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Where *Are* the Anarchists?

Boston Anarchist Drinking Brigade

May 2000

An editorial in the December 4, 1999, issue of *The Economist*, referring to the events in Seattle in November, asked the question, "Why were there no anarchists among all those 'anarchists', by the way?" The question is a reasonable one for an observer to ask. While many of those who protested (and sometimes more) in Seattle were genuine, thoughtful anarchists, who felt that their actions there advanced the cause of human freedom, they failed to put forth a specifically anarchist point of view or adequately distinguish themselves from other protestors, most of whom advocated government action as the way to improve the lives of working people and protect our natural environment.

Unlike other advocates of social change, anarchists have historically opposed the existence of government and coercion. They have argued that free people are capable of organizing their lives as they see fit without the supervision of government with its laws, police, and military, which favor those who have economic or political power at the expense of the vast majority of working people. However, in their press and their public statements, this message is often absent. Anarchist activists in Seattle, London, Washington and elsewhere have

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criticized “globalization” and international capitalism in terms hardly different from those of other protestors. They condemn “free trade,” the WTO, the World Bank, and the IMF, but fail to present an anarchist alternative. The anarchists, by not presenting an explicit anti-government message, end up sounding like the nationalists and protectionists who lament the alleged decline of national sovereignty and advocate continued government intervention in people’s economic arrangements.

In some cases, however, this is not just the result of a failure to make one’s views explicit. Many people who call themselves anarchists are not opposed to using government as a means to promote the things they favor and see it as an acceptable and effective means of improving the lives of regular people. Noam Chomsky, perhaps the best-known and most widely-read writer associated with the anarchist movement, frankly advocates a strengthening of federal power and the political involvement of working people. He believes that criticizing the welfare state shows contempt for poor people and that it is the height of “arrogance and foolishness” for anarchists to criticize involvement in and support for statist politics. It is interesting that Chomsky’s views have had such influence among anarchists, since the idea that supporting the united states government can somehow lead to a libertarian society resembles nothing so much as the argument of marxists that the authoritarian socialist state they advocate will one day produce an anarchist world.

In the absence of any anti-government message, the image of anarchists that most people seem to have come away with since the events in Eugene, Seattle, Washington, and London over the last year, is simply that of protestors who trash stuff and aren’t afraid to fight cops. While property destruction and fighting cops are sometimes appropriate activities, they are not what makes an anarchist and do not promote an understanding of the anarchist critique of society among non-anarchists.

It has been said that recent tactics on the part of anarchists have been worthwhile because they have brought attention to anarchists and have attracted new people to anarchist events and websites. But what are these people attracted to? Street-fighting with cops and trashing the gap or macdonalds, in all likelihood, not the idea of ridding the world of government and freeing up working people to choose for themselves where to shop, who to trade with, what kinds of food to grow and sell, and in general how to live their lives unencumbered by both corporate predators and politicians.

It is not the conventional news media that are to blame for the new image of anarchists. On the internet one can read anarchists happily recounting the actions of the black blocs as they confronted cops, “liberated” intersections, and smashed store fronts. The protestors in Washington chose to call themselves revolutionary anti-capitalists, a label they share with marxists of various sorts. In the lead-up to the April actions, there was no critique of government at all, just anti-corporate rhetoric that would appeal to any leftist. And in their press and internet discussions some anarchists even promote an anarchist politics of “municipalism” with taxes, referenda, and all decision-making by various unions and committees which sound very much like local governments. It is hard to find any mention of government’s role in creating and maintaining this horrid economic arrangement we all live under.

While corporate capitalism is an enemy of working people, it could not wreak its havoc without the governments of the world to protect its privileges and promote its interests. The WTO is an organ of the various governments that participate in it, not a private organization. The cops so many anarchists enjoy fighting with are employees of the state, not the IMF, and are paid with money extorted from working people. Prison laborers in the united states and china are locked up and forced to work by government agents. Government polices, disempowers, and robs working people, enabling busi-

ness owners, bankers, and landlords to dispossess them of the wealth they produce with their labor. Government preserves inequality and privilege and can never be the means of liberating people. This is the anarchist perspective, but it has been sorely lacking among anarchists of late.

Many anarchists, apparently, prefer to promote an image of themselves as anti-corporate activists who enjoy fighting with cops and smashing up businesses of which they disapprove, instead of putting forth a clear anti-statist position which would help others understand what makes anarchists and anarchy unique. It should come as no surprise, then, if people believe we advocate anarchy in its sense of disorder, instead of its alternative meaning of a libertarian world of free individuals and groups leading their lives in peace, without the burden of government on their backs.