

# **J18 London & N30 Seattle 1999 10 years on**



**Booklet compiled by Bristol Anarchist Bookfair Collective**

**3 articles looking at recollections and critiques of J18 and the anti-capitalist movement and the possibilities for future organising**

## **Contents**

**N30 Black Bloc Communiqué - ACME Collective**

**Practice and ideology in the direct action movement - Undercurrent's contribution to a critique of the politics of anti-capitalist protest.**

**Organising for the Anti-Capitalist Transition - David Harvey**



# N30 Black Bloc Communiqué

*A communiqué from one section of the black bloc of N30 in Seattle 1999*

On November 30, several groups of individuals in black bloc attacked various corporate targets in downtown Seattle. Among them were (to name just a few): Fidelity Investment (major investor in Occidental Petroleum, the bane of the U'wa tribe in Colombia) Bank of America, US Bancorp, Key Bank and Washington Mutual Bank (financial institutions key in the expansion of corporate repression) Old Navy, Banana Republic and the GAP (as Fisher family businesses, rapers of Northwest forest lands and sweatshop laborers) NikeTown and Levi's (whose overpriced products are made in sweatshops) McDonald's (slave-wage fast-food peddlers responsible for destruction of tropical rainforests for grazing land and slaughter of animals) Starbucks (peddlers of an addictive substance whose products are harvested at below-poverty wages by farmers who are forced to destroy their own forests in the process) Warner Bros. (media monopolists) Planet Hollywood (for being Planet Hollywood).

This activity lasted for over 5 hours and involved the breaking of storefront windows and doors and defacing of facades. Slingshots, newspaper boxes, sledge hammers, mallets, crowbars and nail-pullers were used to strategically destroy corporate property and gain access (one of the three targeted Starbucks and Niketown were looted). Eggs filled with glass etching solution, paint-balls and spray-paint were also used.

The black bloc was a loosely organized cluster of affinity groups and individuals who roamed around downtown, pulled this way by a vulnerable and significant storefront and that way by the sight of a police formation. Unlike the vast majority of activists who were pepper-sprayed, tear-gassed and shot at with rubber bullets on several occasions, most of our section of the black bloc escaped serious injury by remaining constantly in motion and avoiding engagement with the police. We buddied up, kept tight and watched each others' backs.

Those attacked by federal thugs were un-arrested by quick-thinking and organized members of the black bloc. The sense of solidarity was awe-inspiring.

## **The Peace Police**

Unfortunately, the presence and persistence of "peace police" was quite disturbing. On at least 6 separate occasions, so-called "non-violent" activists physically attacked individuals who targeted corporate property. Some even went so far as to stand in front of the Niketown super store and tackle and shove the black bloc away. Indeed, such self-described "peace-keepers" posed a much greater threat to individuals in the black bloc than the notoriously violent uniformed "peace-keepers" sanctioned by the state undercover officers have even used the cover of the activist peace-keepers to ambush those who engage in corporate property destruction).

## **Response to the Black Bloc**

Response to the black bloc has highlighted some of the contradictions and internal oppressions of the "nonviolent activist" community. Aside from the obvious hypocrisy of those who engaged in violence against black-clad and masked people (many of whom were harassed despite the fact that they never engaged in property destruction), there is the racism of privileged activists who can afford to ignore the violence perpetrated against the bulk of society and the natural world in the name of private property rights. Window-smashing has engaged and inspired many of the most oppressed members of Seattle's community more than any giant puppets or sea turtle costumes ever could (not to disparage the effectiveness of those tools in other communities).

## Ten Myths about the Black Bloc

Here's a little something to dispel the myths that have been circulating about the N30 black bloc:

1. "They are all a bunch of Eugene anarchists." While a few may be anarchists from Eugene, we hail from all over the United States, including Seattle. In any case, most of us are familiar with local issues in Seattle (for instance, the recent occupation of downtown by some of the most nefarious of multinational retailers).
2. "They are all followers of John Zerzan." A lot of rumors have been circulating that we are followers of John Zerzan, an anarcho-primitivist author from Eugene who advocates property destruction. While some of us may appreciate his writings and analyses, he is in no sense our leader, directly, indirectly, philosophically or otherwise.
3. "The mass public squat is the headquarters of the anarchists who destroyed property on November 30th." In reality, most of the people in the "Autonomous Zone" squat are residents of Seattle who have spent most of their time since its opening on the 28th in the squat. While they may know of one-another, the two groups are not co-extensive and in no case could the squat be considered the headquarters of people who destroyed property.
4. "They escalated situations on the 30th, leading to the tear-gassing of passive, non-violent protesters." To answer this, we need only note that tear-gassing, pepper-spraying and the shooting of rubber bullets all began before the black blocs (as far as we know) started engaging in property destruction. In addition, we must resist the tendency to establish a causal relationship between police repression and protest in any form, whether it involved property destruction or not. The police are charged with protecting the interests of the wealthy few and the blame for the violence cannot be placed upon those who protest those interests.
5. Conversely: "They acted in response to the police repression." While this might be a more positive representation of the black bloc, it is nevertheless false. We refuse to be misconstrued as a purely reactionary force. While the logic of the black bloc may not make sense to some, it is in any case a pro-active logic.
6. "They are a bunch of angry adolescent boys." Aside from the fact that it belies a disturbing ageism and sexism, it is false. Property destruction is not merely macho rabble-rousing or testosterone-laden angst release. Nor is it displaced and reactionary anger. It is strategically and specifically targeted direct action against corporate interests.
7. "They just want to fight." This is pretty absurd, and it conveniently ignores the eagerness of "peace police" to fight us. Of all the groups engaging in direct action, the black bloc was perhaps the least interested in engaging the authorities and we certainly had no interest in fighting with other anti-WTO activists (despite some rather strong disagreements over tactics).
8. "They are a chaotic, disorganized and opportunistic mob." While many of us could surely spend days arguing over what "chaotic" means, we were certainly not disorganized. The organization may have been fluid and dynamic, but it was tight. As for the charge of opportunism, it would be hard to imagine who of the thousands in attendance didn't take advantage of the opportunity created in Seattle to advance their agenda. The question becomes, then, whether or not we helped create that opportunity and most of us certainly did (which leads us to the next myth):
9. "They don't know the issues" or "they aren't activists who've been working on this." While we may not be professional activists, we've all been working on this convergence in Seattle for months. Some of us did work in our home-towns and others came to Seattle months in advance to work on it. To be sure, we were responsible for many hundreds of people who came out on the streets on the 30th, only a very small minority of which had anything to do with the black bloc. Most of us have been studying the effects of the global economy, genetic engineering, resource extraction, transportation, labor practices, elimination of indigenous autonomy, animal rights and human rights and we've been doing activism on these issues for many years. We are neither ill-informed nor inexperienced.

10. “Masked anarchists are anti-democratic and secretive because they hide their identities.”

Let's face it (with or without a mask) — we aren't living in a democracy right now. If this week has not made it plain enough, let us remind you — we are living in a police state. People tell us that if we really think that we're right, we wouldn't be hiding behind masks. “The truth will prevail” is the assertion. While this is a fine and noble goal, it does not jive with the present reality. Those who pose the greatest threat to the interests of Capital and State will be persecuted. Some pacifists would have us accept this persecution gleefully. Others would tell us that it is a worthy sacrifice. We are not so morose. Nor do we feel we have the privilege to accept persecution as a sacrifice: persecution to us is a daily inevitability and we treasure our few freedoms. To accept incarceration as a form of flattery betrays a large amount of “first world” privilege. We feel that an attack on private property is necessary if we are to rebuild a world which is useful, healthful and joyful for everyone. And this despite the fact that hypertrophied private property rights in this country translate into felony charges for any property destruction over \$250.

### **Motivations of the Black Bloc**

The primary purpose of this communiqué is to diffuse some of the aura of mystery that surrounds the black bloc and make some of its motivations more transparent, since our masks cannot be.

### **On the Violence of Property**

We contend that property destruction is not a violent activity unless it destroys lives or causes pain in the process. By this definition, private property — especially corporate private property — is itself infinitely more violent than any action taken against it.

Private property should be distinguished from personal property. The latter is based upon use while the former is based upon trade. The premise of personal property is that each of us has what s/he needs. The premise of private property is that each of us has something that someone else needs or wants. In a society based on private property rights, those who are able to accrue more of what others need or want have greater power. By extension, they wield greater control over what others perceive as needs and desires, usually in the interest of increasing profit to themselves.

Advocates of “free trade” would like to see this process to its logical conclusion: a network of a few industry monopolists with ultimate control over the lives of the everyone else. Advocates of “fair trade” would like to see this process mitigated by government regulations meant to superficially impose basic humanitarian standards. As anarchists, we despise both positions.

Private property — and capitalism, by extension — is intrinsically violent and repressive and cannot be reformed or mitigated. Whether the power of everyone is concentrated into the hands of a few corporate heads or diverted into a regulatory apparatus charged with mitigating the disasters of the latter, no one can be as free or as powerful as they could be in a non-hierarchical society.

When we smash a window, we aim to destroy the thin veneer of legitimacy that surrounds private property rights. At the same time, we exorcise that set of violent and destructive social relationships which has been imbued in almost everything around us. By “destroying” private property, we convert its limited exchange value into an expanded use value. A storefront window becomes a vent to let some fresh air into the oppressive atmosphere of a retail outlet (at least until the police decide to tear-gas a nearby road blockade). A newspaper box becomes a tool for creating such vents or a small blockade for the reclamation of public space or an object to improve one's vantage point by standing on it. A dumpster becomes an obstruction to a phalanx of rioting cops and a source of heat and light. A building facade becomes a message board to record brainstorm ideas for a better world.

After N30, many people will never see a shop window or a hammer the same way again. The potential uses of an entire cityscape have increased a thousand-fold. The number of broken windows pales in comparison to the number broken spells — spells cast by a corporate hegemony

to lull us into forgetfulness of all the violence committed in the name of private property rights and of all the potential of a society without them. Broken windows can be boarded up (with yet more waste of our forests) and eventually replaced, but the shattering of assumptions will hopefully persist for some time to come.

Against Capital and State,

the ACME Collective

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Disclaimer: these observations and analyses represent only those of the ACME Collective and should not be construed to be representative of the rest of the black bloc on N30 or anyone else who engaged in riot or property destruction that day.

Source: <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/n30-black-bloc-communic%C3%A9>



# Practice and ideology in the direct action movement



Undercurrent's contribution to a critique of the politics of anti-capitalist protest.

*"The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions".*

Recent explosions of discontent (such as in Seattle in November or in the City of London on J18) have expressed themselves in ways not worthy of their radical practice. The radical content of their practice (such as violence against the police, destruction of property, the sense of collective strength against the state) has been accompanied by a distorted image of capitalism which insists in seeing capital as nothing more than the financial centres, the 'dodgy' companies (as if there are 'non-dodgy' companies), and the shadowy international organisations (such as the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, etc). They identify capital with its most superficial appearances, failing to see it in its totality. On the other hand, these actions definitely inspire the people involved in them, they do cause considerable trouble for the gatekeepers of law and order, and they do spoil the routine of the day-to-day business of the muppets who are being targeted. The problem immediately arises: how can the reformist language of the protests co-exist with their subversive practice?

In a sense, the two are not in contradiction. Movements are never homogenous (practically or theoretically) but rather consist of contradictions and immediate limitations, which could potentially be overcome the more the movement develops. Moreover, however much the official language of a movement represents its content, no homogeneity exists: the people involved in re-appropriations and violent acts of disorder are not necessarily the same who draw up the ideology underlying the actions. At the same time, contrary to appearances, there is nothing intrinsically contradictory between having the desire to destroy the existing world and its glass window and having misconceived ideas of the same world. The history of the revolutionary movement against capitalism is full of examples of such tendencies.

But the above explanation quickly dissolves into a problematic excuse, especially when it is used to pre-empt any radical critique of these struggles. In the two previous issues we carried what was later to be termed a harsh and unjustified attack on the expressed theory of the events leading up to J18. We were essentially attacked for being too dismissive, arrogant and 'idealistic' when dealing with J18. Some of the criticisms expressed were truthful. Our analysis of J18 was indeed problematically focused on the expressed ideology of the movement and not its real content. It would definitely be more accurate and complete to look at the history of the movement that inspired actions such as J18, and to have a more radical approach to its limitations.

However, and without getting into arguments about how our critique was practically and temporally limited (we were, after all, writing before J18 happened and could not have known exactly how it would develop), our critique has largely been confirmed. Regardless of the radical expressions of

actions such as J18 and the 'battles' in Seattle (1), most of our critics end up with dismissing any critique of the ideology of the movement, i.e. part of its content. In an attempt to counter-react against our critique, the result is a rather uncritical approach to reformist and reactionary expressions. There are no apologies to be made. Radical critique is not about exchanging compliments, but about looking at the limitations of movements which claim to be anti-capitalist and trying to contribute to their development. The task of over-emphasising the 'sexy and inspiring' sides is better left to the various direct action conferences and gatherings, whose only purpose seems to be exactly that: big doses of self-reassurance and the absence of critical engagement.

The direct action movement primarily comes out of the anti-roads struggles of the early 90's. Developing as a response to the attempts to accommodate part of the emerging needs of capital which took the form of ambitious road-building schemes, the anti-roads movement was a struggle both ancient -reminiscent as it was of the peasants' attempts to resist the early stages of capital accumulation through land occupations - and contemporary -resisting the needs of advanced (western-European) capitalist development.

Despite its incoherencies and internal inadequacies, the anti-roads movement expressed a side of the class struggle. It did so by attacking (theoretically) the ideology of capitalist progress, and by resisting (practically) the attempts to further alienate people from their immediate environment, by turning it into dead space whose only purpose is the facilitation of the dictatorship of the economy. For those who took part in these struggles, the potential for moving beyond its immediate limitations was visible -and by many, this was realised. Scientific progress (2), the ideological filter for the justification of capitalist modernisation, was exposed as rooted in capital's interests. Democracy, the powerful ideology of capital, was (practically, at least) rejected and replaced by collective action. Many of the seemingly uninterrupted plans for the creation of massive roads were seriously delayed and, in some cases, abandoned.

In the process of its development, the anti-roads movement created a community of struggle against capital and the state, but -as it can be observed today -one which was only a small island within the capitalist desert. However inspiring and creative the communities of struggle of the anti-roads movement were, they were problematically based on the limits of an ecological movement (not to mention subculture and life-stylism) (3). Even though in some cases positive links were made with the locals, these never managed to move beyond immediate necessity and towards the formation of a long-standing basis for anti-capitalist struggles.

Despite its antagonistic relation to capitalist modernisation, the anti-roads movement was unable to break its isolation and to transform itself into a generalised movement which would link the ecological movement (by overcoming its inherent reformism) to the overall movement against capital in its totality. As is usually the case with movements that fail to address their history critically, today the direct action movement is unable to realise that its foundations lay on the alienated result of struggles which never managed to contest capitalist reality in its totality. Based on the corpse of subculture and life-stylism, the direct action movement finds itself rejuvenating ideologies which were already wrong when they first appeared. It fails to understand its inherent contradictions, replacing critique with an -almost -incomprehensible enthusiasm.

People have tried to overcome the problems arising in the direct action scene by claiming it is essentially a problem of theory and practice. The two of course are not separate. Whoever claims that 'theoretical' interventions are inferior to 'practical' ones is either stupid or paternalistic. The two complement each other or they are both useless. To prioritise one over the other is simply to separate our struggle against capital and to justify the existing division of labour which gives a *raison d'être* to the numerous 'professional revolutionaries'. The problems faced by the direct action scene are not, in this respect, the results of a contradiction between theory and practice. Both theory and practice of the direct action movement are reflections of our present situation, primarily characterised by the absence of a widespread movement contesting of capitalist normality. In this environment, it is not a surprise that the direct action movement seems stuck in its contradictions.



The tendency is there, especially at non-revolutionary times, to applaud the emergence of any violent confrontations between proletarians and the state. And to a certain degree it is justified, for it is for many of us an escape from a routinely organised life which offers nothing at all. It carries however the danger of fetishising incomplete expressions of our struggle and thus perpetuating their existence as incomplete. To organise 'days against capitalism', even if that in itself marks an important step forward from the super market of single issues that most of the direct action movement is involved in, is nothing but an expression of our inability to attack capital in its root in a systematic way. Capital is a social relation, and hence our struggle against it is either centred on our everyday life or it is nothing. The only use of 'days against capitalism' is that it provides a chance for many of us to meet outside of boring political frameworks and to collectively express our disgust at the existing world (4). But that's about it. However positive that may be, it does not in itself point towards the emergence of a 'global anti-capitalist movement'.

The movement around events such as J18 and Seattle is largely disconnected from existing struggles against capital's offensive against us (5). However much the direct action scene has picked up the term 'anti-capitalism', and however that may in some ways be an advance, it is common place that capitalism is essentially a system of production. None of the 'sexy and inspiring' actions that took place under the banner of 'anti-capitalism' were in the slightest focused on the production process. Instead, the focus was on finance capital, international monetary institutions and the illusory opposition between 'free trade' and 'fair trade'. The 'targets' that the direct action scene has chosen thus far represent capital's mechanisms for the regulation of decisions already made in the production process.

We are not, as we have pointed out before, fetishising the factory. Production is not only taking place in the factories. But 'anti-capitalism' is not an idea that people pick up on, but a tendency, a movement, arising out of our social conditions (the first of which is our relation to work) aiming at destroying capital in its totality. However important finance capital or the IMF is, a partial attack on capital can only have partial results. And half-made 'revolutions' only dig their own grave.

Failing to identify any 'sexy and inspiring' situations outside its own, the direct action movement stands in the fringes of social antagonisms. Most of its preoccupations do not arise out of immediate social conditions, but are in many cases the result of essentially moral considerations which accompany a specific lifestyle. We thus have the bizarre spectacle of direct action activists choosing which struggles to take part in, a remnant of the direct action's background as a super market of single issues. The refusal to take part in struggles which do not fit the common denominator of 'sexy and inspiring' by some people simply shows that in fact they do live in a 'political comfort zone' (at least in their minds) in which we have the luxury to decide which part of the totality we will attack, usually a different one every day.

What used to be only a potential danger of creating a separate 'class of revolutionaries', with a specialised position in subversive struggles, is now a reality for the direct action movement. The militant role is the dominant spectacle of the direct action movement and it is aware of it. The role of the militant has been properly discredited elsewhere (7) so it is of no point to get into it again. It is interesting however to see the development of the radical part of the direct action scene towards a bizarre fetishism of violence. Although it is right to attack the pacifist elements and to expose their reformism (8), this has resulted in a glorification of violence which seems detached from the social reality that gives rise to it. "The materialist conception of violence excludes any principled position, either in favour of these methods or against them. It does not revert the principles of the bourgeois society in order to transform [violence] into an absolute good, nor does it condemn it as an absolute bad." (Barrot)

The more capital tries to complete its domination upon our lives, the more is our need for a community intensified. This is reflected in every struggle against capital, which is, most importantly, our attempt to connect with other people and to transcend the isolation imposed to us. Yet, the danger of creating a pseudo-community is obvious. In line with the uncritical adoption of the militant role, the direct action movement has tried to fight against isolation by creating a

pseudo-community of activists, separate from the rest of 'normal people', one which possesses a clear revolutionary consciousness that people are simply waiting to learn. Like a petty-bourgeois family, the direct action movement sees itself as the centre of the world, and conceives itself as the community, seeking to recreate itself as such in every opportunity. This illusory community is strongly sustained through constant self-reassuring 'sessions', in which the supremacy of the direct action scene is skilfully demonstrated. This is usually done in comparison to the 'boring lefties', to which the direct action movement stands opposed to as the enlightened militants. Obviously the lefties are boring and their ideas of action are neither imaginative nor inspiring, but that's not the real problem. This opposition fails to expose them as what they really are, i.e. capitalist organisations. Instead, the well-intentioned critique is misplaced and ends up implying that the main problem of the lefties is their lack of imagination! It becomes obvious that this 'critique' of leftist organisation is more directed towards the re-affirmation of direct action activists as the proper revolutionaries rather than an attempt to expose the leftists' counter-revolutionary function. It is surprising to see how anarchists consider it as an integral part of their identity to constantly attack trotskysts, something which is done by simply pointing at the hierarchical structure of their party accompanied by a necessary denunciation of any sort of authority. Yet, even this critique would be useful, if only they directed it against the direct action movement itself, whose structure, although more fluid, also includes hierarchical tendencies.

Similar to the leninist conception of the vanguard party which they so much despise, the direct action scene shares many of its characteristics. The notion that 'normal people' only need to get in touch with their ideas in order to become revolutionaries, the educational tone of their public outreaches ("a festival of anarchist ideas" or "a spoof newspaper...explaining anarchy"), the idea in general that revolution will only occur when 'normal people' come in contact and get influenced by the 'revolutionary consciousness' that the direct action scene is so full of. At the same time, leftist parties are slagged off in every chance because of their 'vanguard-ism'.

In terms of organisation, although the claim is that the direct action scene consists of 'autonomous' and non-hierarchical structures, the underlying agreement is that things like June 18th or Seattle could never have happened unless they were properly organised. Regardless of the non-hierarchical rhetoric, this fact exposes once again the separation between the 'professional activists' and the 'normal people'. In this way, the 'non-hierarchical' Direct Action Network behind the events of Seattle was able to impose a set of rules and guidelines (9) for those who wanted to take part in the 'anti-capitalist' actions prepared for the WTO conference -to which most objections concerned the actual content of the principles without challenging the notion of principles as such-, while the 'anti-authoritarian' anarchists behind the Mayday preparations have also adopted similar 'principles' and rules in order to exclude the hierarchical trotskysts (10). The illusion that hierarchy can be abolished through the drawing out of 'anti-hierarchical' principles, shows that they (as much as the direct action movement) have an ideological conception of hierarchy, failing to see it as a problem to be overcome by the development of our struggle.

Part of the 'anti-globalisation' ideology of the direct action movement is the focus on its consequences on the 'underdeveloped' countries, an effect of which is the fuelling of uncritical support for liberation movements in the third world, a practice reminiscent of leninist babble. The struggle of the Zapatistas in Mexico, the landless peasants in Brazil, maoist guerrillas in Tibet etc., all have received enthusiastic and uncritical support, justified through the argument that 'we', as westerners, who live in the 'political comfort zone', cannot possibly criticise the struggles of people whose experiences and struggle we cannot 'understand', being as they are, so far beyond our 'zone'. But, these struggles are relevant to us only to the extent that we can learn from them and relate them to our struggles. Finding a minimum common denominator between the various struggles in various parts around the world, the direct action scene ignores the content of these movements, and attempts to create a spectacle of unity. The fact, for example, that the Zapatistas are speaking about national unity or civil society, or that the maoist guerrillas are (simply) maoist, is obviously irrelevant for the direct action militants. Instead, the focus is on the spectacular elements of these struggles (people in balaclavas and guns in proper guerrilla fashion). Any radical critique of their content is redundant.

The separation between developed and underdeveloped countries, between 'political comfort zones' and third world national liberation struggles with immunity to radical critique because of their 'revolutionary' spectacle, is by far the biggest pile of shit to come out of the direct action scene. Bizarrely, twenty years ago, revolutionaries would not have the slightest hesitation in discrediting any such bollocks as leninist. Today though, everything is justified if it fits the recipe: sexy, inspiring or exotic.

In the midst of enthusiasm and grandeur, the direct action movement sees a growing anti-capitalist movement everywhere. This illusion stops them from recognizing that, in its present form, the direct action movement is going nowhere.

Notes:

- (1) It seems to be the case that the 'battle' of Seattle was predominantly characterised by extreme police brutality and by peace-types violently (!) protecting property rather than destruction of property and attacks against the cops. Hardly what we would call a 'battle'.
- (2) Like gardening in a graveyard: there are some flowers, but rooted in death and decay.
- (3) A more general analysis/critique of the anti-roads movement can be found in *Aufheben*, #3, 1994, 'Can We Slay the Roads Monster?'
- (4) Recent developments in the direct action scene indicate a neglect of its most important elements: rather than a genuine attempt to understand and move forward from J18 and Euston (N30), the tendency is one of a return to a green agenda (guerrilla gardening) and an anarchist conference.
- (5) An example of that is rightfully pointed out in *Do or Die*, #8, 'War is the health of the State: An Open Letter to the Direct Action Movement'.
- (6) Most activists, for example, refuse to take part in struggles against the unemployed benefit cuts, although most of them are unemployed themselves. These struggles are not, obviously, as 'sexy and inspiring' as occupying the offices of Shell for an afternoon or dressing up like a turtle downtown Seattle.
- (7) The SI provided a very concise critique of this counter-revolutionary tendency. For more recent attacks on the militant role see the useful, yet somewhat hesitant, critique in *Reflections* on June 18th, 'Give up activism'.
- (8) Although to talk about 'pacifism as pathology' really misses the point (see *Do or Die* #8, review of 'Pacifism as Pathology'). In fact, the proposed remedies for this are as 'pathological' as the 'disease' it aims to 'cure'.
- (9) The problem is not the 'undemocratic' nature of the Direct Action Network. If the majority of people abided to these rules, this meant that there was already an agreement as to their content. To claim that it was these 'rules and guidelines' which prevented people from using violence is obviously wrong.
- (10) It was both funny and extremely sad to see the way in which 50-60 'anti-authoritarian' anarchists spent one hour of the mini-conference in order to exclude the one member of the (trotskyists) workers' party, a process which was justified later on with the claim that 'we don't want to be shot like partridges'. Obviously, according to the anarchists, that was a likely possibility of Mayday...

*Undercurrent* #8

Source: <http://libcom.org/library/practice-ideology-direct-action-movement-undercurrent-8>

## **Organising for the Anti-Capitalist Transition**

### **by David Harvey**

The historical geography of capitalist development is at a key inflexion point in which the geographical configurations of power are rapidly shifting at the very moment when the temporal dynamic is facing very serious constraints. Three-percent compound annual growth (generally considered the minimum satisfactory growth rate for a healthy capitalist economy) is becoming less and less feasible to sustain without resort to all manner of fictions (such as those that have characterized asset markets and financial affairs over the last two decades). There are good reasons to believe that there is no alternative to a new global order of governance that will eventually have to manage the transition to a zero growth economy. If that is to be done in an equitable way, then there is no alternative to socialism or communism. Since the late 1990s, the World Social Forum became the center for articulating the theme "another world is possible." It must now take up the task of defining how another socialism or communism is possible and how the transition to these alternatives is to be accomplished. The current crisis offers a window of opportunity to reflect on what might be involved.

The current crisis originated in the steps taken to resolve the crisis of the 1970s. These steps included:

- (a) The successful assault upon organized labor and its political institutions while mobilizing global labor surpluses, instituting labor-saving technological changes, and heightening competition. The result has been global wage repressions (a declining share of wages in total GDP almost everywhere) and the creation of an even vaster disposable labor reserve living under marginal conditions.
- (b) Undermining previous structures of monopoly power and displacing the previous stage of (nation-state) monopoly capitalism by opening up capitalism to far fiercer international competition. Intensifying global competition translated into lower non-financial corporate profits. Uneven geographical development and inter-territorial competition became key features in capitalist development, opening the way towards the beginnings of a hegemonic shift of power particularly but not exclusively towards East Asia.
- (c) Utilizing and empowering the most fluid and highly mobile form of capital -- money capital -- to reallocate capital resources globally (eventually through electronic markets) thus sparking deindustrialization in traditional core regions and new forms of (ultra-oppressive) industrialization and natural resource and agricultural raw material extractions in emergent markets. The corollary was to enhance the profitability of financial corporations and to find new ways to globalize and supposedly absorb risks through the creation of fictitious capital markets.
- (d) At the other end of the social scale, this meant heightened reliance on "accumulation by dispossession" as a means to augment capitalist class power. The new rounds of primitive accumulation against indigenous and peasant populations were augmented by asset losses of the lower classes in the core economies (as witnessed by the sub-prime housing market in the US which foisted a huge asset loss particularly upon African American populations).
- (e) The augmentation of otherwise sagging effective demand by pushing the debt economy (governmental, corporate, and household) to its limits (particularly in the USA and the UK but also in many other countries from Latvia to Dubai).
- (f) Compensating for anemic rates of return in production by the construction of a whole series of asset market bubbles, all of which had a Ponzi character, culminating in the property bubble that burst in 2007-8. These asset bubbles drew upon finance capital and were facilitated by extensive financial innovations such as derivatives and collateralized debt obligations.

The political forces that coalesced and mobilized behind these transitions had a distinctive class character and clothed themselves in the vestments of a distinctive ideology called neoliberal. The

ideology rested upon the idea that free markets, free trade, personal initiative, and entrepreneurialism were the best guarantors of individual liberty and freedom and that the "nanny state" should be dismantled for the benefit of all. But the practice entailed that the state must stand behind the integrity of financial institutions, thus introducing (beginning with the Mexican and developing countries debt crisis of 1982) "moral hazard" big time into the financial system. The state (local and national) also became increasingly committed to providing a "good business climate" to attract investments in a highly competitive environment. The interests of the people were secondary to the interests of capital, and in the event of a conflict between them, the interests of the people had to be sacrificed (as became standard practice in IMF structural adjustments programs from the early 1980s onwards). The system that has been created amounts to a veritable form of communism for the capitalist class.

These conditions varied considerably, of course, depending upon what part of the world one inhabited, the class relations prevailing there, the political and cultural traditions, and how the balance of political-economic power was shifting.

So how can the left negotiate the dynamics of this crisis? At times of crisis, the irrationality of capitalism becomes plain for all to see. Surplus capital and surplus labor exist side by side with seemingly no way to put them back together in the midst of immense human suffering and unmet needs. In midsummer of 2009, one third of the capital equipment in the United States stood idle, while some 17 per cent of the workforce were either unemployed, enforced part-timers, or "discouraged" workers. What could be more irrational than that!

Can capitalism survive the present trauma? Yes. But at what cost? This question masks another. Can the capitalist class reproduce its power in the face of the raft of economic, social, political, geopolitical, and environmental difficulties? Again, the answer is a resounding "yes." But the mass of the people will have to surrender the fruits of their labor to those in power, to surrender many of their rights and their hard-won asset values (in everything from housing to pension rights), and to suffer environmental degradations galore, to say nothing of serial reductions in their living standards, which means starvation for many of those already struggling to survive at rock bottom. Class inequalities will increase (as we already see happening). All of that may require more than a little political repression, police violence, and militarized state control to stifle unrest.

Since much of this is unpredictable and since the spaces of the global economy are so variable, then uncertainties as to outcomes are heightened at times of crisis. All manner of localized possibilities arise for either nascent capitalists in some new space to seize opportunities to challenge older class and territorial hegemonies (as when Silicon Valley replaced Detroit from the mid-1970s onwards in the United States) or for radical movements to challenge the reproduction of an already destabilized class power. To say that the capitalist class and capitalism can survive is not to say that they are predestined to do so nor does it say that their future character is given. Crises are moments of paradox and possibilities.

So what will happen this time around? If we are to get back to three-percent growth, then this means finding new and profitable global investment opportunities for \$1.6 trillion in 2010 rising to closer to \$3 trillion by 2030. This contrasts with the \$0.15 trillion new investment needed in 1950 and the \$0.42 trillion needed in 1973 (the dollar figures are inflation adjusted). Real problems of finding adequate outlets for surplus capital began to emerge after 1980, even with the opening up of China and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc. The difficulties were in part resolved by creation of fictitious markets where speculation in asset values could take off unhindered. Where will all this investment go now?

Leaving aside the undisputable constraints in the relation to nature (with global warming of paramount importance), the other potential barriers of effective demand in the market place, of technologies, and of geographical/geopolitical distributions are likely to be profound, even supposing, which is unlikely, that no serious active oppositions to continuous capital accumulation and further consolidation of class power materialize. What spaces are left in the global economy for

new spatial fixes for capital surplus absorption? China and the ex-Soviet bloc have already been integrated. South and Southeast Asia is filling up fast. Africa is not yet fully integrated but there is nowhere else with the capacity to absorb all this surplus capital. What new lines of production can be opened up to absorb growth? There may be no effective long-run capitalist solutions (apart from reversion to fictitious capital manipulations) to this crisis of capitalism. At some point quantitative changes lead to qualitative shifts and we need to take seriously the idea that we may be at exactly such an inflexion point in the history of capitalism. Questioning the future of capitalism itself as an adequate social system ought, therefore, to be in the forefront of current debate.

Yet there appears to be little appetite for such discussion, even among the left. Instead we continue to hear the usual conventional mantras regarding the perfectibility of humanity with the help of free markets and free trade, private property and personal responsibility, low taxes and minimalist state involvement in social provision, even though this all sounds increasingly hollow. A crisis of legitimacy looms. But legitimization crises typically unfold at a different pace and rhythm to that of stock markets. It took, for example, three or four years before the stock market crash of 1929 produced the massive social movements (both progressive and fascistic) after 1932 or so. The intensity of the current pursuit by political power of ways to exit the present crisis may have something to do with the political fear of looming illegitimacy.

The last thirty years, however, has seen the emergence of systems of governance that seem immune to legitimacy problems and unconcerned even with the creation of consent. The mix of authoritarianism, monetary corruption of representative democracy, surveillance, policing and militarization (particularly through the war on terror), media control and spin suggests a world in which the control of discontent through disinformation, fragmentations of oppositions, and the shaping of oppositional cultures through the promotion of NGOs tends to prevail with plenty of coercive force to back it up if necessary.

The idea that the crisis had systemic origins is scarcely mooted in the mainstream media (even as a few mainstream economists like Stiglitz, Krugman, and even Jeffrey Sachs attempt to steal some of the left's historical thunder by confessing to an epiphany or two). Most of the governmental moves to contain the crisis in North America and Europe amount to the perpetuation of business as usual which translates into support for the capitalist class. The "moral hazard" that was the immediate trigger for the financial failures is being taken to new heights in the bank bailouts. The actual practices of neoliberalism (as opposed to its utopian theory) always entailed blatant support for finance capital and capitalist elites (usually on the grounds that financial institutions must be protected at all costs and that it is the duty of state power to create a good business climate for solid profiteering). This has not fundamentally changed. Such practices are justified by appeal to the dubious proposition that a "rising tide" of capitalist endeavor will "lift all boats" or that the benefits of compound growth will magically "trickle down" (which it never does except in the form of a few crumbs from the rich folks' table).

So how will the capitalist class exit the current crisis and how swift will the exit be? The rebound in stock market values from Shanghai and Tokyo to Frankfurt, London, and New York is a good sign, we are told, even as unemployment pretty much everywhere continues to rise. But notice the class bias in that measure. We are enjoined to rejoice in the rebound in stock values for the capitalists because it always precedes, it is said, a rebound in the "real economy" where jobs for the workers are created and incomes earned. The fact that the last stock rebound in the United States after 2002 turned out to be a "jobless recovery" appears to have been forgotten already. The Anglo-Saxon public in particular appears to be seriously afflicted with amnesia. It too easily forgets and forgives the transgressions of the capitalist class and the periodic disasters its actions precipitate. The capitalist media are happy to promote such amnesia.

China and India are still growing, the former by leaps and bounds. But in China's case, the cost is a huge expansion of bank lending on risky projects (the Chinese banks were not caught up in the global speculative frenzy but now are continuing it). The overaccumulation of productive capacity proceeds apace, and long-term infrastructural investments, whose productivity will not be known

for several years, are booming (even in urban property markets). And China's burgeoning demand is entraining those economies supplying raw materials, like Australia and Chile. The likelihood of a subsequent crash in China cannot be dismissed but it may take time to discern (a long-term version of Dubai). Meanwhile the global epicenter of capitalism accelerates its shift primarily towards East Asia.

In the older financial centers, the young financial sharks have taken their bonuses of yesteryear and collectively started boutique financial institutions to circle Wall Street and the City of London, to sift through the detritus of yesterday's financial giants to snaffle up the juicy bits and start all over again. The investment banks that remain in the US -- Goldman Sachs and J.P. Morgan -- though reincarnated as bank holding companies have gained exemption (thanks to the Federal Reserve) from regulatory requirements and are making huge profits (and setting aside moneys for huge bonuses to match) out of speculating, dangerously using taxpayers' money in unregulated and still booming derivative markets. The leveraging that got us into the crisis has resumed big time as if nothing has happened. Innovations in finance are on the march as new ways to package and sell fictitious capital debts are being pioneered and offered to institutions (such as pension funds) desperate to find new outlets for surplus capital. The fictions (as well as the bonuses) are back!

Consortia are buying up foreclosed properties, either waiting for the market to turn before making a killing or banking high value land for a future moment of active redevelopment. The regular banks are stashing away cash, much of it garnered from the public coffers, also with an eye to resuming bonus payments consistent with a former lifestyle while a whole host of entrepreneurs hover in the wings waiting to seize this moment of creative destruction backed by a flood of public moneys.

Meanwhile raw money power wielded by the few undermines all semblances of democratic governance. The pharmaceutical, health insurance, and hospital lobbies, for example, spent more than \$133 million in the first three months of 2009 to make sure they got their way on health care reform in the United States. Max Baucus, head of the key Senate finance committee that shaped the health care bill, received \$1.5 million for a bill that delivers a vast number of new clients to the insurance companies with few protections against ruthless exploitation and profiteering (Wall Street is delighted). Another electoral cycle, legally corrupted by immense money power, will soon be upon us. In the United States, the parties of "K Street" and of Wall Street will be duly re-elected as working Americans are exhorted to work their way out of the mess that the ruling class has created. We have been in such dire straits before, we are reminded, and each time, working Americans have rolled up their sleeves, tightened their belts, and saved the system from some mysterious mechanics of auto-destruction for which the ruling class denies all responsibility. Personal responsibility is, after all, for the workers and not for the capitalists.

If this is the outline of the exit strategy then almost certainly we will be in another mess within five years. The faster we come out of this crisis and the less excess capital is destroyed now, the less room there will be for the revival of long-term active growth. The loss of asset values at this conjuncture (mid 2009) is, we are told by the IMF, at least \$55 trillion, which is equivalent to almost exactly one year's global output of goods and services. Already we are back to the output levels of 1989. We may be looking at losses of \$400 trillion or more before we are through. Indeed, in a recent startling calculation, it was suggested that the US state alone was on the hook to guarantee more than \$200 trillion in asset values. The likelihood that all of those assets would go bad is very minimal, but the thought that many of them could is sobering in the extreme. Just to take a concrete example: Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, now taken over by the US Government, own or guarantee more than \$5 trillion in home loans, many of which are in deep trouble (losses of more than \$150 billion were recorded in 2008 alone). So what, then, are the alternatives?

It has long been the dream of many in the world that an alternative to capitalist (ir)rationality can be defined and rationally arrived at through the mobilization of human passions in the collective search for a better life for all. These alternatives -- historically called socialism or communism -- have, in various times and places, been tried. In former times, such as the 1930s, the vision of one or other of them operated as a beacon of hope. But in recent times they have both lost their luster, been

dismissed as wanting, not only because of the failure of historical experiments with communism to make good on their promises and the penchant for communist regimes to cover over their mistakes by repression, but also because of their supposedly flawed presuppositions concerning human nature and the potential perfectibility of the human personality and of human institutions.

The difference between socialism and communism is worth noting. Socialism aims to democratically manage and regulate capitalism in ways that calm its excesses and redistribute its benefits for the common good. It is about spreading the wealth around through progressive taxation arrangements while basic needs -- such as education, health care and even housing -- are provided by the state out of reach of market forces. Many of the key achievements of redistributive socialism in the period after 1945, not only in Europe but beyond, have become so socially embedded as to be immune from neoliberal assault. Even in the United States, Social Security and Medicare are extremely popular programs that right-wing forces find it almost impossible to dislodge. The Thatcherites in Britain could not touch national health care except at the margins. Social provision in Scandinavia and most of Western Europe seems to be an unshakable bedrock of the social order.

Communism, on the other hand, seeks to displace capitalism by creating an entirely different mode of both production and distribution of goods and services. In the history of actually existing communism, social control over production, exchange, and distribution meant state control and systematic state planning. In the long run this proved to be unsuccessful though, interestingly, its conversion in China (and its earlier adoption in places like Singapore) has proven far more successful than the pure neoliberal model in generating capitalist growth for reasons that cannot be elaborated upon here. Contemporary attempts to revive the communist hypothesis typically abjure state control and look to other forms of collective social organization to displace market forces and capital accumulation as the basis for organizing production and distribution. Horizontally networked as opposed to hierarchically commanded systems of coordination between autonomously organized and self-governing collectives of producers and consumers are envisaged as lying at the core of a new form of communism. Contemporary technologies of communication make such a system seem feasible. All manner of small-scale experiments around the world can be found in which such economic and political forms are being constructed. In this there is a convergence of some sort between the Marxist and anarchist traditions that harks back to the broadly collaborative situation between them in the 1860s in Europe.

While nothing is certain, it could be that 2009 marks the beginning of a prolonged shakeout in which the question of grand and far-reaching alternatives to capitalism will step-by-step bubble up to the surface in one part of the world or another. The longer the uncertainty and the misery is prolonged, the more the legitimacy of the existing way of doing business will be questioned and the more the demand to build something different will escalate. Radical as opposed to band-aid reforms to patch up the financial system may seem more necessary.

The uneven development of capitalist practices throughout the world has produced, moreover, anti-capitalist movements all over the place. The state-centric economies of much of East Asia generate different discontents (as in Japan and China) compared to the churning anti-neoliberal struggles occurring throughout much of Latin America where the Bolivarian revolutionary movement of popular power exists in a peculiar relationship to capitalist class interests that have yet to be truly confronted. Differences over tactics and policies in response to the crisis among the states that make up the European Union are increasing even as a second attempt to come up with a unified EU constitution is under way. Revolutionary and resolutely anti-capitalist movements are also to be found, though not all of them are of a progressive sort, in many of the marginal zones of capitalism. Spaces have been opened up within which something radically different in terms of dominant social relations, ways of life, productive capacities, and mental conceptions of the world can flourish. This applies as much to the Taliban and to communist rule in Nepal as to the Zapatistas in Chiapas and indigenous movements in Bolivia, and the Maoist movements in rural India, even as they are worlds apart in objectives, strategies, and tactics.

The central problem is that in aggregate there is no resolute and sufficiently unified anti-capitalist



movement that can adequately challenge the reproduction of the capitalist class and the perpetuation of its power on the world stage. Neither is there any obvious way to attack the bastions of privilege for capitalist elites or to curb their inordinate money power and military might. While openings exist towards some alternative social order, no one really knows where or what it is. But just because there is no political force capable of articulating let alone mounting such a program, this is no reason to hold back on outlining alternatives.

Lenin's famous question "what is to be done?" cannot be answered, to be sure, without some sense of who it is might do it where. But a global anti-capitalist movement is unlikely to emerge without some animating vision of what is to be done and why. A double blockage exists: the lack of an alternative vision prevents the formation of an oppositional movement, while the absence of such a movement precludes the articulation of an alternative. How, then, can this blockage be transcended? The relation between the vision of what is to be done and why and the formation of a political movement across particular places to do it has to be turned into a spiral. Each has to reinforce the other if anything is actually to get done. Otherwise potential opposition will be forever locked down into a closed circle that frustrates all prospects for constructive change, leaving us vulnerable to perpetual future crises of capitalism with increasingly deadly results. Lenin's question demands an answer.

The central problem to be addressed is clear enough. Compound growth for ever is not possible and the troubles that have beset the world these last thirty years signal that a limit is looming to continuous capital accumulation that cannot be transcended except by creating fictions that cannot last. Add to this the facts that so many people in the world live in conditions of abject poverty, that environmental degradations are spiralling out of control, that human dignities are everywhere being offended even as the rich are piling up more and more wealth (the number of billionaires in India doubled last year from 27 to 52) under their command, and that the levers of political, institutional, judicial, military, and media power are under such tight but dogmatic political control as to be incapable of doing much more than perpetuating the status quo and frustrating discontent.

A revolutionary politics that can grasp the nettle of endless compound capital accumulation and eventually shut it down as the prime motor of human history requires a sophisticated understanding of how social change occurs. The failings of past endeavors to build a lasting socialism and communism have to be avoided and lessons from that immensely complicated history must be learned. Yet the absolute necessity for a coherent anti-capitalist revolutionary movement must also be recognized. The fundamental aim of that movement is to assume social command over both the production and distribution of surpluses.

We urgently need an explicit revolutionary theory suited to our times. I propose a "co-revolutionary theory" derived from an understanding of Marx's account of how capitalism arose out of feudalism. Social change arises through the dialectical unfolding of relations between seven moments within the body politic of capitalism viewed as an ensemble or assemblage of activities and practices:

- a) technological and organizational forms of production, exchange, and consumption
- b) relations to nature
- c) social relations between people
- d) mental conceptions of the world, embracing knowledges and cultural understandings and beliefs
- e) labor processes and production of specific goods, geographies, services, or affects
- f) institutional, legal and governmental arrangements
- g) the conduct of daily life that underpins social reproduction.

Each one of these moments is internally dynamic and internally marked by tensions and contradictions (just think of mental conceptions of the world) but all of them are co-dependent and co-evolve in relation to each other. The transition to capitalism entailed a mutually supporting movement across all seven moments. New technologies could not be identified and practices

without new mental conceptions of the world (including that of the relation to nature and social relations). Social theorists have the habit of taking just one of these moments and viewing it as the "silver bullet" that causes all change. We have technological determinists (Tom Friedman), environmental determinists (Jared Diamond), daily life determinists (Paul Hawken), labor process determinists (the autonomistas), institutionalists, and so on and so forth. They are all wrong. It is the dialectical motion across all of these moments that really counts even as there is uneven development in that motion.

When capitalism itself undergoes one of its phases of renewal, it does so precisely by co-evolving all moments, obviously not without tensions, struggles, fights, and contradictions. But consider how these seven moments were configured around 1970 before the neoliberal surge and consider how they look now, and you will see they have all changed in ways that re-define the operative characteristics of capitalism viewed as a non-Hegelian totality.

An anti-capitalist political movement can start anywhere (in labor processes, around mental conceptions, in the relation to nature, in social relations, in the design of revolutionary technologies and organizational forms, out of daily life, or through attempts to reform institutional and administrative structures including the reconfiguration of state powers). The trick is to keep the political movement moving from one moment to another in mutually reinforcing ways. This was how capitalism arose out of feudalism and this is how something radically different called communism, socialism, or whatever must arise out of capitalism. Previous attempts to create a communist or socialist alternative fatally failed to keep the dialectic between the different moments in motion and failed to embrace the unpredictabilities and uncertainties in the dialectical movement between them. Capitalism has survived precisely by keeping the dialectical movement between the moments going and constructively embracing the inevitable tensions, including crises, that result.

Change arises, of course, out of an existing state of affairs and it has to harness the possibilities immanent within an existing situation. Since the existing situation varies enormously from Nepal, to the Pacific regions of Bolivia, to the deindustrializing cities of Michigan and the still booming cities of Mumbai and Shanghai and the shaken but by no means destroyed financial centers of New York and London, so all manner of experiments in social change in different places and at different geographical scales are both likely and potentially illuminating as ways to make (or not make) another world possible. And in each instance it may seem as if one or other aspect of the existing situation holds the key to a different political future. But the first rule for a global anti-capitalist movement must be: never rely on the unfolding dynamics of one moment without carefully calibrating how relations with all the others are adapting and reverberating.

Feasible future possibilities arise out of the existing state of relations between the different moments. Strategic political interventions within and across the spheres can gradually move the social order onto a different developmental path. This is what wise leaders and forward-looking institutions do all the time in local situations, so there is no reason to think there is anything particularly fantastic or utopian about acting in this way. The left has to look to build alliances between and across those working in the distinctive spheres. An anti-capitalist movement has to be far broader than groups mobilizing around social relations or over questions of daily life in themselves. Traditional hostilities between, for example, those with technical, scientific, and administrative expertise and those animating social movements on the ground have to be addressed and overcome. We now have to hand, in the example of the climate change movement, a significant example of how such alliances can begin to work.

In this instance the relation to nature is the beginning point, but everyone realizes that something has to give on all the other moments, and while there is a wishful politics that wants to see the solution as purely technological, it becomes clearer by the day that daily life, mental conceptions, institutional arrangements, production processes, and social relations have to be involved. And all of that means a movement to restructure capitalist society as a whole and to confront the growth logic that underlies the problem in the first place.

There have, however, to be some loosely agreed-upon common objectives in any transitional movement. Some general guiding norms can be set down. These might include (and I just float these norms here for discussion) respect for nature, radical egalitarianism in social relations, institutional arrangements based in some sense of common interests and common property, democratic administrative procedures (as opposed to the monetized shams that now exist), labor processes organized by the direct producers, daily life as the free exploration of new kinds of social relations and living arrangements, mental conceptions that focus on self-realization in service to others, and technological and organizational innovations oriented to the pursuit of the common good rather than to supporting militarized power, surveillance, and corporate greed. These could be the co-revolutionary points around which social action could converge and rotate. Of course this is utopian! But so what! We cannot afford not to be.

Let me detail one particular aspect of the problem which arises in the place where I work. Ideas have consequences and false ideas can have devastating consequences. Policy failures based on erroneous economic thinking played a crucial role in both the run-up to the debacle of the 1930s and in the seeming inability to find an adequate way out. Though there is no agreement among historians and economists as to exactly what policies failed, it is agreed that the knowledge structure through which the crisis was understood needed to be revolutionized. Keynes and his colleagues accomplished that task. But by the mid-1970s, it became clear that the Keynesian policy tools were no longer working at least in the way they were being applied, and it was in this context that monetarism, supply-side theory, and the (beautiful) mathematical modelling of micro-economic market behaviours supplanted broad-brush macro-economic Keynesian thinking. The monetarist and narrower neoliberal theoretical frame that dominated after 1980 is now in question. In fact it has disastrously failed.

We need new mental conceptions to understand the world. What might these be and who will produce them, given both the sociological and intellectual malaise that hangs over knowledge production and (equally important) dissemination more generally? The deeply entrenched mental conceptions associated with neoliberal theories and the neoliberalization and corporatization of the universities and the media has played more than a trivial role in the production of the present crisis. For example, the whole question of what to do about the financial system, the banking sector, the state-finance nexus, and the power of private property rights cannot be broached without going outside of the box of conventional thinking. For this to happen will require a revolution in thinking, in places as diverse as the universities, the media, and government as well as within the financial institutions themselves.

Karl Marx, while not in any way inclined to embrace philosophical idealism, held that ideas are a material force in history. Mental conceptions constitute, after all, one of the seven moments in his general theory of co-revolutionary change. Autonomous developments and inner conflicts over what mental conceptions shall become hegemonic therefore have an important historical role to play. It was for this reason that Marx (along with Engels) wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, *Capital*, and innumerable other works. These works provide a systematic critique, albeit incomplete, of capitalism and its crisis tendencies. But as Marx also insisted, it was only when these critical ideas carried over into the fields of institutional arrangements, organizational forms, production systems, daily life, social relations, technologies, and relations to nature that the world would truly change.

Since Marx's goal was to change the world and not merely to understand it, ideas had to be formulated with a certain revolutionary intent. This inevitably meant a conflict with modes of thought more convivial to and useful for the ruling class. The fact that Marx's oppositional ideas, particularly in recent years, have been the target of repeated repressions and exclusions (to say nothing of bowdlerizations and misrepresentations galore) suggests that his ideas may be too dangerous for the ruling classes to tolerate. While Keynes repeatedly avowed that he had never read Marx, he was surrounded and influenced in the 1930s by many people (like his economist colleague Joan Robinson) who had. While many of them objected vociferously to Marx's foundational concepts and his dialectical mode of reasoning, they were acutely aware of and deeply affected by

some of his more prescient conclusions. It is fair to say, I think, that the Keynesian theory revolution could not have been accomplished without the subversive presence of Marx lurking in the wings.

The trouble in these times is that most people have no idea who Keynes was and what he really stood for while the knowledge of Marx is negligible. The repression of critical and radical currents of thought, or to be more exact the corralling of radicalism within the bounds of multiculturalism, identity politics, and cultural choice, creates a lamentable situation within the academy and beyond, no different in principle to having to ask the bankers who made the mess to clean it up with exactly the same tools as they used to get into it. Broad adhesion to post-modern and post-structuralist ideas which celebrate the particular at the expense of big-picture thinking does not help. To be sure, the local and the particular are vitally important and theories that cannot embrace, for example, geographical difference, are worse than useless. But when that fact is used to exclude anything larger than parish politics then the betrayal of the intellectuals and abrogation of their traditional role become complete.

The current populations of academicians, intellectuals, and experts in the social sciences and humanities are by and large ill-equipped to undertake the collective task of revolutionizing our knowledge structures. They have, in fact, been deeply implicated in the construction of the new systems of neoliberal governmentality that evade questions of legitimacy and democracy and foster a technocratic authoritarian politics. Few seem predisposed to engage in self-critical reflection. Universities continue to promote the same useless courses on neo-classical economic or rational choice political theory as if nothing has happened and the vaunted business schools simply add a course or two on business ethics or how to make money out of other people's bankruptcies. After all, the crisis arose out of human greed and there is nothing that can be done about that!

The current knowledge structure is clearly dysfunctional and equally clearly illegitimate. The only hope is that a new generation of perceptive students (in the broad sense of all those who seek to know the world) will clearly see it so and insist upon changing it. This happened in the 1960s. At various other critical points in history student-inspired movements, recognizing the disjunction between what is happening in the world and what they are being taught and fed by the media, were prepared to do something about it. There are signs, from Tehran to Athens and onto many European university campuses of such a movement. How the new generation of students in China will act must surely be of deep concern in the corridors of political power in Beijing.

A student-led and youthful revolutionary movement, with all of its evident uncertainties and problems, is a necessary but not sufficient condition to produce that revolution in mental conceptions that can lead us to a more rational solution to the current problems of endless growth.

What, more broadly, would happen if an anti-capitalist movement were constituted out of a broad alliance of the alienated, the discontented, the deprived, and the dispossessed? The image of all such people everywhere rising up and demanding and achieving their proper place in economic, social, and political life is stirring indeed. It also helps focus on the question of what it is they might demand and what it is that needs to be done.

Revolutionary transformations cannot be accomplished without at the very minimum changing our ideas, abandoning cherished beliefs and prejudices, giving up various daily comforts and rights, submitting to some new daily life regimen, changing our social and political roles, reassigning our rights, duties, and responsibilities, and altering our behaviours to better conform to collective needs and a common will. The world around us -- our geographies -- must be radically re-shaped as must our social relations, the relation to nature, and all of the other moments in the co-revolutionary process. It is understandable, to some degree, that many prefer a politics of denial to a politics of active confrontation with all of this.

It would also be comforting to think that all of this could be accomplished pacifically and voluntarily, that we would dispossess ourselves, strip ourselves bare, as it were, of all that we now possess that stands in the way of the creation of a more socially just, steady-state social order. But it

would be disingenuous to imagine that this could be so, that no active struggle will be involved, including some degree of violence. Capitalism came into the world, as Marx once put it, bathed in blood and fire. Although it might be possible to do a better job of getting out from under it than getting into it, the odds are heavily against any purely pacific passage to the promised land.

There are various broad fractious currents of thought on the left as to how to address the problems that now confront us. There is, first of all, the usual sectarianism stemming from the history of radical action and the articulations of left political theory. Curiously, the one place where amnesia is not so prevalent is within the left (the splits between anarchists and Marxists that occurred back in the 1870s, between Trotskyists, Maoists, and orthodox Communists, between the centralizers who want to command the state and the anti-statist autonomists and anarchists). The arguments are so bitter and so fractious as to sometimes make one think that more amnesia might be a good thing. But beyond these traditional revolutionary sects and political factions, the whole field of political action has undergone a radical transformation since the mid-1970s. The terrain of political struggle and of political possibilities has shifted, both geographically and organizationally.

There are now vast numbers of non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that play a political role that was scarcely visible before the mid-1970s. Funded by both state and private interests, populated often by idealist thinkers and organizers (they constitute a vast employment program), and for the most part dedicated to single-issue questions (environment, poverty, women's rights, anti-slavery and trafficking work, etc), they refrain from straight anti-capitalist politics even as they espouse progressive ideas and causes. In some instances, however, they are actively neoliberal, engaging in privatization of state welfare functions or fostering institutional reforms to facilitate market integration of marginalized populations (microcredit and microfinance schemes for low-income populations are a classic example of this).

While there are many radical and dedicated practitioners in this NGO world, their work is at best ameliorative. Collectively, they have a spotty record of progressive achievements, although in certain arenas, such as women's rights, health care, and environmental preservation, they can reasonably claim to have made major contributions to human betterment. But revolutionary change by NGO is impossible. They are too constrained by the political and policy stances of their donors. So even though, in supporting local empowerment, they help open up spaces where anti-capitalist alternatives become possible and even support experimentation with such alternatives, they do nothing to prevent the re-absorption of these alternatives into the dominant capitalist practice: they even encourage it. The collective power of NGOs in these times is reflected in the dominant role they play in the World Social Forum, where attempts to forge a global justice movement, a global alternative to neoliberalism, have been concentrated over the last ten years.

The second broad wing of opposition arises out of anarchist, autonomist, and grassroots organizations (GROs) which refuse outside funding even as some of them do rely upon some alternative institutional base (such as the Catholic Church with its "base community" initiatives in Latin America or broader church sponsorship of political mobilization in the inner cities of the United States). This group is far from homogeneous (indeed there are bitter disputes among them pitting, for example, social anarchists against those they scathingly refer to as mere "lifestyle" anarchists). There is, however, a common antipathy to negotiation with state power and an emphasis upon civil society as the sphere where change can be accomplished. The self-organizing powers of people in the daily situations in which they live has to be the basis for any anti-capitalist alternative. Horizontal networking is their preferred organizing model. So-called "solidarity economies" based on bartering, collectives, and local production systems is their preferred political economic form. They typically oppose the idea that any central direction might be necessary and reject hierarchical social relations or hierarchical political power structures along with conventional political parties. Organizations of this sort can be found everywhere and in some places have achieved a high degree of political prominence. Some of them are radically anti-capitalist in their stance and espouse revolutionary objectives and in some instances are prepared to advocate sabotage and other forms of disruption (shades of the Red Brigades in Italy, the Baader Meinhof in Germany, and the Weather

Underground in the United States in the 1970s). But the effectiveness of all these movements (leaving aside their more violent fringes) is limited by their reluctance and inability to scale up their activism into large-scale organizational forms capable of confronting global problems. The presumption that local action is the only meaningful level of change and that anything that smacks of hierarchy is anti-revolutionary is self-defeating when it comes to larger questions. Yet these movements are unquestionably providing a widespread base for experimentation with anti-capitalist politics.

The third broad trend is given by the transformation that has been occurring in traditional labor organizing and left political parties, varying from social democratic traditions to more radical Trotskyist and Communist forms of political party organization. This trend is not hostile to the conquest of state power or hierarchical forms of organization. Indeed, it regards the latter as necessary to the integration of political organization across a variety of political scales. In the years when social democracy was hegemonic in Europe and even influential in the United States, state control over the distribution of the surplus became a crucial tool to diminish inequalities. The failure to take social control over the production of surpluses and thereby really challenge the power of the capitalist class was the Achilles heel of this political system, but we should not forget the advances that it made even if it is now clearly insufficient to go back to such a political model with its social welfarism and Keynesian economics. The Bolivarian movement in Latin America and the ascent to state power of progressive social democratic governments is one of the most hopeful signs of a resuscitation of a new form of left statism.

Both organized labor and left political parties have taken some hard hits in the advanced capitalist world over the last thirty years. Both have either been convinced or coerced into broad support for neoliberalization, albeit with a somewhat more human face. One way to look upon neoliberalism, as was earlier noted, is as a grand and quite revolutionary movement (led by that self-proclaimed revolutionary figure, Margaret Thatcher) to privatize the surpluses or at least prevent their further socialization.

While there are some signs of recovery of both labor organizing and left politics (as opposed to the "third way" celebrated by New Labor in Britain under Tony Blair and disastrously copied by many social democratic parties in Europe) along with signs of the emergence of more radical political parties in different parts of the world, the exclusive reliance upon a vanguard of workers is now in question as is the ability of those leftist parties that gain some access to political power to have a substantive impact upon the development of capitalism and to cope with the troubled dynamics of crisis-prone accumulation. The performance of the German Green Party in power has hardly been stellar relative to their political stance out of power and social democratic parties have lost their way entirely as a true political force. But left political parties and labor unions are significant still, and their takeover of aspects of state power, as with the Workers' Party in Brazil or the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela, has had a clear impact on left thinking, not only in Latin America. The complicated problem of how to interpret the role of the Communist Party in China, with its exclusive control over political power, and what its future policies might be about is not easily resolved either.

The co-revolutionary theory earlier laid out would suggest that there is no way that an anti-capitalist social order can be constructed without seizing state power, radically transforming it, and re-working the constitutional and institutional framework that currently supports private property, the market system, and endless capital accumulation. Inter-state competition and geoeconomic and geopolitical struggles over everything from trade and money to questions of hegemony are also far too significant to be left to local social movements or cast aside as too big to contemplate. How the architecture of the state-finance nexus is to be re-worked along with the pressing question of the common measure of value given by money cannot be ignored in the quest to construct alternatives to capitalist political economy. To ignore the state and the dynamics of the inter-state system is therefore a ridiculous idea for any anti-capitalist revolutionary movement to accept.

The fourth broad trend is constituted by all the social movements that are not so much guided by

any particular political philosophy or leanings but by the pragmatic need to resist displacement and dispossession (through gentrification, industrial development, dam construction, water privatization, the dismantling of social services and public educational opportunities, or whatever). In this instance the focus on daily life in the city, town, village, or wherever provides a material base for political organizing against the threats that state policies and capitalist interests invariably pose to vulnerable populations. These forms of protest politics are massive.

Again, there is a vast array of social movements of this sort, some of which can become radicalized over time as they more and more realize that the problems are systemic rather than particular and local. The bringing together of such social movements into alliances on the land (like the Via Campesina, the landless peasant movement in Brazil, or peasants mobilizing against land and resource grabs by capitalist corporations in India) or in urban contexts (the right to the city and take back the land movements in Brazil and now the United States) suggests the way may be open to create broader alliances to discuss and confront the systemic forces that underpin the particularities of gentrification, dam construction, privatization, or whatever. More pragmatic rather than driven by ideological preconceptions, these movements nevertheless can arrive at systemic understandings out of their own experience. To the degree that many of them exist in the same space, such as within the metropolis, they can (as supposedly happened with the factory workers in the early stages of the industrial revolution) make common cause and begin to forge, on the basis of their own experience, a consciousness of how capitalism works and what it is that might collectively be done. This is the terrain where the figure of the "organic intellectual" leader, made so much of in Antonio Gramsci's work, the autodidact who comes to understand the world firsthand through bitter experiences but shapes his or her understanding of capitalism more generally, has a great deal to say. To listen to peasant leaders of the MST in Brazil or the leaders of the anti-corporate land grab movement in India is a privileged education. In this instance the task of the educated alienated and discontented is to magnify the subaltern voice so that attention can be paid to the circumstances of exploitation and repression and the answers that can be shaped into an anti-capitalist program.

The fifth epicenter for social change lies with the emancipatory movements around questions of identity -- women, children, gays, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities all demand an equal place in the sun -- along with the vast array of environmental movements that are not explicitly anti-capitalist. The movements claiming emancipation on each of these issues are geographically uneven and often geographically divided in terms of needs and aspirations. But global conferences on women's rights (Nairobi in 1985 that led to the Beijing declaration of 1995) and anti-racism (the far more contentious conference in Durban in 2001) are attempting to find common ground, as is true also of the environmental conferences, and there is no question that social relations are changing along all of these dimensions at least in some parts of the world. When cast in narrow essentialist terms, these movements can appear to be antagonistic to class struggle. Certainly within much of the academy they have taken priority of place at the expense of class analysis and political economy. But the feminization of the global labor force, the feminization of poverty almost everywhere, and the use of gender disparities as a means of labor control make the emancipation and eventual liberation of women from their repressions a necessary condition for class struggle to sharpen its focus. The same observation applies to all the other identity forms where discrimination or outright repression can be found. Racism and the oppression of women and children were foundational in the rise of capitalism. But capitalism as currently constituted can in principle survive without these forms of discrimination and oppression, though its political ability to do so will be severely curtailed if not mortally wounded in the face of a more unified class force. The modest embrace of multiculturalism and women's rights within the corporate world, particularly in the United States, provides some evidence of capitalism's accommodation to these dimensions of social change (including the environment), even as it re-emphasizes the salience of class divisions as the principle dimension for political action.

These five broad tendencies are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive of organizational templates for political action. Some organizations neatly combine aspects of all five tendencies. But there is a lot of work to be done to coalesce these various tendencies around the underlying question: can the

world change materially, socially, mentally, and politically in such a way as to confront not only the dire state of social and natural relations in so many parts of the world, but also the perpetuation of endless compound growth? This is the question that the alienated and discontented must insist upon asking, again and again, even as they learn from those who experience the pain directly and who are so adept at organizing resistances to the dire consequences of compound growth on the ground.

Communists, Marx and Engels averred in their original conception laid out in *The Communist Manifesto*, have no political party. They simply constitute themselves at all times and in all places as those who understand the limits, failings, and destructive tendencies of the capitalist order as well as the innumerable ideological masks and false legitimations that capitalists and their apologists (particularly in the media) produce in order to perpetuate their singular class power. Communists are all those who work incessantly to produce a different future to that which capitalism portends. This is an interesting definition. While traditional institutionalized communism is as good as dead and buried, there are by this definition millions of de facto communists active among us, willing to act upon their understandings, ready to creatively pursue anti-capitalist imperatives. If, as the alternative globalization movement of the late 1990s declared, 'another world is possible' then why not also say 'another communism is possible'? The current circumstances of capitalist development demand something of this sort, if fundamental change is to be achieved.

Source: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/harvey151209.html>

### **Further reading**

J18 in Do or Die no.8: [http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/j18\\_intro.html](http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/j18_intro.html)

Reflections on J18 pamphlet (Oct '99): <http://www.afed.org.uk/online/j18/index.html>

'Give up Activism' is a provocative article in the Reflections on J18 pamphlet, you can access the text, and it's 'Postscript' here <http://www.bristolanarchistbookfair.org/?p=533>

Seattle archive & images: <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/seattle/index.htm>

Seattle protests:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Trade\\_Organization\\_Ministerial\\_Conference\\_of\\_1999\\_protest\\_activity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Trade_Organization_Ministerial_Conference_of_1999_protest_activity)

A random personal account from Seattle: <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/4/hawken.html>

Seattle 10 years on: [http://www.democracynow.org/2009/11/30/the\\_battle\\_of\\_seattle\\_10\\_years](http://www.democracynow.org/2009/11/30/the_battle_of_seattle_10_years)

10 years of Indymedia: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/11/442558.html>

Comment piece: <http://datacide.c8.com/10-years-j18-1999/>

Red Pepper article by War on Want: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2009/12/442610.html>

Comment on 1999 & COP15 mobilisations: <http://notesfrombelow.wordpress.com/2009/11/12/13/>

Seeing The Elephant In Copenhagen: A Blind Mans Account - (reflections on movements)  
by Chris Carlsson : <http://www.nowtopians.com/>

Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism:

<http://libcom.org/library/social-anarchism--lifestyle-anarchism-murray-bookchin>

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