Direct Action

Towards an understanding of a concept

Harald Beyer-Arnesen

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Campaigning for wage-workers to join the Industrial Workers of the World, Eugene V. Debs stated in December 1905: "The capitalist own the tools they do not use, and the workers use the tools they do not own." To this one could add: At times direct action may mean putting the tools we do not own out of action, at times it may mean bringing them into play for our own, self-defined needs and ends. In the final instance, it can only mean acting as if all the tools were in fact our own.

Direct action brought to its ultimate and logical end is the libertarian social revolution: the working class's direct overtaking, rearrangement, transformation and deconstruction (when not found appropriate to human needs) of the means of production (the material tools of freedom), and the disarmament of the forces protecting the order that was. If we are talking about a genuine social revolution, this can be nothing but the collective, direct action by the working class abolishing itself as a class, and thus the state and class society as such, making us all into citizens of a world of our own making.

Many are those who talk about direct actions these days, fewer try to explore its meaning, asking what kind of tool it is. This is not a semantic question but one of substance – one that lies at the core of the whole anarchist, social-revolutionary project where "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves," and the means are determined by and contained in our ends. From this perspective we can define direct action as being an action carried out on the behalf of nobody else but ourselves, where the means are immediately also the ends, or if not, as in a wage strike not mediated by any union bureaucracy, the means (decreasing the bosses' profits by our non-work, and thus also diminishing the bosses' power) stand in an immediate relationship to self-defined ends (increasing our wages and extending our own power). A direct action successfully carried out brings about a direct rearrangement of existing conditions of life through the combined efforts of those directly affected.

Nobody need wholly agree with this definition, but I find it logical as well as a potentially powerful instrument in developing a practice where the future society comes to life within the shell of the old. In all circumstances, we as anarchists and social revolutionaries must comprehend direct action within the context of our project of human emancipation. Direct action is however not like pregnancy, which is something you either are or are not. Elements of direct action may be contained in actions that do not fully qualify as such. Part of our task consists in trying to

make these elements as dominant as possible, whenever possible. To this we need a usable definition, something to aspire towards and measure our actions by, and thus also acquire a greater awareness of the sources of our strengths and shortcomings.

We will not always have the power to reach our ends through direct action. More than any other form of action, it tends to demand a collective, organizational force. Most clearly this will manifest itself in the working class's direct re-expropriation of the instruments of production and freedom. We can achieve anything together. Building that togetherness is the difficult part, and like a muscle not used, the force of collective action is weakened by passivity. On a local level, where most of our actions are still confined, or on international level, through the coordinated actions within one small sector of the working class, our ability to carry out direct action will be restricted by it being a means not yet generalized. We should still be able to make use of it some of the time, but not all of the time without being crushed by the forces we are up against. If you are fired, a sit-down strike might save your job, but if you are the only one sitting there it might be a good idea to look up a lawyer or some union bureaucrat. Something which also draws our attention to how the concept of direct action links up with another old word in the vocabulary of working class struggles, namely practical solidarity. Solidarity does not mean charity, and cannot be reduced to altruism. Rather it is something which grows out of an understanding of common interests. At the root of the IWW catchword, "an injury to one is an injury to all," lies more than a moral economy. The words also describe a fact of social life.

Direct action has been defined as action without intermediaries. This is a definition in need of qualification. From an anarchist perspective direct action is connected not only to solidarity, but also to what tends to be a precondition for solidarity and the underlying principle of the concept of direct democracy: non-hierarchical human communication. Such communication lies at the roots of what direct action always is, individual and collective self-empowerment. As direct action contains its own end, within that self-defined end its meaning is also found. The more the ends are manifested in the means, the more it is a direct action.

If we stay seated or go on playing darts as a means to prolong a lunch break, and thus shorten our working day, then the meaning of the action is also immediately the means used. But such collective action has as its precondition the human dialogue. It is through the mediation of the dialogue the ends are defined that gives the action its signification for us as human beings. If we stay seated or go on with our dart playing because the boss tells us so, then even if this will prolong our lunch break just as much or more, it is not direct action. Now there are forms of direct action that may involve only a single person, precisely because it is something which is of nobody elseÕs concern. But in general, for an action to be effective and have more than a symbolic significance in a social context, it must involve the participation of many. A one-(wo)man strike is at best a political statement.

Protesting the modern-day popes and tsars

If you lack water you might have to dig a well, and the act of digging will be direct action. You may need the assistance of others and your lack will very likely also be shared by them, making it into a collective task. But within a class society things are rarely that simple. The land may be owned by an absent landowner, and an apparatus of force will exist to impose proprietor rights. Just going out there digging the well would thus be illegal. Still, illegality is not what defines it as direct action. Collective self-education, for instance, is a form of direct action that often, if not always, would be perfectly legal.

We could imagine that rather than digging the well without a permit, we organized to sit down outside the landowner residence, the KingÕs Palace, the White House or the parliament building, called in the press and proclaimed we would remain seated on the lawn (committing the crime of trespassing) until the absent landowner, a legislative body or somebody else with authority, granted us a permit to dig for water on his or her property – or until we were carried or otherwise forced away.

This surely would be civil disobedience, a breach of law, but would it also be direct action? Hardly. We had tried to put pressure on an authority to make or undo a judgment. In this we had abided by their power and authority to make such a judgment in the first place. Rather than letting our ends only be mediated by our own efforts and (wo)man-made tools – which in this case would be spades or excavators – we had put their rule between our means and ends. The tools yes, the instruments of production and destruction, as well as our own creativity: sold hours of life turned into instruments of our exploitation. We are the ones who employ these tools, but not according to own plans, needs and desires. We rarely utilize them as means of direct action. The wage working cook does not serve the poor as part of collective project in the time (s)he has sold to an alien force, instead (s)he casts a vote, signs a petition, joins a demonstration, breaks some windows or blows up a building in his or her unwaged time. None of which produces anything immediately digestible.

Some would define any non-parliamentary action as a direct action, such as any street demonstration. But to make a statement about we would like something to be, or not to be, is not likely to move any mountain. If the mere words, “Stop the bombing!” halted bombs in mid-air, or took away their deadly effect, the world be a better place to live. It is not any more likely that breaking window panes would generate this effect, either.

That symbolic actions, and actions that borrow their efficiency from the very powers we are struggling against, more and more have come to be defined as direct actions, reflects our present organizational impotence, our social fragmentation and a generalized lack of trust among waged and unwaged workers in their own collective powers. Under particular circumstances symbolic actions can be powerful. But they should be seen as what they are at their best: means of communication. Their degree of efficiency outside this lies foremost in the fear among the owners of the world that they will be followed up by more direct forms of action. At the present moment, disorganized as we stand, or organized into passivity, they are also often all we have, but that should not lead us to the conclusion that they are all we could have.

Often, as during the WTO meeting in Seattle, we see proclaimed as direct actions protests carried out in spectacular and some times violent or destructive ways to draw the attention of mainstream media. Though often denied, the whole logic of such actions is to influence the powers that be by way of some imagined “public opinion.” And in the age of the world-wide web, even a demonstration of a few dozen people can appear as a world event if only the rumor about it is widely enough circulated, while you can live a couple of blocks away without even noticing that it has taken place. So maybe a better term than direct action in such circumstances might be virtual or multi-mediated action. Ironically, both larger protests, like those in Seattle, as well as smaller ones tend to be followed by a critique of the mainstream media for distorting the (f)acts, for only having reproduced their most spectacular aspects.

Of course it could be said, and not without some truth, that the property destruction in Seattle had a symbolic value that it gained from the particular context if functioned within. I am not arguing against that, though this value would soon be devalued if the same procedure was tried

repeated over and over again. However, apart from their symbolic value, the actions had no immediate relation to what one wanted to achieve. The blocking of the meeting or the destruction of property were not means to bring about any immediate changes in the conditions of trade, exploitation and oppression: they fed no one, did not reduce the pollution of our environment or in other ways enrich the lives of working-class people.

Exploitation and oppression always work in concrete ways, and the realities of what one was protesting against and the concrete points of possible change escaped the protesters. Lacking the power to bring about immediate changes, one appealed to the Pope and the Tsar, some would say in less than polite ways, to use their commanding powers over us to bring such changes about. Rather than going out digging the wells to find the water, one demanded of the high and mighty to order us to do so, and rather than blocking the ruling order from polluting our water, one called on them to make laws prohibiting such acts, or to refrain from introducing new ones allowing the pollution. One appealed to the force of their laws, asking for better ones: asking for an atheist Pope, a landless Tsar, a capitalism where money wields no power. Many will find this a misrepresentation: "We demanded the break-up of the WTO," they will say. But this, even had it been realistic – which it was not – would at best only substitute a not yet defined set of international laws and power relations for the particular ones existing or in making. It was a wholly abstract demand.

If temporarily halting the mere coming together of the delegates of the World Trade Organization was all one had wanted to achieve, then the protesters used means (their own bodies) appropriate to this end. But was this really their end? Hopefully, and far more likely, they thought of it as a means. In the age before the telegraph and telephone, to say nothing about more modern means of communication, such means might also have had a more immediate effect, and a far closer relation to the end. But today such gatherings of the high and mighty foremost have symbolic significance. The decision-making and coordination of power takes place elsewhere, and not in any particular place at any particular date. I for one am certain that the protesters aspired to bring about an end to particular destructive practices associated with the policies of the World Trade Organization, as well as to halt even more destructive ones, and not to the mere obstruction of the coming together of some people at a certain place and time. Had practices of exploitation, oppression and destruction existed only in the minds and the statements of the high and mighty, we would not have to offer them much attention. Nor would the high then be very mighty.

If from every community affected by the policies of the WTO (or rather of global capitalism) there had been one person present among the protesters in Seattle, they would be in the wrong place to bring about changes through direct action. The concrete and daily manifestations of WTO policies takes place in the communities they would have left behind, and it is also there these policies could be directly confronted. On the other hand, such a global assembly could have served as an opportunity to coordinate actions throughout the world, and not primarily to worry about what was going on in the congress halls where the WTO delegates were gathered. As it was, people from every community of the planet were not gathered in Seattle. What is more, those who were there, to the degree they at all considered the option of direct action, were in Seattle precisely because of their, or rather our, impotence to bring about the organization needed to confront the WTO through direct action on our home ground.

Propaganda by the deed & solidarity revisited

A critical dialogue in search of forms of action that could directly put whatever has and will be resolved within the framework of the WTO, IMF and World Bank wholly, or more realistically at this stage, in part out of operation, has hardly even been attempted, despite of, or maybe because of all claims of direct action practices.

In this context, it is interesting that West Coast longshoremen carried out a political strike against the WTO. However positive this was a sign of times to come, it did not go beyond being a symbolic action. But the event may also be considered as symbolic in another context. The longshoremen (dockers and wharfies) and transport workers in general, are the wage workers with the most manifest potency to directly and materially impose the terms of world trade. Thus also all the efforts to destroy their strength. But these workers would in no circumstances be able to wield such power for long if their "propaganda by the deed" did not also bring about manifestations of direct action by the waged and unwaged workers of the world, or at least within significant parts of it.

The term "propaganda by the deed" brings forth associations to bombs and other individual acts of desperation and social impotence. But it need not refer to this. When tasks meet us on a global scale, direct action carried out locally to bring about smaller changes in the here and now, or internationally by a small section of the working class, may be considered as just a drop in the bucket. But if successfully carried out direct actions will communicate a message beyond their immediate ends, carrying within themselves the very seeds of a libertarian social revolution. Acts of immediate empowerment tend to be contagious as they practically illustrate roads that may be traveled outside the realm of bureaucratic intermediaries and parliamentary representation. Direct action is always "propaganda by the deed."

This all brings us back to the question of solidarity and its relation to direct action, and then in particular as defined as an action carried out on behalf of nobody else. The question also arises out of ecological concerns. Who are the directly affected, and at what point does an act cease being direct action because it is not being carried out by those directly affected? What interests us here is of course the political implications of the answer given. The advocates of ideologies of representative democracy, social democracy and Leninism all claim to act on the behalf of "the people" in the interest of "the people." Anarchists have always rejected not only that the representatives of these ideologies do so, but the very notion that they could. What is more, even if they could, we claim that this would not be in our best interest as the value of being our own masters is the very essence of being a human being. Something, it must be added, which does not imply an escape from the influence and critique of others, without which we would be nothing.

On the other hand we uphold the principles of mutual aid and solidarity; that an injury to one is an injury to all, and thus also the concern of all. We can skip the most absurd interpretations of non-representation, like: "If we see a person drowning, this is not our concern." Whether or not saving another person from drowning also should be defined as direct action is not an interesting question. Philosophical riddles are not the concern here, but the politics of human emancipation.

On this level the answer to the question leads us to another: who has the defining power? I define the low wages and bad working conditions in company X, wherever it may be situated in the world, as my concern not only for moral reasons, but also because, to paraphrase Bakunin: in the hands of the owners of the world, their exploitation and oppression becomes an instrument for my subordination. Brought to its logical conclusion this reasoning may however brings us straight back to rule by representation and enlightened despotism. The defining power must be situated among the workers of company X. However, my participation in direct action on their

initiative, or through joint initiative and cooperation, would make me part of this direct action if my acts also otherwise qualified as such, for instance through a blockade during a strike. We have realized our common interests.

There is much more that could be said around this topic. But what is crucial is to grasp its importance, so that claimed direct action does not become a road that leads us towards elitism, and thus also away from the anarchist project of individual and social emancipation.

Once again we reach the conclusion that as a rule, the greater the task the more collective the action – this to fit a libertarian definition of direct action. We should never lose sight of the fact that the concept of direct action emerges out of people doing something with their own situation. It is for this reason that it has held such a central position within the traditions of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism. Direct action is an expression of power over our lives: our empowerment. Direct actions are primarily, if not exclusively, tied to collective forms of actions also for the simple reason that it is together we as waged and unwaged workers have the potency to directly, and often immediately, change our conditions of life. The fewer the actors the more symbolic our acts as a rule will also be. They then tend to become, not means to the immediate transformation of part of our reality through our own efforts but foremost to call on the power of others.

While many may live under the illusion that through direct action we escape the need for organizing, the opposite is true: Generally it requires a greater degree of organized coordination. The degree of our disorganization is the degree to which our lives will be organized by others. It is we who make the world, but we make it as a collective (presently under the command of and through the mediation of the owners of the world) and it is thus also together we can make direct profound changes unmediated by outside forces, and in the final instance conquer the world and the power over our own destinies.

Direct action could be seen as a kind of language: a language of practical articulation. As such it contains also a symbolic force far greater than any mere symbolic action, precisely because its message is contained in and not separated from its means. Much of the reason for our present impotence to express us through direct action lies in an ever increasing division of labor within modern capitalism. Not so much due to this division in itself but in our failure to bridge it in our minds, and through organization and action.

We need to reconnect our means with our ends. To return to the wage strike Ð it used to signify, and still often does, striking the bosses where it hurt them the most, their banking accounts, by withholding our capacity for labor. So why did the workers of the "public owned" trams in Melbourne ten years ago strike by running the trams Ð the tools they do not own – free of charge for the public, while their bosses struck back by closing them down by force? The reason is obvious. As so often is the case with public services, the non-work of the publicly employed tramdrivers would not have cost the city council a cent. It could only save them the expenses of the workers' wages. Free public transport, however, would cost them.

What is more crucial, this was a manifestation of workers turning the tools they do not own into means for their own ends, as well as for the working class community at large. What if all the waged and unwaged workers (including school and university students) of Melbourne had non-hierarchically organized to do the same, if only for day or a week? That really would have been a symbolically powerful manifestation of our potency by means of direct action. Reality is still concrete. Let's not forget it. Also in the struggle against the policies of the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank we should seek to find ways

to on a local and global scale halt and put into action the tools we do not own for our self-defined needs.

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