Reclaim the Cities

From Protest to Popular Power

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"Direct action gets the goods," proclaimed the Industrial Workers of the World nearly a century ago. And in the relatively short time since Seattle, this has certainly proven to be the case. Indeed, "the goods" reaped by the direct action movement here in North America have included creating doubt as to the nature of globalization, shedding light on the nearly unknown workings of international trade and supranational governance bodies, and making anarchism and anticapitalism almost household words.[1] As if that weren't enough, we find ourselves on the streets of twenty-first-century metropolises demonstrating our power to resist in a way that models the good society we envision: a truly democratic one.

But is this really what democracy looks like?

The impulse to "reclaim the streets" is an understandable one. When industrial capitalism first started to emerge in the early nineteenth century, its machinations were relatively visible. Take, for instance, the enclosures. Pasturelands that had been used in common for centuries to provide villages with their very sustenance were systematically fenced off—enclosed—in order to graze sheep, whose wool was needed for the burgeoning textile industry. Communal life was briskly thrust aside in favor of privatization, forcing people into harsh factories and crowded cities.

Advanced capitalism, as it pushes past the fetters of even nation-states in its insatiable quest for growth, encloses life in a much more expansive yet generally invisible way: fences are replaced by consumer culture. We are raised in an almost totally commodified world where nothing comes for free, even futile attempts to remove oneself from the market economy. This commodification seeps into not only what we eat, wear, or do for fun but also into our language, relationships, and even our very biology and minds. We have lost not only our communities and public spaces but control over our own lives; we have lost the ability to define ourselves outside capitalism's grip, and thus genuine meaning itself begins to dissolve.

"Whose Streets? Our Streets!" then, is a legitimate emotional response to the feeling that even the most minimal of public, noncommodified spheres has been taken from us. Yet in the end, it is simply a frantic cry from our cage. We have become so confined, so thoroughly damaged, by capitalism as well as state control that crumbs appear to make a nourishing meal.

[1] Throughout this chapter, the "direct action movement" refers to the time period ranging, approximately, from the Zapatista uprising in January 1994 and the subsequent global anticapitalist movement of movements, to today's climate justice movement, Greek rebellion, and wave of occupations.

Temporarily closing off the streets during direct actions does provide momentary spaces in which to practice democratic process, and even offers a sense of empowerment, but such events leave power for power's sake, like the very pavement beneath our feet, unchanged. Only when the serial protest mode is escalated into a struggle for popular or horizontal power can we create cracks in the figurative concrete, thereby opening up ways to challenge capitalism, nation-states, and other systems of domination.

This is not to denigrate the contemporary direct action movement in the United States and elsewhere; just the opposite. Besides a long overdue and necessary critique of numerous institutions of command and obedience, it is quietly yet crucially supplying the outlines of a freer society. This prefigurative politics is, in fact, the very strength and vision of direct action, where the means themselves are understood to intimately relate to the ends. We're not putting off the good society until some distant future but attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now, however tentative and contorted under the given social order. In turn, this consistency of means and ends implies an ethical approach to politics. How we act now is how we want others to begin to act, too. We try to model a notion of goodness even as we fight for it.

This can implicitly be seen in the affinity group and spokescouncil structures for decision making at direct actions. Both supply much needed spaces in which to school ourselves in direct democracy. Here, in the best of cases, we can proactively set the agenda, carefully deliberate together over questions, and come to decisions that strive to take everyone's needs and desires into account. Substantive discussion replaces checking boxes on a ballot; face-to-face participation replaces handing over our lives to so-called representatives; nuanced and reasoned solutions replace lesser-of-two-(or-three-)evils thinking. The democratic process utilized during demonstrations decentralizes power even as it offers tangible solidarity; for example, affinity groups afford greater and more diverse numbers of people a real share in decision making, while spokescouncils allow for intricate coordination—even on a global level. This is, as 1960s' activists put it, the power to create rather than to destroy.

The beauty of the direct action movement, it could be said, is that it strives to take its own ideals to heart. In doing so, it has perhaps unwittingly created the demand for such directly democratic practices on a permanent basis. Yet the perplexing question underlying episodic "street democracy" remains unaddressed: How can everyone come together to make decisions that affect society as a whole in participatory, mutualistic, and ethical ways? In other words, how can each and every one of us—not just a counterculture or a protest movement—really transform and ultimately control our lives and that of our communities?

This is, in essence, a question of power—who has it, how it is used, and to what ends. To varying degrees, we all know the answer in relation to current institutions and systems. We can generally explain what we are against. That is exactly why we are protesting, whether it is against capitalism or climate change, summits or war. What we have largely failed to articulate, however, is any sort of response in relation to liberatory institutions and systems. We often can't express, especially in any coherent and utopian manner, what we are for. Even as we prefigure a way of making power horizontal, equitable, and hence, hopefully an essential part of a free society, we ignore the reconstructive vision that a directly democratic process holds up right in front of our noses.

For all intents and purposes, direct action protests remain trapped. On the one hand, they reveal and confront domination and exploitation. The political pressure exerted by such widespread agitation may even be able to influence current power structures to amend some of the worst

excesses of their ways; the powers that be have to listen, and respond to some extent, when the voices become too numerous and too loud. Nevertheless, most people are still shut out of the decision-making process itself, and consequently, have little tangible power over their lives at all. Without this ability to self-govern, street actions translate into nothing more than a countercultural version of interest group lobbying, albeit far more radical than most and generally unpaid.

What gets forgotten in relation to direct action mobilizations is the promise implicit in their own structure: that power not only needs to be contested; it must also be constituted anew in liberatory and egalitarian forms. This entails taking directly democratic processes seriously—not simply as a tactic to organize protests but as the very way we organize society, specifically the political realm. The issue then becomes: How do we begin to shift the strategy, structure, and values of direct action in the streets to the most grassroots level of public policy making?

The most fundamental level of decision making in a demonstration is the affinity group. Here, we come together as friends or because of a common identity, or a combination of the two. We share something in particular; indeed, this common identity is often reflected in the name we choose for our groups. We may not always agree with each other, but there is a fair amount of homogeneity precisely because we've consciously chosen to come together for a specific reason—usually having little to do with mere geography. This sense of a shared identity allows for the smooth functioning of a consensus decision-making process, since we start from a place of commonality. In an affinity group, almost by definition, our unity needs to take precedence over our diversity, or our supposed affinity breaks down altogether.

Compare this to what could be the most fundamental level of decision making in a society: a neighborhood or town. Now, geography plays a much larger role. Out of historic, economic, cultural, religious, and other reasons, we may find ourselves living side by side with a wide range of individuals and their various identities. Most of these people are not our friends per se. Still, the very diversity we encounter is the life of a vibrant city itself. The accidents and/or numerous personal decisions that have brought us together frequently create a fair amount of heterogeneity precisely because we haven't all chosen to come together for a specific reason. In this context, where we start from a place of difference, decision-making mechanisms need to be much more capable of allowing for dissent; that is, diversity needs to be clearly retained within any notions of unity. As such, majoritarian decision-making processes begin to make more sense.

Then, too, there is the question of scale. It is hard to imagine being friends with hundreds, or even thousands, of people, nor maintaining a single-issue identity with that many individuals. But we can share a feeling of community and a striving toward some common good that allows each of us to flourish. In turn, when greater numbers of people come together on a face-to-face basis to reshape their neighborhoods and towns, the issues as well as the viewpoints will multiply, and alliances will no doubt change depending on the specific topic under discussion. Thus the need for a place where we can meet as human beings at the most face-to-face level—that is, an assembly of active political beings—to share our many identities and interests in hopes of balancing both the individual and community in all we do.

As well, trust and accountability function differently at the affinity group versus civic level. We generally reveal more of ourselves to friends; and such unwritten bonds of love and affection hold us more closely together, or at least give us added impetus to work things out. Underlying this is a higher-than-average degree of trust, which serves to make us accountable to each other.

On a community-wide level, the reverse is more often true: accountability allows us to trust each other. Hopefully, we share bonds of solidarity and respect; yet since we can't all know each other well, such bonds only make sense if we first determine them together, and then record them, write them down, for all to refer back to in the future, and even revisit if need be. Accountable, democratic structures of our own making, in short, provide the foundation for trust, since the power to decide is both transparent and ever-amenable to scrutiny.

There are also issues of time and space. Affinity groups, in the scheme of things, are generally temporary configurations—they may last a few months, or a few years, but often not much longer. Once the particular reasons why we've come together have less of an immediate imperative, or as our friendships falter, such groups frequently fall by the wayside. And even during a group's life span, in the interim between direct actions, there is frequently no fixed place or face to decision making, nor any regularity, nor much of a record of who decided what and how. Moreover, affinity groups are not open to everyone but only those who share a specific identity or attachment. As such, although an affinity group can certainly choose to shut down a street, there is ultimately something slightly authoritarian in small groups taking matters into their own hands, no matter what their political persuasion.

Deciding what to do with streets in general—say, how to organize transportation, encourage street life, or provide green space—should be a matter open to everyone interested if it is to be truly participatory and nonhierarchical. This implies ongoing and open institutions of direct democracy, for everything from decision making to conflict resolution. We need to be able to know when and where popular assemblies are meeting; we need to meet regularly and make use of nonarbitrary procedures; we need to keep track of what decisions have been made. But more important, if we so choose, we all need to have access to the power to discuss, deliberate, and make decisions about matters that affect our communities and beyond.

Indeed, many decisions have a much wider impact than on just one city; transforming streets, for example, would probably entail coordination on a regional, continental, or even global level. Radicals have long understood such mutualistic self-reliance as a "commune of communes," or confederation. The spokescouncil model used during direct actions hints at such an alternative view of globalization. During a spokescouncil meeting, mandated delegates from our affinity groups gather for the purpose of coordination, the sharing of resources/skills, the building of solidarity, and so forth, always returning to the grassroots level as the ultimate arbiter. If popular assemblies were our basic unit of decision making, confederations of communities could serve as a way to both transcend parochialism and create interdependence where desirable. For instance, rather than global capitalism and international regulatory bodies, where trade is top-down and profit-oriented, confederations could coordinate distribution between regions in ecological and humane ways, while allowing policy in regard to production, say, to remain at the grassroots.

This more expansive understanding of a prefigurative politics would necessarily involve creating institutions that could potentially replace capitalism and nation-states. Such directly democratic institutions are compatible with, and could certainly grow out of, the ones we use during demonstrations, but they very likely won't be mirror images once we reach the level of society. This does not mean abandoning the principles and ideals underpinning direct action mobilizations (such as freedom, cooperation, decentralism, solidarity, diversity, and face-to-face participation); it merely means recognizing the limits of direct democracy as it is practiced in the context of an anticapitalist convergence.

The Zapatistas, along with other revolutionaries before them, have already shown that declarations of freedom "touch the hearts of humble and simple people like ourselves, but people who are also, like ourselves, dignified and rebel." Yet starting in 2001, they have proved as well that municipalities can strive to become autonomous from statecraft and capital, to put human and ecological concerns first, while retaining regional and global links of solidarity and mutual aid. "This method of autonomous government was not simply invented by the EZLN [Zapatista Army of National Liberation], but rather it comes from several centuries of indigenous resistance and from the Zapatistas' own experience. It is the self-governance of the communities. In other words, no one from outside comes to govern, but the peoples themselves decide, among themselves, who governs and how. . . . And, also through the Good Government Juntas, coordination has been improved between the Autonomous Municipalities." Among other achievements, these self-governments also facilitated "much improvement in the projects in the communities. Health and education have improved, although there is still a good deal lacking for it to be what it should be. The same is true for housing and food."[2]

Another recent example was the neighborhood assembly movement that sprang up in Argentina in 2001–2, in response to an economic crisis that simultaneously delegitimized parliamentary politics. In late December 2001, a spiraling sense of desperation and powerless combined to force people not only out onto the streets to loudly protest by banging on pots and pans (and destroying ATMs) but also into an empowering dialogue with their neighbors about what to do next—on the local, national, and global levels. Some fifty neighborhoods in Buenos Aires began holding weekly meetings and sending delegates every Sunday to an interneighborhood general coordinating gathering. The anarchist Argentine Libertarian Federation Local Council explains that the assemblies were "formed by the unemployed, the underemployed, and people marginalized and excluded from capitalist society: including professionals, workers, small retailers, artists, craftspeople, all of them also neighbors." As the Libertarian Federation notes, "The meetings are open and anyone who wishes can participate," and common to all assemblies was the "non-delegation of power, self-management, [and a] horizontal structure." While these assemblies didn't end up replacing the state structure, they did supply Argentineans with a glimpse of their own ability to make public policy together. "The fear in our society has turned into courage," the Libertarian Federation reports. "There is reason to hope that all Argentineans now know for certain who has been blocking our freedoms."[3]

Indeed, such innovative efforts, even when they fall short of social transformation, end up inspiring other attempts. The current series of building occupations on college campuses across the state of California, sparked by dramatic tuition increases and budget cuts to public education in fall 2009, draws on the recent Oaxacan rebellion of 2006. As La Ventana Collective, made up of students at San Francisco State University, writes, "The APPO (the Popular People's Assembly of Oaxaca) organized large general assemblies held in the midst of the occupation of the zocalo of the capital city of the state of Oaxaca. The 'planton'—or occupation—was a space where meetings took up to 3 days in many cases due to the horizontal nature and directly democratic principles of the APPO, which functioned as guidelines and principles of the movement." These students assert

[2] Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona (June 2005), introduction and "II. Where We Are Now," available at http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/SixthDeclaration.html.

[3] Argentine Libertarian Federation Local Council, "Argentina: Between Poverty and Protest," translated from the Spanish original by Robby Barnes and Sylvie Kashdan, available at http://news.infoshop.org/article.php?story=02/02/26/0963155.

in relation to their own ongoing resistance that "a general assembly is, for us, a large gathering of people willing to talk about the issues through discussion in order to formulate plans for moving forward." Looking ahead as students, faculty, staff, workers, and community supporters around California gear up for further contestation, including a "Strike and Day of Action in Defense of Public Education" called for March 4, 2010, La Ventana points to the significance of "the communization of the struggle. . . . This is a philosophy that was stressed during the 2001 horizontalist movement in Argentina after the collapse of the economy. Once again, during the actions that followed the collapse of the government, the people self-organized."[4] For the San Francisco State University students, the lived reality of directly democratic processes during their own struggle is just as important as winning that struggle; it is, in fact, part and parcel of winning.

Such instantiations of self-governance don't appear out of thin air. They take, among other things, patience, deliberation, self-reflection, and imagination. They take courage. The Zapatistas spent ten years "talking with and listening to other people like us," joining "forces in silence," learning and getting "organized in order to defend ourselves and to fight for justice." Then, "when the rich were throwing their New Year's Eve parties, we fell upon their cities and just took them over" on December 31, 1993. "And then the people from the cities went out into the streets and began shouting for an end to the war. And then we stopped our war, and we listened to those brothers and sisters. . . . And so we set aside the fire and took up the word." Still, it would take another seven years, until 2001, before the EZLN would begin "encouraging the autonomous rebel zapatista municipalities—which is how the peoples are organized in order to govern and to govern themselves—in order to make themselves stronger."[5]

At worst, such fragile yet exceedingly beautiful experiments will forever change those people who participate in them, for the better, by "self-mentoring" a new generation of rebels through the lived practice of freely constituting one's community collectively. They will provide material and moral support, and serve as the continuity between other similar efforts, in other parts of the world. And they will also supply messages in bottles to future generations that directly democratic, confederated ways of making social, economic, political, and cultural decisions are a tangible alternative. This is a pretty good "worst-case scenario," as the horizontal movement of movements of the past couple decades attests to—from Chiapas to Buenos Aires to Oaxaca, from Greece to North America. At best, though, such forms of freedom will widen into dual powers that can contest and ultimately replace forms of domination. They will become the basis for a new politics of self-legislation, self-management, and self-adjudication, forever shattering the bleak world of states, capital, and prisons.

Any vision of a free society, if it is to be truly democratic, must of course be worked out by all of us—first movements, and later, in our communities and federations. Even so, we will probably discover that newly defined understandings of what it means to be a politically engaged person are needed in place of affinity groups; hybrid consensus-seeking and majoritarian methods of decision making that strive to retain diversity are preferable to simple consensus and informal models; written compacts articulating rights and duties are crucial to fill out the unspoken cul-

[4] La Ventana Collective, "On the Actions of December 10th and in Defense of the SFSU Occupation" (December 12, 2009), available at http://ventanacollective.blogspot.com/.

[5] Sixth Declaration, "I. – What We Are" and "II. – Where We Are Now,"

ture of protests; and institutionalized spaces for policymaking are key to guaranteeing that our freedom to make decisions doesn't disappear with a line of riot police.

It is time to push beyond the oppositional character of the direct action movement by infusing it with a reconstructive vision. That means beginning, right now, to translate movement structures into institutions that embody the good society; in short, cultivating direct democracy in the places we call home. This will involve the harder work of reinvigorating or initiating civic gatherings, town meetings, neighborhood assemblies, community mediation boards, any and all forums where we can come together to decide our lives, even if only in extralegal institutions at first. Then, too, it will mean reclaiming globalization, not as a new phase of capitalism, but as its replacement by confederated, directly democratic communities coordinated for mutual benefit.

It is time to move from protest to politics, from shutting down streets to opening up public space, from demanding scraps from those few in power to holding power firmly in all our hands. Ultimately, this means moving beyond the question of "Whose Streets?" We should ask instead "Whose Cities?" Then, and only then, will we be able to remake them as our own.

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