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Stick It To The Manarchy

The Rock Bloc Collective

March 7, 2001

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Manarchy: Aggressive, competitive behavior within the anarchist movement that is frighteningly reminiscent of historically oppressive male gender roles. Such behavior includes acting macho, holier than thou, and elitist. Manarchy often results in exclusivity.

We feel obliged to share our discomfort with manarchy as it presents itself in the anarchist movement. We are excited and inspired by the development and practice of anarchist ideals, and we must remain critical of our movement in an effort to maximize our effectiveness. Anarchism and direct action are powerful forces, yet we are still susceptible to taking on some of the oppressive cultural practices of the very system we are challenging.

We are two women and two men, all white and coming from economically privileged backgrounds. We are anarchists. We support direct action and the Black Bloc as a tactic for empowerment. In this article we focus on what has been coined “manarchy.” We intend to explain and criticize manarchist behavior by running through a series of experiences that we have had at mass actions, conferences, and in our day-to-day organizing.

Most insidious is the dogmatism of “no compromise” that is often accompanied with a macho spirit that assumes a “tougher

than thou” attitude toward dominant culture as well as allies in the movement.

At the presidential debates in Boston, one of us saw a group of people bust through a police barricade of an already blocked off street. The move was far-fetched and ill planned, and resulted in several people being pepper sprayed. This is tough, not tactical. For some of these people, being pepper sprayed became a battle wound that illustrated their no-compromise “radical” politics.

In a similar vein, two of us were at a Black Bloc meeting where one man declared: “If you’re not willing to take a hit [to the head with a baton] and you’re not willing to go to jail, don’t march with the Black Bloc.” He was frustrated with the fact that he had been marching with the Black Bloc at the Inauguration protests and upon confronting a police barricade, found that no one was backing him up. We question whether sacrificing oneself to a beating is an effective goal. We cannot overemphasize the importance of protecting each other, yet we also understand that people in different situations have different needs. In other words, not everyone can and wants to get beat up and sent to jail for an act that may or may not be perceived as tactically useful.

The man’s divisive statement assumes that he is one of the more qualified Black Bloc participants in the group. He found that no one else had stuck around to take a beating with him, demonstrating that he is tougher and, therefore, a better radical than others. His superior position—his statements suggest—gives him the authority to declare who is allowed to march in the Black Bloc. Thus, he feels comfortable telling others to stay home.

The no-compromise position has been exemplified by a posting on the Independent Media Center’s website. In a critique of the Inauguration Protests in Washington, D.C., Slip writes:

“i think we really need to ask ourselves what our militancy means? is it really militant to allow to be searched to enter into the are that you were scheduled

Maggie, Rayna, Michael, and Matt
The Rock Bloc Collective
C/O the Student Action Collective
Bard College
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504
rm479@bard.edu

to have your first amendright right? that's not militant or defiant. is revolt if you ask for permission for the same system you are protesting? permitted protests are in no way a resistance, let alone a revolution. to me, in this revolution the ends ARE the means. we have to live our visions and take control of our own lives. this is exhibiting in not just how we live our lives, and use our lives as tools, but how we extend our dissent into literally reclaiming our spaces, when we get into the streets. we can no longer pander and go through 'the proper means' the proper means are practicing real democracy and claiming our right to free assembly. NO COMPROMISE."¹

In this critique, Slip raises an important point about the need for militancy, defiance, and fundamental subversion of the system. Yet, his analysis around "NO COMPROMISE" remains problematic. In a capitalist system, we all must compromise. No one is perfect, and we are all implicated with the oppression that this system is built on. Some are more implicated and privileged than others are. It's ironic that the more privileged are often the ones who make the call for "no compromise" at mass actions. We should question who is able to "not compromise" at large demonstrations. For example, as four white, college students, it's pretty easy for us to be militants at mass actions. In addition to easy access to lawyers, the cops and courts treat us better than classes of people who are traditionally victimized. It is much harder for people of color, the economically disadvantaged, and people who are not physically capable of intense physical confrontation to take such a position.

Ultimately, we find the "NO COMPROMISE" position compromises a significant part of our ideals. We are working to build a world where people are empowered and loving. However, manar-chist militancy tends to insult allies in the movement rather than

¹ http://indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=24345&group=webcast

act in solidarity. The narrative of non-compromised purity reminds us of the elite members of college fraternities saying, “you’re not macho enough” and the Christian Right saying, “you’re not holy enough.” It is simply a form of chauvinism that divides people.

The intersection of the militancy and no-compromise position is strikingly similar to the martyr ethic of the religious movement’s call for civil disobedience. In this tactic, people sacrifice themselves for a greater cause. In the past few years, civil disobedience has come under fire by radicals calling for tactics that are less cooperative with the system and more empowering and inclusive for the participant. Yet, anarchist reasoning has gone full circle; jail time and battle wounds have become the new self-sacrificial disobedience.

We would also like to note that religious movements calling for civil disobedience tend to emphasize love, while anarchists emphasize aggression. *Five Days That Shook the World*, a book written within the movement about “Seattle and Beyond,” celebrates direct action participants as “street warriors.” The Random House dictionary defines warrior as “1. A man engaged or experienced in warfare; soldier. 2. A person who has shown great vigor, courage, or aggressiveness, as in politics.” In the context of which we are critical, a warrior is a self-proclaimed hero, dogmatic and competitive.

We do not romanticize the image of the non-compromising militant, ready to take anything on in the name of the cause. We are not Rambo. We are not the Navy Seals. We are not heroes. We are anarchists, building a space that is empowering, accepting, inclusive, accessible, communicative, and community oriented.

To build the movement we must be more than merely relentlessly physically rugged, devoted to the cause, self-sacrificial, and militant. Those who cannot afford—monetarily, physically, or emotionally—to risk arrest, lawsuits, or physical assault are excluded from this club. This means that many women, people of color, the young and elderly, and the economically disadvantaged

do not have what it takes to participate in the anarchist revolution. Is this a revolution to benefit the participants who are mostly middle/upper class white males, or is this a revolution of young warriors sacrificing themselves for the good of the women and children they exclude? Both are unacceptable.

Mass actions are only one part of anarchist organizing. However, when they occur they should feel like gatherings where people are empowered, enjoying themselves, and in solidarity with their allies. Marching in the Black Bloc we have found many are tough enough to get hit on the head, but not open enough to say hello, let alone communicate tactical ideas, need, or feelings. This embodies the typical male gender role. If one wants to be a street warrior, we urge the warrior to direct his or her negative energies at the system and contribute positive feelings back to the movement.

Rather than the motto, “NO COMPROMISE,” we call for “whatever works.” And if that sounds too cold, we suggest, “Live the Revolution.” Quite simply, we urge our comrades to more carefully evaluate how our actions will affect our targets, capitalism, and oppression. We are not critiquing militant tactics, nor are we critiquing people who use them. We are calling for people to step outside the anarchist dogmatism and use tactics as they are useful.

We see importance and value in alliance building, discussing ideological and tactical differences, and understanding and respecting each other’s varying opinions. If a movement is uniform in all its tactics and ideologies, it is not only boring, but vulnerable to extinction. We need to work with those who have different opinions, while recognizing our common goals and organize in a way that respects and acknowledges difference through communication.

We hope this article helps to open up discussion. We encourage people to respond. Please contact us personally as well as publish your ideas.