Beyond May Day

From Ritual to Resistance

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Perhaps few recurring events show the great disparity that exists between activist subcultures and broader working class and poor communities in North America than the May Day celebrations that happen each year (with a few exceptions). Despite its proud origins in working class movements of resistance, and its resonance in the mass struggles of the 1930s, May Day in Canada and the US has become little more than a historical commemoration among certain subcultures, an opportunity to (once again) unfurl black flags and distribute pamphlets (largely to one another). For the most part May Day events are little more than replays generally of the rote ritualism of the Left, with a bit heavier symbolism and sentimentality.

Even as outreach moments, to share histories of class struggle and perspectives on revolutionary politics and change, the May Day festivals in Canada and the US have been massively unsuccessful. Typically people with some connection already to the subcultures or with some awareness of, and interest in, radical histories show up and participate while bemused members of the community glance fleetingly at the parade or pay no attention at all.

On the whole May Day activities have little resonance or meaning for working class and oppressed communities in North America, even where there is some recognition of May Day or appreciation for its history—particularly among people from backgrounds in working class cultures in Europe or Latin America.

This year, with the impetus of the Occupy waves a call has gone out for a May Day General Strike. This is the familiar hope for May Day and one that many of us have mobilized toward before (without any real capacity or promise to actually pull off). This most recent call too has shown tendencies to privilege image and symbolism—marches under insurrectionary rhetoric—over more modest organizing work on building or extending militant infrastructures in our communities. Will May Day be an opportunity for more than noisy marches and perhaps the stage for a few more sources of riot porn? One can hope.

Having participated in numerous efforts to revitalize May Day in various Canadian contexts over the last twenty or so years, I have also done some work to organize May Day actions locally again this year as well. I have seen first hand the pull of symbolism and myth and tendencies to default into black flag marches and the distribution of sectariana that dominate too much of contemporary Left activity.

What is needed, well beyond May Day, is a real and honest assessment of forces and, based on that assessment, strategies for developing the sorts of capacities that might make the case for a General Strike more than a mythic yearning. Perhaps a May Day call in the near future would be an opportunity for rooted projects of resistance to celebrate their work and extend the real and grounded connections they might be building in specific neighborhoods and workplaces.

A history forged in struggle

May Day celebrations of International Workers' Day emerged in a period, encompassing the Industrial Revolution, of great class conflict as workers seeking better working and living conditions opposed powerful industrialists backed by governments and institutions of the criminal justice system that acted to protect the claims of elites to property and profit. Class struggle, rather than hidden away in workplaces, was often open, and often violent. Working people recognized that they were being exploited by business owners and organized to improve their lives

and escape the exploitative conditions of their labor, not only through improved working conditions but through calls for workers' control of the industries in which they worked.

Chicago was the site of some of the most vicious crackdowns by state forces, police and military, against labor organizing and unions. The first great struggles for the eight hour workday initiated in Chicago. These were often tumultuous and bloody struggles. In 1886, during a demonstration and rally for the eight hour day, a dynamite bomb was thrown by an unknown person into a crowd assembled at Haymarket Square. What is known as the Haymarket Massacre left several people dead (mostly police killed by friendly fire) led to a violent wave of repression against labor and community organizers and union members. It resulted in the judicial frame up of eight people identified as anarchist labor organizers (George Engel, Samuel Fielden, Adolph Fischer, Louis Lingg, Oscar Neebe, Albert Parsons, Michael Schwab, and August Spies). Four were convicted and executed while a fifth committed suicide while in prison. All of this occurred despite that fact that the prosecution admitted that none of the defendants had actually thrown the bomb.

Clearly the men were targeted because of their political perspectives and activities defending working people against exploitation by business owners. They were targeted because they posed a real or perceived threat to corporate property and profitability. The personal identities of the accused men are even more telling. Beyond being anarchist labor organizers, five of the men were German immigrants and another was of German descent. Another was an immigrant from England. Clearly class intersected with ethnicity and national origin in the targeting of organizers for prosecution. At the time elites expressed much concern publicly that immigrant radicals were "contaminating" the domestic workforce with supposedly foreign ideas like anarchism and socialism. Such claims have persisted throughout US history, with echoes in Canada, as a means of discrediting labor and community organizers and presenting them and their ideas as outsiders or aliens.

The Haymarket Martyrs, as they have come to be known, were clearly innocent of the crimes of which they were accused, and for which five of them had their lives taken. They were set up by the state, acting on behalf of business owners, as scapegoats to serve as a warning to other labor and community organizers, and the poor and oppressed more broadly, not to take up the struggle for working class justice and equality. The Haymarket Martyrs were killed by the state largely because they held more radical views on social inequality and injustice, including anarchist and Marxist perspectives. To say their perspectives were radical, if one looks at the origin of the term radical, simply means that they went beyond surface explanations to get to the root of the problem.

The frame up, show trials, and executions of the Haymarket Martyrs serve, once again, as a reminder of the role of power in the selection, promotion, dissemination, or silencing of ideas. It is a clear illustration of the part played by powerful groups, economic and political elites, in the privileging of certain ideas over others. It shows that those ideas which confront and challenge power and authority within unequal societies face imposing, even lethal, obstacles in gaining a broad public hearing. The history of capitalist societies is filled with examples similar to the tragedy of the Haymarket Martyrs. Working class and poor people who oppose exploitation and oppression are arrested, defamed, and executed on a regular basis. Indeed, this is the unspoken story of criminal (in)justice in class based societies, including Canada and the US.

May Day celebrations globally, up to the present day, commemorate the Haymarket Martyrs while asserting a public commitment to revolutionary working class struggle. It is a celebration

of the working class fighting spirit and should be a cultural touchstone for all working class people in the US and Canada (as it is for many globally).

In 1889 the first Congress of the Second International called for international demonstrations in 1890 to mark the anniversary of Chicago protests. May Day as an annual International Workers Day was formally asserted at the International's Congress of 1891. Riots have broken out on various May Days in the US, notably in Cleveland in 1894 and 1919. Calls have repeatedly gone out for May Day as the start of a General Strike. In many countries workers' May Day has been recognized as a holiday. Such has not been the case in the US and Canada, where Labor Day (first weekend in September) has been instituted as a workers' holiday. Indeed in the US Labor Day was explicitly chosen as a workers' holiday (recognized officially by the administration of President Grover Cleveland) to avoid commemoration of Haymarket and to lessen the possibility of riots. Perversely, given that May Day was often a day for working class demands for universal peace, the state capitalist countries, the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba, have used May Day as a day for mass displays of militarism, with military parades.

Today, in Canada and the US, May Day is largely a focal point for anarchists, communists, socialists, and some labor activists. Yet it might once again come to mean something more for broader sectors of the working class. To do so efforts will need to be made to go beyond the marches and parades and return May Day to a meaningful celebration of rooted struggles.

Beyond ritualism

There is a rote ritualism that gives street demos and public expressions of dissent priority over other strategies and tactics. Yet mass demos that bring together atomized individuals without a real base or infrastructures supporting the mobilizations have minimal real impact. As James Herod suggests:

But opposition movements gravitate again and again to these kinds of actions. "Taking to the Streets," we call it. Yet we can't build a new social world in the streets. As long as we're only in the streets, whereas our opponents function through enduring organizations like governments, corporations, and police, we will always be on the receiving end of tear gas, pepper spray, and rubber bullets, and almost everywhere in the world but North America or Europe, real bullets, napalm, poisons, and bombs. (2007, 3)

It seems highly likely, indeed almost certain, that the spectacular waves of alternative globalization struggles from the summit protests since Seattle in 1999 to the ongoing Occupy movements launched in 2011, will lose momentum and subside or drift into reformism in the absence of building real connections and moving toward struggles for control in workplaces and neighborhoods. The realms of workplaces, neighborhoods, and households have largely been ignored or abandoned as sites of transformative struggle by current activist movements (Herod 2007, 2). Workplace struggles, where they exist at all, are dominated by bureaucratic mainstream unions focused on bargaining compromises with employers. Household organizing has been largely overlooked by radical activists—apart from those who retreat into their own (privatized and detached) collective houses. Issues of mental health and wellbeing have been given too little attention in movements focused on economics and politics in a more traditional and limited fashion.

Building infrastructures of resistance

Anarchists recognize (or should) that struggles for a better world beyond state capitalism must occur on two simultaneous levels. It must be capable of defeating states and capital and it must, at the same time, provide infrastructures or foundations of the future society in the present day. Indeed, this latter process will be a fundamental part of the work of defeating states and capital.

Through infrastructures of resistance movements will build alternatives but, as importantly, have capacities to defend the new social formations. These infrastructures of resistance will directly confront state capitalist power. Thus they will need to be defended from often savage attack. The key impulse is to shift the terrain of anti-capitalist struggle from a defensive position—reacting to elite policies and practices or merely offering dissent—to an offensive one—contesting ruling structures and offering workable alternatives. Movements need to shift from a position of resistance to one of active transformation.

There is a pressing need to take decision-making out of government bureaucracies, parliament, and corporate suites and boardrooms and relocate it in autonomous assemblies of working class and poor people. There is also a need to take activism out of the atypical realms of demonstrations and protests and root it in everyday contexts and the daily experiences of working class and poor people's social lives.

This would serve to meet practical needs—of shelter, education, health, and wellbeing—while also raising visions for broader alternatives and stoking the capacity to imagine or see new possibilities.

Building infrastructures of resistance will directly affect movements in practical and visionary ways. It will also challenge ruling elites by pushing them into reactive, rather than purely offensive, and confident, positions. Such infrastructures of resistance would shift possibilities for strategizing and mobilization. They might render demonstrations unnecessary.

As Herod suggests:

> "If we had reorganized ourselves into neighborhood, workplace, and household assemblies, and were struggling to seize power there, then we would have a base from which to stop ruling-class offensives like neoliberalism. If we then chose to demonstrate in the streets, there would be some teeth to it, rather than it being just an isolated ephemeral event, which can be pretty much ignored by our rulers. We would not be just protesting but countering. We have to organize ourselves in such a way that we have the power to counter them, not just protest against them, to refuse them [and] to neutralize them. This cannot be done by affinity groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or isolated individuals converging periodically at world summits to protest against the ruling class, but only by free associations rooted in normal everyday life." (2007, 2–3)

Transformation must focus on controlling means of reproduction as well as means of production. Focus on workers control alone leaves communities unable to allocate resources effectively and efficiently to meet broader needs (social or ecological). At the same time, community control without control of means of production would be futile, a fantasy. Even more, leaving households as privatized realms would reinforce an unequal gender division of labor and reinforce the duality of public and private realms of which anarchists are generally critical (Herod 2007, 13). At

the very least, neighborhood assemblies will constantly lose people who need to move in search of employment in the absence of worker control of industry.

A new social world cannot be built from scratch. Nor does it need to be. The mutual aid relationships and already existing associations that people have organized around work and personal interests (clubs, groups, informal workplace networks, even subcultures) can provide possible resources. At the same time, many infrastructures are needed, even today, in working class and poor neighborhoods and households, many workers have only loose informal connections in their workplaces. In apartment complexes, households can link up in direct assemblies to organize shared resources. Some might include cooking, maintenance, laundry, health care, education, birthing rooms, and recreational facilities (Herod 2007, 11).

Building infrastructures of resistance encourages novel ways of thinking about revolutionary transformation. Rather than the familiar form of street organization or protest action, within constructive anarchist approaches, the action is in the organizing. There need to be already existing infrastructures or else a radical or revolutionary transformation will be impossible (or disastrous). On the need for pre-existing revolutionary infrastructures, we might concur with Herod who suggests:

> Workplace associations would have to be permanent assemblies, with years of experience under their belts, before they could have a chance of success. They cannot be new forms suddenly thrown up in the depths of a crisis or the middle of a general strike, with a strong government still waiting in the wings, supported by its fully operational military forces. (2007, 26)

Similarly general strikes cannot have a meaningful impact in the absence of infrastructures of resistance. As Herod notes:

> "General strikes cannot destroy capitalism. There is an upper limit of about six weeks as to how long they can even last. Beyond that society starts to disintegrate. But since the general strikers have not even thought about reconstituting society through alternative social arrangements, let alone created them, they are compelled to go back to their jobs just to survive, to keep from starving. All a government has to do is wait them out, perhaps making a few concessions to placate the masses. This is what Charles de Gaulle did in France in 1968." (2007, 27)

Under general strike conditions essential goods and services would be absent. Water, energy, food, and medical services would not be available without alternative associations or capacities to occupy and run workplaces to meet human social needs. These sorts of takeover themselves require pre-existing infrastructures.

Unions

One of the infrastructures that requires a real alternative is the labor union, institutions that have been at the heart of working class (and May Day) struggles. For most anarchists, unions have lost any emancipatory capacities they might have once held. Indeed, for many anarchists, unions were never geared toward emancipation from capitalism, apart from the examples posed

by a few syndicalist unions such as the Industrial Workers of the World in North America or the Conféderation National de Trabajo (CNT).

In some ways the role of radical capacity of unions is a moot point since unionization rates have declined to miniscule proportions in industries in the United States and Canada. There is presently an eight percent unionization rate in non-governmental workplaces in the United States. It is likely that the union movement will not recover, at least in its previously understood and recognized forms. As Herod suggests:

> Even if current labor activists succeed and rebuild unions to what they once were, can we expect these newly refashioned unions to accomplish more than previous ones did, at the height of the unionization drives of a strong labor movement — a movement that was embedded in communist, socialist, and anarchist working-class cultures that have now been obliterated? Hardly. (2007, 29)

So the door is wide open, the floor cleared for new forms of working class workplace association or organization. Yet, there have been only halting, experimental attempts to fill the void. Some have been false starts while others hold some promise. Those that are most promising suggest a coming together of rank and file activists and militants.

Unions manage the labor and wage relationship. They do not oppose it. They represent a bureaucratic structure outside of the workplace rather than a democratic free association of workers within it. In fact, mainstream unions often work to stamp out or disband such associations where they do emerge in workplaces and challenge management and ownership.

Unions were readily co-opted and indeed co-opted themselves to become little more than mid-level managers of the contract and a range of working conditions (around pay, hours, job descriptions, vacations). Unions became disciplinary agencies against the autonomous activities of the membership. They prevent or manage strikes, job actions, sabotage, and occupations. They mobilize against absenteeism. There can be no meaningful workplace strike without some workplace organizing. Militant organizing in the workplace requires rank and file alternatives, such as flying squads, working groups, and direct action groups.

Conclusion

Anarchist revolutionaries must radically shift the terrain of anti-capitalist struggles, moving to new battlegrounds rather than staying in the streets of protest and the town squares of Occupy movements. For Herod and other constructive anarchists there are three primary sites of struggle with which anarchists must be engaged. These are the neighborhoods, workplaces, and households. Successful organizing in these areas should provide means to defeat states and capital, while also making the new world in the present—rather than waiting for a post-capitalist future. This shift must involve offensive as well as defensive strategies.

Movements have too often, for too long, been caught up in defensive or reactive struggles—responding to pieces of harmful legislation or damaging public policy, or opposing specific corporate or government practices. Such pursuits have dominated the vision of movements and activists in the Global North. It has led to a staleness of approach that fails to inspire people while leading instead to frustration and demoralization as rote repetitions of rituals are played out in response to external decisions by others (rather than asserting internal or organic needs

and desires of the people directly involved). Instead, movements need to affirm their own wishes and visions of a better world.

Even more, the rituals of street protest do little to actually challenge power or structure of inequality. Typically they simply serve to reinforce the notion that liberal democracies allow spaces for dissent and divergent views. One might question the amount of energy, resources, and time put into single issue campaigns, street demonstrations, and camps on public lands. As a former Right wing Premier of Ontario once remarked dismissively, in the face of mass street demonstrations: "I don't do protests."

Yet spectacular ritual events like demonstrations, protests, and public occupations dominate activist imaginations and organizational visions. This demonstration fixation has hindered social movements in liberal democracies for generations. The present period offers some new and encouraging openings—windows of opportunity for radical perspectives and movements against and beyond states and capital. To take advantage of this moment it is necessary to take a hard look at the ingrained rituals that have come to dominate movements, particularly those holdovers from periods of lesser mobilization.

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