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“Activism” and “Anarcho-Purism”

sasha k

“After Seattle” (words that launched a thousand articles) there has been much talk about how to keep “building the movement.” In “Rethinking Radical Activism and Building the Movement,” Chris Dixon adds his thoughts on the matter. After reading the article one is prompted to ask what of “activism” is rethought and what is the movement to be built? In fact, very little is rethought and a critical look at “activism” is entirely absent from Dixon’s celebratory piece. Dixon focuses his discussion around hope, a hope that he calls “critical”; unfortunately, the hope in Dixon’s article is mostly self-congratulatory and contains almost no critical reflection.

The article contains two “criticisms”: 1. the movement, which for Dixon started in Seattle, not in the third world, is mostly white, and 2. Dixon is critical of any theoretical reflection on the contradiction of the movement, what he calls “purist” anarchism. In linking these two criticisms together, Dixon cuts off any discussion of tactics, strategy, goals and, above all, of the role of the activist/organizer.

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Retrieved on September 1, 2009 from www.geocities.com

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There has been much discussion in Europe and especially England about the role of activists within society; in the U.S., due in a large part to the anti-intellectual nature of the radical milieu, such a discussion has mostly been precluded. (Time is certainly ripe for this discussion in the U.S.) This untheoretical approach allows Dixon to talk in extremely abstract terms. The most glaring example is his use of the term “social change/transformation”. In Dixon’s article social change can mean anything at all; it can be change in any direction for practically any goal as long as it is progressive: more or better of something. But this abstractness is not an accidental omission; it is central to the logic of his argument, it is central to the logic of the activist mentality. The more abstract we are in our goals the more that people join our parade: it is the mentality of numbers. This is the Clintonification of anarchism – Clinton made the Democratic Party so bland and middle of the road that even some Republicans could applaud or join it and Dixon proposes doing the same for anarchism.

We need to ask what is the movement that Dixon wants to build? The movement that Dixon is so enthused about is a movement of activists, of specialists in social change, who stand above and outside of the communities they organize. And for the most part this movement is a collection of single-issue groups. If anything has been inspiring in the U.S. over the last year or so it is that more people have begun to see themselves as opposed to capitalism in its totality. Yet if we add up a bunch of single-issue campaigns we don’t get an anti-capitalist movement, but a reformist movement full of contradictions and led by activists. The movement of the exploited and excluded, which is antagonistic to capitalism and the state, can’t be built by welding together a bunch of single issue groups; it is a movement that grows out of our present social conditions and our desires for a different world.

However, it seems that to build a movement led by activists any tactic or goal will do, no matter how contradictory. Dixon

lists a set of demands and goals of which none suggest any serious critique of capitalism and the state in their totality: they include, “fighting reactionary ballot measures,” “demanding authentic public oversight of police,” “building art installations,” and “painting graffiti.” As Dixon states, “we all choose a variety of tools, tactics, strategies, and demands based on our circumstances and objectives.” And when one’s objectives remain vague enough any tool, tactic, strategy or demand will do fine; in fact, they can be “seen as complementary.” They can be “seen” as such when we remain abstract and unreflective, but in reality the contradictions remain. Yet for the activist it is the spectacle of unity that is important.

If our tactics and strategies are truly to be “based on our circumstances [the capitalist social relations we are enmeshed within] and our objectives” — for anarchists, presumably, the ending of capitalism and the state, not just some general idea of social change — we should be especially critical of tools, tactics and strategies that contradict these objectives, that lead us in a different direction, or that reproduce the very thing we are trying to eliminate from society. For Dixon, however, the “critical” in his “critical hope” is a criticism of being theoretical or reflexive in our understanding. He is critical of making any distinction that might question the abstractness of his conception of social change, any distinction that might force one to make difficult decisions. While Dixon does state that a more theoretical understanding of capitalism is important, for him this seems to remain a separate project from that of organizing; thus practice and theory become two separate worlds, as if one could be done without the other.

Dixon cuts off the very type of reflexive and theoretical discussion on tactics, strategy and, above all, goals that we now need through the coupling up of the rhetoric of white privilege with charges of anarcho-purism. If you disagree with him it is probably because you are a “white, middle-class” male — and probably an anarcho-purist to boot — so you have no

right to talk. Such “purist anarchists” are also critiqued as “self-appointed bearers of a radical standard.” And the use of “self-appointed” is telling. In the activist world one needs to claim some authentic, democratic position in order to take on the role of “activist,” “organizer,” or “theorist.” The question is, ‘who do you represent?’ for you can’t just represent yourself. But we don’t need expert, specialized “theorists,” we all need to be reflexive and theoretical in our understanding of social change, not as some vague concept but as something intimately connected to our own desires for a different life. Unfortunately, it is to just such experts that Dixon turns to bolster his argument: everyone he quotes is either an “activist,” “organizer,” or, god forbid, “theorist”: only one of his expert witnesses is even an anarchist, yet he is still identified as a specialist — as if this were some academic paper — he is an “anarchist writer.”

But who is an anarcho-purist? What is anarcho-purism? It is a term that gets thrown about quite often these days, particularly in activist circles. We should, therefore, try to make our thinking clear on this matter. An anarcho-purism is always a morality as opposed to an ethics. Morality is a statement, such as “thou shalt not,” instead of a question posed in the moment. It is a set, blind standard that rules over behavior. Anarcho-purism is a morality that tries to keep anarchism pure and separate from certain tactics or from working with certain groups for the sake of purity. Dixon’s use of the term “purist anarchists,” however, suggests not only that anarchism shouldn’t be a morality — a suggestion that I would definitely agree with — but that it shouldn’t be an ethics as well. In fact, following Dixon’s logic one would have to conclude that anarchism should have almost no meaning at all.

An anarchist ethics is an affirmation, an affirmation of the creativity, desire and power of the individual; it is an affirmation of the ability of individuals to come together and decide their own fate without the need of any imposed decision coming in from the outside whether in ‘totalitarian’ or ‘democratic’

problem. The ‘role’ of the activist is not simply ‘self-imposed;’ it is also socially-imposed. Capitalist society produces activists the way it produces other specialists, the way it produces, for example, that close cousin of the activist, the intellectual.” Thus, while Kellstadt states that we need to operate within the tension between the subjective and the objective, her/his critique often falls back significantly into an overly objectivist position. While committing “role-suicide” won’t make the social position of “the activist” disappear, there are always openings to different types of self-organization. We may not be able to kill the role, but we are not stuck in it either; and, if we are to rid ourselves of capitalism we need to struggle in a different way and not celebrate the role of the activist.

Certainly “giving up activism” isn’t revolution in itself; it won’t make the social roles that are conditioned by our historical circumstances disappear. Nor will it allow us to “truly appropriate an authentic self.” Struggling to organize ourselves in a qualitatively different manner, however, can open the potential of insurrection to overthrow capitalism and the state. For such a potential to open, hope lies not in cheerleading, but in a much more critical and reflexive understanding of our practices and forms of organization.

form. As an ethics, it is both a way of living and a way of relating to others: how can we come together — combine — in a fashion that doesn’t restrict, limit and suppress the desire, creativity and active power of each other? This ethical question is at the heart of anarchism. And it is just such a question that Dixon wipes out as he wipes anarchism clean of any content. As an ethics, anarchism recognizes that there is no escape from social life; the anarchist ethic, after all, grows out of the movement of the exploited and excluded, and it only remains vital within that movement. Living this ethic will mean that one will come into conflict with imposed social order, with hierarchy, with any archy or cracy. To live this ethic is thus not always an easy choice, we can’t make it into a Snickers Bar; anyhow, no matter how drained of content anarchism becomes the masses won’t run to sign up any day soon.

That said, it is also a simple fact of language that those who want to reform the present system are called reformists. There are also many people who wish to end the rule of capital and the state but unwittingly use means that can only bring about a reform of the present system. It is, therefore, obviously important to come to a clear understanding of the results of our actions; this is what theory and critique are for, and it should not be turned into a pleasant game of compliments. Yet, as anarchists, we can work with them towards intermediate aims, while always remaining clear as to how such aims tally with our ultimate goals. There are, however, important limits — limits that are obscured when we hold only an abstract conception of social change. Working to “demand authentic control over the police” might be a small step for social change in some general sense, but ultimately it is a step backwards as it strengthens the legitimacy of the police and of imposed decision. That is of course, unless one’s goal is nicer police and “democratic control over our lives” — the term ‘democratic,’ which we hear repeated over and over by activists these days, is another term usually left unthinkingly abstract. “Direct democratic control

over our lives” might make a nice slogan, but it is vague enough for most politicians in Washington to use.

Secondly, working with those who attempt to limit my activities, my power of acting, is a combination that would not work well. Strangely, it is most often the activists who try to restrict the actions of others — one only needs to look at D.A.N.’s role in Seattle, believing that they could set rules of engagement for others. This is the ethical question always posed to anarchists; when does combining with others multiply our power to act towards our goals and when does it not? It is an important question, not one to be ignored or vilified. None of this means that there is only one way to act, but that just acting without any thought is more often than not counter productive.

Maybe the investigation of white privilege needs first to turn its gaze on the activist/organizer’s role as a specialist in social change. Perhaps it is not that activists have been organizing the wrong people or around the wrong issues, as Dixon’s article suggests, but that organizing people is the wrong way to bring about a truly different world. There has, however, been a discussion brewing on “activism” especially since the J18 protests. Some of the more interesting articles include Andrew X’s “Give Up Activism,” J. Kellstadt’s “The Necessity and Impossibility of ‘Anti-Activism,’” and “Practice and Ideology in the Direct Action Movement” from Undercurrents. I will not repeat all their arguments here, but hope to push the discussion forward.

In “Give Up Activism,” Andrew X critiques activism as a specialized role separate from society and leading to an inadequate practice. Andrew X argues, therefore, that the practice of activism must be given up. “[T]acking capitalism will require not only a quantitative change (more actions, more activists) but a qualitative one (we need to discover some more effective form of operating).” This is the problem at the heart of Dixon’s argument: it relies solely on getting more people involved, more people organizing and organized, but lacks the reflection necessary to begin to move us towards a qualitatively different prac-

tice. If anything, Dixon’s arguments reinforce and celebrate the specialized role of the activist as one who stands outside and above the masses — the famous real people — to be organized. But, to use Dixon’s words, “we can do better.” As Andrew X states, “The ‘activist’ is a specialist or an expert in social change — yet the harder we cling to this role and notion of what we are, the more we actually impede the change we desire. A real revolution will involve the breaking out of all preconceived roles and the destruction of all specialism — the reclamation of our lives. The seizing control over our own destinies which is the act of revolution will involve the creation of new selves and new forms of interaction and community.” Andrew X, however, suggests that breaking out of the role of the activist is no easy task, especially during low points in the struggle against capitalism, but we must “constantly try to push at the boundaries of our limitations and constraints.”

In “The Necessity and Impossibility of ‘Anti-Activism,’” J. Kellstadt is supportive but critical of Andrew X’s discussion, thus the title of the article. While Kellstadt also sees the limits of activism, s/he argues that it is also impossible to simply give up activism. The most suggestive aspect of Kellstadt’s article is that it both notes the subjective elements of choice involved in being an activist and the objective conditions of society that limit our ability to simply give up activism: “I think that a rather high degree of ambivalence and the ability to live the tension of seemingly irreconcilable contradictions is central to the problems of formulating an ‘anti-activism’ and ‘anti-politics.’ In short, I argue that we must embrace simultaneously the necessity and the impossibility of ‘giving up activism.’” Kellstadt critiques Andrew X for being too subjectivist (that we could simply ‘give up activism’): “the collective human dynamics by which social groups and professions (cops, priests, or activists) emerge out of the division of labor cannot be denied or thrown over by acts of individual will, which is the level at which Andrew X addresses the