

And After We Have Burnt Everything?

Correspondences about revolutionary strategy and emotions

A few "rioters"

August, 2009

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letter...

For ten years I have run with the black bloc, seizing every chance, every moment we were strong enough, to run riot and fill the air with the sound of breaking glass and baton rounds, and the heady smells of adrenaline, gasoline, testosterone and teargas. For ten years I have stood up for the “diversity of tactics” and pushed for radicalization: from social movement to social struggle to social war. So this text is difficult for me to write...

During the days in Strasbourg I was always in or close to the black bloc-style actions, because that is where my affinity lies. For me it was appropriate to react to Police complicity in yet another death, this time at the G20 demonstrations in London; we were right to be angry at the way the demonstration in Strasbourg was relegated to an abandoned industrial estate and divided by thousands of riot police across the French-German border; I supported the decision to fight the police to try to break out of the space they had pushed us into with their negotiations and their crowd control weapons, and to try to take our actions somewhere more meaningful; and it filled me with joy to see the border post burn.

Even the Ibis Hotel action made me smile. It is a more complex issue: I don't think our actions on Saturday (or possibly ever?) are worth risking someone being seriously hurt for. However, I understand that no one was hurt in the action, and it is important to remember that the Hotel was part of the NATO summit, one of five Hotels in Strasbourg publicly set aside to house the thousands of journalists there to cover the “celebrations”, and a place from which police were spying on the demonstrators. So, even if we ignore the fact that Ibis profit from the deportations of *sans papier*, it is difficult to say that it was not a legitimate target.

But despite all that, the experience of that week left me feeling uncomfortable, alienated and confused. We took advantage of a peace march to make it look like war... We used the camp space, ate the food, and shat in the toilets. But, compared to previous self-managed events and camps, our participation in the village life was mostly limited to drinking beer, hiding in closed action meetings, or fighting the cops around the camp-site, building burning barricades, and making it look like war... And through it all I found myself questioning more and more how our actions relate to our politics, ourselves, our interactions and our values.

I am not saying that we were wrong to behave the way we did. I have long been critical of the tendency to pour so much energy into building up “activist service industries” (legal support, medical teams, camp organisation, independent media, etc) until there is almost no one left to do the (in the end mostly symbolic) actions. In that sense, Strasbourg was a welcome change. But our arrogance disturbed me. There was no interest in participating, explaining, or at least showing some recognition of being part of a common dynamic, where people focussing on different things makes it possible for the whole action to happen and be powerful. The focus, perhaps the only interest, was in violent confrontation. And we seem to look down on anyone who questions or does not immediately understand why we think and act the way we do.

As usual, in the days after the demonstration in Strasbourg, the leaders of the dead-in-the-water political parties of the left denounced and disassociated themselves from the “violent minority” and the pacifists decried their actions “ruined” by hooligans with no political ideas. It is always frustrating to read those comments, and it easily creates the “them and us” divide that enables us to despise the “democrats” and “reformists” who take their symbolic actions and then go back to a comfortable bourgeois life. But at the same time I was embarrassed by the lack of respect or interest shown by the black bloc for the other participants in the anti-NATO actions,

particularly because while they could do their actions without us, we could not have done our actions without them.

Sure, we are sexy, all dressed in black, striking yet another riot-porn pose for the cameras. But we really were only a small part of a big whole. It is ironic that the black bloc, who criticise the media so much, are also the first to accept the hype that makes breaking windows and burning garbage the only focus of the day. It is important to recognize that if it were not for the infrastructure provided by the camp organizers (which we mostly consumed), if it were not for the extremely hard work done by the legal team, which included negotiations with the police and creating legal and political pressure (which we scorn), and if it were not for the political and physical protection offered by the presence of thousands of protesters many of whom have political views and ways of acting different from our own, it would not have been possible to burn the border, destroy the cameras, or attack the police in the way that we did.

I saw groups of pacifists, elderly people, people with children, running terrified from tear gas, flash-balls and stones (because there are always people who don't look who they are throwing at, or idiots who throw from the back and usually just hit the first line of protesters!) And for the first time I wondered what it must feel like to be on the outside of the black bloc.

We organised in whispered meetings in small, closed, paranoid groups. If you are not on the inside there is almost no possibility to participate. Yet we take our actions into spaces (like the demonstration) where they directly affect people who have had no opportunity to dialogue, to doubt, to debate or to decide. And we expect them to assume the consequences. We expect them not to publicly criticise, but we give them very little opportunity to criticise in private. We expect them not to disassociate from something they were not, in fact, involved in planning or perpetrating. We expect them to respect our political position and forms of action, while we often behave in ways that suggest we have no respect for or interest in theirs.

I am not a hippy. I am not a pacifist. I do not believe the State, the corporations, the Armies and Police, will one day, if exposed to enough information or enough persuasion, be convinced to put down their arms, their power, their assault on the earth and those who populate it. I do not think peaceful protest "works". Actually neither am I convinced that violent action "works", since our violence will always be less than theirs by dint of their access to new technologies, manpower and weapons. But I am prepared to do both since struggle we must, or give up.

I feel maybe I am older than a lot of the people who were in the black bloc in Strasbourg. I come from the generation that took to the streets and fought for the sheer mad joy of it in the mid-1990s. I guess I come from an age of innocence: before the death of Carlo Giuliani, before they called us terrorists, before all our creativity was swallowed into the meaninglessness of the "mass movement" at the Heiligendamm blockades, or the political emptiness of the ESF. I remember a time when we trusted, and sometimes we even felt like we had something to win. In that context, the "diversity of tactics" meant a willingness to consider all the forms of action available to reach our aims. But for that, we had to have aims...

One thing that alienated me in Strasbourg was that I was no longer sure what our aims were. The people involved in black bloc tactics did not seem interested in the blockades of the summit, or in other, less predictable actions; only in the demonstration. According to our own analysis, demonstrations are a poor substitute for "direct action". But we put our energy into creating the space, or the situation, where we could riot (even if the only place we could do that was in an empty industrial estate miles from anywhere). The success or failure of the action, it seems, can be measured by how many rocks were thrown, how many bins were burnt, how much glass was

broken, or how many cops were injured.

Riot ceases to be a tactic and becomes an end in itself. We do not need political arguments to defend or define our actions. Our actions are our political arguments: they require no more context than capitalism itself in all its forms, and they speak for and define themselves.

Which in some ways is good. Politics should come from the gut, not just from the head. But if we only use poetic, insurrectionist calls to arms such as *apell* (call) or *ai ferri corti* (at daggers drawn) to define what we do, then we end up abstracting our actions from reality. When I got home I re-read a book I'd read a long time ago, *The Demon Lover: On the sexuality of terrorism*, by Robin Morgan (ex-Weathermen). She describes the process of radicalising struggles as:

"...leading to an ends-justify-the-means attitude. As abstractions proliferate, the original issues are likely to be forgotten entirely...Rhetoric, 'turf', tools and weapons, uniforms, become fetishes of the manhood identity...The shift from living for a cause – e.g. fighting to enhance quality of living – to dying for a cause now locks into place. Violence. Those who question it are traitors...A politics of hope has become a politics of despair. The goal is now too abstract to be attainable, nor can manhood be satisfied by less. Cynicism sets in, as does the strategy of provocation and polarisation. What once aimed for a humanistic triumph now aims for a purist defeat.

The State obliges."

It is a bleak picture she paints, of political violence as a dead-end street; by embracing violence, she says, we condemn ourselves to reproduce patterns of patriarchy, authority and masculine value systems in our actions, collectives and relationships until the bitter end. I rejected this book as pacifist garbage when I first read it, but now it makes me think.

Sometimes it feels like our weakness, lack of direction, and lack of advance, creates a culture where we close ourselves into a political aesthetic (not even an ideology!) and limit what we can do, what we can say, and what forms of action are militant enough to be acceptable. We close ourselves off from complexity. We leave no room for doubts or questions. There is no assembly, no forum, no spokespeople, so our only form of political communication is our actions and the images they project. We create ourselves in the image of the black-clad urban guerilla; we give symbolic meaning to what is often only violent indirect action (as opposed to non-violent direct action) by creating the momentary image of the civil war that capitalism wages on life... But we should be able to be honest and sincere about the content of what we do, otherwise we will end up being all about image.

Under the shade of an oak tree we talk in whispers. My jaw is tight with the thrill of conspiracy, and with... pride. The secrecy and self importance that surrounds this group is infectious. In my pent up frustration at the ever deepening desert of the existent I am won over by their power, their language, and their arrogant conviction that they are right. My need to do something, anything, is seduced by their militance. I am honoured that they are talking to me, and I want to prove myself worthy of being part of this secret, self-important thing. So I learn fast, to speak this language of violence with confidence and hide my doubts and ambivalence like they do... but today I look at the faces of my *compañeros*, tight lipped and quick to disapprove, quick to condemn this or that breach of security, failure of militancy, or simple show of weakness. And I find an unexpected, stubborn and anti-authoritarian urge to say out loud "I am scared."

And maybe it is because I am getting older (and I see that the faces around me change: people get tired, burn out, disappear, while the average age of the kids taking to the street stays the same). Or maybe it is because beneath my black hood, and behind my mask, I am still a woman. And, like it or not, as a woman I worked hard for my militant credentials, said the right things,

and proved myself time and time again through trial by fire. But the masculine, insurrectionist values of unswerving ideological conviction and willingness to hurt for the cause do not always come naturally to me.

And if we are not really honest with ourselves, if we continually hide our feeling of weakness, despair and intimacy behind masks and militant posturing, then we limit ourselves, stop ourselves from examining our true position and from exploring where we can go next. We are not winning, we are losing. But only when we recognise and understand the problem, can we begin to search for a solution. I am writing this text because I feel we need to communicate something more than the arrogance of youth and the image of war.

For me it was exciting to be on the streets with the boys from the banlieu, racing about on their motor-scooters, given strength by our presence to take back streets that should have been theirs from the start. It was a rush to confront the cops together. Violence can (and in that case, did) unite us and help to build relationships. I doubt those boys would have been very interested if we had marched as a peaceful demo through their neighbourhood and given out flyers about NATO.

Nevertheless, from time to time I was disturbed by an edge I felt to the atmosphere. It was present on the street, and even more so in the camp, where sharpened by drink and drugs, it broke out from time to time into small macho dog-fights to establish the hierarchy of the day... Perhaps I am not nihilist enough (or perhaps it is because I am a woman?), but I struggle with the contradictions in this.

I want to reach out of our milieu to contact, to interact and to act with others, find the common ground to strike out together at the neon-lit plastic-wrapped prison of our everyday lives. But if we uncritically fetishise the street gang, the banlieu, the incarnation of "people's rage"; if we turn our actions over to a culture of violence and give them no content at all, then we are no different from the football crews and street gangs who set a time and place for a staged fight. (Saturday afternoon at the demo, instead of after the game!) To put it simply, there are dynamics, values and behaviours that I am not interested in reproducing, however "street" they may be.

I am intrigued as to why certain people are attracted to particular types of political thought and action. I know for myself how seductive I find the uniform of the autonomen, how excited I get by a black bloc, how much I like covert actions. But what are the aesthetic, cultural and gender values underlying this attraction, where do they come from, where do they lead and who do they serve?

I am not suggesting that we leave behind the path we are on, not at all, only that we follow it with great care and consideration, understanding what it does to us. We need to constantly deconstruct how we respond to our acts, how they change our relationships to other people, what we personally and collectively need to do to go through with certain acts and how that affects us and our relationship with and attitudes towards others.

Violence – whoever is using it – has repercussions on the psychological health not only of those who are at the receiving end but also of those perpetrating violence, for whatever end, whatever ideology. I have no feeling for pacifism as an ideology. What I do feel is a need to help us fight militantly for longer and with greater personal and collective health. To choose a path of violence at great personal and collective risk means choosing a security culture whose inherent qualities are exclusion, paranoia, unspokenness and a complex of relationships in which important parts of your life must be kept hidden and not shared. This leads to tension and other feelings (jealousy, insecurity, not being valued). It is a path where you sometimes have to treat

people not as you would treat your comrades but as faceless enemies with faces. This is not easy. And I believe it takes a great toll on us: on how we view others, and on how we view ourselves.

I am scared that voicing these doubts and questions will mean I am rejected. But such “un-warlike” values as empathy, ambivalence, reflection, and anchoring our behaviour in the personal and the real, are political too. So I will risk rejection and I will write. I hope that this text will be understood as self-criticism, and not as an attack. I hope that some of these ideas may find fertile ground to generate debate: to shatter our images and look at the substance beneath.

We are living in interesting times. Resistance is becoming more and more evident, in the face of the ecological, social, political and economic crises that are rocking the world, and it seems that States and corporate powers no longer even try to cover up the true face of capitalism, war and social control. Change (one way or another) may well be inevitable, and we will probably have to struggle through it, like it or not. In this context, I write with hope, out of the desire to look for some answers to the question asked by Greek friends, still riding high on the revolt of December 2008:

“and after we have burnt everything? what next...?”

interlude...

This text, like the extracts from responses that follow, is written in the first person, as though they were the thoughts of one person and the responses of a series of others. In fact these people do not exist. All the texts contain many different voices merged together from different languages, countries and political cultures. The first is taken mainly from conversations after the 2009 anti-NATO convergence in Strasbourg and extracts from other writings by different people at different times. The responses are compiled from conversations and correspondences with people who had read it.

These texts are presented as a collective project, but there is not really a group or collective behind these writings. There was no meeting or common project to create these ideas. Many, but not all, of us whose opinions and ideas are expressed here were in Strasbourg in April 2009, and probably all of us have crossed paths at some time, behind banners and barricades, or in the squats and free-spaces of Europe. What we all share is a need to generate and participate in debates around the actions that took place in Strasbourg against the NATO summit.

This way of writing was chosen to break free from the political polarities that shape our thinking about an idea or approach. Writing in this way was an exercise that required a level of trust and acceptance of the ideas expressed that is unusual in a political culture which tends to validate or dismiss an argument according to the ideological position that we perceive lies behind it. The doubts and questions raised by people who had experienced different parts of the actions in Strasbourg (over the full four days, not only on the Saturday) and who came from different, countries, contexts, genders and experiences of struggle were, of course, varied and at times contradictory. We chose to treat them not as incompatible positions, but as internal doubts, questions, contradictions and ambivalences, which could potentially be part of the same movement or even coexist in a single mind.

This way of writing was chosen to break the dynamic that turns questions or critiques into a threat. The variety of ideas expressed means that there is unlikely to ever be any consensus on these texts. There is no absolute position here against which we must defend ourselves or our

actions.

Thinking about how to present these questions was a slow and difficult collective process, which is why they are being published more than three months after the events in Strasbourg. However we think the issues raised will continue to be relevant for a long time, and we hope that the way they are written will help to create open thinking and discussion about actions, dynamics and relationships in the context of our struggles for freedom...

These texts were published on Indymedia in July 2009

responses...

(selected extracts)

« I went to fight the NATO-Summit in Strasbourg filled with hope that it would really clash. I longed for strong gestures of resistance. Something that would express, through our presence, that our struggle is against the entire system. And clash we did... Even though it can make us all too aware of the deficiencies of some of our daily struggles; even if it doubtless involves an element of political deceit and spectacular illusion, it is impossible for me to deny the pleasure and strength I derive from these moments where we get out of control. Where, for a few minutes, or a few hours, en masse, we break out of the hegemony of “we can’t change anything anyway”.

Even so, my experiences around the Europe-Bridge in Strasbourg on Saturday, left me feeling somewhat uneasy and frustrated. The police strategy seems to have been to isolate the demonstration, and with it the “black bloc”, on an industrial wasteland, an island reachable only via a few bridges, on a road to nowhere. From this point of view, their strategy worked. Despite the efforts of the blockade groups in the morning, the inner-city stayed peaceful and quiet. As I walked through the city centre later that afternoon, I passed delegations and convoys of NATO cars moving, unmolested, through the streets, and I could not help feeling that we might have been able to create much more useful chaos away from the expected battlefield.

So I was interested to read your text, and find ways to frame my questions that do not fall into the typical “the black block works with the police” type of denunciations. Some of the things you said disturbed me though, so, to keep the debate moving, I have written you an answer.

First, I think it is important to stress that the actions taken on the demonstration on Saturday – the smashing of cameras, banks, the hotel Ibis, the border post, and other tools of domination – were not disconnected from the presence of NATO in town. These actions drew a link between NATO policies and the banks and corporations, and the State institutions and military industrial complex that surrounded the summit. They aimed beyond the NATO celebrations, at the global security architecture NATO is designing to deal with to the increasingly frequent uprisings and direct actions that are emerging in response to the “crisis” of the capitalist and post-colonial system.

The outrageous deployment of police forces and the challenge laid down by French and German States when they implied that everything was under control and nothing would happen raised the political stakes: it gave added meaning to showing that whatever the number of cops, helicopters, controls and propaganda to scare the population, things could still get out of control, and new links and alliances could still be made...

It was a risky bet, and it paid off this time. That does not mean that it is always the most appropriate thing to do to come up against the cops, in direct combat, where they are concentrating

their forces. It is important to be unpredictable, and not to fall into rigid patterns of behaviour. (...))»

« (...) As you talk, in your text, about a “we”, it seems important to be clear about what this refers to. As vague and contradictory as this “we” may be, it seems to me to refer to amorphous groupings with an anti-authoritarian basis, that aim to go beyond the State, capitalism, and patriarchal and post-colonial oppression, using direct action and attacks, building autonomy from these institutions, without the dogma of non-violence. That is one way of describing it, there could be 2000 others. As this “we”, a kind of “revolutionary international”, is not a party, and does not have any fixed or formal existence, we can feel more or less part of it as we chose, and we can define it or perceive it in different ways. Some of us refer to a “we”, interconnected on an international scale, through networks, organisations, travels, actions, strategical discussions, friendships and romance... Others will have difficulty to recognise a “we” beyond more restricted and contextualised local connections. Some of us will find it easy to feel part of a movement and to share a common history. Others will be far more reticent to create a “we” out of such a heterogeneous and divided whole, without more precise political definition. (...))»

« Your text seems to create the false impression that there was one black bloc in Strasbourg, more or less organizing as a group, made up of collectives and individuals who recognise that label to describe themselves, and who would recognise a common history based on that tactic. But the “black bloc” is not a group. It is an over simplistic term that, in a given moment, encompasses groups that may otherwise endorse very different political visions and strategies for confrontation. It is always important to remember that attending counter summits and participating in black-bloc-style tactics is only one of the forms (and often not even a central one) of the political action that these people are involved in. A lot of people who could be considered to have been part of the “black bloc” in Strasbourg participate daily in struggles, forms of autonomy and spaces in many other ways. Also, there are many other people who might identify with riot tactics, but who make the choice not to come to counter summits like Strasbourg. Some people may indeed have a sense of a common history and a political line that can be traced back through the multiple and varied appearances and communiques issued by the “black bloc” during the past decade and even before. However, many of those who chose these tactics in Strasbourg or elsewhere do not represent themselves as black bloc and even criticize the concept and its posturing as an identitarian trap and a media label, that mostly risks alienating people with whom it might otherwise be possible to share these types of actions. In that sense, there was no unitary coordination of “black bloc” tactics in Strasbourg, just smaller or bigger groupings and re-groupings based on affinities of many kinds: people who prepared for a certain style of action in a specific context, using connections based on diverse affinities(...).

It is particularly important not to enclose ourselves within the black bloc identity now, because this diversity of people sharing confrontational tactics is likely to increase. The so-called “crisis” that you talk about means, above all, a readjustment of capitalist domination, in which the social situation and levels of control will get harder; and with it, let’s hope, also the resistance. Diverse groups and movements are already creating a resurgence of illegal and confrontational tactics, such as kidnapping their bosses, threatening to bomb their workplaces, economic blockades, “auto-reductions” (mass shoplifting or non-payment of bills), occupations, sabotage and militant demonstrations, as part of their daily struggles. In Europe (and notably through NATO

and the convergence and coordination of security policies), armies and police are collaborating and preparing to move against social movements in the explicit expectation that things will intensify and more people will bring their rage to the streets. This context is going to challenge our strategic cleverness, our capacity not to fall into arrogant vanguardist, messianic and identitarian dynamics, and our ability to keep and create connections from inside the social movements, with all their complexities, diversity of tactics and contradictory debates.(...) »

«(...) In the context of Strasbourg, your self-guilt in saying we “used” the demonstration is misplaced. It is true that we made it more confrontational, and we contributed to making it impossible for the people who would have enjoyed to march peacefully through an isolated industrial wasteland or to try to negotiate their way through the police lines to do so. But those of us who joined the peace march with masked faces, dressed in black, with the will to confront the summit and its protectors in actions as well as words, were not a small minority: we were several thousands. The march was also “our” march.

During the G8 in Genova in 2001 and on other occasions, many people from the “black bloc” lived in “social-democratic” and “pacifist camps”, in order not to be directly repressed and isolated by the police. By comparison, even if a lot of people unfortunately were not interested in contributing in any way to the organization, the Strasbourg camp felt much more like it was “our” camp. Many of the people in the camp were anarchists or other revolutionaries, and this offensive position was reflected in a lot of the actions coming out of the camp over those days. This struggle is also our struggle, and a good part (much more, I felt, than at past summits) of the people present at the demonstration were either actively involved in confrontational tactics, or at least passively supported the more militant actions that took place. (...)»

« It is interesting that, when you talk about the arson at the hotel, you wonder whether it was worth risking someone being hurt for our actions. Asking this question in such a generalised way disturbs me. In fact, a lot of the actions we do, (as with many other less political things in life) mean taking that risk. When we take a stand against militarism and social control we are taking on some of the best resourced and most brutal military and public order institutions in the world. Every time we take our critique to the streets, especially if we do not restrict ourselves to passively parading, there is a risk that we, our companions, the cops, or someone else might get hurt, arrested or emotionally impacted by the events of the day. Any participant in a demonstration should be aware that whatever our actions, there is always the risk that we will be attacked by the police (who did not hesitate to gas and beat up non-violent demonstrators that same morning in Strasbourg). However, the situations we are willing to create and the risk we are willing to take on in each context should never be considered self-evident and beyond question. Our ethics, the levels of repression we will have to face, and the support we can expect to receive depends on it.

This is a deep and complex issue, but maybe we can try to approach it by breaking it down into “simpler questions”. For example, it is possible to say that there is an obvious difference, in terms of relationship to risk, between those of us who choose and prepare for this fight (such as ourselves or the super-protected cops who aim to block us or attack us), and the passer-by or fellow protester who have not chosen these tactics and are not prepared for violent conflict. It is not the same to risk hurting a cop during an action, or even willingly attack them when they block our way, as to risk hurting someone who was there more or less in the wrong place at the

wrong time. That does not mean that hurting a cop can be considered an interesting political aim, in and of itself, unless we seek to simply reproduce and reflect the punitive logic of the State.

What it does mean is that decisions and courses of actions that turn our protest spaces into conflict zones require careful consideration. Having diverse blocks in a demo, divided according to the tactic of choice, has sometimes worked quite well in the past. As has using different moments for different types of demonstration. On the other hand it is politically meaningful to have physical conflict coming from everywhere and not being isolated in a separate box. It's also tactically more effective as it is far more difficult for police to contain the chaos, and because it can allow many more people to participate and feel part of conflict. And then there are always the unexpected and spontaneous moments that boil over, with differing success, and which can change the cards on the table despite the best laid plans of mice and men. However, in all these cases, the fact that we reject the political forms of the traditional left, with their empty speeches, pointless demonstrations and persistent avoidance of conflict, that should not also mean that we abandon basic solidarity, which includes protecting the people who are on the same side as us but who do not want to assume such high levels of risk and repression. »

« At the Rostock anti-G8 demonstration in 2007, I had to make the heartbreaking decision between going with the black bloc or staying with my close friend who had recently broken his back and could not join in for fear of damaging his spine, and because he was psychologically traumatised by the fact that his body, which had previously been strong and invincible, had now failed him. I went on the black bloc. But it was not an easy choice. It made me realise that our capacity to physically engage in the confrontational parts of the social war is fragile. It reaffirmed the need to search for some kind of long-term radicalisation of our struggles that goes beyond the creation of pseudo-military ghettos or playgrounds for twenty-something revolutionaries. Sometimes it feels like for a 25 year old black bloc activist, being 40 or being physically incapacitated seems far away, improbable or just downright embarrassing. But if that is the case, it seems even more inconceivable that they will reach that age and still be involved in militant struggle.

Risk levels are not simply a question of political ideology. Someone facing jail for other actions, people living without papers, parents with children, or even my grandma may chose to go on a demonstration but try to stay out of trouble. We should not paralyse ourselves and our actions on that basis, because they will never please everybody. However, it is not necessarily “counter-revolutionary” to look for ways in which communities of all ages and backgrounds can come together to fight, and work together to understand our strengths and weaknesses, break barriers, and protect each other against a common enemy.

In terms of our material resistance, we have made some advances in this direction through the collective structures we have developed over the years – legal support, medical teams, collective kitchens, transport infrastructures, camp organisation, communications (such as independent media), and trauma support... These are proof of our capacity to learn from our experiences and grow as a movement. As long as they don't become separate services but remain active in the creation of political content and aims, they are part of our strength. In the light of the Greek rebellion, in a context of growing social discontent, I think the use and proliferation of these self-organised structures is going to become increasingly important.”

«(...)In your text, you describe a trap, a paradox, in which the emphatic critique of the alienation of the capitalist “desert” may, in the end, lead to an abstraction of our struggles that empties

them of any immediate meaning or tangible aims. The messianic projection that focusses on the distant final aim of a globalised insurrection tends to establish a way of thinking that disregards any in-betweens, processes, concrete victories, demands or specific struggles as boring and necessarily part of a reformist agenda that in the end will only preserve social peace... It is sometimes as if any partial and specific improvements to our lives are suspected of setting back the collapse of the system.

By finding reformist citizenship in almost all forms of dissent, we end up forgetting all their more conflictual aspects, their strengths, and their potential to evolve, and this leads us to drastically reduce the possible forms of action and alliances available to us. In my opinion, a revolutionary process should, on the contrary, take an interest in other doubtlessly fragmented and incomplete resistances, which can, nevertheless, transform the lives of the people involved. We should understand the forms of radicalisation that these resistances might undergo and how they can link in to a wider perspective. We often need starting points, issues to anchor our resistance, walls to tear down, and small, specific victories... There are many examples of large movements that kept themselves going using this double dynamic. Perhaps some of the most well known include the trajectory of the road protest movements in the UK in the 1990s that moved from single-issue struggles and victories in the field, to a more global anti-capitalist dynamic; or the way the Italian autonomous movement in the 1970's managed to link specific demands and struggles for housing, working conditions, refusals to pay bills etc. with a global revolutionary vision, and, to an extent, managed not to place one in opposition with the other.»

« Turning the tactics we adopt to respond to a particular situation into an identity has been a constant problem within parts of the “anti-capitalist” movements: We started to use drum bands (such as the Infernal Noise Brigade in the USA or the Samba Band used on J18 in London in 1999) as a tactic to increase the tension in the atmosphere and out-smart the police by moving crowds, where sound-systems in vans were not flexible or quick enough. Later, people got involved who had not participated in the political/tactical thinking, and the idea was formed that samba music was radical and revolutionary in and of itself, whatever the Samba groups did during the demonstration. The same thing happened to the Clowns... the original clown army idea - whatever you think of it - was at least based on political and tactical thinking, not on idea that clowns are revolutionary whatever the context. It is maybe easier for us to see the abstraction of a tactic from its aims and context in these examples, because we are more critical of the initial tactic, but the same can sometimes be said of more confrontational methods such as wearing balaclavas, burning garbage bins or smashing windows. (Some readers perhaps remember the 4am black bloc that left the Retterlich camp during the 2007 G8, and went out to burn garbage and build barricades in a tiny village miles from anything? I was there, it was deeply depressing!)

But I think that, despite the obvious criticisms of certain postures and gestures, they nevertheless do offer a way to deal with our fear and not give in to it, at a time when there are good reasons to be afraid, and we want to overcome that fear and be able to act.

I am very critical of the current tendency in capitalist society to promote and instrumentalise a victim mentality as though it were the only path to truth. As though recognising domination must, necessarily, cut us off from possible forms of fighting back in a strong and autonomous way. As though our struggle should, paradoxically, only structure itself around our weakness. Of course, we know, and there is no question, that the fetishisation of physical and martial strength is, at best, proto-fascist. But I believe it is necessary from time to time to take a deep breath and

to try to seriously believe in our capacity to act, and to be strong and big and wild. That said, for me it is also vital to keep the capacity to laugh (in the privacy of my own head, and amongst ourselves) at our war-like posturing. For me there is a fundamental difference between starting from a position where we believe that it is necessary to go beyond our fears, while being able to laugh and not take ourselves too seriously, and having an uncritical approach to these same, warlike attitudes.

I have seen many new people (of all genders) join our 'gangs' and drop straight into these 'macho' roles we use to overcome our fears. Often they learn to position themselves in the power structures we create (and which all too often mimic the power structures we wish to defeat) and they immerse themselves in the hero culture of the "urban guerilla warrior". (Other examples of this hero culture from our scenes include the "d.i.y. Super-squatter" and the "intransigent political intellectual"). They learn these social roles from the older anarchists and autonomists, who may or may not have a more critical approach to the use of these persona, but who rarely make these criticisms clear or explicit.

Young men are perhaps more likely to uncritically embrace the process of "competing militancies" that is rewarded by social status in our scenes. I suspect this is because (just like in other patriarchal value systems) they probably have most to gain from it. The promotion of political violence plays, sometimes in the extreme, with behaviours that feed off and feed into social conditioning around gender and power, and, to be frank, we run the risk of creating monsters! (...))

«(...)It is not totally true to say that the black bloc only works in "closed and paranoid groups". Perhaps in Strasbourg, where there was a more marked "affinity group" structure, it was more true than during "spontaneous" riots, as seen for example, in some social struggles in France in recent years, where it has sometimes been quite easy to meet and act together in the heat of the moment. But even in the black bloc in Strasbourg, I know that people who didn't know each other worked together spontaneously on some action or another. An illustration of this is the Thursday demonstration with the people from the local housing estate... Paranoias and closed groups do exist, but they exist in part because of the police, and the probability of infiltration and arrest, at least when dealing with certain types of action. This should not prevent us from actively trying to maintain much more accessible spaces and forms of struggle, but any attempt to be more open and honest and raise questions and reflections about things we do not usually talk about must take place in this context: just as both your text and mine must be written anonymously!

It is therefore difficult to find space for debate in which we don't risk creating splits and disassociations or revealing our weaknesses and other information that could be useful to our enemies. Criticisms, especially self-criticisms of "violence" are hard to hear. They come at a time when we are bombarded constantly with a strong condemnation of any means dubbed "violent" used in confrontation with State and economic violence. We hear over and over again that "violence" is a dead end, that it's contradictory, that it will just attract repression... States are trying to define any action that might weaken those in power as "terrorist", and to create a dividing line between acceptable, non-violent demonstrators and the "evil hooligans", "banlieue savages" or "anarcho-autonome". It is therefore crucial to keep our options open, maintain a variety of tools for struggles and not be reduced to being "totally harmless". In this context it is logical that we focus on defending the possibilities for and necessity of using violent tactics when necessary. In the face of attacks from all sides, it is natural that we are reluctant to add new doubts. But

perhaps we can also hope that “benevolent” critiques from within the movement could help to bring us closer to people who often keep their distance after hitting an intransigent ideological wall.

In this tense atmosphere of sometimes justified paranoia we should not allow ourselves to be painted into corners. There are very few meetings or assemblies in our circles where we haven’t taken sides, where we are free to discuss the complex relationships to and thoughts we have about what we do; where we can express the passion and drive as well as the doubt and the sense of futility. We are quick to condemn and quick to label in our desperate hunt for identity and strength, and in this context, most of us are very careful what doubts we will admit to having, because we do believe in confrontation, and we do want to participate in social war, and we don’t want to be excluded from this milieu of militants, where one incautious admission or question could have us tarred-and-feathered as a pacifist or a traitor.

However, this radical one-upmanship often proves to be counter productive, if the idea is to overcome our fears in the long term. A high percentage of people quietly disappear from our movements all over Europe. Too many people burn out or give up with their first taste of real fear or repression. This is what can happen when we push our rhetoric beyond what we are really capable of assuming in our actions, and deny or bottle up our fears instead of pushing through them. Until people still talk really big, but increasingly there are mysteriously often not enough people available to follow through with a plan on the night.

Turning the rhetoric of the “world civil war against life” into action means more than simply recreating a momentary image of the glorious, exiting heroic parts of war, like a Hollywood movie. Strategic lucidity demands that we don’t simply crystallise our struggle in a series of spectacular, climactic moments, but that we also consider the complexity of steps, preconditions, and encounters that allow these resistances to exist and give them meaning. Without denying the reality of social war, we cannot hide the fact that an increase in violence does not only bring seeds of emancipatory intensity. It also leads to all sides of the conflict closing themselves into sterile and vengeful dynamics. Most wars are, in a large part made up of a lot of boredom, stupidity and random cruelty; often punctuated by fear and even death... These evidences are no more emancipatory than they are attractive and we should neither glorify them nor turn a blind eye to them.

However, we could doubtless paralyse ourselves with self-criticism if we seek too much coherence in our actions, instead of trying to give them most leverage. We’re born into a politically individualistic environment with a low sense of collective commitment and collective beliefs, and little faith in the possibility of a revolutionary process, or an alternative social system. But if we manage to rebuild some kind of persistent involvement and strength out of our post-modern fragility, without falling into some of the religious and ideological traps of past revolutionary movements, we may find the subtle balance necessary to keep going in the long term and to avoid the massive burnouts, desertions and side-changing experienced by previous generations. (...))»

Annexe...

This is a communiqué produced by “a few ‘rioters’ from an affinity group that took part in the black bloc”. It was published on April 8th 2009 along with a “flurry of worthy quotes” taken from the media coverage of the NATO summit. We thought it was interesting to include it as a compliment to the texts published here. It is also available as a brochure in French, together with the media quotes at <http://infokiosques.net/spip.php?article684>

appendix...

« L'insurrection désoriente les partis politiques. Leur doctrine, en effet, a toujours affirmé l'inefficacité de toute épreuve de force et leur existence même est une constante condamnation de toute insurrection »*

Franz Fanon *Les damnés de la terre*,
[*The Wretched of the Earth*] 1961.

"Otan en emportent
les black blocks"

(Black Bloc communiqué, Strasbourg anti-NATO, April 2009)

* Insurrection disorients all political parties. Their doctrine, has indeed, always affirmed the ineffectiveness of any test of strength a their very existence is a constant denial of all insurrection

1. Events in Strasbourg were relatively easy to predict and probably unavoidable. Nevertheless, as in the aftermath of every counter-summit where people have had a good riot, the great and the good on both the left and right cry foul. Accusations fly that someone must have let the rioters get away with it or incited them. Some even go so far as to suggest that someone Machiavellian was the organising mind behind their actions. All political parties, even on the far-left, are suddenly competing to become the mouth piece for the most disgusting securitarian discourse. Explicitly or implicitly they regret the powerlessness of the police in the face of riotous acts. Finally it is always the same old story, an idea that is, at heart, shared by all of them, from the UMP to the Socialist party, from Attac to the National Front: it is impossible that people could be angry enough to start a riot themselves. These people must have been manipulated in some way.

2. We repeat what was already said in July 2001 following the riots in Genoa during the G8 summit: we don't need leaders to provoke us to revolt and struggle. On Saturday 4th April 2009 in Strasbourg, if we broke shop windows; if we set fires in buildings that serve the State and capitalism, (border control point, banks, a petrol station, tourism office, Hotel Ibis, etc.); If we destroyed video cameras and advertising hoardings; if we attacked the police, it is not because an occult organisation told us to do so, but because we deliberately chose it ourselves.

3. If we were able to act in this way, it is not because the police allowed us to, it is because we were several hundred, or even thousands: the infamous "international black block"! It is because the cops are not totally robots, they are human and they can feel fear too. The police probably could have tried to stop the riots faster, by shooting more at the people than just gas, baton rounds and concussion grenades. However, even in the Sarkozy-esque democracy of France today, it is not yet the done thing to kill demonstrators. On the 8th April 2009 Luc Chatel declared that "the government's priority was to ensure no one died". We are not yet a sufficient threat to their regime for that.

4. If we only acted in poor neighbourhoods around Strasbourg's industrial port it is because we lacked the strength or finesse necessary to reach the town centre. The police and the army were fiercely protecting the infamous red zone (the town centre and the bourgeois areas of the city). However, no one can seriously believe that we would not have been a lot more formidable if we had made it to those richer neighbourhoods. Despite the media hype, only institutional or commercial buildings were attacked, in the poor areas, things belonging to the local population

were left untouched.

Our fight is against power, not against those who suffer as a result of power.

5. The press and politicians try to portray the black bloc as nihilistic and bloody vandals. But the praxis of the black blocs are not limited to acts of destruction (just as our lives are not limited the black bloc, which is just a momentary and contextualised form of protest.) Black blocs practice mutual aid and complicity with all demonstrators in confronting, defending ourselves, and running away from the cops.

In a riot a spontaneous and anonymous solidarity is created, authentic in the sense that no gesture requires anything in return. There are two worlds that oppose each other in their choices and behaviours: on the one side the determined demonstrators who are here because of their convictions, desires and rage, living truly and freely. On the other side, cops under oath who are here out of a duty to orders and money, who are paid to repress and trained to think as little as possible about what it is that they do (the risk of them resigning would be too high).

6. We are all concerned by what was discussed at the NATO summit in Strasbourg. The post-colonial war led by the Western superpowers, and their internal war against the “enemy within” make us sick. Social control, management of migration flows, reinforcement of the police, improved intelligence and registration of the population... that is what we rose up against.

7. Those in power aim to continue the imposition of capitalist democracy on everyone as the only possible form of social organisation. Despite the shitty lives we live, despite the tottering of the capitalist empire in recent times, revolutionary perspectives seem so far away that we can only even imagine them with difficulty. And yet, the deeply counter-revolutionary resignation or our times is not an inevitability. It is a big challenge to manage to emancipate oneself from capitalism, through struggle and mutual aid, and that emancipation cannot coexist with capitalist and state power.

8. Knowing that another world cannot be possible without the total collapse of the globalised capitalist democratic system; knowing that “all the dominant classes will continue to defend their privileges to the bitter end with dogged perseverance and energy” (Rosa Luxemburg, *What does the Spartacus League Want?* 1918), it seems to us that sowing the seeds of chaos and destruction (to cite the sensationalist terms used by the media) at the heart of this world of oppression and social control is not so problematic. In fact, it seems to me that it is not nearly enough.

There is no possibility for revolutionary transformation of this world without a tangible power struggle. It is the task of the dominated to build new bases for social life without waiting for the consent of our dominators.

9. Recent years have been dotted with uprisings that have clearly worried those in power: riots in poor neighbourhoods in November 2005, the anti-CPE movement in spring 2006, anti-Sarkozy riots around the presidential elections in 2007, the high-school student mobilisations of 2007-2008, and lately the French state expressed their growing concern over the Greek uprising that verged on insurrection.

Just as with the Black Bloc in Strasbourg, the media focused on how young these movements were, as though trying to reduce revolt to a generational phenomenon (with all the condescending remarks along the lines of: “just you wait, in ten years, you will have forgotten all that and you will be resigned to your fate like the rest of us”).

We believe that there is an inherent danger in this attitude that needs to be overcome. An insurrection (not to mention a revolution) cannot be undertaken by the youth alone. Like the class struggle, it should be transversal and lived by all, beyond differences of age, skin colour,

gender, trade, etc. In full consciousness of the dominations and oppressions.

10. Although we are clear that overthrowing power will take more than being content to peacefully demonstrate, however many millions of people we may be, we are equally aware that a few thousand people attacking the police and vandalising state or capitalist property will not be enough.

If we were several millions it might look a bit better. All the technologies of repression and control might be not enough to contain the generalised rage.

But until then, what we do is put in place and spread common practices of resistance, specific kinds of solidarity and forms of struggle that are illegal and have a revolutionary perspective... A full kit of ideas for bringing an end to the old world with its technologies from a future that is already rotten.

Somewhere in France, 8th April 2009

A few “rioters” from an affinity group that was active inside the Black Bloc on the 4th April 2009 in Strasbourg.

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A few "rioters"
And After We Have Burnt Everything?
Correspondences about revolutionary strategy and emotions
August, 2009

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