

# **Notes on the article “Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism”**

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The objective of this article is to deal with certain issues that I believe to be insufficiently dealt with if at all, in the article of Joe Black, “Anarchism, Insurrections and Insurrectionalism”. I believe those issues to be of importance if we are to debate on insurrectionalism, so as to understand in perspective some of its ideas and the specific place it has in the general anarchist movement.

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Before going any further, I want to say that I find praiseworthy the approach of comrade Black on the subject; at no time, he slipped into easy dismissals, distortions, nor biased interpretations to which, unfortunately, we are so accustomed in the anarchist movement. Above all, his discussion has been respectful and he has clarified some of the misinterpretations on the topic that among the anarchist-communists are a common currency. Through this humble contribution to the debate I hope not to be lead astray from that spirit, and to deal only with real differences instead of creating artificial ones.

I believe the criticism of comrade Black, fundamentally accurate in a number of issues, to be nonetheless a merely formal criticism. It is a criticism of the insurreccionalist “recipe book”, but not of its “catechism”. He directs his criticisms to certain practices that insurrectionalists could well do or not. But he does not deal with the political conceptions lying behind that give shape to their positions and the organisational format they resort to –personally, I’m far from believing as comrade Black suggests, that our differences only emerge in the face of the organisation question. I’m of the opinion that those organisational issues are reflecting some basic political differences. There’s, therefore, needed an internal criticism and not only a formal criticism.

To understand the problem at the root of insurrectionalism’s political conceptions (fundamentally wrong, in my opinion) we have to take into account that they are the offspring of a certain historical moment, something that cannot be regarded as a mere coincidence. Every political idea is a daughter of its times. Secondly, many of these political conceptions are common to a wide section of the left, beyond anarchism. Insurrectionalism is a particular response to some problems that are in no way the sole heritage of anarchism, but that expressed in a wide range of political currents. This I think to be of paramount importance, particularly in the Chilean experience, where there has been a generation that speaks an insurrectionalist language after moving forward from the “lutarismo” towards anarchism. Though there has been a certain change in their political ideas, it is this “insurrectionalist” quintessence that has given continuity to this generation that has changed, to a certain extent, aesthetics but not discourse.

## **The Political context of the birth of insurrectionalism**

First of all, I want to insist on the fact that despite insurrectionalism being portrayed as a new anarchist current for the last couple of decades, on various historical moments (and under various flags –marxist, republican and anarchist alike) there have emerged movements that share some fundamental features with insurrectionalism: rejection in practice of any type of organisation with some projection in time (“formal organisation” according to the insurrectionalists), rejection of systematic and methodical work, despise for the people’s struggle for reforms and

mass organisation, what it has as a counterpart voluntarism, maximalism, a primarily emotional approach to politics, a certain sense of urgency, impatience and immediatism .<sup>1</sup>

Conditions for these sorts of tendencies to emerge in the anarchist milieu have taken place under very specific historic moments, in which there has been a combination, on the one hand, of a high level of repression from the system and, on the other, of a low level of popular struggles. These factors combined have been historically a fertile ground for insurrectionalist tendencies in anarchism. The first precedent was “Propaganda by the Deed”, that was born as a result of the repression to the Paris Commune. Then we have terrorism in Russia during the repressive aftermath to the 1905 revolution and illegalism in France, just before the First Great War. In Argentina, these tendencies flourished at the end of the 20s and during the 30s, years of acute repression and of flinching of the once powerful workers movement –this was a desperate, though heroic, of a decadent movement. Then we have Italy and Greece during the early 60s, decades in which the Post War low tide of the popular movement was probably at its lowest and when it was felt with all its weight the political defeat of the anti-fascist left, smashed from the left by Stalinism. In Spain, the experience of the MIL develops during the 70s, when it is clear to everyone that the Franco regime is going to have a “natural death” and when the transition, on the grounds of the strict exclusion of the revolutionary elements, was on its way. Even the very mention of comrade Black of insurrectionalism emerging in the English speaking world in the 80s, is not a minor issue: these are the years of a very low level of class struggle as a whole and years that saw the neocons on the rise, by the hand of Thatcher in England and of the “Reaganomics” in the US.

Even in Chile, the experience of the MJL (Lautaro), what I regard as the direct referent giving a certain sense of tradition to the local movement that has some insurrectionalist features, dates from the late 80s, when the fate of the popular movement that grew in the struggle against the dictatorship was already decided. That very popular movement that had resorted without blushing to “all means of struggle”, and that was at this stage worn out, on its decline and that in the end, found itself blocked by the democratic institutions, unable to fight back in the same way they have done, up to that very minute under Pinochet’s tyranny.

When the popular movement is on a low level of struggle, there’s usually a growing feeling of isolation of the revolutionary movement from the masses; this leads often to a loss in the confidence in the mass organisations of the people and, actually, on the people themselves. This lack of confidence is frequently disguised in a highly abstract jargon about a proletariat that does not materialise but in spontaneous acts of revolt. This lack of confidence is not only expressed as a denunciation of certain bureaucratic, reformist or compromised tendencies that are hegemonic in the popular organisations (such a criticism we would share with them), but they criticise the very nature and the *raison d’être* of these organisations.

Also, the moments of a low level of popular struggle generally happen after high levels of class confrontation, so the militants still have lingering memories of the “barricade days”. These moments are frozen in the minds of the militants and it is often that they try to capture them again by trying hard, by an exercise of will alone, by carrying on actions in order to “awaken the masses”... most of the times, these actions have the opposite result to the one expected and end up, against the will of its perpetrators, serving in the hands of repression.

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<sup>1</sup> Neither enthusiastic participation in insurrections, nor armed struggle are distinctive elements of insurrectionalism regarding other political currents, included anarchist ones.

This condemnation of the popular organisations and this sense of urgent action –the one that does not ponder its impact on the popular consciousness and that usually end up, in fact, as extreme forms of vanguard action, though theoretically they might claim a distance from the concept of vanguard as a whole- tends to make even worse the initial isolation, what makes, at the end of the day, even easier the tasks of the repression and annihilation of dissent to the system.

## **Making general rules out of exceptional circumstances**

When the levels of class struggle are high, those are the most relevant moments of it. However, they are exceptional moments on history, moments that work as hinges that open new revolutionary and radical alternatives out of the crisis of the old. The very nature of class struggle is to have moments of an open and brazen confrontation and others of scarce struggle; it is this fact what makes necessary for the revolutionary organisation to have a strategic vision.

Often there had been tendencies in the left that have based their tactics into making general rules out of moments of the class struggle that, by definition, are transitory: thus, the social-democracy consolidated in the moment of low level of struggles after the Paris Commune, renouncing to revolution and putting forward a reform by stages approach as their strategy. For them, the moment of low confrontation was the historical rule –this is the main reason to their opportunism.

Contrary to this, there were those who made a general rule out of the peak moments of class struggle: council communism is an example of that. Their strategy of forming council bodies based in the experience of the European revolutions of the 1920s, without any room for the struggle for reform and only with an all or nothing programme. This leads to the opposite pole of opportunism, that is maximalism, what is not a problem in revolutionary times, but in moments of low intensity of class struggle leads to isolation and confines the revolutionary movement to be nothing but a sect, probably full of devotion, but with no decisive role in the popular organisation. The most dogmatic versions of this current are incapable of appreciating revolutionary potential of those experiences not adjusting to their scheme.

In regard to insurrectionalism, as we already expressed, there seems to be as well a tendency to make a general rule out of certain hot moments in the class struggle. The exclusive practice out of context of forms of action more proper of those moments of open confrontation, at the expense of other forms of struggle, seems to demonstrate this trend of freezing historical moments as stated. This can have nefarious consequences.

Revolutionary movements have to learn how to be flexible, how to accommodate to new circumstances without losing from sight their principles and their fundamental politics. We have to reject dogmatism not only theoretically, but also tactically .<sup>2</sup>

## **Tactical dogmatism**

One of the biggest problems of anarchism today is dogmatism, as this replaces concrete analysis for a number of eternal slogans, which are absolute, inaccurate and aprioristic. In reality,

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<sup>2</sup> Recently, an article by Wayne Price, from NEFAC, called “Firmness in Principles, Flexibility in Tactics” was shedding some light on this issue [www.anarkismo.net](http://www.anarkismo.net)

dogmatism is only the other face of our theoretical insufficiencies. The theoretical documents of contemporary anarchism are often full of inaccuracies and are impregnated by a rigid spirit, unaltered by encounter with reality. Contrary to what many believe, it is not only in the ideological aspect where this dogmatism can be felt. Dogmatism is far stronger when it comes to tactics. We, unfortunately, often see tactics turned into principles.

A way in which this tactical dogmatism is expressed is in the tendency among many anarchists to enounce a tactic or a political position –generally, nothing more than predictable phrases, identical to what has been said by other anarchists in places and times totally different- and only after that, to try to look for ways to justify it. That’s doing the thing the other way round: analytical efforts happen after the positions are already taken!

Another way for this tactical dogmatism to be expressed, as we were reminded by comrade Black, is in the tendency to construct a whole ideology or current around a single tactic: we find traces of this in certain forms of anarcho-syndicalism as well as in insurrectionalism. This is a particularly weak line of thought that reduces the complexity of the political landscape and of the libertarian struggle to unique and sacred formulas.

What is worth noting is that often revolutionary struggle demands a variety of tactics that are imposed by the very necessities of practice: pacific and armed forms of struggle, legal mechanisms and transgression of law, public and clandestine organisation, all of these has been used, not infrequently, simultaneously by the anarchist movement, and there’s no other parameter to measure the effectiveness of these tactics than the objectives of the movement, or the progress made in the construction of popular power and the weakening of the bourgeois power. There are no intrinsic qualities for tactics: what can be valid today mightn’t be so tomorrow. And at the end of the day, tactics can only be chosen and discarded in relation to a global strategic programme; so, any judgement around them should not be based on the tactics as such, but on the way they served to the long term objectives.

The parameter to measure the effectiveness of the actions of the anarchists should be nothing short of their programme –what becomes a major problem when most of the anarchist groups lack even the most basic of the programmes. How is it possible then to hold a coherent vision between the immediate action –that can be even elevated to a fetish- and the long term objectives that are not envisaged as nothing but vague slogans? Does this mean to suggest for the comrades to sit and wait eternally so as to have a brand new programme with the one we can go out and fight? Certainly not. Simply it means to develop our tasks as organisations and gain our space in the popular struggles while we develop on parallel and give specific shape to the general view on things provided by anarchist theory. It means to take the general principles of anarchism to a concrete alternative for a place and space given.

Comrade Black reminds us of the importance as a parameter to measure our solidarity action that the group of people we are practicing solidarity with approve our tactics (ie., workers on strike). This being valid, only represents a minor proportion of the possible actions in which anarchists are regularly involved. This type of action is only useful for the struggles in which anarchists are a group of external support (to be honest, this situation is more likely to happen in places like Ireland –country where the original author of the article is from- where the level of social struggles is extremely low and with a political level of militancy as low). Most of the times our action are not merely intending to support some external group of people, but would have ourselves as the primary actors of struggle (ie, we are the workers striking, etc.) or would respond to political motives of the very organisation.

## **Defence, attack and victory**

To assume this tactical flexibility means to assume together with our action, the need to politically evaluate and analyse. It is a well known motto that there is no revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory, and vice versa. Political theory on its own is of no good, as practice on its own is of no good as well. But both concepts are irrelevant in the absence of political analysis to make theory and practice go hand in hand and to make them relevant for the here and now. It is necessary for making our practice effective as well.

Theory gives us tools to interpret reality, but they have to be applied, understanding the objective and subjective factors, as well as the huge range of factors combining of them both. In taking those factors into account, we are giving a direction to our practice. This is what will lead our way. I clarify that our focus is always in moving forward and in no case we privilege a mere waiting: there's always something to be done today. What is the most recommendable for the present, that varies enormously according to the context and we cannot have a pre determined alternative nor easy answers.

In moments when the class conflict is at a low level or on retreat, it is not that difficult to lose patience, thus falling into the hands of voluntarism and in the fetish of action. We know that social processes are long and we do not intend to make them any longer by putting lead shoes on our feet; but we know as well that history do not have shortcuts, that the processes of building an alternative take long and that the "final clash" is nothing but a myth that in reality happens in diverse struggles and confrontations throughout history. We have to be prepared for the moments when we can take a frontal offensive but, all too conscious of the complexity of social processes and of the fluctuations of class struggle, we have to be equally prepared to confront those moments when it is the State and the capitalist that will be sharpening their knives, so as to confront those moments of low struggle when indifference will probably beat us stronger than repression. Revolutionaries, above all, have to learn the art of perseverance. Impatience is not a good adviser as taught by revolutionary experience. This does not mean to wait, but to know how to choose the type of actions to perpetrate in certain moments.

All I want to say with this is that "attack", a central concept of insurrectionalism, is not all; in revolutionary struggle there is attack, as there is defence. There are moments to move forward, as there are moments to hold positions. Sometimes the moment for the offensive has to be carefully chosen and nothing of this can be predicted in none of the revolutionary doctrines. This can only be learnt through experience, political clarity and, above the rest, by a healthy environment for criticism that is mature and serious. At the end of the day, what we are interested in is not in doing actions as to calm the consciousness of our comrades, but our real interest is victory and, unfortunately, the number of attacks does not necessarily add up to that goal.

## **Discussion and revolutionary praxis**

Many of the weak aspects of anarchism are taken to paroxysm with insurrectionalism. Many of the things we actually consider to be basically wrong with them are not only to be found among insurrectionalists but rather they are to be found in one way or another present in the broader anarchist movement. We have talked of this tendency to freeze certain historical moments, of making general rules out of extraordinary experiences, of tactical dogmatism; but we

recognise as another weakness of the anarchist movement the almost absolute lack of a tradition of constructive criticism. Discussions among anarchists are seldom directed towards clarifying situations or searching for solutions to the difficulties that the revolutionaries find into their practice. Most of the times discussions are motivated by a double effort of condemnation of the deviates and to demonstrate who's the legitimate representative of ideological purity.

Another huge problem in discussion among anarchists is the use of blanket concepts, as demonstrated by comrade Black, that in fact help more to obscure than to clarify debate. For instance, it is too often that "unions" are criticised as if all of them were exactly the same thing... ignoring the world of difference between, let's say, the IWW, the maquilas unions or the AFL-CIO in the US. To group them all under the same category not only doesn't help the debate, but it is also a gross mistake that reveals an appalling political and conceptual weakness.

All these have caused, among other things, a serious lack of debate among libertarian circles. It is not our intention now to look for the roots of this problem, the one is caused by numerous reasons (isolation, idealism, absence of real practice, dogmatism, sectarianism, etc...), but we only intend to call the attention on the link existing between this lack of a tradition of constructive debate and the problem noted by comrade Black about the terms in which debate is usually posed: whether you are with us or against us.

Comrade Black correctly disagrees with the blackmail inherent to the claim made by insurrectionalists that any criticism to their actions means to side with the State and repression. No one is free from revolutionary criticism, least the revolutionary themselves. It is neither legitimate nor honest to say that he who criticises a stupid action is "adjusting the straight jacket" or is validating repression, or is siding with the State, or is a coward.

But I find it important to state that the line dividing left-wing criticism from right-wing criticism has to be unequivocally marked and cannot be left as a nebulous zone. For being true that we don't have to accept everything other organisations do, nor remain silent in the face of actions we might consider stupid and wrong, we always have to be conscious that our criticism can be used by the class enemy if it is not clearly posed and if we don't distinguish, above anything else, who is it the one with whom we have an antagonistic difference (State-Capital) from the comrades with whom we might have political differences, no matter how big, but which do not turn us into warring opposites. The problem here is not criticism, but how this criticism is posed. We do not want to see our criticism to be turned into an argument into repression's and our enemy's favour. Let us remember that this system is always looking for the seeds of division and for the slightest chance to attack dissent.

But not only criticism against insurrectionalism could be used by the State and its repressive forces; in fact, the very criticism made by insurrectionalists can work as a godsend for State to justify repression. A pathetic example of this is the declaration issued by the Informal Anarchist Coordination of Mexico in the face of the events in Oaxaca ("Solidaridad directa con los oprimidos y explotados de Oaxaca" November 16<sup>th</sup>). In this public declaration, the bulk of it is directed against the APPO, the CIPO-RFM and other popular organisations that were in direct fight against State and Capital. Not much for theory there, that was quintessential class struggle. But they preferred to spend their saliva and ink criticising in a dishonest way, and worse, resorting to some of the same arguments used by the State media that questioned the movement in Oaxaca. This criticism could not only be labelled as reactionary, but also as untimely, appearing at the very minute that the comrades there were needing the most of our solidarity and when repression was at its highest.



This attitude was in a remarkable contrast with the attitude assumed by the Magonist Liberation Commando (Democratic Revolutionary Tendency –Army of the People), which knew when to keep a low profile, which knew how to respect the different alternatives of struggle tactically assumed by protesters in Oaxaca and who were notably conscious that not only our criticism can be useful to the system, but also our own irresponsible action. They say so in a public statement on November 27<sup>th</sup> *“Up to now, we remained expectant and on alert in order to avoid repression to be unleashed over the popular movement gathered around the APPO under the excuse of the armed revolutionary struggle, but the brutality of the federal and national neoliberal government forces us to raise our voice and to make use of our weapons so as to contain and dissuade the neoliberal offensive that should not and cannot be tolerated by any revolutionary organisation”*

At the end of the day, the danger for our actions to be used into the system’s favour (just like our differences can be) has to be considered seriously, but seems to be something absolutely underestimated, or worse, ignored by insurrectionalists. This is a serious omission, for we know thanks to historical experience how important it has been for the system the role of the agent provocateur and of stupid actions to look for ways to justify an excessive repression and to isolate the revolutionary movement from the masses. History is full examples, as those illustrated by Victor Serge in “What everyone should know about repression” (1925) about the provocateurs at the Czar’s services in post 1905 Russia (remarkable as this document is, it was only possible thanks to documents seized after the 1917’s revolution from the files of the okhrana, the political police of the Czar); Alexander Skirda in his book “Facing the Enemy” also gives us ample documentation from the French police files of the role of the provocateurs among the anarchist terrorist groups from 1880 until the end of that century. Stories of provocateurs and of senseless actions plague the records of the left and anarchism. But even more dangerous than the actions of the provocateurs themselves is the irresponsible or untimely action of sincere comrades, but too wrong in action or lacking any sense of direction to aim.

We, therefore, cannot silence our criticism in the same way as those who are disagreement with us have the same duty to criticise. I say a duty, for the fraternal and constructive criticism, though not for this less energetic, is a need in order to develop a healthy movement and to look for ways to improve our praxis in the search for the road towards freedom. All it is needed to know is when, how and where criticism will be formulated, so it becomes a factor of strength of the movement instead of a factor of weakness. The same holds truth for action itself.

## **To conclude...**

I think insurrectionalism is useful for debate today not as much as for the criticism it directs towards authoritarian organisations or to the left, and not even to the anarchist movement. It is so, because it brings to our attention a number of the greatest weaknesses of the libertarian movement. It is the mirror image of our historical flaws and of our insufficiencies. Many of our comrades who would take a prudent distance from insurrectionalism would be surprised that, no matter they might disagree in the end results with it, they might be nonetheless sharing a number of its political foundations as well as some its weaknesses. It seems to me that insurrectionalism is not, as many comrades would want us to believe, a bizarre product of the ideological confusion of recent decades. It has been, instead, the expression of tendencies emerging at different times in history, in the face of certain circumstances of a very particular nature, and its expression has

been possible due to the existence of serious fault lines in our politics and, what we believe to be, misconceptions. These misconceptions are nothing new and are not limited to insurrectionalism –they are far more widespread in the ranks of our movement than what we would believe.

To sum it up, I hold that insurrectionalism has been incubated, nurtured, bred and developed under the shade of the very mistakes of the anarchist movement (something equally valid for other leftist versions of a certain “insurrectionalism”) and their conscious expression, as a tendency in its own right over the last while, gives us the opportunity to deal with its politics and thus move forward.

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