

The New Anarchists

David Graeber

2002

Contents

A globalization movement?	3
Billionaires and clowns	6
Anarchy and peace	8
Practising direct democracy	9
Prefigurative politics	10

It's hard to think of another time when there has been such a gulf between intellectuals and activists; between theorists of revolution and its practitioners. Writers who for years have been publishing essays that sound like position papers for vast social movements that do not in fact exist seem seized with confusion or worse, dismissive contempt, now that real ones are everywhere emerging. It's particularly scandalous in the case of what's still, for no particularly good reason, referred to as the 'anti-globalization' movement, one that has in a mere two or three years managed to transform completely the sense of historical possibilities for millions across the planet. This may be the result of sheer ignorance, or of relying on what might be gleaned from such overtly hostile sources as the *New York Times*; then again, most of what's written even in progressive outlets seems largely to miss the point — or at least, rarely focuses on what participants in the movement really think is most important about it.

As an anthropologist and active participant — particularly in the more radical, direct-action end of the movement — I may be able to clear up some common points of misunderstanding; but the news may not be gratefully received. Much of the hesitation, I suspect, lies in the reluctance of those who have long fancied themselves radicals of some sort to come to terms with the fact that they are really liberals: interested in expanding individual freedoms and pursuing social justice, but not in ways that would seriously challenge the existence of reigning institutions like capital or state. And even many of those who would like to see revolutionary change might not feel entirely happy about having to accept that most of the creative energy for radical politics is now coming from anarchism — a tradition that they have hitherto mostly dismissed — and that taking this movement seriously will necessarily also mean a respectful engagement with it.

I am writing as an anarchist; but in a sense, counting how many people involved in the movement actually call themselves 'anarchists', and in what contexts, is a bit beside the point.¹ The very notion of direct action, with its rejection of a politics which appeals to governments to modify their behaviour, in favour of physical intervention against state power in a form that itself prefigures an alternative — all of this emerges directly from the libertarian tradition. Anarchism is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what's new and hopeful about it. In what follows, then, I will try to clear up what seem to be the three most common misconceptions about the movement — our supposed opposition to something called 'globalization', our supposed 'violence', and our supposed lack of a coherent ideology — and then suggest how radical intellectuals might think about reimagining their own theoretical practice in the light of all of this.

A globalization movement?

The phrase 'anti-globalization movement' is a coinage of the US media and activists have never felt comfortable with it. Insofar as this is a movement against anything, it's against neoliberalism, which can be defined as a kind of market fundamentalism — or, better, market Stalinism — that holds there is only one possible direction for human historical development. The map is held by an elite of economists and corporate flacks, to whom must be ceded all power once held by institutions with any shred of democratic accountability; from now on it will be wielded largely through unelected treaty organizations like the IMF, WTO or NAFTA. In Argentina, or

¹ There are some who take anarchist principles of anti-sectarianism and open-endedness so seriously that they are sometimes reluctant to call themselves 'anarchists' for that very reason.

Estonia, or Taiwan, it would be possible to say this straight out: 'We are a movement against neoliberalism'. But in the US, language is always a problem. The corporate media here is probably the most politically monolithic on the planet: neoliberalism is all there is to see — the background reality; as a result, the word itself cannot be used. The issues involved can only be addressed using propaganda terms like 'free trade' or 'the free market'. So American activists find themselves in a quandary: if one suggests putting 'the N word' (as it's often called) in a pamphlet or press release, alarm bells immediately go off: one is being exclusionary, playing only to an educated elite. There have been all sorts of attempts to frame alternative expressions — we're a 'global justice movement', we're a movement 'against corporate globalization'. None are especially elegant or quite satisfying and, as a result, it is common in meetings to hear the speakers using 'globalization movement' and 'anti-globalization movement' pretty much interchangeably.

The phrase 'globalization movement', though, is really quite apropos. If one takes globalization to mean the effacement of borders and the free movement of people, possessions and ideas, then it's pretty clear that not only is the movement itself a product of globalization, but the majority of groups involved in it — the most radical ones in particular — are far more supportive of globalization in general than are the IMF or WTO. It was an international network called People's Global Action, for example, that put out the first summons for planet-wide days of action such as J18 and N30 — the latter the original call for protest against the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle. And PGA in turn owes its origins to the famous International Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, which took place knee-deep in the jungle mud of rainy-season Chiapas, in August 1996; and was itself initiated, as Subcomandante Marcos put it, 'by all the rebels around the world'. People from over 50 countries came streaming into the Zapatista-held village of La Realidad. The vision for an 'intercontinental network of resistance' was laid out in the Second Declaration of La Realidad: 'We declare that we will make a collective network of all our particular struggles and resistances, an intercontinental network of resistance against neoliberalism, an intercontinental network of resistance for humanity':

Let it be a network of voices that resist the war Power wages on them.

A network of voices that not only speak, but also struggle and resist for humanity and against neoliberalism.

A network that covers the five continents and helps to resist the death that Power promises us.²

This, the Declaration made clear, was 'not an organizing structure; it has no central head or decision maker; it has no central command or hierarchies. We are the network, all of us who resist.'

The following year, European Zapatista supporters in the Ya Basta! groups organized a second *encuentro* in Spain, where the idea of the network process was taken forward: PGA was born at a meeting in Geneva in February 1998. From the start, it included not only anarchist groups and radical trade unions in Spain, Britain and Germany, but a Gandhian socialist farmers' league in India (the KRRS), associations of Indonesian and Sri Lankan fisherfolk, the Argentinian teachers' union, indigenous groups such as the Maori of New Zealand and Kuna of Ecuador, the Brazilian

² Read by Subcomandante Marcos during the closing session of the First Intercontinental Encuentro, 3 August 1996: *Our Word is Our Weapon: Selected Writings*, Juana Ponce de León, ed., New York 2001.

Landless Workers' Movement, a network made up of communities founded by escaped slaves in South and Central America — and any number of others. For a long time, North America was scarcely represented, save for the Canadian Postal Workers' Union — which acted as PGA's main communications hub, until it was largely replaced by the internet — and a Montreal-based anarchist group called CLAC.

If the movement's origins are internationalist, so are its demands. The three-plank programme of Ya Basta! in Italy, for instance, calls for a universally guaranteed 'basic income', global citizenship, guaranteeing free movement of people across borders, and free access to new technology — which in practice would mean extreme limits on patent rights (themselves a very insidious form of protectionism). The noborder network — their slogan: 'No One is Illegal' — has organized week-long campsites, laboratories for creative resistance, on the Polish — German and Ukrainian borders, in Sicily and at Tarifa in Spain. Activists have dressed up as border guards, built boat-bridges across the River Oder and blockaded Frankfurt Airport with a full classical orchestra to protest against the deportation of immigrants (deportees have died of suffocation on Lufthansa and KLM flights). This summer's camp is planned for Strasbourg, home of the Schengen Information System, a search-and-control database with tens of thousands of terminals across Europe, targeting the movements of migrants, activists, anyone they like.

More and more, activists have been trying to draw attention to the fact that the neoliberal vision of 'globalization' is pretty much limited to the movement of capital and commodities, and actually increases barriers against the free flow of people, information and ideas — the size of the US border guard has almost tripled since the signing of NAFTA. Hardly surprising: if it were not possible to effectively imprison the majority of people in the world in impoverished enclaves, there would be no incentive for Nike or The Gap to move production there to begin with. Given a free movement of people, the whole neoliberal project would collapse. This is another thing to bear in mind when people talk about the decline of 'sovereignty' in the contemporary world: the main achievement of the nation-state in the last century has been the establishment of a uniform grid of heavily policed barriers across the world. It is precisely this international system of control that we are fighting against, in the name of genuine globalization.

These connexions — and the broader links between neoliberal policies and mechanisms of state coercion (police, prisons, militarism) — have played a more and more salient role in our analyses as we ourselves have confronted escalating levels of state repression. Borders became a major issue in Europe during the IMF meetings at Prague, and later EU meetings in Nice. At the FTAA summit in Quebec City last summer, invisible lines that had previously been treated as if they didn't exist (at least for white people) were converted overnight into fortifications against the movement of would-be global citizens, demanding the right to petition their rulers. The three-kilometre 'wall' constructed through the center of Quebec City, to shield the heads of state junketing inside from any contact with the populace, became the perfect symbol for what neoliberalism actually means in human terms. The spectacle of the Black Bloc, armed with wire cutters and grappling hooks, joined by everyone from Steelworkers to Mohawk warriors to tear down the wall, became — for that very reason — one of the most powerful moments in the movement's history.³

There is one striking contrast between this and earlier internationalisms, however. The former usually ended up exporting Western organizational models to the rest of the world; in this,

³ Helping tear it down was certainly one of the more exhilarating experiences of this author's life.

the flow has if anything been the other way around. Many, perhaps most, of the movement's signature techniques — including mass nonviolent civil disobedience itself — were first developed in the global South. In the long run, this may well prove the single most radical thing about it.

Billionaires and clowns

In the corporate media, the word 'violent' is invoked as a kind of mantra — invariably, repeatedly — whenever a large action takes place: 'violent protests', 'violent clashes', 'police raid headquarters of violent protesters', even 'violent riots' (there are other kinds?). Such expressions are typically invoked when a simple, plain-English description of what took place (people throwing paint-bombs, breaking windows of empty storefronts, holding hands as they blockaded intersections, cops beating them with sticks) might give the impression that the only truly violent parties were the police. The US media is probably the biggest offender here — and this despite the fact that, after two years of increasingly militant direct action, it is still impossible to produce a single example of anyone to whom a US activist has caused physical injury. I would say that what really disturbs the powers-that-be is not the 'violence' of the movement but its relative lack of it; governments simply do not know how to deal with an overtly revolutionary movement that refuses to fall into familiar patterns of armed resistance.

The effort to destroy existing paradigms is usually quite self-conscious. Where once it seemed that the only alternatives to marching along with signs were either Gandhian non-violent civil disobedience or outright insurrection, groups like the Direct Action Network, Reclaim the Streets, Black Blocs or Tute Bianche have all, in their own ways, been trying to map out a completely new territory in between. They're attempting to invent what many call a 'new language' of civil disobedience, combining elements of street theatre, festival and what can only be called non-violent warfare — non-violent in the sense adopted by, say, Black Bloc anarchists, in that it eschews any direct physical harm to human beings. Ya Basta! for example is famous for its tute bianche or white-overalls tactics: men and women dressed in elaborate forms of padding, ranging from foam armour to inner tubes to rubber-duffy flotation devices, helmets and chemical-proof white jumpsuits (their British cousins are well-clad Wombles). As this mock army pushes its way through police barricades, all the while protecting each other against injury or arrest, the ridiculous gear seems to reduce human beings to cartoon characters — misshapen, ungainly, foolish, largely indestructible. The effect is only increased when lines of costumed figures attack police with balloons and water pistols or, like the 'Pink Bloc' at Prague and elsewhere, dress as fairies and tickle them with feather dusters.

At the American Party Conventions, Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) dressed in high-camp tuxedos and evening gowns and tried to press wads of fake money into the cops' pockets, thanking them for repressing the dissent. None were even slightly hurt — perhaps police are given aversion therapy against hitting anyone in a tuxedo. The Revolutionary Anarchist Clown Bloc, with their high bicycles, rainbow wigs and squeaky mallets, confused the cops by attacking each other (or the billionaires). They had all the best chants: 'Democracy? Ha Ha Ha!', 'The pizza united can never be defeated', 'Hey ho, hey ho — ha ha, hee hee!', as well as meta-chants like 'Call! Response! Call! Response!' and — everyone's favourite — 'Three Word Chant! Three Word Chant!'

In Quebec City, a giant catapult built along mediaeval lines (with help from the left caucus of the Society for Creative Anachronism) lobbed soft toys at the FTAA. Ancient-warfare techniques have been studied to adopt for non-violent but very militant forms of confrontation: there were peltasts and hoplites (the former mainly from the Prince Edwards Islands, the latter from Montreal) at Quebec City, and research continues into Roman-style shield walls. Blockading has become an art form: if you make a huge web of strands of yarn across an intersection, it's actually impossible to cross; motorcycle cops get trapped like flies. The Liberation Puppet with its arms fully extended can block a four-lane highway, while snake-dances can be a form of mobile blockade. Rebels in London last Mayday planned Monopoly Board actions — Building Hotels on Mayfair for the homeless, Sale of the Century in Oxford Street, Guerrilla Gardening — only partly disrupted by heavy policing and torrential rain. But even the most militant of the militant — eco-saboteurs like the Earth Liberation Front — scrupulously avoid doing anything that would cause harm to human beings (or animals, for that matter). It's this scrambling of conventional categories that so throws the forces of order and makes them desperate to bring things back to familiar territory (simple violence): even to the point, as in Genoa, of encouraging fascist hooligans to run riot as an excuse to use overwhelming force against everybody else.

One could trace these forms of action back to the stunts and guerrilla theater of the Yippies or Italian 'metropolitan Indians' in the sixties, the squatter battles in Germany or Italy in the seventies and eighties, even the peasant resistance to the expansion of Tokyo airport. But it seems to me that here, too, the really crucial origins lie with the Zapatistas, and other movements in the global South. In many ways, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) represents an attempt by people who have always been denied the right to non-violent, civil resistance to seize it; essentially, to call the bluff of neoliberalism and its pretenses to democratization and yielding power to 'civil society'. It is, as its commanders say, an army which aspires not to be an army any more (it's something of an open secret that, for the last five years at least, they have not even been carrying real guns). As Marcos explains their conversion from standard tactics of guerrilla war:

We thought the people would either not pay attention to us, or come together with us to fight. But they did not react in either of these two ways. It turned out that all these people, who were thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, did not want to rise up with us but ... neither did they want us to be annihilated. They wanted us to dialogue. This completely broke our scheme and ended up defining zapatismo, the neo-zapatismo.⁴

Now the EZLN is the sort of army that organizes 'invasions' of Mexican military bases in which hundreds of rebels sweep in entirely unarmed to yell at and try to shame the resident soldiers. Similarly, mass actions by the Landless Workers' Movement gain an enormous moral authority in Brazil by reoccupying unused lands entirely non-violently. In either case, it's pretty clear that if the same people had tried the same thing twenty years ago, they would simply have been shot.

⁴ Interviewed by Yvon LeBot, Subcomandante Marcos: El Sueño Zapatista, Barcelona 1997, pp. 214 — 5; Bill Weinberg, *Homage to Chiapas*, London 2000, p. 188.

Anarchy and peace

However you choose to trace their origins, these new tactics are perfectly in accord with the general anarchistic inspiration of the movement, which is less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it. The critical thing, though, is that all this is only possible in a general atmosphere of peace. In fact, it seems to me that these are the ultimate stakes of struggle at the moment: one that may well determine the overall direction of the twenty-first century. We should remember that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when most Marxist parties were rapidly becoming reformist social democrats, anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism were the centre of the revolutionary left.⁵ The situation only really changed with World War I and the Russian Revolution. It was the Bolsheviks' success, we are usually told, that led to the decline of anarchism — with the glorious exception of Spain — and catapulted Communism to the fore. But it seems to me one could look at this another way.

In the late nineteenth century most people honestly believed that war between industrialized powers was becoming obsolete; colonial adventures were a constant, but a war between France and England, on French or English soil, seemed as unthinkable as it would today. By 1900, even the use of passports was considered an antiquated barbarism. The 'short twentieth century' was, by contrast, probably the most violent in human history, almost entirely preoccupied with either waging world wars or preparing for them. Hardly surprising, then, that anarchism quickly came to seem unrealistic, if the ultimate measure of political effectiveness became the ability to maintain huge mechanized killing machines. This is one thing that anarchists, by definition, can never be very good at. Neither is it surprising that Marxist parties — who have been only too good at it — seemed eminently practical and realistic in comparison. Whereas the moment the Cold War ended, and war between industrialized powers once again seemed unthinkable, anarchism reappeared just where it had been at the end of the nineteenth century, as an international movement at the very centre of the revolutionary left.

If this is right, it becomes clearer what the ultimate stakes of the current 'anti-terrorist' mobilization are. In the short run, things do look very frightening. Governments who were desperately scrambling for some way to convince the public we were terrorists even before September 11 now feel they've been given *carte blanche*; there is little doubt that a lot of good people are about to suffer terrible repression. But in the long run, a return to twentieth-century levels of violence is simply impossible. The September 11 attacks were clearly something of a fluke (the first wildly ambitious terrorist scheme in history that actually worked); the spread of nuclear weapons is ensuring that larger and larger portions of the globe will be for all practical purposes off-limits to conventional warfare. And if war is the health of the state, the prospects for anarchist-style organizing can only be improving.

⁵ 'In 1905 — 1914 the Marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a de facto non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism.' Eric Hobsbawm, 'Bolshevism and the Anarchists', *Revolutionaries*, New York 1973, p. 61.

Practising direct democracy

A constant complaint about the globalization movement in the progressive press is that, while tactically brilliant, it lacks any central theme or coherent ideology. (This seems to be the left equivalent of the corporate media's claims that we are a bunch of dumb kids touting a bundle of completely unrelated causes — free Mumia, dump the debt, save the old-growth forests.) Another line of attack is that the movement is plagued by a generic opposition to all forms of structure or organization. It's distressing that, two years after Seattle, I should have to write this, but someone obviously should: in North America especially, this is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. Ultimately, it aspires to be much more than that, because ultimately it aspires to reinvent daily life as whole. But unlike many other forms of radicalism, it has first organized itself in the political sphere — mainly because this was a territory that the powers that be (who have shifted all their heavy artillery into the economic) have largely abandoned.

Over the past decade, activists in North America have been putting enormous creative energy into reinventing their groups' own internal processes, to create viable models of what functioning direct democracy could actually look like. In this we've drawn particularly, as I've noted, on examples from outside the Western tradition, which almost invariably rely on some process of consensus finding, rather than majority vote. The result is a rich and growing panoply of organizational instruments — spokescouncils, affinity groups, facilitation tools, break-outs, fishbowls, blocking concerns, vibe-watchers and so on — all aimed at creating forms of democratic process that allow initiatives to rise from below and attain maximum effective solidarity, without stifling dissenting voices, creating leadership positions or compelling anyone to do anything which they have not freely agreed to do.

The basic idea of consensus process is that, rather than voting, you try to come up with proposals acceptable to everyone — or at least, not highly objectionable to anyone: first state the proposal, then ask for 'concerns' and try to address them. Often, at this point, people in the group will propose 'friendly amendments' to add to the original proposal, or otherwise alter it, to ensure concerns are addressed. Then, finally, when you call for consensus, you ask if anyone wishes to 'block' or 'stand aside'. Standing aside is just saying, 'I would not myself be willing to take part in this action, but I wouldn't stop anyone else from doing it'. Blocking is a way of saying 'I think this violates the fundamental principles or purposes of being in the group'. It functions as a veto: any one person can kill a proposal completely by blocking it — although there are ways to challenge whether a block is genuinely principled.

There are different sorts of groups. Spokescouncils, for example, are large assemblies that coordinate between smaller 'affinity groups'. They are most often held before, and during, large-scale direct actions like Seattle or Quebec. Each affinity group (which might have between 4 and 20 people) selects a 'spoke', who is empowered to speak for them in the larger group. Only the spokes can take part in the actual process of finding consensus at the council, but before major decisions they break out into affinity groups again and each group comes to consensus on what position they want their spoke to take (not as unwieldy as it might sound). Break-outs, on the other hand, are when a large meeting temporarily splits up into smaller ones that will focus on

making decisions or generating proposals, which can then be presented for approval before the whole group when it reassembles. Facilitation tools are used to resolve problems or move things along if they seem to be bogging down. You can ask for a brainstorming session, in which people are only allowed to present ideas but not to criticize other people's; or for a non-binding straw poll, where people raise their hands just to see how everyone feels about a proposal, rather than to make a decision. A fishbowl would only be used if there is a profound difference of opinion: you can take two representatives for each side — one man and one woman — and have the four of them sit in the middle, everyone else surrounding them silently, and see if the four can't work out a synthesis or compromise together, which they can then present as a proposal to the whole group.

Prefigurative politics

This is very much a work in progress, and creating a culture of democracy among people who have little experience of such things is necessarily a painful and uneven business, full of all sorts of stumblings and false starts, but — as almost any police chief who has faced us on the streets can attest — direct democracy of this sort can be astoundingly effective. And it is difficult to find anyone who has fully participated in such an action whose sense of human possibilities has not been profoundly transformed as a result. It's one thing to say, 'Another world is possible'. It's another to experience it, however momentarily. Perhaps the best way to start thinking about these organizations — the Direct Action Network, for example — is to see them as the diametrical opposite of the sectarian Marxist groups; or, for that matter, of the sectarian Anarchist groups.⁶ Where the democratic-centralist 'party' puts its emphasis on achieving a complete and correct theoretical analysis, demands ideological uniformity and tends to juxtapose the vision of an egalitarian future with extremely authoritarian forms of organization in the present, these openly seek diversity. Debate always focuses on particular courses of action; it's taken for granted that no one will ever convert anyone else entirely to their point of view. The motto might be, 'If you are willing to act like an anarchist now, your long-term vision is pretty much your own business'. Which seems only sensible: none of us know how far these principles can actually take us, or what a complex society based on them would end up looking like. Their ideology, then, is immanent in the anti-authoritarian principles that underlie their practice, and one of their more explicit principles is that things should stay this way.

Finally, I'd like to tease out some of the questions the direct-action networks raise about alienation, and its broader implications for political practice. For example: why is it that, even when there is next to no other constituency for revolutionary politics in a capitalist society, the one group most likely to be sympathetic to its project consists of artists, musicians, writers, and others involved in some form of non-alienated production? Surely there must be a link between the actual experience of first imagining things and then bringing them into being, individually or collectively, and the ability to envision social alternatives — particularly, the possibility of a society itself premised on less alienated forms of creativity? One might even suggest that revolutionary coalitions always tend to rely on a kind of alliance between a society's least alienated and its

⁶ What one might call capital-A anarchist groups, such as, say, the North East Federation of Anarchist Communists — whose members must accept the Platform of the Anarchist Communists set down in 1926 by Nestor Makhno — do still exist, of course. But the small-a anarchists are the real locus of historical dynamism right now.

most oppressed; actual revolutions, one could then say, have tended to happen when these two categories most broadly overlap.

This would, at least, help explain why it almost always seems to be peasants and craftsmen — or even more, newly proletarianized former peasants and craftsmen — who actually overthrow capitalist regimes; and not those inured to generations of wage labour. It would also help explain the extraordinary importance of indigenous people's struggles in the new movement: such people tend to be simultaneously the very least alienated and most oppressed people on earth. Now that new communication technologies have made it possible to include them in global revolutionary alliances, as well as local resistance and revolt, it is well-nigh inevitable that they should play a profoundly inspirational role.

Previous texts in this series have been Naomi Klein, 'Reclaiming the Commons' (NLR 9), Subcomandante Marcos, 'The Punch Card and the Hourglass' (NLR 9), John Sellers, 'Raising a Ruckus' (NLR 10) and José Bové, 'A Farmers' International?' (NLR 12).

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



David Graeber
The New Anarchists
2002

Retrieved on May 14th, 2009 from www.newleftreview.org
Originally published in "New Left Review", 13 – January-February 2002.

theanarchistlibrary.org