

LECTURE 10

Direct Action: Fighting for Autonomy

Notes for opening remarks, which aim to frame a context for the following lecture

1. Revolutionary Organisation

- i. Mass Activity, the Mass Strike, The Mass Party¹
- ii. Organisation of the revolutionary cadre

2. Democratic Centralism – *What is to be Done*²

- i. Concentrating and centralising the experience of the Party
- ii. Concentrating and centralising the experience of the working class
- iii. Becoming the ‘memory of the class’

3. Cells and Commando groups of various kinds

- i. Military Functions
- ii. Terrorism

4. Modern terrorist cells and affinity groups

- i. Centralism: Political and operational coherence
- ii. Hierarchy rooted in technical and spiritual authority
- iii. Decentralised Networks: Security and safety

¹ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike, The Political Party and the Trade Unions*, 1906, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1906/mass-strike/index.htm>

² V. I. Lenin, *What is to be done? Burning Questions for Our Movement*, 1902, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/>

Direct Action: Fighting for Autonomy

When we encounter the phrase ‘Direct Action’ in any of the contemporary anti-capitalist campaigns or indeed in the traditions of the radical left more generally, we know that we are in for something unlawful – some kind of protest action, which is illegal.

Ordinary lawful demonstrations, pickets, propaganda stalls, conferences, rallies and street meetings, paper sales and petitioning, do not, generally speaking, count as ‘Direct Action’. Neither, interestingly, do strikes. Official strikes, i.e., those called with the tacit support or permission of a formal trade union, are not usually described as ‘Direct Action’. Nor are strikes that take place without the support of a trade union. These strikes might be called ‘wildcat’ by the popular press, ‘irresponsible’ by the union officials, and ‘spontaneous’ and ‘fully justified’ by the strikers’ leaders. They are rarely if ever described as ‘Direct Actions’, though that is indeed, exactly what they are.

[Trade Unions and Trade Union Laws]

This is because the designation ‘Direct Action’ appears to be reserved on the left for actions taken by comparatively small groups of people organised in some kind of autonomous manner for the specific purpose of carrying out some unlawful action in support of a larger campaign or movement. Generally speaking these activities are aimed at raising the public profile of a campaign and at generating as much public attention and interest as is possible.

In recent years these actions have been organised by affinity groups and clusters and their relationship to illegality is very broad indeed. Such groups might break the law in the most formal sense of digging up unused allotments or derelict urban wasteland in order to plant vegetables and flowers. Such activities might involve disruptive pranks designed to dismay and confuse authority at key moments during a larger demonstration or action. An affinity group might decide to hold a street party, without the permission of the police or the highway authority in a quiet and rarely used cul-de-sac. Alternatively, they might organise high profile raids on the laboratories of vivisectionists in order to release caged animals or even to threaten laboratory workers with iron bars. Such affinity groups might organise massive traffic disruption by assembling hundreds of bicycles and very slow cyclists, while yet others might organise the petrol bombing of a bank or the trashing of a branch of McDonald’s. Whether it is low key, or very conspicuous, entirely peaceful, or frighteningly violent, the actions of these small autonomous groups are commonly described as ‘Direct Action’.

[Tweeting & Texting] [UKUncut]

It is ‘Direct’ because it is unmediated by the majoritarian democratic procedures of larger organisations and campaigns, and it is ‘Action’ because it refuses to be

constrained by the protocols of lawful demonstrations or more conventional or routine forms of protest.

Such affinity groups can be anything from five or six people to a couple of dozen. They are likely to be bound together by friendship, community, or organisational ties. Fundamentally they offer a challenge to what their members might call ‘top-down’ decision-making and organisation. They emphasise the ‘empowerment’ and ‘creativity’ that is released through their rejection of ‘top-down’ decision-making. They believe in the *virtues* and *power* of decentralised structures. Consequently, they are the enemies of all hierarchies and of hierarchical organisations like Leninist, Trotskyist, or Maoist groupuscule or of political parties more generally, and of big centralised organisations altogether.

They organise themselves through consensual decision-making. The Californian based group Direct Action to Stop the War explained it thus:

We use consensus for many reasons. It allows people to collectively explore solutions until the best one for the group emerges. Consensus assures that everyone has a voice in the decision making process, synthesizing all ideas into one plan that all participants agree to implement. Since all participants agree to the decision, people are more invested in carrying out what has been decided. The process promotes commitment to carry out decisions.³

[“Everybody has good ideas” Aaron Peters, UKUncut]

Of course this breaks down when people dissent from the consensus by ‘standing aside’ or even by ‘blocking’ decisions, which they think, violates the group’s ethos, principles or purpose.

Nevertheless, it is a form of organisation which sets great store by the autonomy of individuals, by their free association in autonomous affinity groups, by the free association of these groups into larger clusters and even by sending representatives to much larger planning meetings or ‘Spokescouncils’.

These sorts of groups often associate their modes of organisation rather fancifully to the Anarchist movement in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Spain or even Russia. Though I don’t think that we should put much trust in that. Not least because the mass Anarchist movement in Spain had a very strong syndicalist element to it involving mass trade union membership, trade union federations, and trade union committees composed of delegates; all modes of organisation at some distance from contemporary affinity groups and clusters.

³ Direct Action to Stop the War, Berkeley CA, <http://www.actagainstwar.org/article.php?id=14>, accessed 20 June 2005.

[SYNDICALISM: 1900-1914]

[INTERNATIONAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD/ WOBBLIES/ IWW]

However, the reason why modern ‘Direct Action’ groups of all sorts associate themselves with Anarchism is because they wish to identify their affinity groups with *individual autonomy, the entirely voluntary character of their associations*, and with a *hatred of hierarchical organisations and centralisation*. [Again, this association with what might be called *a la carte* anarchism, removed entirely from the conditions of peasant life or mass proletarian organisation, is a problem that I will discuss more fully in Lecture 11]

By and large these modern small autonomous groups, which assemble specifically in order to carry out particular kinds of direct action, do not usually regard themselves as part of some working class or class-based movement. They are often strongly rooted in a particular locality valuing high levels of activity and involvement and placing a premium upon the rewards, which a direct experience of solidarity and commitment, that working within a small group often brings.

Gay Liberation
Act Up
Outrage
Reclaim the Streets
The Clandestine Rebel Clown Army
Class War
Plane Stupid
UKUncut

There are other traditions which associate the struggle for autonomy and self-management with a perhaps more rigorously revolutionary outlook in which the mode of autonomous organisation is seen much more directly as a prefiguration of the victory of the anti-capitalist forces in the form of the revolutionary proletariat. In the ‘Minimum Definition of Revolutionary Organizations’ published by the Bureau of Public Secrets, the authors make it clear that in order to be revolutionary an organisation must work “*consistently and effectively . . . toward the international realization of the absolute power of the workers councils, as prefigured in the experience of the proletarian revolution of this century.*”⁴ [i.e. 20th Century]

However, although this might sound like Lenin’s slogan, ‘All Power to the Soviets!’ it is in fact quite different. It is different for two reasons.

Firstly, because it sets its face determinedly against the tactical manoeuvres advocated by Communists and other centralisers, the revolutionaries at the

⁴ Situationist International, July 1966, Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley CA, <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/11.mindf.htm>, accessed 16 June 2005.

Bureau of Public Secrets “aim not at the masses’ self-management of the *existing* world, but at its uninterrupted transformation.”

Secondly, they believed that genuinely revolutionary organisation would refuse “to reproduce within itself any of the hierarchical conditions of the dominant world.”

These Situationists see in the established revolutionary parties the emergence of a “revolutionary ideology” which is in fact “the private property of new specialists of power, as one more fraudulent *representation* setting itself above real proletarianized life.”⁵

[PARTY INTELLECTUALS AND PARTY THEORISTS]

So, it is clear, from the rather cuddlier guerrilla gardeners, to bicycling street reclaimers, to the rather fiercer libertarian type of revolutionaries the *autonomy* that is sought by those contemporary anti-capitalists *into* ‘direct action’ is autonomy from majoritarian control. They do not want to be subject to the decisions of large centralised organisations. They do not want their actions to be controlled or directed by the decisions of large gatherings claiming representative authority of some sort.

The objection to being bound by majority rule or by representative authority is not generally speaking brought about because they fear being placed in the invidious positions of racial, ethnic, linguistic, or sexual minorities, within some largely homogeneous dominant group.

These fears are sometimes, no doubt, important in commitment to autonomy of some black or gay or religious minorities, but by and large, a commitment to autonomous affinity groups expresses much wider fears concerning the kinds of leadership and political manipulation which is thought to accompany majoritarian kinds of representative organisations. Such organisational conventions as formally elected leaderships, or policy confirmation by the majority of votes cast for formal resolutions are thought to be irretrievably hierarchical and centralised.

[Argument concerning security from police surveillance – e.g. Plane Stupid]

[Police Spies at environment camps and protests]

What becomes clear is that the more that one thinks about the issues of autonomy and direct action is that they embody an approach not simply to a particular form of anti-capitalist campaigning or to a preference for a particular type of demonstration, but that they express a deeply-held ideological commitment to the value of personal

⁵ *Ibid.*

relationships that can only be forged in very local, very small, face-to-face *voluntary associations*.

The commitment of those engaged in direct actions organised within affinity groups is evidently to a kind of egalitarianism that it is hard to maintain within the setting of large representative or majoritarian organisations. This egalitarianism is not merely an organisational idea, but is, in fact, a key element of their political outlook and vision.

They hate capitalism for much the same reason that they fear and distrust bourgeois political parties, or indeed the Trotskyist, Maoist, or Leninist parties of the far left. Those committed to autonomous modes of organisation generally believe that centralisation and majoritarian decision-making will simply perpetuate or compound the very violence and inequality that they think is inherent in the workings of profit-hungry corporations, and militaristic governments.

So, their mode of organisation – small affinity groups and direct action – is a direct expression of their political principles and objectives: *Autonomous voluntary associations, decision-making by consensus, egalitarianism, and a principled objection to hierarchy, elitism, and centralisation.*