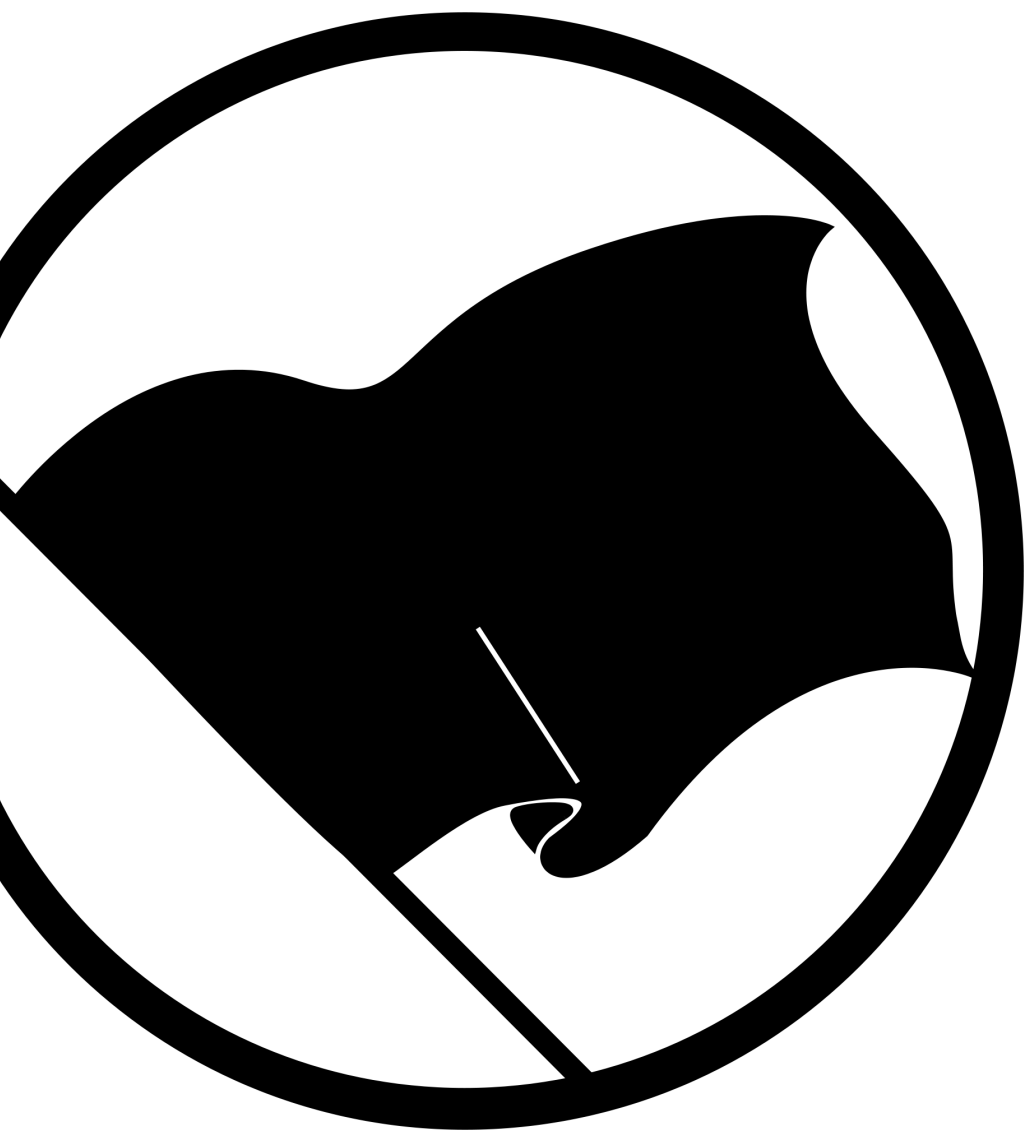


# Anarchy Works

# **Revolution**



Peter Gelderloos

*This text was taken from Chapter 6 of the book Anarchy Works by Peter Gelderloos.*

To put an end to all coercive hierarchies and open space for organizing a horizontal, liberated society, people must overcome the repressive powers of the state, abolish all institutions of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy, and create communities that organize themselves without new authorities.

### **How could people organized horizontally possibly overcome the state?**

If anarchists believe in voluntary action and decentralized organization, how could they ever be strong enough to topple a government with a professional army? In fact, strong anarchist and anti-authoritarian movements have defeated armies and governments in a number of revolutions. Often this occurs in periods of economic crisis, when the state lacks vital resources, or political crisis, when the state has lost the illusion of legitimacy.

The Soviet revolution of 1917 did not begin as the authoritarian terror it became after Lenin and Trotsky hijacked it. It was a multiform rebellion against the Tsar and against capitalism. It included such diverse actors as Socialist Revolutionaries, republicans, syndicalists, anarchists, and Bolsheviks. The soviets themselves were spontaneous non-party worker councils that organized along anti-authoritarian lines. The Bolsheviks gained control and ultimately suppressed the revolution by playing an effective political game that included co-opting or sabotaging the soviets, taking over the military, manipulating and betraying allies, and negotiating with imperialist powers. The Bolsheviks adeptly established themselves as the new government, and their allies made the mistake of believing their revolutionary rhetoric.

One of the first actions of the Bolshevik government was to sign a backstabbing peace treaty with the German and Austrian Empires. To pull out of World War I and free up the army for domestic action, the Leninists ceded the imperialists a treasure trove of money and strategic resources, and bequeathed them the country of Ukraine — without consulting the Ukrainians. Peasants in southern Ukraine rose up in revolt, and it was there that anarchism was strongest during the Soviet revolution. The rebels called themselves the Revolutionary Insurgent Army. They were commonly described as Makhnovists, after Nestor Makhno, their most influential military strategist and a skilled anarchist organizer. Makhno had been released from prison after the revolution in February 1917, and he returned to his hometown to organize an anarchist militia to fight the occupying German and Austrian forces.

As the insurrectionary anarchist army grew, it developed a more formal structure to allow for strategic coordination along several fronts, but it remained a volunteer militia, based on peasant support. Guiding questions of policy and strategy were decided in general meetings of peasants and workers. Aided rather than hindered by their flexible, participatory structure and strong support from the peasants, they liberated an area roughly 300 by 500 miles across, containing 7 million inhabitants, centered around the town of Gulyai-Polye. At times, the cities surrounding this anarchist zone — Alexandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav (now named Zaporizhye and Dnipropetrovsk, respectively) as well as Melitopol, Mariupol and Berdyansk, were freed

from the control of the state, though they changed hands several times throughout the war. Self-organization along anarchist lines was deployed more consistently in the rural areas in these tumultuous years. In Gulyai-Polye, the anarchists set up three secondary schools and gave money expropriated from banks to orphanages. Throughout the area, literacy increased among the peasants.

In addition to taking on the Germans and Austrians, the anarchists also fought off the forces of nationalists who tried to subjugate the newly independent country under a homegrown Ukrainian government. They went on to hold the southern front against the armies of the White Russians — the aristocratic, pro-capitalist army funded and armed largely by the French and Americans — while their supposed allies, the Bolsheviks, withheld guns and ammunition and began purging anarchists to stop the spread of anarchism emanating from the Makhnovist territory. The White Russians eventually broke through the starved southern front, and reconquered Gulyai-Polye. Makhno retreated to the West, drawing off a large portion of the White armies, the remainder of which beat back the Red Army and advanced steadily towards Moscow. At the battle of Peregenovka, in western Ukraine, the anarchists obliterated the White army pursuing them. Although they were outnumbered and outgunned, they carried the day by effectively executing a series of brilliant maneuvers developed by Makhno, who had no military education or expertise. The volunteer anarchist army raced back to Gulyai-Polye, liberating the countryside and several major cities from the Whites. This sudden reversal cut off the supply lines of the armies that had almost reached Moscow, forcing them to retreat and saving the Russian Revolution.

For another year, an anarchist society again flourished in and around Gulyai-Polye, despite the efforts of Lenin and Trotsky to repress the anarchists there the way they had repressed them throughout Russia and the rest of Ukraine. When another White incursion under General Wrangel threatened the revolution, the Makhnovists again agreed to join the Communists against the imperialists, despite the earlier betrayal. The anarchist contingent accepted a suicide mission to take out enemy gun positions on the Perekop isthmus of Crimea; they succeeded in this and went on to capture the strategic city of Simferopol, again playing a crucial role in defeating the Whites. After the victory, the Bolsheviks surrounded and massacred most of the anarchist contingent, and occupied Gulyai-Polye and executed many influential anarchist organizers and fighters. Makhno and a few others escaped and confounded the massive Red Army with an effective campaign of guerrilla warfare for many months, even causing several major defections; in the end, however, the survivors decided to escape to the West. Some peasants in Ukraine retained their anarchist values, and raised the anarchist banner as part of the partisan resistance against Nazis and Stalinists during the Second World War. Even today, the red and black flag is a symbol of Ukrainian independence, though few people know its origins.

The Makhnovists of southern Ukraine maintained their anarchist character under extremely difficult conditions: constant warfare, betrayal and repression by sup-

posed allies, lethal pressures that required them to defend themselves with organized violence. In these circumstances they continued to fight for liberty, even when it was not in their military interests. They repeatedly interceded to prevent pogroms against Jewish communities while the Ukrainian nationalists and Bolsheviks fanned the flames of anti-Semitism to provide a scapegoat for the problems they themselves were exacerbating. Makhno personally killed a neighboring warlord and potential ally upon learning he had ordered pogroms, even at a time when he desperately needed allies.<sup>1</sup>

During October and November [1919], Makhno occupied Ekaterinoslav and Aleksandrovsk for several weeks, and thus obtained his first chance to apply the concepts of anarchism to city life. Makhno's first act on entering a large town (after throwing open the prisons) was to dispel any impression that he had come to introduce a new form of political rule. Announcements were posted informing the townspeople that henceforth they were free to organize their lives as they saw fit, that the Insurgent Army would not "dictate to them or order them to do anything." Free speech, press, and assembly were proclaimed, and in Ekaterinoslav half a dozen newspapers, representing a wide range of political opinion, sprang up overnight. While encouraging freedom of expression, however, Makhno would not countenance any political organization which sought to impose their authority on the people. He therefore dissolved the Bolshevik "revolutionary committees" (*revkomy*) in Ekaterinoslav and Aleksandrovsk, instructing their members to "take up some honest trade."<sup>2</sup>

The Makhnovists stuck to defending the region, leaving socio-economic organization to the individual towns and cities; this hands-off approach to others was matched by an internal emphasis on direct democracy. Officers were elected from within every sub-group of fighters, and they could be recalled by that same group; they were not saluted, they did not receive material privileges, and they could not lead from behind to avoid the risks of combat.

In contrast, officers in the Red Army were appointed from above and received privileges and higher pay on the scale of the Tsarist Army. In fact the Bolsheviks had es-

1 Some mainstream sources still contest that the Makhnovists were behind anti-Semitic pogroms in Ukraine. In *Nestor Makhno, Anarchy's Cossack*, Alexandre Skirda traces this claim to its roots in anti-Makhno propaganda, while citing unfriendly contemporary sources who acknowledged that the Makhnovists were the only military units not carrying out pogroms. He also references propaganda put out by the Makhnovists attacking anti-Semitism as a tool of the aristocracy, Jewish militias that fought among the Makhnovists, and actions against pogromists personally carried out by Makhno.

2 Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, Oakland: AK Press, 2005, p. 218.

entially taken over the structure and personnel of the Tsarist Army after the October Revolution. They retained most of the officers but reformed it into a “people’s army” by adding political officers responsible for identifying “counter-revolutionaries” to be purged. They also adopted the imperialist practice of stationing soldiers far across the continent from their homes, in areas where they did not speak the language, so they would be more likely to obey orders to repress locals and less likely to desert.

To be sure, the Revolutionary Insurgent Army enforced a strict discipline, shooting suspected spies and those who abused the peasants for personal gain such as embezzlers and rapists. The insurgents must have held many of the same powers over the civilian population as does any army. Among their many opportunities to abuse that power, some of them probably did. However, their relationship with the peasants was unique among the military powers. The Makhnovists could not survive without popular support, and during their lengthy guerrilla war against the Red Army many peasants provided them with horses, food, lodging, medical help, and intelligence gathering. In fact the peasants themselves provided the majority of the anarchist fighters.

It is also debated how democratic the Makhnovist organizations were. Some historians say Makhno exerted substantial control over the “free soviets” — the non-party assemblies where workers and peasants made decisions and organized their affairs. Even sympathetic historians relate anecdotes of Makhno bullying delegates he saw as counter-revolutionary in meetings. But one must weigh these against the many occasions Makhno refused positions of power, or the fact that he left the Military Revolutionary Soviet, the assembly that decided military policy for the peasant militias, in an attempt to save the movement from the Bolshevik repression<sup>3</sup>.

One criticism the Bolsheviks had of the Makhnovists was that their Military Revolutionary Soviet, the closest thing they could have had to a dictatorial organization, wielded no real power — it was really just an advisory group — while individual workers’ groups and peasant communities retained their autonomy. More charitable is the description by Soviet historian Kubanin: “the supreme body of the insurgent army was its Military Revolutionary Soviet, elected at a general assembly of all insurgents. Neither the overall command of the army nor Makhno himself truly ran the movement; they merely reflected the aspirations of the mass, acting as its ideological and technical agents.” Another Soviet historian, Yefimov, says “No decision was ever taken by just one individual. All military matters were debated in common.”<sup>4</sup>

Grossly outnumbered and outgunned volunteer anarchist militias successfully defeated the armies of the Germans, the Austrians, the Ukrainian nationalists, and

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3 Makhno hoped that Lenin and Trotsky were motivated by a personal vendetta against him rather than an absolute desire to crush the free soviets, and would call off the repression if he left.

4 Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno, Anarchy’s Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917–1921*, London: AK Press, 2005, p. 314.

the White Russians. It took a professional army supplied by the world's greatest industrial powers and simultaneous betrayal by their allies to stop them. If they had known then what we know now — that authoritarian revolutionaries can be as tyrannical as capitalist governments — and Russian anarchists in Moscow and St. Petersburg had succeeded in preventing the Bolsheviks from hijacking the Russian Revolution, things might have turned out differently.

Even more impressive than the example provided by the Makhnovists is the victory won by several indigenous nations in 1868. In a two year war, thousands of warriors from the Lakota and Cheyenne nations defeated the US military and destroyed several army forts during what became known as Red Cloud's War. In 1866, the Lakota met with the US government at Fort Laramie because the latter wanted permission to build a military trail through the Powder River country to facilitate the influx of white settlers who were seeking gold. The US military had already defeated the Arapaho in its attempt to open the area for white settlers, but they had been unable to defeat the Lakota. During the negotiations it became apparent that the US government had already started the process of building military forts along this trail, without even having secured permission for the trail itself. The Oglala Lakota war chief Red Cloud promised to resist any white attempts to occupy the area. Nonetheless in the summer of 1866 the US military began sending more troops to the region and constructing new forts. Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors following the direction of Red Cloud began a campaign of guerrilla resistance, effectively closing down the Bozeman trail and harassing the troops stationed in the forts. The military sent down the order for an aggressive winter campaign, and on December 21, when their wood train was attacked yet again, an army of about one hundred US soldiers decided to pursue. They met a decoy party including the Oglala warrior Crazy Horse and took the bait. The entire force was defeated and killed by a force of 1,000–3,000 warriors that waited in ambush. The commanding officer of the white soldiers was knifed to death in hand to hand combat. The Lakota left a young bugle boy who fought with just his bugle covered in a buffalo robe as a sign of honor — with such acts the indigenous warriors demonstrated the possibility of a much more respectful form of warfare, in contrast with the white soldiers and settlers who often cut out fetuses from pregnant women and used the amputated genitals of unarmed victims as tobacco pouches.

In the summer of 1867 US troops with new repeating rifles fought the Lakota to a standstill in two battles, but they failed to carry out any successful offensives. In the end, they asked for peace talks, which Red Cloud said he would only grant if the new military forts were abandoned. The US government agreed, and in the peace talks they recognized the rights of the Lakota to the Black Hills and Powder River country, a huge area currently occupied by the states of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Montana.

During the war, the Lakota and Cheyenne organized without coercion or military

discipline. But contrary to the typical dichotomies, their relative lack of hierarchy did not hamper their ability for organization. On the contrary, they held together during a brutal war on the basis of a collective, self-motivated discipline and varying forms of organization. In a Western army, the most important unit is the military police or the officer who walks behind the troops, pistol loaded and ready to shoot anyone who turns and runs. The Lakota and Cheyenne had no need for discipline imposed from above. They were fighting to defend their land and way of life, in groups bound by kinship and affinity.

Some fighting groups were structured with a chain of command, while others operated in a more collective fashion, but all of them voluntarily rallied around individuals with the best organizational abilities, spiritual power, and combat experience. These war chiefs did not control those who followed them so much as inspire them. When morale was low or a fight looked hopeless, groups of warriors often went home, and they were always free to do so. If a chief declared war, he had to go, but no one else did, so a leader who could not convince anyone to follow him to war was engaging in an embarrassing and even suicidal venture. In contrast, politicians and generals in Western society frequently start unpopular wars, and they are never the ones to suffer the consequences.

The warrior societies played an important role in the indigenous organization of warfare, but women's societies were vital as well. They played a role similar to that of the Quartermaster in Western armies, provisioning food and materials, except that where the Quartermaster is a simple cog obeying orders, the Lakota and Cheyenne women would refuse to cooperate if they disagreed with the reasons for a war. Considering that one of Napoleon's most important contributions to European warfare was the insight that "an army marches on its stomach," it becomes apparent that Lakota and Cheyenne women exercised more power in the affairs of their nations than the histories written by men and white people would lead us to believe. Additionally, women who chose to could fight alongside the men.

Despite being impossibly outnumbered by the US military and white settler paramilitaries, the Native Americans won. After Red Cloud's War, the Lakota and Cheyenne enjoyed nearly a decade of autonomy and peace. Contrary to pacifist allegations about militant resistance, the victors did not begin oppressing one another or creating uncontrollable cycles of violence just because they had violently fought off the white invaders. They won themselves several years of freedom and peace.

In 1876, the US military again invaded the Lakota territory to attempt to force them to live on the reservations, which were being transformed into concentration camps as part of the campaign of genocide against the indigenous populations. Several thousand troops were involved, and they met with several early defeats, the most notable of which was the Battle of Greasy Grass Creek, also known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Around 1,000 Lakota and Cheyenne warriors, defending themselves from an attack, decimated the cavalry unit commanded by George A. Custer and killed several hundred soldiers. Custer himself had previously invaded



Lakota lands to spread reports of gold and provoke another wave of white settlers, who were a major driving force for the genocide. The settlers, aside from being an armed paramilitary force responsible for a large share of the encroachments and murders, provided a sufficient pretext for bringing in the military. The logic was that those poor homesteaders, in the act of invading another country, had to be defended from “marauding Indians.” The US government ultimately won the war against the Lakota, by attacking their villages, invading their hunting grounds, and instituting strong repression against the people living on the reservations. One of the last to surrender was the Oglala warrior Crazy Horse, who had been one of the most effective leaders in the fight against the US military. After his group agreed to come into the reservation, Crazy Horse was arrested and assassinated.

Their ultimate defeat does not indicate a weakness in the horizontal organization of the Lakota and Cheyenne so much as the fact that the white American population trying to exterminate them outnumbered these indigenous groups by a thousand to one, and had the ability to spread disease and drug addiction on their home turf while destroying their food source.

Lakota resistance never ended, and they may win their war in the end. In December 2007, a group of Lakota again asserted their independence, informing the US State Department that they were withdrawing from all treaties, which had already been broken by the settler government, and seceding, as a necessary measure in the face of “colonial apartheid conditions.”<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most uncompromising struggles against the state are indigenist. Current indigenist struggles have created some of the only zones in North America that enjoy physical and cultural autonomy and have successfully defended themselves in periodic confrontations with the state. These struggles typically do not identify themselves as anarchist, and perhaps for this reason anarchists have even more to learn from them. But if learning is not to be another commodity relation, an act of acquisition, it must be accompanied by horizontal relationships of reciprocity, which is to say, solidarity.

The Mohawk nation have long fought against colonization and in 1990 they won a major victory against the forces of the settler state. In Kanehsatake territory, near Montreal, white people in the town of Oka wanted to expand a golf course at the expense of a forested area in which a Mohawk graveyard was located, sparking native protests. In the spring of 1990, Mohawks set up a camp there and blocked the road. On July 11, 1990, Quebec police attacked the encampment with tear gas and automatic weapons, but the Mohawk defenders were armed and dug in. One cop was shot and killed and the rest ran away. The police cars, which they had left behind in panic, were used to build new barricades. Meanwhile, Mohawk warriors at Kahnawake blocked Mercier Bridge, halting commuter traffic to Montreal. Police began a siege of the Mohawk communities, but more warriors came, smuggling in supplies. The resisters organized food, medical care, and communications services,

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5 Amy Goodman, “Lakota Indians Declare Sovereignty from US Government,” *Democracy Now!*, December 26, 2007.

and the blockades persisted. White mobs formed in neighboring towns and rioted, demanding police violence to open the bridge and restore traffic. Later in August, these mobs attacked a group of Mohawks while police stood by.

On August 20, the blockades were still going strong, and the Canadian military took over the siege from the police. In total 4,500 troops were deployed, backed by tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, fighter jets, artillery, and naval ships. On September 18, Canadian soldiers raided Tekakwitha Island, shooting tear gas and bullets. The Mohawks fought back and the soldiers had to be evacuated by helicopter. Across Canada, native people protested in solidarity with the Mohawk, occupying buildings, blocking railroads and highways, and carrying out acts of sabotage. Unknown people burned down railway bridges in British Columbia and Alberta, and cut down five hydro-electric towers in Ontario. On September 26, the remaining besieged Mohawk declared victory and walked out, having burned their weapons. The golf course was never expanded, and most of those arrested were acquitted of weapons and riot charges. "Oka served to revitalize the warrior spirit of indigenous peoples and our will to resist."<sup>6</sup>

At the end of the '90s, the World Bank threatened not to renew a major loan on which the Bolivian government depended if they did not agree to privatize all water services in the city of Cochabamba. The government conceded and signed a contract with a consortium headed up by corporations from England, Italy, Spain, the US, and Bolivia. The water consortium, lacking knowledge of local conditions, immediately raised the rates, to the point where many families had to pay a fifth of their monthly earnings just for water. On top of this they enforced a policy of shutting off the water of any household that did not pay. In January 2000, major protests erupted against the water privatization. Primarily indigenous peasants converged on the city, joined by retired workers, sweatshop employees, street vendors, homeless youth, students, and anarchists. Protestors seized the central plaza and barricaded major roads. They organized a general strike which paralyzed the city for four days. On February 4 a major protest march was attacked by police and soldiers. Two hundred demonstrators were arrested, while seventy people and fifty-one cops were injured.

In April people again seized the central plaza of Cochabamba, and when the government began arresting organizers, protests spread to the cities of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí, as well as many rural villages. Most major highways throughout the country were blockaded. On April 8, the Bolivian president declared a 90 day state of siege, banning meetings of more than 4 people, restricting political activity, allowing arbitrary arrests, establishing curfews, and putting the radio stations under military control. Police occasionally joined the demonstrators to demand higher pay, even participating in some riots. Once the government raised their salaries, they returned to work and continued beating and arresting their erstwhile comrades. Across the country people fought against the police and military with stones and molotov cocktails, suffering many injuries and multiple deaths. On April 9, soldiers

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6 From an anonymous illustrated pamphlet, "The 'Oka Crisis' "

trying to remove a roadblock encountered resistance and shot two protestors to death, injuring several others. Neighbors attacked the soldiers, seized their weapons, and opened fire. Later they stormed a hospital and seized an army captain they had wounded, and lynched him.

As violent protests only showed signs of growing despire, and often because of, repeated killings and violent repression by the police and military, the state cancelled its contract with the water consortium and on April 11 annulled the law that had authorized the privatization of water in Cochabamba. Management of the water infrastructure was turned over to a community coordinating group that had arisen from the protest movement. Some participants in the struggle subsequently travelled to Washington, D.C. to join antiglobalization protestors in the demonstration intended to shut down the annual World Bank meeting.<sup>7</sup>

The complaints of the protestors moved far beyond water privatization in one city. The resistance had generalized to a social rebellion that included socialist rejections of neoliberalism, anarchist rejections of capitalism, farmers' rejections of their debts, poor people's demands for lower fuel prices and the end of multinational ownership of Bolivia's gas, and indigenous demands for sovereignty. Similarly fierce resistance in subsequent years defeated Bolivia's political elite on a number of occasions. Farmers and anarchists armed with dynamite took over banks to win the forgiveness of their debts. Under intense popular pressure, the government nationalized the extraction of gas, and a powerful union of indigenous farmers defeated the US-backed program of coca eradication. The coca farmers even got their leader, Evo Morales, elected president, giving Bolivia its first indigenous head of state. Because of this, Bolivia is currently facing a political crisis the government may be incapable of resolving, as the traditional elite, located in the white, eastern areas of the country, refuse to submit to the progressive policies of the Morales government. In the rural areas, indigenous communities used more direct means to preserve their autonomy. They continued blockading highways, and sabotaged attempts of government control of their villages through daily acts of resistance. On no fewer than a dozen occasions when a particular mayor or other government official proved especially intrusive or abusive, he would be lynched by the villagers.

Decentralized resistance can defeat the government in an armed standoff — it can also overthrow governments. In 1997, government corruption and an economic collapse sparked a massive insurrection in Albania. In a matter of months, people armed themselves and forced the government and secret police to flee the country. They did not set up a new government or unite under a political party. Rather, they pushed out the state to create autonomous areas where they could organize their own lives. The rebellion spread spontaneously; without central leadership or even coordination. People across the country identified the state as their oppressor and attacked. Prisons were opened and police stations and government buildings burned to the ground. People sought to meet their needs at the local level within

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7 Oscar Olivera, *Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia*, Cambridge: South End Press, 2004.

pre-existing social networks. Unfortunately, they lacked a consciously anarchist or anti-authoritarian movement. Rejecting political solutions intuitively but not explicitly, they lacked an analysis that could identify all political parties as enemies by their nature. Consequently the opposition Socialist party was able to install itself in power, though it took an occupation by thousands of European Union troops to pacify Albania completely.

Even in the wealthiest countries of the world, anarchists and other rebels can defeat the state within a limited area, creating an autonomous zone in which new social relations can flourish. In 1980–81, the German conservative party lost power in Berlin after trying to forcefully crush the squatters' movement. The squatters occupied abandoned buildings as a struggle against gentrification and urban decay, or simply to provide themselves with free housing. Many squatters, known as *autonomen*, identified with an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian movement that saw these squats as bubbles of freedom in which to create the beginnings of a new society. In Berlin, the struggle was fiercest in the Kreuzberg neighborhood. In some areas, the majority of the residents were *autonomen*, dropouts, and immigrants — it was in many aspects an autonomous zone. Using the full might of the police, the city attempted to evict the squats and crush the movement, but the *autonomen* fought back. They defended their neighborhood with barricades, rocks, and molotov cocktails and outmaneuvered the police in street fighting. They counterattacked by wreaking havoc in the financial and commercial districts of the city. The ruling party gave up in disgrace and the Socialists took power; the latter employed a legalization strategy in an attempt to undermine the movement's autonomy, since they were unable to forcibly evict them. Meanwhile, the *autonomen* in Kreuzberg took measures to protect the neighborhood from drug pushers, with a "fists against needles" campaign. They also fought against gentrification, smashing up bourgeois restaurants and bars.

In Hamburg, in 1986 and 1987, the police were stopped by the barricades of the *autonomen* when they attempted to evict the squats of Hafenstrasse. After losing several major street battles and suffering counterattacks, such as a coordinated arson attack against thirteen department stores causing \$10 million in damage, the mayor legalized the squats, which still stand and continue to be centers of cultural and political resistance as of this writing.

In Copenhagen, Denmark, the autonomous youth movement went on the attack in 1986. At a time of militant squatting actions and sabotage attacks on Shell Oil stations and other targets of anti-imperialist struggle, several hundred people rerouted their protest march by surprise and occupied Rymsgade, a street in the neighborhood of Osterbro. They built barricades, and won neighborhood support and brought groceries to elderly neighbors blocked in by the barricades. For nine days, the *autonomen* held the streets, defeating the police in several major battles. Free radio stations throughout Denmark helped mobilize support, including food and supplies. Finally, the government announced it would bring in the military to clear the barricades. The youth at the barricades announced a press conference, but when the appointed morning came, they had all disappeared. Two city negotiators wondered:

Where did the BZers [Occupation Brigaders] go when they left? What did the town hall learn? It seems the act can start all over again, anywhere, at any time. Even bigger. With the same participants.<sup>8</sup>

In 2002, Barcelona police attempted to evict Can Masdeu, a large squatted social center on a mountainside just outside the city. Can Masdeu was connected to the squatters' movement, the environmental movement, and the local tradition of resistance. The surrounding hillside was covered in gardens, many of them used by older neighbors who remembered the dictatorship and the struggle against it, and understood that this struggle still continued in the present day despite the veneer of democracy. Accordingly, the center received support from many corners of society. When the police came, the residents barricaded and locked down, and for days eleven people hung in harnesses on the outside of the building, dangling over the hillside, high above the ground. Supporters streamed in and challenged the police; others took action throughout the city, blocking traffic and attacking banks, real estate offices, a McDonalds, and other stores. Police tried to starve out the ones hanging from the building and used psychological torture tactics against them, but ultimately failed. The resistance defeated the eviction attempt and the autonomous zone survives to this day, with active community gardens and a social center.

On December 6, 2008, Greek police shot to death the fifteen-year-old anarchist Alexis Grigoropoulos in the middle of Exarchia, the anarchist and autonomous stronghold in downtown Athens. Within minutes, anarchist affinity groups communicating by internet and cell phone sprang into action across the country. These affinity groups, in their hundreds, had developed relationships of trust and security and the capacity for taking offensive action over the previous years as they organized and carried out numerous small-scale attacks on state and capital. These attacks included simple graffiti actions, popular expropriations from supermarkets, molotov attacks on police, police cars, and commissaries, and bomb attacks against the vehicles and offices of political parties, institutions, and corporations that had led the reaction against social movements, immigrants, workers, prisoners, and others. The continuity of actions created a background of fierce resistance that could come to the fore when Greek society was ready.

Their rage over the murder of Alexis provided a rallying point for the anarchists, and they began attacking police all over the country, before the police in many cities even knew what was happening. The force of the attack broke the illusion of social peace, and in subsequent days hundreds of thousands of other people came out into the streets to vent the rage they too harbored against the system. Immigrants, students, high school kids, workers, revolutionaries from the previous generation, old folks — all of Greek society came out and participated in a diversity of actions. They fought against the police and won, winning the power to transform their cities. Luxury shops and government buildings were smashed and burned to the ground. Schools,

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8 George Katsiaticas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*. Oakland: AK Press, 2006, p. 123

radio stations, theaters, and other buildings were occupied. Their mourning turned into celebration as people set fires and commemorated the burning away of the old world with parties in the streets. The police responded in force, injuring and arresting hundreds of people and filling the air with tear gas. The people defended themselves with more fires, burning down everything they hated and producing thick clouds of black smoke that neutralized the tear gas.

On the days when people started to go home, perhaps to return to normality, the anarchists kept the riots going, so that there could be no doubt that the streets belonged to the people and a new world was within their reach. Amidst all the graffiti that appeared on the walls was the promise: "We are an image from the future." The riots went on for two weeks straight. The police had long lost all semblance of control, and had run out of tear gas. In the end people went home out of sheer physical exhaustion, but they did not stop. Attacks continued, and huge parts of Greek society began participating in creative actions as well. Greek society had been transformed. All the symbols of capitalism and government were proven to provoke the scorn of the masses. The state had lost its legitimacy and the media was reduced to repeating the transparent lie, *these rioters simply don't know what they want*. The anarchist movement won respect throughout the country, and inspired the new generation. The riots subsided, but the actions continued. As of this writing, people throughout Greece continue occupying buildings, starting social centers, protesting, attacking, evaluating their strategies, and holding massive assemblies to determine the direction of their struggle.

Democratic states still entertain the option of calling in the military when their police forces cannot maintain order, and occasionally do so in even the most progressive countries. But this choice opens dangerous possibilities, as well. The dissidents may also take up arms; if the struggle continues to gain popularity, more and more people will see the government as an occupying force; in an extreme case, the military may mutiny and the struggle spread. In Greece, soldiers were circulating letters promising that if they were called in to crush the revolt, they would give their arms to the people and open fire on the cops. Military intervention is an unavoidable stage of any struggle to overthrow the state; but if social movements can demonstrate the courage and organizational capacity to defeat the police, they may be able to defeat the military or win them over. Thanks to the rhetoric of democratic governments, soldiers today are much less prepared psychologically to repress local uprisings as brutally as they would in a foreign country.

Because of the globally integrated nature of the system, states and other institutions of power are mutually reinforcing, and thus stronger up to a certain point. But beyond that point, they are all weaker, and vulnerable to collapse on a global scale like never before in history. Political crisis in China could destroy the US economy, and send other dominoes falling as well. We have not yet reached the point at which we can overthrow the global power structure, but it is significant that in specific contests the state is often unable to crush us, and bubbles of autonomy exist alongside the system that purports to be universal and without alternatives. Governments are overthrown every year. The system has still not been abolished because the victors of

such struggles have always been co-opted and reincorporated into global capitalism. But if explicitly anti-authoritarian movements can take the initiative in popular resistance, this is a hopeful sign for the future.

### **How do we know revolutionaries won't become new authorities?**

It is not inevitable for revolutionaries to become the new dictators, especially if their primary goal is the abolition of all coercive authority. Revolutions throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century created new totalitarian systems, but all of these were led or hijacked by political parties, none of which denounced authoritarianism; on the contrary, a great many of them promised to create a “dictatorship of the proletariat” or a nationalist government.

Political parties, after all, are inherently authoritarian institutions. Even in the rare case that they legitimately come from disempowered constituencies and build internally democratic structures, they still must negotiate with existing authorities to gain influence, and their ultimate objective is to gain control over a centralized power structure. For political parties to gain power through the parliamentary process, they must set aside whatever egalitarian principles and revolutionary goals they might have had and cooperate with pre-existing arrangements of power — the needs of capitalists, imperialist wars, and so on. This sad process was demonstrated by social democratic parties around the world from Labour in the UK to the Communist Party in Italy, and more recently by the Green Party in Germany or the Workers' Party in Brazil. On the other hand, when political parties — such as the Bolsheviks, the Khmer Rouge, and the Cuban communists — seek to impose change by taking control in a coup d'état or civil war, their authoritarianism is even more immediately visible.

However, expressly anti-authoritarian revolutionaries have a history of destroying power rather than taking it. None of their uprisings have been perfect, but they do provide hope for the future and lessons on how an anarchist revolution could be achieved. While authoritarianism is always a danger, it is not an inevitable outcome of struggle.

In 2001, following years of discrimination and brutality, the Amazigh (Berber) inhabitants of Kabylia, a region of Algeria, rose up against the predominantly Arab government. The trigger to the uprising came on the 18<sup>th</sup> of April when the gendarmerie killed a local youth and later subjected a number of students to arbitrary arrest, though the resulting movement clearly demonstrated itself to be much broader than a reaction against police brutality. Starting April 21, people fought with the gendarmerie, burned down police stations, government buildings, and offices of opposition political parties. Noting that the offices of government social services were not spared, domestic intellectuals and journalists as well as leftists in France paternalistically admonished that the misguided rioters were destroying their own neighborhoods — omitting out of hypocrisy or ignorance the fact that social services in poor regions serve the same function as the police, only that they perform the softer part of the job.

The riots generalized into insurrection, and the people of Kabylia soon achieved one of their main demands — the removal of the gendarmerie from the region. Many police stations that were not burnt down outright were besieged and had their supply lines cut off so that the gendarmerie had to go out in force on raiding missions just to supply themselves. In the first months, police killed over a hundred people, and wounded thousands, but the insurgents did not back down. Due to the fierceness of the resistance rather than the generosity of the government, Kabylia was still off limits to the gendarmerie as of 2006.

The movement was soon organizing the liberated region along traditional and anti-authoritarian lines. The communities resurrected the Amazigh tradition of the *aarch* (or *aaruch* in plural), a popular assembly for self-organization. Kabylia benefited from a deep-rooted anti-authoritarian culture. During the French colonization, the region was the home to frequent uprisings, and daily resistance to government administration.

In 1948, a village assembly, for example, formally prohibited communication with the government about community affairs: “Passing information to any authority, be it about the morality of another citizen, be it about tax figures, will be sanctioned with a fine of ten thousand francs. It is the most grave type of fine that exists. The mayor and the rural guard are not excluded” [...] And when the current movement began to organize committees of neighborhoods and villages, one delegate (from the aarch of Ait Djennad) declared, to demonstrate that at least the memory of this tradition had not been lost: “Before, when the tajmat took charge of the resolution of a conflict between people, they punished the thief or the fraudster, it wasn’t necessary to go to the tribunal. In fact it was shameful.”<sup>9</sup>

Starting from April 20, delegates from 43 cities in the subprefecture of Beni Duala, in Kabylia, were coordinating the call for a general strike, as people in many villages and neighborhoods organized assemblies and coordinations. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, delegates from the different assemblies and coordinations throughout Beni Duala met to formulate demands and organize the movement. The press, demonstrating the role they would play throughout the insurrection, published a false announcement saying the meeting was cancelled, but still a large number of delegates came together, predominantly from the wilaya, or district, of Tizi Uzu. They kicked out a mayor who tried to participate in the meetings. “Here we don’t need a mayor or any other representative of the state,” said one delegate.

Delegates from the aaruch kept meeting and created an interwilaya coordination. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of June they met in El Kseur:

9 Jaime Semprun, *Apología por la Insurrección Argelina*, Bilbao: Muturreko Burretzioak, 2002, p.34 (translated from French to Spanish by Javier Rodríguez Hidalgo; the translation to English is my own). The quotes in the next paragraphs are from p.18 and p.20.



We, representatives of the wilayas of Sétis, Bordj-Bu-Argeridj, Buir, Bumerdes, Bejaia, Tizi Uzu, Algiers, as well as the Collective Committee of Universities of Algiers, meeting today Monday the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2001, in the Youth House "Mouloud Feraoun" in El Kseur (Bejaia), have adopted the following table of demands:

For the State to urgently take responsibility for all the injured victims and the families of the martyrs of the repression during these events.

For the trial by civil tribunal of the the authors, instigators and accomplices of these crimes and their expulsion from the security forces and from public office.

For a martyr status for every dignified victim during these events and the protection of all witnesses to the drama.

For the immediate withdrawal of the brigades of the gendarmerie and the reinforcements from the URS.

For the annulment of judicial processes against all the protestors as well the liberation of those who have already been sentenced during these events.

Immediate abandonment of the punitive expeditions, the intimidations, and the provocations against the population.

Dissolution of the investigation commissions initiated by the power.

Satisfaction of the Amazigh claims, in all their dimensions (of identity, civilization, language, and culture) without referendum and without conditions, and the declaration of Tamazight as a national and official language.

For a state that guarantees all socio-economic rights and all democratic liberties.

Against the policies of underdevelopment, pauperization, and miserabilization of the Algerian people.

Placing all the executive functions of the State including the security forces under the effective authority of democratically elected bodies.

For an urgent socio-economic plan for all of Kabylia.

Against the Tamheqranit [roughly, the arbitrariness of power] and all forms of injustice and exclusion.

For a case by case reconsideration of the regional exams for all students who did not pass them.

Installment of unemployment benefits for everyone who makes less than 50% of the minimum wage.

We demand an official, urgent, and public reply to this table of demands.

Ulac Smah Ulac [the struggle continues]<sup>10</sup>

On June 14, hundreds of thousands went to march on Algiers to present these demands but they were preemptively waylaid and dispersed through heavy police action. Although the movement was always strongest in Kabylia, it never limited itself to national/cultural boundaries and enjoyed support throughout the country; nonetheless opposition political parties tried to water down the movement by reducing it to simple demands for measures against police brutality and the official recognition of the Berber language. But the defeat of the march in Algiers did effectively demonstrate the movement's weakness outside of Kabylia. Said one resident of Algiers, regarding the difficulty of resistance in the capital in contrast to the Berber regions: "They're lucky. In Kabylia they're never alone. They have all their culture, their structures. We live in between snitches and Rambo posters."

In July and August, the movement set itself the task of reflecting strategically on their structure: they adopted a system of coordination between the aaruch, dairas and communes within a wilaya, and the election of delegates within towns and neighborhoods; these delegates would form a municipal coordination that enjoyed full autonomy of action. A coordination for the whole wilaya would be composed of two delegates from each of the municipal coordinations. In a typical case in Bejaia, the coordination kicked out the trade unionists and leftists that had infiltrated it, and launched a general strike on their own initiative. At the culmination of this process of reflection, the movement identified as one of its major weaknesses the relative lack of participation by women within the coordinations (although women played a large role in the insurrection and other parts of the movement). The delegates resolved to encourage more participation by women.

Throughout this process some delegates kept secretly trying to dialogue with the government while the press shifted between demonizing the movement and suggesting that their more civic demands could be adopted by the government, while ignoring their more radical demands. On August 20, the movement demonstrated its power within Kabylia with a major protest march, followed by a round of interwilaya meetings. The country's elite hoped that these meetings would demonstrate the "maturity" of the movement and result in dialogue but the coordinations continued to reject secret negotiations and reaffirmed the agreements of El Kseur. Commentators remarked that if the movement continued to reject dialogue while pushing for their demands and successfully defending their autonomy, they effectively made government impossible and the result could be the collapse of state

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10 Jaime Semprun, *Apología por la Insurrección Argelina*, Bilbao: Muturreko Burutazioak, 2002, pp. 73–74 (translated from French to Spanish by Javier Rodriguez Hidalgo; the translation to English is my own).

power, at least within Kabylia.

On October 10, 2002, after having survived over a year of violence and pressure to play politics, the movement launched a boycott of the elections. Much to the frustration of the political parties, the elections were blocked in Kabylia, and in the rest of Algeria participation was remarkably low.

From the very beginning, the political parties were threatened by the self-organization of the uprising, and tried their hardest to bring the movement within the political system. It was not so easy, however. Early on the movement adopted a code of honor that all the coordination delegates had to swear to. The code stated:

The delegates of the movement promise to

Respect the terms enunciated in the chapter of Directing Principles of the coordinations of aaruch, dairas, and communes.

Honor the blood of the martyrs following the struggle until the completion of its objectives and not using their memory for lucrative or partisan ends.

Respect the resolutely peaceful spirit of the movement.

Not take any action leading to establishing direct or indirect connections with power.

Not use the movement for partisan ends or drag it into electoral competitions or attempts to take power.

Publicly resign from the movement before seeking any elected office.

Not accept any political office (nomination by decree) in the institutions of power.

Show civic-mindedness and respect to others.

Give the movement a national dimension.

Not circumvent the appropriate structure in matters of communication.

Give effective solidarity to any person who has suffered any injury due to activity as a delegate of the movement.

Note: Any delegate who violates this Code of Honor will be publicly denounced.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Ditto, p. 80. Regarding the fourth point, in contrast to Western society and its various forms of pacifism, the peacefulness of the movement in Algeria does not preclude self-defense or even armed uprising, as evidenced by the preceding point regarding the martyrs. Rather, peacefulness indicates a preference for peaceful and consensual outcomes over coercion and arbitrary authority.

And in fact, delegates who broke this pledge were ostracized and even attacked.

The pressure of recuperation continued. Anonymous committees and councils began issuing press releases denouncing the “spiral of violence” of the youth and the “poor political calculations” of “those who continue loudly parasitizing the public debate” and silencing the “good citizens.” Later this particular council clarified that these good citizens were “all the scientific and political personages of the municipality capable of giving sense and consistency to the movement.”<sup>12</sup>

In the following years, the weakening of the movement’s anti-authoritarian character has demonstrated a major obstacle to libertarian insurrections that win a bubble of autonomy: not an inevitable, creeping authoritarianism, but constant international pressure on the movement to institutionalize. In Kabylia, much of that pressure came from European NGOs and international agencies who claimed to work for peace. They demanded that the aarch coordinations adopt peaceful tactics, give up their boycott of politics, and field candidates for election. Since then, the movement has split. Many aarch delegates and elders who appointed themselves leaders have entered the political arena, where their main objective is to rewrite the Algerian constitution to institute democratic reforms and end the present dictatorship. Meanwhile, the Movement for Autonomy in Kabylia (MAK) has continued to insist that power should be decentralized and the region should win independence.

Kabylia did not receive significant support and solidarity from anti-authoritarian movements across the globe, which might have helped offset the pressure to institutionalize. Part of this is due to the isolation and eurocentrism of many of these movements. At the same time, the movement itself restricted its scope to State boundaries and lacked an explicitly revolutionary ideology. Taken on its own, the civic-mindedness and emphasis of autonomy found within Amazigh culture is clearly anti-authoritarian, but in a contest with the State it gives rise to a number of ambiguities. The movement demands, if fully realized, would have made government impractical and thus they were revolutionary; however they did not explicitly call for the destruction of “the power,” and thus left plenty of room for the state to reinsert itself in the movement. Even though the Code of Honor exhaustively prohibited collaboration with political parties, the movement’s civic ideology made such collaboration inevitable by demanding good government, which is of course impossible, a code word for self-deception and betrayal.

An ideology or analysis that was revolutionary as well as anti-authoritarian might have prevented recuperation and facilitated solidarity with movements in other countries. At the same time, movements in other countries might have been positioned to give solidarity had they developed a broader understanding of struggle. For example, due to a host of historical and cultural reasons it is not at all likely that the insurrection in Algeria would ever have identified itself as “anarchist,” yet it was one of the most inspiring examples of anarchy to appear in those years. Most self-identified anarchists were prevented from realizing this and initiating relationships of solidarity due to a cultural bias against struggles that do not adopt the

aesthetics and cultural inheritance prevalent among Euro/American revolutionaries.

The historic experiments in collectivization and anarchist communism that took place in Spain in 1936 and 1937 could only happen because anarchists had been preparing themselves to defeat the military in an armed insurrection, and when the fascists launched their coup they were able to defeat them militarily throughout much of the country. To protect the new world they were building, they organized themselves to hold back the better equipped fascists with trench warfare, declaring “No pasarán!” *They shall not pass!*

Though they had plenty to keep them busy on the homefront, setting up schools, collectivizing land and factories, reorganizing social life, the anarchists raised and trained volunteer militias to fight on the front. Early in the war, the anarchist Durruti Column pushed back the fascists on the Aragon front, and in November it played an important role in defeating the fascist offensive on Madrid. There were many criticisms of the volunteer militias, mostly from bourgeois journalists and the Stalinists who wanted to crush the militias in favor of a professional military fully under their control. George Orwell, who fought in a Trotskyist militia, sets the record straight:

Everyone from general to private drew the same pay, ate the same food, wore the same clothes, and mingled on terms of complete equality. If you wanted to slap the general commanding the division on the back and ask him for a cigarette, you could do so, and no one thought it curious. In theory at any rate each militia was a democracy and not a hierarchy... They had attempted to produce within the militias a sort of temporary working model of the classless society. Of course there was not perfect equality, but there was a nearer approach to it than I had ever seen or than I would have thought conceivable in time of war...

...Later it became the fashion to decry the militias, and therefore to pretend that the faults which were due to lack of training and weapons were the result of the equalitarian system. Actually, a newly raised draft of militia was an undisciplined mob not because the officers called the privates ‘Comrade’ but because raw troops are *always* an undisciplined mob... The journalists who sneered at the militia-system seldom remembered that the militias had to hold the line while the Popular Army was training in the rear. And it is a tribute to the strength of ‘revolutionary’ discipline that the militias stayed in the field at all. For until about June 1937 there was nothing to keep them there, except class loyalty... A conscript army in the same circumstances — with its battle-police removed — would have melted away... At the beginning the apparent chaos, the general lack of training, the fact that you often had to argue for five minutes before you could get an order obeyed, appalled and infuriated me. I had British Army ideas, and certainly the Spanish militias were very unlike the British Army.

But considering the circumstances they were better troops than one had any right to expect.<sup>13</sup>

Orwell revealed that the militias were being deliberately starved of the weaponry they needed for victory by a political apparatus determined to crush them. Notwithstanding, in October, 1936, the anarchist and socialist militias pushed the fascists back on the Aragon front, and for the next eight months they held the line, until they were forcefully replaced by the government army.

The conflict was long and bloody, full of grave dangers, unprecedented opportunities, and difficult choices. Throughout it the anarchists had to prove the feasibility of their ideal of a truly anti-authoritarian revolution. They experienced a number of successes and failures, which, taken together, show what is possible and what dangers revolutionaries must avoid to resist becoming new authorities.

Behind the lines, anarchists and socialists seized the opportunity to put their ideals in practice. In the Spanish countryside, peasants expropriated land and abolished capitalist relations. There was no uniform policy governing how the peasants established anarchist communism; they employed a range of methods for overthrowing their masters and creating a new society. In some places, the peasants killed clergy and landlords, though this was often in direct retaliation against those who had collaborated with the fascists or the earlier regime by giving names of radicals to be arrested and executed. In several uprisings in Spain between 1932 and 1934, revolutionaries had shown little predisposition to assassinate their political enemies. For example, when peasants in the Andalusian village of Casas Viejas had unfurled the red and black flag, their only violence was directed against land titles, which they burned. Neither political bosses nor landlords were attacked; they were simply informed that they no longer held power or property. The fact that these peaceful peasants were subsequently massacred by the military, at the behest of those bosses and landlords, may help explain their more aggressive conduct in 1936. And the Church in Spain was very much a pro-fascist institution. The priests had long been the purveyors of abusive forms of education and the defenders of patriotism, patriarchy, and the divine rights of the landlords. When Franco launched his coup, many priests acted as fascist paramilitaries.

There had been a long-running debate in anarchist circles about whether fighting capitalism as a system necessitated attacking specific individuals in power, apart from situations of self-defense. The fact that those in power, when shown mercy, turned right around and gave names to the firing squads to punish the rebels and discourage future uprisings underscored the argument that elites are not just innocently playing a role within an impersonal system, but that they specifically involve themselves in waging war against the oppressed. Thus, the killings carried out by the Spanish anarchists and peasants were not signs of an authoritarianism inherent in revolutionary struggle so much as an intentional strategy within a dangerous conflict. The contemporaneous behavior of the Stalinists, who established a secret

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13 George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1938, pp. 26-28.

police force to torture and execute their erstwhile comrades, demonstrates how low people can sink when they think they're fighting for a just cause; but the contrasting example offered by anarchists and other socialists proves that such behavior is not inevitable.

A demonstration of the absence of authoritarianism among the anarchists can be seen in the fact that those same peasants who liberated themselves violently did not force individualistic peasants to collectivize their lands along with the rest of the community. In most of the villages surveyed in anarchist areas, collectives and individual holdings existed side by side. In the worst scenario, where an anti-collective peasant held territory dividing peasants who did want to join their lands, the majority sometimes asked the individualist peasant to trade his land for land elsewhere, so the other peasants could pool their efforts to form a collective. In one documented example, the collectivizing peasants offered the individual landholder land of better quality in order to ensure a consensual resolution.

In the cities and within the structures of the CNT, the anarchist labor union with over a million members, the situation was more complicated. After defense groups prepared by the CNT and FAI (the Iberian Anarchist Federation) defeated the fascist uprising in Catalunya and seized weapons from the armory, the CNT rank and file spontaneously organized factory councils, neighborhood assemblies, and other organizations capable of coordinating economic life; what's more, they did so in a nonpartisan way, working with other workers of all political persuasions. Even though the anarchists were the strongest force in Catalunya, they demonstrated little desire to repress other groups — in stark contrast to the Communist Party, the Trotskyists, and the Catalan nationalists. The problem came from the CNT delegates. The union had failed to structure itself in a way that prevented its becoming institutionalized. Delegates to the Regional and National Committees could not be recalled if they failed to perform as desired, there was no custom to prevent the same people from maintaining constant positions on these higher committees, and negotiations or decisions made by higher committees did not always have to be ratified by the entire membership. Furthermore, principled anarchist militants consistently refused the top positions in the Confederation, while intellectuals focused on abstract theories and economic planning gravitated to these central committees. Thus, at the time of the revolution in July, 1936, the CNT had an established leadership, and this leadership was isolated from the actual movement.

Anarchists such as Stuart Christie and veterans of the libertarian youth group that went on to participate in the guerrilla struggle against the fascists during the following decades have argued that these dynamics separated the de facto leadership of the CNT from the rank and file, and brought them closer to the professional politicians. Thus, in Catalunya, when they were invited to participate in an antifascist Popular Front along with the authoritarian socialist and republican parties, they obliged. To them, this was a gesture of pluralism and solidarity, as well as a means of self-defense against the threat posed by fascism.

Their estrangement from the base prevented them from realizing that the power was

no longer in the government buildings; it was already in the street and wherever workers were spontaneously taking over their factories. Ignorant of this, they actually impeded social revolution, discouraging the armed masses from pursuing the full realization of anarchist communism for fear of upsetting their new allies.<sup>14</sup> In any case, anarchists in this period faced extremely difficult decisions. The representatives were caught between advancing fascism and treacherous allies, while those in the streets had to choose between accepting the dubious decisions of a self-appointed leadership or splitting the movement by being overly critical.

But despite the sudden power gained by the CNT — they were the dominant organized political force in Catalunya and a major force in other provinces — both the leadership and the base acted in a cooperative rather than a power-hungry manner. For example, in the antifascist committees proposed by the Catalan government, they allowed themselves to be put on an equal footing with the comparatively weak socialist labor union and the Catalan nationalist party. One of the chief reasons the CNT leadership gave for collaborating with the authoritarian parties was that abolishing the government in Catalunya would be tantamount to imposing an anarchist dictatorship. But their assumption that getting rid of the government — or, more accurately, allowing a spontaneous popular movement to do so — meant replacing it with the CNT showed their own blinding self-importance. They failed to grasp that the working class was developing new organizational forms, such as factory councils, that might flourish best by transcending pre-existing institutions — whether the CNT or the government — rather than being absorbed into them. The CNT leadership “failed to realise how powerful the popular movement was and that their role as union spokesmen was now inimical to the course of the revolution.”<sup>15</sup>

Rather than painting a rosy picture of history, we should recognize that these examples show that navigating the tension between effectiveness and authoritarianism is not easy, but it is possible.

### **How will communities decide to organize themselves at first?**

All people are capable of self-organization, whether or not they are experienced in political work. Of course, taking control of our lives won't be easy at first, but it is imminently possible. In most cases, people take the obvious approach, spontaneously holding large, open meetings with their neighbors, co-workers, or comrades on the barricades to figure out what needs to be done. In some cases, society is organized through pre-existing revolutionary organizations.

The 2001 popular rebellion in Argentina saw people take an unprecedented level of control over their lives. They formed neighborhood assemblies, took over factories

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14 There were 40,000 armed anarchist militants in Barcelona and the surrounding region alone. The Catalan government would have been effectively abolished had the CNT simply ignored it, rather than entering into negotiations. Stuart Christie, *We, the Anarchists! A study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) 1927–1937*, Hastings, UK: The Meltzer Press, 2000, p. 106.

15 Ditto, p. 101



and abandoned land, created barter networks, blockaded highways to compel the government to grant relief to the unemployed, held the streets against lethal police repression, and forced four presidents and multiple vice presidents and economic ministers to resign in quick succession. Through it all, they did not appoint leadership, and most of the neighborhood assemblies rejected political parties and trade unions trying to co-opt these spontaneous institutions. Within the assemblies, factory occupations, and other organizations, they practiced consensus and encouraged horizontal organizing. In the words of one activist involved in establishing alternative social structures in his neighborhood, where unemployment reached 80%: “We are building power, not taking it.”<sup>16</sup>

People formed over 200 neighborhood assemblies in Buenos Aires alone, involving thousands of people; according to one poll, one in three residents of the capital had attended an assembly. People began by meeting in their neighborhoods, often over a common meal, or *olla popular*. Next they would occupy a space to serve as a social center — in many cases, an abandoned bank. Soon the neighborhood assembly would be holding weekly meetings “on community issues but also on topics such as the external debt, war, and free trade” as well as “how they could work together and how they saw the future.” Many social centers would eventually offer:

an info space and perhaps computers, books, and various workshops on yoga, self defence, languages, and basic skills. Many also have community gardens, run after school kids’ clubs and adult education classes, put on social and cultural events, cook food collectively, and mobilise politically for themselves and in support of the piqueteros and reclaimed factories.<sup>17</sup>

The assemblies set up working groups, such as healthcare and alternative media committees, that held additional meetings involving the people most interested in those projects. According to visiting independent journalists:

Some assemblies have as many as 200 people participating, others are much smaller. One of the assemblies we attended had about 40 people present, ranging from two mothers sitting on the sidewalk while breast feeding, to a lawyer in a suit, to a skinny hippie in batik flares, to an elderly taxi driver, to a dreadlocked bike messenger, to a nursing student. It was a whole slice of Argentinean society standing in a circle on a street corner under the orange glow of sodium lights, passing around a brand new megaphone and discussing how to take back control of their lives. Every now and then a car would pass by and beep its horn in support, and this was all happening between 8 pm and midnight on a Wednes-

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16 John Jordan and Jennifer Whitney, *Que Se Vayan Todos: Argentina's Popular Rebellion*, Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2003, p. 56.

17 Natasha Gordon and Paul Chatterton, *Taking Back Control: A Journey through Argentina's Popular Uprising*, Leeds (UK): University of Leeds, 2004.

day evening!<sup>18</sup>

Soon the neighborhood assemblies were coordinating at a city-wide level. Once a week the assemblies sent spokespeople to the interbarrio plenary, which brought together thousands of people from across the city to propose joint projects and protest plans. At the interbarrio, decisions were made with a majority vote, but the structure was non-coercive so the decisions were not binding — they were only carried out if people had the enthusiasm to carry them out. Accordingly, if a large number of people at the interbarrio voted to abstain on a specific proposal, the proposal was reworked so it would receive more support.

The *asamblea* structure quickly expanded to the provincial and national levels. Within two months of the beginning of the uprising, the national “Assembly of Assemblies” was calling for the government to be replaced by the assemblies. That did not occur, but in the end the government of Argentina was forced to make popular concessions — it announced it would default on its international debt, an unprecedented occurrence. The International Monetary Fund was so scared by the popular rebellion and its worldwide support in the anti-globalization movement, and so embarrassed by the collapse of its poster child, that it had to accept this stunning loss. The movement in Argentina played a pivotal role in accomplishing one of the major goals of the anti-globalization movement, which was the defeat of the IMF and World Bank. As of this writing, these institutions are discredited and facing bankruptcy. Meanwhile, the Argentine economy has stabilized and much of the popular outrage has subsided. Still, some of the assemblies that made a vital niche in the uprising continue to operate seven years later. The next time the conflict comes to the surface, these assemblies will remain in the collective memory as the seeds of a future society.

The city of Gwangju (or Kwangju), in South Korea, liberated itself for six days in May, 1980, after student and worker protests against the military dictatorship escalated in response to declarations of martial law. Protestors burned down the government television station and seized weapons, quickly organizing a “Citizen Army” that forced out the police and military. As in other urban rebellions, including those in Paris in 1848 and 1968, in Budapest in 1919, and in Beijing in 1989, students and workers in Gwangju quickly formed open assemblies to organize life in the city and communicate with the outside world. Participants in the uprising tell of a complex organizational system developed spontaneously in a short period of time — and without the leaders of the main student groups and protest organizations, who had already been arrested. Their system included a Citizen’s Army, a Situation Center, a Citizen-Student Committee, a Planning Board, and departments for local defense, investigation, information, public services, burial of the dead, and other services.<sup>19</sup>

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18 John Jordan and Jennifer Whitney, *Que Se Vayan Todos: Argentina’s Popular Rebellion*, Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2003, p. 9.

19 George Katsiaficas, “Comparing the Paris Commune and the Kwangju Uprising,” [www.erosseffect.com](http://www.erosseffect.com). That the resistance was “well-organized” comes from a report from the conservative Heritage Foundation, Daryl M. Plunk’s “South Korea’s

It took a full-scale invasion by special units of the Korean military with US support to crush the rebellion and prevent it from spreading. Several hundred people were killed in the process. Even its enemies described the armed resistance as “fierce and well-organized.” The combination of spontaneous organization, open assemblies, and committees with a specific organizational focus left a deep impression, showing how quickly a society can change itself once it breaks with the habit of obedience to the government.

In the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, state power collapsed after masses of student protestors armed themselves; much of the country fell into the hands of the people, who had to reorganize the economy and quickly form militias to repel Soviet invasion. Initially, each city organized itself spontaneously, but the forms of organization that arose were very similar, perhaps because they developed in the same cultural and political context. Hungarian anarchists were influential in the new Revolutionary Councils, which federated to coordinate defense, and they took part in the workers’ councils that took over the factories and mines. In Budapest old politicians formed a new government and tried to harness these autonomous councils into a multiparty democracy, but the influence of the government did not extend beyond the capital city in the days before the second Soviet invasion succeeded in crushing the uprising. Hungary did not have a large anarchist movement at the time, but the popularity of the various councils shows how contagious anarchistic ideas are once people decide to organize themselves. And their ability to keep the country running and defeat the first invasion of the Red Army shows the effectiveness of these organizational forms. There was no need for a complex institutional blueprint to be in place before people left their authoritarian government behind. All they needed was the determination to come together in open meetings to decide their futures, and the trust in themselves that they could make it work, even if at first it was unclear how.

### **How will reparations for past oppressions be worked out?**

If government and capitalism disappeared overnight, people would still be divided. Legacies of oppression generally determine where we live; our access to land, water, a clean environment, and necessary infrastructure; and the level of violence and trauma in our communities. People are accorded vastly differing degrees of social privilege according to skin color, gender, citizenship, economic class, and other factors. Once the exploited of the earth rise up to seize the wealth of our society, what exactly will they inherit? Healthy land, clean water, and hospitals, or depleted soil, garbage dumps, and lead pipes? It depends largely on their skin color and nationality.

An essential part of an anarchist revolution is global solidarity. Solidarity is the polar opposite of charity. It does not depend on an inequality between giver and receiver. Like all good things in life, solidarity is shared, thus it destroys the categories of giver and receiver and neither ignores nor validates whatever unequal power dynamics may exist between the two. There can be no true solidarity between a revolutionary in Illinois and a revolutionary in Mato Grosso if they must ignore that the one’s

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Kwangju Incident Revisited,” The Heritage Foundation, No. 35, September 16, 1985.

house is built with wood stolen from the lands of the other, ruining the soil and leaving him and his entire community with fewer possibilities for the future.

Anarchy must make itself wholly incompatible with colonialism, either a colonialism that continues to the present day in new forms, or a historical legacy which we try to ignore. Thus an anarchist revolution must also base itself in the struggles against colonialism. These include people in the Global South who are trying to reverse neoliberalism, indigenous nations struggling to regain their land, and black communities still fighting to survive the legacies of slavery. Those who have been privileged by colonialism — white people and everyone living in Europe or a European settler state (the US, Canada, Australia) — should support these other struggles politically, culturally, and materially. Because anti-authoritarian rebellions have been limited in scope thus far, and meaningful reparations would have to be global in scale because of the globalization of oppression, there are no examples that fully demonstrate what reparations would look like. However, some small-scale examples show that the willingness to make reparations exists, and that the anarchist principles of mutual aid and direct action can accomplish reparations more effectively than democratic governments — with their refusal to acknowledge the extent of past crimes and their embarrassing half measures. The same goes for revolutionary governments, which typically inherit and cover up oppression within the states they take over — as exemplified by how callously the governments of the USSR and China took their places at the heads of racial empires while claiming to be anti-imperialist.

In the state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico, the Zapatistas rose up in 1994 and won autonomy for dozens of indigenous communities. Named after Mexican peasant revolutionary Zapata and espousing a mix of indigenous, Marxist, and anarchist ideas, the Zapatistas formed an army guided by popular “encuentros,” or gatherings, to fight back against neoliberal capitalism and the continuing forms of exploitation and genocide inflicted by the Mexican state. To lift these communities up out of poverty following generations of colonialism, and to help counter the effects of military blockades and harassment, the Zapatistas called for support. Thousands of volunteers and people with technical experience came from around the world to help Zapatista communities build up their infrastructure, and thousands of others continue to support the Zapatistas by sending donations of money and equipment or buying fair-trade goods<sup>20</sup> produced in the autonomous territory. This assistance is given in a spirit of solidarity; most importantly, it is on the Zapatista’s own terms. This contrasts starkly with the model of Christian charity, in which the goals of the privileged giver are imposed on the impoverished receiver, who is expected to be grateful.

Peasants in Spain had been oppressed throughout centuries of feudalism. The partial revolution in 1936 enabled them to reclaim the privilege and wealth their oppressors had derived from their labors. Peasant assemblies in liberated villages met to decide how to redistribute territory seized from large landowners, so those who had labored as virtual serfs could finally have access to land. Unlike the farcical Recon-

20 Goods produced in environmentally friendly ways, by workers who receive a living wage in healthier labor conditions.

ciliation Commissions arranged in South Africa, Guatemala, and elsewhere, which protect oppressors from any real consequences and above all preserve the unequal distribution of power and privilege that is the direct result of past oppressions, these assemblies empowered the Spanish peasants to decide for themselves how to recover their dignity and equality. Aside from redistributing land, they also took over pro-fascist churches and luxury villas to be used as community centers, storehouses, schools, and clinics. In five years of state-instituted agrarian reform, Spain's Republican government redistributed only 876,327 hectares of land; in just a few weeks of revolution, the peasants seized 5,692,202 hectares of land for themselves.<sup>21</sup> This figure is even more significant considering that this redistribution was opposed by Republicans and Socialists, and could only take place in the part of the country not controlled by the fascists.

### **How will a common, anti-authoritarian, ecological ethos come about?**

In the long run, an anarchist society will work best if it develops a culture that values cooperation, autonomy, and environmentally sustainable behaviors. The way a society is structured can encourage or hinder such an ethos, just as our current society rewards competitive, oppressive, and polluting behaviors and discourages anti-authoritarian ones. In a non-coercive society, social structures cannot force people to live in accordance with anarchist values: people have to want to do so, and personally identify with such values themselves. Fortunately, the act of rebelling against an authoritarian, capitalist culture can itself popularize anti-authoritarian values.

Anarchist anthropologist David Graeber writes of the Tsimihety in Madagascar, who rebelled and removed themselves from the Maroanetra dynasty. Even over a century after this rebellion, the Tsimihety “are marked by resolutely egalitarian social organization and practices,” to such an extent that it defines their very identity.<sup>22</sup> The new name the tribe chose for themselves, Tsimihety, means “those who do not cut their hair,” in reference to the custom of subjects of the Maroanetra to cut their hair as a sign of submission.

During the Spanish Civil War in 1936, a number of cultural changes took place. In the countryside, politically active youth played a leading role in challenging conservative customs and pushing their villages to adopt an anarchist-communist culture. The position of women in particular began to change rapidly. Women organized the anarcha-feminist group *Mujeres Libres* to help accomplish the goals of the revolution and ensure that women enjoyed a place at the forefront of the struggle. Women fought on the front, literally, joining the anarchist militias to hold the line against the fascists. *Mujeres Libres* organized firearms courses, schools, childcare programs, and women-only social groups to help women gain the skills they needed to participate in the struggle as equals. Members of *Mujeres Libres* argued with their male comrades, emphasizing the importance of women's liberation as a necessary part

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21 Sam Dolgoff, *The Anarchist Collectives*, New York: Free Life Editions, 1974, p. 71.

22 David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004, pp. 54–55.

of any revolutionary struggle. It was not a minor concern to be dealt with after the defeat of fascism.

In the cities of Catalunya, social restrictions on women lessened considerably. For the first time in Spain, women could walk alone on the streets without a chaperon — not to mention that many were walking down the streets wearing militia uniforms and carrying guns. Anarchist women like Lucia Sanchez Saornil wrote about how empowering it was for them to change the culture that had oppressed them. Male observers from George Orwell to Franz Borkenau remarked on the changed conditions of women in Spain.

In the uprising spurred by Argentina's economic collapse in 2001, participation in the popular assemblies helped formerly apolitical people build an anti-authoritarian culture. Another form of popular resistance, the piquetero movement, exerted a great influence on the lives and culture of many of the unemployed. The piqueteros were unemployed people who masked their faces and set up pickets, shutting down the highways to cut off trade and gain leverage for demands such as food from supermarkets or unemployment subsidies. Aside from these activities, the piqueteros also self-organized an anti-capitalist economy, including schools, media groups, clothing give-away shops, bakeries, clinics, and groups to fix up people's houses and build infrastructure such as sewage systems. Many of the piquetero groups were affiliated with the Movement of Unemployed Workers (MTD). Their movement had already developed considerably before the December 2001 run on the banks by the middle class, and in many ways they were at the forefront of the struggle in Argentina.

Two Indymedia volunteers who traveled to Argentina from the US and Britain to document the rebellion for English-speaking countries spent time with a group in the Admiralte Brown neighborhood south of Buenos Aires.<sup>23</sup> The members of this particular group, similar to many of the piqueteros in the MTD, had been driven to activism only recently, by unemployment. But their motivations were not purely material; for example, they frequently held cultural and educational events. The two Indymedia activists recounted a workshop held in an MTD bakery, in which the collective members discussed the differences between a capitalist bakery and an anti-capitalist one. "We produce for our neighbors... and to teach ourselves to do new things, to learn to produce for ourselves," explained a woman in her fifties. A young man in an Iron Maiden sweatshirt added, "We produce so that everyone can live better."<sup>24</sup> The same group operated a *Ropero*, a clothing shop, and many other projects as well. It was run by volunteers and depended on donations, even though everyone in the area was poor. Despite these challenges, it opened twice a month to give out free clothes to people who could not afford them. The rest of the time, the volunteers mended old clothes that were dropped off. In the absence of the motives that drive the capitalist system, the people there clearly took pride in their work, showing off to visitors how well restored the clothes were despite the scarcity of materials.

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23 John Jordan and Jennifer Whitney, *Que Se Vayan Todos: Argentina's Popular Rebellion*, Montreal: Kersplebedeb, 2003, pp. 42–52.

24 Ditto, pp. 43–44.

The shared ideal among the piqueteros included a firm commitment to non-hierarchical forms of organization and participation by all members, young and old, in their discussions and activities. Women were often the first to go to the picket lines, and came to hold considerable power within the piquetero movement. Within these autonomous organizations, many women gained the opportunity to participate in large-scale decision-making or take on other male-dominated roles for the first time in their lives. At the particular bakery holding the workshop described above, a young woman was in charge of security, another traditionally male role.

Throughout the 2006 rebellion in Oaxaca, as well as before and after, indigenous culture was a wellspring of resistance. However much they exemplified cooperative, anti-authoritarian, and ecologically sustainable behaviors before colonialism, indigenous peoples in the Oaxacan resistance came to cherish and emphasize the parts of their culture that contrasted with the system that values property over life, encourages competition and domination, and exploits the environment into extinction. Their ability to practice an anti-authoritarian and ecological culture — working together in a spirit of solidarity and nourishing themselves on the small amount of land they had — increased the potency of their resistance, and thus their very chances for survival. Thus, resistance to capitalism and the state is both a means of protecting indigenous cultures and a crucible that forges a stronger anti-authoritarian ethos. Many of the people who participated in the rebellion were not themselves indigenous, but they were influenced and inspired by indigenous culture. Thus, the act of rebellion itself allowed people to choose social values and shape their own identities.

Before the rebellion, the impoverished state of Oaxaca sold its indigenous culture as a commodity to entice tourists and bring in business. The Guelaguetza, an important gathering in native cultures, had become a state-sponsored tourist attraction. But during the rebellion in 2006, the state and tourism were pushed to the margins, and in July the social movements organized a People's Guelaguetza — not to sell to the tourists, but to enjoy for themselves. After successfully blocking the commercial event set up for the tourists, hundreds of students from Oaxaca City and people from villages across the state began organizing their own event. They made costumes and practiced dances and songs from all seven regions of Oaxaca. In the end the People's Guelaguetza was a huge success. Everyone attended for free and the venue was packed. There were more traditional dances than there had ever been in the commercial Guelaguetzas. While the event had previously been performed for money, most of which was pocketed by the sponsors and government, it became a day of sharing, as it had been traditionally. At the heart of an anti-capitalist, largely indigenous movement was a festival, a celebration of the values that hold the movement together, and a revival of indigenous cultures that were being wiped out or pared down to a marketable exoticism.

While the Guelaguetza was reclaimed as a part of indigenous culture in support of an anti-capitalist rebellion and the liberatory society it sought to create, another traditional celebration was modified to serve the movement. In 2006 the Day of the Dead, a Mexican holiday that syncretizes indigenous spirituality with Catholic

influences, coincided with a violent government assault upon the movement. Just before the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, police forces and paramilitaries killed about a dozen people, so the dead were fresh in everybody's minds. Graffiti artists had long played an important role in the movement in Oaxaca, covering the walls with messages well before the people had seized radio stations to give themselves a voice. When the Day of the Dead and the heavy government repression coincided in November, these artists took the lead in adapting the holiday to commemorate the dead and honor the struggle. They covered the streets with the traditional tapetes — colorful murals made from sand, chalk, and flowers — but this time the tapetes contained messages of resistance and hope, or portrayed the names and faces of all the people killed. People also made skeleton sculptures and altars for each person murdered by police and paramilitaries. One graffiti artist, Yescka, described it:

This year on Day of the Dead, the traditional festivities took on new meaning. The intimidating presence of the Federal Police troops filled the air — an atmosphere of sadness and chaos hung over the city. But we managed to overcome our fear and our loss. People wanted to carry on with the traditions, not only for their ancestors, but also for all those fallen in the movement in recent months.

Although it sounds a bit contradictory, Day of the Dead is when there is the most life in Oaxaca. There are carnivals, and people dress up in different costumes, such as devils or skeletons full of colorful feathers. They parade through the streets dancing or creating theatrical performances of comical daily happenings — this year with a socio-political twist.

We didn't let the Federal Police forces standing guard stop our celebrating or our mourning. The whole tourist pathway in the center of the city, Macedonio Alcalá, was full of life. Protest music was playing and people danced and watched the creation of our famous sand murals, called tapetes.

We dedicated them to all the people killed in the movement. Anyone who wanted to could join in to add to the mosaics. The mixed colors expressed our mixed feelings of repression and freedom; joy and sadness; hatred and love. The artwork and the chants permeating the street created an unforgettable scene that ultimately transformed our sadness into joy.<sup>25</sup>

While artwork and traditional festivals played a role in the development of a liberating culture, the struggle itself, specifically the barricades, provided a meeting point where alienation was shed and neighbors built new relationships. One woman described her experience:

25 Diana Denham and C.A.S.A. Collective (eds.), *Teaching Rebellion: Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca*, Oakland: PM Press, 2008, interview with Yescka.



You found all kinds of people at the barricades. A lot of people tell us they met at the barricades. Even though they were neighbors, they didn't know each other before. They'll even say, "I didn't ever talk to my neighbor before because I didn't think I liked him, but now that we're at the barricade together, he's a *compañero*." So the barricades weren't just traffic barriers, but became spaces where neighbors could chat and communities could meet. Barricades became a way that communities empowered themselves.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout Europe, dozens of autonomous villages have built a life outside capitalism. Especially in Italy, France, and Spain, these villages exist outside regular state control and with little influence from the logic of the market. Sometimes buying cheap land, often squatting abandoned villages, these new autonomous communities create the infrastructure for a libertarian, communal life and the culture that goes with it. These new cultures replace the nuclear family with a much broader, more inclusive and flexible family united by affinity and consensual love rather than bloodlines and proprietary love; they destroy the division of labor by gender, weaken age segregation and hierarchy, and create communal and ecological values and relationships.

A particularly remarkable network of autonomous villages can be found in the mountains around Itoiz, in Navarra, part of the Basque country. The oldest of these, Lakabe, has been occupied for twenty-eight years as of this writing, and is home to about thirty people. A project of love, Lakabe challenges and changes the traditional aesthetic of rural poverty. The floors and walkways are beautiful mosaics of stone and tile, and the newest house to be built there could pass for the luxury retreat of a millionaire — except that it was built by the people who live there, and designed in harmony with the environment, to catch the sun and keep out the cold. Lakabe houses a communal bakery and a communal dining room, which on a normal day hosts delicious feasts that the whole village eats together.

Another of the villages around Itoiz, Aritzuren, exemplifies a certain aesthetic that represents another idea of history. Thirteen years ago, a handful of people occupied the village, which had been abandoned for over fifty years before that. Since then, they have constructed all their dwellings within the ruins of the old hamlet. Half of Aritzuren is still ruins, slowly decomposing into forest on a mountainside an hour's drive from the nearest paved road. The ruins are a reminder of the origin and foundation of the living parts of the village, and they serve as storage spaces for building materials that will be used to renovate the rest of it. The new sense of history that lives amidst these piled stones is neither linear nor amnesiac, but organic — in that the past is the shell of the present and compost of the future. It is also post-capitalist, suggesting a return to the land and the creation of a new society in the ruins of the old.

Uli, another of the abandoned and reoccupied villages, disbanded after more than a decade of autonomous existence; but the success rate of all the villages together is

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26 Ditto, interview with Leyla.

encouraging, with five out of six still going strong. The “failure” of Uli demonstrates another advantage of anarchist organizing: a collective can dissolve itself rather than remaining stuck in a mistake forever or suppressing individual needs to perpetuate an artificial collectivity. These villages in their prior incarnations, a century earlier, were only dissolved by the economic catastrophe of industrializing capitalism. Otherwise, their members were held fast by a conservative kinship system rigidly enforced by the church.

At Aritzkuren as at other autonomous villages throughout the world, life is both laborious and relaxed. The residents must build all their infrastructure themselves and create most of the things they need with their own hands, so there is plenty of work to do. People get up in the morning and work on their own projects, or else everyone comes together for a collective effort decided on at a previous meeting. Following a huge lunch which one person cooks for everyone on a rotating basis, people have the whole afternoon to relax, read, go into town, work in the garden, or fix up a building. Some days, nobody works at all; if one person decides to skip a day, there are no recriminations, because there are meetings at which to make sure responsibilities are evenly distributed. In this context, characterized by a close connection to nature, inviolable individual freedom mixed with a collective social life, and the blurring of work and pleasure, the people of Aritzkuren have created not only a new lifestyle, but an ethos compatible with living in an anarchist society.

The school they are building at Aritzkuren is a powerful symbol of this. A number of children live at Aritzkuren and the other villages. Their environment already provides a wealth of learning opportunities, but there is much desire for a formal educational setting and a chance to employ alternative teaching methods in a project that can be accessible to children from the entire region.

As the school indicates, the autonomous villages violate the stereotype of the hippy commune as an escapist attempt to create a utopia in microcosm rather than change the existing world. Despite their physical isolation, these villages are very much involved in the outside world and in social movements struggling to change it. The residents share their experiences in creating sustainable collectives with other anarchist and autonomous collectives throughout the country. Many people divide each year between the village and the city, balancing a more utopian existence with participation in ongoing struggles. The villages also serve as a refuge for activists taking a break from stressful city life. Many of the villages carry on projects that keep them involved in social struggles; for example, one autonomous village in Italy provides a peaceful setting for a group that translates radical texts. Likewise, the villages around Itoiz have been a major part of the twenty-year-running resistance to the hydroelectric dam there.

For about ten years, starting with the occupation of Rala, near Aritzkuren, the autonomous villages around Itoiz have created a network, sharing tools, materials, expertise, food, seeds, and other resources. They meet periodically to discuss mutual aid and common projects; residents of one village will drop by another to eat lunch, talk, and, perhaps, deliver a dozen extra raspberry plants. They also participate in an-

nual gatherings that bring together autonomous communities from all over Spain to discuss the process of building sustainable collectives. At these, each group presents a problem it has been unable to resolve, such as sharing responsibilities or putting consensus decisions into practice. Then they each offer to mediate while another collective discusses their problem — preferably a problem the mediating group has experience resolving.

The Itoiz villages are remarkable, but not unique. To the east, in the Pyrenees of Aragon, the mountains of La Solana contain nearly twenty abandoned villages. As of this writing, seven of these villages have been reoccupied. The network between them is still in an informal stage, and many of the villages are only inhabited by a few people at an early point in the process of renovating them; but more people are moving there every year, and before long it could be a larger constellation of rural occupations than Itoiz. Many in these villages maintain strong connections to the squatters' movement in Barcelona, and there is an open invitation for people to visit, help out, or even move there.

Under certain circumstances, a community can also gain the autonomy it needs to build a new form of living by buying land, rather than occupying it; however though it may be more secure this method creates added pressures to produce and make money in order to survive, but these pressures are not fatal. Longo Maï is a network of cooperatives and autonomous villages that started in Basel, Switzerland, in 1972. The name is Provençal for “long may it last,” and so far they have lived up to their eponym. The first Longo Maï cooperative are the farms Le Pigeonnier, Grange neuve, and St. Hippolyte, located near the village Limans in Provence. Here 80 adults and many children live on 300 hectares of land, where they practice agriculture, gardening, and shepherding. They keep 400 sheep, poultry, rabbits, bees, and draft horses; they run a garage, a metal workshop, a carpentry workshop, and a textile studio. The alternative station Radio Zinzine has been broadcasting from the cooperative for 25 years, as of 2007. Hundreds of youth pass through and help out at the cooperative, learning new skills and often gaining their first contact with communal living or non-industrial agriculture and crafting.

Since 1976 Longo Maï has been running a cooperative spinning-mill at Chantemerle, in the French Alps. Using natural dyes and the wool from 10,000 sheep, mostly local, they make sweaters, shirts, sheets, and cloth for direct sale. The cooperative established the union ATELIER, a network of stock-breeders and wool-workers. The mill produces its own electricity with smallscale hydropower.

Also in France, near Arles, the cooperative Mas de Granier sits on 20 hectares of land. They grow fields of hay and olive trees, on good years producing enough olive oil to provide for other Longo Maï cooperatives as well as themselves. Three hectares are devoted to organic vegetables, delivered weekly to subscribers in the broader community. Some of the vegetables are canned as preserves in the cooperative's own factory. They also grow grain for bread, pasta, and animal feed.

In the Transkarpaty region of Ukraine, Zeleniy Hai, a small Longo Maï group, started up after the fall of the Soviet Union. Here they have created a language school, a

carpentry workshop, a cattle ranch, and a dairy factory. They also have a traditional music group. The Longo Maï network used their resources to help form a cooperative in Costa Rica in 1978 that provided land to 400 landless peasants fleeing the civil war in Nicaragua, allowing them to create a new community and provide for themselves. There are also Longo Maï cooperatives in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, producing wine, building buildings with local, ecological materials, running schools, and more. In the city of Basel they maintain an office building that serves as a coordinating point, an information hub, and a visitors' center.

The call-out for the cooperative network, drafted in Basel in 1972, reads in part:

What do you expect from us? That we, in order not to be excluded, submit to the injustice and the insane compulsions of this world, without hope or expectations?

We refuse to continue this unwinnable battle. We refuse to play a game that has already been lost, a game whose only outcome is our criminalization. This industrial society goes doubtlessly to its own downfall and we don't want to participate.

We prefer to seek a way to build our own lives, to create our own spaces, something for which there is no place within this cynical, capitalist world. We can find enough space in the economically and socially depressed areas, where the youth depart in growing numbers, and only those stay behind who have no other choice.<sup>27</sup>

As capitalist agriculture becomes increasingly incapable of feeding the world in the wake of catastrophes related to climate and pollution, it seems almost inevitable that a large number of people must move back to the land to create sustainable and localized forms of agriculture. At the same time, city dwellers need to cultivate consciousness of where their food and water come from, and one way they can do this is by visiting and helping out in the villages.

## **A revolution that is many revolutions**

Many people think that revolutions always follow a tragic course from hope to betrayal. The ultimate result of revolutions in Russia, China, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, and elsewhere was the establishment of new authoritarian regimes — some worse than their predecessors, others hardly different. But the major revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were carried out by authoritarians who intended to create new governments, not abolish them. It is now obvious, if it wasn't before, that governments always uphold oppressive social orders.

But history is full of evidence that people can overthrow their oppressors without replacing them. To do so, they need reference to an egalitarian culture, or explicitly anti-authoritarian aims, structures, and means, and an egalitarian ethos. A revolutionary movement must reject all possible governments and reforms, so as not to be recuperated like many of the rebels in Kabylia and Albania. It must organize in

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27 "Longo Maï," *Buiten de Orde*, Summer 2008, p.38. My own translation.

flexible and horizontal ways, ensuring that power is not permanently delegated to leaders or anchored down in a formal organization, as happened with the CNT in Spain. Finally, it must take into account that all insurrections involve diverse strategies and participants. This multitude will benefit from communication and coordination, but it should not be homogenized or controlled from a central point. Such standardization and centralization are neither desirable nor necessary; decentralized struggles such as those waged by the Lakota or the squatters in Berlin and Hamburg have proven capable of defeating the slower-moving forces of the state.

A new ethos can come about in the process of resisting, as we find common cause with strangers and discover our own powers. It can also be nourished by the environments we build for ourselves. A truly liberating ethos is not just a new set of values, but a new approach to the relationship between the individual and her culture; it requires that people shift from being passive recipients of culture to participants in its creation and reinterpretation. In this sense, the revolutionary struggle against hierarchy never ends, but continues from one generation to the next.

To be successful, revolution must occur on many fronts at once. It won't work to abolish capitalism while leaving the state or patriarchy untouched. A successful revolution must be composed of many revolutions, accomplished by different people using different strategies, respecting each another's autonomy and building solidarity. This will not happen overnight, but in the course of a series of conflicts that build on each other.

Unsuccessful revolutions are not failures unless people give up hope. In their book on the popular rebellion in Argentina, two UK activists close with the words of a piquetero from Solano:

I don't think December 2001 was a lost opportunity for revolution nor was it a failed revolution. It was and is part of the ongoing revolutionary process here. We have learnt many lessons about collective organizing and strength, and the barriers to self-management. For many people it opened their eyes to what we can do together, and that taking control of our lives and acting collectively whether it's as part of a piquete, a communal bakery or an afterschool club dramatically improves the quality of our lives. If the struggle stays autonomous and with the people the next uprising will have strong foundations to build upon...<sup>28</sup>

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28 Natasha Gordon and Paul Chatterton, *Taking Back Control: A Journey through Argentina's Popular Uprising*, Leeds (UK): University of Leeds, 2004.

## Further reading

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1 For those who cannot read French or Spanish, in 2004 Firestarter Press put out a good zine about this insurrection, called "*You Cannot Kill Us, We Are Already Dead.*" *Algeria's Ongoing Popular Uprising*.



Anarres Press  
[anarrespress.wordpress.com](http://anarrespress.wordpress.com)

*There are hidden stories all around us,  
growing in abandoned villages in the mountains  
or vacant lots in the city,  
petrifying beneath our feet in the remains  
of societies like nothing we've known,  
whispering to us that things could be different.  
But the politician you know is lying to you,  
the manager who hires and fires you,  
the landlord who evicts you,  
the president of the bank that owns your house,  
the professor who grades your papers,  
the cop who rolls your street,  
the reporter who informs you,  
the doctor who medicates you,  
the husband who beats you,  
the mother who spansks you,  
the soldier who kills for you,  
and the social worker who fits your past and future into a folder in a filing cabinet  
all ask*

*“WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITHOUT US?*

*It would be anarchy.”*

*And the daughter who runs away from home,  
the bus driver on the picket line,  
the veteran who threw back his medal but holds on to his rifle,  
the boy saved from suicide by the love of his friends,  
the maid who must bow to those who can't even cook for themselves,  
the immigrant hiking across a desert to find her family on the other side,  
the kid on his way to prison because he burned down a shopping mall they were building  
over his childhood dreams,  
the neighbor who cleans up the syringes from the vacant lot, hoping someone will turn it  
into a garden,  
the hitchhiker on the open road,  
the college dropout who gave up on career and health insurance and sometimes even food  
so he could write revolutionary poetry for the world,  
maybe all of us can feel it:  
our bosses and tormentors are afraid of what they would do without us,  
and their threat is a promise —  
the best parts of our lives are anarchy already.*