

Bashing the Black Bloc?

Ray Cunningham

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We believe that part of the purpose of this magazine is to address issues that anarchists may find controversial. This essay represents the opinion of one member of the WSM — we hope this will add to the debate, and would like to receive responses from other anarchists.

Although the basic idea of the Black bloc has been around for years, it only really entered the public consciousness after the Seattle demonstrations. But after two years of Black Blocs at all the major summit protests, has the Black Bloc tactic reached the end of its usefulness? What role should anarchists play in the anti-globalisation protests? Are they still relevant at all?

The four main summits of the last four years — Seattle, Prague, Quebec, and Genoa — have all been different, and the Black Bloc has been different at each one. The Seattle protest, though it involved far fewer people than some of the later protests, was probably the most effective. Because it was the first protest of its kind the police and the summit organizers weren't prepared, and protestors were able to block access to the summit for most of the day, causing major disruption. The Black Bloc played a relatively small part in the blockade, but received a major part of the news coverage. The two types of action — blockades and property destruction — pointed to a new kind of protest, protest that was visible, illegal, and more concerned with getting results than with making a symbolic point.

Since Seattle, summit organizers have been more prepared, and they know that they'll have to deal with protests, so each summit has seen an increased level of security. In Prague, all entrances to the summit were guarded by the police, making it impossible for the protestors to mount an effective blockade. Different sections of the protest had different reactions. One group, the Pinks, marched around the conference center, and didn't try to breach the perimeter (though they did enter the summit area when they found an unguarded section). Another, the Yellows, were led by Ya Basta, and chose to take symbolic action. Their attempt to simply push their way through the police lines could never succeed, but was intended to show that they were going beyond simply passive demonstrations. The third block, the Blue block, wanted to take more direct action, and tried to punch through the police lines to get to the summit, or at least the subway station that would be transporting the delegates, blockading them inside the conference center. In their willingness to destroy property, and actually fight the police, this group consciously thought of themselves as an anarchist Black Bloc.

In Quebec, the level of security increased again, and again the situation changed. The erection of the perimeter fence, and the raids on squats in the days before the summit, raised the stakes even higher. Like in Prague, the protestors responded by dividing the protest area into zones, so people could choose the level of illegality and confrontation with which they were comfortable. Here, as in Seattle, there was a separate Black Bloc, though unlike in Seattle this Black Bloc concentrated on attacking the summit, confronting police and trying to get through the perimeter fence.

Most recently, the Genovese protests, on the day of direct action at least, operated on the understanding that different tactics would be used by different groups of protestors, each in different areas. Although poor advance co-ordination was a factor, the major problem protestors faced in Genoa was the large, and very active, police presence. As well as having formidable perimeter fencing, the police attacked the protestors on their way to the perimeter, stopping some groups from getting near the fence and forcing other elements of the protest together. The Black Bloc, which intended to try to break into the summit, ended up destroying banks and shops in the streets of Genoa.

With every summit, with every escalation of security, the conditions that made Seattle possible are getting further away. In Seattle it was possible to have large numbers of people taking part in an action that wasn't especially illegal or confrontational (any more than a Reclaim the Streets or Critical Mass) and yet directly achieved its aims of closing the summit. But now that the barricades have gone up, protestors seem to be left with two alternatives – return to symbolic, peaceful protests, that have no (direct) effect, or move on to very illegal and highly-planned protests that might be directly effective. (And every time summit security is increased, the level of illegality and planning required to breach that security is also increased.)

Alongside this growing problem there is the constant question of the Black Bloc. Its difficult to even define what the Black Bloc is, let alone to decide what part it could play in the summit protests. It may have started out as a purely anarchist grouping (though one which many anarchists avoid) but it's not a permanent grouping, it's just something that comes together at protests. Being in the Black Bloc just means being willing to break the law, destroy property, or fight with the police to achieve the aims of the protest. As such, many non-anarchists will happily join the block, to the extent that one of the Black Blocs in Genoa contained a group of Maoists.

The Black Bloc's willingness to destroy property may be what sets them apart from other protestors, but there is also some division within the block about what this should mean. On the one hand, there are those willing to use 'violence' for a particular purpose, to take down a fence or barricade, or get past police lines, as part of disrupting a summit. At the other extreme are those who think that opposing global capitalism means opposing all of its manifestations, and attacking shops, cars, and the police whenever possible. Most people seem to be somewhere in the middle, not having a problem with people attacking banks or chain stores, but sometimes questioning whether it's being done at the expense of more important things, or thinking that people should take more care in their choice of targets.

The continuing increase in the level of summit security is going to particularly affect the Black Bloc. We saw in Genoa that the police are ready to stop large, amorphous groups like the Black Bloc from getting close to a summit. So, added to the choices of symbolic, peaceful protests, or highly planned, very illegal protests, anarchists can also join a Black Bloc which, from the outset, won't be able to do any more than attack shops and banks.

There is already an activist tradition of going underground to carry out actions. Arson attacks on corporate property generally aren't advertised in advance, any more than Animal Liberation Front raids. If secrecy is the price of effective action, then plenty of people are willing to pay it. But is it worth it?

What made the Seattle blockade effective? At first glance, Seattle — and all of the summit protests — have been important because they used direct action. Protestors didn't restrict themselves to polite lobbying of politicians, or to polite demonstrations that stayed within the approved routes — they set out to stop the summits themselves. But stopping the summits isn't much of a goal in itself. No-one believes that stopping the WTO or G8 from having these large meetings will actually stop them from operating. Nothing happens at these meetings that couldn't be organized some other way.

The summits are themselves symbolic acts — opportunities for the powerful to assert their authority, publicise and legitimize their institutions, and reinforce the belief that their way is the only way for the world to run. This means that the protests against the summits are also symbolic actions, no matter how effective they are. In themselves, they don't change the world, any more than the summits do. But they demonstrate an alternative — they show that you don't have to leave decisions up to others, that it's possible for large numbers of people to come together and organize themselves, that direct action and direct democracy are possible.

That is the real point of the summit protests, and that's what we must remember when we work out how to deal with future summits. Mass democratic participation is not just a tactic to be adopted or discarded — it's the most important thing about these protests. That's what's wrong with, to take one example, some of the plans being circulated for stopping the G8 summit in Alberta. It's all very well to suggest that groups of anarchists should live in the woods for the month before the summit, planning various acts of sabotage — some of the plans may even be workable. But why bother? What is the possible gain from a tiny group of people adopting tactics that, by their nature, exclude the vast majority of people? It's not going to stop any decisions being made by the G8, because those decisions will be made anyway, somewhere else if not there. And there is no 'public relations' victory to be won — that was won the day the G8 admitted that they had to meet in such an isolated location.

The same arguments can be made when the summits are in more accessible locations, protected by lines of fences, armoured cars and riot police, rather than miles of wilderness. By their adoption of such extreme security measures, the G8/WTO/World Bank admit that they have lost a lot of public support. The summits no longer function as self-congratulatory press conferences when they are held in a militarized zone, to the extent that even people who support the World Bank or the G8 wonder what purpose the summits serve. So we have to ask what we would be gaining by disrupting them, especially given the tactics that would be required.

For all that activist cells and secret societies have long been part of the revolutionary tradition, they are deeply problematic for anarchism. While Leninists and authoritarians of all descriptions have no problems with decisions being made by an elite minority, a central tenet of anarchism is that decisions should be made by the people affected by them. That kind of democratic control is ruled out if the movement, or the anarchist part of it, goes underground — we'll be left with small groups doing what they think is in everyone's interests, instead of everyone getting a chance to make their own decisions.

It would be disastrous for anarchism in the long term too. Again, the Leninists think it's possible for a small group of people to take control, and usher in a better society, but it's not

that simple for us. Anarchism has to be the free and conscious creation of the majority of people in society, which means that a lot of people are going to have to be convinced that it's a good, workable idea. That work is almost impossible if we can't show our faces in public, if at every demonstration the anarchists are hidden in the crowd. The bourgeois media will always be happy to portray anarchism as mindless violence — if we don't show that there's also a positive side to anarchism, no-one else will.

That doesn't mean that we have to become absolute pacifists, or that we have to rule out all violence/property destruction, before or during the revolution. There may still be cases when 'violence' is the best solution to the problem — fighting fascism for example. But there are costs to this course of action, and all too often they seem to be ignored. The decisions about which tactic to use isn't based on what's best for advancing anarchism, its about how exciting it is to mask up and break things, against how boring it is to try to persuade people. If the Black Blocs continue at summit protests, will it be because people have weighed up their pros and cons and decided they are the most effective tactic, or because people like to dress up in gas masks and bandanas?

Of course there's another reason for the Black Block. As well as using violence/property destruction as a means to an end, to try to break police lines and close down a summit, there's an argument that destroying corporate property (or just private property) is a useful goal in itself. (Though it can also end up advancing other goals — I'm sure one reason so few cities are keen to host summits these days is because of the level of small-scale destruction they can expect to endure. They can seal off the conference centers, but they can't barricade every business in the city). How could it be alright to attack a World Bank meeting, but wrong to attack a high street bank? They are both elements of the same system, just operating on a different scale. How can it be wrong to attack a summit that paves the way for sweatshops, but wrong to attack a company that is directly involved in those same sweatshops? Or to attack a shop that sells sweatshop-made goods? Or sells food produced in equally horrendous conditions?

There is some legitimacy to these arguments. Sure, breaking up a McDonalds isn't going to stop global capitalism, but neither is breaking up a summit meeting. We don't accept that damaging property is the same as injuring people — in fact, it's a pretty sad reflection of our current society that the two are equated — so why is this even being argued about? If a company participates in, or just supports, the oppression of actual, existing people, what's wrong with breaking their windows? Why should we shed tears for Nike?

On the other hand, what does it actually accomplish? Smashed windows won't even dent the profits of a multinational, especially not if they can pass the cost on to someone else. Broken windows don't convince anyone either. If they come at the end of a long campaign, people may understand why a particular shop was attacked, but otherwise it's just seen as random. (And, in Genoa at least, some of it was completely random) So it comes back to the same question again — are we choosing based on our wish to see an anarchist society? Or are we just blowing off steam?

It's not quite that simple, because there's something to be said for blowing off steam. There are so many restrictions on life in capitalist society that it's worth taking the chances you get to throw off those restrictions. Being an anarchist activist shouldn't mean sitting through endless meetings and paper sales, we also have to seize our freedoms when we can, and if a demonstration can be turned into a party, that's great. But one demonstration isn't going to change society, and no matter how good the party is — or how destructive the riot is — as long as capitalism continues

all our victories can only be temporary. So we've got to keep a balance, making sure our short-term gratification isn't making our long term goals harder to reach. We're fighting for the whole world, and not just for a week.

Perhaps the biggest challenge the anti-globalisation movement faces at the moment is to realize that this first round is over, and we've won. Summits will never be the same again — instead of open displays of power and confidence, staged in the major cities of the west, the World Bank, WTO, IMF, and G8 have to meet in the Canadian wilderness, or in a repressive state like Qatar. They've been forced onto the defensive — they're the ones that have to justify their existences, and they have to do so from behind lines of barricades and riot cops.

As they've withdrawn, we've gained in confidence. The world is full of networks of activists, sharing information and working together on a scale few would have dreamed of a few years ago. And these networks have been built democratically, from the ground up. Delegates and spokescouncils, ideas that few had heard of a couple of years ago, are now common currency. Many new groups organize without leaders as a matter of course, and more and more people are questioning the idea that people need rulers at all, whether they call themselves capitalist, socialist, or communist.

But things can't continue as they are for much longer. We can't continue to use the same tactics against the same targets and expect to keep being successful. So what's going to change? So far the movement has been open, democratic, and has mostly used fairly peaceful direct action. As these tactics prove less successful there will be calls to change. To prevent police infiltration, some will cry for appointing small groups of leaders who will decide how demonstrations will be run, rather than having open discussions. Others are withdrawing from discussions altogether, preferring to stage their own actions. And if these trends catch on the result will be that most demonstrators will be reduced to passive participants, cut out of the important decisions, reduced to spear-carriers in someone else's army.

The alternative is to change targets. Instead of focusing on the major summits, take smaller actions against a broader range of targets. Military installations, corporate AGMs, refugee detention centers the list goes on. All of these things are important to oppose, and they can't all have as high a level of security as the summits, which means we don't have to resort to undemocratic tactics to take them down. And for the big, spectacular actions? Cities themselves. J18 or Seattle style tactics still work fine if you don't have to get past serious barricades, which means that people can get involved — and involved in making decisions, not just following orders — with a minimum of training and experience.

As anarchists, we have to remember why we're involved in the first place. We need to improve the situation immediately, taking what victories we can whenever we can. That's part of the reason we emphasise direct action, because it should have immediate positive effects. But we're also in this for a larger goal, to create an anarchist society. That means convincing people that anarchism is possible, not just by argument, but by showing how anarchist decision-making can really work, how people can make decisions themselves without relying on experts and professionals to do their thinking for them. So we have to remember the importance of making campaigns accessible, and keeping them democratic. This is not a revolutionary situation, and most of the people protesting with us aren't about to devote their lives to living in squats or going to meetings. So we have to make sure that this doesn't stop people from having a say in our campaigns, that we're not putting up barriers that end up creating an unofficial leadership that's as bad as the Leninist 'official' one. And that means fighting to continue the type of campaign,

and the sorts of organizations, that really involve people, rather than allowing ourselves to be pushed into a ghetto.

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