

DIRECT ACTION, PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

CHAPTER TWO:

On September 27, 2002, thousands of activists from across the United States descended on Washington, DC to challenge the increasing barbarity of the neo-liberal world. In what was to be the first major convergence of anti-globalization and anti-war sensibilities post September 11, the People's Strike—as the day was called—targeted both US imperialist military policy and the IMF/World Bank leviathan. As with previous mass demonstrations in DC, activists were confronted with sweeping arrests. Among those picked up and detained were three women who, in the spirit of non-cooperation that had become a cornerstone of movement activity since Seattle, chose to delay and frustrate the state's attempt to process them by refusing to provide identification. Since the police could not process them at the station and since they could not be released on bail, the Jane Does, as the activists came to be known, were transferred to a Washington-area women's prison.

As might be expected, this change of venue led the organizers of the People's Strike—DC's Anti-Capitalist Convergence (ACC)—to begin coordinating jail visits. Within a few days, their efforts led them to circulate instructions for how to visit the Jane Does over the Internet. Jails, after all have rules and, if activists were to be able to visit their comrades, they would have to know how to approximate good behavior. Presumably because of the prison policies they had encountered, the ACC posted the following "rules for visits" on their website: "30 minutes for each visit, only 2 adults at a time, No sandals or open-

toed shoes. No sweat suits, No camouflage, No cross-dressing. Women must (appear to be) wearing a bra." To the end of these regulations, ACC added the following parenthetical note: "(Unfortunately, this is not a joke)." Indeed.

While the bemusement is noteworthy, I think the encounter with prison regulations described above has significance beyond providing another anecdotal basis for despising institutional (hetero)sexism. Apart from the offensive, decidedly unfunny, encounter with antiquated gender categories, what took place in this interaction? Through what process did ACC activists come to know prison visit rules? In order to answer these questions, it's useful to consider how direct action and confrontation allowed these activists to learn something very concrete about the belly of the beast.

Many anti-globalization activists embraced direct action as an effective means of struggle. What was less frequently considered, however, was how direct action might also be the basis for a new kind of thinking. By reading the movement's direct action practices through the insights of radical educator Paulo Freire and activist-scholar George Smith, it becomes clear that direct action is more than an effective and courageous means of resistance; it can be a potentially effective research practice and pedagogy as well. However, a sober assessment of the movement's direct action practices also reveals how residual commitments to forms of idealist thought (forms of thinking that emphasize the signifier over the signified and confuse representation with production) currently make it all the more difficult for us to make the most of this potential.

For readers familiar with Freire and Smith, it's important to note that I'm not arguing that their approaches are identical or without contradiction. Indeed, Smith (whose writing takes up and extends the themes of institutional ethnography) would probably have scoffed at some of the existential formulations in Freire's writing. In particular, Freire's idea of an "ontological vocation" and the struggle to "become more fully human" (1996: 25) would likely have struck him as an unproductive detour into the snared terrain of ideological thought.

Nevertheless, there are significant points of convergence in Smith and Freire's approaches. This is particularly the case with respect to each writer's desire to break down distinctions between various forms of human activity. For Freire and Smith, education, research, learning, and struggle are actualized through the process by which they become inextricably bound to—and completed through—one another. Likewise, both Smith and Freire place significant emphasis on the role of confrontation in the process of knowledge

production. Both insist, too, that learning must be based on forms of concrete investigation that begin from where people are located.

How can activists use these insights to help realize the potential of direct action in order to help us increase the effectiveness of our disruptions? To begin, it's useful to consider how confrontation can be both a tactical and an analytic procedure. As in Chapter 1, I emphasize how the moment of confrontation with the limits of representational action makes the possibility of a genuine politics—a politics based on production—possible. However, as will become clear, this process remained incomplete in the anti-globalization movement. Even at its point of greatest elaboration, it remained replete with contradictions in need of further clarification.



"Women must (appear to be) wearing a bra," read the ACC's account. Was the parenthetical qualifier part of the jail's policy? It seems unlikely. Instead, this sentence is probably best understood as an expression of a struggle between the rigid jailhouse code and the stern will and defiance of activism. More to the point, it represents a conflict between the letter of the law and the experience of existing within it, of trying to navigate its stipulations. Whether or not it actually happened this way, it's not difficult to imagine a member of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence going to the prison and being told that they could not visit their comrades on account of a transgression of one of these rules.

Perhaps the activist went further and challenged the prison official to provide an account of why these rules even existed. Through this process, she may have discovered that the overlapping and intersecting projects of incarceration and gender regulation were enshrined in a written policy. And, we might imagine, as the concrete practice of the jail became clearer, the mystifications through which it ordinarily gets perceived began to fade away. Although this interaction can only be inferred from ACC's disclosure of the policy for prison visits, the parenthetical note reveals something about a confrontation and an active moment of social research.

From the meticulous planning of logistics committees preparing large actions to the long hours individuals spend brushing up on the depravity of the bourgeois world, activists already engage in extensive amounts of investigation aimed at making their movements more effective. However, as of yet, there have been very few systematic attempts to use movement participants' experiences of confrontation as the starting point for research. There have been

even fewer attempts to turn movement activists themselves into conscious, organized, and effective researchers. Such an attempt, I feel, would allow for a considerable escalation in both the level and effectiveness of our struggles.

Is activist research of this sort possible? A cursory glance suggests that the general orientation toward direct action within the anti-globalization movement spontaneously satisfied many of the criteria for effective social research outlined by George Smith. In his 1990 essay "Political Activist as Ethnographer," Smith suggested how, since we are located outside of but in constant interaction with "ruling regimes" (like the prison in which the Jane Does were held), activists could explore the social organization of power as it was revealed through moments of confrontation (1990: 641). In this way, confrontation becomes the basis not only for factual innovations but for epistemological ones as well.

How, then, might this capacity for research be clarified and extended so that it is able to provide us with reliable knowledge that we can draw upon while making strategic and tactical decisions? This question becomes especially important when we consider how, even though the carnivalesque abundance of the movement played an important role as a life-affirming impulse, it remained insufficient as a basis upon which to extend disruptive capacities. However, by challenging the formal distinctions between research, education, and disruption, and by engaging in activism as producers (and not merely critics) of social relations, activists could considerably extend the possibilities of transformative intervention.

It's in light of this possibility that the confluence between the direct action ethos and Paulo Freire's conception of education as an act of freedom becomes especially clear. As a practice of resistance, but also as a method of engaging with the world that throws many of its mediations into relief, direct action provides activists with a strategy of moving beyond what Freire, following Alvaro Vieira Pinto, called "limit situations" (1996: 83). By impelling conditions that require actively uncovering how social relations are put together and by forcing ourselves to enter more fully into the concrete details of social relations, direct action facilitates the demystification of the world in a manner not unlike that advocated in Freire's pedagogy. Even a brief appraisal of activist attempts to visit the Jane Does reveals how this is the case.

The entire Jane Doe situation and the knowledge people gained from it was made possible through a systematic commitment to confrontation. This commitment, which lies at the heart of the direct action ethos, enabled activists to push against limit situations. In this instance, conflict and learning

began with the ACC's call to action for the People's Strike. In the context of police fears about losing control of American cities since the Battle of Seattle, this call-out led police to organize a massive operation that culminated in the mobilization of hundreds of riot cops. Even before activists had hit the streets, confrontation played a key role in producing the situations that led them to discover the policies that organize visits to DC-area women's prisons, and much more besides.

As many activists learned the hard way, police and lawmakers during this period worked to expand the category of "confrontation" to such an extent that it encapsulated many apparently non-confrontational practices. In the context of anti-globalization protests, it was not difficult to wind up in custody. This was the case with the Jane Does. Picked up for failing to disperse when they were ordered to, the Jane Does—once arrested—continued their confrontation with police by refusing to comply with the institutional mechanisms through which they would be processed. Finally, by taking an active interest in what was happening to the Jane Does, ACC activists came into confrontation with the bureaucratic mechanisms regulating interactions between inmates and those who would visit them.

While this small piece of information might not initially seem to be especially important when considered in the overall context of the fight for global justice, it's critical to remember that this knowledge was gained during (and determined by) the course of struggle itself. And while, in this case, it appears to have happened accidentally, allowing the course of struggle to determine our research agenda is not a bad idea. Indeed, it was a central premise of Smith's political activist ethnography. Start where you're at. Map your way out. Watch the interconnections proliferate. Recounting his experience doing research to further gay liberation struggles and AIDS activism, Smith confides that he did not base his work on separate or formal interviews. Instead, "the route of access was determined by the course of confrontation, which in turn was determined . . . by analyzing the data. Thus the research had a reflexive relation to the political struggle of people" (1990: 641). Dissidents in the anti-globalization movement were on the verge of making this discovery.

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For the Jane Does, confrontation helped to reveal a small but significant piece of the social regulation puzzle by uncovering a connection between gender and the carceral project. What happens, then, if we try to make sense of this

small discovery in the context of the anti-globalization movement as a whole? Although arrest is not the only place that confrontational research can lead, it is an important point of contact between dissidents and the conceptual relevancies of ruling regimes. And there have been plenty of arrests. During the People's Strike alone, more than 650 activists were arrested.

In Seattle, approximately 500 activists were picked up; nearly 500 more were arrested in Quebec City during demonstrations against the Summit of the Americas; more than 200 were nabbed in New York during protests against the World Economic Forum in February of 2002; hundreds more were booked in each of Genoa, Gothenburg, Prague, and other protest venues between 1999 and 2001. On top of this partial list, we must remember the A16 actions in Washington, DC, where it is estimated that nearly 1200 people were arrested in a week of protests against the IMF and World Bank.

All told, since the Battle of Seattle, several thousand anti-globalization activists were able to directly learn something about the state while spending time in its custody. And though the state seemingly relied on arrest during this period as a means of diverting activist energies and breaking organizing momentum, this regulatory strategy often led to a new fearlessness. The repressive apparatus of the state, once exposed through excessive use, ceased to generate the same trepidation that it did when its machinations were unknown. Again, we find traces of George Smith: "being interrogated by insiders to a ruling regime, such as a crown attorney," Smith pointed out, "allows a researcher to come into direct contact with the conceptual relevancies and organizing principles of those bodies" (1990: 640). And so it was that, in swallowing us, they exposed their squishy insides, their ineptitudes, and the causes of their indigestion. Through the concrete experience of arrest, many activists came to a better understanding of how the system actually works and managed, in a manner of speaking, to inoculate themselves against its mystifications.

However, while direct action can play an important role in the process of demystification, demystification itself remained—at best—a secondary consideration for many activists. A result of the habits and contradictions endemic to white and middle class experience, many activists approached these moments of confrontation from the standpoint of what these actions were thought to *mean*. And though they were engaged in confrontations that unearthed the social organization of the material world, many activists remained oriented to (and motivated by) *a priori* conceptions. George Smith observed a similar tendency amongst activists fighting against the policing of gay men and for treatment options for people living with AIDS. According to Smith:

Rather than critiquing the ideological practice of ... politico-administrative regimes as a method of determining how things happen, activists usually opt for speculative accounts. The touchstone of these explanations was the attribution of agency to concepts... Instead of events being actively produced by people in concrete situations, they are said to be "caused" by ideas. (1990: 63-4)

Although ideas give shape to the conceptual relevancies that are made actionable in any course of events, events themselves are not caused by ideas but rather by concerted and coordinated forms of social action and organization. Significantly, ideas themselves find their condition of possibility in the same arrangement. In other words, the cause of events (and even of ideas themselves) cannot be found in ideas. It must be located instead in forms of organized and coordinated social action. And while ideas, especially when they converge to form an ethos of struggle, can be powerful motivating forces, they do not in and of themselves cause those who are motivated by them to realize their objectives. This requires a form of translation through which the ideal is forced to come to terms with the material world. In other words, at the point of its operationalization, it ceases to be an "idea" and becomes instead a form of socially coordinated action. In order to make our struggles more effective, it's therefore necessary for dissidents to overcome the mystifications of idealist thought. And dissidents are often more attentive to the dynamics of the world than most. Nevertheless, we still succumb to our own forms of wishful thinking.

For Freire, abstract thought was a principal barrier to transformative engagement. This is because conceptual abstraction allows for the resolution of social contradictions at the representational level while, at the same time, concealing the necessity of elaborating a politics rooted in production. "Closing themselves into 'circles of certainty' from which they cannot escape," Freire argues, people committed to conceptual abstraction "make' their own truth." But there are limits to solipsism:

It is not a truth of men and women who struggle to build the future, running the risks invoked in this very construction. Nor is it the truth of men and women who fight side by side and learn together how to build the future—which is not something given to be received by people, but is rather something to be created by them. (1996: 20-21)

Because these individuals transpose the world into the register of ideas (because, in this way, they treat history in a "proprietary fashion"), they "end

up without the people—which is another way of being against them” (1996: 20–21). Pushed to its ultimate logical conclusion, Freire’s insight suggests that movement unity and coherence is best achieved not through tactical moderation (as was often proposed) but through the inescapable truth of confrontational production.

I first got a sense of this in 1997 during an occupation of the president’s offices at the University of Guelph. Provoked by government plans to increase tuition, the occupation represented an attempt by students to address the growing inaccessibility of Ontario universities. Although the provincial Tory government had been systematically raising tuition since its election in 1995, by 1997 (perhaps in an effort to avoid criticism for its anti-education policies), it left the tuition increase to the “discretion” of individual universities. This localization of decision-making power allowed dissidents to begin reconsidering the manner in which they approached struggle.

Ontario students had been opposing attacks on education for years. However, the “discretionary” tuition increase fundamentally changed the dynamics of student activism. Before 1997, Ontario students would regularly gather on the lawn of the provincial legislature to raise their voices in moral outrage. Since the actual processes involved in implementing educational policy were opaque to most of us, all that was left to protest was a governing “anti-student” ethos. Assembled in front of the legislature, students would learn about “the issues” but could not intervene in the events shaping the future of education. In 1997, with the purported shift in decision-making power from the province to the university itself, many students were provoked into looking closely at our own institutions, perhaps for the first time. A whole world of specificity began to unfold.

Occupation impelled the need for a new kind of knowledge of the university and its social relations. In order to get into the president’s offices in the first place, activists had to become familiar with mundane aspects of the building and its operation. A discernable shift in student politics took place. Once a measure of commitment and engagement, being “informed about the issues” was quickly surpassed by the need to develop an intricate knowledge of actual social relations. At organizing meetings leading up to the occupation, activists began compiling lists of things we would need to know in order to proceed: “When do the janitors unlock the door from the stairwell to the

administrative floor?” “How many doors lead in and out of the space?” “Will we be able to lock them?” “Once inside, what will we do if administrators or office staff are already there? Is it better, legally speaking, to force them to leave the office before locking the doors or risk the possibility of locking them in and being charged with forcible confinement?”

A process of research and concrete investigation ensued. According to Smith, when investigating the “extra-local realm,” it’s necessary for “the local experiences of people” to “determine the relevancies of the research.” This is because these experiences “point to the extra-local forms of organization in need of investigation” (1990: 638). Although none of us was versed in Smith’s work at the time, it was in this manner that we proceeded. Starting from our initial point of local confrontation, we began looking outward and asking specific questions about the organizational processes that impacted upon the immediate situation.

These organizational processes were often enshrined in and made possible through texts. Both the Criminal Code of Canada and the University’s Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities came into view as potentially significant. Since these texts weighed heavily on the local situation and gave it its social character, activists needed to consider how their activities would be interpreted and made intelligible. At the same time, however, activists also considered how the regulatory process of textual inscription might be dodged, subverted, or made irrelevant through decisive action. Continuing well after the action itself, this new approach to confrontation changed the way we understood the university and the world beyond its walls. Resulting from an epistemic shift demanded by the action itself, research, pedagogy, and production each became important (if under-articulated) aspects of our activist practice.

But students were not the only actors in the confrontation dynamic. Arriving to find locks and chains on their doors and barring the entrance to their offices, administrators began making urgent pleas, backed by threats, that the occupiers not read or tamper with files in the offices. Files, after all, are a critical part of the infrastructure that makes a ruling relation possible. Initially, the administration knew this more than the occupiers did. It was their domain, after all. However, through confrontation, the importance of the files was revealed to the activists as well. (In retrospect, we should have been much more curious—and more disruptive, too. The occupation only began to scratch the

surface of what we didn't know about the university and how it worked.)

After assuring the occupiers that hell hath no fury like a bureaucrat whose files have been tampered with, the administration's next course of action was to call the city fire department. With the doors locked, the administration reasoned, the occupation was a fire hazard and posed a threat to the "safety of students." Although, in the end, the firefighters did not intervene, the incident revealed something important about how physical spaces are often regulated. Since then, I've noticed how common it is for authorities to cite fire code violations when evicting activists from squatted buildings or organizing centers. Zoning laws, fire codes, property titles: these are the texts that make it possible for ruling relations to be coordinated and enacted in actual spaces in the actual world. And because these texts prompt standardized and universal courses of action to address ideologically construed local "situations," they can be mobilized to regulate a multitude of moments that, from the standpoint of experience, can appear to be completely unrelated. Given the regulatory capacities they enable for those in power, these texts are thus of supreme importance to activists as well.

Although we were not fully aware of it at the time, the occupation provided us with a way to begin piecing together a concrete understanding of how the university worked. However, despite the intensity of our engagement, learning was not limited to those of us directly involved in locking down the site. By forcing the administration to act in ways to which it was unaccustomed, we were able to throw into relief some previously invisible dynamics. These became evident to everyone on campus. Consequently, there was a palpable shift in the character of discussions between students. Although it had not been our initial intention, the confrontation produced by the occupation created an important pedagogical moment.

With the rise of the anti-globalization movement, I began conducting workshops on direct action and street tactics. With an academic background in critical pedagogy and a desire to make struggles against globalization as effective as possible, I became very interested in the problem of designing a workshop that would prepare people to engage in sometimes frightening confrontations. Since many workshops I had attended took place immediately before major actions, they tended to focus on lists of things that activists "needed to know."

Don't wear contact lenses; don't lose your buddy; remember not to say more than required while under arrest; remove pepper spray with mineral oil followed immediately by rubbing alcohol: our lists were certainly notable for their esoteric contents. But despite this novelty, our direct action workshops never strayed too far pedagogically from the banking model of "education" critiqued by Freire. Activists were being equipped with lists of what to know, however the more difficult problem of *how* to know still needed to be addressed.

When I began conducting my own workshops, I noticed that participants often felt that they couldn't engage in any activities until I defined direct action. Although my workshop began with an exercise in which participants were asked to situate themselves in relation to whatever conception of direct action they currently held, for many, this was insufficient. Until I described what I meant by direct action, some participants intoned, there would be insufficient grounds for collective learning. The workshop participants' concerns highlighted two related problems. The first was that, despite the fact that everybody talked about it, there continued to be profound ambiguity about the meaning of direct action within the movement.

The second and more significant problem was that, despite being the epistemic premise of the very powers we were fighting, activists attending my workshops often expressed a strong desire to start from the standpoint of concepts and explain their experiences from there. While *knowing* is an act made possible by deliberate and productive engagement with the world, what activists at the workshop often sought was *knowledge*, the objectified residue of knowing. As workshop facilitator, I was expected to convey this knowledge, which was perceived as static, universally applicable, and transferable from situation to situation. The social specificities that prompt knowing—and the knowing of workshop participants themselves—were forgotten in the leap toward abstract thought.

For Dorothy Smith, this way of thinking is an important component of contemporary ruling regimes. In *The Conceptual Practices of Power*, she explains how, in a ruling relation, subjective experience is conceived in opposition to the objectively known. "The two are separated from each other by the social act that creates the externalized object of knowledge—the fact."

Facts mediate relations not only between knower and known but among knowers and the object known in common... A fact is construed to be external to the particular subjectivity of the knowers. It is the same for everyone, external to anyone and ... is fixed, devoid of perspective, in the same relation

to anyone. It coordinates the activities of anyone who is positioned to read and has mastered the interpretive procedures it intends and relies on. (1990: 69)

Since I was the workshop facilitator, I was cast in the role of dispensing the facts, the knowledge particular to "the workshop"—a form of social organization with its own conventions and interpretive procedures. Under these conditions, it's not surprising that I was called upon to provide a definition of direct action. Such a definition, according to the standards of objectified knowledge, was a universal object that I could dispense: an object that anyone, provided they had come to my workshop, could receive. Needless to say, I found that this approach bore a strong and disconcerting resemblance to the "banking" model of pedagogy critiqued by Freire. In this model, knowledge is construed as an object that can be "deposited" into the student, the passive recipient. According to Freire, in the banking model, "the teacher talks about reality as though it were motionless, static, compartmentalized and predictable or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students."

His task is to "fill" the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance. Words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated and alienating verbosity. (1996: 52)

I shuddered at the thought that this "teacher" could be me. Having spent the last several years of my life trapped in the academy, I knew that I was sometimes guilty of "alienating verbosity." But hadn't I been the one pushing workshop participants to generate an account of direct action derived from their own experiences? Had I not, further, encouraged participants to think about confrontation as a productive dynamic? Was it the workshop itself, with the interpretive structure that it demanded, that led participants to want to set a universal definition of direct action and empty it of its concreteness? I was perplexed by the disappearance of workshop participants as knowing subjects. What became of the subjects who could use experience as the starting point for developing an understanding of the social world so that they could better transform it? Did the workshop swallow them? Or was there something about our presuppositions concerning direct action itself that led us back into the world of conceptual abstraction and representational knowledge?

When participants at these workshops did refer to their experiences, it often took the form of testimony. They spoke in a way that seemed less about developing an understanding of the world by investigating concrete situations and more about telling a personal truth. While it was good to hear accounts of people's experiences, these did not bring us much closer to understanding social relations or determining how we might blow them up. Although they did not start from the standpoint of reified objective "knowledge," these testimonial accounts would often go to the opposite extreme and assert subjective experience *as* truth. Adopting the narrative voice that Freire identified as the defining tool of banking pedagogy (1996: 52), workshop participants would end by entering experience itself into the realm of objectified knowledge. Often, this would produce situations in which the presented knowledge-objects would stand in sharp contradiction with one another.

What could be done? Following the conventions of post-modern politeness, should we have concluded that the situation lent itself to multiple readings? This seemed depressing: we weren't talking about twentieth century working-class Irish novels, after all. We were talking about the social relations that made up the terrain upon which we struggled. Surely, there was something concrete that we could actually know. How could we find it? What seemed to be required (as George Smith succinctly outlined) was not a "shift from an objective to a subjective epistemology ... but rather a move from an objective to a reflexive one where the sociologist [and the activist!], going beyond the seductions of solipsism, inhabits the world that she is investigating" (1990: 633).

Likewise, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire cautions about the shortcomings of both "objectivism" and "subjectivism." As with Smith, Freire suggests that what is needed is a form of praxis that breaks down the dichotomy between subject and object. Starting from within the realm of situated experience, this approach plays itself out on the world of objects through a process of broadening and socializing subjectivity. "The more people unveil this challenging reality which is to be the object of their transforming action," Freire argues, "the more critically they enter that reality" (1996: 35). By "entering that reality," which is the object of their activity, the subject ontologically *becomes* the social. In this way, conscious production (the transformation of the world of objects and social relations) becomes the means by which activist-researchers transform themselves.

For Freire, understanding this process first requires that the relationship between subject and object be properly understood. "To present this radical demand for the objective transformation of reality, to combat the subjectivist immobility which would divert the recognition of oppression into patient waiting for oppression to disappear by itself," he suggests, "is not to dismiss the role of subjectivity in the struggle to change structures."

On the contrary, one cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity. Neither can exist without the other, nor can they be dichotomized. The separation of objectivity from subjectivity, the denial of the latter when analyzing reality or acting upon it, is objectivism. On the other hand, the denial of objectivity in analysis or action, resulting in a subjectivism which leads to solipsistic positions, denies action itself by denying objective reality. Neither objectivism nor subjectivism, nor yet psychologism is propounded here, but rather subjectivity and objectivity in constant dialectical relationship. (1996: 32)

Since I was beginning to suspect that direct action contained a strong revelatory impulse, I was frustrated that personal activist experiences were so regu- larly transposed into a narrative, story-telling frame. It seemed odd that direct action, which had been so pedagogically generative during the occupation at the University of Guelph, could be reduced in workshops to either testimonial utterances or lists of things to remember. Despite the potential of becoming an effective research practice and strategy for the conscious production of new social relations, and despite real similarities with Freire's pedagogy and Smith's activist ethnography, discussions about direct action in the workshop setting erred toward banking and not problem-posing pedagogy, toward abstract and not reflexive understandings of the social. Why was this so?

Although direct action compels activists to adopt a problem-posing approach that encourages confrontations with limit situations, activists have also dem- onstrated a continued reliance upon conceptual abstraction. This seems to be especially true when activists try to explain what direct action is. Although di- rect action has allowed activists to confront limit situations and break abstract and solipsistic "circles of certainty" (Freire 1996: 20), it has not always proven to be effective in breaking the binds of idealist abstraction or the facticity of

ruling regimes. Rather than existing in dialectical interaction (as Freire and Smith both propose), practice seems here to be ahead of theory. It's a disjunc- ture that finds expression in the written accounts of activists themselves.

The following passage, drawn from the pages of the *Anarcho-Synicalist Review*, is an excellent case in point. As a piece of writing, it's exceptionally bad; however, the frustration experienced in reading it is not the result of poor writing alone. Indeed, the solipsistic sentence structures appears to have less to do with literary deficiencies than with an abstract conceptual world spinning out of control. "From an anarchist perspective," the writer begins:

Direct action is connected not only to solidarity, but also to what tends to be the precondition for solidarity and the underlying principle of the concept of direct democracy: non-hierarchical human communication. Such communi- cation lies at the root of what direct action always is, individual and collective self-empowerment. As direct action contains its own end, within that self- defined end its meaning is also found. The more the ends are manifested in the means, the more it is direct action. (Beyer-Arnese 2000: 11)

Conceptually, this is quite elaborate and complicated. And while it's true that not all movement accounts of direct action are this indecipherable, it's important to acknowledge that many activists have had difficulty providing a clear articulation of the term. This passage, then, can be read as a hyperbolic reflection of a more general problem. Given that this definition was published in a movement magazine's feature on the topic suggests that it's not merely the matter of one writer's anguish or incomprehensibility, nor the result of lax editorial protocols.

What's at work in this passage? First, by situating his account within an "anarchist perspective," the writer provides the interpretive procedure through which to read the rest of the account. Direct action becomes a knowledge- object. Second, the writer enters the world of predetermined logical concepts, drawn out in an interlocking constellation of abstract relations. Direct action is connected to solidarity. Solidarity and direct democracy are connected to and have their precondition in non-hierarchical human communication. Non- hierarchical human communication is, in turn, the definition of what direct action always is (individual and collective self empowerment, remember?). Snap! The circle of certainty closes.

Fortunately, not every attempt to define direct action comes to such unhappy ends. Nevertheless, as an approach to making sense of the social

relations in which we engage, activists frequently begin from the perspective of the concept (self-empowerment, direct democracy, non-hierarchical human communication) and never entirely work their way out. Materials produced for distribution during the People's Strike by DC's Justice and Solidarity Collective show strong signs of this conceptual imbrication. The Collective, which functioned as a legal support team for activists during the protest, issued a leaflet instructing demonstrators on how to deal with cops showing up at their doors in the lead up to or during the action. Written in convenient point form, the leaflet provided the following instructions:

Write down the names and badge numbers of all police officers

Write down the names, job titles and departments of any fire marshals, building inspectors, or other government officials that enter with the police or independently

Write down an inventory identifying everything being searched and/or confiscated, where in the center it comes from

The leaflet is standardized knowledge, a textual list of procedures that can be initiated by activists in multiple local settings. In order to accomplish this effect, the leaflet follows the conventions of writing adopted by ruling institutions. The effect of this form of writing is to turn specific experiences of encounters with police into a series of universal knowledge claims that can then be used to organize the practices of activists. Dorothy Smith has described how this kind of writing is achieved by transposing the experiences that produce knowing into universal, "textual time."

In this transposition, the active processes that led to the production of the textual account are rendered invisible. However, while the leaflet presents itself in a way that obscures the concrete experiences underlying its knowledge claims, it's important to note how, in this case, the transposition of activist knowledge into textual time is never fully completed. A trace of the concrete experiences that compelled the knowing upon which the text is based is left behind. Even as the Justice and Solidarity Collective provide universal procedures for activists, the everyday world cannot help but make a symptomatic appearance.

The leaflet presents general guidelines for coming through police visits as unsearched as possible. These guidelines are written in such a way as to be useful to activists in a variety of local circumstances. However, the Collective's

suggestions—and what they anticipate as possible during a police visit—almost certainly emerge from the experience of anti-globalization actions where police have raided convergence centers using the pretence of fire code violations. Activists in DC were witness to such a raid during the A16 actions against the IMF and World Bank.

While the Justice and Solidarity Collective leaflet begins by talking generally about the "police" coming to "your home or workplace" (a framing which aims to cast its relevance as broadly as possible) by the end, the text has become much more specific. With the introduction of particulars that are neither "police" nor "your home," but rather "fire marshals," and "where in the [convergence] center" confiscated materials came from, the leaflet makes a return to specificity that betrays its attempt to speak in universal textual time.

Evident in the text, then, is a conflict between what people have learned through experience and the particular forms of textual production by which ruling regimes make the everyday world fall from view. Since these sense-making procedures divorce people from their own experiences, they stand at odds with the kind of concrete material reckoning that direct action makes possible. It's therefore not surprising to find that the Justice and Solidarity Collective's transposition of activist experience into textual time is only partially realized. What remains is a trace of the events that were then worked up into knowledge. As such, the leaflet can be read as a symptom of the split that many anti-globalization activists experienced between forms of concrete knowing arising from confrontation and forms of ideological thought.

For Dorothy Smith, it's precisely this split that provides a point of entry for investigating the organization of social relations. Especially for those who do not determine the content of representational abstractions but must live within them, the inevitable rupture between ideology and the everyday world signals the starting point for research. For Freire, the situation was nearly identical. Describing the contradiction of "progressive" educators using inherited pedagogical practices, Freire recounts how the ensuing discord can sometimes provide the oppressed with an opportunity to engage productively with the world: "Those who use the banking approach, knowingly or unknowingly (for there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize), fail to perceive that the deposits themselves contain contradictions about reality."

But, sooner or later, these contradictions may lead formerly passive students to turn against their domestication and the attempt to domesticate reality.

They may discover through existential experience that their present way of life is irreconcilable with their vocation to become more fully human. They may perceive through their relationship with reality that reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation. If men and women are searchers and their ontological vocation is humanization, sooner or later they may perceive the contradiction in which banking education seeks to maintain them, and then engage themselves in the struggle for their liberation. (1996: 56)

However, while the contradiction between experience and deposited knowledge can function as an engine impelling people to act (an engine encouraging a more complete engagement with the social), this outcome is not guaranteed. It must be seized upon and elaborated within the framework of a conscious political production. For activists intent on learning from the experiences of the anti-globalization movement, the task is twofold. First, it involves developing a reliable knowledge of the social through productive and pedagogical confrontations. Second, it requires that what is learned through this process be transposed into an effective means of communication that does not abide by the epistemic conventions of our enemies.



Did the movement go far enough with its confrontations? Did we learn all that we could, or were the results as contradictory as the movement itself? A cursory investigation reveals that, even in the more militant sections of the movement, it was not always possible to push the process of learning from confrontation to its necessary conclusion. The "Communiqué on Tactics and Organization" penned by members of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective (GMAC) in December of 2000 is an excellent case in point. While it was admittedly one of the more militant statements to come out of the movement, its conclusions seem profoundly incomplete.

"The following document is presented," they begin, "with the intention of furthering the basic effectiveness of our movement, by advocating various tactical practices that we hope will be adopted by the Black Bloc as a whole" (2000: 1). Throughout the communiqué, GMAC makes considerable efforts to outline how the concrete situation at demonstrations necessitates specific forms of organizing. They show how the Black Bloc could become more effective by developing a more formal and tactically reflexive command structure. In order to substantiate these recommendations, they produce a detailed account

of police strategies used since Seattle. Recognizing the importance of maintaining control of the streets when trying to disrupt business as usual, GMAC exhorts discipline and organization. This is because, "at the present time, the mobilization of our forces is done in such a haphazard manner that our ability to combat well trained and disciplined State forces is limited" (2000: 7). In order to overcome this organizational and tactical deficit, GMAC proposed various command structures and disciplinary techniques aimed at extending activist control of the streets.

Making sense of GMAC's considerable emphasis on control of the streets requires that we acknowledge the tremendous energy that police forces devoted to addressing this same question. Before retreating to remote and inaccessible regions after the G8 demonstrations in Genoa, the anti-summer protest scenario had begun to take on the attributes of a medieval siege. Large perimeter walls were constructed to ward off demonstrators in Windsor, in Quebec City, and in Genoa. When this strategy proved to be too costly in terms of finances and legitimacy, global leaders made their way into the hinterland. During the 2002 meeting of the G8, delegates assembled at a remote mountain resort in Kanaskis, Alberta. In addition to strategies of geographic isolation and the erection of physical barriers, security agencies and private corporations also began investing considerable time and money developing "less than lethal" technologies aimed at controlling demonstrations.

Faced with these and other challenges, GMAC proposed several measures. They included: the formation of an elected tactical facilitation force; increased discipline and preparedness within individual affinity groups (including a division of labor between defensive and offensive forces, each outfitted with the appropriate equipment); extending reconnaissance and communications capacities; implementing a system of reserve forces that could be mobilized at a moment's notice; devising extra security precautions (including marking maps in code and using preplanned fluctuating radio frequencies for communication); circulating comprehensive communiqués after every action; engaging in physical fitness training between actions; and taking pre-emptive measures to diminish state capacities.



On this last point, "A Communiqué on Tactics and Organization" makes a very deliberate connection between the concrete situation and the forms of activity appropriate to addressing it. Drawing on movement experiences, the Collective writes: "The forces of the State are known to take pre-emptive

measures against demonstrators prior to their actions." Given the previously mentioned raids on convergence centers, this can hardly be disputed. Furthermore, says GMAC, the police "regularly infiltrate us and make arrests before any general demonstration or acts of civil disobedience begin." Finally, the police also "start their tactical mobilization long before the sun comes up prior to the demonstrations on any particular day."

In order to neutralize this advantage, limited elements presently engaged in Black Bloc actions should independently take countermeasures. Here sabotage of police (and when necessary, National Guard) equipment is our best bet... If one of the primary advantages of the State is their mechanized mobility, then we should strike out against these repressive tools by effective, clandestine means. (2000: 20)

One is struck by the undeniably militaristic inflection of these proposals. While it is unquestionable that—if the goal is to beat the cops on the streets through tactical usurpation—the practice of sabotage would undoubtedly put activists at a greater advantage, the communiqué's analysis of the concrete situation nevertheless misses an important point. Who are the people who will do this sabotage? Where will they come from? The document is somewhat vague: "Such activities should be voluntarily coordinated by separate affinity groups under their own direction" (2000: 20). Roughly translated, this means: "someone else should do it." A contradiction thus arises. In order for the Bloc to be more effective, it needs to be more coordinated and disciplined. However, the intensification of coordination and discipline is made possible by (and requires, at its threshold) uncoordinated and clandestine actions. Such a limit situation would, of course, be fine if it weren't for the fact that the uncoordinated and clandestine actions were supposed to arise from within the ranks of the coordinated body itself.

So while the document challenges its reader to confront the idealism that would, for instance, eschew a "militaristic tone" (2000: 1), it nevertheless engages in its own form of wishful thinking. Specifically, it anticipates the possibility of turning the Black Bloc into a large, disciplined force capable of engaging in highly specialized and illegal operations against ruling regimes without looking at the broader dynamics of movement building. But these dynamics are also concrete social relations that must be explored and mapped. While GMAC correctly identifies many of the concrete measures that the state might take to make activists less effective (and does so in a way that obviously

makes use of their own concrete experience), their analysis nevertheless fails to consider important aspects of movement building.

After all, the Black Bloc is not merely a clandestine organization. The question to be posed, then, is not how to use available forces to accomplish necessary goals on a plane where "us" and "them" are already constituted. Instead, we must ask how to change the balance of forces by reconstituting the plane itself. GMAC's contribution remains valuable because of its meticulous attention to the social organization of our opponents. What remains to be explained, however, are the specific conditions of an equally important and contradictory social force: the people.

The goal here is not to dismiss GMAC's contribution. However, because their analysis aims only in one direction (because it engages with questions of social organization without considering corresponding questions of pedagogy), it needs to be extended in at least one important respect. Specifically, we must broaden GMAC's insights to include considerations of movement building. These considerations must take into account both the not-yet-active and those who are active but have not yet acknowledged that they are, in fact, at war. In order for direct action to become a research practice and pedagogy, it must aim in two directions at once. In one direction we find our enemies: the state, the police, and the capitalist class. In the other, we find our friends, the people. But friendships must be cultivated. They are not always self-evident. And sometimes the things we do to build our friendships end up inadvertently undermining them. In the following chapter, I will consider some of these dynamics.