

# **The Emperor Wears No Clothes: More on Mayday, May Day!**

John Connor

# Contents

Mass and Mayday . . . . .	4
From Where to Where? . . . . .	6

*Written by John Connor before Prague S26 for the Reflections on MayDay anthology, this article was not published in it, further underlining his point about Chiapatnik manipulation of popular assemblies and restriction of debate within their 'acceptable limits'.*

Why debate with those that won't listen? Certainly RTS isn't listening to Earth First!. After every big London street party "against capitalism", the consensus at EF! gatherings has been that capitalism isn't the totality of our oppression. RTS always accepts this, only to ignore it hyping their 'next big thing'. Rightly refusing representation, consensus conclusions at EF! gatherings are not binding and neither is RTS what it was, London EF!. Anarcho-ouvrierists who jumped on the RTS bandwagon as a result of the MayDay conferences from 1998 on — those responsible for the 'bad penny' references to capitalism — generally don't even attend EF! gatherings, reducing the participation of those that do to propaganda / recruitment exercises. If they're not prepared to listen to EF!ers criticism, the only purpose of RTSers attending EF! gatherings is to persuade others to contribute to their project on RTS's terms, increasingly necessary as this one-way 'dialogue' means fewer and fewer are willing to organise street parties each time.

At the Winter 2000 Moot, RTS were told that protesting on a bank holiday would reduce the event to mere demonstration, symbolic and not direct action, and that this lack of true focus could be disastrous. Learning that this date had been imposed by the ouvrierists post-N30 with an announcement to the media in order to boost their MayDay 2000 conference, most at the Moot said they'd organise local street parties rather than accept this *fait accompli*. Unable to heed this criticism, RTS carried on regardless, precipitating the predicted disaster and — because of the demo 'law of gravity' that builds big (London) demos at the expense of smaller (regional) ones — drawing the majority of EF!ers into it too. If there had been genuine dialogue, this disaster could have been averted, or at least mitigated by more successful local street parties.

The May Day autopsy process at the EF! Summer Gathering was another exercise in illusory participation. There were half-a-dozen workshops over the course of days with 'issues' discussed in the minutest detail and endless quibbles about process and garbled report-backs, but by the time we all reached the last session everyone (especially facilitators) was so exhausted by the same people saying the same things again and again that even the patter of rain on the meeting-space roof was excuse enough for it to fizzle out. This 'prevailing through exhaustion' technique reminded me of the old CP's, except critics get to bore themselves silly, which looks so much more participatory and leaves them feeling they only have themselves to blame! The autopsy process was made all the more futile by RTS's indifference to any conclusion that could have come out of it anyway. Even if those present had cared — and their concerns appeared limited to improving the next street party, their reason d'être, rather than whether there should be one — past experience shows that those that weren't wouldn't have.

Most depressing — and one thing that decided me to contribute to this anthology — was the discussions about 'the next big thing', Prague S26, going on parallel to the May Day autopsy at the Gathering. It was obvious from this that those hyping it had learned next to nothing. They were as wedded to the mass demo formula as ever, even though May Day had shown how problematic it was. S26's leading lights — the usual 'organisers' and 'empire-builders' — were urging passivity, stressing the objective was recruitment / propaganda and building up their contacts "for next time" rather than trying to kick the WTO out this time, in the spirit of Seattle N30. When will the WTO next be in Prague then, and why gather activists from across the world there for S26 if not to take action? Those suggesting disruption in this workshop were pointedly ignored and any that occurs is now likely to arise only as self-defence against fascist provoca-

tion, not as necessary, concerted offensive action. Throughout, the implicit agenda was leading lights aggrandising themselves by inculcating representational principles, both within EF!UK in the name of concerted action on demos (those falling for this being offered the compensation of thinking themselves ‘professionals’, ‘the select few’ in on the next trend) and beyond it in the name of international liaison.

But — again — why debate with those that won’t listen? Aside from testing the integrity of this platform (well done on that, anyway, assuming you’ve published [but they didn’t!]), this provides a space for responsibility and remembering, both things RTS aren’t hot on, now even revising their ‘No M11’ roots. I’m not saying they should stupidly ‘stand up and be busted’, just that the ‘house style’ is against future best effort. Hopefully elsewhere in this anthology, Squall’s Jim Paton has put the counter-argument to the ‘official version’ that May Day was somehow really about guerrilla gardening in Parliament Square and everything that happened elsewhere is to be blanked. I’ll take this opportunity to point to an elsewhere, Euston N30, where RTS offered no analysis and little comment on police provocation and subsequent easy containment of that event (‘the kettle’), rendering everyone vulnerable to carbon-copy treatment by the Met on May Day. This failure to acknowledge and learn from past mistakes means there are still idiots out there insisting ‘J18 was great’ as if every subsequent event will be a simple replay. They’re evidently totally oblivious to the law of diminishing returns operating with these mass demos or even such obvious local factors as demonstrators being unfocused and less up for it on May Day v. the Met being better prepared, resourced and trained to deal with public order situations than City police on what was their own best patch, central London. The point of debating here is not to appeal to those RTSers that won’t listen, but to others that will.

## Mass and Mayday

One distinction made endlessly at the Summer 2000 Gathering was between big demos and mass demos. The latter were characterised as exercises in manipulation, a small number of organisers steering a large number of other, ignorant people where they wanted them to go to do what they wanted them to do. Another feature of this is RTS propaganda being dished out on the day to facilitate this process and to represent to participants and, more importantly, the media what the spectacle ‘really means’. RTS came in for a lot of criticism for the content of literature issued during J18 (some spuriously equating criticism of finance capital with anti-Semitism!), but almost none for presuming to represent the views of the majority of participants per se. These leaflets often present anti-globalisation issues in the opposite of concrete terms, adequate for disseminating ‘group-think’ jargon to the faithful but — as the May Day disaster demonstrated — the opposite of useful. Perhaps it’s a good thing that the emphasis on sound systems has now reduced, but the mass of people on events like May Day are really there for the party and adventure, not because of ‘issues’, and RTS’s current manipulative style only encourages this passive consumption of protest. Given their indifference to the motivations of the majority (and their ineffectiveness in disseminating their brand of ideology), is it surprising that most come to street parties with mainstream media-created expectations of them and act accordingly? (One plus: this blows all peace police talk of imposing ground-rules on street parties out the water). Figleaves to ‘popular participation’ like the microphones in Parliament Square aren’t enough — they were dead on the day and even if they hadn’t been, they’d have been used either to vent hot air (as

with the Gathering autopsy) or by RTS to issue authoritative crowd directions (such de facto stewarding might have been necessary under the circumstances they'd contrived, perhaps, but hardly counts as 'popular participation').

Another problem with this representation is the shift in RTS manifestations from direct to symbolic action. The protest is about 'sending a message' rather than achieving anything in itself, what direct action is. This is a surrender of power to others supposed to act on the message rather than doing it yourself. The movement-building but not movement-doing tendency revealed by the approach of some organising Prague S26 is a variant of this and a symptom of the same problem — a slide into representation. The concern is with what looks impressive (numbers and publicity: spectacle) rather than with what is actually effective (direct action). Early RTS street parties were primarily direct action, pedestrians temporarily reclaiming space from cars. Reclaiming space from capital doesn't mean anything on the same level — its temporary too but symbollocks because capitalism is more diffuse process than concrete place. As the original RTS Internet posting had an article by Graham Burdett in *Green Anarchist* 30 down as the inspiration for the guerrilla gardening on May Day, I particular want to take issue with this. Inspired by Anthony Wigen's classic, *The Clandestine Farm*, Graham's article suggested guerrilla gardening as a clandestine subsistence activity for small groups in diverse geographical locations, not a throwaway media stunt. No doubt a few will point to the odd dope plant left in Parliament Square as evidence that the guerrilla gardening was actually somehow 'direct action', but none of the veg planted then has fed anyone since, nor was it intended to. Endless blurb about the utopian potential of this action proves its symbolic intent — or else it wouldn't have been done publicly and en masse, and it wouldn't need explanation because in feeding people, its meaning would be directly obvious. I thought there was something particularly hollow about RTSers pitching May Day to 'send a message' symbolically and then take umbrage when this didn't work out as they expected. What did they expect, given the reception they've always had from the mainstream media? Particularly noteworthy was the outrage directed against George Monbiot, supposedly 'one of us', for his *Guardian* piece despite endless previous proof of his moderation. Notably, this vitriol was not also thrown at *The Ecologist's* Zac Goldsmith for a *Telegraph* piece equally hostile but also pushing his magazine's very Right-wing 'oppose corporations, not capitalism' and 'family, nation and tradition against globalisation' lines. Then again, the Goldsmiths have put a lot more dosh into EF! UK through the back door than George Monbiot ever has...

I'd have thought it was *prima facie* unacceptable to pro-anarchy types to have a manipulative, hierarchical relationship between organisers and organised and — for what it's worth — RTSers readily accepted this at the last Gathering. Affinity groups were suggested as a 'half-way house' solution, allowing big demos based on principles other than mass. Manchester's May Day protest, where each group participating was given an action kit, was cited as an example of this in practice. However, this only involved a few hundred people, rather than the thousands attracted to big London street parties, and if they have trouble handing out enough leaflets, enough action kits is clearly going to be beyond their means. Perhaps this is a way for enlarging the number of active participants in a demo, but it still suggests central direction (eg. through issuing instructions in the action kits) and thus mass action with all the problems associated with that, just at one more remove. There's also the problem of large numbers of out-of-it or leery people turning up anyway, led on by mass media expectations and not interested in this more self-directed activity. The most likely consequence of this is going to be a few hundred activist types acting in affinity groups and using the mass of others attending as cover, much as during J18. As well as being little

more than a replay of previous elitism, current police containment tactics mean the time for this is past. Some will argue for this anyway, reasoning that getting large numbers of people together at a street party is more likely to win the 'issue' publicity and that some of those attending may 'join the movement' and take direct action later — propaganda / recruitment arguments. The difficulty with 'publicity' is that — as MA'M found to their cost, with the Met telling the mainstream media they were containing anti-monarchy demos MA'M never even called — is that the authorities now know the script and are scoring more points this way than the movement is, hardly surprising given the media's own biases and the police's better access to and control over it. Traditionally, a slagging from police mouthpieces in the mainstream media was simply adjudged the inevitable cost of effective direct action — but with the slide into representation, we're getting a situation of bad publicity and no direct action either by way of compensation! No doubt the Met are thanking RTS for all that (unnecessary) bank holiday overtime too. A particular point to note here — and to show how the direct action movement moves in cycles — is that the authorities had no difficulty dealing with one-off / one-day disruption of the sort most street parties represents. During the early days of EF!UK, there were a series of blockades against tropical timber imports. The cops actually instructed mill owners targeted to shut down for the day, knowing blockaders and media would have a very boring day ahead (detering both from future blockades) and the mill concerned could happily carry on with deforestation-as-usual the other 364 days of the year. This proved so successful that EF!UK was in a tail-spin until the start of the anti-roads campaign.

## From Where to Where?

To summarise, RTS has gone from being a direct action movement superseding the traditional Left by uniting means and ends and effectively targeting what is specific and concrete, to a clique publicising grievances against airy abstractions using symbols, claiming to represent others probably indifferent to these ends by manipulating them into attending mass demos mainly for propaganda / recruitment purposes, like any Trotskyite party but without the ideological coherence. Before discussing alternatives, we need to ask how they made this transition.

Out of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Encuentro for Human Dignity and Against Neo-Liberalism in Spain, RTS offshoot Peoples Global Action absorbed the Zapatistas anti-globalisation / anti-capitalist rhetoric and their penchant for delegates and mass organising (much of which is in the interest of the Zapatistas as a state-in-waiting, rather than the peasantry they presume to represent and whose 'popular assemblies' they manipulate true to their Maoist form). With anti-roads campaigns reaching a hiatus, the direct action movement looked to globalisation and capitalism as root causes for environmental degradation, especially when national regulations against it could be overridden by the likes of the WTO. Because of RTS's effectiveness in opposing roads using direct action and their rather inarticulate anti-capitalist concerns, they linked with workers groups like the striking Liverpool dockers. 'Linked' is a shaky term here, implying formal agreement between formally-demarcated bodies, much like the old Left used to do. This wasn't what was going on, but the idea of representatives with their contacts squirreled away 'fixing things' by acting as de facto delegates to workers groups in the name of anti-capitalism and the international anti-globalisation network obviously appealed to such people. Recognising a rhetoric and organising techniques increasingly like their own, RTS's public activities drew in the anarcho-ouvrierists

in a last-ditch throw to revitalise their tail-ending politics, something RTS had itself done much to discredit in the mid-1990s. With this came substantial back-doors bungs from the ouvrierists allies Chumbawamba, flush from signing to EMI, which further led to the use of catch-penny anti-capitalist rhetoric, discredited mass organising techniques, and secretiveness amongst the clique. Having an ability to deliver numbers to order is a big asset here, ultimately leading to absurdities like May Day, where a few people manoeuvred many others into a situation there was no opportunity for real direct action available whatsoever.

In terms of alternatives, we need to look why the anarcho-ouvrierist milieu failed before RTS repeats all of its mistakes. Their suggestion is that we need the active co-operation of the majority — typically identified in the vaguest terms as the working class — to make revolution, so we must adopt policies that will appeal to this majority and avoid issues and actions that won't. By opting to struggle for a Cause as abstract from themselves (despite rhetoric, ouvrierists often make the revealing slip of calling the mass of people in society 'they' even if they're working class themselves — their particular sect is, of course, 'we'), this perspective is inevitably ideologised and shot through with all the difficulties of ideology. These include mistaking ideology for a complete world-view clashing with all others slightly different — such difference becoming a challenge to sectarian loyalties and power bases — slides into unthinking dogma, and a cult of self-sacrifice / self-denial akin to the repression / work fetishism that built this society and which is ultimately Christian in origin. Such a perspective is the worst concomitant of representation, intrinsically inauthentic and so inappropriate as a force for liberation. As proposing or acting on anything this majority aren't already would be 'substitutionalist', anarcho-ouvrierist found themselves trailing behind various groups in dispute, repeating demands reformists were more likely to win them. Despite this, they claimed to represent the whole working class rather than only their own small group (or even just themselves), though the former hardly noticed them and would be most unimpressed if it did. The idea (often tricked up as 'counter-power') is to take the State's legitimacy for themselves and then somehow to free the majority of society using this power. Concerned with mass mobilisation, they've never really dealt with the difficulties of delegating power and representing others in an authentically accountable way because that would discredit their whole perspective. As RTS are rapidly discovering and as any simple review of history would have shown them, you just can't.

Rather than attempting to seize power or represent anyone but ourselves, we should recognise that we aren't struggling for anyone else — our concern is with our own liberation, although by struggling against what oppresses us, we will contribute to the liberation of others also oppressed by it. The alternative to this is the cult of self-sacrifice / self-denial discussed above, intrinsically a dead-end. There is nothing to stop this being a collective process, struggling with and alongside others, but it's not an act of charity that we can put off to return to some privileged background or whatever (I've seen too many ideologue-turned-bosses). The point is not to get others to 'join up' or for us to act on their behalf, but for them to take action by and for themselves. The most we can expect to teach by example is technique and maybe a little defiance. Our role shouldn't be counter-power, but the destruction of power and how it is applied to hold together and hold down this society. At its inception, I thought RTS's street parties could contribute to this as the focus on pleasure and the immediate got over difficulties of ideologisation and self-sacrifice / self-denial as well as the rigid distinctions that typified ouvrierist politics. I can now see how they've been recuperated into a form of passive mass entertainment or a ritual of blowing off steam at best — Carnival's traditional role in preserving society through a one-day concession

by gratifying the immediate desires of the mass — and actually acts as a surrender of initiative and self-determination.

Acting from clandestinity at times and places of our choosing and allowing our actions to speak for themselves inasmuch as they make more activity by more people possible should be enough as an alternative and should stop any unwanted legitimacy accruing to us. This is not to create a platform to put demands to the WTO or whoever to change their policies, it's a way of stopping the implementation of these policies on the ground until they have to pack them in. Though tainted with reformism, the anti-GM crops campaign is an approximate example of this in action. Relatively small-scale crop trashings by a small but determined minority picking where, when and how they wanted to take such action, whether in conjunction with others emphasising different tactics or not, has proved uncontrollably flexible and a lot more effective in challenging globalisation in practice than any of the big London demos. I don't want to get drawn too much into questions of whether this small group approach would have been as effective as J18 or N30 Seattle, not least because trying to attack where the system is strongest rather than where it is most vulnerable is frankly not smart tactics, but note here on J18 that any action was just down to a few hundred active people organised in affinity groups and a very inexperienced police force. On Seattle N30, it doesn't take 10,000s to shut down any modern city, just a dedicated few in the right places who know what they're doing (also — the SWP's opportunistic, revisionist accounts notwithstanding — it wasn't the mass blockades but the looting of the few dozen involved in the Black Block that encouraged the local underclass to loot too, and it was this that provoked the state of emergency that forced the WTO from Seattle). One tragedy has been the amount of effort diverted from this into one-off symbolic mass actions well-signposted ahead which the police and media can easily contain, both physically and ideologically. Actions in decentralised campaigns cited don't take half a year (and half a rainforest of leaflets) to organise and they don't need big clandestine funders exerting their corrosive influence either (in fact, revolutionaries should make it a rule of thumb not to get together actions any bigger than they can fund from amongst themselves using their own resources, to ensure transparency and human scale). It seems whenever anyone wants to protest anything now, they just ritually intone: 'why not organise a street party?' or, even more pathetically, 'why not get RTS to organise a street party?'. Instead of saying something so brainless and now — given the sophistication of current police tactics — pointless, it is past time we, ourselves, resisted actively.



The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



John Connor  
The Emperor Wears No Clothes: More on Mayday, May Day!

Retrieved on Januray 1, 2005 from [www.greenanarchist.org](http://www.greenanarchist.org)  
from *Green Anarchist* #66

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)