending about a third of each meeting on funding issues and, eventually, taking advertising in their free newspaper and otherwise compromising many of their original principles. Another particularly telling space is ABC No Rio—as I mentioned, founded as an art space and squat in 1980, and given a tacit agreement with the city that they could maintain themselves as a community center if the occupants moved out. Almost immediately upon making this agreement, city inspectors arrived and declared that the building needed eighty thousand dollars worth of repairs to be up to code and unless they could raise the money and carry out the repairs within two years, the building would be condemned, and ABC evicted. Punk shows and other benefits were held as far away as Poland to raise the money, but the result was, again, that a collective created to oppose capitalism, provide free services, and provide a general alternative to the cash economy, was forced to spend a very large part of its time on fund-raising. Squatters regularly report similar stories: even when they are legalized, building inspectors are far more stringent in their demands on the occupants than they ever are to surrounding abusive landlords.

The loss first of Blackout, then of Charas, left the Loisaida activist community decentered and homeless—finding a space for large meetings during mobilizations became a continual problem. Still, the Lower East Side was never the only such cluster. Similar archipelagos of activist or activist-friendly centers and hangouts can be found in the upper 1920s, around the Independent Media Center office itself, another, rather different one, in Harlem, another quite extensive one, with social centers, squats, and community gardens, in the Bronx, another in Dumbo, and so on. But also all of them share the same sense of being enclaves under continual attack.

That same precariousness, incidentally, is felt around other activist institutions as well. Pirate radio stations are spaces won from the FCC; they tend to be shut down. Even Pacifica, the most friendly media outlet, was under continual peril after the “Christmas coup” at the very end of 2000, when it was effectively taken over by a pro-corporate faction. Many members were purged and banned, and the remaining radicals mostly marginalized. It took two years of continual mobilization, direct action, lobbying, and propaganda to finally restore it to its original board. All free or even semi-free territory has to be defended. One result is to reinforce the somewhat untidy, impromptu feel of all the spaces. Everything is slightly unfinished, or in process of construction. It’s partly an aesthetic, as we’ll see; but it’s partly also because almost everything in such spaces is in the

process of either being captured or taken away.

### THREE PARTIES

Having given some small sense of activist landscapes, let me conclude this—necessarily rather schematic—chapter by placing some people in them. What follows are, again, extracts from my notebooks. It's all taken from the same weekend in spring of 2001, at the conclusion of a prolonged strike by the employees of the Museum of Modern Art in Midtown. DAN's labor working group had played a large part in supporting the official UAW picket line with puppets, street theater, secondary blockades, and propaganda, and when the employers finally caved in, we felt it was as much our victory. The celebration was held in the union offices of another somewhat offbeat UAW local, the musician's union, in their offices at midtown. Later many of us went off to a rumored rooftop rave in Queens, and the next day there was a Reclaim the Streets! Party—that is, not a street party, but a party put on by the RTS people, a fundraiser of some sort held not that far away, on Forty-second Street. At the time I was in the habit of writing up summaries of just about everything that happened; the results might give a little sense of the texture and quality of such events:

#### **MOMA Victory Party**

*(UAW Musician's Union HQ, 48th Street between 8th and 9th)*

I arrive fairly late, at 10PM. Most of the food is gone. The room is littered with plates of potato salad, coleslaw, potluck salads in huge wooden bowls, a box that used to contain six-foot heroes, pizza, beer. There's a band playing. Images of rats are everywhere. There's a rat piñata hanging, and another, plastic rat on the table. Rats are the universal effigy for strike actions in New York: unions share several giant inflatable rats, the largest about two stories tall, that can be delivered to picket lines around the city. Most are, on any given day, in use somewhere (they are kept, at night, in a warehouse across the river in New Jersey). The MOMA strikers even had a strike zine called *Rat Poison*, here prominently displayed. The party, when I come in, is attended by perhaps a hundred people, and many danced; perform a train to "Love Train" accompanied by whoops and joy.

The setting: institutional. It reminds me pointedly of grade school. The same sorts of cheap tables and folding chairs. Church social rooms have them too, as do old radical spaces like the War Resisters League, or for that matter, Communist Party headquarters on Twenty-third Street, which is always offering itself for events and screenings, and which we sometimes use, if always with slightly embarrassment. I guess this defines cheap group space: minimal everything, folding tables, folding chairs, designs unchanged since the 1950s or

1960s. I don't know how many hours of my activist life I've spent stacking and folding chairs after meetings in churches and union halls.

The celebrants—MOMA workers and their supporters—varied wildly in shape and size, age and background, from one tiny fiftyish lady who looked like a librarian to huge palookas, and hipster types all in black with fancy glasses. (The union included everyone from painters to bookstore cashiers.)

The climax of the party was the destruction of the rat piñata, which they went after in the traditional way, with blindfolded partygoers hitting it with a stick. Much cheering. During the next train dance, one Asian guy was carrying the remains of the rat with him, thrusting it in the air in a gesture of conquest. The party didn't run too late—it had started around 6:30PM, I was told. Though the band only started up around 10, their set ran maybe an hour. It was one of those perfectly good cover bands which cover a huge range of stuff from Motown to reggae if they have to. ("That's the amazing thing about New York," notes Rufus. "Even the bad bands here are good." Except, we agree, for those Teamsters with all the electric guitars on the float at the Labor Day parade. They were kind of awful.)

Afterwards, most of the hardcore activists are heading off for a rooftop party somewhere in Queens: not exactly a rave, according to Rufus' information: the music is going to be more industrial. Clumps of six or seven keep heading off for the subway. Around midnight I end up in a car mostly occupied by activists—a wide variety, too, ranging from anarchists to labor people to diehard ISO. We get out in an industrial section of the city and follow someone named Alex, of the Lower East Side collective, who had brought along a downloaded map.

### **Rooftop Party in Queens**

The party is being held at the home of Jessica Rockstar, known to me mainly as a member of one of the I-Witness video teams that monitor police during actions. (Her name is not actually "Rockstar," but something quite similar, and someone had been telling me she'd actually changed it officially to "Rockstar," since she feels she really ought to have been one.) JR lives in yet another of those radical semi-industrial spaces so many direct-action types seem to live in. The building is several stories high, in an area full of warehouses, parking for dump-trucks, streets full of trucks and utility vehicles of one sort or another. On the way there, we pass several large manufacturing floors, presumably carpentry or light industry, with their lights still on and workers inside, even though it's shortly after midnight on a Friday night. Streets in this part of the city are wide, often ending in fences. Viewed from above, aside from revealing yet another beautiful Manhattan cityscape, there were nothing but huge, blocklike, flat-

top, warehouse/industrial spaces. This is quite far from the Navy Yards, but the buildings are of that same mold, with huge cinderblock massiveness, freight elevators, big blank hallways, occasional doors, heavy metal stairs. JR's building was five stories, with a couple of open doors. I assume our hostess lived in there somewhere. (Alex's reaction, "Oh, didn't we do labor organizing out of here at some point?") There were Nader stickers on some of the blank walls; rather incongruous with their emphasis on green, since there was nothing growing anywhere.

The roof was huge, a block's worth surely, and full of screens with mainly conceptual shapes and colors being projected on them; the sort of thing you see inside your eyes perhaps if you are on good drugs, but the drugs themselves were not much in evidence. There was officially a cover charge of five dollars, for which you get your hand stamped ("we're asking for a five dollar contribution," said the woman with the nose ring) but as at any activist event, no one was turned away if they didn't have the money. There was also a bar featuring some sort of Brazilian cane drink, also for five dollars. The music, far from industrial, was actually rather sensual and even had an instrumental version of Ministry's "Work for Love."

At midnight, such parties are only really getting off the ground. The roof was half occupied, and Rufus and most everyone else I knew immediately went off to the roof's most dramatic feature, a high platform with extremely rickety stairs, which gave an even more panoramic view of the surrounding city. I hung around with a few friends scheming and plotting things, and waiting for JR herself to appear, though, in fact, rumors that she was out with a bad flu turned out to be true, and our hostess never materialized. It only got hopping around 2AM, and I left shortly thereafter, around the time the fire-jugglers and fire-eaters and people playing with flaming hoola hoops and the like started up. According to Rufus, around 3AM, "the crowd got much younger."

### **Reclaim the Streets Party**

*(Chashama Theater on 42nd Street, between 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>)*

I arrive around midnight, with several friends.

Chashama is an interesting space, an empty theater located smack in the middle of Forty-second Street, in the epicenter of the city's one-time sex district, now a kind of marginal zone between the Disney theaters and development around Times Square to the west, and the New York Public Library to the east. There is, as usual, a story behind Chashama. It turns out there is a wealthy developer who has been systematically buying up every piece of property on the block, so as to rip everything down and put up a big high-rise or something. The problem is there's one shop whose owner refuses to sell, so they're forced to

wait him out. Meanwhile, the developer's daughter is friends with some RTS folk, and, since no one is using the space anyway, convinced her dad to let them use it.

I get the feeling that, for activists, the very emptiness and blankness of the space seems to appeal. There's a whole aesthetic of blank spaces associated with activist events. Much like in many of the rooms in Charas—that is, the ones not painted with colorful murals documenting key events of Latin American history—everything is empty functionality: empty rooms with often black walls, full of very large objects that are dangerous to move around—booms, trestles, machinery—or, in other rooms, white rooms containing nothing at all. It is radically different than offices, or domestic spaces, where everything is essentially created for comfort or convenience or efficiency. Such spaces already suggest their use to you. These kind don't. If they're meant for anything, it's clearly something other than what they're being used for. The same is true of most of the objects one encounters here. Everything is what you make of it. It's putty. Just, usually, very large, heavy, unwieldy putty.

Walking into Chashama that night, one first passes some kind of beached piece of a catwalk, also, an improvised little rock shrine that seems to have been used for a Living Theater production. The walls are painted black. Someone has marked out the space for a bandstand.

There were several bands lined up, but most have finished. The headliners, "German Cars Not American Homes," are playing as I come in. The name would imply it's really a band made up for this event—since this party is raising money for an anti-car action in the Village next week—though it's not really in the raver spirit you'd expect of RTS. Actually, they're almost a punk band; some songs could have been by the Sex Pistols, others more straight rock'n'roll, but very hard-driving. People are pogo-ing, bouncing, dancing frenetically, a lot of arms extended out towards the stage. I'd say perhaps about 100 to 150 people inside—but it's hard to say precisely, since it's a hot day, and since it only stopped raining half an hour before, everyone is flowing outside, chatting up pedestrians, who in this part of midtown are still flowing pretty much all night long.

RTS folk hustle by periodically, looking vaguely official. The Reverend Billy, phony preacher and performance artist, who was officially a professor at the New School at the time, was bouncing around in costume during the set, dancing occasionally, waiting to go into character. Several of the Billionaires for Bush or Gore were around, in high camp tuxedos and evening dresses. A few others were in costume: one guy in what I think was a Kiss mask with a huge tongue, another with a fedora with a large flickering day-glow great white shark attached. Brooke was wearing a mask, one of those creepy white

Italian-style *comedia del arte* masks, but it was atop her head the whole night and never actually put it on. Mostly, though, dress was extremely informal and unpretentious.

When I came, in two activists, Simon and Brooke were working a make-shift bar in the back: three dollar beer on tap, Rolling Rock in bottles. As usual, they were no big sticklers for money, and it seemed like every third person was broke. On the other hand, maybe one out of ten threw in some kind of extremely excessive tip, so all in all, the event seems to have been a money-maker. There was also a spot to buy raffle tickets at a dollar a shot.

The main room itself was all dark, blank walls, except for the blue and red Christmas lights along the top. The hall that led off to the bathroom, however, was extremely brightly lit, bright and fluorescent, the walls covered with 8 1/2-by-11 hand-drawn cartoons and slogans ranging from beautiful works that seemed to be by professional artists, to six-year-old's stick-figures. Mostly pro-party and anti-cop themes, though varied (one sported a picture of a lovely mermaid, with the inscription "What I did on my summer vacation: I went to the mermaid parade").

Despite the punk vibe from the band, the whole event had, I noticed, an extremely friendly, open atmosphere, especially when the music ended and we could actually talk. I say hello to Jessica Rockstar, finally feeling well enough to appear. She's showing off a new tattoo on her back—or actually, it's at present a sketch, the actual tattoo to be put in later in the week—in the form of angel wings. They look like budding baby wings just starting to emerge from her back. She introduces me to a tall, guidoish fellow who explains he's just completed a musical album about A16. We fall silent as the Reverend Billy took the mic (next to him, a short silent woman stood with a bucket of coupons) to advertise the action that upcoming Friday and then perform the main event of the night—a raffle of items donated by members of RTS or sympathetic neighborhood institutions from the Lower East Side.

The Reverend Billy made an excellent emcee. The raffle items included everything from DIY books to jazz CDs, some "sustainably harvested firewood," a gift certificate to St. Mark's Bookstore, a pair of Amazonian feather earrings (won by someone from the IMC), a "bad haircut" (volunteered by some East Village salon), shiatsu sessions, and even more books. About half of them ended up being won by someone named Chuck who no one seemed to know, and since he wasn't actually there, ended up in a small pile by the stage (inevitable word-play: "how does Chuck have all the luck?" and "who the fuck is Chuck?")

We ended with a sermon, Jimmy Swaggart style. Reverend B did his usual act, this time featuring "some asshole from New Jersey in a big Lincoln Mercury who might see such an action, come back and see their car turned into

a home for unwed mothers, and have to actually walk places and think about his life.” The real high point, though, was the end when Kelvin, of the Dumba Collective, offered to auction off his clothes. Up till then, I’d known Kelvin, who looked rather like a long-haired David Bowie, as the extremely thoughtful and good-natured activist who usually manned the absinthe bar at Complacent parties. “I have nothing except the shirt on my back,” he announced, “but we can all give that.” Kelvin explained that he was about to recite a rather long short story written by a French Surrealist—the only Surrealist, he noted, who had actually done something about the radical politics they all espoused and volunteered to fight with the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War—as a “spoken word” as Rev. B put it. He produced a book and began a reading—I’m not quite sure if he was reading in French or English actually, anyway no one was listening, because as soon as he did so, the Reverend began auctioning off his clothes. One sock came off first (I noticed he’d already put aside the shoes, which would be hard to replace), and then white shirt, T-shirt, pants, the other sock, boxers, until finally he was standing there in front of the microphone, reading, entirely naked. The Rev. B ended with, “How much do I hear to make him stop reading?” which produced the largest bids of all. At this point Emily—a very pretty young cartoonist in a ridiculous schoolgirl get-up, with over-the-top bloomers came out and auctioned the blouse and shirt, but giggled and ran away when someone started bidding on the bra.

Then music (the DJ was already playing and scratching bits of some fundamentalist rant about a sinful strip in a big city as the Reverend Billy ended his act)—which was techno but very bouncy, and fun in spirit. The performance ended, things started breaking up. Emily came on stage again a while later to announce that at 6:30AM, some famous photographer was conducting a mass nude photoshoot on 125th Street (he’s done a lot of major streets in New York filled with nudes). “By the end of the evening, I want to see most of us naked”—but despite the fact that the stairs down to the lounge also said, “lounge, clothing optional,” the theme didn’t really take off. Half an hour later even Kelvin was back in a red shirt and plaid pants that someone had donated, when I saw him standing on the street outside chatting with some activists who’d gone out to smoke.

One thing that emerges from all this is the constant preference for places of construction—or, sometimes, destruction—where the ordinary surfaces of life are either being patched together or torn down. (Black Blocs, as we’ll see, have love of construction sites, and finding improvised uses for industrial fencing, dumpsters, and the like). Industrial environments. The idea seems to be, to couch the matter in appropriately Situationist terms, to poke behind the spectacle and



hover instead as much as possible around the grimmest, most unlovely places where the spectacle itself is produced; there to create one's own spectacles, perhaps, but collectively, transparently, in a participatory fashion without the split between backstage and onstage, between workshop and shop floor, that is the original form of all alienation. One anarchist lives in a squatted loft apartment over the workshop in which Star Wars action figures are produced; the place looks half like a factory, half like a stage set. Three DAN veterans live in a loft amidst a row of warehouses, full of masks and elaborate costumes. Everything on the walls, or on display, can be taken down and worn. Another activist house is on an otherwise abandoned, overgrown street in Brooklyn between a lumberyard and a municipal parking lot, where school buses are tucked away—all these are things you're not normally supposed to remember even exist. Most rooms in Charas or Chashama are theaters where there is no formal stage, every place is stage and behind the scenes simultaneously.

Colin Campbell (1987) once suggested that one reason bohemians have always hated the bourgeoisie is that the former see themselves as people who have abandoned comforts for the pursuit of pleasure, whereas the bourgeoisie are people who have done exactly the opposite. However glib, there is a kind of truth here. Campbell also argues that bohemians are, effectively, the avant-garde of consumerism, exploring new forms of pleasure that can be commodified in the next generation, and here I think he misses the point. The point is that this pleasure is, specifically, at the point of creation: the pleasure of destroying the very boundaries that categories like production and consumption create. Pleasure in production is never comfortable. But it often can feel all the more thrilling for that fact.

## CONCLUSION, WITH SOME NOTES ON THE IDEOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF GOVERNMENT REGULATION

The global anti-capitalist movement that debuted, in the US, in Seattle at the very end of 1999, came at a very peculiar historical juncture. It was the time of the "Washington Consensus," a moment of capitalism's complete ideological hegemony. During the Cold War, it was only opponents of capitalism who really called it that; capitalism's proponents tended to prefer to talk about "democracy" or "freedom," or "private enterprise." It was only in the 1980s that capitalism began to dare to speak its name. Ten years later, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, it had achieved such an ideological power that its exponents were arguing that supercharged, free-market capitalism was the only possible economic model for anything, and would remain so for the rest of human history. That the next great global social movement would define itself as anti-capitalist was in its way inevitable; as a movement of the first generation of young people brought up in a world

without alternatives; it was literally all there was against which to rebel. Insofar as it became a revolutionary movement, it was not, demographically, fundamentally different from revolutionary movements of the past. As a result, it had to confront most of the same dilemmas. Before proceeding, let me summarize them. Such dilemmas, I think, exist even in moments of spontaneous insurrection, but they tend to become ever more salient the more long-term a revolutionary struggle tends to become:

In any revolutionary movement, there will tend to be a tension between those who have the most resources with which to carry out acts of rebellion, and those who have the most reason to rebel.

Often, as a result, the make-up of revolutionary groups tends to combine upwardly mobile children of working class or otherwise disenfranchised families, and downwardly mobile (often voluntarily downwardly mobile) children of the elite, since these two groups are most likely to produce individuals who both wish to see radical change, and have the social, cultural, and economic resources to be able to engage in effective long-term struggle.

All this tends to exacerbate another, more conceptual, tension within any revolutionary movement: the degree to which it is inspired not simply by a rejection of the structure of a given social order—that is, the distribution of those things people want or need (wealth, honor, security, food, and so on), and what they have to do to get them—but a rejection of the standards that define what people *ought* to want. That is to say, tensions arise from the degree to which the movement is based in a broad rejection of existing standards of value. One can define alienation, in turn, as the subjective experience of this: what one feels when one's conception of value—of what one feels it is appropriate to desire from life, of what should be important or worthwhile in it—is radically out of sync with prevailing social standards. The problem here is always the tension between this sort of politics of alienation, and more immediate problems of oppression: radical exclusion from basic necessities, those means of existence that need to be to some degree guaranteed in order to be able to pursue any other forms of value to begin with.

In the United States, these issues become infinitely more complicated, and often explosive, insofar as they inevitably become inflected by questions of race.

Those who participated in this movement were first written off as naïve utopians or flat-out lunatics. This is par for the course as well, though one might say the dismissal, this time around, has been much more absolute, and enduring, than usual—especially in the United States. Perhaps it's not surprising, consider-

ing the combination of the collapse of "actually existing socialism" and the fact that so many revolutionaries consider themselves anarchists. Still, I think we might do well to think about what it is that makes anarchism, and revolutionary dreams more generally, seem so unrealistic to non-anarchists. The ideological effect operates in a manner far more subtle than one would at first suspect.

Ideology, it's often said, is at its most effective when it makes certain social arrangements—ones that might well be arranged differently—seem natural and inevitable. Insofar as the market, the state, or the patriarchal family, seem so obvious that anyone who suggests an alternative to them appears—precisely like our revolutionaries—at best an unrealistic dreamer, at worst, insane, we are dealing with a classic ideological effect. And it's certainly true that capitalism has always been unusually effective at this game. It does so largely by defining itself not in terms of wage labor, or any relations of production, or for that matter even capital, but as simply a combination of private property rights and self-interested exchange. Both of these can then be posited as universal, indeed, natural phenomena: they combine the presumably natural desire to own things, and what Adam Smith (1776) famously called people's "natural propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another." Time cards and limited liability can thus be seen somehow as more complex emanations from this omnipresent base. Some of the power of this view can be gauged by the rhetoric one often heard after the fall of the Soviet Union, when analysts seemed to shift, within only a matter of months, from arguing that a command economy would never be able to enter the computer age, to arguing that an economy not based on the profit motive "simply couldn't work," since it flies in the face of universal human dispositions—leaving one to wonder how the Soviet Union could ever have existed for seventy-two years to begin with.

According to this logic, anarchism—as a form of libertarian communism—is not just unrealistic, it's contradiction in terms. Communism can only take the form of state control. Since any free economy will always take the form of a market, any attempt to create collective alternatives will either founder, since they fly in the face of human nature, or, alternately, have to end up being enforced by state coercion. It is assumed that state and market are opposite principles. This kind of argument can be traced back at least to the nineteenth century—back when it was called "liberalism," and not yet "neoliberalism"—in authors like Herbert Spencer, who argued that the state would eventually dissolve away entirely, as it was replaced by free contractual relations based on market principles. Emile Durkheim (1893) long ago pointed out the fallacy here: Spencer's predictions were in no way borne out by the empirical evidence. In fact, he found that as free contractual arrangements increased in number, states actually became much larger: there had to be an endless elaboration of new legislation and ad-

ministrative mechanisms to monitor and enforce them all—what he referred to as the “non-contractual element in contract.” Modern police forces, in fact, were created precisely in the heyday of the “free contract” (Neocleous 2000), and they were primarily concerned with the protection of private property, suppression of traditions of street mobilization and unruly forms of proletarian sociability, and even the regulation of the labor market.

When one examines what really does create practical problems when anarchists try to start creating “new society in the shell of the old,” this is precisely what one finds. Certainly, there are always complaints about “accountability issues,” as activists like to put it—how to make sure volunteer workers actually show up for their shifts, or activists actually perform the tasks they volunteered for in a meeting. But I’ve never heard of a project like a cooperative bookstore, or of bicycle shop, collapsing as a result. Instead, the one thing the immediate, day-to-day experience of people trying to create alternatives really brings home is the degree to which almost everything, in America, is surrounded by endless and intricate government regulation. The coercive force of the state is everywhere. Most of all, it adheres in anything large, heavy, and economically valuable; in any valuable object, in other words, that cannot be simply hidden away: in cars, in boats, in buildings, in machinery.

Let me provide a simple illustration.

At one point in 2002, someone gave the NYC Direct Action Network a car. It was an old car that the donor had no real use for; he handed it over with all the appropriate papers in the glove compartment. We quickly discovered that a “DAN car” was basically a legal impossibility. In the eyes of the law, a car must have an owner. That owner is normally presumed to be an individual, not a collectivity. It is of course possible for a car to be owned by a collectivity, but that collective entity has to be one recognized by the state. This means that, unless the car is owned by the government itself (or a foreign government), the collectivity has to be some sort of corporation. One could imagine DAN as a kind of non-profit corporation, but actually, to be legally recognized as a nonprofit requires a great deal of paperwork. It also requires that one at least pretend to have a certain form of organization, with a director and various responsible parties willing to fill out the paperwork. Governments almost invariably insist the groups they are dealing with are hierarchically organized. The IMC, for example, encounters this problem all the time. One doesn’t even have to be dealing directly with the government; one need only deal regularly with organizations that operate within the formal economy (that the state monitors and regulates). In doing so, one immediately enters into a world where all collectivities are assumed to have certain positions: a president, a board of directors, an editor-in-chief. The same goes, actually, for any financial transaction that isn’t carried out in cash: in order for it

to be possible for potential contributors to write checks to DAN, for example, the group would have had to be entirely differently organized, at least on paper. At any rate, open-ended networks of activists cannot legally own cars.

Of course one can just pretend. This is what the IMC does, and it is essentially what we did with the car: technically, title was transferred not to DAN, but to one member of it, Moose, who thus became the point person for the "DAN car working group." But this made it much harder to manage the car collectively. In theory, there were two others in the working group as well. Still, everyone knew that, if Moose was not driving and the car was pulled over, paperwork would have to be produced; and, if the car was towed (which it quickly was, since the former owner had unpaid tickets), only Moose could get it out. This meant he had to front all the money, and that, in turn, meant the rest of us did, even though we did help to try to raise the money ourselves, tend to treat it more and more like his car.

I should point out that none of this would have happened if someone had given DAN, say, a potted palm, or a bicycle. Or even an expensive computer. No doubt there are on the books all sorts of similar laws and regulations concerning the ownership and transfer of books, computers, and potted palms, but they are so rarely enforced most of us have no idea what they even are, and for this there's a very simple reason. Books and potted palms and computers are relatively small; they are quite easy to hide; as a result, there's no way for the government to effectively regulate them. The fact that a car is large, heavy, and cannot be easily hidden (at least, if one is actually going to use it) means it can be continually monitored by a branch of the state whose job it is precisely to monitor cars—their speed, location, registration status, whether their driver is licensed, and so on—and enforce the endless very detailed laws that regulate such matters—laws which, I again emphasize, presume all sorts of things about what sort of social groups can and can't have legal standing. These rules are enforced by the threat of force. Armed representatives of the state can pull over your car at any time and check your papers, and if this happens, the occupants would not do well to talk back. If your car is towed, and you try to simply take it back without paying the fine, state representatives will use force to stop you. The fact that the DAN car turned into an immediate problem, and, after several months, was abandoned was not proof that egalitarian collectives cannot manage property (human history is full of examples of egalitarian collectives successfully managing property). It is, in fact, much more a testimony to the immediate effectiveness of state violence in enforcing a certain vision of human possibilities.

What is true of a car or boat is, of course, even more true of a building. There are endless regulations concerning how buildings can and must be maintained. Squatters invariably complain that the first thing city representatives do, if squat-

ters do somehow win legal title to their building, is to send inspectors to demand every possible repair to keep the building up to code: demands which, these same squatters always point out, inspectors almost never demand of absentee landlords, no matter how loudly their tenants beg for them. Some of this work can, and usually is, taken on within the alternative economy: there are always squatter plumbers, or electricians, willing to contribute their services. Some of the materials can often be salvaged or reclaimed. But not all of them. The result is, as I mentioned above in the case of ABC No Rio, that one is plunged into the formal economy in a very traumatic way, and forced to spend much of one's time and energy on organizing benefit concerts, or fund-raisers, or selling T-shirts, or otherwise raising money. But, again, this is in no way an effect of economic imperatives. It's an effect of threats of violence. If one did not comply, armed men would come and expel one from the building. If you sell a T-shirt, in turn, matters have to follow a certain legal form, because one has to levy sales tax. If you want to apply for grants, you need to register as a nonprofit.

What I want to emphasize here is the ideological effect. I will call it the "reality effect." Government regulations essentially enforce a certain model of society, in which individual actors or hierarchically organized companies seek profits, and anyone who wishes to organize themselves differently—around any sort of conception of common good—needs to either be part of the state apparatus, or to register with it as a nonprofit corporation. In theory, every aspect of "civil society" is so regulated. Basically, the *only* areas that are entirely off-limits to this sort of regulation backed by force are communicative ones: speech, discussion in meetings, exchanges on the Internet, etc.<sup>22</sup> As soon as one enters the world of material objects, regulations abound. And the larger, heavier, and more visible the objects, the more those regulations tend to be enforced. The obvious result is to leave people with the feeling that radical politics is unrealistic. It's all an ephemeral dream-world that melts away the moment it hits material reality. As soon as it enters the "real world," the world of large heavy things like buildings and machinery and so on, it all seems to be proved unrealistic. In fact, this is really just because heavy physical objects are so much easier to regulate. As a result, large, heavy, valuable objects tend to be surrounded by threats of physical force that back up a certain ideology of how people are expected to interact, and if they don't, they tend to be taken away from you. The objects that seem the most self-evidently real are in fact those most surrounded by forces and abstractions.

To anticipate an argument I will make in the conclusion: consider for a moment some of the uses of the word "real." One can speak of the forms of property that are easiest to regulate—the largest, the hardest to hide, therefore, the most

---

22 Walter Benjamin (1978) was very concerned about slander laws since speech is the only area in which state violence had previously not entered in.

effectively surrounded by the threat of violence—as “real estate,” “real property” as opposed to movables. Note that “real” property is in no sense more empirically real than movables: in fact, insofar as it involves complex abstractions like air rights, one might say that compared with, say, a tomato, it is decided less so.<sup>23</sup> But one can also talk about “realpolitik,” or political “realism.” In international relations, for instance, to be “Realist” (as opposed to an “Institutionalist”) means proceeding from the assumption that nations will not hesitate to use force in pursuit of their own national interests. Once again, this has nothing to do with recognizing what we like to think of as empirical reality: “nations” with collective “interests” are purely imaginary constructs. They become “real” when they threaten to send in the army. The “reality” one recognizes when one is being a “realist” is purely that of violence. Yet it’s precisely that collapse of the effects of violence into the very apparent solidity of the object that produces the reality effect I’m talking about, and makes social alternatives seem so unrealistic. Abstractions like law and the state attach themselves, by threat of force, particularly to the largest, heaviest objects—the things that seem most empirically “real.”

All this might make it possible to understand the anarchist love of industrial settings, construction sites, backstage spaces, and the like in a slightly different way. What’s being “detourned” there—to use a somewhat bastardized version of the Situationist expression—is precisely that reality effect, in order, I think, to propose another one, in which the ultimate reality is not the ability to deploy violence, the power to destroy, but rather, the power of creativity itself.

I will return to this theme in the conclusion.

---

<sup>23</sup> It is also etymologically derived not from Latin “res” but from Spanish “real,” “royal,” ultimately belonging to the king, and hence under the jurisdiction of state power.