

Radical Politics: Assuming We Refuse, Let's Refuse to Assume

by Chris Carlsson

I knew something different was happening when I saw Suits outside a luxury hotel imploring demonstrators to let them pass. The demonstrators, arms locked, resolutely refused. The protestors smiled, they were cordial but firm. One businessman became frantic and circled back from the line of protesters and suddenly walked quickly towards the line, assuming his personal authority would lead to the people parting and letting him pass. Violating all our assumptions about personal space and territorial imperatives, they didn't. Not only that, he quickly found himself dogged by a longhaired demonstrator who made it his personal mission to stay in his face until he left.

Seattle on November 30, 1999 was a surprising breakthrough in radical politics. Or was it? Clearly it was a victorious day for disparate and usually disorganized forces opposed to the juggernaut of capitalist globalization. A spirit of unity and strength snowballed during the day as blockade after blockade withstood the pleadings of businessmen and the physical violence of the Seattle police. In the aftermath of this exhilarating day, pundits and analysts of all stripes have tried mightily to pinpoint the meaning and future of this newly visible movement.

I see the anti-WTO Seattle demonstrations, and those that have followed, as a more visible and successful form of protest than anything in the preceding twenty years. But it hasn't left me feeling particularly victorious or even that optimistic. The daunting tasks associated with an anti-capitalist revolution are hard to face.

The current social movement against global capitalism (as seen in Seattle, Washington, Prague and Quebec) has no concrete vision of an alternative to capitalism. The new anti-capitalism has done well at mobilizing thousands to protest the big institutional forms of capitalism, but not much to define changes in daily life that may ensue from the transformation implied by the anti-capitalist agenda.

Since the various "1960s" movements were defeated or ran their course, people have learned an enormous amount about how to self-manage group processes, handle sexism and racism, and promote a culture of egalitarianism and participation. Anti-nuclear, peace, anti-poverty, and identity politics movements have provided a rich training ground during the last quarter century. This has greatly strengthened our abilities to contest the global capitalist system within our daily lives.

This germinating culture of resistance must go beyond young radicals who like reclaiming streets, riding bicycles or protesting multinational corporations. People who are usually dismissed as "average Americans" will also have to see their advantage in embracing an agenda of radical change. Those of us already committed to radical politics must develop enormous reservoirs of patience. It will take a sustained effort over the long haul to bring about change so deep that it recasts our whole conception of work, economy, and life itself.

I want to articulate a life worth living, one that inspires passionate commitment and engagement, and presents practical choices in daily life. After more than twenty years in and around radical political projects and movements, I want to stop and re-think. I want to get out of the familiar "box" in which our political efforts seem to remain stuck.

The walls of this box are made up in part of assumptions among anti-authoritarian grassroots movements and groups that I've been part of for years: unstated assumptions about power and leadership, organizational forms and institutionalization. We believe in a radical vision that for the most part we cannot articulate, and we repeat self-defeating tactics out of habit and a misplaced urgency to "do something." Dissatisfied with my own pat answers, I want at least to deepen our inquiry, even if I still don't solve the problems satisfactorily.

Utopia or what is it we really want?

The problem is that without a vision of Utopia there is no way to define that port to which we might want to sail. —David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, p. 190

Most political activity is reactive and contrary, demanding a halt to this or that excess, perhaps sprinkled with rhetoric calling for an end to capitalism, all too often depending on a neo-Christian moral guilt over so-called "greed." A more fundamental critique of the system is lacking, and an articulated alternative is completely absent.

It is common for radicals in our era to describe easily what they are against, but when it comes to what we are for, a painful silence descends. (A couple of notable exceptions are Ken Knabb's "The Joy of Revolution" in his collected skirmishes *Public Secrets* and Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel's *Looking Forward*.) If anyone is ready to talk about a different way of life at all, it is in vague terms that defy ready application.

No one is ever going to get excited about radical social change if it doesn't promise to make their life much better

in clearly demonstrable ways. Generally, advocates of an anti-capitalist future have completely ignored this basic problem of . . . what shall we call it? . . . imaginative exploration . . . education . . . marketing? Most attempts to convince people to join oppositional political movements depend on moral outrage, shame, guilt, fear and appeals to fairness. This is understandable, but it also underlines why radical politics attracts such a relatively small part of the population.

American society brags to itself through the mass media that it is the best of all possible worlds. People tend to go along with this, at least to the point of utter skepticism regarding suggestions that there could be a much better system. I think skepticism, reinforced daily by the mightiest propaganda machine in history, will only be assuaged by an exciting, appealing and credible alternative to the status quo. There are no compelling visions of this alternative in circulation. This is an era that rejects utopian thinking, either because it is by definition impossible, or because it is conflated with the totalitarian nightmares of the 20th century. To dream of a more just, pleasurable and well-organized life is somehow to believe in a totalizing system in which all aspects of human life that don't fit the new model are forcibly banished.

This is a poverty of imagination. Radical change can erupt from any number of sources and lead in unexpected directions. We have stopped imagining a better life. We limit our thoughts to tinkering with the more obvious inequities of the status quo. The old opposition between 'radical' and 'reformer' finds its current incarnation among us in those who fight for a total transformation versus those who see the battle in terms of incremental change. To the radical, the minor changes achieved by reformers don't seem worth fighting for, or can even be seen as making things inadvertently worse. To the reformer, the sweeping change advocated by radicals seems naïve or dogmatically prescriptive. In the face of this ready criticism, radicals are hesitant to declare for any particular set of proposals. This hesitance, in turn, leaves us politically weakened, incapable of going beyond a generalized yearning for an undefined 'better,' afraid of the authority established by any choice of specific institutional and material relations. But if we won't assert the authority of any specific alternative vision, the fundamental social question about "valid authority" is abdicated to moralistic nuts and neoliberal free marketeers.

One of the intellectual problems that radicals have had in articulating what they want stems from an anti-authoritarian impulse to resist defining goals because to do so would be inherently authoritarian. If one person, or a small group, lays out a "blueprint" everyone else is supposed to embrace and adapt to, that perfectly contradicts the radical goal of a self-directed movement of generalized social liberation.

I often answer critics in conversation that I cannot lay out the institutional form or mechanisms of a new way of



Chris Carlsson by Mona Caron

life. It remains for people in motion in the future to make radical change and create out of necessity and collective vision the institutional forms of the new life. That still sounds right, but I am quite dissatisfied with that answer, which is just as easily interpreted as a total cop-out.

... the faith in the spontaneous creative powers of revolutionary action [has] disarmed the constructive political imagination of the left...

—(Roberto Unger, *False Necessity: Anti-necessitarian Social Theory in the Service of Radical Democracy*, Cambridge 1987, cited in *Spaces of Hope*, (UC Press, 2000), David Harvey, p. 188)

It boils down to accepting a type of social power. Any vision embraced, once adopted in the real world, precludes other visions. Any choice we make about how we'd like life to be arranged closes off other options. Instead of refusing to articulate anything, out of fear of imposing our visions (on helpless victims?), and thereby create a new form of authority, let's accept the fact that stating our preferences

and visions IS a form of authority. Moreover, it is an acceptable form that enjoys only the power that it gains as other people embrace and share our vision. Of course articulating such a vision is predicated on the notion that anyone could do the same, and that everyone should be encouraged to do so.

Ideally, I imagine a social upheaval that puts numerous well-spoken agitators before the public, addressing a range of issues, articulating a variety of goals, maybe even constituting together a utopian vision of a different way of life. If such a time arrives we can be sure it will not be tidy, it will not automatically find a consensus, and it will require a great deal of strenuous discussion and argument. This is something I look forward to eagerly.

That said, I am also presently stymied by a problem of tactical imagination. What are the approaches, activities, and organizations that might overcome the dead-end of reforms that actually strengthen the status quo—but do it by articulating ideas and reaching goals that are genuine steps toward a life beyond capitalism? What are practical activities that make our lives better now AND move us forward in terms of revolution, but avoid the boomerang of reformist co-optation?

I was in Seattle for the anti-WTO protests in November 1999. I also went to Washington DC to protest the IMF and World Bank in April 2000. My associates and I (the Committee for Full Enjoyment) played drums and did support work in the streets for folks who were putting their bodies on the line in lock-downs. We also prepared printed materials in which we called for a more radical approach than the common demands of the protesters.

In Seattle we distributed an anti-business card called “Life Not Trade” which went considerably beyond the liberal demand for “fair trade, not free trade.” In April we once again took off, this time to Washington DC to protest the IMF/World Bank meetings, and this time handing out a different card called the Debt Wipe Card, a satirical anti-credit card calling for “Gifts Not Debts!” The two pieces varied from each other in certain respects but each featured these words in conclusion:

“We are here in the spirit of a real alternative, maybe we should

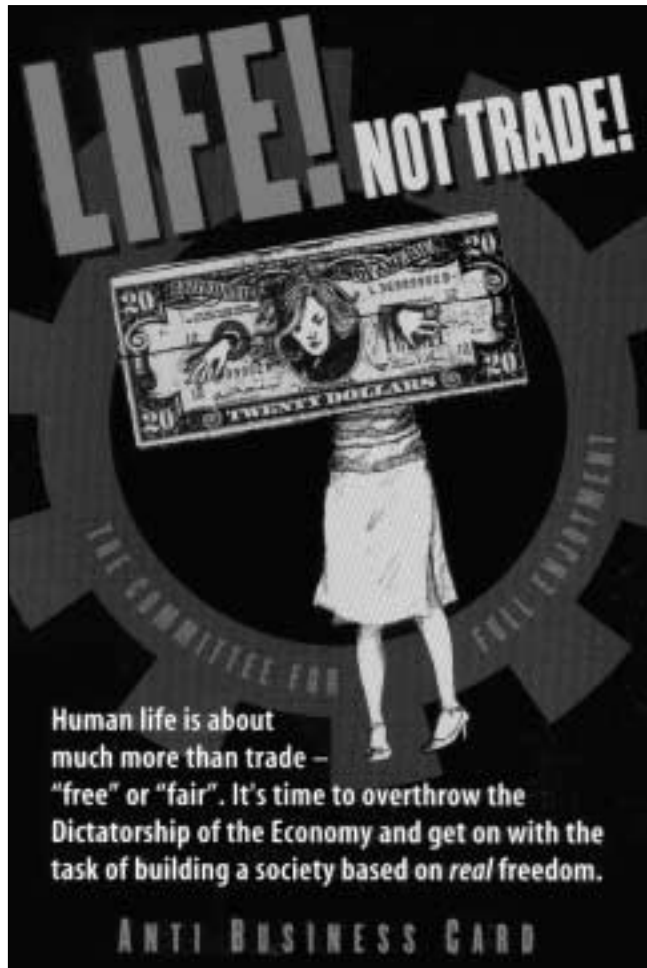
call it the Global Association of Gift Givers (GAGG). The passion for life is the same passion that convinces us that together we can make life what we want it to be. In the streets we have re-created the public commons, at least temporarily. We reject trade, free or fair; for trade reinforces the pecuniary mentality that reduces human life to the arbitrary measurement of its products, to the Economy. As free people we can live better; work less (and enjoy the pleasure of the work we deem worthwhile) and provide an unprecedented level of material comfort to everyone on the planet. . . . When we abolish the Economy, we will see the world with new eyes, new energy, new possibilities. We make the world everyday when we return to work for them. Why not make the world we want to live in instead?”

These words resonated for many participants in the protest movement. They are important to me, too, because they go beyond the usual smorgasbord of tepid reforms and empty demands. But I must confess, they ring rather hollow as soon as you try to apply them to the real world, to imagine what actions we might take immediately to begin reaching for the world these words describe.

One of the self-imposed problems this kind of thinking has created is an inability to embrace any goals other than the most sweeping imaginable. But that position soon resembles a religious one that posits a complete simultaneous, spontaneous transformation of everyone everywhere. In this extreme position I am seeking a change that is without historic precedent or any connection to real people living in the real world. I scorn intermediate goals as muddled reformism and liberal cooptation.

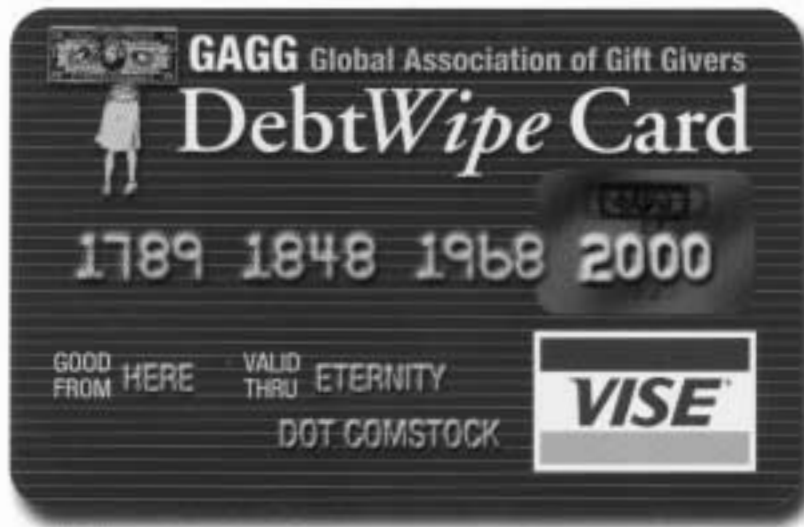
Having participated for years in maintaining this impossible conundrum I am fed up with being stuck. This does not mean I want to turn to electoral politics or the tired ideas of the old or new left or liberals. But it does mean I don’t feel at ease with the constant rejection of every initiative that anyone tries in this culture.

Revolutions do happen, and social institutions can be radically altered—even abolished—in short periods of time. But to presuppose a total change as the definition of an acceptable political program, and to have no ideas of intermediate, achievable goals is finally a failure of practical imagination.



designs by Hugh D'Andrade for the Committee for Full Enjoyment

You're Pre-Approved!



Note: Card may not be honored by corporations and other institutions whose goal is to reduce life to a series of market transactions.

Leadership

I have been part of several projects* over the past decades that eschewed formal leadership structure. Nevertheless, many people who came into contact with these projects concluded that I was the leader. If asked, I would urgently insist that I was not the leader, that in fact there was no leader, that the collective as a whole was the source of power and decision-making.

That was true, too, and I certainly never have had anything like unfettered, unchallenged control over any project. In fact, I lost collective votes on numerous occasions. But within the day-to-day life of a project I have taken initiatives, made decisions that shaped the direction of events, established and extended the personal relationships that led to the participation of new contributors, and so on. (Similarly, while I am the author of this piece, the ideas expressed are a product of intense discussions with friends over the past months and years, and thus the arguments are “mine” only in that derivative and collaborative sense.)

My own ideological leanings are informed by emotional and personal preferences. I yearn for a world of peers. I narcissistically wish for a life filled up with different people who are a lot like me! I don't want them to think like me and march in lockstep with my opinions or theories, but I want them to have the same energy, willpower, ability to

* *ProcessedWorld* magazine and *Shaping San Francisco* (the interactive multimedia excavation of the lost history of San Francisco) are perhaps the most prominent examples. I also had an important role in launching Critical Mass in San Francisco, but in that case my role as a “leader” was quickly overcome by the rapid and widespread embrace of the event by thousands of others, both in San Francisco and elsewhere. Less prominent, short-term groups such as the Union of Concerned Commies, the Anti-Economy League of San Francisco, the Committee for Full Enjoyment, and the Department of Public Art also inform these ruminations (as do my earlier participation in the anti-nuclear movement, farmworker and textile worker solidarity campaigns, and an incipient union drive at a bookstore).

project themselves, organize activities, frame questions, and dynamically challenge everyone around them to reach new levels of excitement and insight. With that in mind, I've always clung to the idea that “leadership” is bad, hierarchy is a problem, and that everyone should be equal. I still feel this way.

There is a profound contradiction at the heart of this. I believe in human freedom, that each person should have the maximum ability to become him/herself. In other words, I believe in maximum human differentiation—the more unique every person is, the richer all our lives become. If that is true, doesn't it follow that some people are more extroverted, verbally precocious, self-confident, organizationally adept, inclined to take the initiative, etc., while others are more introverted, shy, less vocal, less public, not assertive, self-deprecating, and so on? This simple truth in any group or endeavor leads to something approaching a “natural” division of labor, which I consider an inevitable and useful feature of human society.

No one is inherently incapable of change or taking on different traits or roles over the course of a life. But let's face it, at any given moment, in any given group or project, different people are going to play different roles based on a wide variety of preferences, predispositions, talents, and desires. This is so obvious that it may seem pointless to bring it up. But the problem arises in political projects when this differentiation manifests itself and the group bogs down in bickering and fighting, even sometimes into name-calling, as those behaving as “leaders” find themselves attacked and blamed for creating this differentiation out of some Macchiavellian power grab.

This underscores a profound poverty of philosophy and political savvy in our culture. In our healthy rejection of

vanguardist politics and patriarchal social assumptions, we have lost a sense of “power” in the practical sense. The power to move people with words, to organize and finish projects, to facilitate wide participation, are just a few of the qualities of social power that we don’t know how to evaluate and discuss without descending into clichés about domination and oppression rooted in assumptions derived from the dominant culture.

The successful perpetuation of political resistance depends on individuals banding together and taking action. People use power with—rather than on—each other to act in the world. In the best cases, anti-authoritarian groups encourage all their participants to be powerful—both within the group and vis-à-vis the outside world. This kind of power is different from the kind that elevates someone to a leadership position from which they hierarchically rule.

An egalitarian theory of practical social power needs to be specific about kinds of power, and its connection to other parts of life. For instance, if you need surgery, you want someone who is an expert surgeon. But just because someone is an expert surgeon, she shouldn’t necessarily derive fixed social benefits or power from that talent. By extension, if someone performs the role of leader in a given movement or group or project, it is important to define the scope of that leadership, how it is held accountable to the larger community (or communities), and to prevent the extension of that

leadership into a fixed, privileged status in society.

In the Washington DC protests against the IMF/World Bank in April 2000 this tension played itself out. At the Spokescouncil meetings, where in the days directly preceding the direct action over 100 affinity groups sent representatives to hammer out a consensus on tactics to “shut down” the IMF, various individuals who had been prominent meeting facilitators in Seattle in November 1999 were again running the meetings. I heard various people grumbling about what they perceived as a problem of “authoritarian manipulation” by these same individuals. This charge seemed absurd to me. In fact, running a complicated, multi-polar meeting to coordinate a type of urban wargame was a very daunting job, and I was impressed by how well they did it, and how open they actually were to the participation of everyone present.

It is true that a lot of decisions had been made prior to these Spokescouncil meetings. Discussion had taken place by email and through a series of meetings around the country, both within small affinity groups and between and among them. The gathering in DC was premised on accepting the general parameters of the action. Still, there was bitter disagreement on the spot. There were those who felt they had a right to participate whether or not they agreed to the definitions of nonviolence that had been promulgated by the organizers. And there were those who felt that if you were going to be part of the effort, you had a moral obligation to refrain from any kind of violence against property or police. That dispute remained unresolved. Some people consider that a reason to withdraw from the movement, others are tolerant of the fact that there is always going to be disagreement on this precise issue.

But it is noteworthy that the organizers and meeting facilitators did not elevate themselves to being an ongoing committee, leaders of a new national organization, or anything remotely resembling the old model. Clearly this would have happened twenty or thirty years earlier. I consider the ad-hoc nature of the power exercised by the leaders in DC and Seattle an excellent example of the kind of power we need to be comfortable with in order to succeed in our social movements. It is the kind of power that happily disappears when the specific reasons for its existence pass.

Institutionalization

or the problem of fighting for the long haul without becoming comfortably dependent on the way things are

How do we launch political opposition in entirely ad-hoc and short-term ways again and again without having to reinvent the wheel each time? Can we have ongoing, long-term political resistance that doesn’t turn into a kind of alternative business? How do we pay for staff, offices, phones and equipment, and keep a focused oppositional political movement alive if not through selling t-shirts and

What If? A Journal of Radical Possibilities



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This is a wonderful new journal. As the title indicates, it focuses on the question of utopia, of imagining a life worth living. Editor Christy Rodgers sets the stage, detailing the lamentable history of the past two

decades and characterizing the repression and cooptation of utopian ideas as “kill the best and buy the rest.” Still, she declares “there continue to be true—and growing—expressions of utopian dreaming given form all around us, all the time.” A welcome look back at English revolutionaries from the Diggers of the 1640s to William Morris in the 1890s starts it off. Wise Fool Puppet Intervention and David Solnit of Art & Revolution Convergence are given a long look in a couple of thoughtful pieces appreciating their important contributions to the anti-capitalist events in Seattle and beyond. Home schooling gets a look, and amidst some future visions is a newly rewritten version of Adam Cornford’s “Death of a Nation,” originally published in *Processed World* #30 in 1992. We send a hearty congratulations and welcome to *What If?*

—Chris Carlsson

coffee mugs, bake sales, seeking support from foundations and large donors? Can we grow our political opposition without institutionalizing our organizational forms? Can we make sure practical knowledge is shared and spread without institutionalizing that process?

If we don't institutionalize ourselves, with organizations, resources (computers, printing presses, radio stations, video production facilities, meeting rooms, offices, homes, etc.) and the like, we have to re-acquire access every time we begin organizing on a new project. On the other hand, as we seek greater permanence and reliability, we tend to duplicate resources and infrastructure, since our efforts tend to be highly localized and specific. If we share space and media equipment across issues, groups, time and space, we can make much greater use of the limited resources we have.

Currently it is common to create small businesses and collectives to acquire productive resources, sell our skills and resources to "movement" groups (and the open market), and maintain the necessary infrastructure that way. But that leaves it all tangled up in the structures of small business and profitability. I've brought print jobs or video projects to collectively-owned businesses and found they need to charge nearly the same as any business to do it. Similarly, I have a small typesetting and graphics arts business. I do a lot of free work for interesting political projects, but I reserve the right to decide, and no one else has a right to my labor or my facilities. So where's the "movement" at that moment? The small business model, even collectively owned, is a poor solution to the problem of continuity and sustained resistance. (Granted, it is often a much better solution to the problems of personal survival than working for "The Man".)

Learning from the anarchists of the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s, the anti-nuclear and peace movements organ-

ized into small affinity groups. This model re-emerged to fight the WTO in Seattle in 1999, the IMF and World Bank in DC and Prague in 2000, and the FTAA in Quebec in 2001. This anti-institutional, ad-hoc movement is based on small affinity groups that come together to organize specific actions as part of the larger demonstration. The affinity groups thus avoid being subsumed into the logic of small business. They also avoid the bureaucratization and salaried hierarchies of ongoing nonprofit organizations. There is no need to maintain structures of property, ongoing expenses for offices and equipment, etc. Being rooted in local small groups is one of the anti-capitalist movement's greatest strengths, both depending on and reinforcing real communities and face-to-face networks of neighbors and friends.

One of the most notable qualities of the affinity group structure is the dependence on meetings and consensus. This is both a strength and a social liability. The tyranny of meetings, especially those run by consensus, can be extremely exhausting and often demoralizing. When it works, it can be a source of genuine collective euphoria. But it tends to burn people out and often leaves a trail of bitter feelings in its wake. This derives in part from the questions of power addressed above, and our difficulties in facing and handling creatively the inevitable differentiation among people in any group.

There is also an implicit assumption that the affinity group is somehow a prefigurative formation of the kind of life we want to live in the future. In that respect it becomes an agent of subcultural exclusion. Not everyone is inclined to organize their lives through face-to-face meetings and consensus. It attracts some personalities and political ideologies, and repels many others. The same could be said about most institutional forms.

For those who are part of an affinity group, and have participated in the political movements of the past quarter cen-



Mimna Eloranta



from The Wasp, c. 1875, courtesy the Bancroft Library

tury, it is hard to accept that for lots of people it is precisely the anonymity and lack of responsibility that daily life in the capitalist market provides that makes them feel “free.” You get your money from your job and you spend it however you see fit, privately and anonymously. There is no accountability for the meaning of the work you do (if someone pays you, that’s all that matters), nor for the invisible social costs of what you consume. There is a great freedom to the individual in this arrangement, and one that advocates of social revolution and human liberation must take into account when they propose an alternative life based on a high level of accountability and responsibility.

With this in mind, we might be better off describing our goals in other terms than ‘freedom’, even if we believe that it is crucial to free ourselves from the logic of buying and selling. Our society is increasingly characterized by emptiness, isolation, alienation, and fragmentation. It is a society that craves “community” and human conviviality so much that cults and religions easily find new recruits in spite of their patently absurd belief systems.

Our self-perpetuating youth culture, driven and reinforced by consumer society, encourages us individually and collectively to remain in a state of arrested development. The youthful rebellions of the past decades, so easily co-opted into fashion and shopping, repudiated authority uncritically. The predictable result is the social equivalent of a child with negligent parents: a rootless society lacking in meaning or purpose in which individuals are treated like children. At work we are told what to do, and if we have the

temerity to ask why, the inevitable answer is every parent’s cop-out: because that’s the way it is.

As we seek a balance between our revolutionary impulses and our need to nurture and sustain a revolutionary movement—perhaps across generations—we cannot avoid grappling with the dialectic of personal freedom and social accountability. Accountability is always a form of authority, and a necessary part of a liberated future. Our yearning for community is at some point antithetical to the yearning for freedom. We seek recognition, appreciation and accountability in community—precisely the qualities absent in our anonymous ‘freedom’ as wage slaves and consumers.

As we think about institutionalization, we face our own mortality, our own issues about “settling down,” building a home, and making commitments. The frenzied life we’ve adapted to under late capitalism is defined by a high degree of personal mobility and choice. Can we embrace stability and rootedness in a way that enhances our quality of life? Can we build new institutions that embody a new way of life instead of being responsive to the dictatorship of economic efficiency? Can we build lasting institutions that transcend the need for charismatic individuals to hold them together? And what are these new institutions to do?

The Tactical Cul-de-Sac, or the problem of identifying and using real social power

In Seattle an exciting coalition appeared. Direct action anarchists, mainstream labor unionists, environmentalists and third world solidarity activists united to protest the

WTO. For a brief time it seemed that this new coalition had really changed the nature of social opposition. But by the time April 2000 rolled around and a similar effort was made to “shut down” the World Bank/IMF meetings in Washington DC, it was clear that the coalition already had returned to its original fragments, and was not unified in tactics or strategy, and certainly not unified in a shared vision.

I have experience during the past twenty years in all of these so-called movements. I am critical of all of them but I prefer to encourage the parts of each that advance our efforts to a more thorough, far-reaching oppositional movement. What Seattle really showed all of us who were there was that we are MUCH stronger in our unity than any of us are alone. This is the oldest lesson of revolution.

The distinctive elements of the “Seattle coalition” are not revolutionary when taken alone. Their goals are partial and reformist (except perhaps the anarchists, but they are the same people who really need to help answer the questions raised in this piece). The social power these groups wield is largely a matter of public perception or the lack thereof; in other words, the solidarity activists, ecologists, and labor activists all depend on getting attention in the mass media as their primary lever of power. The surprisingly successful seizure of downtown Seattle during the WTO re-introduced us all to the occupation of public space as a form of social power. Even while it was underway, however, bitter fights broke out among the occupiers about the behavioral norms of the occupation, obliquely endorsing the propaganda counterattack that sought to invalidate the entire protest on the grounds that some protesters were “naughty.” This latter technique is used during every “successful” protest or direct action (which become recorded as instances in which things “got out of control”). The use of force, however nonviolently, is always deemed a greater affront and violation than the blatantly violent behavior that passes as “normal business practices” in the world market.

Following Seattle, activists tried to re-create the coalition and dynamics in Washington DC and again at the political conventions in Philadelphia and Los Angeles in summer 2000. The preparations of the authorities (who were delighted to radically increase their security budgets in the wake of Seattle) prevented similar achievements. Also, most trade unionists, solidarity activists and mainstream environmentalists were dissuaded from participating, either because they were afraid of the violence (that the state would provide, even if the protesters didn’t), or because they didn’t want to be associated with what had become an “extremist” approach. European protesters took up the fight during the September 2000 IMF/World Bank meeting in Prague, Czech Republic, where again they succeeded in exercising the social power of occupying public space. In April 2001, activists from the Americas descended on Quebec City to contest the well-guarded elite’s plans to endorse a Free Trade Area of the Americas. Canadian police enclosed a large area of the city

behind barricades, and attacked protesters with impunity, but participants emerged energized and buoyed by the successful protest on the ground in Quebec and international media coverage.

Anyone who has been in a major urban riot and has walked the deserted streets behind the lines of confrontation has had a taste of liberated space. A similar sensation comes in the wake of earthquakes, floods, blackouts, so-called “natural” disasters. But the everyday liberation of social space requires not just a spasm of refusal and disobedience, or an unpredictable and occasional event, but a creative reinhabitation of the spaces in which we live as an everyday truth. What is most notably suspended during these brief tastes of liberated space is business as usual. People stay home from work and school. Strangers are suddenly your friends. It is common to extend a helping hand and to feel the connected euphoria of real human community. Seattle and the rest gave all their participants a major dose of this intensely seductive experience.

Our mass market culture channels desires for collective euphoria into mass spectator sports and religion. My goal as a revolutionary is to link the desire for shared experiences, community, and collective euphoria to more spaces in which we can live without “business as usual.” The two major components of “business as usual” are working and shopping. Interestingly, Bay Area elements of the Reclaim the Streets movement have recently embraced the “Buy Nothing” concept as an extension of the ongoing campaign to reclaim public space. “Proletarian shopping” (mass shoplifting) is another phenomenon that radically attacks the shopping side of the equation, and establishes a temporary zone of collective, affirmative action. Both approaches have radical moments, but in the end suffer from being initiatives shaped by a world already made at work.

Most of our assumptions about the “real world” are profoundly shaped by our experiences at work, the place where we reproduce ourselves, where we “pull our own weight” and make a contribution (we hope) to society’s general well-being. And it is at work that most people are more fragmented, disconnected and isolated than ever before. The redesign of work away from individual craftsmanship and an integrated knowledge of any particular line of endeavor is far advanced. Henry Ford applied Frederick Taylor’s time-and-motion research to increasing the intensity of work through dividing it into ever smaller, more measurable and more easily controlled tasks. In the past quarter century, the twin processes of exporting the dirtiest jobs to faraway countries and automating the ones that remain has turned a large portion of the workforce into temporary, contingent, semi-skilled workers who shift from job to job, industry to industry, as the needs of business dictate. Most workers today have very limited knowledge of the purpose of their work, or how it fits in to the larger processes that lead to real goods and services. The transience in workplaces has done a great deal to prevent attempts

to build new kinds of workplace-based communities and organizations (unions being the most formal example).

Organized and Disorganized Labor

Members of the early *Processed World* collective believed that the existing trade unions were part of the problem, not the solution. We saw most workplace organizing as being inherently conservative insofar as people were motivated by a desire to protect their status as wage-workers, perhaps to gain a bit more wages and benefits.

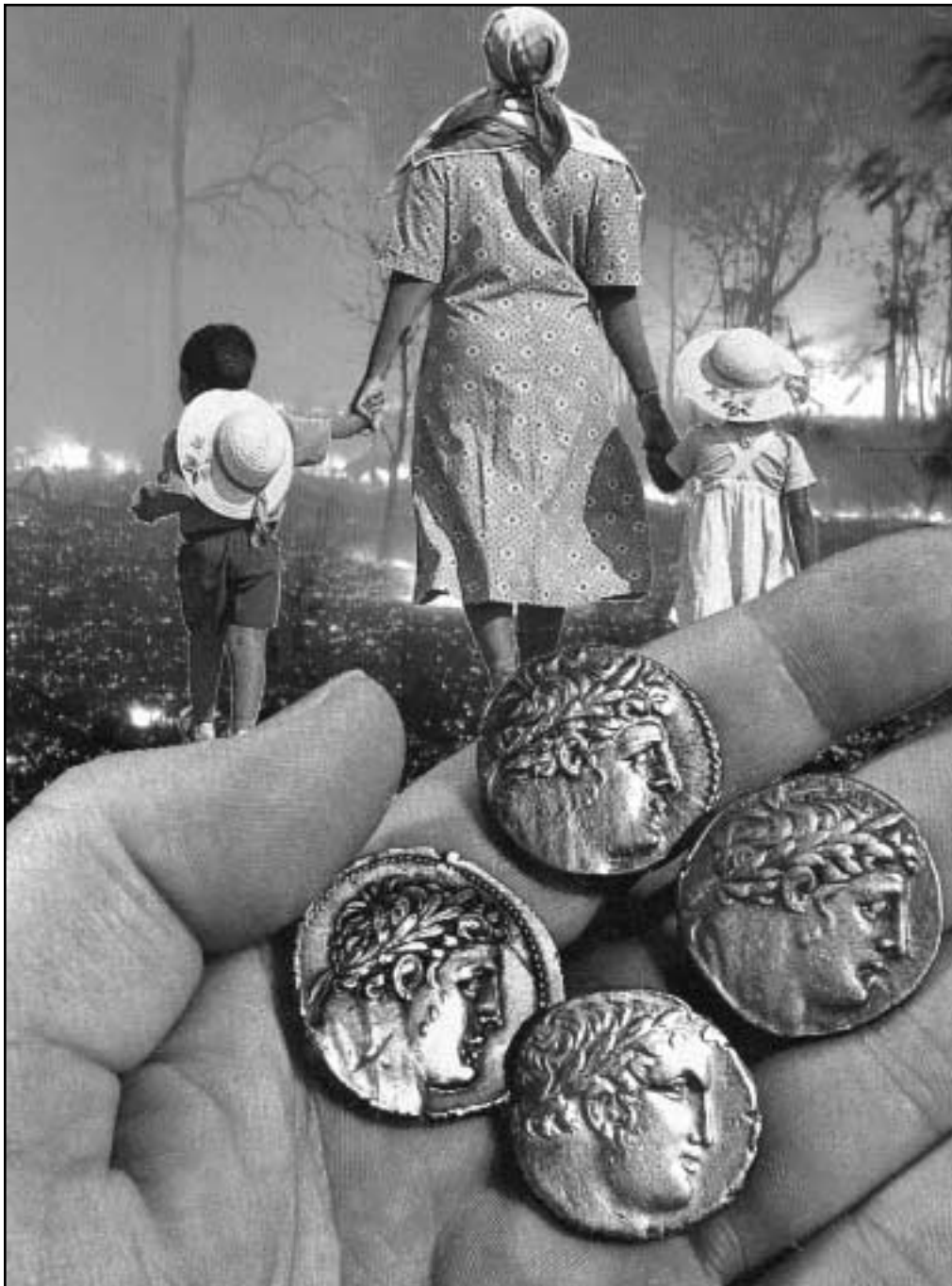
And yet we held fast to the idea that workplace organizing was the key to any future successful revolt. I still think this. But workplace organizing not directed at abolishing wage-labor and money seems counterproductive. And yet,

how can one get organized on the job, win over wavering coworkers who aren't sure they're ready to join up, gain a majority of folks as active allies, when your goal is to abolish the whole set-up of daily life? It doesn't make much sense in the absence of a larger culture of revolt. It makes even less sense in the absence of a social vision of a life beyond the Economy, where human time is freely shared, production and distribution is freely organized by those who do the work, etc.

This is a very serious problem. Radical revolt depends on overthrowing the reproduction of everyday life, in large part at the point of production (and distribution). If people are organizing on the job, it is always to gain protection from arbitrary bosses, to improve wages and benefits, or to assert

a right to control some aspect of the workplace. How does getting organized to defend oneself now (in a given historic moment of the capitalist division of labor) lead to an *assertive* collectivity that may eventually take over everything? In asking this question I paint myself into the corner. There is no room for radical steps between the first goal and the total change. In the worst case, this leads to a numbing paralysis or a disdainful, condescending participation in struggles that I already think are going in the wrong direction!

Moreover it doesn't take into account the overwhelming transience that plagues the structure of work. Few people remain at the same job or workplace more than a few years. New workers are expected to be good, fast learners and multi-talented, able to shift from task to task. Work is so thoroughly structured in most places that the workers are easily replaced. Mounting any kind of ongoing, organized resistance at a given workplace depends on trust and familiarity between the workers. These are not qualities easily attained when you've only known each other for a few weeks or months, and then only through the strained "niceness" of corporate culture.



collage by Raven

Opening spaces in this closed world of work—physical or virtual—where people can connect is a crucial step. Organizing campaigns introduce the reality of workers taking action together for their own needs—openly different than the company’s needs. The role of trade unions in channeling and curbing the direction of such campaigns is important history to share so such movements can avoid the obvious pitfalls of the past.

In the spirit of a difficult compromise with the “real world” workplace organizing around immediate demands is crucial, even if it falls under a typical (conservative and/or corrupt) trade union. History is littered with the failed efforts of radical reformers to “take over” unions from bad leaders and corrupt regimes. The point for me is not to worry about taking over the larger organizations but to make vital on an everyday basis the fight over the terms of daily life at work. If the union becomes an obstacle (as it tends to if your efforts exceed their narrow agenda) that just reinforces the need to make alliances across the boundaries of occupation, workplace, neighborhood, municipality, and nationality.

Organizing on the job brings people together in a basic conspiracy. Workers together can alter the rhythms of work, open up free time for each other, and divert resources to other ends than that on which the company is focused. They can also force the company to take profits and plow them back into wages and benefits. In the best case, organizing on the job can create counter-institutions at work that eventually become the framework for disempowering the managers and self-managing the job. Though this, in itself, leaves unchallenged what the company actually does, it sets the stage for a collective approach to deeper questions.

Doing Nothing is Sometimes Something (or Slow Down the Speed-Up)

One of the most painful ironies of this era has to be the amazing overwork of radical activists. So many people drawn to political movements during this long difficult period have found themselves overwhelmed by the amount of work needed to mount a demonstration, carry on an educational campaign, publish a ’zine or book, organize a union, fight a company. Time and again activists burn out over low or no wages, very long hours, bizarre interpersonal relationships with others who seem to have unresolved psychological problems, and a general anxiety that comes from being a tiny underdog in a world that goes to the victors.

It’s too common for those who are most capable and interested to get so pulled in that they sacrifice important aspects of their humanity. Many are attending meetings every day, going to every important demonstration and event, organizing all their friends all the time to the point where they only have friends who are part of their organizing efforts. The ready use of guilt and shame to keep people doing work for free or very little is routine. The guilt or pressure that drives people to overwork and over-partici-

pate is itself a crippling quality.

By the mid-1970s, “the personal is political” became a slogan justifying many people’s choice to drop out of formal political activity. The overwork and psychological distress common to political activism pushed many people to define their lifestyle choices as a sufficient contribution to political change. Unfortunately, for too many, taking a political stand has come to mean shopping properly.

The underbelly of this critique, however, is the implication that to be “truly” political we must “do something”—something more than just shop well. It’s true that our effort to pursue a revolutionary agenda requires creative action and steady public participation. But, the urge to “do something” often leads to demonstrations and political forms (in print and on the streets) that are utterly unimaginative, dogmatic, repetitive, and profoundly self-defeating. As someone who has marched in countless demonstrations, published scores of flyers, posters and ’zines, and participated in dozens of street theater interventions, I admit to feeling depressed, less powerful and less effective after a demonstration.

The Seattle movement was launched by West Coast activists who led the way with colorful giant puppets and other new forms of creative protest. They have pioneered an exciting break with the visible style of leftist protest that dominated the past decades, and it has been exhilarating to be a part of it. Nevertheless, the urgency to attend rallies, create puppets, organize demonstrations and the like, itself reproduces the pattern of taking action without a clear idea of where we’re going. And—unfortunately—the use of giant puppets (for example) doesn’t really break with the familiar leftism of reactive protest and help us move to the offensive.

“The personal is political” was an important reintroduction of subjective values and experience to the political landscape. In that sense it parallels the age-old concern for ensuring consistency between means and ends. Participants in a renewed radical movement must find ways to live well *now*—not based on sacrifice and guilt, nor defined by a deferred gratification that will come “after the revolution.”

“Living well is the best revenge,” goes the saying. Resisting overwork and self-sacrifice is an important radical goal in itself. If we aren’t enjoying our lives and finding fulfillment in human connections, our ability to sustain a long-term revolutionary effort is compromised. We need to take the time to develop our philosophical and political depth, study history, ecology, and technology, and practice imagining the world we want to live in. If we cannot trust each other to take the lead, create lasting institutions, articulate more clearly where we’re trying to go, and create living examples (insofar as it’s possible) of the way we want to live, we will have a hard time convincing others to join us. We have to make it clear that we’re fighting for a world dramatically better than the insane world of today.



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