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The New Unrest

L.A. Kauffman

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For the longest time, being on the left has meant being marginal, powerless, and embattled. Since at least the Reagan years, we've been history's losers, the dorks and freaks of the political realm. Often, we adapted poorly to our general irrelevance, turning inward to fight over inanities or purveying stale messages – "Bad slogans repeated, ensure we'll be defeated" – at predictable demonstrations.

There were issue-oriented movements that bucked this trend – big, important causes that won sizable victories, like the anti-apartheid movement or the AIDS direct action group ACT UP. But viable on-the-ground activism with a sweeping economic and political agenda? That kind of radicalism was almost nowhere to be found.

History has turned a corner. Suddenly, as this new century begins, a new radicalism has emerged: broad, confident, and compelling. The World Trade Organization protests in Seattle marked this movement's first major victory and mass media debut, but the new unrest is not limited to the loud and varied activism around issues of corporate globalization.

You can find it any place where dissent is growing more vocal and spirited, and where groups that once worked at arm's length from one another are newly discovering common ground – from the increasingly multi-generational and multi-ethnic campaigns against police brutality and the “prison-industrial complex” to the new collaborations between organized labor and immigrant rights groups to secure amnesty for the undocumented.

“People are getting fed up everywhere, people are seeing the same things,” says JR Valrey, a young activist in Oakland, California, who has worked on everything from guerrilla hip-hop concerts to direct action protests as part of an expansive community empowerment campaign. “It doesn’t stop at the borders – it’s nationwide, if not worldwide. The world is already an oligarchy with only a few people running it, and it’s about to turn into one big monopoly, and people know that if we don’t combine, it’s going to eat us.”

Han Shan, program director for the Ruckus Society, a five-year-old organization that trains activists in the techniques and strategies of direct action, echoes this analysis: “I think that people have finally begun to dig deeper and understand that there are vast economic paradigms that underlie a lot of the environmental problems that we have, a lot of the human rights issues that they face.”

With this new sense of momentum and common ground, level-headed organizers are beginning to talk in terms that would have seemed delusional just a short time ago.

“This is the biggest opening for building a mass movement in my lifetime,” says David Solnit, a veteran of 1980s and 1990s activism and one of the key organizers of the Seattle WTO blockade. “Most of the past mass movements in this country have been around single issues like disarmament or Central America or forests. This is bringing people together from all the different fights and very clearly saying that the economic system of this country and this world is wrong – and we’re going to overthrow it and build a new one in its wake.”

Personally, I'm dubious about anything being actually overthrown – the snarky cynicism of the 1990s is beginning to seem dated, but healthy skepticism never goes out of style.

That said, a whiff of insurrection is unquestionably in the air. Everywhere you turn, it seems, people are vowing to shut one or another elite institution down.

The biggest such event in the near-term future is a major protest in Washington, D.C., on April 16, designed to disrupt an annual meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Radical activists around the world have declared May 1, 2000 to be a "Global Day of Action, Resistance, and Carnival Against Capitalism," with talk of blockading stock exchanges and other institutions of the global economy. And plans are afoot in Los Angeles and Philadelphia to mess with this summer's Democratic and Republican Party conventions, on the reasoned grounds that both parties have become nothing more than shells for moneyed interests.

Meanwhile, local fights are escalating. In New York City, for example, where I live, there has been a longstanding battle against private luxury development on publicly owned community gardens. The other night, several hundred people calling themselves the Subway Liberation Front staged a raucous outlaw party, taking over first an L and then an A train. A large part of the crowd, juiced by its own defiance, proceeded to the recently bulldozed Esperanza Garden on Manhattan's Lower East Side, where they tore down the developer's fence and began replanting the land. This impromptu action came at a high price: With no news cameras or legal observers to provide cover for the radical gardeners, the NYPD swooped in, badly beating a number of the participants.

There is much about the new unrest that bears closer examination. Will gestures of revolt overwhelm strategic considerations, as they did that night in Esperanza Garden? How deep are the new alliances, particularly those that seek to bridge racial and class divides? What role does the identity politics of recent decades play

in activism today? How far in the direction of direct action is organized labor willing to go?

For the moment, anything seems possible. "People are very conscious of the passing of time and the fact that history is being written," observes Nadine Bloch, one of the organizers of the upcoming IMF/World Bank protests, "and young people especially are jumping in and taking responsibility for what their future will look like.