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The Rebirth of Anarchism in North America, 1957–2007

An Historical Sketch

David Graeber

February 2010

Abstract: Anarchism has undergone a broad renewal in the US and Canada in recent decades, flowering most spectacularly in the alter-globalization movement in the years after the protests against the WTO ministerial in Seattle in November 1999. At the time, the movement seemed to outsiders to have spring out of nowhere. In fact, it was the product of a long development of transformation where movements of the '60s confronted internal dilemmas highlighted in the rise of feminism, and experiments with new organizational models drawn from many different global contexts. A brief glance at debates concerning consensus decision-making and decentralized organization during the '50s and '60s civil rights movement and '70s anti-nuclear movement highlights how this came about.

Keywords: Anarchism, North America, antinuclear movement, civil Rights movement, feminism.

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What I'd like to do in these brief pages is to outline some of the broad historical context for the rise of anarchism, in the United States, to the position it now holds as the effective center of the revolutionary Left. By "anarchism" here I am speaking less about anarchism as a political identity, about explicitly "anarchist" organizations, individuals who refer to themselves as "anarchists" of one variety or another—though these have, certainly, increased dramatically in number in recent decades—so much as anarchism as a form of practice, an ethical system that rejects the seizure of state power, and, to the extent possible, any appeal to or entanglement in institutions of state power, and that relies instead on classical anarchist principles of self-organization, voluntary association, direct action, and mutual aid. The centrality of anarchism in this sense only really became fully apparent to those on the radical Left in North America in the early days of the global justice movement from 1999–2001, but by now—as increasingly in other parts of the world as well—it has become impossible to deny.

Impossible, at least, for activists or anyone actively engaged with social movements or radical campaigns... For activists, "anarchist process" has become synonymous with the basic principles of how one facilitates a meeting or organizes street actions. For most of those outside—intellectuals, for example, or even readers of the Left press—all this is much less apparent. There are various reasons for this. One is the way the mainstream media, and to some degree, the Left press itself, tend to speak of "anarchists" only when discussing militant street tactics, particularly, property destruction. When anarchists in Black Bloc broke windows in Seattle during the WTO protests in November, 1999, they were referred to as "anarchists"; when other (far more numerous) anarchists organized pirate radio collectives, facilitated meetings, made puppets, or locked down in non-violent street blockades, the fact that they were anarchists went entirely unremarked. This has been a consistent pattern. Nonetheless, the fault cannot be laid completely at the feet of the media. Another persistent problem

same conjunction between direct action and direct democracy. It is precisely in the conjunction between these two phenomenon, now pretty much irreversibly established in the most radical social movements in North America and increasingly, elsewhere, that the future of anarchism really lies.

ination: there are now Food Not Bombs chapters, for instance, in Caracas and Bandung. The year or two directly after Seattle also saw the emergence of the network of Independent Media Centers, radical web journalism that has completely transformed the possibilities of information flow about actions and events: activists who used to struggle for months and years to put on actions that were then entirely ignored by the media now know that anything they do will be picked up and reported instantly in photos, stories, and videos, across the planet—if in a form accessible largely only to other activists. The great problem has been how to translate the flow of information into structures of collective decision-making—since egalitarian decision-making is one thing that is almost impossible to do on the internet. Or, more precisely, the question is: when and on what level are structures of collective decisionmaking required? DAN, and the Continental DAN network that was set up after Seattle, was a first effort to address this problem. Ultimately, it foundered. In doing so, however, it too played a key role in disseminating certain models of direct democracy, and making their practice pretty much inextricable from the idea of direct action.

After September 11, the level of repression in the United States—already being ratcheted up steadily in the year and a half after Seattle—began increasing quite dramatically. Most of the structures created in the early days of the alterglobalization movement crumbled or shrank radically in size. At time of writing (late 2007) this process has already begun to reverse itself: we have seen a plethora of new organizations and new initiatives, many ostensibly revivals of much older institutions (the newfound efflorescence, Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, the revival of SDS...) but now based on profoundly different principles of process and organization. In the meanwhile, the basic principles of “anarchist process” have, as noted in the beginning of this essay, reached the point where they have become the very ground rules of organization almost across the spectrum, with the exception of most NGOs and old-fashioned, sectarian Marxist groups. All reflect this

has been the anarchist press itself, which remains dominated by Primitivists, Platformists, sectarians, and hyper-individualists—proponents of strains of anarchism that are almost completely unrepresentative of the movement as a whole. Someone casually perusing a shelf of anarchist magazines at an infoshop, would be left with the impression that the overwhelmingly majority of American anarchists were either proponents of positions and forms of organization that had barely changed since the ‘20s and ‘30s (as for example with the Northeast Confederation of Anarchist Communists, or NEFAC) or, alternately, opposed to all forms of organization and looking forward to a collapse of civilization and return to a world of tiny bands of hunters and foragers. The impression would be completely inaccurate. According to Chuck Munson, who as manager of www.infoshop.com, has conducted the most comprehensive surveys of the North American anarchist community, roughly 90% of American anarchists do not identify with any particular sect or tendency at all. They are what I have elsewhere referred to as “small-a” anarchists, non-sectarian or even anti-sectarian, tending to operate outside of anarchist-only groups, and whose ideological practice largely consists of teaching by example. If such people are little represented in official anarchist literature, it is largely for this reason.

Another reason, I think, that the rise of anarchism might seem invisible to some is that—in part because of its growing small-a orientation—it has become so entangled with other political traditions outside observers are never quite sure what they’re looking at. “Anarchist process” can also be referred to as “feminist process”, it’s entirely unclear where one begins and the other ends or if indeed there is a difference. Even more confusing for those used to earlier anarchism’s hostility to anything associated with God, churches, and religion, the history of anarchist practice in North America has become entangled with alternative spiritual traditions, from Quakerism, to Paganism.

What I am going to do in the following pages, then, is to provide a brief history of the rise of what I've been calling small-a anarchism in America, beginning with the civil rights movement in the late '50s and early '60s. It is, of necessity, a brief and partial narrative. No doubt it could be told very differently. Since I am not primarily interested in anarchism as identity, I am also not interested in tracing the history of specific anarchist organizations. Rather, I am interested in the origins of anarchist process, and particularly, the convergence between concerns to develop new forms of direct democracy and dedication to principles of direct action. Many of those who thus contributed to the rise of anarchism in America did not, in fact, consider themselves anarchists. But they were, one might say, anarchists in practice, and as in so many areas, theory has followed practice here rather than the other way around.

The '60s New Left kicked off with a call for "participatory democracy" in the famous Port Huron Statement of 1962, the founding document of Students for a Democratic Society. Its principle author, Tom Hayden, was inspired ultimately by John Dewey and C. Wright Mills¹ and the document was notable for calling for a broad democratization of all aspects of American society, to create a situation where people are making for themselves the "decisions that affect their lives". One might see this as a very anarchistic vision, but SDS, as its inception, certainly did not. Actually, their original political program was to radicalize the Democratic Party (they only abandoned it when placed in an impossible position by the Democrats' pursuit of the Vietnam War). Even more crucially, those who framed the statement seemed to have only the sketchiest ideas of what "participatory democracy" might mean in practice. This is most evident in the contradictory character of SDS's own structure.

¹ The more immediate inspiration was his former philosophy teacher Arnold Kaufman at University of Michigan.

the turn of the millennium there were literally hundreds. But Food Not Bombs is not an organization. There is no overarching structure, no membership or annual meetings. It's just an idea—that food should go to those that need it, and in a way that those fed can themselves become part of the process if they want to—plus some basic how-to information (now easily available on the internet), and a shared commitment to egalitarian decisionmaking and the spirit of DIY. Gradually, cooperatives, anarchist infoshops, clinic defense groups, Anarchist Black Cross prisoner collectives, pirate radio collectives, squats, and chapters of Anti-Racist Action began springing up on a similar molecular basis across the continent. All became workshops for the creation of direct democracy. But especially since so much of it developed, not on campuses, but within countercultural milieus like the punk scene, it remained well below the radar of not only the corporate media, but even of mainstream Left journals like *The Nation*. This, in turn, explains how, when suddenly such groups became to coalesce and coordinate in Seattle, it seemed, for the rest of the country, as if a movement had suddenly appeared from nowhere.

By the time we get to the birth of the globalization movement, which debuted in North America in the November 30, 1999 actions against the WTO Ministerial in Seattle, though, it's impossible to even pretend such matters can even be considered within a purely national framework. What the press insists on calling the "anti-globalization movement" was, from the very beginning, a self-consciously global phenomenon. The actions against the WTO Ministerial were first proposed by PGA, a planetary network that came into being by the initiative of the Zapatista rebels in Chiapas; the emphasis on the WTO reflected the concerns of farmer's groups in India; the tactics employed could equally well be seen as an amalgam of ideas drawn mainly from the global South than as an indigenous American development. It was the internet, above all, that made all this possible. If nothing else, the internet has allowed for a qualitative leap in the range and speed of molecular dissem-

unworkable.¹² At the same time, direct action proved spectacularly successful in putting the issue of nuclear power on the map. If anything, the movement fell victim to its own success. Though it rarely won a battle—that is, for a blockade to prevent the construction of any particular new plant—it very quickly won the war. US government plans to build 100 new generators were scotched after a couple years and no new plans to build nuclear plants have been announced since. Attempts to move from nuclear plants to nuclear missiles, and from there to a social revolution, however, proved more of a challenge, and the movement itself was never able to jump from the nuclear issue to become the basis of a broader revolutionary campaign. After the early '80s, it largely disappeared.

This is not to say nothing was going on in the late '80s and '90s. Radical AIDS activists working with ACT UP, and radical environmentalists with groups like Earth First!, kept these techniques alive and developed them. In the '90s, there was an effort to create a North American anarchist federation around a newspaper called Love & Rage that at its peak involved hundreds of activists in different cities. Still, it's probably accurate to see this period less as an era of grand mobilizations than as one of molecular dissemination. A typical example is the story of Food Not Bombs!, a group originally founded by a few friends from Boston who had been part of an affinity group providing food during the actions at Shoreham. In the early '80s veterans of this group set up shop in a squatted house in Boston and began dumpster-diving fresh produce cast off by supermarkets and restaurants, and preparing free vegetarian meals to distribute in public places. After a few years one of the founding members moved to San Francisco and set up a similar operation there; word spread (in part because of some dramatic, televised arrests); and by the mid-'90s autonomous chapters of Food Not Bombs were appearing all over America, and Canada as well. By

¹² Many of the standard complaints about the impracticality of consensus go back to this very early period.

As Francesca Polletta has pointed out,² SDS was on paper a quite formal, top-down organization, with a central steering committee and meetings run according to Roberts Rules of Order. In practice, it was made up of largely autonomous cells that operated by a kind of crude, de facto consensus process. The emphasis on consensus, in turn, appears to have been inspired by the example of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the student wing of the civil rights movement. SNCC had originally been created on the initiative of Anita Baker and a number of other activists who had previously been involved in the South Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and were hoping to create an alternative to SCLC's top-down structure and charismatic leadership (embodied, of course, in the figure of Dr. Martin Luther King.) Famous for organizing lunch table sit-ins, freedom rides, and other direct actions, SNCC was organized on a thoroughly decentralized basis. Ideas for new projects were expected to emerge from individual chapters, all of which operated by a kind of rough-and-ready consensus process.

This emphasis on consensus is a bit surprising, since at the time there was very little model for it. In both SNCC and SDS, it appears to have emerged from a feeling that, since no one should be expected to do anything against their will, decisions really had to be unanimous. However, there doesn't seem to have been anything like what's now called "consensus process" in the formal sense of the term. The problem was there was no obvious model for one. The only communities in North America with a living tradition of consensus decisionmaking (the Quakers, and various Native American groups) were either unknown, unavailable, or uninterested in proselytizing. Quakers at the time tended to see consensus as essentially a religious practice; they were, according to Polletta,³ actually fairly resistant to the idea of teaching it to anyone else.

² Polletta, Francesca, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

³ Polletta op cit, p. 195.

The New Left was as we all know essentially based on campuses. Paul Mattick Jr.⁴ has argued that the wave of '60s activism seems to have emerged from a kind of social bottleneck. The Welfare State ideal of the time had been to defuse class tensions by offering a specter of perpetual social mobility (in much the same way the frontier had once done); after the war, there was a very conscious effort on the part of the government to pump resources into the higher education system, which began to expand exponentially, along with the number of working class children attending university.

The problem of course is that such growth curves invariably hit their limits, and as any Third World government that has attempted this strategy has learned, when they do, the results are typically explosive. By the '60s this was starting to happen. Millions of students were left facing without any realistic prospect of finding jobs that bore any relation to their real expectations or capacities—a normal prospect in industrial societies, actually, but suddenly hugely exacerbated. At first, of course, the crunch came largely in the form of type of employment (in the '60s, the sky still seemed the limit in terms of economic prosperity): people were being trained as creative thinkers, and left with the prospect of becoming soulless functionaries. Matters were further complicated by the fact that the students who first became involved in SDS did, as Mattick emphasizes, like their equivalents in the Global South, ultimately see themselves as a kind of breakaway fragment of the administrative elite. This was, he suggests, crucial to understanding the limits of the New Left. Activists invariably saw themselves as “organizers”, social workers⁵: What united all factions of the left was the

⁴ Mattick, Paul, Jr. “Old Left, New Left, What’s Left?” *Root & Branch* No. 1 (1970): 15–24.

⁵ Demographic studies (e.g. Flacks, Richard, *Youth and Social Change*. Chicago, Rand MacNally, 1971) tended to show that in the early years of SDS, the movement was largely composed of liberal arts students in elite universities, from affluent, left or left-leaning professional families: i.e., children of doctors,

New Society (MNS), based in Philadelphia. MNS was spearheaded by a gay rights activist named George Lakey, who—like several other members of the group—was both an anarchist, and a Quaker. Lakey and his friends proposed a vision of nonviolent revolution. Rather than a cataclysmic seizure of power, they proposed the continual creation and elaboration of new institutions, based on new, non-alienating modes of interaction— institutions that could be considered “prefigurative” as they provided a foretaste of what a truly democratic society might be like. Such prefigurative institutions could, gradually replace the existing social order.¹¹ The vision in itself was hardly new. It was a non-violent version of the standard anarchist idea of building a new society within the shell of the old. What was new was that men like Lakey, having been brought up Quakers, and acquired a great deal of experience with Quaker decision making processes, had a practical vision of how some of these alternatives might actually work. Many of what have now become standard features of formal consensus process—the principle that the facilitator should never act as an interested party in the debate, for example, or the idea of the “block”—were first disseminated by MNS trainings in Philadelphia and Boston.

The anti-nuclear movement was also the first to make its basic organizational unit the affinity group—a kind of minimal unit of organization first developed by anarchists in early twentieth century Spain—and to hold action spokescouncils. As those involved frequently pointed out to me, all this was at first very much a learning process, a kind of blind experiment, and things often seemed to go very wrong. At first, organizers were such consensus purists that they insisted that any one individual had the right to block proposals even on a nationwide level. Needless to say, this proved

¹¹ Lakey, George, *Strategy for a Living Revolution*. Philadelphia, Grossman Publishers, 1973. ¹² Many of the standard complaints about the “impracticality” of consensus go back to this very early period.

like. Egalitarians object that even to the extent this is true, it is far worse to have a leadership that feels fully entitled to its power than one that has to take accusations of hypocrisy seriously. Anarchists, therefore, have usually read Freeman's argument as a call to formalize group process to ensure greater equality, and in fact, most of her concrete suggestions—clarifying what tasks are assigned to what individuals; finding a way for the group to review those individuals' performances; distributing responsibilities as widely as possible (for instance, by rotation); ensuring all have equal access to information and resources—were clearly meant to precisely that end.

Within the feminist movement itself, most of these arguments eventually became moot, because within mainstream feminism at least, the anarchist moment was relatively brief. Especially after *Roe v. Wade* made it seem strategically wise to rely on government power, mainstream feminism was to take off in a liberal direction and rely increasingly on organizational forms that were anything but egalitarian. But for those still working in egalitarian collectives, or trying to create them, feminism had effectively framed the terms of debate. If you want to keep decision-making to the smallest groups possible, how do those groups coordinate? Within those groups, how to prevent a clique of friends from taking over? How to prevent certain categories of participants (straight women, gay women, older women, students... in mixed groups it soon became, simply, women) from being marginalized?

The origins of the current direct action movement go back precisely to attempts to resolve those dilemmas. The pieces really started coming together in the anti-nuclear movement in the late '70s, kicked off by the founding of the Clamshell Alliance and the occupation of the Shoreham nuclear power plant in Massachusetts in 1977, then followed by the Abalone Alliance and struggles over the Diablo Canyon plant in California a few years later. The main inspiration for anti-nuclear activists—at least the main organizational inspiration—came from a group called the Movement for a

conception of their relationship to actual or fantasized communities as organizers—after the example of trade unionists and social workers—rather than as “fellow students” or workers with a particular understanding of a situation shared with others, and ideas of what to do about it. Despite the disagreement over the primary target for organizing—unemployed, blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, dropout youth—in each case the “community” was seen as a potential “constituency” (or, in PL's language, “base”). The radicals saw themselves as professional revolutionaries, a force so to speak outside of society, organising those inside on their own behalf. Thus the activist played the part reserved in liberal theory for the state, a point not to be neglected in the attempt to understand the drift of the New Left from an orientation to liberal governmental reform to leninist-stalinist concepts of socialism.⁶

The contradictions of this situation became increasingly apparent as the decade wore on. The crisis was sparked first in groups like SNCC, when demands for civil rights began to give way to calls for Black Power. The radicals in SNCC, who were eventually to inspire the Black Panthers, called on white activists to stop trying to organize black communities but to return to their own: specifically, to organize white communities against racism. SDS activists always greeted such calls with profound ambivalence.⁷ The main reason, I think, was because most of them were never quite

lawyers, teachers rather than businessmen; children of successful immigrant families rather than members of the old-money elite. However after SDS expanded in the late '60s the social base became much broader, and began to include many students of working class backgrounds as well. As we'll see this latter pattern is basically the one that always recurs in revolutionary movements: a convergence of alienated and rebellious children of the professional classes with frustrated but upwardly mobile children of the working class with some experience of higher education.

⁶ Mattick op cit, p. 22.

⁷ Barber, David “A Fucking White Revolutionary Mass Movement’ and Other Fables of Whiteness, with Afterward by Noel Ignatiev.” *Race Traitor*, no 12 spring 2001, pp. 4–93.

clear on what ‘their own communities’ were supposed to be. One could say something along these lines had been attempted in the early ‘60s with ERAP (the Economic Research Areas Project), intended as the white equivalent to grass roots civil rights organizing, that brought SDS activists into poor white communities and tried to mobilize them around matters of common concern. The problem was this most activists had found this project rather uninspiring. Some ERAP projects scored victories in gaining local reforms, but organizers rarely felt a part of the communities in which they worked, soon began to feel isolated from the company of other activists, and few saw the results as worth the sacrifice. The project fell apart in 1965. The call to return to their own communities, then, could only lead to ambivalence. Many in fact saw their natal “communities”—whether alienated professional-class suburbs, or racist working class ones, as precisely what the kind of environment they were trying to flee. Instead, as Mattick so keenly observed, many began to realize that if there was a way to overcome the alienation of dead-end jobs, to find work that actually lived up to their imaginative capacities, it was in activism itself. Other activists, in effect, were their communities.

The crisis initiated by Black Power ultimately led to a kind of split. Again, at the cost of gross simplification: once their allies in the civil rights movement had abandoned them, white activists were effectively left with two options. They could either try to build countercultural institutions of their own, or they could focus on allying with communities or revolutionary groups in struggle overseas: i.e., the Viet Cong or other Third World revolutionaries, who would take pretty much whatever allies they could get. As SDS splintered into squabbling Maoist factions, groups like the Diggers and Yippies (founded in ‘68) took the first option. Many were explicitly anarchist, and certainly, the late ‘60s turn towards the creation of autonomous collectives and institutionbuilding was squarely within the anarchist tradition, while the emphasis on free love, psychedelic drugs, and the creation of alternative forms

were small consciousness-raising circles; the approach was informal, intimate, and antiideological. Most of the first groups emerged directly from New Left circles. Insofar they placed themselves in relation to a previous radical tradition, it was, generally, anarchism. While the informal organization proved extremely well suited for consciousnessraising, as groups turned to planning actions, and particularly as they grew larger, problems tended to develop. Almost invariably, such groups came to be dominated by an “inner circle” of women who were, or had become, close friends. The nature of the inner circle would vary, but somehow, one would always emerge. As a result, in some groups lesbians would end up feeling excluded, in others the same thing would happen to straight women, other groups would grow rapidly in size and then see most of the newcomers quickly drop out again as there was no way to integrate them. Endless debates ensued. One result was an essay called “The Tyranny of Structurelessness”, written by Jo Freeman in 1970 and first published in ‘72—a text still avidly read by organizers of all sorts in the present day. Freeman’s argument is fairly simple.

No matter how sincere one’s dedication to egalitarian principles, the fact is that in any activist group, different members will have different skills, abilities, experience, personal qualities, and levels of dedication. As a result, some sort of elite or leadership structure will, inevitably, develop. In a lot of ways, having an unacknowledged leadership structure, she argued, can be a lot more damaging than having a formal one: at least with a formal structure it’s possible to establish precisely what’s expected of those who are doing the most important, coordinative tasks and hold them accountable.

One reason for the essay’s ongoing popularity is that it can be used to support such a wide variety of positions. Liberals and Socialists regularly cite “The Tyranny of Structurelessness” as a justification for why any sort of anarchist organization is bound to fail, as a charter for a return to older, top-down styles of organization, replete with executive offices, steering committees, and the

and fussing about; the more militant, Black Power faction could present itself as the model an ideal of the ruthless efficiency appropriate to a truly militant organization. It's probably also significant that Stokely Carmichael, soon to become the main spokesman for the Black Power tendency, was fond of saying things like "the only position for women in SNCC is prone".

The fact that, even by the mid '60s, such things could be said in an organization that was originally founded by a woman as a revolt against charismatic male authority is itself astounding. But it might give a sense of the sexual politics always lying not far below the surface of the old New Left. Militant nationalist movements are of course notorious for providing platforms for the vigorous reassertion of certain types of masculine authority. But sentiments similar to Carmichael's can be found coming from the mouths white activists of that time as well. The feminist movement, in fact, began largely from within the New Left, as a reaction to precisely this sort of macho leadership style—or simply among those tired of discovering that, even during university occupations, they were still expected to prepare sandwiches and provide free sexual services while male activists posed for the cameras. The revival of interest in creating the practical forms of direct democracy, in turn—in fact, the real origin of the current movement—thus trace back less to these male '60s radicals than to the Women's Movement that arose largely in reaction to them.¹⁰

Contemporary American anarchist forms of organization and processes of decisionmaking, however, emerged more than anything else from a crisis in early feminism. When the feminist movement began, it was organizationally very simple. Its basic units

¹⁰ See for example Freeman, Jo, "The Women's Liberation Movement: Its Origins, Structures, and Ideas." In *Recent Sociology* No. 4: Family, Marriage, and the Struggle of the Sexes (edited by Hans Peter Dreitzel), pp. 201–216. New York: The Macmillan Co, 1971; Evans, Sara *Personal Politics: the Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. New York: Knopf, 1979.

of pleasure was squarely in the bohemian tradition with which EuroAmerican anarchism has always been at least tangentially aligned. The Yippie slogan, "revolution for the hell of it" could be seen as emerging directly from the realization that activism itself could become the prime means of overcoming alienation. The other option was to see oneself as primarily allying with revolutionary communities overseas: hence the obsession with glorifying revolutionary heroes in Cuba, Vietnam, China, and elsewhere (men who, as Situationist and Autonomist critics pointed out, were essentially icons of the sort of new radical administration elites with which the SDS had always tacitly identified), and the feeling the need to strike back against the empire from within the Belly of the Beast.

Each strategy involved a return to direct action, but, simultaneously, a jettisoning of the whole project of creating egalitarian decision-making structures. Hippies and yippies might be considered a bit ambivalent in this regard, as small communes and many alternative institutions created in the process generally did usually operate on democratic principles. Still, the Yippies, with their wild acid-inspired pranks and media stunts, tended to turn into a platform for charismatic impresarios like Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, in a style that proved notoriously alienating to many members of the white working class. The Weathermen, in turn, attempted a series of bombings directed at military and corporate targets, meant to inspire spontaneous emulation and drive society towards a revolutionary confrontation—though with the significant limitation that they did not want to kill anyone. They ended up mainly blowing up empty buildings. Interestingly, both had a profound effect on later media policy, since mainstream journalists began to feel complicit in what began to happen, eventually coming to the conclusion that revolutionaries were feeling obliged to continually ramp up the wildness or destructiveness of their acts in order to continue making headlines. I have heard persistent rumors from '60s veterans, for example, that the Weather Underground's bomb-

ing campaign was far more extensive and devastating than has ever been recorded, but that there was a conscious decision by the national media to stop reporting on it. I have no idea if this is true. Still, one thing that is clear is that since this period, the American mainstream media has become—more than that of any other industrial democracy I’m aware of—extraordinarily reluctant to report on activist stunts of any sort, or even, for that matter, demonstrations.

This point will become important later on. For now, though, the key point is that none of these groups combined their interest in direct action with an emphasis on decentralized decisionmaking; to the contrary, whether because the focus turned on the one hand to charismatic figures who were at least potential media stars, or to the kind of cell-like, military structure able to carry out guerilla-style attacks—the impulse was in the other direction. Moreover, both strategies flared up for a few years and very rapidly faded away (though the alternative institutions created around this time often lasted considerably longer).

It has become conventional habit in liberal scholarship to contrast the serious activism of the early ‘60s New Left with the supposed childish extremism of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. I don’t want to leave the reader with the impression I agree with this. The standard liberal complaint is that the ‘60s counterculture—in effect, the first mass-based, industrial bohemianism—destroyed itself in ultra-radicalism, and in doing so, provided an opening for right-wing activists to adopt many of the same grass-roots organizing techniques developed by SDS to reach out to the very white working-class constituencies SDS had such a difficult time reaching, to mobilize them against that very counterculture. There is certainly an irony here. But it seems to me it is better to see both periods as working through fundamental dilemmas that are still with us today. I myself suspect the real culprit in the rise and eventual hegemony of the New Right is not the excesses of Maoists and Yuppies but, rather, the fact that the governing elites in the

US stopped seeing the higher education as a means of creating the image of endless class mobility. As most of Mattick’s frustrated administrative classes were reabsorbed into a new, more flexible capitalism, the white working class was increasingly locked out of any access to the means of cultural production at all. The result was a perhaps predictable resentment against the supposed countercultural excesses of the “liberal elite”.⁸

Be this as it may, the second period was far more complex and creative than critics are usually willing to let on. Many of the ideas that came out of it were really quite prescient. Consider, for example, Huey Newton’s notion of “intercommunitality”, that became the official Black Panther position in 1971, and held that the nation-state was in the process of breaking down as the main stage of political struggle and that any effective revolutionary politics would have to begin by an alliance between local self-organized communities irrespective of national boundaries. The real problem was how they were to be self-organized. The Black Panthers, as typified by figures like Newton himself, eventually came to embody an era in which macho, chauvinist leadership styles themselves came to seem synonymous with militancy.

It’s probably significant that in SNCC, the first move towards rejecting decentralized decision making was initiated by the emerging Black Power faction. Polletta’s careful analysis of the organizational history of the movement⁹ shows quite clearly that consensus and decentralization were not challenged because they were actually inefficient. Rather, they were used as a wedge issue. By challenging the supposed obsession with democratic process, White activists in SNCC and their allies could be identified with endless talk

⁸ In fact, those constituencies that most reliably continue to vote democratic are precisely those who have some hope of mobility through education: immigrants, African-Americans, even women, who are at this point attending university at far higher rates than men. There is certainly no parallel in communities of color to the explicit antiintellectualism of so much of the radical right.

⁹ Polletta *op cit*.