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Twelve Myths About Direct Action

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15th December 2004

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11. Direct action is dangerous and can have negative repercussions for others.

Direct action can be dangerous in a repressive political climate, and it is important that those who practice it make every effort not to endanger others. This is not necessarily an objection to it, however—on the contrary, when it becomes dangerous to act outside established political channels, it becomes all the more important to do so. Authorities may use direct actions as excuses to terrorize innocents, as Hitler did when the Reichstag was set afire, but those in power are the ones who must answer for the injustices they commit in so doing, not those who oppose them. Likewise, though people who practice direct action may indeed run risks, in the face of an insufferable injustice it can be more dangerous and irresponsible to leave it uncontested.

12. Direct action never accomplishes anything.

Every effective political movement throughout history, from the struggle for the eight hour workday to the fight for women's suffrage, has made use of some form of direct action. Direct action can complement other forms of political activity in a variety of ways. If nothing else, it highlights the necessity for institutional reforms, giving those who push for them more bargaining chips; but it can go beyond this supporting role to suggest the possibility of an entirely different organization of human life, in which power is distributed equally and all people have an equal and direct say in all matters that affect them.

French Resistance have demonstrated their courage and accountability by acting against the Nazi occupying army in the full light of day, thus dooming themselves to defeat? For that matter, in a nation increasingly terrorized by police and federal surveillance of just about everyone, is it any wonder that those who express dissent might want to protect their privacy while doing so?

9. Direct action is practiced only by college students/privileged rich kids/desperate poor people/etc.

This allegation is almost always made without reference to concrete facts, as a smear. In fact, direct action is and long has been practiced in a variety of forms by people of all walks of life. The only possible exception to this would be members of the wealthiest and most powerful classes, who have no need to practice any kind of illegal or controversial action because, as if by coincidence, the established political channels are perfectly suited to their needs.

10. Direct action is the work of agents provocateurs.

This is another speculation generally made from a distance, without concrete evidence. To allege that direct action is always the work of police agent provocateurs is disempowering: it rules out the possibility that activists could do such things themselves, overestimating the powers of police intelligence and reinforcing the illusion that the State is omnipotent. Likewise, it preemptively dismisses the value and reality of a diversity of tactics. When people feel entitled to make unfounded claims that every tactic of which they disapprove is a police provocation, this obstructs the very possibility of constructive dialogue about appropriate tactics.

Direct action—that is, any kind of action that bypasses established political channels to accomplish objectives directly—has a long and rich heritage in North America, extending back to the Boston Tea Party and beyond. Despite this, there are many misunderstandings about it, in part due to the ways it has been misrepresented in the corporate media.

1. Direct action is terrorism.

Terrorism is calculated to intimidate and thus paralyze people. Direct action, on the other hand, is intended to inspire and thus motivate people by demonstrating the power individuals have to accomplish goals themselves. While terrorism is the domain of a specialized class that seeks to acquire power for itself alone, direct action demonstrates possibilities that others can make use of, empowering people to take control of their own lives. At most, a given direct action may obstruct the activities of a corporation or institution that activists perceive to be committing an injustice, but this is simply a form of civil disobedience, not terrorism.

2. Direct action is violent.

To say that it is violent to destroy the machinery of a slaughterhouse or to break windows belonging to a party that promotes war is to prioritize property over human and animal life. This objection subtly validates violence against living creatures by focusing all attention on property rights and away from more fundamental issues.

3. Direct action is not political expression, but criminal activity.

Unfortunately, whether or not an action is illegal is a poor measure of whether or not it is just. The Jim Crow laws were, after all, laws. To object to an action on the grounds that it is illegal is to sidestep the more important question of whether or not it is ethical. To argue that we must always obey laws, even when we consider them to be unethical or to enforce unethical conditions, is to suggest that the arbitrary pronouncements of the legal establishment possess a higher moral authority than our own consciences, and to demand complicity in the face of injustice. When laws protect injustice, illegal activity is no vice, and law-abiding docility is no virtue.

4. Direct action is unnecessary where people have freedom of speech.

In a society dominated by an increasingly narrowly focused corporate media, it can be almost impossible to initiate a public dialogue on a subject unless something occurs that brings attention to it. Under such conditions, direct action can be a means of nurturing free speech, not squelching it. Likewise, when people who would otherwise oppose an injustice have accepted that it is inevitable, it is not enough simply to talk about it: one must demonstrate that it is possible to do something about it.

5. Direct action is alienating.

On the contrary, many people who find traditional party politics alienating are inspired and motivated by direct action. Different people find different approaches fulfilling; a movement that is to be

broad-based must include a wide range of options. Sometimes people who share the goals of those who practice direct action while objecting to their means spend all their energy decrying an action that has been carried out. In doing so, they snatch defeat from the jaws of victory: they would do better to seize the opportunity to focus all attention on the issues raised by the action.

6. People who practice direct action should work through the established political channels instead.

Many people who practice direct action also work within the system. A commitment to making use of every institutional means of solving problems does not necessarily preclude an equal commitment to picking up where such means leave off.

7. Direct action is exclusive.

Some forms of direct action are not open to all, but this does not necessarily mean they are without worth. Everyone has different preferences and capabilities, and should be free to act according to them. The important question is how the differing approaches of individuals and groups that share the same long-term goals can be integrated in such a way that they complement each other.

8. Direct action is cowardly.

This accusation is almost always made by those who have the privilege of speaking and acting in public without fearing repercussions: that is to say, those who have power in this society, and those who obediently accept their power. Should the heroes of the