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The Habit of Direct Action

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March 1962

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Retrieved on 5th February 2023 from libcom.org
Published in *Anarchy: A Journal of Anarchist Ideas* #13.

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All action, we can see upon reflection, realizes some belief. Indirect action is often criticized on the ground that the means employed are unreliable; a strong point, but perhaps applied too sweepingly, and I think less fundamental than another. I want to distinguish (as direct action) that action which, in respect to a situation, realizes the end desired, so far as this lies in one's power or the power of one's group; from action (indirect action) which realizes an irrelevant or even contradictory end, presumably as a means to the "good" end. The most significant — but not the only — distinction lies in the kind of fact thereby created for other persons. It is direct action, to present a person with the kind of attitude towards "race" which one advocates; it is indirect action to rely on legal enforcement because in this is realized the concept that these people must obey the law simply because it is the law, and this may hopelessly obscure the aim.

Persons with no patience often make a bad distinction between "talk" and "action". It can be seen that the important distinction is between talk that is mere moral assertion or propositional argument, and talk (in fact: direct action) which conveys a feeling, an attitude, relevant to the desired end.

To take a homely example. If the butcher weighs one's meat with his thumb on the scale, one may complain about it and tell him he is a bandit who robs the poor, and if he persists and one does nothing else, this is mere talk; one may call the Department of Weights and Measures, and this is indirect action; or one may, talk failing, insist on weighing one's own meat, bring along a scale to check the butcher's weight, take one's business somewhere else, help open a co-operative store, etc., and these are direct actions.

Proceeding with the belief that in every situation, every individual and group has the possibility of some direct action on some level of generality, we may discover much that has been unrecognized, and the importance of much that has been under-rated. So politicalized is our thinking, so focussed to the motions of governmental institutions, that the effects of direct efforts to modify one's environment are unexplored.

The habit of direct action is, perhaps, identical with the habit of being a free man, prepared to live responsibly in a free society. Saying this, one recognizes that just this moment, just this issue, is not likely to be the occasion when we all come of age. All true. The question is, when will we begin?