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What is Direct Action?

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Direct Action is a phrase that gets thrown around a lot when describing anarchist tactics.... and rightly so, since it's one of the main ways anarchists put our values of autonomy, self-organization and mutual aid into practice. So... what is it exactly? Well, a simple definition would be to say that a direct action is a political action aimed at achieving a specific goal or objective, and which is carried out directly by an individual or group of people, without appealing to a higher authority for legitimacy.

Now, this broad definition covers a huge range of activities... everything from banner drops, to prison breaks. And it doesn't necessarily tell us much about the politics of those carrying out the action itself. Direct actions are tactics— meaning that they are a specific type of action that can be used to implement a wide variety of strategies. While you don't have to be an anarchist in order to carry out, or to participate in a direct action, the concept itself holds a special importance for anarchists and other anti-authoritarian radicals. And that's because well-timed and well-executed direct actions can offer an escape from the endless cycle of representational politics, which assumes its highest form in the state. The German philosopher

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Max Weber famously defined the state as a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force.

In other words, state violence, whether dispensed by a politician's pen, a judge's gavel, or a cop's baton, is a manifestation of legitimate force, and a harsh reminder of the state's role as the ultimate mediator of social conflict. This mandate includes everything from interpersonal disputes that end up settled in the courts, or by someone calling the cops... all the way up to the broader conflicts that spring from systemic inequality and the structural imbalances inherent to capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, ableism and hetero-patriarchy. In its purest form, direct action does not aim to persuade those in power, but seeks to foster and assert the power of those carrying out the action themselves.

When people carry out a direct action, they are rejecting the state's monopoly on decision-making, and asserting their own autonomy while providing an example for others to follow. To take just one example, rather than petitioning a politician to vote against the construction of a pipeline or appealing to state-controlled regulatory bodies, those who favour a direct action approach often find it more effective and empowering to go out and block the pipeline themselves... directly. Direct action can also be used to set up networks of mutual aid.

Fifty years ago, the Black Panthers were faced with the reality of widespread poverty and lack of service provision in their communities. Rather than appealing to the government, or to the conscience of White America, the Panthers set to work organizing their own health clinics and breakfast programs for hungry school children. These programs were part of a broader strategy of building community power, and were identified by FBI Director J Edgar Hoover as a primary threat to national security – by which he meant a threat to the legitimacy of the state, and the white supremacist power structure that upholds it. Because they transgress the official channels of politics, and often the law itself, direct action campaigns are inevitably met

with a whole toolbox of tactics aimed at bringing conflicts back under state control. These can range from state and corporate-funded non-profits infiltrating and co-opting grassroots movements in order to force a change in tactics or leadership, all the way up to extreme repression, such as mass incarceration and targeted assassinations carried out by state and paramilitary forces.

Although as a concept, direct action has probably existed for as long as there have been hierarchies to rebel against, the term itself dates back to the early workers movement, where it was used to describe militant practices such as industrial sabotage and wildcat strikes. By physically blocking production, and collectively defending themselves from repression, workers were able to force concessions from their capitalist masters. The widespread use of these tactics eventually led to the legalization of trade unions and a whole host of concessions aimed at bringing the more radical sections of the workers movement back under state control.

One of the most significant heydays of direct action in modern history took place in 1970s Italy. Faced with a housing crisis provoked by capitalist restructuring of the economy, thousands of migrants from the country's south squatted apartment blocks, and physically defended families from eviction. When the government attempted to hike transit fares and energy costs, tens of thousands of people refused to pay the increased rates, in collective actions known as auto-reductions. Italy was, at that time, a deeply religious, conservative and rigidly patriarchal country, in which both abortion and divorce were illegal. Within this context, a fearless women's liberation movement organized an underground network of clinics, with doctors and nurses providing hundreds of volunteers, with necessary skills to perform clean and safe abortions. This direct action approach to reproductive health was complimented by massive and regular demonstrations

calling for the legalization of abortion, which were ultimately successful.

In our current age of increasing polarization, uncertainty and insecurity, direct action offers a way for our movements to build and assert our collective power, both to defend our communities, and to fight for the world we want to live in.