

Love and Rage in the New World Order

Christopher Day

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Introduction

Love and Rage is at an impasse. A little over a year ago in San Diego, we made some important decisions about the nature of the organization. For about five months, we maintained a high level of organization, most notably in confronting mobilizations of the racist right. Our membership grew more dramatically than even the most optimistic of us expected. And yet there is a deep sense in which we are justified in feeling we have made little progress. The organization seems to be in permanent shambles and lacking a clear direction.

This paper is an attempt to give a new and clear direction to Love and Rage. It has two main sections. The first section, “The Fix We’re In,” is an analysis of Love and Rage as an expression of developments in the world. It is an attempt to locate Love and Rage in the process of global-capitalist restructuring and the rise and fall of social struggles in the late 20th century. The second section, “Getting Organized,” is an attempt to draw some conclusions about the sort of strategy we should be pursuing and to make some concrete proposals about how we can put such a strategy into effect.

The Fix We’re In

The most interesting thing about Love and Rage is that it exists at all. In spite of no coherent strategy, a poverty of theoretical discussion, a perpetual state of financial crisis, a record of persistent failure to follow through on planned projects, and other failures and screw-ups too numerous to mention, the membership of Love and Rage grows as we attract new people more quickly than we drive people away. Why is this? I believe that the answer is simple. Love and Rage is one of the few national organizations (if it can be called that) that represents the radical political aspirations of a new force in this society. It is my hope to identify precisely what that force is in order to suggest where we can go with it.

The capitalist media has devoted a lot of attention these past few years to what is called “Generation X.” The image of the typical Generation X member put forward in the media is that of an over-educated and under-ambitious twenty-something white youth, often tattooed and/or pierced: the Slacker. This image has been reproduced so often that it is embarrassing to talk seriously about Generation X. The capitalist media has focused its analysis of Generation X almost exclusively on its cultural expressions, the pose and attitude, and the music — that is, the generational qualities of Generation X. This focus has obscured a deeper reality that deserves more serious attention. The cultural definition of Generation X raises all sorts of problems in understanding what lies beneath this surface. There are lots of people who consider themselves culturally outside Generation X or who have a critique of the outlook of Generation X, who are nonetheless part of the same deeper phenomenon that “Generation X” has become a codeword for in the capitalist media.

Since the early 1970s, a global process of restructuring capitalism has been taking place. This process of restructuring is a response to a number of major social, political and technological developments. In particular, the decolonization of Africa and Asia, the development of sophisticated information technologies, and the insurgent movements that rose up in the industrial countries in the ‘60s and ‘70s have compelled capitalism to dramatically reorganize itself.

After the Second World War, a deal was struck in the United States between the major corporations and the organized labor movement that basically guaranteed a large, privileged section of the working class steady improvements in its standard of living in exchange for social peace and support for US military actions around the world. In terms of consciousness, if not always in terms of their economic position in the overall process of exploitation, the effect of this deal was to de-proletarianize a huge section of the US work force.

That deal was broken in the 1960s when anti-colonial movements around the world and the Black liberation movement in the US inspired millions of relatively privileged white youth to openly oppose and defy the US war against Vietnam. At the same time, the enormous expenditures the US was making to wage the war were undermining US domination of the world economy. The other industrialized countries were becoming more competitive, OPEC forced the industrialized countries to pay more for oil, and certain Third World countries, like Korea and Brazil, began to industrialize.

The global capitalist restructuring that has resulted has had several main features. The most significant is the massive relocation of industrial production from the old imperialist countries to the Third World. Hand-in-hand with this de-industrialization has gone a steady erosion in the standard of living of the US working class, both in the form of lost jobs and wage cuts and in the form of cuts in social programs. While the worst effects of this erosion have been borne by people of color, it is important to note that the erosion has affected the entire working class. Amongst the white working class accustomed to a middle-class standard of living, the brunt of the changes have been borne by their children as they have entered the work force. The story is no doubt a familiar one. With either a high-school diploma or a college degree in hand, the twenty-something child of the \$15 an hour industrial or office worker is lucky to get a minimum wage job at McDonalds or doing telemarketing or being a bike messenger.

Young workers have always had to take cruddier jobs at lower pay. What is different this time is that these lower wages are not the first step in a progression of better paying jobs. Rather, they are a dead end; the first in what will probably be a series of low-paying and insecure positions. From the point of view of capital, the logic of this strategy of attacks on younger workers is straightforward; in order to increase profits, it is necessary to cut wages. It is easier to cut the wages of young workers entering the work force, who have little organized power and less sense of entitlement, than it is to cut the wages of older workers. This perspective was quite explicit during the 1980s when companies forced unions to accept two-tier wage structures (one tier for older workers, a lower one for new workers) as part of their contracts. In the new information and services industry, it hasn't even been necessary to renegotiate — the starting point is low wages for unorganized workers.

Large numbers of the children of middle-class families, or working-class families that obtained a middle-class standard of living, are being re-proletarianized: they are being forced into a job market in which they must compete for jobs, not just with their neighbors but with workers in Mexico and Malaysia. This is what "Generation X" really represents: re-proletarianized white youth. Reproles for short. Most Generation Xers may not be conscious of the shift in their class position that has taken place but there is a generalized understanding that they will be worse off than their parents.

Ashamed as we might be to admit it, Love and Rage in the US and Canada is a Generation X organization. (In Mexico the picture is different, but Love and Rage is just as much an expression of global capitalist restructuring there as here. The continental orientation of Love and Rage is

really just a reflection of the new capitalist terrain we are on as reflected in NAFTA.) The US and Canadian membership of Love and Rage is almost exclusively white. The handful of members who are not in their twenties are all people who were attracted to Love and Rage by the activity of its young membership. The vast majority of our members are either from middle-class or relatively privileged working-class families. Only a handful of members are from elite or poor working-class backgrounds. And of course there are all the piercings and tattoos.

It is my position that Love and Rage can only escape its current paralysis by looking at itself no longer as the expression of the whole of oppressed humanity, but rather as the revolutionary organization of a particular section of this society, the reprobles, that acts in alliance with other sections of society and their organizations. It may be our purpose to identify the interests of the reprobles with those of the rest of humanity, but we should not arrogantly attempt to speak on behalf of the whole of humanity.

Revolutionary Slackers?

The position of the reprobles creates conditions that will tend to radicalize them. The deepening realization that the system will not give them the comfortable lives they grew up with is already giving rise to profound frustrations. As conditions get worse, larger numbers of the reprobles will become receptive to calls for militant action for radical social change. The question is what kind of action for what kind of vision of social change. The reprobles are just as likely (maybe more likely) to be won over to internationalist and anti-authoritarian radicalism. Fascism in the 1920s and 1930s obtained its mass following from middle and working-class youth facing unemployment and other attacks on their standard of living. Fascism is already on the march again in Europe; in North America, the Klan, the Nazis, and the Christian Right are all growing.

If we re-conceive of Love and Rage as a reprob organization, then the main task that confronts us quickly becomes clear. We must seek to win over as large a section of the reprobles as possible to a perspective of acting in a revolutionary alliance with other oppressed groups and away from various forms of fascism. The details of how to carry out such a project are what we need to talk about. What is the relative importance of directly fighting the fascists and opposing the racist violence of the state (in the form of police brutality and the mass imprisonment of Black and Latino youth)? How important is international solidarity work in this process? To what degree does the fight for women's liberation or for queer liberation undermine the appeal of fascism? What are the prospects for struggles in the workplace, in communities or on campuses?

Do the Right Thing And Not the White Thing

So far I have talked about Generation X in terms of the changing structure of capitalism and the re-shuffling of class relationships represented by reprobetarianization. But this is a white-supremacist society and it is not possible to neatly separate the categories of class and race. The project of winning over the reprobles to revolutionary politics means we have to confront the question of whiteness.

The reprobles are largely white for a simple reason: it has been almost exclusively white people who have been allowed to escape the proletariat in the first place. The post-World War deal between corporate America and organized labor was built on the foundation of an earlier deal

that has fundamentally shaped this society; the deal of whiteness. Whiteness is the separate deal that one section of the working class cut with the ruling class in exchange for their cooperation in enforcing the whole system of exploitation on the (non-white) rest of the working class. The price of the relative comforts enjoyed by much of the white working class after the Second World War was the continuing racial oppression of African Americans and the raining down of napalm on the Vietnamese. The embrace of whiteness is treason to the rest of humanity.

The rise of nazism in Germany in the 1920s can be understood, in part, as the brutality of a thwarted German imperialism turned inward as a result of Germany's exclusion from overseas colonial exploitation after the First World War. Similarly, the rise of fascism today must be understood, at least in part, in terms of the thwarted promises of whiteness. The price of capitalist reorganization is being paid mainly by people of color, and the disparity between the standards of living of white people and people of color continues to grow. But those facts are not felt directly by the white worker who sees simply their own paycheck cut and the rise of a newly visible (but still tiny) Black middle class. From this point of view, the existing system has been insufficiently vigilant in defending the privileges of whiteness, and it is on this basis, explicitly or implicitly, in a white-supremacist society, that the appeal of fascism is made.

Any successful revolutionary appeal to the discontent of the reprobates must openly reject whiteness in order to be of any use in alliance with other oppressed groups in society. It must explicitly reject any effort by the white working class to cut separate deals with capitalism.

If we attempt to appeal to the majority of reprobates simply on the basis of their immediate economic self-interest we will not be able to effectively compete with the fascists. The ability of white supremacy to deliver a relatively comfortable life is a historical fact that lives in the memory, if not the mortgage, of a huge section of the working-class, white people. As the most privileged section of the international working-class, white American workers occupy an ambiguous and ambivalent position. Simply stated, many still have an awful lot more to lose than their chains. In particular situations, it may prove immediately beneficial for white workers to ally with people of color. But just as often there will exist the possibility of a better, separate deal in exchange for treason to the rest of the class. The project of race treason (as articulated in the pages of *Race Traitor*), of undermining the reliability of skin color as a determinant of loyalty to the system has the long term goal of stripping white people of their privileged status and thereby compelling the mass of white people to take their side by the rest of humanity. Race treason is the negation of whiteness. This is a necessary component of a revolutionary strategy. But this negation must be complemented with a compelling vision of a new and better society. Loyalty to humanity must be bound up with the possibility of a better way of living.

The New World In Our Hearts

The most crucial thing that a revolutionary organization can do is to articulate and popularize a credible vision of a new society that is really worth fighting for. The fascists can promise that by putting Black folks or women or queers in their place," they can return the young, white worker to the semi-mythical prosperity of the past. To defeat the fascists, we need to convey the possibility of something much better than a \$15 an hour job, a house in the suburbs, a car, and a VCR.

The new world we need to project must speak to the actual miseries of alienated life under capitalism. It is an impoverished vision of revolution that holds out no more than a bigger paycheck, more consumer goodies, and control over the production process. We need to layout a comprehensive critique of every aspect of life under capitalism and authority to discuss how we plan to transform it. If the vast majority of people “lead lives of quiet desperation, we need to speak to all the things that add up to that desperation: the loneliness and ugliness of the lives we are always painting a happy face on, the shitty food we eat, the fucked-up sex we have, the compulsions and neuroses that cripple our efforts to be who we want to be, the plastic culture, and the poisoned physical environment we know is wrong but numb ourselves to anyway.

Just as important as building a revolutionary organization is nurturing broader cultures of resistance that embody the vision of a new world we are fighting for. While the focus of this paper is on the building of a revolutionary organization, that project needs to be placed within the larger context of a revolutionary movement and the cultures it emerges from. To succeed, a revolutionary organization will need to identify itself with these cultures in popular consciousness and at the same time retain a critical relationship with them that is rooted in a coherent vision of the transformation of all aspects of daily life.

Let's Talk About Sex

Over sixty years ago, Wilhelm Reich pleaded with the German Communist Party to understand the role of authoritarian social conditioning in the rise of fascism and the importance of sexual liberation as part of any serious revolutionary politics. Reich's vision of sexual liberation may seem impoverished to us now (he was a male chauvinist and a homophobe), but the essence of his argument is still applicable to our current situation. In short, Reich argued that the fascists could successfully channel mass discontent into a longing for the comfort of authoritarian order so long as the revolutionary movement refused to struggle directly against the processes and institutions (the family, the church, the schools) of authoritarian conditioning.

If we combine a feminist analysis of the role of sexual violence and terror in the patriarchal family with Reich's analysis of the function of sexual repression in creating the personality structures of tyrants and their obedient followers, we can see why it is important to take on these structures. The women's and queer liberation movements have posed a profound challenge to the authoritarian structure of contemporary society. These movements' demands for basic civil rights can be absorbed by the existing order. But the corrosive effect on a general respect for authority that they set in motion by challenging deeply socialized beliefs about the role of women and the limits of sexuality are a more serious threat. The Christian Right understands this. Their relentless assault on the queer movement is more than a cynical play to popular prejudices; it reflects a serious estimation on their part of what is the greatest threat to their vision of society.

The disintegration of family structures is a fact of life in the late 20th century. This constitutes the falling away of one of the last pieces of human community that many people have. Fascism in general, and the Christian Right in particular, promise to restore something that probably cannot be restored. But to defeat them, we must convey the bold possibility of a new kind of human community in which sexual repression and the oppression of women are not the glue that holds things together...

The New Social Movements

While the typical Love and Rage member may fit the reprove profile, very few (if any) of us were first radicalized in the course of an economic struggle in which we had a direct and immediate self-interest. If we have participated in such struggles, it is because we have made life decisions as a consequence of our radicalism that have changed our social position (moving into a squat, doing workplace organizing, etc.). Almost all of us were radicalized as a result of our participation in what are frequently called the New Social Movements (feminism, queer liberation, ecology, anti-militarism, etc.).

The New Social Movements (NSMs) have their roots in the upheavals of the 1960s. The struggles of African Americans and then the Vietnamese raised the possibility of the radical transformation of all aspects of society. In response to this possibility, a wide range of social movements emerged. At first, these movements embraced the revolutionary spirit of the times and saw themselves, in some way or another, as acting in alliance with the various other struggles then taking place. On a theoretical level, these movements challenged the narrow politics of the New Left that saw all questions through the lens of the struggle against capitalism and imperialism. Eventually, the revolutionary movement was lost, but the NSMs set in motion by the events of the '60s did not disappear. Instead, they moved to the center of radical or oppositional politics in the US. Over the '70s and '80s the NSMs developed more sophisticated analyses of gender, sexuality, ecology, and so on. But they also lost much of their original revolutionary spirit and adopted increasingly reformist and fragmented or single-issue approaches to struggle.

The Re-emergence Of Anarchism

In the 1980s, the anarchist movement re-emerged in part as an expression of the frustration of many younger activists with the caution and narrowness of the concerns of the New Social Movements. These younger activists saw in anarchism a theoretical framework, a utopian spirit, and militant practice that could link up a number of different struggles and lead to a renewal of the revolutionary spirit that had once infused them. The NSMs developed their own social theories in response to the often-crude class reductionism of the (now old) New Left. But in the process, they often became uncritical of the middle-class domination of their own movements. The new anarchist movement did not at first identify its antagonism with the established organizations of the NSMs as a class antagonism involving its own interests — though it generally embraced a class-based criticism of them.

In retrospect, the development of Love and Rage can be seen as part of a longer (and still embryonic) process of the emergence of a revolutionary reprove consciousness out of the middle-class dominated NSMs (in particular the anti-militarist and ecological struggles of the 1980s). Anarchism, with its rejection of orthodoxy and willingness to embrace a diverse range of struggles, represented the closest thing around to a theory that would meet the needs of the reproles. But anarchism carries a certain amount of historical baggage that, combined with certain habits picked up from the NSMs, has been a hindrance to the development of a strong revolutionary current among the reproles. In Europe, where the historical experience of anarchism has a more prominent place in political consciousness, there is also a deeper awareness of its historical failings and weaknesses. (The European counterparts of the young activists who turned towards anarchism

in North America instead tended to embrace the libertarian Marxism of the autonomist currents that emerged first in Italy in the '70s and then established themselves in most of Western and Central Europe.)

Anarchism and the Crisis on the Left

The current stagnation within the anarchist movement (the poverty of theoretical discussion and the absence of any meaningful initiative in the field of action) cannot be separated from the larger crisis of the left. Since the early 1980s, there has been a growing acknowledgement by all but the most dogmatic and sectarian forces that there is a profound crisis on the left. This crisis is reflected in the general failure of the left to effectively generate any sort of mass enthusiasm for its politics and in its ability to adequately explain new developments in the world. A series of blows came in 1989 that precipitated a collapse of much of the already withered organized left. The Tiananmen Square massacre, the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe, and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas combined to demoralize almost every wing of the radical left.

For a while it was possible for anarchists to define themselves outside this crisis on the left. The anarchist movement had seemingly no investment in the success of either the Leninist or Social Democratic projects. Much of the failure of the left was generally acknowledged to be related to its statism and authoritarianism. We could smugly say, "I told you so."

But anarchism is a part of the left and the crisis on the left affects us as well. Since the defeat of the Spanish revolution in the 1930s, the anarchist movement has been largely marginalized among revolutionary-minded people. The anarchist movement has generally contented itself with the role of perpetual gadfly, always annoying and occasionally pricking the consciences of those in control of real mass movements. The result has been a deep poverty of serious revolutionary anarchist theory, a substitution of moral posture for critical political analysis.

It is not too difficult for us as anarchists to see why the collapse of Stalinist regimes around the world would deeply shake the Trotskyist movement in spite of their protestations that those regimes did not represent their politics. Trotskyism's identity is built around distinguishing itself from Stalinism. With Stalinism "gone," so goes much of what distinguishes Trotskyism from other varieties of Leninism and it stands revealed as arcane scholasticism. While anarchism has an important pre-Leninist history, what it has meant to be an anarchist for the past seventy-five years has been defined around our opposition to Leninism. For most of the past century, the so-called socialist states have had a dominating or hegemonic influence on the thinking of revolutionary minded people. All currents of revolutionary thought, including anarchism, have stood in the shadows of these state ideologies and have had their development stunted as a result.

The question that the current situation asks of the anarchist movement is no longer "How is what you stand for different than what exists in Russia (or Cuba or China)?" but rather, "How do you explain what is happening in the world now?" and "How do you propose to build a new revolutionary movement from the wreckage of the old?" Unfortunately, most of the anarchist movement is not really interested in venturing into such uncharted theoretical territory, preferring the comfort of a stock set of slogans and pat answers to questions that now have entirely different meanings.

In the 1980s, it made a certain sense for a group of young activists who wanted to challenge the orthodoxies of both the NSMs and "the left" to identify themselves as anarchists. The anti-statism,

anti-authoritarianism, and visionary utopianism of anarchism must be essential ingredients of any serious new revolutionary movement, and the historic tradition of anarchism gave a certain legitimacy (at least in our own eyes) to our often raw and imprecise politics. (In Europe, where identifying with anarchism carries much more specific historical baggage, like-minded radicals identified themselves as autonomists.)

In the 1990s, I believe, the implications of calling ourselves anarchists” is different. The identification with a historical tradition at a moment when the totality of left politics (libertarian and authoritarian) is in serious question, puts us not so much in the camp of that particular historical tradition, but in the camp of defenders of *Historical Tradition*. That is to say that calling ourselves “anarchists” identifies us not as anti-authoritarians but as ideological dinosaurs defending a set of politics that are not so much wrong as they are irrelevant. The weight of anarchist history is no longer an anchor holding us steady in the stormy sea of the authoritarian left but a set of concrete boots dragging us to our deaths in the muck at the bottom of a stagnant lake. The question here is neither the importance of history or of proper respect for our anti-authoritarian ancestors. Future generations will still have much to learn from Durruti, Goldman, Makhno, the Magóns, and others. But it is no longer clear to me why this tradition is more important, for example, than those of the Abolitionists, of the Seminoles, of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. It is clear to me that otherwise critically thinking anarchists, instead of grappling with the new terrain we are on, rely on unexamined anarchist orthodoxies, most notably on questions of organization.

While the left as a whole was KO’ed by the one-two punch of the events of 1989 and the Gulf War in 1991, organizational remnants persist. Different remnants have responded to the new circumstances in one of two ways — either acknowledging the general failure of the left or publicly insisting that nothing has changed and that the current situation calls for the courageous defense of old ideas. Anarchists must make a similar choice between a commitment to rethinking our politics and defending tradition.

It is understandable why, with radical politics in retreat almost everywhere, defending ideas that have informed the struggles of generations might offer comfort in the face of an uncertain future. But comfort is not a revolutionary virtue; we need to face this new situation with the courage to confront the unknown.

Getting Organized

The lengthy exploration of the current political situation above is crucial to confronting the organizational problems that confound Love and Rage. It is tempting to ascribe our organizational failings to individual screw-ups or to look for a magic solution in some structural formula. This fails to understand that organizations are expressions of larger social forces. There are particular choices that confront us, and how we respond to them is important. But we make these choices in a context, and what is a good organizational formula in one situation may be political suicide in another. The following discussion is based on the assumption that building a continental revolutionary organization is a crucial task because the existence of such formal structures is necessary if explosive social contradictions are to be transformed into effective movements for change. Building Love and Rage is about preparing for revolution by putting in place a structure that will be of use in a revolutionary situation.

The Struggle for Organization

At the 1993 Love and Rage conference in San Diego, a number of people who opposed the decisions that were made there felt that they were unfairly characterized as “anti-organizational.” And indeed, since then, most of these people have proceeded to build important local anarchist groups. If the question of organization was a simple one of “for it” or “against it” we would be in much better shape. Building a serious revolutionary organization is not simply a matter of identifying the self-evidently correct structure and then filling it up with members. A revolutionary organization must be built on the basis of a conception of its role in the revolutionary process and the correct direction in which the organization must move. People will leave and new people will join as a result of any important decision we make.

A serious revolutionary organization can only be built through a process of continuous struggle. That struggle must include both the larger social struggles in the outside world and the struggles within the organization over the interpretation of what is taking place in the outside world. It is only through such a process that a revolutionary organization can hope to be politically prepared for a situation in which revolutionary change is a real possibility. Our failure to understand things correctly may cause unnecessary delays or defeats to the revolutionary movement. Differences over the interpretation of what is going on in the world are quite literally matters of life and death and should be treated accordingly.

The Primacy of Politics

There is a tendency in the anarchist movement when talking about questions of organization to become preoccupied with questions of internal dynamics at the expense of talking about what the organization is going to do in the world outside it. This is not to say that internal dynamics are not important. It is to say that the internal dynamics of an organization that doesn't have an impact on the world outside of itself will be consistently lousy, as people who joined the organization in order to change the world are thwarted and feed on each other's inevitable failings.

If Love and Rage is to become an effective revolutionary organization, its development must be driven not by a desire to perfect its internal life, but by an effort to make it useful in the struggle to change the world. Such an effort must be informed by a constant and lively debate about the nature of the world we are trying to change and the events and developments that are taking place within that world. For such a debate to flourish, there needs to be an atmosphere that encourages crucial theoretical work. Theoretical work, the work of studying and discussing questions about the nature of this society and what it will take to transform it, is an absolutely central element of what it means for us to prepare ourselves for a revolutionary situation. We can be the most kick-ass militant and theoretical participants in demonstrations, but without clear and correct ideas guiding our actions this militancy makes little contribution to building a truly revolutionary movement.

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*From A New World in Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writings from the Love and Rage Revolutionary
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