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Keepers of the Flame

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Light a New Way for Dissent

Esther Kaplan

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he arrived in the U.S. from India with her parents when she was just a little kid—long before she took the name Warcry or started protesting institutions like the World Economic Forum. It was 1976, the bicentennial, and right off her dad bought her a small American flag. She says he saw America as a land of promise, but she watched him work hard as a researcher every day of his life only to die young. “I don’t want to live my whole life for the system,” she says. At college in the Bay Area, she read Emma Goldman for the first time, and “it was like someone threw open a window in my brain. Fresh air rushed in and I never went back.” She got her direct action chops tree-sitting in old growth forests—and then came Seattle, and the chance to take on the “corporate death machine” itself.

In an activist video about that now famous protest against the World Trade Organization, there’s a shot of Warcry, a black scarf masking all but her radiant eyes, shouting giddily, “I always wanted to be part of a revolution!” Yet this same Warcry has kept that little flag all these years, and still feels an affinity for her dad’s struggles and hopes. “The American dream is dead,” she says. “But there are

certain American ideals—freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to dissent—these are things I believe in and would like to make real.”

That zeal, matched by the passions of thousands of like-minded young radicals, will be on full display in New York City this week, as activists raucously confront the World Economic Forum, whose thousands of global elites will gather at the Waldorf-Astoria. This outpouring will get a boost from the recent resurgence of anarchism after years relegated to the oral history dustbin.

The cries of the anarchists may echo loudly in this post-9-11 world. In a climate where dissent has been called un-American, and the Patriot Act has granted the government new powers to eavesdrop, arrest, and detain, many of the global justice movement’s more mainstream players have decided to lie low. The Sierra Club has completely bowed out, while at the fair trade outfit Global Exchange, says cofounder Kevin Danaher, “we are still dusting ourselves off” from the blow of 9–11. The group will conduct only teach-ins. The AFL-CIO had hoped to march, but was denied a permit.

So the anarchists and direct action types like Warcry have been left to lead the charge. Not only have they assembled the samba bands, but also, for the first time, the anti-capitalists even negotiated a permit for a march, the only legal one this week. To a great extent, what happens at the WEF showdown—the size and energy and confrontational tone—depends on them.

While the whole world wasn’t watching, anarchists have spent their time between demos getting organized.

If you had wandered into the InterGalactic Anarchist Convention last Sunday, in the Chashama Theater just off of the New Times Square, you’d have passed a tableful of Barricada back issues, including the one featuring “The Black Bloc in Genoa: An Affinity Group’s Account”; stacks of literature on animal rights and labor exploitation in the global south; free copies of *To Arms!!!*, with its ecumenical listing of WEF protests and a handy lesson on wheat-

pasting, published by the CrimethInc Ex-Workers Collective. You might also have been invited down to the basement for a vegan meal fashioned from supermarket throwaways, or happened upon a few dozen sweatshirted activists in low-slung pants and ruffled hair talking protest.

Perhaps none of this would have surprised you. But most striking, if you listened in, would have been the gently earnest tone of the debates, and the palpable humility of the participants. That night, a twentysomething hippie sitting cross-legged on the floor offered up a defense of nonviolence that could have come out of SNCC's civil rights playbook—"We draw out the inherent violence of the police"—while a rosy-faced teenager decried what he called "militant pacifism" and an older woman drew a distinction between damaging property (OK, since property doesn't feel pain) and injuring people (unacceptable). Everyone spoke briefly and passionately and stopped to really listen, and speakers reflected on how much they had to learn. At a larger meeting, facilitators set aside just five or 10 minutes for each agenda item—as if to schedule in a half hour was too presumptuous—extending the time only after seeing enough fluttering fingers (a sign of consensus). Sunday night's impromptu conversation ended only when Lena, 28, one of the conference organizers, quietly mentioned that the evening panelists had arrived, and would it be all right for them to take the microphone?

The textured disagreements that aired out that weekend—sandwiched between lectures on Afghanistan, Argentina, and "Why WEF Is Evil"—hardly call to mind the anarchism we have read about in the two years since Seattle.

It was there that America discovered anarchism for the first time since Sacco and Vanzetti—in the intimidating form of the masked militants of the black bloc. "Street rage," blared *The New York Times*; "nightmare of protests," declared NBC Nightly News, as everyone from the Rainforest Action Network to the president rushed to separate the good protesters from the bad. Rainforest head Randy Hayes said the vandalism hurt the movement, while direct action

trainer John Sellers, head of the Ruckus Society, called it “inexcusable.” Last year’s protests in Genoa inspired more variations on the theme: The black bloc’ers were “barbarians at a castle’s gates ... whose modus operandi is to infiltrate more moderate groups and launch attacks,” reported *Newsweek*. And as WEF delegates began to arrive at ground zero, even a *Village Voice* reporter regurgitated whole the police assertion that black bloc’ers are “Al Qaeda-like.”

This groupthink has not only obscured the true nature of the protest violence—since the police have been by far the most aggressive perpetrators, from the pepper spray and nightsticks of Seattle to the fatal bullets of Genoa—but also made invisible a significant new development: The anarchist fringe is fast becoming the movement’s center.

Decades of Republican assaults on the basic functions of government, capped by a presidential election decided by dirty tricks and partisan courts rather than by popular will, have plowed the soil for a generational politics that is suspicious of political power. *No Logo* author Naomi Klein has long argued that the global justice movement has an inherently anarchist feel. But as the months have rolled by since Seattle, more and more activists, with little fanfare, have come to explicitly identify as anarchists, and anarchist-minded collectives are on the rise.

There are now more than 175 Food Not Bombs chapters, at least 60 Independent Media Centers (the newest of which are mostly in the global south), nearly a dozen People’s Law Collectives, countless troupes of puppetistas, and several new medic teams, including one cofounded by anti-capitalist EMS worker James Creedon, who assisted with the World Trade Center rescue. And starting with the Quebec free-trade protests last spring, the radical wing of the movement has consolidated its troops under the banner of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence. All of these formations will provide crucial infrastructure for the protests ahead.

The movement is widely perceived as anti-intellectual, but sales are up at Oakland’s AK Press, which publishes more than 80 anar-

York City,” says Graeber, a sometime black bloc’er, “though a certain level of urban redecoration is appropriate. No one’s going to abjure spray paint.”

No one’s promising that there won’t be a black bloc, either. Warcry recalls joining the bloc at previous protests, the sense of anonymity, collectivity, of people you don’t even know having your back, of “glimpsing the possibility of a world where they don’t have total and absolute control,” of feeling that viscerally. Her tribe is the one that’s not intimidated by the new Patriot Act, that hasn’t lost sight of challenging corporate exploitation even while there’s a war on.

Warcry, as always, speaks from the heart. “We want to save the life of this planet,” she says. “We can’t afford to sit this one out.”

In debates over the sustainability of the global justice movement, the anarchists are mostly chalked up as a problem. But their spirit of cultural celebration, combined with an elaborate web of small, accessible collective endeavors, has clearly provided activists with skills, support structures, and points of entry.

Of course there's still that nagging question of violence, as important to the movement as to the media, because, as Danaher of Global Exchange says, "The test of any tactic is whether it builds the movement. And you don't attract people to a movement that looks dangerous and messy." But there were plenty of half-a-million-strong peaceful marches in Washington, D.C., over the past decade that raised nary an eyebrow, while Seattle galvanized a generation.

Watching some old footage from that watershed event, Warcy shakes her head at the depth of the people's discontent. "To be honest, what the left has done since the '60s hasn't been that successful, and we can't afford to embrace tactics that don't work," she says. "I don't think Seattle would be on the map if it weren't for the catalyzing level of rage that was made visible through property destruction." She calls window-smashing "the transformation of the psychogeographic landscape" and points out that it's far more strategic than most people think—with specific corporate targets, such as sweatshop operators like Nike—and getting more strategic as the years progress. Besides that, as Public Citizen's Dolan emphasizes, whether people get injured in New York this week is mostly up to the police.

When pushed, most of the Anti-Capitalist crew recognize that the people of this city—including its uniformed officers—are still recovering from the trauma of 9–11. Though it's hard to find an anarchist who doesn't fiercely defend the right to destroy certain kinds of property, placing vandalism of McDonald's in the respected tradition of the Boston Tea Party, most are also cautious that the movement itself not get too attached to this, or any other, particular tactic. "No one's talking property destruction right now in New

chist titles, including a new English translation of Daniel Guérin's classic anthology of anarchism, *No Gods No Masters*; and students are flocking to Vermont's Institute for Social Ecology, where they study the anarchist works of Murray Bookchin and, according to instructor Brooke Lehman, 29, "spend the summer talking about how we might realize our vision of direct democracy and freedom."

Unlike modern-day social reformers, who want Nike to let inspectors into their factories or the World Bank to forgive some debt, anarchists explicitly oppose capitalism itself. They don't attack the International Monetary Fund or the WEF just because their policies exploit the poor, but because their power is illegitimate. They envision an egalitarian society without nation states, where wealth and power have been redistributed, and they take great pains to model their institutions in this vein, with autonomous, interconnected structures and consensus-based decision making. UC Santa Cruz professor Barbara Epstein, an expert on direct action, senses that anarchism has now become "the pole that everyone revolves around," much as Marxism was in the '60s. In other words, even young activists who don't identify as anarchists have to position themselves in relation to its values.

The reformist perspective is likely to retreat further with groups like the Sierra Club absent from WEF week and the AFL-CIO presence reduced from a march to a rally. Danaher says Global Exchange will focus instead on the alternative World Social Forum in Brazil. Shooting more from the hip, Public Citizen staffer Mike Dolan, an architect of Seattle, says his group has not yet endorsed the one permitted march because the sponsor, Another World Is Possible, "can't guarantee that the event will be nonviolent, and that the movement won't be marred by vandalism." At press time, Drop the Debt, Earth First!, Rainforest Action Network, and the Ruckus Society had all not signed onto the march, either.

With these significant players sitting it out—or penned in by overzealous police—who's left to distribute schedules, run listservs,

host spokescouncils, paint banners, and coordinate legal and medical support, food, and housing? The anarchists are making do.

The Anti-Capitalist set tends to be far more mixed by background than, say, the middle-class student movement, and no deep pockets are keeping them afloat now. Their genius is in making use of the wealth all around them—whether human resources or capitalism’s leavings—despite a lack of cash or access to traditional forms of power.

At a party last week for the political comic book *World War III* at Theater for a New City, an interview with InterGalactic conference organizer Lena turned into a group discussion—as so many interviews with anarchists seem to, the collective impulse is so strong—about the joys of mutual aid. “It’s about finding out who needs what and filling in the blanks,” says Lena, who incidentally is the daughter of a construction worker and has supported herself since age 16. Her friends Jenna, 22, a slender Asian woman; and Kevin, 23, Jenna’s lanky white partner, are indeed itinerant activists, floating from community to community in what they see as a profoundly American hobo tradition. They live off bartering and networks, not checks from Mom. “I appreciate anarchists so much,” says Jenna, “because I’ve never gone to a demo and not found housing or food.” Kevin recalls showing up in Houston, hearing about a collective anarchist household, and bunking there for a month and a half while he engaged in prisoner support. The two just returned from a trip to a punk show in Gainesville, Florida, that morphed into a month of work on a community farm.

The idea is that the resources to live, and the chance to do good, are out there for the taking—it’s an economy of opportunity, not scarcity, an ethos that extends to their analysis of global poverty. Ben, 21, an NYU dropout who now cooks food each week for the homeless denizens of Tompkins Square Park through Food Not Bombs, says anarchism’s egalitarianism helps attract youth who are new to politics of any kind. “Some of the drunkest kids I’ve ever seen are now going to Food Not Bombs meetings and taking

responsibility,” he says. “Once they find a place where they’re not on the bottom rung, where they can take initiative, they do it. They start out listening to a Subhuman song and they end up reading Noam Chomsky.” Come to think of it, he later adds, that’s pretty much how it happened for him, too—catching punk shows at ABC No Rio, noticing the Food Not Bombs shopping cart, and slowly waking up to the fact that poverty and hunger are not natural. As the conversation breaks up around midnight, the kids head out to dumpster dive, to supply food for their own kitchens and the anarchists camping out at Cabo Rojo in the Bronx, to save that community garden from the bulldozer.

After spending any significant amount of time around the nonhierarchical, collective sensibilities of these anti-capitalists, you can begin to feel your entire life is corrupted by absurd power imbalances, your apartment overrun by excess goods. Ben mentions that Food Not Bombs had a serious discussion about collecting more plastic forks from fast food places so they could put savings from the cost of purchasing them toward the WEF legal defense fund. David Graeber, 40, a Yale professor and Anti-Capitalist Convergence cofounder, says the network would probably spend no more than a couple thousand on the WEF protests, all earned through passing the hat.

Which is not to say this movement is ascetic. Lena and her friends use words like *joy* and *beauty* as often as some long-ago editor of *Mother Earth*. Jenna rhapsodizes about how anarchists constantly create space for poetry jams, musical performance, and art; Ben giggles as he recounts a black bloc contingent at a Boston biotech protest, led by a man in a bunny suit carrying a sign that read “The Violent Fringe.” This week, as the NYPD practices cracking heads at Shea Stadium, the puppetistas are madly rehearsing a street tango corps and a line of Radical Rockettes, assembling a samba band, and building papier mâché globes painted with images of better, possible worlds.