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The Surgeons of Occupy

Peter Gelderloos

2 September 2012

In his February 6 article entitled, “The Cancer of Occupy,” Chris Hedges attempts to analyze the political beliefs and practices of the black bloc, a group he characterizes as the scourge of the Occupy movement. Although Mr. Hedges evidently conducted at least a little to research his article, he does not quote a single proponent or participant of a black bloc, neither within the Occupy movement nor from any of the many other black blocs that have been organized in the United States. Such research would not have been difficult. There are a plethora of anarchist blogs, websites, newspapers, and magazines that discuss Occupy, the black bloc, and even the use of the black bloc within Occupy protests.

Despite this major failing, I cannot accuse Mr. Hedges of laziness. He does, after all, dig up an anarchist magazine published in Oregon ten years earlier and he quotes one particular article extensively. The magazine, *Green Anarchy*, is tied in to Hedges’ tirade on the basis of the unsupported and inaccurate assertion that anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan, one of the magazine’s former editors, is “one of the principal ideologues of the Black Bloc movement”. In fact, the black bloc evolved—as a tactic, not a movement—in Europe and came to the United States without

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any input from Zerzan. Zerzan's only link to the bloc is as one of the few public figures to have endorsed it.

So why does he appear at all in Hedges' article? Presumably to provide the link to *Green Anarchy*. And why *Green Anarchy*? Of all the anarchists and others who have participated in black blocs in the last decades, green anarchists or anarcho-primitivists have only been one small part. Labor union anarchists, anarcha-feminists, social anarchists, indigenous anarchists, Christian anarchists, as well as plain old, unaffiliated street youth, students, immigrants, parents, and others have participated in black blocs.

However, for a mainstream audience susceptible to fear-mongering, the anarcho-primitivists can easily be portrayed as the most extreme, the most irrational, and this kind of crass emotional manipulation is clearly Mr. Hedges' goal.

Despite the tenuous to null connection between *Green Anarchy* and the use of the black bloc within the Occupy movement, he uses a skewed presentation of that magazine to frighten his readers away from a reasoned consideration of the political arguments on which the black bloc is based. For the more intrepid readers, he finishes off the job with inaccurate and unreferenced generalizations such as, "Black Bloc anarchists oppose all organized movements [...] They can only be obstructionist."

Hedges introduces the widely read Zerzan merely as an apologist for the ideas of Ted Kaczynski (The Unabomber). Referred to by one NBC reporter as "probably one of the smartest individuals I have encountered" and "very low key, reasoned, and non-threatening," Zerzan is a far more complex figure, but such details fall outside of Hedges' plan of attack. His characterization of *Green Anarchy*, and by extension, of all black bloc anarchists, is based on a single article that only appeared in *GA* as a reprint some ten years ago. Neither does Hedges admit that the article itself, "The EZLN are Not Anarchist," generated considerable controversy and debate among anarchists, nor that *GA* itself published a response by several Zapatistas, which

tionary elements will have to be surgically removed. It is an operation the police, the media, and some careerist progressives have been engaged in for months, and Hedges' contribution is just the latest drop in the bucket.

This form of co-optation and manipulation is nothing new for a movement that cynically harvested a few images from Tahrir Square—an unfinished popular uprising in which hundreds of thousands of people defended themselves forcefully from the cops, ultimately torching dozens of police stations—to declare a victory for nonviolence.

Around the world, people are fighting for their freedom and resisting the depredations of the rich and powerful. In the United States, there is plenty of cause to join this fight, but as long as people continue enact a fear-driven, Not-In-My-Backyard pacifism, and to pander to the corporate media as though they would ever show us in a positive light, the rich and the powerful will have nothing to worry about.

criticized the article for “a colonialist attitude of arrogant ignorance”.

The openness to debate and criticism present in *GA*, is totally absent from Hedges' latest work of journalism. The manipulation, cherry picking, and dishonesty that underlie his arguments show that for this award-winning journalist, fairness is only a courtesy one extends to those rich or powerful enough to press libel charges. This conception certainly abounds in the pages of the *New York Times*, Hedges' longtime employer.

The medical language of Hedges' title, referring to the anarchists as a “cancer,” should immediately ring alarm bells. Portraying one's opponents as a disease has long been a tactic of the state and the media to justify the repression. This language was used against the Native Americans, against the Jews, against communists, and many others. Recently the police and the right wing used this same language of hygiene to talk about the occupations around the country as health threats so as to justify their eviction and generate disgust and repulsion.

In sum, Chris Hedges deals with the “Black Bloc anarchists” with fear-mongering manipulation and without the slightest glimmer of solidarity. But beneath the black masks, anarchists have been an integral part of the debates, the organizing, the cooking and cleaning in dozens of cities. Anarchists also participated in preparing the original call-out for Occupy Wall Street, and they played a key role in organizing and carrying out the historic Oakland general strike and the subsequent West Coast port blockades—probably the strongest actions taken by the Occupy movement to date.

The very fact that Occupy Oakland got out 2,000 people to fight the police for hours in an attempt to occupy a building, at a time when Occupy in other cities is dwindling or dead, contradicts the parallel claims that anarchists are trying to “hijack” Occupy and that their tactics turn people away. On the contrary, anarchists are part and parcel of the Occupy movement and their methods of struggle resonate with many people

more than the staid, hand-wringing pacifism and middle-class reformism of careerists like Chris Hedges.

It would be useful to debate the appropriateness of aggressive tactics in demonstrations, and anarchists themselves have often encouraged this debate, but Hedges has passed over the critique and gone straight for the smear. He calls the black bloc anarchists “a gift from heaven for the surveillance and security state,” choosing conspiracy theory paranoia to distract from the public record, filled with cases of government officials and the media alternately serenading and threatening the Occupy movement into an acceptance of nonviolence.

Its proponents in the Occupy movement have generally protected nonviolence from an open debate, instead imposing it through manipulation, fear-mongering, and, when all else fails, turning their opponents over to the police. Hedges himself implies that illegal or aggressive tactics cannot exist in a space where “mothers and fathers [feel] safe”, ignoring the many militant movements built around the needs of mothers and fathers, such as his own favorite example, the Zapatistas. He also dismisses the concept of a diversity of tactics as a “thought-terminating cliché”, demonstrating a willful ignorance of—to name just one example—the many weeks of thoughtful debate that went into the “St. Paul principles” that allowed hundreds of thousands of people with a huge diversity of political practices to come together in 2008 and protest the Republican National Convention.

Predictably, Chris Hedges uses the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., to gain legitimacy for his stance, again contradicting his argument that the “corporate state” wants protestors to fight police and destroy property, given that this same corporate state venerates King (or at least a well managed version of King) while demonizing or silencing the equally important Malcolm X or Black Panthers. Just as predictably, Chris Hedges does not mention that King vocally sympathized with the urban youths who rioted, youths whose contemporary

equivalent Hedges calls “stupid” and a “cancer.” Ironically, Hedges refers to the famous Birmingham campaign attributed with achieving the end of segregation. What Hedges and pacifist ideologues like him fail to mention is that Birmingham was a repeat of King’s Albany campaign, which ended a total failure, all its participants locked up, and no one slightly moved by the supposed dignity of victimhood. The difference? In Birmingham, the local youths got fed up, rioted and kicked police out of large parts of the city for several days. The authorities chose to negotiate with King and replace de jure segregation with de facto segregation in order to avoid losing control entirely.

It’s also hypocritical that on the one hand Chris Hedges utilizes King and parades the dignity of nonviolent suffering while on the other hand he uses the fear of getting injured by police or spending a few nights in jail to mobilize his comfortable, middle class readership to reject the black bloc and the dangers it might bring down on them. “The arrests last weekend in Oakland of more than 400 protesters [...] are an indication of the scale of escalating repression and a failure to remain a unified, nonviolent opposition.” He goes on to detail the horrible ways police attacked demonstrators, and the conditions in jail.

It’s election year. Those who still have faith in the system, or those whose paychecks are signed by the major unions, the Democratic Party, progressive NGOs, or the left wing of the corporate media, know it’s their job to forcibly convert any popular movement into a pathetic plea to be made at the ballot box. The unmediated, experimental politics of the Occupy movement must give way to symbolic protest and dialogue with the existing “structures of power” whose members must be brought “to our side”. For the Occupy movement to be sanitized and converted into a recruiting tool for the Democratic Party, it will have to be neutralized as a space for real debate, experimentation, and conflict with authority. Its more revolu-