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Direct Action: Radicalism in Our Time

L.A. Kauffman

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There's something ultimately unknowable about why protest movements arise: why one injustice inspires outrage, while another goes unanswered; why one campaign captures the public imagination, and another languishes. Certainly no one expected a major upsurge of radical activism in the United States at the dawn of the 21st century, least of all the anti-capitalist radicalism we have seen since the late 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization protests.

The question of *how* protest movements arise – what form they take, how they define themselves, what political vision they express – is a different story. The Seattle protests owed their success to a singular mix of opportunity, skill, and serendipity. But they owed their character to a thirty-year process of political reinvention: the creation, in the decades after the Sixties, of an effective, decentralized, multi-issue radicalism.

Radicalism in the United States was supposed to have disappeared, at least according to the conventional wisdom of the last thirty years. It died when the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, or when Ronald Reagan was elected, or when the Berlin Wall

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fell. It fractured into the aggrieved grouplets of identity politics or, under the sway of political correctness, degenerated into the marginalized refuge of scolds.

Or, if radicalism was neither dead nor derailed, conventional wisdom held that it was anachronistic, a throwback to the glory days of the Sixties. From the Seventies onward, movement after movement was labeled "reminiscent of the Sixties" by the media, irrespective of the constituencies it mobilized, the goals it expressed, or the manner of its organization.

The cumulative effect of these prejudices has been to treat the radicalism after the Sixties as if it had no history of its own. One can find histories, many quite excellent, of individual movements – environmentalism, say, or feminism – but they have generally been viewed in isolation from their contemporaries. There have been virtually no attempts to survey the radical landscape as a whole, to tease out broad historical patterns from the tangle of organizations and events.

The task is made all the more difficult because of the sheer number and variety of recent radical movements, which have often seemed like disconnected fragments. Until very recently, when disparate movements (like the fabled "turtles and Teamsters") have begun to converge in surprising and explosive ways, the basic trend in radical activism has been dispersion: a proliferation of causes, identities, and approaches. It's been impossible for some time now to speak of "the left" as some unitary entity, or to select out some single organization or struggle as representative of the whole – a condition reinforced by activists' frequent preference for small groups and local battles.

The most successful radical movements of the last three decades, however, have shared two traits: a rejection of New Left organizing as undemocratic and poorly structured, and an embrace of direct action. Far from replaying the radicalism of the Sixties, the movements of recent decades have renounced many of its hallmarks: the centralized character of national organizations like Students

allel, but more tentative, embrace of direct action by the more boisterous segments of organized labor – is one of the most promising features of present-day radicalism.

My own experiences as an activist and journalist have unquestionably shaped this narrative. I've been involved in radical projects of one kind or another since 1980, when at the age of 16 I became politicized by a right-wing effort to restrict minors' access to abortion in my home state of Wisconsin. I have marched, rallied, protested, blockaded, chained myself to things, been in and out of jail numerous times. I've also interviewed hundreds of activists over the years, from a wide array of movements.

Since thousands of activists braved pepper spray and tear gas to shut down the WTO meetings in Seattle, there's been a sense of hope and momentum in radical circles unlike anything else in my lifetime. This book is a story of how we got there, across decades of what sometimes felt like pointless wandering in a political desert. The Wobblies would have had a simpler and shorter explanation for today's radical renaissance: In the words of their most famous slogan, "Direct action gets the goods."

The question of African-American, Latino, Native American, and Asian-American activism in recent decades – and their place in this book – is more complex. The black freedom struggle of the Fifties and Sixties has been the single most important inspiration for subsequent social movements. Yet, with a few key exceptions, including the anti-apartheid and environmental justice movements and the ongoing fights over ethnic studies, the direct action struggles of the mid-Seventies through the Nineties were overwhelmingly white affairs.

Much of the responsibility for this racially lopsided condition lies with white activists, who for reasons of obliviousness or active bias have excluded perspectives and agendas other than theirs (and belatedly – after the movement’s basic priorities and strategy were already set – tried to compensate with missionary “outreach” to communities of color).

At the same time, until quite recently, many activists of color have chosen against a direct action approach, for reasons of their own. Especially in the Seventies, but in more recent times as well, a large number of black and Latino grassroots activists opted to build on their hard-won new access to political and economic institutions and create change from within. More radical activists who spurned that approach often devoted their energies instead to community empowerment campaigns, many of which were nationalist in character. Meanwhile, as the incarceration rates for people of color skyrocketed in recent decades and the police became an increasingly intrusive presence in people’s lives, the notion of deliberately subjecting oneself to arrest came to seem both personally and strategically unwise.

Just in the last few years, however, there’s been a resurgence of direct action within activist communities of color. The change has been the most pronounced within the overlapping movements concerned with police and prison issues, from the New York City campaign against police brutality to the California-based movement against the criminalization of youth. This shift – along with a par-

for a Democratic Society or the large anti-Vietnam War coalitions; the reliance upon charismatic leaders and prominent spokesmen to represent the movement; the lack of grassroots participation in strategic and tactical decision-making (despite lip service paid to “participatory democracy”); the movement’s domination by men and blindness to issues of gender and sexuality.

The most fertile terrain for radical innovation and transformation has been direct action. From the anti-nuclear and anti-intervention movements of the Seventies and Eighties to Earth First! and ACT UP in the Eighties and Nineties, direct action has functioned as the basic toolbox for building radical campaigns. It has generally gone hand in hand with a decentralized movement structure built upon affinity groups, or small collectives, and a commitment to radically democratic decision-making.

The notion of direct action has been a part of American radicalism for a century. The term was first used by the early 20th century Industrial Workers of the World, the liveliest labor movement in U.S. history. The Wobblies, as they are familiarly known, called for “industrial action directly by, for, and of the workers themselves, without the treacherous aid of labor misleaders or scheming politicians.” Direct action, in Wobbly parlance, could take the form of anything from strikes to slowdowns to sabotage; the key was that it take place “at the point of production,” the workplace, and be collectively organized by the affected workers.

By mid-century, the term was taken up by both the radical pacifist and civil rights movements, each employing it in a different way. In the fight against Southern segregation and racial injustice, “nonviolent direct action” and “civil disobedience” were used more or less interchangeably to signify deliberately disobeying an unjust law, in the defiant spirit of Henry David Thoreau. By the early Sixties, radical pacifists broadened its meaning in both spirit and action, to include what one activist termed “nonviolent obstruction”: breaking some intrinsically innocuous law to prevent a greater evil,

such as trespassing on a missile base in hopes of blocking the deployment of nuclear weapons.

The direct actionists of our time have combined elements of all three usages. The basic strategy of direct action movements remains that outlined by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that . . . [an issue] can no longer be ignored." Direct action shines a spotlight on abuses, brings conflict out into the public eye, leverages the power of ordinary people. It's a frankly confrontational approach, whose intention is to catalyze change, not to negotiate the inevitable compromise.

The setting for most recent direct action, meanwhile, is that advocated by the Wobblies: "the point of production," that is to say, the frontlines of the fight at hand. Opponents of nuclear energy, for instance, took direct action by blockading the entrances of nuclear plants; AIDS activists occupied the offices of pharmaceutical companies; ancient forest defenders climbed up into the trees they were trying to save. Direct actionists devote little if any energy to lobbying or passing legislation; if they interact with the government, it's almost always by raising a ruckus.

Finally, the direct action movements of the past few decades have followed the lead of radical pacifists in broadening their tactics well beyond classic civil disobedience into an array of obstructionist and rabble-rousing techniques. Their emphasis is not on rallies, or any sort of event where speeches take center stage. Instead, their protests are designed to be disruptive: blocking roads, shutting down bridges, lying down in front of bulldozers, and things of that sort.

But direct action has also come to mean something else as well, a do-it-yourself approach to social and cultural change, in which laws are broken simply because they get in the way. Taking over an abandoned building to house the homeless, creating a community garden on a blighted vacant lot, setting up a pirate radio station: These types of activist projects have flourished in recent decades,

combining a desire to get things done with a longing for communities.

The road from the Sixties to Seattle and beyond has been a bumpy one. Most of the efforts to transform American radicalism during those years took place in a difficult and hostile climate, in which conservatism was ascendant and radicalism often invisible or impotent or both. Throughout the Seventies, Eighties, and Nineties, a sense of retrenchment and defeat tinged most radical efforts, even those that could boast measurable gains. In part because of this embattled position, but also through a certain vapidity and inaction, many radicals retreated into either lifestyle politics or interminable debates about "the future of the left." No history of radicalism in our time can be complete without discussing the failures and follies of recent decades.

This book does not pretend to be a definitive history, if such a thing were even possible. While the story I tell meanders throughout the sprawling radical landscape, it lingers in some places far longer than others. Gay and lesbian movements, for instance, receive extensive treatment, having played the same pioneering role vis-à-vis the direct action radicalism of the last three decades that the black civil rights movement did vis-à-vis the New Left. Lesbian activists, especially, are central to the direct action tradition of our time, having created continuities between movements that were otherwise largely unconnected, such as the anti-nuclear movement, the movement against U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, and the AIDS activist fight.

However, it would be impossible to follow every thread in recent radical history, and there are a number of important efforts that I scarcely address: progressive electoral politics (Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, the Greens, the New Party, the Labor Party); the reinvention of grassroots labor activism in recent years; the "civil society" activism of citizen watchdog organizations and other nonprofit groups. I hope that readers who keenly feel these absences will be inspired to write histories of their own.