Militancy Beyond Black Blocs: An Essay

by Teoman Gee

On Terminology: In the context of this text "pacifist" signifies an opposition to property destruction and physical attacks on law and order forces in the course of political protests. "Violent" signifies such means, and "militant" signifies a readiness to exercise them. "Black bloc" signifies militants who (mainly in small groups) join protests black- clad, masked, and sometimes armed, demonstrating such a readiness by appearance alone. I understand that there exist many other possible interpretations of these terms, but I will have to ask the readers of this text to accept the offered interpretations as the ones I have chosen to communicate what I'm trying to say in the best way possible to me.

Ever since property destruction brought so much media attention to the mass anti-WTO- protests in Seattle in 1999, there has been an ongoing debate within the anti- globalization movement about the legitimacy and usefulness of militant resistance employed in the fight against the political and corporate powers controlling our lives. Often, these debates get stuck in an ideological or pragmatic confrontation of pacifist vs. non- pacifist approaches to resistance, and usually, the infamous "black bloc" becomes the one insurgent entity representing the latter.

I see this short text as a very modest contribution to the debate on the virtues (or non- virtues) of property destruction and streetfights with law and order forces. Its main purposes are a) to defend the right to non-pacifist protesting in general, b) to criticize certain current aspects of black bloc culture, and thereby c) to go beyond an exclusive connection of militant protesting to black bloc activities. I hope that such an approach can help to analyze and discuss the issues at stake here in a possibly more complex and differentiated manner.

On property destruction and militancy against law and order forces in general:

The criticism militant activists usually have to face goes something like this: to be but a gang of racketeers, drunks, and professional troublemakers without much (or no) ideological awareness, no ability to organize, no serious political agenda, and no real political goals, leave alone any suggestions for how to effectively introduce a just society of equals. The activists are accused of not liking capitalism because they are losers, of not liking to work because they are lazy, of not liking the cops because they have authority-problems, of throwing rocks because they lack brains. In short, militant activists are like soccer hooligans disguised as anarchists or Marxists with funny outfits and hair-do's, in it for the violence and nothing but. (And, indeed, the equation of extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing street violence has become an almost unquestioned truism in the corporate media.)

That the establishment and the bourgeoisie would paint such a picture, okay. Annoying again and again, but what can one expect? More disturbing is the fact that the pictures painted by dozens of "alternative", "left-wing", "critical", even self-declared "radical" groups and individuals hardly differ. In some statements released by pacifist activists after Seattle over the internet, or in the movement's journals and magazines, as well as in comments made for the corporate media, it seemed that the masked kids in torn clothes and with slingshots in their back pockets had become their biggest enemies. Never mind the corporate bosses, or government leaders. And after almost any big anti-WTO, -G8, or –EU meeting since, we've heard the same old repetitive disassociations from the "violent" protesters, the same moralistic attempts to discipline them like they were mean, disobedient kids, the same complaining about how they've spoilt yet another otherwise great protest, and about how they would jeopardize the future of a movement that so much promises to bring about

real change. A big part of the anti-globalization movement, it seems, desperately wants to exclude the militant activists from its ranks, wants to discredit them as serious political activists, to reject them as comrades, to deny them their right to resist the way they want to resist, and to disrespect their contribution to the anti-neoliberal cause.

I am quite opposed to these sentiments. I think they combine, in varying degrees, ignorance, prejudice, and self-righteousness, and are both unfair and short-sighted.

It's not about declaring militant protesters to be the avantgarde of liberation and their methods to be the only of truly revolutionary character. I don't hold this opinion, and I don't agree with the comrades who suggest this in defensive reactions to the permanent criticism they are subjected to by pacifist activists. It's also not about self-pity, or whining about being treated and criticized unfairly, being made the victims of a witch- hunt, or being misunderstood and abandoned by one's own people. I understand and respect that people have issues with militant protesting, I know there are attitude problems, irresponsible or imprudent behavior, and certain inherent dangers in readily embracing violence as a justified political means (more about this later when talking about the black bloc).

Nonetheless, I do feel strongly about the militants being a legitimate force in radical politics, and it'd be nice to see this acknowledged and accepted by activists in favor of different means of resistance. Mainly, because I feel sympathy for a lot of individuals who are ready to engage in militant ways of protesting, and I'd find it more appropriate to respect rather than to demonize them within the wider context of the new social movements. But also, because I honestly think militant tactics can positively contribute to movements that are widespread and diverse by nature, and that they have in case of the anti-globalization campaigns.

My view of militant protesting might best be explained through a reference to my understanding of ethics.

I do not believe ethics is about finding or introducing universal and general rules of conduct. It's about reflecting upon the socio-ecological consequences of our daily actions, and making concrete moral decisions based on this. So, the question at stake here seems whether there really are any good moral reasons for someone to abstain from smashing a McDonald's window even though he or she would like to, or to refrain from fighting cops with physical means. And, honestly, I know of no such reasons. In the first case, I mean, common, it's a window, belonging to a corporation making millions of dollars a day and being insured up the ass. What can really be the problem here? And in the second, I simply understand how the often brutal and in any case uncompromising defense of a destructive global and economic system by quasi-military police units can provoke responses going beyond pacifist means alone. Maybe it's virtuous to remain non-violent when threatened with water-cannons, tear-gas, or rubber bullets, but that doesn't necessarily make militant responses less virtuous to me. (Admittedly, once again it's a case-to-case decision. I do, of course, have a problem with looting cornershops, or endangering others by uncontrolled rioting. But the fact that activists will have to draw their individual lines, doesn't make symbolic desecration of corporate property, or throwing things at semi-military police units problematic. And that's my point here.)

Obviously, though, many pacifist activists believe there are good moral reasons to abstain from such activities:

Some of them refer to a strong moral code, mostly a strict version of what they understand as

a form of uncompromising pacifism. I have no interest to get into a debate about what pacifism or violence respectively are. I don't consider such a debate of relevance for this text, because I've already objected to an understanding of ethics centered around (static, universal) moral codes, pacifist or not. I find people who claim to be in tune with the moral truth much scarier than kids hiding their faces behind bandanas to take a swoosh off a shopping mall. I do truly respect pacifist forms of political protest, but I'd equally expect the self-declared pacifists to respect forms of political protest that might fall into their definition of violence. Diversity rules okay. Also, I don't really care about whether property destruction is violent, only about whether militant activists should be allowed to exercise it within the context of a wider social movement. I think they should. And no moral universal code could convince me of the opposite, 'cause it's hard for what I consider to be illegitimate and potentially dangerous abstract constructions to convince me of anything.

Probably more frequently, though, the militants are not so much criticized for their lack of moral righteousness, as for their political counter-productivity in the context of current global politics mainly in respect to the anti-globalization movement's cause. Personally, I take this tactical criticism more seriously. Its main arguments seem to be: The militants are only a tiny minority in the movement, but get most of the media attention due to their ability to provide sensationalist protest-coverage, thereby distorting the public's view of who the protesters really are and what they really want. Instead of seeing concerned yet decent citizens standing up for social justice, civil liberties, environmental protection, and the world leaders' accountability, the public pictures a mob of loonies getting a kick out of smashing and burning shit. So, what the militants do is shroud issues with violence. Instead of debating the protesters' reason to protest, the media and the public dwell on images of street battles. In the end, the militants discredit the whole movement. This has several consequences: The militants give the enemy an excuse not to discuss the issues put forward by the protesters - „We don't give in to terrorism." The militants alienate the public from the movement - what would grow otherwise might fall apart, only due to the recklessness of a few irresponsible cobblestone-fetishists. The militants provide the excuse for Babylon's security forces to crack down hard on the movement as a whole - police violence at rallies, everyday surveillance of everyone with a critical mind, possibly neo-McCarthyianism.

Drawing a line between reformist and revolutionary political agendas probably lies at the heart of the way I feel about this line of thought.

In a reformist context I'm all for considering (at least some of) the arguments above. If your goals are social security for workers, protected forest areas, public control of multinational corporations, transparency of governmental decision-making processes, legal status for so-called illegal immigrants, a halt to the permanent extension of the military complex, increased funds for education and arts, and so on, you might very well want to think tactics. You want changes within the system, you play by its rules. Fair enough. And I honestly think tactical considerations are important at times, as campaigns within the system are important at times, since achieving any of the goals mentioned above is very honorable and makes the system potentially more endurable for certain individuals and/or communities over a certain amount of time. (I don't believe in the hardcore revolutionary credo that all reforms are necessarily bad, because they keep people oppressed and content, instead of terrorized and rebellious. I think it's cynical.) And, just as I see militant activists having a responsibility to set their own moral limits to their tactics (see above), I see them having a responsibility not to jeopardize a possible success in reformist campaigns by possibly inappropriate militant action (if, for example, a corporate boss already has his back against the wall because of widespread public support for his workers demanding fairer wages, looting his home would probably be a silly thing to do). But again, these have to be case-to-case decisions and the responsibility

lies with the activists alone. It does in no way compromise the general revolutionary right to militant action I concede to them, or allow others to become their potential advisers.

And from a revolutionary perspective the arguments above all seem very weak.

Reputation and media-image? Fuck that, I thought we weren't Calvin Klein trying to sell as much underwear as possible through professional manipulative advertising and public relations campaigns. And whose definitions for „reputable" activists would we wanna follow anyway? The New York Times'? Oprah Winfrey's? Tipper Gore's?

A sympathetic content-based media coverage? Yeah, right. Either it's a simply ridiculous idea, or, if a real possibility, an indication that we'd better start looking for the revolution some place else.

Alienating the public? First of all, revolutionary souls won't be alienated by some rock- throwing kid. Secondly, what does this notion really mean? Doesn't it imply an activists' avantgarde with superior social consciousness whose historic duty it is to educate the masses, instead of „alienating" them? Don't the masses have brains and wills of their own? If you see people on TV turning cop cars upside down and setting them on fire, wouldn't you ask why they did that? And if that action was part of a big demonstration including thousands of peaceful protesters, wouldn't you ask yourself what the differences between them were? And what the demonstration was all about? And what the various groups had to say about their motivations and actions? Yes, probably you would ask these questions. So, why wouldn't the masses? They don't have proper opinion forming skills? Who's the elitist here?

Making a dialogue with the enemy impossible? I don't wanna talk to Bill Gates or George W. Bush. I want them to pack their bags and take a hike. ("It must all come down!")

Provoking a crackdown on everyone involved in the movement, regardless of how peaceful and reformist? Admittedly, that's a possibility, and not to be taken lightly. But if you pursue the revolution, what do you wanna do? By backing down whenever the State threatens to show its ugliest fascist face, we'll never get anywhere. Besides, if a cop whacks the shit out of a peaceful protester 'cause someone threw a rock, it's still the cop who swings the club, not the comrade who threw the rock.

Concerning the role the militants have played in the anti-globalization movement, I think there are a few things to consider for the ones constantly criticizing the militants and their actions:

1. I don't believe the movement would be such a present force in today's global political discourse if it wasn't for its more militant parts. (Assuming that such a presence, inevitably gained, channeled and maintained through the corporate media, is a good thing. I'm actually not completely sure about this myself, but this text is not the place to pursue this question.) Why did Seattle become such a milestone? A year earlier thousands of people in dozens of cities all over the world had demonstrated against the WTO-meeting in Geneva. Today, hardly anyone remembers. Sure, there were a few factors making Seattle special. It happened in the States, which was first of all surprising since there is not exactly a global image of US-Americans being socially and ecologically very concerned, and secondly guaranteed attention and coverage in the US-controlled global mass media. There were also the impressive numbers, and the wide range of groups present. Of course. But most of the attention then focused on the riots, and mainly thanks to this it became common knowledge that from now on the movers and shakers of this world wouldn't be able to move and shake no more without the committed and determined interference of thousands of individuals opposing the

evil consequences of their power and the way it is executed. And believing that the media time used to cover the actions of the militants would have been used otherwise to discuss the protesters issues, I consider rather naive if I'm allowed to say so. The militants didn't steal media time from other protesters. They brought media- time to the movement. Was the coverage more sensationalist than content-based? Of course. But the alternative was not in-depth analyses of the wrongs of neo-liberalism - it was hardly any coverage at all.

My points are, a) that the militants have played a role in the anti-globalization movement that has helped it grow as a still potentially revolutionary force, and b) that opponents of militant action today use platforms to voice their opinions that those very militant actions had helped build.

2. It's the militants who are the reason for the fences, the robo-cops, the suspensions of civil rights in the name of security for the rich and powerful. Peaceful protests in form of unannounced and unforeseen mass sit-ins, for example, can cause massive disruption and irritation. But as a continuous form of protest they can very easily be incorporated (inviting NGO's to meetings, allowing rallies if peaceful, etc.). Also, they might be a nuisance for the governmental and corporate bosses, but they don't scare them. It's the militant comrades who do, and it's the militants who allow it to remain obvious and tangible that there is a wall between „them" and „us", that makes the WTO retreat to the desert of the Arab Gulf, that makes Klaus Schwab move his WEF out of Davos. (The latter also showing that the public does not always side with the masters against the militants. Most Swiss are happy to see the WEF go. They've had enough of it. Not because some protesters smashed a handful of windows in Davos a couple of years ago. But because the Swiss public perceived the massive security repercussions as blown out of proportion, and had no interest in seeing its tax money go into protecting the asses of the political and economic world elite.)

3. Even if the rest of the movement completely disappeared behind the militants, media focus on riots at big rallies does by no means only turn people away. I know for a fact that it does arouse curiosity in some people who wouldn't give a rat's ass about people holding banners and playing street theater. I also know for a fact that it is the symbolic power of the militancy that attracts certain kids to the movement and motivates them to come to protests. (To say that one doesn't want such kids there, because they supposedly just wanna violently release their anger and have no social consciousness, simply fits in with the general anti-militant prejudices addressed above. If these kids just wanted to release their anger, why would they do that at anti-globalization meetings, and not by going gay-bashing or duck shooting? Being angry is more than understandable and justified in our society's kids, and, personally, I'm happy if they are capable of directing their anger towards its causes, instead of releasing it randomly.)

Finally, just a quick word about the never-ending allegations that the militants mainly consist of agents provocateurs and undercover cops, and/or non-political troublemakers.

If you dig through all the people involved in militant protests in the streets of Europe or North America over the last thirty years you will definitely find individuals working for the other side. So what? An agent provocateur might slowly try to undermine your Critical Mass Friday, or your grassroots anti-nuclear community group right now, and undercover cops are everywhere.

Can I swear that no „drunks", „hooligans", or pure „adventurers" ever make part of a militant protest? No, I can't. But, again, so what? There might have been people on such occasions more attracted by the opportunity to play high-risk hide and seek with the cops than by political ideals, but luckily the militants are no totalitarian party taking count of its members. A lot of young fascists

like to pogo to Rage Against The Machine. Does this make the band lose its political credibility? At every big anti-globalization meeting you have people thinking that abortion is murder, that a social welfare system is a Stalinist threat to individual liberty, or that Mexicans belong to Mexico. Does this make these meetings lose their moral credibility?

I can't look into the heads of the militants, and I don't really want to either. All I can say is that hardly any of the many militant activists I've met in now over ten years in various countries have embodied any of the stereotypes they usually find themselves confronted with. Almost all the activists I know and have known, are (were) politically very committed, and permanently engaged in discussions about responsibility and the moral implications of their actions. The images of the typical militant being either an angry- at-everything trouble-seeking punk on booze, or a spoilt middle-class adolescent with a weakness for throwing bottles at cops and smashing windows, both of whom don't even know how to spell (for example) "globalization", are simply bullshit.

On the black bloc:

The "black bloc" is a very loose term referring to what's usually a network of various smaller groups of mostly black-clad and masked protesters ready to use property destruction and street-fights with the police as means to express their political stand, their disapproval of the currently dominant political forces, and their anger towards what are seen as symbols, representatives, or defendants of a political and economic system they long to overthrow.

Even though as a reoccurring and apparently rather well established phenomenon fairly recent to North America, the legacy of the black bloc goes back to the militant post-68 political street opposition in Europe, and might have seen its heyday at the peak of the German squatters movement in the mid-eighties when clashes with the police regularly drew hundreds, sometimes thousands, of black-clad and masked activists together in their desire to stand up against the State's and the Capital's restrictions to their ideas of individual and collective freedom. Hamburg's infamous Hafenstraße owes a great part of having become an autonomist myth to these occurrences.

To me, there can be no doubt about the historic significance and legitimacy of the black bloc in the fight against the powers of the State and the Capital. At the same time, I think it's neither empirically true nor ideologically beneficial to reduce militant resistance to the presence, appearance, and activity of the black bloc.

Firstly, on many occasions individuals and groups who are neither black-clad nor masked nor armed nor "prepared" in any other way get involved in militant ways of protesting, given a particular situation. To reduce militant activities to black bloc activities seems simply false in this sense.

Secondly, I feel that today one can identify certain problems with certain black bloc groups that have nothing to do with militant protesting in general. The main problems I'd like to name in this context are the following:

Sectarianism: There are black bloc activists who definitely do see and understand themselves as superior in their way of attacking the enemy than other protesters. Elitism won't get any movement anywhere. If anything, it's an immediate danger for things to go wrong.

Machismo: Verbally glorifying violence, more or less explicitly suggesting that pacifists are cowards, or bragging about one's own readiness to "fuck shit up" or "give it to the pigs" can very easily

become pathetic and embarrassing, if not outright offensive and dumb. It seems impossible to deny that such tendencies exist within certain black bloc groups.

Ritualism: As explained above, I definitely do not have a general problem with property destruction or streetfighting. But, I do think, like any other means of resistance, such activities receive their political meaning and legitimacy from the context in which they occur. Smashing windows or throwing bottles at cops by principle don't qualify in this respect. Not because I feel sorry for either the window or the cop. But because aggressive behavior simply seems out of place on certain occasions. If a group of comrades has a great time dancing to revolutionary beats during a street party without a cop in sight, the shattering of glass simply is an inappropriate disruption of the feeling of solidarity and happiness. Each thing at its time. Ritualizing property destruction or street battles with the cops threatens to empty their significance like ritualization does with everything else.

The black bloc image: Undeniably, the black bloc looks scary. Admittedly, it wants to, and, once again, in a historic-political context this might very well make sense. But, also once again, taken out of that context, the black costume with the mask can become a uniform as silly and ridiculous as any other. In any case, it sure ain't inviting to people without personal connections to the black bloc, and I doubt it can help to tear down the borders between militant and non-militant protesters.

Trivialization of violence: I do think the black bloc gets way too much slack for irresponsible and imprudent behavior. I see most of its actions as far from being random. Usually, the targets are carefully chosen, and the possible consequences of the attacks for others well considered. Then again, no one can deny that mistakes can happen – anywhere, and also within the activities of the black bloc. The problem then being that, once violence and destruction are involved, the results of such mistakes can be rather dramatic. Looting a cornershop, smashing the old fifth-hand Mercedes of an immigrants' family, or hitting a comrade instead of a cop with that bottle one just threw aren't things to be taken lightly. But, they do happen. Admittedly, they are an inherent danger of militant protest in general, but, again, in the context of the seemingly obligatory and ritualized use of violence displayed by some black bloc groups today, the likelihood of their occurence does increase to a problematic level.

To be clear: This criticism of certain aspects of the role of the black bloc(s) today has to be understood of a criticism in solidarity. I am not generally speaking out against the black bloc, and I would be the last to sell out black bloc comrades to the enemy. The solidarity is untouchable. But, within a revolutionary discourse about resistance in general, and militant resistance in particular, I think the aspects I've mentioned ought to be considered. If only to allow us to pursue certain paths of analytical and critical thought that an undifferentiated equation of militant protesting and the black bloc might not:

1. To criticize certain aspects of the black bloc without having to side with "the pacifists".

2. To criticize the black bloc without denouncing one's solidarity with the comrades constituting it.

3. To reflect upon possibilities of militant resistance outside of the black bloc.

Take 'em down!