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The Allure of Insurrection

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Abstract

In this essay, we identify the primary traits of the "insurrectionary anarchism" that has recently influenced the North American anarchist community and attracted attention from other political activists. In doing so, we explore insurrectionary anarchism's genealogy, discourse, and relation to other strains of theory and praxis.

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More so than most ideologies, anarchism emphasizes practice over theory. Long ago, it gravitated toward encouraging people to take matters into their own hands, to engage in direct action, to advance the cause through "propaganda of the deed." In recent years, as anarchist politics experienced a revival, debates over the direction of the movement reappeared. New works, whether in print or online, readily discuss the relative merits of movement organizing or Temporary Autonomous Zones, of platformism or postanarchism. Of course, such discussions hold little interest for activists whose attention remains focused on arenas of direct struggle. That focus has meant that where activists once drew inspiration from the Zapatistas of Chiapas, they now draw it from the student rebels of Athens. The common link, to be sure, is a pervasive spirit of taking charge, of acting as if one were already free, of rebellion and insurrection; hence: "Insurrectionary anarchism is primarily a practice, and focuses on the organisation of attack."[1]

Insurrection and anarchism have long been associated, not only in popular culture over the last two centuries, but also in contemporary radical rhetoric and practice. In their compelling historical review, Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt discern two dominant strategic approaches within the broad tradition of anarchism — approaches that they labeled "insurrectionist anarchism" and "mass anarchism."[2] In their view, the former strategy "argues that reforms are illusory and organised mass movements are incompatible with anarchism, and emphasises armed action . . . as the primary means of evoking a spontaneous revolutionary upsurge."[3] Even so, Schmidt and van der Walt argue that this strain of anarchism has tended to play a minor role in the anarchist drama.

Other anarchists claim, though, that the revolutionary spirit of insurrection and class struggle constitute the very nature of anarchism.[4] After the repeated failures of traditional leftism, and the seeming impotence of new social movements, anarchists have embraced a different orientation toward radical politics. Frustrated by the seeming inactivity of planning the revolution, or by the drudgery

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1 "Insurrectionary Anarchy: Organising for Attack!," *Do or Die*, no. 10 (2003) http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no10/anarchy.htm (accessed 19 August 2011).

2 Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009).

3 Ibid., 123.

4 Joe Black, "Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism," http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=3430 (accessed 19 August 2011).

of organizing for it, some anarchists are captivated by the promise of insurrection: "It is a yearning to break out, to destroy walls and norms, to forget every social fact, to see, hear, feel and know things we'd never imagined."[5] Beyond the allure of breaking out and fighting back, there is a more substantive criticism of contemporary anarchist theory and practice. Insurrectionists share some or all of the following ideas: "rejection in practice of any type of organisation with some projection in time ('formal organisation' according to the insurrectionalists), rejection of systematic and methodical work, despise for the people's struggle for reforms and mass organisation, what is has [sic] as a counterpart voluntarism, maximalism, a primarily emotional approach to politics, a certain sense of urgency, impatience and immediatism."[6]

In a sort of back-to-future moment, the trope of insurrection has taken root and the meme of insurrectionary anarchism has become widespread — spurred recently by the appearance of *The Coming Insurrection*.[7] Foreshadowing the street violence that occurred in Greece and France in 2009, *The Coming Insurrection* (hereafter, *TCI*) presents a brief for "new forms of activism, forms that discard older logics of protest, visibility and organization and embrace instead spontaneity and invisibility."[8]

In the context of a society in an "advanced degree of social decomposition," the authors of *TCI* "count on the coming movement to find the necessary breath of nihilism."[9] Amid the gloom and despair of contemporary life, amid a sort of biopolitics dominated by Empire, the spirit of revolt needs to be spread. It does not spread in the linear form of a contagion, but instead "takes the shape of a music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythm of their own vibrations, always taking on more density."[10] Rather than be content with building solidified networks of activists or constructing alternative institutions in isolated milieus,

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5 monkey bars, "The Allure of Insurrection," *Infoshop News*, http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=20090816220733878 (accessed 19 August 2011).

6 José Antonio Gutiérrez D., "Notes on the Article 'Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism'," http://www.anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=4542 (accessed 19 August 2011).

7 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

8 Sam Cooper, "The Coming Insurrection: Nothing Will Change without a Revolution," *Adbusters*, no. 87 (2009) https://www.adbusters.org/magazine/87/coming_insurrection.html (accessed 19 August 2011).

9 Committee, 12.

10 Ibid., 12–13.

The Invisible Committee anticipate that young people everywhere will transition from generalized rioting to a full-scale insurrectionary situation. "It's not a question of providing a schema for what an insurrection should be, but of taking the possibility of an uprising for what it never should have ceased being: a vital impulse of youth as much as a popular wisdom."[11]

Having now raised the specter of a youth revolt (matching if not exceeding that of the 1960s), our aim in this essay is to explore the distinctive features of insurrectionary anarchism. We will be examining its primary expression in *TCI*, initially focusing on sketching the critique of contemporary society and politics that its authors present. From there, we will turn to a discussion of the strategies for social change that *TCI* advances. In both domains, we will be noting some of the affinities that *TCI* has with other modes of radical theory and practice. To be sure, the approach advocated by The Invisible Committee is not without its critics. We will discuss the substance of those criticisms, and then, trace the strategic disputes that the work has generated among anarchists. Finally, we will offer some assessment of the significance of this insurrectionist moment in contemporary anarchism.

Modern Life

The outlines of *TCI*'s critique of modern life, its alienating and repressive nature, are familiar enough to anyone aware of the history of social and political thought. The targets are familiar, too; work, urban life, and capitalism are among the usual suspects scrutinized in the book. In some respects, though, the call for a different sort of response to familiar situations may indicate that new ground is being explored. *TCI* traces a pervasive "decomposition of all social forms" that now offers "the ideal condition for a wild, massive experimentation with new arrangements, new fidelities."[12]

Modern life is not a happy one. In an age where economic consumption is the primary activity, work has lost its real meaning as the production of useful goods. It has instead focused solely on the reproduction of oneself and others as subjected workers and consumers.[13] We deny its exploitive nature, but have not yet realized

11 Ibid., 19.
12 Ibid., 42.

its full character as participation in a common endeavor. Our paradoxical lives constitute "a society of workers without work, where entertainment, consumption and leisure only underscore the lack from which they are supposed to distract us."[14] Empty at its core, the activity we call work no longer fulfills our deepest needs and desires. "The same empty gaze alights on the half empty glass, the TV screen, the football match, the heroin dose, the cinema screen, traffic jams, neon lights, prefabricated homes that have completed the killing of the landscape."[15] The culture of consumption vainly tries to fill the lack, but only serves to make us more aware of it. Though we try to buy and amuse ourselves out of our misery, we know in our hearts that the aim can never be achieved. It is no wonder, then, that we spend our lives anxious and depressed, looking for the magic potion or pill to make the world go away.

Metropolitan areas that once promised vitality and community no longer offer much of either. Instead, they have become tepid, shallow places where life is lived privately rather than communally. Though we live side-by-side, in proximity to one another, we do not share genuine community. "The private bubble doesn't burst, it floats around. The process of cocooning is not going away, it is merely being put in motion."[16] While metropolis represents the triumph of managed society, it also serves as the locus of conflict and confrontation. The social order and geography associated with the metropolis may turn us into willing subjects, but they also permit enough mobility for the emergence of nomadic resistance along lines of flight.[17] Further, the constructed metropolis remains vulnerable to interruptions of their essential networks of power, supplies, and communication.[18]

At the heart of any metropolis, of any civilization, lies the economy. The trouble today is that we have experienced decade after decade of crisis, yet we persist in accepting the dogmas of capitalism — whether in its market or state forms. Now is the time to recognize that "the economy is not 'in' crisis, the economy is itself the crisis."[19]

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13 Ibid., 49.

14 Ibid., 46.

15 Alfredo Bonanno, "Armed Joy," http://theanarchistlibrary.org/pdfs/letter/Alfredo_M._Bonanno__Armed_Joy_letter.pdf (accessed 19 August 2011).

16 Committee, 59.

17 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans., Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

18 Committee, 60–62.

Doing so does not mean that one accepts this or that reform, this or that recommendation for action, but it means instead that one acknowledges the profoundly political nature of economic relations. Neither neoliberalism nor negative growth offer any hope of improving the situation, if only because the operation of the economy yields little but environmental destruction.

Our standard approach to the persistent crisis is trapped in circular reasoning: "We have to consume a little less *to be able to keep consuming*. We have to produce organically *to keep producing*. We have to control ourselves *to go on controlling*."[20] Beset with the ill effects of the cumulative decisions made by political and economic elites, we turn to those very same elites to alleviate those effects. In other words, society's prevailing response to environmental crisis (or any other) is to attempt to *manage* the crisis. Management only obscures our vision of reality, though; it remains outside the actual dynamics of the situation. A better approach would be to let the crisis occur, so that we are forced to confront it in its own terms, to realize that the environment is not something outside us but within and through us. Only then might we have a chance "to rediscover the rhythms of reality."[21]

No one knows the ills, the sickness, of this life better than today's youth. Young people are keenly aware of its troubles because they can see past the spectacle that entrances others into willing subjection. As a result, young people are "foreigners in this world, guests in our own family."[22] The alienation they feel is more than a psychological malady, though. The analysis in *TCI*, not unlike those by New Left radicals in the 1960s, is premised on the idea that the personal is also political. "We are not depressed; we're on strike. For those who refuse to manage themselves, 'depression' is not a state but a passage, a bowing out, a sidestep towards a *political* disaffiliation."[23]

19 Ibid., 63.
20 Ibid., 78, original emphasis.
21 Ibid., 82.
22 Ibid., 36.
23 Ibid., 34, original emphasis.

Social Change

In all these manifestations, the authors of *TCI* insist, society is not *in* crisis; it simply *is* the crisis. There is no remedy at hand to keep the crisis at bay or to resolve fundamental problems. There is no medicine to prevent a dying civilization from extinction. One must accept, even embrace, its extinction; indeed, one must will it. "To decide for the death of civilization, then to work out *how* it will happen: only decision will rid us of the corpse."[24]

The decision one has to take is the decision for insurrection. Prevailing modes of social and political action do not rise to the occasion. Indignantly responding to the news of the world is reactive, nonanalytical, and ultimately futile. Joining community organizations or building a social movement either reinstitutes already troublesome patterns of power or condemns activists to patient, eternal waiting. There is nothing left but revolt, even though we are isolated and weak as we face the system. "Nothing appears less likely than an insurrection, but nothing is more necessary."[25]

Insurrection and revolt are the natural outlets of those who do not fit the mold, those who do not conform to mainstream society. "Our *inadaptability*, our fatigue, are only *problems* from the standpoint of what aims to subjugate us."[26] Rather than treat this alienation as symptomatic, it is time to embrace it as the starting point for new life. Rather than remain compliant and submissive, it is time to rebel against authority. The anonymous author of "At Daggers Drawn" asserts that the "time has come to break away from this *we*, a reflex of the only community that now exists, that of authority and commodities."[27] Indeed, it is time to challenge life itself — the very locus of the social war. To become autonomous in this context no longer means growing up, getting a job, and starting a family. Instead, it now means acting as if one were already free; it means "learning to fight in the street, to occupy empty houses, to cease working, to love each other madly, and to shoplift."[28] Why act? It has to be because no viable alternative that remains. "People are tired of meetings, the

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24 Ibid., 94, original emphasis.

25 Ibid., 96.

26 Ibid., 34, original emphasis.

27 Anon., "At Daggers Drawn with the Existent, Its Defenders and Its False Critics," http://www.reocities.com/kk_abacus/ioaa/dagger.html (accessed 19 August 2011).

28 Committee, 42.

classics, pointless marches, theoretical discussions that split hairs in four; endless distinctions, the monotony and poverty of certain political analyses. They prefer to make love, smoke, listen to music, go for walks, sleep, laugh, play, kill policemen, lame journalists, kill judges, blow up barracks."[29]

In other words, it is time to let loose, to go on the attack. "*Attack is the refusal of mediation, pacification, sacrifice, accommodation, and compromise in struggle. It is through acting and learning to act, not propaganda, that we will open the path to insurrection, although analysis and discussion have a role in clarifying how to act. Waiting only teaches waiting; in acting one learns to act.*"[30] The argument seems to be that organization will be necessary, but that organization nevertheless remains a trap. The culture of rebellion no doubt has to be celebrated, but any settled activist milieu must be avoided. The insurrection will rely upon both *rage* and *politics*. "Without the first, the second is lost in discourse; without the second the first exhausts itself in howls."[31] With that combination, accompanied by an "armed presence," the insurrection has a chance to succeed. Its success will occur once people are forced to take sides in the combat, to opt either for the side of anarchy or the side of order. The insurrection will have succeeded once it cannot be undermined or reversed. "It becomes irreversible when you've defeated both authority and the need for authority, property and the taste for appropriation, hegemony and the desire for hegemony."[32]

What are the tools or the means for insurrection? For people rebelling against the very conditions of their lives, it seems quite natural for rebellion to take the form of simple, small, spontaneous acts — the sort of acts synonymous with sabotage. For example, advocates of insurrection have pointed to a string of arsons perpetrated by the Earth Liberation Front protesting the development of housing subdivisions. Similarly, in Italy, "sabotage of high speed railways has spread uncontrollably, again because anyone can plan and carry out their own action without needing a large organisation with charters and constitutions, complex techniques or sophisticated knowledge."[33]

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29 Bonanno.
30 "Insurrectionary Anarchy: Organising for Attack!."
31 Committee, 111.
32 Ibid., 130–131.
33 "Insurrectionary Anarchy: Organising for Attack!."

The call for insurrection found in *TCI* seems to draw upon a range of theories and ideas that have influenced contemporary anarchist practice. One such source of inspiration seems to be that of the Situationist International.[34] As Sam Cooper has noted, "the Invisible Committee has clearly been influenced by the Situationist directive to create situations — moments of life directly lived — that undermine the dominant logic of passive consumption and alienated representation."[35] Encouraging people to attach themselves to what is felt to be true, the Invisible Committee clearly values authentic existence. We need to challenge the stupor of everyday life, to interrupt the endless cycle of the constitution and reproduction of subjectivities. In that way, we will soon see that "every event produces truth by changing our way of being in the world."[36] If an occurrence does not change us, does not alter our commitments, it simply cannot count as truth.

The Situationist critique of modern life and its recommendations for restoring authenticity is indeed evident in *TCI*. It is also easy to see the influence of ideas drawn from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they marshal a range of spatial metaphors in order to outline a postmodern politics of resistance in an age where a pervasive State apparatus dominates in multiple, intertwining, and invisible ways.[37] For Deleuze and Guattari, conventional approaches to politics view the combat between State and rebels as a game of chess; the better approach is to regard the conflict between the State and a nomadic, rhizomatic resistance (called a "war machine") as a game of go. "Chess is indeed a war, but an institutionalized, regulated, coded war, with a front, a rear, battles. But what is proper to Go is war without battle lines, with neither confrontation nor retreat, without battles even: pure strategy, whereas chess is a semiology."[38]

The Invisible Committee largely accepts and assumes this poststructuralist account of deterritorialized, productive power. "Power is no longer concentrated in one point in the world; it is the world itself, its flows and its avenues, its people and its norms, its codes and its technologies."[39] Without a center to attack from the periph-

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34 Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, revised and expanded ed. (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006).

35 Cooper.

36 Committee, 97.

37 Deleuze and Guattari.

38 Ibid., 353.

ery, without a castle wall to breach, resistance to authority has to adopt a different strategy than that embodied in traditional class struggle. The strategy is one of wild, untamed — guerrilla-style, if not entropic — resistance. "Having the *choice of terrain*, we can, like the Black Bloc of Genoa in 2001, bypass the red zones and avoid direct confrontation. By choosing our own trajectory, we can lead the cops, . . . rather than being herded by them."[40] Forsaking striated space and adopting a smooth one, ensuring that lines of flight are available, the resistance can proliferate, communicate horizontally, and coordinate across milieus.

This combination of Situationism and poststructuralism found in *TCI* is reminiscent as well of the ontological anarchism of Hakim Bey. Central to Bey's vision is the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), conceived as an "uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it."[41] When activists rely on the TAZ — a combination of peak experience, revolutionary fervor, and ludic carnival — they command a space for momentary acts of rebellion and autonomy in those aspects of social life where the State apparatus has yet to reach. In other words, the TAZ constitutes a postmodern tactic of protest and prefiguration; it represents "an island of achieved social change, a place where the revolution *has actually happened*, if only for a few, if only for a short time."[42]

One finds similar ideas spread throughout *TCI*. The aesthetic spirit of revolt that Bey promotes is precisely what the Invisible Committee most desires to resurrect. In their eyes, countercultural activist circles are "the old people's homes where all revolutionary desires traditionally go to die."[43] What they have in mind is courageous action, not community organizing. Action must wait for the most opportune moment, to be sure, because the resistance cannot become visible before it is ready. When insurrectionists do engage in confrontation, though, "it's a matter of increasing the density of the communes, of circulation, and of solidarities to the point that

39 Committee, 131.

40 Ibid., 127, original emphasis.

41 Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, second ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2003), 99, original emphasis.

42 Richard J. F. Day, *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 163, original emphasis.

43 Committee, 100.

the territory becomes unreadable, opaque to all authority. We don't want to occupy the territory, we want to *be* the territory."[44] Taking it one step further, the goal of insurrection has to be this: "Subversive action must tend towards the paralysis of normality, no matter what originally caused the clash."[45]

Approach to Action

Since "anarchists are distinguished by what they do, and how they go about doing it," then one important way to distinguish insurrectionary anarchism from other schools of thought would be to look at its strategy and praxis regarding the role of action in changing social relations.[46] The tactics most associated with insurrectionary anarchism include riots, building occupations, street conflicts with police, and the destruction of property. These acts are celebrated in the texts of insurrectionary books and periodicals, while photos of them appear regularly in zines and websites. However, simply equating insurrectionary anarchism with riots and attacks on police seems unhelpful for two reasons. First, there is nothing particularly novel about the use of these tactics within anarchist communities. Debates about property destruction and physical attacks on political enemies have occurred for more than a century, with the last decade being no exception. Second, what distinguishes the insurrectionary trend in today's anti-capitalist movements is less about the acts of resistance themselves and more about how these actions are perceived as part of a broader strategy for changing social relations.

A cornerstone of insurrectionism's approach to anti-capitalist resistance is the sense of urgency and immediacy regarding direct action. The idea is not to patiently wait for change to come or to wait for capitalism to destroy itself. "To no longer wait is, in one way or another, to enter into the logic of insurrection."[47] Refusing to be patient is at the heart of one of insurrectionary anarchism's distinctive features — a profound critique of, and opposition to, any other movements that fail to take immediate action. Insurrectionism offers a

44 Ibid., 108, original emphasis.
45 Anon.
46 David Graeber, *Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion and Desire* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007), 304.
47 Committee, 96.

wholesale rejection of the traditional way social movements achieve change. "Social movements are made to die, long live insurrection" has become a prominent insurrectionary slogan.[48]

Opposed to the very idea of being a "social activist," insurrectionary anarchists direct their critique to two specific elements of that type of activism — formal organizations and issue-based action. Insurrectionary anarchism rejects the notion that any potential for anti-capitalist resistance can be found in formal organizations. While an organization's membership might include "individuals who are sincere — if a little desperate," the group itself is little more than an empty structure concerned with its own interests and existing only for self-perpetuation.[49] Formal organizations and anarchist milieus seek to alleviate social conflict, while the call for insurrection requires actions that escalate social conflict, that "make the most out of every crisis."[50] Activists and organizations that try to minimize the damage caused by capitalism or the policies of the State, that seek social or political reforms, only enable the catastrophe to continue. "Our goals will always include the production or amplification of social conflict."[51] The most scathing critique of organizations, however, is the charge that they duplicate the function of the State. This analysis claims that NGOs, community organizations, and even more loosely organized groups such as Food Not Bombs, become state-like through their attempts to control actions and manage societal conflicts. "Every organization that claims to contest the present order mimics the form, mores and language of miniature states."[52] Clearly, this is a damning attack on organizations that otherwise identify with anarchism — the ideology that at its very core is opposed to the State.

Not only do insurrectionary anarchists lament the organizational bias of contemporary activism, they also find much to criticize in the tendency of activists to flock to this or that social or political cause. Picking sides, identifying what they are *for* and what they are *against*, today's activists often limit themselves to taking action

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48 "Taking Communion at the End of History," in *Politics Is Not a Banana: What Are You Doing after the Orgy or Insurrection or Whatever?*, ed. Institute of Experimental Freedom (2009), 71.

49 Committee, 99–100.

50 Ibid., 119.

51 Liam Sionnach, "A Plan B Theory of Attack for the Us," in *Politics Is Not a Banana*, ed. Institute of Experimental Freedom (2008), 22.

52 Committee, 95.

around specific issues. This sort of political action is premised upon a transactional model of social change. Such a model focuses on one group, most often a political organization, making a demand upon a powerful institution (e.g., a corporation or the government) and applies pressure in an attempt to force the institution to concede to the demand. For insurrectionists, embracing this model and continuing to make demands is to "assume the existence of a power capable of conceding them. We know this power does not exist. Why go through the motions of negotiation when we know we will not win anything but paltry concessions?"[53] Confronting power in this way views political action much like a chess match, where two sides battle face-to-face, rather than like the game of Go — which broadens the parameters of social struggle by imagining a war without battle lines. "The limits of demands reveal the limits of class struggle, which can either mean the opening to its overcoming through broadened social struggle — insurrection, social war — , or the closure of struggle all together. We bet on the former."[54] Because global capitalism has produced a totalizing, oppressive, and alienating existence — insurrectionists argue — it is no longer politically sound to isolate a particular injustice or cause for action. Instead, they proudly declare that "we are 'for nothing' and in this we look to create a trend that desires to destroy 'everything.'"[55]

G20 Protests

A closer look at insurrectionary praxis can be had by reviewing the actions in Pittsburgh in September 2009. At that time, thousands of people gathered there to protest the G20 Summit, where the leaders of powerful nations met to make decisions of global consequence. The first day of action was initiated primarily by anarchist and anti-authoritarian organizers, who had obviously been influenced by insurrectionary thought. In the afternoon, an estimated 1,000 people took the streets in an un-permitted march. Riot police used sonic weapons and tear gas on the protestors, and they responded by kick-

53 "Occupation: A Do-It-Yourself Guide," (n.d.), 4. http://zinelibrary.info/files/OccupationGuide.pdf (accessed 19 August 2011).

54 Johan Kasper, "We Demand Nothing," *Fire to the Prisons*, no. 7 (2009), 14. http://zinelibrary.info/files/FIRETOTHEPRISONS7.pdf (accessed 19 August 2011).

55 "Briefing," *Fire to the Prisons*, no. 7 (2009), 3. http://zinelibrary.info/files/FIRETOTHEPRISONS7.pdf (accessed 19 August 2011).

ing back tear gas canisters and rolling dumpsters toward the police lines. A portion of the crowd turned around and began moving in the opposite direction, eventually ending up in another neighborhood, where they smashed the windows of a bank, a car dealership, and fast food restaurants before dispersing with only a few arrests. Another un-permitted march took place later that night, called for by Bash Back! — a queer anarchist network that embraces many elements of insurrectionary analysis and action. During the nighttime march, more businesses and a police substation were attacked, and dumpsters were again used to impede police — this time, by being overturned or set ablaze. Reports of the day's events celebrated these acts of revolt, describing "the running figures, the explosions of breaking glass reverberating off the buildings, the dim streetlights on masked faces, the sound of nearby sirens reminding everyone that militarized riot police in full force were on the way from only a couple blocks' distance."[56] Such descriptions of the actions in Pittsburgh clearly show some similarity to the conviction expressed in *TCI* that "a real demonstration has to be wild."[57]

There is certainly nothing novel in the use of these tactics, as property destruction and scuffles with police have long been present in anarchist movements. What is unique about the contemporary situation is the framework that has been used to justify such actions. This framework represents a significant shift in strategy from what has been employed by anti-capitalist resistance in recent years. For example, during the anti-globalization era from 1999–2002, David Graeber has noted that activists imposed restrictions upon themselves and their actions: "Smashing a Starbucks or Niketown window is a legitimate act, but trashing an owner-operated coffee shop or shoe store is strictly illegitimate. Generally speaking, such restrictions are scrupulously observed. When property destruction does occur, targets are researched in advance and often some kind of explanation offered."[58]

Consider further the example of the Black Bloc's actions at the WTO Ministerial in Seattle. In Seattle, a group of a few hundred masked individuals dressed in black smashed the facades of businesses such as GAP, Niketown, and Fidelity Investment. Following

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56 CrimethInc., "Breaking News from the Pittsburgh G20 Protests," http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/g20.php (accessed 19 August 2011).

57 Committee, 127.

58 David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009), 408.

the action, ACME Collective released a communiqué focusing on how those businesses and others played important roles in destroying rainforests, using sweatshop labor, oppressing indigenous communities, and perpetrating other social injustices.[59] Anarchists directed property destruction at essentially the same targets that preoccupied other parts of the anti-globalization movement — namely, multinational corporations and the injustices they caused in the Global South. While the Bloc certainly used tactics that differed from those of other groups, they were still part of the same anti-globalization movement that revolved around anti-corporate activism.

In Pittsburgh, though, the approach embraced by anarchists clearly parted company with that broader social movement. This time, there was no communiqué released explaining why Bloc activists took the action they did or why specific businesses were targeted. Also, while the majority of the destruction occurred on property owned by the same corporations attacked during the anti-globalization era (McDonald's, major banks, etc.), windows were also smashed at corporations that were not necessarily targeted during previous mobilizations — Quizno's subs and Bruegger's Bagels, for example, as well as smaller businesses such as a diner and locally owned art and gift shop. This more wild or nihilistic approach clearly indicates a shift from what counted as "legitimate" property destruction during the anti-globalization era.

A related shift in strategy was evident in the fact that, on the first day of the Pittsburgh actions, the summit itself was not a target. While the march first proceeded toward the Convention Center, it quickly rerouted and went in the opposite direction. Previous scuffles with police at major mobilizations have often been direct challenges to police lines, made in order to shut down or physically disrupt meetings of governmental or financial leaders. In Pittsburgh, though, it appeared that attacking the police line was actually more of an effort to keep the police on the defensive — leaving other activists free to disrupt other parts of the city. This shows a shift toward "a conception of direct confrontations as that which pins down opposing forces, buying us time and allowing us to attack elsewhere — even nearby."[60]

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59 ACME Collective, "Peasant Revolt: N30 Black Bloc Communiqué," in *The Black Bloc Papers*, ed. David Van Deusen and Xavier Massot (Shawnee Mission, KS: Breaking Glass Press, 2010), 42–51.

60 Committee, 127.

That conceptual or theoretical shift has been evident in discussions within the anarchist community. One of the more visible discussions after the summit revolved around the essay "Are We Addicted To Rioting?" written by Ryan Harvey, which initially appeared on the RiotFolk website and was subsequently posted on a number of other sites. In the article, Harvey observes that the "insurrectionary rhetoric that is so popular today among us young anarchists is belittling and destroying anarchism. It's turning it into a mythic fantasy world, where things magically change because someone breaks a window or quits their job."[61] In it, he criticizes anarchists for lauding, if not fetishizing, conflicts in the street to the detriment of more mundane organizing in communities and movement-building. While some responses describe how people could or should be engaged in both endeavors — street fighting at major mobilizations, while organizing in their communities at other times — other responses demonstrate the theoretical shift at play. Liam Sonnach, who writes for the US-based insurrectionary periodical *Politics Is Not a Banana*, responded to Harvey's argument by quipping: "How does your concept of history and how change is achieved correspond to mine? I mean, you're on some progress shit. Revolution is not a progressive shift, its [sic] a rupture with capitalist-time and the subjectivity of the state-form."[62] This exchange clearly exhibits the tension between two conflicting strategies of changing social relations — movement-building and social activism, on the one hand, and escalating social conflict toward insurrection, on the other.

Student Occupations

Regardless of its theoretical implications, the general call for insurrection has found a receptive audience among a segment of the recent student movement active in California and other parts of the United States. While the movement is rather diverse and includes many different critiques, analyses and goals, the appeal of insurrection has clearly resonated with a number of radical students. One can see it manifested particularly among those who have chosen

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61 Ryan Harvey, "Are We Addicted to Rioting?," http://riotfolk.org/popup.php?p=lyrics&id=338 (accessed 19 August 2011).

62 Liam Sionnach, "Comment on 'Are We Addicted to Rioting?'," http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=2009092714272755 (accessed 19 August 2011).

occupying university buildings as a primary tactic in their struggle.

Communiqués coming out of occupied buildings, as well as reports on the movement written by anonymous individuals and collectives, have generally echoed much of the rhetoric and theory promoted in *TCI* and other insurrectionist texts. These declarations demonstrate that these occupations are more than conventional student protests. Young people are viewing them not simply as a way to bring attention to a particular issue or as an attempt to apply pressure to an administration in order to change policies. Rather, the act of occupying a building is seen as a direct disruption of the social forces that alienate and impoverish the lives of students, namely capitalism. "Occupations themselves . . . occur as material interventions into the space and time of capitalism."[63] By refusing to play the role of student, consumer, or even student activist, these young people see themselves not only as liberating people from social control, but as interrupting the very flow of capital through the campus.

In finding each other and collectivizing this disruption through occupation, students organize for struggle by creating communes. "A commune forms every time a few people, freed of their individual straightjackets, decide to rely only on themselves and measure their strength against reality."[64] Embracing the urgency of this trend, communes are not visions of a future society or something to build toward, but spaces and relationships that are immediately formed and then defended. One report on the movement observes the emergence of "the 'communization current' — a species of ultraleftism and insurrectionary anarchism that refuses all talk of a transition to communism, insisting, instead, upon the immediate formation of 'communes.'"[65] These structure and intent of these communes appear similar to that embraced by writers for *Reality Now* and other advocates of "autonomous base groups" back in the late 1980s. At that time, such informal organizations would be founded on insurrectionist ideas, such as being completely autonomous, permanently conflictual, and ever focused on attack.[66]

Insurrectionist ideas are being spread not just through the example set by direct action, but also through the inspiration of popular

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63 "We Are the Crisis: A Report on the California Occupation Movement," in *After the Fall: Communiqués from Occupied California* (2010), 6.

64 Committee, 102.

65 "We Are the Crisis," 5.

66 Allan Antliff, ed., *Only a Beginning: An Anarchist Anthology* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 191.

slogans. For instance, during the occupations at the University of California at Berkeley in November 2009, students reportedly wrote "live communism, spread anarchy" (a slogan drawn from *The Call,* a pamphlet written by the Invisible Committee) on every chalkboard in Wheeler Hall.[67] Another such slogan has become almost a mantra in the student movement: "Demand Nothing, Occupy Everything!" When students occupied a building at UCLA in the fall of 2009, they put out a statement — as such groups routinely do. This statement was different, though, for not only did it not include demands, but it specifically stated that the students would be making no such demands. Subverting the standard narrative for occupations, they adopted an insurrectionist stance: "The time has come for us to make a statement and issue of demands. In response to this injunction we say: we will ask nothing. We will demand nothing. We will take, we will occupy."[68]

"Demand Nothing, Occupy Everything!" seems to be an updated version of 1968's ubiquitous slogan "Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible!" The refusal to make demands represents, in part, a recognition that the desires of radical students are such that no recipient of the demands would be able to fulfill them. Even top university administrators would hardly be in a position to respond to calls for a university run collectively by faculty and students or for absolutely free public education, let alone calls for the abolition of capitalism itself. Alternatively, were students to give in to the imperative to make a formal list of demands, they would likely produce a set that would either be so distant from their true desires that it would compromise their struggle, or so trivial that fulfillment of the demands would not produce substantial change. In other words, the view of insurrectionist activists is that "demands are always either too small or too large; too "rational" or too incoherent."[69]

Critique

With their common emphasis on action and attack, insurrectionists have taken center stage in the consciousness of many anarchists.

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67 "We Are the Crisis."

68 "Carter-Huggins Hall Occupation Statement," in *After the Fall: Communiqués from Occupied California* (2010), 16.

69 "We Are the Crisis," 5.

The central idea is that reformist or organizational strategies are so bankrupt that the only legitimate path of action left is that of attack and confrontation. Once going on the attack, committing acts of sabotage, activists trust that either the working class or the popular forces in society will soon take up the cause — spreading insurrection across the land. Fomenting such radical ruptures with the existing order is thus seen as one means (if not the only means) of making injustice visible, of forcing people to choose sides — one is either with authority and reaction, or with freedom and rebellion. Advocates of this confrontational stance are not without their critics, however. The CrimethInc. Ex-Workers Collective has been one such source of criticism, devoting a good bit of Issue #8 of *Rolling Thunder* to an examination of the insurrectionist tendency.[70]

So, where does insurrectionism falter? One approach of the CrimethInc. authors is to remind the insurrectionists that they are no better than any other anarchist. Like the tendencies they criticize, insurrectionists are insular, trapped in an isolated subculture. Indeed, for insurrectionists to claim that building an oppositional culture is a dead end is to ignore a vital truth about society and politics. "One could argue that the circulation of insurgent desires and values — essentially a cultural phenomenon — is as indispensable for the proliferation of revolt as gasoline is to a Molotov cocktail."[71] Insurrectionists, too, exhibit some lifestyle hypocrisies. Imagine, note the CrimethInc. folks, "an insurrectionist who goes to work or school during the week but smashes bank windows on the weekends."[72] Such a person has no greater revolutionary purity than anyone else in the movement, nor are they any less likely to burnout over the long haul.

For the CrimethInc. activists, the main problem with insurrectionism is that it is strategically inept. "Symbolic clashes can help develop the capacity to fight for more concrete objectives, but not if they are so costly that they drain their social base out of existence."[73] If too many scarce resources, notably money and time, are diverted into bailing people out of jail or providing other kinds of assistance, then there will be little left over to building a broader social move-

70 CrimethInc., "Say You Want an Insurrection," *Rolling Thunder*, no. 8 (2009) http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/rollingthunder/insurrection.php (accessed 19 August 2011).
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.

ment. Indeed, insurrectionist approaches run counter to the very project of movement building. The CrimethInc. folks assert that "the most pressing task for anarchists is not to carry out secretive military strikes but to spread skills and practices. There is no substitute for participatory activities that offer points of entry for new people and opportunities for existing groups to connect."[74]

Insurrection only makes sense if it lays the foundation for just such movement building, if we take seriously the often repeated injunction that the force of insurrection is *social*, not *military*. Such a condition, though, is rarely met. Insurrectionists, drawing inspiration from so-called "riot porn," are so focused on the moment's expression that they become part of the spectacle — rather than function as its rupture. As the confrontational element in the spectacle, insurrectionist activities are conducted primarily for the effect on their practitioners. Unfortunately, though, their ultimate worth is determined by their effect on broader audiences, including the non-anarchist public. "Resistance is defined not only by resisters' perceptions of their own behavior, but also by targets' and/or others' recognition of and reaction to this behavior," as sociologists Jocelyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner have noted.[75] As a result, one cannot advocate a single, exclusive approach to social and political change; instead, infrastructural and confrontational approaches need to be synthesized into a coherent effort.

Joel Olson makes a similar point in his examination of how two models of political activity, infoshops and insurrection, become problematic any time they "are seen as revolutionary strategies in themselves rather than as part of a broader revolutionary movement."[76] Autonomous spaces are necessary, but their purpose is to serve the movement as a staging area; spontaneous upheavals cannot substitute for the movement, but must instead be built upon it. To win people over to the anarchist enterprise, say the CrimethInc. authors, means that "you'll have to spend a lot more time building up relationships and credibility than running around with masks on — but there are no shortcuts in social war."[77]

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74 Ibid.

75 Jocelyn A. Hollander and Rachel L. Einwohner, "Conceptualizing Resistance," *Sociological Forum* 19, no. 4 (2004): 548.

76 Joel Olson, "The Problem with Infoshops and Insurrection: U.S. Anarchism, Movement Building, and the Racial Order," in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, ed. Randall Amster et al. (London: Routledge, 2009), 40.

For Joe Black, the problem with insurrectionism is that its ideology has emerged in the form of a critique of other anarchist tendencies.[78] When they are not critiquing other tendencies, insurrectionists seem to be avoiding serious discussion of forms of anarchism alternative to their own. Insurrectionists are distrustful of organization, largely because many apparent organizers of actions are self-aggrandizing spirits, who revel more in the media attention they receive (given their role as spokespersons) than in the hard work of ensuring that actions occur as planned. As groups become more permanent, take on more of the trappings of formal organization, the division of labor among activists creates the position of the *organizer*. Eventually, they come to stand apart from the activists in whose name they claim to speak. "Organisers rarely view themselves as part of the multitude, thus they don't see it as their task to act, but to propagandise and organise, for it is the masses that act."[79]

Although they share the traditional anarchist opposition to hierarchy, insurrectionists go too far in challenging any organizational principle. Abandoning the sort of organization that would give unity and persistence to the struggle, they opt instead for an ad hoc, informal organizational model — a model that lacks any sort of necessary planning. Because of their aversion to planning and organization, anarchists will have almost no success in spreading the insurrection beyond their affinity groups and ad hoc cadres. As Black puts it, insurrectionist practice "often means attacks that achieve little except on the one hand providing an excuse for state repression and on the other isolating all anarchists, not just those involved, from the broader social movement."[80]

Assessment

As we try to make sense of insurrectionary anarchism, we have to begin by noting that insurrectionism represents but one wing among many in the anarchist tradition. Indeed, it has been a tendency that has been rather critical of other anarchists who "believe they are 'carriers of the truth' and try to impose their ideological and formal

77 CrimethInc., "Say You Want an Insurrection."
78 Black.
79 "Insurrectionary Anarchy: Organising for Attack!."
80 Black.

solution to the problem of social organisation."[81] At the same time, though, the insurrectionists assert their conviction that it is only through self-organized direct action that one learns how to struggle. Critical of others' claims to knowledge and wisdom, insurrectionary anarchists seem in turn to be just as self-satisfied and self-assured as their fellow anarchists adhering to other tendencies.

Within any movement, such patterns of charge and countercharge seem nearly inevitable. They appear as the natural outgrowth of a movement trying to come to terms with both failure and success, of a movement that wants to remain relevant. Self-critique, seemingly endless debate over theory and practice, is certainly one key to keeping any movement vital. The danger in following this path lies in the perpetual tension between orthodoxy and factionalism, between inclusive consensus and internecine squabbling. Anarchists quite obviously work extremely hard at avoiding any trace of orthodoxy, but they thereby run the risk that the movement degenerates into factional quarrels over who is more revolutionary than whom.

At times, the insurrectionary anarchism very much moves in that latter direction. No longer content to say that existing strategies and tactics miss something important, they want to dismiss them altogether. To many insurrectionists, it appears that organizations, milieus, and infoshops are not merely erroneous, they are anathema. Rather than embrace a position that accepts multiple paths to achieving anarchist goals, instead of pointing out issues in order to strengthen the movement, they want merely to say "goodbye to all that."

Insurrectionists are not nearly as isolated or as self-absorbed as their critics seem to suggest. For instance, they often take pains "to note that the force of an insurrection is social, not military. The measure for evaluating the importance of a generalised revolt is not the armed clash, but, on the contrary, the extent of the paralysis of the economy, of normality."[82] Yet, as one explores the discussions surrounding the ideas and acts associated with insurrection, one gets the distinct feeling of reliving the well-rehearsed (if not hackneyed) arguments of the past. The whole debate between infoshops and insurrection as alternative modes of struggle is certainly nothing new. One side says that activists should not waste time with routine organizing or movement building, let alone seeking ameliorative

81 "Insurrectionary Anarchy: Organising for Attack!."
82 Ibid.

reforms. The point is to act, notes the insurrectionist. The other side in the debate reminds us that you cannot blow up (or smash) a complex set of social relationships — let alone win friends and influence people by unsettling them. There will be time enough for fighting, the organizer says, the focus now should be on bringing supporters to the cause.

To the insurrectionist, general discussion of such ideals as self-management or federalism is futile. Ideals absent the conditions for their realization are incredibly abstract. As Alfredo Bonanno observes, more mainstream, garden-variety anarchists "dream of orderly revolutions, neatly drawn up principles, anarchy without turbulence. If things take a different turn they start screaming provocation, yelling loud enough for the police to hear them."[83] Hence, the activist must focus on the imperatives created by the idea of freedom, by the *exercise* of freedom. This necessarily implies a substantial break with present society; insurrection throws off the ideological masks of that society and lays the groundwork for the one to come. "Insurrection is the *whole* of social relations opening up to the adventure of freedom once the mask of capitalist specialisation has been torn off. Insurrection does not come up with the answers on its own, that is true. It only starts asking questions. So the point is not whether to act gradually or adventuristically. The point is whether to act or merely dream of acting."[84] Insurrection represents an open-ended moment of creation — "an uncontainable movement that breaks with historical time to allow the emergence of the possible."[85]

As such, acts of insurrection appear as the embodiment of the natality of which Hannah Arendt often spoke. Such moments bring out the best in human beings as we create anew the conditions and aims of our lives together. Such times are the heady ones of revolutionary spirit, radical upheaval, and new alternatives to the political status quo. It is not hard to see, then, that social and political life consists more or less of a punctuated equilibrium — periods of stasis broken up by moments of struggle and change. The trouble with insurrectionism, as José Gutiérrez observes, is that it has "a tendency to make a general rule out of certain hot moments in the class struggle."[86] It mistakes the part for the whole; it takes a single tactic in

83 Bonanno, 5.
84 Anon.
85 Ibid.

the activist arsenal and makes it the only one to use; it transforms a momentary experience into a long-term program. Insurrectionary anarchism so celebrates these moments of resistance (all too often portrayed in the form of "riot porn") that it needlessly dismisses the very communities and efforts needed to ensure that such moments develop and grow in ways that could yield genuine, lasting rebellion — and the ultimate end of domination.

This longstanding debate is of such lengthy pedigree that we doubt that it can ever be resolved. Both the infoshop and insurrectionary tendencies are needed to advance the cause of contemporary anarchism. Pushing one to the exclusion of the other seems erroneous and wrongheaded, if only because it seems that the very tension between the tendencies is what animates the spirit of anarchism today. Regardless of the pitfalls in having anarchist struggle beset by potential factionalism, we have to acknowledge that there likely is no single, overarching way to be an anarchist or to build an anarchist movement. There is no über-anarchism that can mediate the infoshop/insurrection ideological split. There can be no effective "anarchism without adjectives," "Type 3" anarchism, or "anarchyism" capable of overcoming the movement's strategic and tactical divides.[87]

At this point, the question of what is to be done remains unanswered in any definitive way. What can be addressed is the question of what can be learned from this study of the insurrectionist tendency in contemporary anarchism. Beginning with a fairly common critique of modern society, insurrectionary anarchism has also turned its critical eye toward other tendencies in anarchist theory and practice. Noting the limits of community organizing and movement building, insurrectionists have continued to stress the need for acts of defiant resistance and open attack. Of course, insurrectionary anarchism itself — with its rage and riot porn — has not gone unchallenged by other anarchist theories. When all is said and done, though, the very idea of insurrection appears as yet another version of Georges Sorel's myth of the general strike.[88] For Sorel, such a

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86 Gutiérrez D.

87 Bob Black, "My Anarchism Problem," 3, http://theanarchistlibrary.org/pdfs/letter/Bob_Black__My_Anarchism_Problem_letter.pdf (accessed 19 August 2011); CrimethInc., "Say You Want an Insurrection."; Leonard Williams, "Anarchism Revived," *New Political Science* 29, no. 3 (2007).

88 Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999 [1908]).

myth was not all that useful when it came to having an actual impact on the world. Its utility and validity were more directly linked to its ability to crystallize lines of political conflict or to encourage activists to join organizations and enact the resistance. In this same spirit, the allure of insurrection lies in its appeal to alienated youth searching for a cause and a method, to nihilists weary of the pervasive spectacle and willing subjection fostered by late capitalism, and to anarchists frustrated with the direction and pace of social change.

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