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IN THIS ISSUE:

the politics of 'black bloc',
ukuncut, and the trade unions

remember the climate camp,
p. 24

what's popular education?,
p.21

anarchists and the big society,
p.18



Whose Ritz? Our Ritz!

May '11 - September '11

Contents

Shift Magazine Issue 12

- 4** A day in three parts
NIC BEURET
- 8** March 26th - the emergence of a new radical subjectivity?
ALESSIO LUNGHI and SETH WHEELER
- 12** March 26th and the aftermath – where next for the anti-cuts movement?
JON GAYNOR
- 15** To 'the movement': on work and unions in an age of austerity
TOM DENNING
- 18** Anarchists and the Big Society
PERCY
- 21** Popular education as a doomed project?
INGA SCATHACH
- 24** Remember, remember: climate camp
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editorial

So that was it. We had 'our' moment, 'our' J18. March 26th was the day that the emerging anti-austerity movement had been waiting for, and there were certainly parallels (both political and aesthetic) to the heydays of the 'movement of movements', as little as 10 years ago, when black-clad anarchists turned their backs on the marches of global justice coalitions to smash the windows of McDonald's, Starbucks and luxury hotels.

After Millbank, nobody knew what was going to come next, but could it have been predicted that we'd return to the aesthetics of the Black bloc? After Millbank, despite the escalated forms of action that took place, the distinctions of good protester/bad protester, anarchist/liberal, student/worker were hard to uphold. But what did the smashing of the Ritz, on March 26th, amongst other 'symbols' of capitalism/wealth, signify?

Smashing up Oxford Street and the militant forms of 'action' that took place on the day no doubt felt exciting, a break from several things - passive marching, respect for private property, obedience to the law etc. And in this way they can certainly be experienced as transgressive - revolutionary even - a 'step up' from the traditional lobby, march, go home format. This was the first time that you could seriously talk of a Black bloc in the UK. Spontaneous and presumably unplanned, this did not hamper the unravelling of events once people got to the West End/Soho: surrounded by the symbols of wealth and capital, energy high, the city became an outlet for the frustration of the workers, students and unemployed who took part. However, although there were elements which felt like markers of progress on the day - the levels of militancy, the amounts of students still active since the education protests and the unquestionable antagonism toward the current political/economic system - there were also familiar flaws and potentials which weren't taken advantage of.

While the Black bloc was vanguard in its form of action (we mean this both in a negative and a positive sense: negative in its separatism and scorn towards public sector workers on the demo; positive in its move to create a discursive space outside of the sanctioned and sanitised world of Barber, Miliband & Co), its content was a shameless and at times embarrassing political patchwork borrowed from the much more articulate UK Uncut and from social democratic populism dressed up as 'class war'. Black bloc tactics are an important strategy to protect ourselves and to maintain the same anonymity that the authorities use to protect corporations, the police, etc. But a strategic focus on tactics should come hand-in-hand with a political strategy and analysis. At a time when the discourse of the anti-globalisation left makes sense, with the political/economic system blown open and exposed for what it really is, how do these forms of action make use of this opportunity and resonate with those outside of the militant activist 'ghetto'?

But then again, the UK Uncut message, however media friendly and attractive it may seem is also deeply flawed. By focusing on tax evasion we run the risk of supporting the legitimacy of the state and hiding the inherent inequality of capitalism beneath calls for fairness ('we pay our taxes, why don't you'). Attempts at trying to match up this 'lost money' with the budget cuts also serves to mask the political element of the cuts behind simple, technocratic solutions.

For many anarchists and anti-capitalists there was a strong 'get rid of the rich' message. Whilst this might be a first step toward a class analysis we must be careful with anti-rich politics. Millionaires are not the same as the bourgeoisie. From many anarchists there was a peculiar combination of 'smash the state' but also calls to 'tax the rich' (presumably a call to increase income tax, inheritance tax, taxation of financial transactions, and similar). While no-one was arguing for austerity, no-one really seemed to be making the case for 'luxury for all' either. Arguments that placed capitalism at blame, structurally, for blocking universal prosperity, were lacking. The 'anarchist' alternative seemed to rely almost entirely on the redistribution of wealth, rather than on the argument that there is no distribution without production, and that it is this sphere of work that we have to address to really provide a class struggle alternative and an alternative to the attacks on our quality of life.

Whether we were smashing windows, occupying Fortnum and Mason's or marching on the main demonstration, there is clearly a concern here that we are separating ourselves off, giving ourselves a very distinct identity from each other, from 'ordinary people'. Contrary to Millbank and Dec 9th, where even Cameron admitted that a majority of people were making trouble, March 26th saw the dusting off of the traditional protest narratives of the violent minority. So if there's a group of maybe a few thousand annoying the cops in Piccadilly/Trafalgar Sq. while 300,000 are listening to speeches by the Labour leader, there's clearly the question of how we relate to wider struggle against cuts, especially those of the public sector workers present. This will be a key task in the coming months - one which is, unfortunately, much harder than breaking a plate glass window.

a day in three parts

“UK uncut has reached its political and organisational limit... the imagery of the black bloc in action struck no chord with its audience”

March 26th saw over half a million people take to the streets of London to protest against the latest regime of austerity, cuts and social reorganisation. This multitude of bodies had no one single (or simple) demand. Their dissent flowed through select channels on the day; three well worn acts of an old play, one that looked tired and failed to evoke much feeling from the audience or the actors on the streets. What comes next is the pressing question, but we need to first look at why the play failed to resonate. What happened on the 26th and why did it leave so many with such an empty feeling?

ACT ONE - THE MARCH

The march on the 26th was significantly larger than had been anticipated when the Trade Union Council (TUC) reluctantly called it last year. The TUC's complicity with the human rights organisation, Liberty, and the Metropolitan Police around the management of the protests was born of a particular fear – one that may still come to pass. Their fear was (and is) that the mass of bodies on the march would not

merely flow smoothly into electoral politics but instead move beyond it into some realm of civil disobedience. They fear that we will move past the existing consensus that organises our lives and become 'un-governable'.

In many ways their fear is justified – disobedience is becoming attractive and the impotence of electoral politics (and the bankruptcy of the Labour Party) is patently clear. Since the global downturn began there has been a return of workplace occupations and wildcat strikes in the UK, and a series of uprisings and revolutions around the globe. Their fears were heightened by the militancy of the student protests last year and the actions inspired by groups like UK Uncut as well as the range of disobedient struggles by groups defending libraries, nurseries and other services and spaces.

The sheer scale of numbers involved in the march speaks to the powerful potential for disobedience and resistance. On their own, however, numbers are just one public relations element in the electoral cycle; fodder

for headlines, opinion polls, party manifesto promises and back-room deals - much like the Iraq war protests of 2003. Complicity with the police was the only possible response to the not-yet disobedient mass, to contain it and direct it towards acceptable political spaces and ward off any possible contagion from its proximity to more radical forms of politics.

In many ways the moment of fear may have passed, in part because the radical left failed to make the most of the potential on the day. Disobedience is not the preserve of the radical left. Disobedience and resistance are both continually coming into being throughout society. But the tides of rebellious desire, spontaneous in their eruption, also tend to ebb without channels within which to flow. Spontaneity and organisation have a necessary (if conflictual) relationship – in whatever form they take (gang, collective, union, party, social network, etc) – that is necessary for substantive social transformation 'from below'. The radical left has an important role to play here; not as leaders but as co-conspirators, comrades organising re-



sistance through their proximity to other potentially rebellious bodies.

The two main co-conspiratorial bodies on the day – UK Uncut and Black bloc – both failed to make something more – more disobedient, more radical, more disruptive – out of the day. UK Uncut because of their organisational and political limits and the Black bloc because of their separatism and misjudged theatre of militancy.

ACT TWO - THE OCCUPATION

Somewhere in the order of 4,000 people headed off from the TUC march towards Oxford St on the 26th. However singular and distinct they were, their actions were largely conditioned by the narrative (political and organisational) of UK Uncut, and a much smaller number as a part of the Black bloc. So while the radical left in general can be said to have fallen short of what was possible, particular attention has to be paid to the two ‘groups’ that demarcated the disobedient space on the day.

After March 26th it is clear that UK Uncut has reached its political and organisational limit. Beyond the critique of the ‘leaderless network’ form adopted by them over the last year, their network on the day failed. By all accounts the dispersed actions were poorly coordinated and left largely to the initiative of individual groups who lacked the means to effectively communicate between themselves. The main occupation on the day was so badly organised that several of the groups, organised by flag colour, were ‘led’ by people who didn’t know where they were going or what the action was.

This lack of organisational capacity speaks to a larger problem. Calling UK Uncut a ‘banner that actions can take place under’, a network that needs no further coordination or leadership of any kind, both mystifies the actual organisational processes that are at play and works to inhibit the development of other forms of coordination. UK Uncut is clearly not leaderless – it is obvious that there are some core personnel narrating the story via ‘owned’ communication channels and by the dom-

inance of their voices both within the network and publicly (manifesting an invisible hierarchy of the most unreconstructed kind). All this is enabled by the rhetoric of a leaderless network. There is no such thing. All structures have spaces, processes or bodies that have more or less access to power than others. The important question is not whether or not there are leaders, but how power is distributed and decisions made.

If the problems with UK Uncut were purely organisational, it would be easy enough to call some form of spokescouncil (as in the days of the anti-globalisation movement), or arrange some form of participatory democracy or delegate structure. We can speculate that perhaps the fact that this hasn’t happened echoes some of the similarly problematic processes within Climate Camp – a political precursor to UK Uncut. It also points to the urgent need to analyse the NGO-ification of social movements in the UK. But the problems of UK Uncut go beyond organisational forms and into its political content.

Tax avoidance is an easy entry point for many people and it directs outrage towards those that embody a kind of capitalism that is built on theft and dispossession. However, while it might be easy and simply it misdirects people and their outrage in three important ways.

Firstly, it rests on a false assumption - one that moves people back towards the kind of policy-driven politics that the TUC favour. The basic political 'ask' (to use the NGO concept that underpins so much of the strategy of UK Uncut) is that if all the tax that large corporations avoided was paid there would be no need for cuts. The problem with this is that the cuts are not necessary per se (i.e. for purely economic reasons, as evidenced by the variety of economic strategies being pursued by other neoliberal governments) - the cuts and restructuring are political and would still be taking place if the tax was paid. Targeting 'unpaid' tax reinforces the idea that it is this 'missing' money that is the problem and ignores the immediately political nature of the restructuring.

Secondly, targeting tax avoidance as a practice accepts the reduction of politics to economics. Part of the neoliberal project is to reduce politics to a narrowly defined species of economics. Individual responsibility and a belief in the market as a fair mechanism for distribution are both essential to neoliberalism. Fighting the political reordering of society by calling for companies to play fair 'just like us' leaves this form of politics intact. What UK Uncut is calling for is mere correction, one brought about by a (very) 'civil' disobedience.

Finally, the main actor prefigured in UK Uncut's actions is the 'good citizen' - one who does the right thing, who pays their taxes, participates and above all believes. This wholesome figure, if it ever existed, is certainly fracturing under the weight of the crisis. This is exactly where the outrage and defiance we have seen over the last six months comes from, with the betrayal of the old form of citizenship and aspiration, of the promise of social mobility and the payout on entrepreneurial activity. Using this figure reinvigorates what is now a false constituency and misdirects people's anger and rage.

What attracts people to the actions of UK Uncut is something that many seem to instinctively grasp as appropriate to the moment - the occupation. The occupation as an idea has been bubbling up through the imaginary within the UK - from Climate Camp to the numerous workplace occupations that have taken place over the last three years, as well as examples from Greece to France and Tunisia to Egypt. Occupation has a strong grip on our imagination of disobedience. It is this that we should take from UK Uncut - people recognise it as an appropriate tactic for this moment and one that speaks to our reappropriation of time and space.

INTERMISSION

The terrain of the 26th was marked out by two different forms of protest that both led back to existing political forms of expression, both aimed at reform and both ultimately correlated to a reduced constituency. What we saw was a mass of bodies from a range of networks, organisations, groups and tendencies take part in these two spaces. While the potential existed within this disparate multitude to go beyond the limits of the TUC march and the UK Uncut spectacular occupation, on the day this did not manifest itself. Hope lies with some of the actions and forms that emerged before the 26th - such as the university occupations, the local anti-cuts actions and town hall 'riots', the various service actions and campaigns around childcare and the NHS.

This hope requires that people quickly recover from the fact that while most organisations were building for the TUC march or actions on the 26th, few had any plans for what comes next. Despite a vast amount of the radical left proclaiming otherwise, the latest neoliberal restructuring of our lives is not a re-run of the Poll Tax. It is in fact completely different. Our parallel is not with the Poll Tax but with the Structural Adjustment Programs that until 2008 have been taking place in the global South. We need to look to the forms of resistance in South Africa, Mexico, Argentina and elsewhere, and not to the much-reified Poll Tax resistance and riot.

ACT THREE - THE BLACK BLOC

According to those that took part on the day, at their height the Black bloc numbered around 500. While the boundaries between the Black bloc and the remaining mass involved in civil disobedience were not absolutely distinct, the Black bloc was a clearly demarcated form on the day, and needs to be analysed as such. Especially, it marked itself out as the militant anti-capitalist body above all others.

The Black bloc as a form came into its own during the anti-globalisation movement. Its purpose was to form a visible anarchist body that engages in property damage against specific targets that embody capitalism. It was, ten years ago, an attempt to engage in a form of militant theatre that



broke with the non-violence mantra of other protesters and to bring into the movement a form of class analysis that was perceived to be lacking.

On March 26th, as an alternative to both the TUC march and the UK Uncut inspired actions, the Black bloc's propaganda of the deed had two implicit aims: to deepen and generalise the militancy on the streets and draw attention to a critique of capitalism through its choice of targets. The Black bloc failed on both points.

The Black bloc does not represent militancy – this isn't, but should be, obvious. Reviewing the various analysis and conversations surrounding the events of the 26th, it would seem that this is the perspective of many on the bloc. There were 4,000 people actively engaged in radical disobedience on the day and 500 on the bloc at its peak.

The majority of the militants who have come out of the various protests over the last six months, many of whom engaged in property damage, chose not to join the Black bloc. This does not mean that they were any less militant for it. Militancy cannot be reduced to property damage, nor is property damage the most militant form of protest. As the history of Black struggles in the USA teaches us, sometimes taking a seat in the 'wrong' place can be the most militant action of all. Militancy has become generalised, and with 4,000 militant bodies in the streets, what was the point of the Black bloc as a separate entity? As a piece of militant and aggressive theatre it wasn't needed to maintain visible antagonism on March 26th, or to develop the existing militancy out there on the streets. Nor did it generate 'more' militancy in the same way the Millbank riot in November 2010 did. Why?

Millbank was a mass action – it wasn't a self-defined group that smashed its way into the Tory HQ but a huge section of the demonstration. Its character as such made it resonate – it was open and undefined. The protests that followed had similar characteristics: huge sections of the crowd were involved in fighting the cops during December, for example. This open and undefined nature created spaces where bodies came together to find a common need

for militancy. It was this free-for-all nature that generalised militancy; the open relationships in struggle without pre-definition beyond a shared anger and rage. And it is the closing down of this space that was the ultimate achievement of the Black bloc on the day.

By failing to do something that took things further that others could join without losing their own political identities, or by refusing to act as just a part of the larger mass, the Black bloc actively separated itself from the remaining militant bodies and ruptured this openness.

We haven't really begun to explore what militancy could mean – we don't really know what is possible anymore.

This exclusivity meant that the imagery of the Black bloc in action struck no chord in its audience. All they saw was empty theatre – what they were expecting from 'the anarchists'. Symbolic actions, including attacking banks, can be vital moments in a rebellion. But the power of these actions comes from their resonance – people must feel the moment and realise what lies at the heart of that feeling. But what they saw was a group of bodies alien to them, apart, engaged in actions they could not be involved in or identify with because they were not the Black bloc. The Black bloc ultimately marks out a territory – we are the militants, taking the battle to the state and capital, and you are not – that fractures the potential for mass insurrection. There are times this alienness can serve to excite the imagination, but when it is but a small part of a larger militant mass, it has the opposite effect and undermines its own reason for being.

FINALE

The frustration with the 26th is born of the potential to move through those limits that currently define our resistance. A potential that was not fulfilled for a transgression that somehow didn't come to pass.

It is clear that the politics of the TUC and the old electoral left are long past being able to serve even reformist ends. It is less clear what emerges beyond the politics of UK Uncut and the Black bloc. What was surprising was the lack of visible presence from the other main character on the stage in the lead up to the 26th – the students as a singular body. After all it is this body that made many think something more was possible. As individual occupations and groups they were there, but somehow their presence was not felt, not as a moment of rupture. Perhaps it was impossible that they could provide this moment on the day. Perhaps something else was needed. Or, perhaps, the day was made for something more subtle and quiet – a series of subtexts and whispers that ran between the lines and acts of the play.

We haven't really begun to explore what militancy could mean – we don't really know what is possible anymore. We need to move out of our old roles and habits, and find new ways to inspire resistance and revolt and make both endure. The day could have been, and should have been, a space to explore what this could be. But we lack, as a radical left, the places for these conversations and seductions to happen. After the 26th it's become painfully clear that we need forms of organisation to carry this militancy further. If militant organisation has any meaning, it is in this – to inspire revolt and make it endure beyond the moment of insurrection and riot.

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march 26th – the emergence of a new radical subjectivity?

“UK uncut as well as the black bloc need each other, and the refusal to denounce one another is reflective of this”

The explosion of militant activity that escaped the A to B route on March 26th led to the inevitable round of condemnation from both the authorities and the mainstream media, as well as the busy hum of internet debate between those in the direct action/anarchist communities and the wider anti-cuts movement.

For us, these subsequent debates have attempted to return participants of direct action to easily codified ideological positions, and as such, has disguised the transformative and fluid nature of a new antagonistic radical subjectivity.

November 10th – the emergent radical subjectivity

Since setting the agenda with the storming of Millbank on November 10th 2010, the student movement has posited a combative character for the broader fight back against the governments austerity measures. Students have shown an advanced level of self-organisation and a capacity to respond in the face of increased levels of state repression. The attachment to a more ‘immediate’ means of action has led to a convergence with the proponents of direct action, anarchist and autonomist ideas. This ‘meeting of minds’ has pro-

duced a dynamic and antagonistic sphere that exists within the broader anti-cuts movement.

The actions at Millbank were welcomed by many in the anarchist/direct action movements, as a breath of fresh air, ushering in a new cycle of struggle that would overturn the long period of sterility in street based action. While the 10th November was reflective of a growing dissatisfaction with parliamentary politics, it was broader in participation than the pre-existing far-left and anarchist groupings. While anarchists and other militants were present, the day belonged to a new, and as yet unidentified, political subjectivity. This subjectivity has since grown in size, confidence and militancy throughout the student demonstrations, occupations and actions that characterised the winter of 2010.

The first crisis of this new movement came on December 9th, when parliament voted through the rise in tuition fees. Rather than abandon the struggle as a lost cause, a period of ‘regroupment’ around university campuses began. Plans were laid out that intended to extend the terrain of struggle beyond the confines of the university. In London, this was expressed in a

wave of squatted occupations, such as the nomadic Really Free School, the Anticuts Space in Bloomsbury and the occupation of the Jobcentre in Deptford. These spaces adopted the organisational form and aesthetics of the university occupations defined as they were by political openness, debate, creativity and horizontal formation.

March 26th - One Day, Two Spheres

The March for the Alternative, organised by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) - had a clear aim. The Labour Party and their Trade Union allies did all they could to ensure a clear pro-labour, pro-growth message to the day. As March 26th approached, it became clear that two political spheres were beginning to appear on the public stage – the institutional and the antagonistic. The former defined by the limitations set out by liberal democracy (an A to B route, march, rally, appeals to parliament), the latter by its aspiration to circumvent or transcend these limitations.

Dozens of autonomous feeder marches were organised and were subsequently declared “unofficial” by the TUC. This act of control was the the first demarcation be-



tween these loosely defined spheres. Many of these feeder marches were organised through the networks and spaces established out of the previous winter's struggles. As such these marches were characterised by their autonomous and decentralised political forms, some of which had no or limited consultation with the police on agreed routes.

Politically organised calls, such as the 'Radical Workers' and 'Militant Workers' Blocs further aided the exposure of participants on the feeder marches to more radical identities and ideas, with a large militant Black bloc of around 600 people forming at ULU. The unwillingness from the TUC – the institutional sphere – to embrace the diversity of messages emerging from within these movements, was significant in enabling radicals and militants free reign to build up strength and influence.

The 'antagonistic sphere' of the anti-cuts movement acknowledged the limitations of 'calling upon parliament' to effect change. Despite the contradictions that exist inside it (e.g. UK Uncut's militant lobbying) commonalities are shared that emphasise direct democracy and direct action as a means of affecting change.

UK Uncut's action has focused on a sustained campaign of targeting tax avoidance by corporations. They employ peaceful civil disobedience, theatre and occupation as the form their actions take. The viral dynamic, reproducing replica demonstrations throughout the country, is testament to the accessibility of this form of action. Actions that are both open and participatory, not reliant on someone's physical ability to confront the police or damage property. Their actions carry with them the possibility of 'another world' - transforming banks into nurseries etc - and as such are an interesting model for symbolic protest that both disrupts the flow of capital and posits the possibility of another post-capitalist relationship to space. As such the form their action takes has an ability to generalise but is contained inside a restrictive content that does not seek to posit a systemic critique. While proponents of UK Uncut come from a broad cross section of society, its numbers have been blustered by students radicalised in the fees struggle. As such many of their actions have cross-pollinated, carrying both anti-tax and fee messaging.

There is also another aspect of this broad antagonism, one characterised by property destruction, combative attitudes to-

wards the police and the ability to circumvent police "kettling" techniques. All these experiences, as well as the legalistic and anti-surveillance lessons were learnt in the recent cycle of struggle and as such created the basis for the popularity of the Black bloc for March 26th.

We suggest that UK Uncut and the Black bloc, rather than being projections of separate ideological concerns, are reactions to existing modes of resistance and democracy. Therefore an unofficial union has occurred, a united front of antagonism to the current order of things and for the time being have empathy for each other. UK Uncut's message is too limiting to express exactly what is necessary to say about the cuts, the crisis and capitalism. The Black bloc freely articulates itself through a symbolic immediacy, but is unable to build the conditions for a wider participation. UK Uncut as well as the Black bloc need each other, and the refusal to denounce one another is reflective of this. As our conceptualization of this sphere suggests, it's a space that is in constant development, one that seeks to escape fixed identities.

Identity and Boundary maintenance

'Militancy' is often conflated with an anarchist identity, bolstered by a lazy media, who at the first opportunity will define any form of action that steps outside of legalism as being derived from an anarchist politics.

Political identity informed by ideology has a tendency to calcify thought. Ideologies contain preformed sets of ideas and interpretive tools that attempt to assimilate and codify possible interactions in line with its own principles.

While the hundreds of red & black flags that many took up on the Black bloc, were useful in reaffirming and uniting the bloc on the day it easily codified the bloc as a purely 'Anarchist' expression. In reality the bloc's 'politics' was more than that of its symbolism. Many on the bloc removed their dark clothing, replacing it with normal clothes so as to join UK Uncut outside of Fortnum & Mason's. We assert that this was more than a means to disappear into a crowd, but representative of the new radical subjectivity, that possesses the ability to shift from one form to another inside this antagonistic sphere.

Placing the 'militant action' into a more defined and political constrictive ideology has enabled the media and police to manage the actions of this "violent minority" as separate from legitimate participants (contained inside the institutional sphere) – this narrative exists as the default position of the establishment.

This equation of the Black bloc with anarchism has been repeated in the analysis of various left commentators and political blogs. Many of these have denounced the Black bloc actions as belonging to an anarchist vanguardist minority. This is ironic given that many of these political commentators supported similar militant actions at Millbank, seeing those as an articulation of a generalised radicalism. Therefore the aesthetics of the Black bloc (tied to an anarchist/militant identity) have contained how far the actions have resonated.

It could also be argued that the Black bloc on March 26th was an expression of anarchists' new found confidence to act in conjunction with others, as well as a means by

which people radicalised in the recent wave of struggle could enact a militant symbolic engagement.

Some in UK Uncut have been quick to distance themselves from the property damage undertaken by the Black bloc and posit themselves solely as proponents of peaceful, civil disobedience. This has been undertaken for a variety of reasons – as a defence, to enable such actions to continue without huge levels of policing; and to keep UK Uncut's core message of tax justice separate from other ideological expressions.

Those in the Black bloc who have spoken to the media, have also extended the hand of solidarity to UK Uncut (see Brighton Solidarity Federation's Open Letter), again promoting the 'diversity of tactics' narrative but ideologically positioning themselves outside of what they see as UK Uncut's limited analysis.

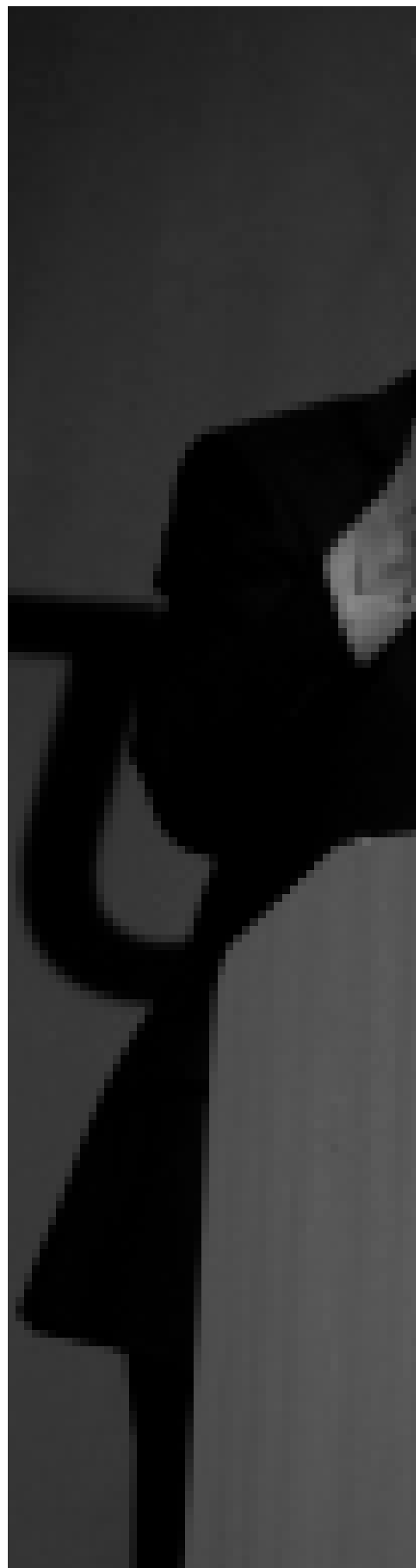
This ideological 'boundary maintenance' is an attempt to 'own' activity on the day, to clearly delineate and equate action (form) with politics (content). This disguises the fluid nature of the new subjectivity, positing instead pre-formed identities and limitations.

Conclusion

We state that both participants of UK Uncut and Black bloc exist within a commonality, defined by a shared history and a mutual attraction. That this commonality is the basis of a new antagonistic sphere, wider than these two visible elements, that have characterised and shaped an attraction beyond the dominant institutional space which is fast loosing ground to it.

This was illustrated on March 26th when huge crowds stayed to support the Fortnum and Mason's occupation, the crowd swelling into the thousands, who were then involved in cat and mouse games with the police, resisting baton charges and police dispersal. As yet the political content of this subjectivity is still developing but posits a radicality in its forms, if not currently in its content.

The new subjectivity is categorised by a tendency towards consensual decision





making, a rejection of hierarchy, open political debate, participation and a fluidity in how it articulates itself. Our initial investigation leads us to pose more questions than we have answers. These include - but are not limited to: What are the political demands or aspirations that exist within the fuzzy boundaries of this 'antagonistic sphere'? In what sense are these demands radical? How will this sphere interact with or expand into other forms of struggle?

Taking inspiration from the new movements we believe that inside the context of symbolic engagements, we need to re-conceptualise the meanings of actions that capture the public imagination, inspire confidence and participation whilst fostering collective power. We need wherever possible to escape the straitjacket of the rigidity that ideology can impose on these tactics, that ultimately leads to their over-coding/association with fixed and easily manageable identities.

On the evening of March 26th, Business Secretary Vince Cable, in a pre-written press release, reinforced the coalition government's message that the demonstration will not change the course of the government's austerity measures, a definitive response to the institutional sphere. It seems that the institutional sphere is fast running out of space to move and accommodate the demands from the antagonistic sphere for more radical action.

The next challenge we see is how this 'antagonistic sphere' mutates to embrace any new wave of industrial disputes also faced with cuts and whether or not it can resonate within these struggles. This will be the true test of it and may begin to 'flesh out' its political content. When previously contained symbolic actions spill over onto the terrain where capital requires a discipline and dominance for it is stability, things will really start to get interesting.

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march 26th and the aftermath – where next for the anti-cuts movement?

Peaceful and violent protests

Well, we should have seen it coming. The police, media and protest organisers were talking up the prospect of “violent trouble-makers” “hijacking” the TUC march for weeks in advance of March the 26th, and a few smashed windows and paint bombs later, they showed us - in the words on the Daily Telegraph - “Britain’s face of hatred” in all its spectacular glory.

The distinction between “legitimate”, “peaceful” protest on the one hand, and on the other the “violence” of property destruction was used and abused in the aftermath of the demonstration, with Teresa May describing “black shirted thugs” rampaging through the West End, championing the arrest of 146 protesters and outlining further curbs to the right to protest. While the number of arrests was consistently quoted in the media within the context of “violence”, the overwhelming majority (138) of them came from the mass arrest of the peaceful occupants of Fortnum and Mason’s. In fact, only three people were charged with criminal damage, and two with assaulting police officers.

While the mainstream media and police had already set up their distinction between “peaceful” and “violent” protesters well in advance of the day, and made maximum use of it afterwards, this division began to be mirrored in radical circles in the distinction between the peaceful disorder of UK Uncut and the “violence” of the window-breakers. Some UK Uncutters appeared to object at being lumped in with the black bloc, and sought to distance themselves from its actions. Describing their occupation of Fortnum and Mason’s in an article for The Guardian the following day, Alex Pinkerman pointed out that “Balloons and beachballs were the only things being thrown in the air. A basket of chocolates was accidentally knocked over so we picked them up.”

While the binary distinction between “peaceful protesters” and “hooligans” is obviously questionable, there is some mileage in comparing the actions of UK Uncut and the black bloc. Mainly, this is because of the nature of the targets. Some of those of the bloc’s were simply posh shops and other ostentatious displays of wealth, Topshop was smashed because of the Arcadia group’s tax dodging, and the Ritz Hotel is owned by the Barclay brothers, who live offshore their own Island,

Brecqhou. Fortnum and Mason’s, which was occupied by UK Uncut, is owned by Wittington Investments and has its own elaborate tax-dodging schemes.

In this article, we want to look at some of the issues surrounding both forms of protests, and make some suggestions for the direction of the anti-cuts movement.

The promise and limitations of UK Uncut

The UK has seen a wave of high-street demonstrations under the banner of the UK Uncut campaign, many of which have been organised locally following call outs distributed through the internet. The protests have seen a number of stores associated with Tax-Dodging picketed, occupied and flyered in cities and towns up and down the country.

The targets of the campaign have been pretty specific. The most high-profile company to be taken on has been the UK-based telecoms giant Vodafone, which is the most profitable mobile phone operator in the world. Last year veteran investigative magazine Private Eye broke a story on Vodafone’s successful tax-dodging, which had involved setting up a subsidiary com-

pany in Luxembourg purely to route profits from the company's acquisition of Mannesman through a country with a more agreeable tax regime. After a lengthy legal battle, which apparently was going HMRC's way, the taxman agreed to let Vodafone pay a tax bill of £1.2 billion, rather than the full £6 billion in estimated tax. Vodafone have since dismissed the £6 billion figure as a "urban myth", despite the fact their accountants projected for it in their own bookkeeping. Understandably, the story produced a groundswell of anger, of which these demonstrations are a product.

Target number two is head of the Arcadia group empire - and author of the Efficiency Review advising the government on how to shape its cuts - Sir Philip Green. Green, who made his fortune on the back of workers in South Asia working 12 hour shifts for poverty wages, took home a paycheque unprecedented in UK history when he paid himself £1.2 billion in 2005. This was paid to his wife, living in the tax-haven of Monaco, so as to avoid tax.

The demonstrations have garnered a good deal of attention from the authorities and the media, both of whom have launched investigations into the "ringleaders" of the protests. On their own, the demos have caused a fair bit of disruption, and brought to light the fact that the same government seeking to impose historic cuts in the standard of living in the UK is also allowing its friends in business to avoid fulfilling their tax obligations, if nothing else shattering the great lie that "we're all in this together".

There are evidently positive aspects to the protests, but some of their limitations are immediately striking. Fundamentally, the protests don't push beyond the logic of social democracy, in fact, playing devil's advocate one could go further and argue they are compatible with a right-wing populist analysis of the crisis: tax-avoiding multinational companies are sucking money from the country, unlike the hard done-by 'British taxpayer', forming another fundamentally alien parasite on the country's back - add it the list with the EU, immigrants, etc...

Furthermore, the basic logic of the call-

outs is the need to uphold the rule of law - these companies have a legal obligation to pay their taxes, which they shirk. This much is stated up front by UK Uncut, who, styling themselves as "big society revenue and customs", state that "if they won't chase them, we will". Essentially, the argument as it stands is for the state to live up to its promise and to actually deliver on the idealised face of its material function.

fundamentally, the uk uncut protests don't push beyond the logic of social democracy

The role of the state in capitalism is to underwrite the functioning of the capitalist market. The state is a prerequisite of capitalism in that the ability to guarantee private property rights and therefore the ability to buy and sell requires a legal and judicial system and repressive state body there to make those rights possible. What makes any property yours or mine, but much more importantly what makes the property of the capitalist his, is ultimately the ability of the state to adjudicate and guarantee that he can dispose of his accumulated wealth as he pleases. In practice this means the need to mediate parties and maintain the social fabric in the face of potential unrest - translated into bourgeois ideology in its current, successful iteration as an even-handed regime of "fairness" where we are all taxed, prosecuted, and end up on the receiving end of cuts fairly. Witness every political party attempting to outdo one another by positing the "fairness" of their plans for the economy and attacks on working class living standards in the UK. The state is a subject of criticism because it fails to fulfil its promised role correctly, not because this promised role, along with the toleration of tax avoidance and the regime of austerity all step from its role as a key actor in the continued existence of capitalism.

However, saying this is not to dismiss

these protests out of hand or deny they have positive aspects that can be built on, or that there is no space for growth and dialogue. To remain aloof to nascent movements and all the inevitable contradictions real people in the real world bring with them as they become politically engaged is to condemn ourselves to irrelevance.

One positive feature of the demonstrations is the fact that protesters in many cases are willing to create disruption as a tactic. Effective direct action, be it in the form of strike action, demonstrations or occupations, is effective by virtue of its ability to disrupt the normal functioning of society. In a society entirely based on the accumulation of capital, this means the disruption of the economy. Occupations of high-street stores have the capacity to inhibit buying and selling and affect directly the normal working of parts of the economy. If we are to effectively resist these cuts, we will have to recognise that ultimately symbolic protests and petitioning representatives to manage capitalism differently isn't going to cut it. The rowdier of the UK Uncut protests have involved high-street linchpins like Topshop being effectively shut down and unable to trade. Such disruption needs to take the form of mass action, and links need to be built with shop workers - the vanguardist paradigm of a few activists on an "action" supergluing themselves to things is no basis for a mass movement, and promisingly many UK Uncut activists recognise this fact.

Another positive aspect of the protests - with qualification - is the fact that the line spun by the government, opposition and media on the ultimate inevitability of the cuts agenda is being rejected. Clearly, the "there is no alternative", "Britain is bankrupt" line on cuts to public services isn't washing with people, and with good reason - it's hardly a convincing argument when HMRC is haemorrhaging billions in unpaid tax. This rejection is obviously positive. However, this needs to be qualified. Ultimately, if those on the receiving end of these attacks feel the need to balance the state's books on capital's behalf by offering alternate solutions to Britain's deficit there is a problem. Firstly, because we can question the degree to which public debt is a "problem" for capital anyway, as opposed

to an integral part of the functioning of states in today's world which is neither inherently "good" or "bad". Secondly, the overall subordination of everyday life and our needs to those of the economy needs to be questioned. Many attacks on tax-avoidance take the desirability of a healthy national economy as a given, with tax-dodging companies being seen as at least in part to blame for capitalism's present difficulties.

Of course, nascent movements are going to be full of contradictions. People don't develop a perfect analysis (if such a thing exists) overnight, and any mass movement against the cuts that may appear is going to be full of all kinds of illusions in social democracy, the labour party, the petitioning of our representatives, the rule of law and order and so on. There remains the possibility of escalation and radicalisation, that participants in such campaigns can move beyond the initial limitations they have. There are a number of positives to such protests which can be built on without tempering constructive criticism.

"Violent protest"

There are criticisms to be made of black bloc-type actions too, but first it is necessary to question some of the common assertions about these kinds of protests, which inform some of the most common criticisms. One obvious point to make is that the policing of protests, even the "fluffiest" of peaceful demonstrations makes any situation implicitly violent. The role of the police is to exercise the state's monopoly on violence; under capitalism this means providing the underpinning of commodity exchange and capital accumulation by guaranteeing property rights and containing any social unrest that could pose a threat to capital. In the context of a demonstration, the police's presence represents ultimately the threat of state violence.

Another obvious point is that property destruction is not violence – violence is the harming of living things, breaking a window is damaging an inanimate object which can be replaced by another. By this reasoning, the overwhelming majority of the black bloc's actions were nonviolent.

However, there are criticisms to be made of this kind of spectacular protest. One is practical – the risks involved as far as prosecution goes compared to the outcomes are significant. Another is that the black bloc strategy can lend itself to a kind of protest tourism and the separation of political action from our daily lives. There are many activists for whom politics is something they do at the weekends, "actions" unrelated to day-to-day organising and agitation in communities and workplaces, the front line of our exploitation by capital. There isn't much evidence that this was the case in London, but nonetheless it is a tendency associated with these kinds of actions that must be borne in mind.

Still, the "disorder" was much more captivating for many of the marches participants than both the official rally and its unofficial rivals, such as that organised by the National Shop Steward's Network, which was a washout. Many demonstrators, admittedly overwhelmingly younger than the majority of the TUC marches participants, were pulled into the unofficial splinter marches and direct action which the black bloc were part of. The author even saw a fair few afternoon drinkers out for a pint before the football getting involved. So much for the elitism of these actions, as was roundly asserted on the internet in the following days.#

Moving forward – dialogue, direct action, and mass action

March 26th was inspiring, both in the numbers who turned out to show their opposition to austerity and the willingness of many to break out of the straitjacket of police-"facilitated" protest. But mass demonstrations like it are not going to beat the cuts.

Ultimately, being right isn't what matters. We can turn out in the hundreds of thousands to make the point that the deficit is a fraction of what it was for decades after the war, that the cuts aren't necessary, that they are opportunistic, that they are laying the bill for the financial crisis at the feet of those who didn't cause it, that the government could raise funds by cracking down on tax evasion, by selling the banks it owns, by returning corporate tax levels

to somewhere near what they were for most of the postwar period, etc, etc. We're right, but that isn't what matters.

What matters is the balance of power between capital on the one side and those it exploits on the others – all those who have to work for a living, will have to work for a living (students) or those who must scrape by on the dole. The government feels confident enough that they won't face significant resistance that they're even cutting the pay of the police and prison guards.

So how do we go about building a movement against austerity that can win?

First, by resisting attempts to divide and rule. We have to reject the narrative of "peaceful" protests being hijacked by "extremists", of property destruction as being inherently "violent", or of UK Uncut being the legitimate face of direct action as opposed to hooded youths.

Secondly, by taking what is effective from the protests which have emerged so far. Occupying a shop en masse and denying it a day's trading is an effective way of causing economic disruption for those who are not in a position to go on strike or take other workplace action. This logic can be expanded to carrying out economic blockades, which have been used with success in the past 20 years as part of protest movements in South America and France. Direct action is only meaningful when it is mass action which has an economic impact – it is alienating and counterproductive when it becomes the preserve of activists "doing actions" for their own sake.

Thirdly, by not fetishising "non-violence" – either as unthinking reverence for property even when it belongs to a company like Fortnum and Mason's, or refusing to defend ourselves in the face of police violence. Peaceful protesters chanted "this is not a riot" and held up their hands as they were brutally kettled and dispersed during the G20 demonstrations in 2009 – it didn't stop them being beaten by the police.

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Tom Denning

to 'the movement': on work and unions in an age of austerity

In an age of austerity, at a time in which industrial struggle seems to be on the agenda in a way in which it hasn't been for years, activists are asking questions about unions. What can we expect from them? How should we relate to them? Why are they as they are?

We begin with who we are

Movements tend to reproduce their own social base and subjectivity according to the tactical repertoire which constitutes them. The things they do determine who takes part, and who takes part determines what they do. Thus, a movement based around students, unemployed people, NGO workers, and those with jobs that allow them a high degree of personal flexibility, tends to reproduce itself based on a set array of actions: camping, occupying or blockading commercial property, street-theater, banner drops, etc. – with an apparent diversity, but all a characteristic response to the lack of a mass social base rooted in contexts of everyday experience in which non-activists can be mobilised for . . . action.

The ecological anti-capitalist movement has largely been constituted outside, and to an extent, against, work. It has not

therefore, often, found itself with a plurality of militants at a single workplace, or in a given industry, who need to, or who could, struggle within that context. Where the movement has had such a plurality, there is quite probably little or no collective awareness of that fact, and there has been little or no effort to bring them together, or support them. Their social position has not been seen as a potential tactical lever by the movement as a whole, and perhaps not even by the workers themselves.

Therefore, the movement tends to relate to workers' struggle, and therefore to unions, as something outside itself. When activists need to get normal jobs in large workplaces – and they show enormous creativity in not doing so – they often leave the movement; particularly if they also need to put time into a family. So, as in the case of debates over open cast mining, or coal-fired power stations, unions appear as an external ally or even an adversary: not something we're part of.

Just as there is, in general, no useful revolutionary theory not based on revolutionary practice, there is no useful critique of trade unionism which does not rely on, or imply, a practical project to supercede

unions in practice. That is: cheering or denouncing unions, whether from inside or outside, is wholly sterile. Even a nuanced critique, which understands the countervailing dynamics of the union form (how they express class struggle; how they hold it back) is somewhat sterile, unless it is linked to practice. Such a nuanced critique is nonetheless necessary.

The unions: what they are

Unions, in Britain today, seek to bargain with employers over workers' terms and conditions and are based on a mass worker-membership. They are stable institutions, persisting through occasional disputes, and rather longer periods which see little conflict at all. From these facts, a number of dynamics follow.

Firstly, unions appear as an expression of workers' self-organisation, and reflect, to an extent, workers' opinions and perceptions. However, they are also better adapted to compromise – which is what they spend most of their time doing – than they are to struggle. As long-established institutions based on a fairly passive membership, they acquire a permanent administrative staff and a leadership to run them – what is often called 'the bureaucracy'. In

the absence of permanent industrial warfare or revolution, they need to be able to compromise with the employer. And therefore they also need to compromise with the state, which seeks to regulate industrial relations through a legal framework which appears to offer a proper procedure for industrial action, but without making it too easy. Thus, over time, unions develop an institutional interest in capitalism, and a symbiotic relationship with the state. In the UK, this relationship is expressed partly, but not wholly, through the unions' support for the Labour Party.

However, this process is not something wholly apart from workers. The mass of workers themselves accept capitalism and the state, and it is their lack of willingness to engage in relentless anti-capitalist struggle which provides the basis on which unions are founded. So, all is well between workers and unions? Not at all. Typically, the leadership of the union has a greater interest in compromise than the base, a fact which is often exposed when workers decide to struggle. They probably weren't all that interested in the union when it wasn't organising struggle, but when they do engage, are confronted with an organisation which has become more suited – in terms of its form and leading personnel – to compromise than the sort of action they want, or need, to win. Just as workers seek to organise through their union, they also discover a conflict with the official leaders, structures, and rule-book.

These dynamics also affect the nature of trade union demands. Not only are these demands not revolutionary, they very rarely move beyond wages and redundancies to question the content and nature of work, and the place of the worker within society as a whole.

Unions are therefore best understood as the expressions of two countervailing dynamics. On the one hand, unions are a basic form of workers' self-organisation against the day-to-day predations of capital; they express – albeit in a very staid manner – the class struggle. On the other, unions are institutions which seek to control and limit that very self-organisation, limit the militancy of its members in pursuit of that aim, and limit the scope of demands they raise. These tendencies are



both so strong, and so integral, to unions that it is rare that one entirely wins out. The extent to which one prevails over the other differs from time to time, and place to place, depending on the circumstances.

Ideas about trade unions

Most Trotskyists identify the struggle over work precisely with the trade union struggle; and attribute the failings of unions in large part to a 'crisis of leadership', which can be solved by themselves being in charge. They are probably also officially in favour of democratising the unions, and will generally support unofficial action. Trotskyists generally accept that unions are 'not revolutionary' (the remnants of a critique of trade unions which was common in early 20th Century Marxism), but rarely have a general structural analysis, such as the above. Typically, they do not prominently raise the possibility of struggle beyond the unions.

The orthodox 'ultra-left' position adopts the opposing view. Rather than seeing unions as institutions ripe to be captured and redirected by revolutionaries (and implicitly free of a structural relation to capital and the state), they see unions solely in their aspect of a limit to the class struggle. This, at its worst, results in a total disengagement from trade unions, and a tendency to denounce every defeat of the working class as evidence of 'union sabotage'. There is little acknowledgement that workers organise class struggle through unions, still less that workers often choose to end disputes themselves. Blaming 'the union' posits a bogeyman, wholly external to the workers' movement, and prevents serious engagement with the subjective and material sources of workers' interest in compromise with capital. It also lets us off the hook: given that we have failed to build support for our ideas – direct action, participatory democracy, anti-capitalism – don't we have cause to look hard at ourselves?

A third position, which is often held implicitly but very rarely expressed, is that of critical routineism. Many libertarian activists who are formally critical of both perspectives are involved in their union because they want to do what they can to oppose day-to-day injustice. They don't

necessarily want to take over the union, and are aware of the limits of trade unions, but neither do they have a clear idea of how to go beyond it. Often, the union will take up a lot of their energy, not leaving much time for extra-union-routine politics. Whilst individually critical of unions, their day-to-day activity doesn't move beyond trade unionism.

Critique beyond theory: the need for an independent practice

Earlier in this article, I argued that the lack of an independent libertarian revolutionary practice in relation to work was not only a product of our movement's sociological isolation, but a cause of it. We've seen that unions are the crucible of countervailing dynamics, which express class struggle, just as they stifle it. We've seen that trying to take over trade unions is likely, in the end, to be as futile as denouncing them from the sidelines; and as unlikely to develop an anti-capitalist dynamic as individualised routine. What does that leave? Loren Goldner calls it 'extra-unionism': "be in the union, be outside the union, but your perspective is beyond the union". But how?

There are no easy answers. But it's possible to suggest a few different approaches.

Industrial networks. At present, our movement makes no serious attempt to ensure that militants working in the same job or sector get together to organise collective work. A first step would be to make it part of our regular practice that health workers and education workers, for instance, meet in fora such as the Anarchist Bookfair. Discussing perspectives for organising solidarity and agitation could form part of this.

Solidarity unionism. In the US, the IWW has developed a workplace organiser training which has been taken up and adapted by the Solidarity Federation here in the UK. The purpose is to train workers how to build collective confidence and power on the job, without relying on official structures or mediation. In the US, the Starbucks and Jimmy Johns workers' unions have been two important consequences of this approach. We need to stop thinking of 'direct action training' as based

on a discrete series of skills, such as lock-on and tripods, but instead about how we involve non-politicos in direct action. Contact SolFed if you're interested.

Base groups and bulletins. In the 1970s, libertarian socialists in Big Flame and the early International Socialists adopted an effective organising model. It was particularly well suited to large factories, but there may be a way to apply it today. Militants based inside and outside the workplace would work together to produce a regular workers' bulletin, designed to reflect the experience of work and struggle, and help workers communicate with each other. Rather than laying down 'the line', at their best they'd show the radical implications of being honest about our working lives, and provide a way to organise politically at work, without relying on the union. The support of outsiders was often necessary due to the pressure of work, family life, and union activity.

Workers and service users: in and against the state. Cuts are attacks on service users and workers. In the late 1970s, another period of public sector cuts, workers and service users found ways to organise to support each other, in a way that cut against the capitalist logic of the state sector which divides the working class against itself. These attempts are documented in chapter 6 of the book *In and Against the State*.

We live in an economic and political reality very different from the high points of class struggle, characterised by mass expressions of workers' autonomy. But, once again, workers are in the front line. Where will we be? To find a way to answer this in practice will require ingenuity and experimentation. But unless we learn to speak with our own voice, we will never be heard. And if we are never heard, we might as well be mute.

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anarchists and the big society

“how are anarchists supposed to interact with a shrinking state and public condemnation of the removal of state support initiatives?”

The Big Society is an unnerving idea, one that has tripped many with even the slightest public conscious as they stagger towards confronting the austerity regime. Amidst the dismantling of social provisions of the State, it seems this vacuous rhetoric goes straight to the heart of undermining the traditional foundations of progressive movements; calling for cooperation and solidarity in lifting society to a higher plain of socialisation. It is, of course, a divisive use of language, but even so, it has been approached with caution. There is nothing new taking place when the ideas and values of the Left get swept up with and become part of the status quo. This time, again, Conservative party intentions seem not only to incorporate but also to subvert or blunt the political concerns of broad groups from community charities to squatted social centres.

When the government asks its subjects to “come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want” (Cabinet Office), it’s fair to take a skeptical step back and reflect on what is going on. Not just because it seems out of character for a Conservative government to propose an approach that offers such a particular form of social agency. Looking back, our experience of modern Thatcherite conservatism

is one of social destruction and decapitation of the means for social action. Of course, few on the broad left would ponder on the idea of the Big Society without skepticism and we only need scratch the surface to reveal the dogma of Neoliberalism. David Cameron is, after all, following in the footsteps of Thatcher, but the Big Society is something more than a ploy to differentiate him from the deeply unpopular ‘there is no such thing as society’.

When the Big Society was first introduced as a potential policy for the new government it was met with instant scorn and distrust. Britain’s large Third (or charity) Sector has dealt with funding cuts while continuing to make up for a lack of political will to tackle the social grievances in this country. Any calls for charities to further their provision of social services while putting a halt on funds was seen as insulting and misguided. An embarrassing policy U-turn for the government was anticipated.

But the concept hasn’t gone away. Charities and voluntary organisations never had the unity of perspective, nor the political impetus, to present a real challenge. Instead they criticise the perspective of the government for their lack of consulta-

tion and their failure to recognise charities need more money, not less. Then, reluctantly, they work longer hours and accept more volunteers. Initially, it is easy to denounce the Big Society as incapable of delivering – in the short term in particular the results will be sparse – but in the long term the success for the government will be more subtle.

The Tories claim the argument for a free market has been won. Despite this they have always known there are winners and losers and that markets still need something (pacifying) to hold the fabric of society together. The Big Society is the attempt to expropriate community and compassion, to ‘provide’ the ideas of social responsibility (outside the State) without providing anything at all.

Charities and publicly funded institutions will call the Big Society unsuccessful. And that’s fine, but the danger is we lose sight of the government’s long term objectives, to re-establish the role of the state – to dismantle and reassemble the notion of the ‘public’ – and make way for a new moral order that sanctifies the existing social divisions while incorporating social action as a solution to the inability of capitalism to close the divide.

Our 21st Century Big Society claims to hand power to communities through decentralization and fosters a spirit of social action. This presents a problem. Social action among communities has always taken place. Big Society is a huge insult to all those in established institutions, plus all those who work tirelessly outside these institutions - often for no financial return - in the interests of community and social change. Those who struggle to stabilise the social deficit between the rich and the poor, those with and those without opportunities, between the exploited and the exploiters.

The means of community resistance is now being triumphed as the saving grace of our future homogeneous and socially aware society. The role of the state is changing. It can no longer function with the pretence of being a publicly contested space, a place for ideologue and bastion of public need. Now we have managers of the economy and administrators of law and order. When we consider the changes in State form we can see the removal of political ideas which are being replaced with a logic of economic governance. The Big Society is the perfect solution for a small government that protects total capitalism. The rolling back of the State is precisely a removal of social responsibility for (homes, health, education) the things it took so long for social struggles to achieve. Such changes will inevitably provoke protest.

Chants of 'No Cuts' and 'pay your taxes' that have been heard across the protest landscape suggest the State should uphold its responsibility to serve our needs and mediate our social life. Furthermore, there is a moral plea being proposed to the rich to avoid legal loopholes, perhaps even for State law to be firmer in regulating capital. We could say these pleas call for a stronger, bigger State. Or simply suggest a confusion of ideas among the direct-action Twitterati.

An evident insecurity has also taken hold among anarchist and anti-capitalist circles. The drive towards cooperative organizing, community empowerment and resilience has left many in fear that their actions will complement the rhetoric of the State. Particularly, anything that is volunteer led, without funding and is mostly achieved at the expense of the time

we have left after selling our labour, is understandably ill at ease. What needs to be tackled is not the method of social action, but rather the cause.

So how are anarchists supposed to interact with a shrinking State and public condemnation of the removal of State support initiatives? Why are anarchists against the austerity cuts? What are we protecting here?

the Big Society aims to make the catastrophe of communities in Britain more bearable while reproducing socio-economic relations for the benefit of a certain class

An ideological push towards total-market-capitalism is being presented as an economic necessity with a social policy to salvage the cohesive quality that social rights once achieved. But beneath the image it is clear that Tory plans to foster cooperation are shrouded in a veil of economic slavery and consolidation of a republic of property. As a global phenomena, the establishment of State administered legal systems - which work most effectively for the protection of property rights - cement capitalism in the logic of the State. Of course, it has been like this for some time; however, the destruction of the 'public' consciousness of the State marks the final process of the separation of Politics from Economics.

This diversionary separation, once achieved, ensures the safeguarding of the economic logic and performative role of the government that operates on two different strata. Any challenge is met with Law

and Order and sanctioned State violence. And so, the coercion of the State lies in its protection of forms of living and dissemination of moral norms. The protection of rights of property - and the moral order that follows - exacerbates exploitation and directly binds the nature of the economy to the State. State politics and the economy are presented as power, or forces, in their own right, but are in fact wholly linked and support each other. Social relations are embedded in the economic inequalities that are protected and maintained by State law. The majority of populations are denied access to valuable property or ownership of resources that give opportunities for capital accumulation.

The Big Society is a negative policy that aims to make up for the inequality and disproportionate allocation of resources that create the social inefficiency of Capitalism. It is a policy that aims to affect the grievance without affecting the cause. We could call this a meta-policy, following market economics, which accepts existing socio-economic relations as given, yet outside the realm of politics. Furthermore, the Big Society extends the myth of abstract equality. Before the law, it is claimed, we are all equal and equality of rights equates to an equality of being and meritocratic impartiality. Meanwhile, the inequality of society is separated from the politics of the State. Any social divisions deriving from this inequality are smoothed out, or made (somehow) irrelevant, in part by the participation in an imagined community. Instead of exchanging wages for labour, active members of Big Society initiatives receive moral fortitude for their actions and sense of belonging to a community committed to social values and provision of care. We are all in this together.

Capitalism, many would argue, is a planetary catastrophe. The Big Society aims to make the catastrophe of communities in Britain more bearable while reproducing socio-economic relations for the benefit of a certain class. The unequal impact of these austerity cuts, the integration of market capitalism into all aspects of social life, the proliferation of crisis-capitalism - the march of the zombie - can only be made bearable through an assault on the mediator of socio-economic relations, as well as development of forms of living and social

relations that do not seek to extract capital from relationships; not simply by cooperative social actions - at one's own expense - that leaves the social reproductive potential of capitalism in place.

We should not be afraid of the incorporation of our language and ideas into the rhetoric and function of the State. We must occupy the rhetoric! Transform it with an understanding of our relationship to the State. It is an invisible hand that, safeguarded by the State, creates the division, exploitation and mechanisation of social life. It must be revealed as the hand of the State.

The necessity now is to subvert this negative cooperative society for a more positive one. For a community where social action can encounter a new form of lived social experience. An experience that can inform a new politics by its critique of State form, recognition of economics as politics and creative engagement with social reproduc-

tive forces. We are human by our own being, and not the membership of someone else's vision of society. The Big Society separates community from the means for people to establish their own communities as they please and are desirable for them. It separates citizens (equal under law) from the wider context of citizenship - the potential of social agency - and ignores the binary between citizens and the state.

Only once it is realised that equality, democracy and liberty cannot be provided by a government authority that protects private property are communities able to locate the critical part of their struggle for social care. The other, creative part will be realised in the production of communities to come. We want to protect our public services (many of which were founded on the principles of working-class self-help initiatives), not because we rely on the State for support but because it is part of an experience beyond Capitalism that was forced on the State. The Conservatives

may develop their policies around an anarcho-capitalist vision of the future, by dismantling the State's 'public' function, but anarchists should continue to point to the destruction of the Common in the relations of people to economic value. The anarcho-capitalist Big Society poses a development in State form but not a change in the relevance of anarchism. Property is still theft, not simply in a classical sense in the denial of its collective possession and use for other purposes, but, under the tyranny of rent and sanctity of profit, of the social means to a life of one's choosing. When it comes to social action, we are not all in this together, but we should come together, for the Common and beyond the State.

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Inga Scathach

popular education as a doomed project?

There's the rumbling of a groundswell. You can hear it murmuring if you eavesdrop at activist-type gatherings. Unless you listen really closely, you may be mistaken in thinking it to be another utopian proposal, flung haplessly into the ring of consensus decision-making. But this is not a recent radical fad to be horizontally-organised beyond all recognition: popular education has been practised in Latin America for the past 70 years. Developed as a way of working with politically marginalised communities to identify the sites of their disenfranchisement and act towards addressing it, the region's political ignition has seen its popularity grow. From its emergence in Brazil, the technique has gone global in the past 30 years, with particularly strong uptake in countries (at the risk of falling into lazy categorisations) in the global south. What distinguishes popular education from other forms of education? And why is it increasing in popularity?

Largely credited to the fieldwork and writing of Paulo Freire, popular education is based on the recognition that conventional forms of education replicate the oppressor-oppressed relationship. This Hegelian understanding addresses the authoritarian approach favoured by formal education

as a dialectical relationship. By drawing on Hegel, it also echoes Marx's bourgeoisie-proletariat dichotomy, and allows us to understand education in the context of the social relations that exist to reinforce capitalist and colonialist functions. By recognising the function of traditional forms of education as hegemonic, popular education supposes to offer a radical alternative that emancipates participants rather than perpetuating their subjugation. So, how does it work in practice? It is first important to note that even within a form of education that eschews the prescription of a curriculum, popular education theory has an aim: to address political marginalisation and confront hegemony as an emancipatory process.

The main aim of popular education is understood as conscientisation (ed.: a somewhat clumsy translation from Freire's native Portuguese - *conscientização*) for action. Both components are key here, as "to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognise its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation." Conscientisation is a process of increasing critical consciousness of our present condition and the situation of self within existing power dynamics, and feeling com-

pelled to respond to this by taking action. Popular educators reject any notion that people can become politically conscious without also wanting to act on their understanding, or that genuinely political action can take place without analysis. Consciousness and the will to act are acquired simultaneously and are facets of the same process. In order to build a political awareness, learners and educators need to participate in a mutual process of unpacking each others' ontological assumptions. Henry Giroux acknowledges the imperative of dialogue and discussion in this exploration of ideas by referring to developing a "language of critique" and "language of possibility".

The role of pedagogical philosophy as a method of confronting hegemony was explored in depth by Gramsci, while Augusto Boal explored variations on the dialectic form in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*. More recently, bell hooks has applied a feminist, anti-racist approach to university education and come to very similar conclusions on aims and methodology. It is hooks' work that helps us address the question of popular education's ever-increasing exposure, and why it might be gaining attention in radical circles. Speaking in a US context, she suggests that

“without ongoing movements for social justice in our nation, progressive education becomes all the more important since it may be the only location where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination.”

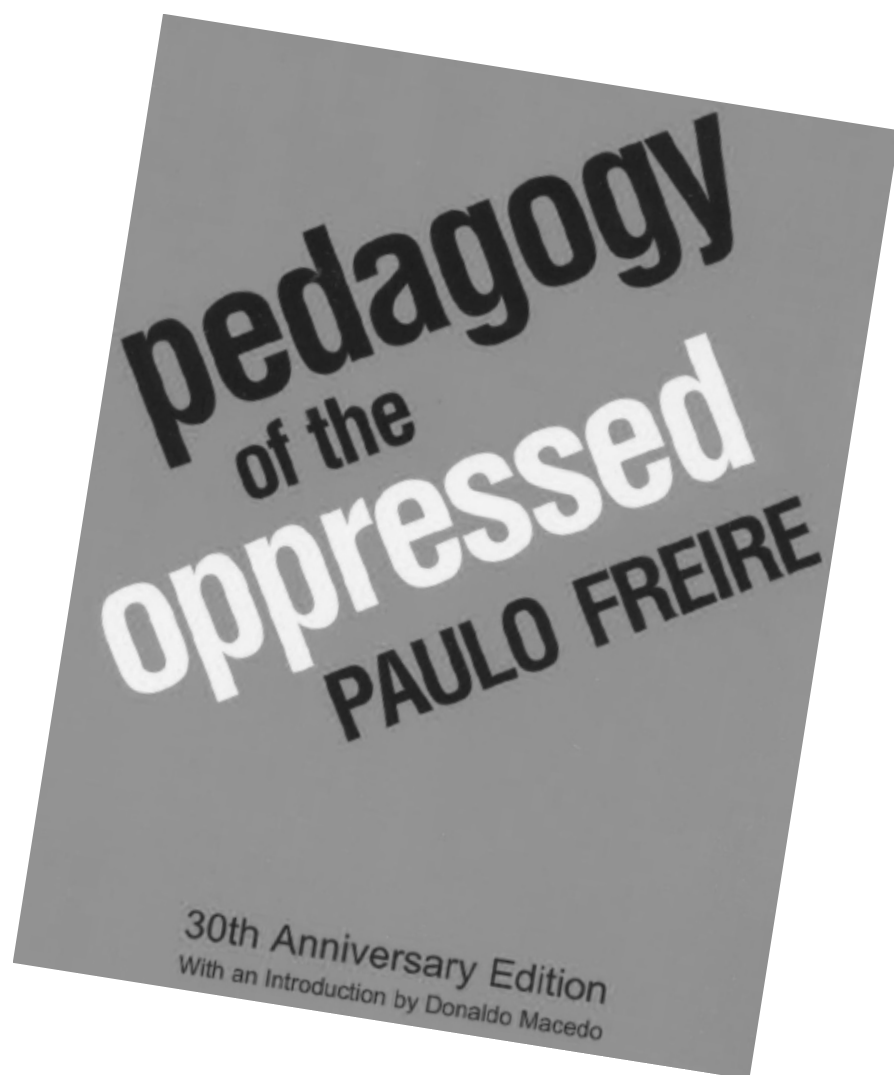
Reluctantly drawing tenuous connections between recent political developments in the UK and an ongoing global emancipatory project, there appears to be a correlation between growing interest in forms of education and rapidly diminishing economic and political agency:
the simulta-

neous decimation by the British right of what little democracy remained in Higher Education has coincided with the launch of the government’s meritocratic Free School programme; meanwhile, there has been a surge in alternative education projects such as the Really Open University, Really Free School, Ragged Universities and Open Schools, while large numbers of school, college and university students of all ages are becoming radicalised into direct action and property destruction. Having been the preserve of education theorists and a clutch of radical educators, the buzz around popular education is getting steadily louder in our changing political climate. But is it a helpful tool, a cumbersome method-

ology or a lethal weapon? Does it work?

It’s not just radicals and progressive educators on the left that are falling over themselves to comment on this project. The inclusion of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* on the reading lists of most US teaching programmes (and many UK ones) has triggered a backlash from the hard right. Sol Stern asks “How did this derivative, unscholarly book about oppression, class struggle, the depredations of capitalism, and the need for revolution ever get confused with a treatise on education that might help solve the problems of twenty-first-century American inner-city schools?” Stern’s question is a sobering reminder of the vulnerabilities of our approach, and of too hastily extrapolating meaning from a few snatched phrases of conversation or comments on Indymedia. The word on the street might be that popular education is where things are at right now but adopting popular education methodology is not necessarily indicative of political perspective. That its key theories are being explored within the American educational establishment should be enough to temper any blind acceptance or over-zealous enthusiasm.

If we come good on our intentions to be honest with ourselves, popular education is discussed frequently in radical circles but rarely translates into practice. One theory is that conscientisation is crippled by process. Through facilitated and mediated workshops, rather than open and dynamic storytelling, exchanges of experience become neutered. Without the shared learning and emotional outpouring of lived experience, individual perspectives prevail, and the process fails to find the flash-point of community solidarity, indignation and a call to action. Non-radical educators put popular education techniques into practice regularly. It’s easy to use participatory methods and use words like “empowering” and “inspiring”. However, the explicit aim of popular education is to inspire action, which raises questions about the integrity of many so-called popular education projects. So, how can we ensure that popular education doesn’t become just a toolkit for facilitating yet more meetings?



It would be naïve to believe that the oppressor-oppressed relationship is simply a relational dichotomy between individuals. The true oppressor-oppressed dichotomy is internalised - with the oppressed replicating the behaviour of the oppressors, with which they have become acculturated, and vice-versa - and can only be addressed through honest self-reflection and evaluation, or praxis. The nature of this internalised dialectical relationship means even the most committed pedagogue is still engaged in a process of self-emancipation. In part because of this impossibility of fully transcending the self, popular education is not inherently anti-oppressive. In fact, at times it can replicate the very same social relations it attempts to expose. From a feminist analysis, the emphasis on sharing lived experience through storytelling has been used to feminise political projects and legal battles. In a group dynamic, it also allows the loudest voices to dominate, and these usually reflect the relational privileges in the group. The abiding struggle of educators is to facilitate without leading. In trying to create space for horizontal learning, popular education practitioners risk exposing themselves and learners to the tyranny of the structurelessness (ed.: for more, see Jo Freeman's seminal 1970s text *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*) - whereby hierarchies become established via the attempted negation of their very existence.

The rhetoric of popular education, with the specialised terms and concepts discussed in this article, raises questions of who has access to what information and who then controls the content of discussions and flows of dialogue. Both Arlene Goldbard and Joao Bosco Pinto have criticised the all-too-frequent attempts of self-styled activists to embark on 'awareness raising' crusades, involving the dissemination of pre-selected knowledge misleadingly branded as popular education. Although increasing numbers of practitioners are adopting popular education techniques in various settings, there is no possibility of an emancipatory encounter without confronting our own motives, and abandoning the mythology of consensus.

Theory aside, the practice of popular education is a sticky affair. With an arsenal of techniques that includes theatre, story-

telling and art, popular education carries the risk of being adopted by liberal arts organisations or the kind of social movements that promote self-improvement over confrontational political action. As with any radical project, there exists the tendency to fascinate and attract lifestyle activists, and while this seems somewhat contradictory to its *raison d'être*, popular education is proving no exception. In spite of aiming itself squarely at politically marginalised communities, it is frequently co-opted as a tool for the left to wave around while only really putting it to any use within existing networks.

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Part of the enthusiasm for 'doing' popular education stems from a global south fetishisation that has been increasingly widespread in Europe since the heyday of the alter-globalisation movement. The proliferation of the technique through peasant movements in India and Argentina triggers 'outreach' obsessives into a heroic fantasy of liberating the working class;

while its long-standing connections to Latin American struggles also lend popular education a certain cachet to revolutionary communists. Popular educators need to move beyond an understanding of political marginalisation as poverty and small-holdings, and furthermore beyond popular education as the only means of developing critical consciousness. Framing the pedagogue as a missionary-liberator who radicalises the marginalised through supposedly emancipatory techniques is missing the point: "I am not a liberator. Liberators do not exist. The people liberate themselves."

Popular education is not imperative for conscientisation, merely an approach to developing it. The international student protests that have been taking place over the past six months demonstrate that students are developing a critical political consciousness and, crucially, innovating and hybridising modes of action in direct response to understanding the conditions of our existence. Our marginalisation is not over land rights or indigenous practice, but it is still over our political agency. We are educated with the linguistic and creative skills to articulate our desires, but we cannot yet transcend the dialectical relationships that govern our lives. It is the political climate, not an educational paradigm, underpinning the conscientisation of today's students.

In response to hooks' comment, is there still a place for popular education when social movements emerge? Perhaps a useful way to see popular education is as a method of agitating for conscientisation where the conditions for this don't already exist. This means recognising the goal of popular education as planned obsolescence. As an approach confounded with contradictions, perhaps it only reaches the point of resolution when its continued existence is no longer required. Are we radical enough to face the facts?

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remember, remember: climate camp

Since the first ‘climate campers’ descended on Drax coal fired power station back in 2006, SHIFT has maintained a critical dialogue with the camp. This dialogue has at times been a process of development for both projects, at others a running battle. In February, the attendees at the Climate Camp ‘Space for Change’ gathering made the decision to enter into a metamorphosis; leaving behind the traditional ‘one camp a year’ model to allow for more flexible and effective forms of action. This short article will take a retrospective look at the role of the Climate Camp, as an embodiment of a radical environmental politics, as well as a structure for organising towards social change. Looking back over the (many) internal and external critiques that have been thrown its way, we are left asking: considering the unquestionably important contribution the Climate Camp has made in shaping environmental and anti-capitalist action and discourse in the UK, what lessons can we learn?

The original principles of the camp were as follows:

1. Climate change is already happening and its effects will be catastrophic if we don’t act now.

2. New technology and market-based solutions are not enough to address the problem - tackling climate change will require radical social change.

3. There is a need to work together in our communities to come up with solutions. We cannot rely on business and government to bring about the radical changes that are needed.

No sooner had the camp put up its first marquee, done its first action and had its first media presence, the interventions into the seemingly less radical principles started crashing in. As an article in *Last Hours* magazine, printed after the first camp, concluded, “It seemed like a lot of people at the camp seemed to be placing faith in our movement – or this one week of climate camp – being able to stop climate change. We really need to be more realistic (which doesn’t mean being more compromising it means being more demanding)”. Following this there was an attempt by the ‘Westside’ neighbourhood to get the camp to adopt the PGA hallmarks “as a way of reaffirming the radical basis of the Climate Camp”. Whilst there has undoubtedly been a strong critical current arguing that the camp, in many ways, has

failed to live up to these principles, here at SHIFT we maintain that this critique was always intended to move us forward, to challenge ourselves in the present and to learn from the past. In 2009, together with *Dysophia*, we produced the reader ‘Criticism without Critique’, a collection of many of these dissenting voices. What were the major criticisms?

Carbon fetishism. This is particularly pertinent when we consider the current Japan nuclear disaster and George Monbiot (our celebrity climate camper) coming out in favour of nuclear on the basis that (reflecting on Fukushima) nuclear is objectively less harmful, to people and the planet, than coal. Leaving any social or political factors out of his analysis, in the same way that the focus on the airport industry, or indeed any other ‘top contributor to CO2 emissions’ does, is a reductionist presentation of the complex and inherently everyday social relationships of human and natural resource exploitation, private property, commodity exchange and profit that underlay global environmental and social injustice. Similarly the COP-15 summit was described as ‘post-political’ in its failure to engage with environmental issues beyond the level of carbon emis-

An open letter to the neighborhoods

We are a large group of anti-authoritarian participants in the climate camp. Many of us have put a great deal of time and energy into preparing and setting up the camp this year.

We are writing to express our deep concern with the direction that the debates at the camp have taken in the past days. In more than one workshop, we have heard calls from the podium for command-and-control and market-oriented measures to address climate change. The responses to these proposals have been far too polite.

While we recognise the importance of creating a welcoming and non-sectarian space, we feel that the camp risks losing contact with its anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian roots and appearing as a gathering that lends its support to top-down, state-centered responses to the crisis that climate change and energy deflection pose for capitalism. As a result, even the mass action is now likely to be interpreted as a gesture of support for tightened social control and austerity measures visited upon the population, rather than expressing resistance to the exploitative obsession with economic growth that has precipitated the present crisis.

In order to re-establish the crucial space of a radical perspective married to action at the core

sions.

Ethical Lifestylism: “The decision to go to Heathrow was wrong”, (Shift editorial, issue 1). Whilst this was also a criticism of the focus on carbon and the demonization of the aviation industry as a distraction from the ‘root causes’ of climate change, we also felt that “the emerging social movement against climate change is as radical as an ethical lifestyle guide”. We were wrong. The camp evolved radically; the first camp booklet promoted a list of lifestyle choices that was to become unthinkable in later years. However, we still argue that the focus on individual lifestyle change as a means for promoting or agitating towards large scale political change is a prominent feature of the anti-capitalist left and is at best naïve and at worst conservative. Hence we would contest this reflection on the camps decision to come to an end: “This tendency (to criticise lifestyle change) was seen in Climate Camp with some people saying action should never impede the actions of individuals and that ‘government and corporations’ should be the sole targets. The anti-cuts campaigns are much more comfortable from this position (as long as we ignore the contradiction of anarchists complaining about a reduction of state intervention in our lives)”. The focus on lifestylism isn’t problematic because it’s a drain on our energy, it is a much bigger head fuck to work with a total systemic critique, and the anti-cuts struggle, I would agree, offers the perfect platform to challenge the capitalist political system in its entirety.

The state/austerity: “Top-down government intervention may be the fastest way of reducing CO2 emissions. However considering the intrinsic necessity of capitalism to reproduce wealth from the exploitation of human and environmental resources and the role of the state to manage and maintain this, all calls on the state to lighten the load on the environment, will inevitably find the burden falling onto the human”. (Shift editorial, issue 7).

At the Blackheath climate camp we held a workshop titled ‘Green Authoritarianism’ where we aimed to challenge state led solutions to the climate change problem. We were shocked by the response. Again, pertinent to the anti-cuts movement that is currently in its infancy, the tendency to

defend certain features of the state that we saw as immediately beneficial (such as taxes, in the case of Blackheath) is a sticking point.

“Let’s get this straight. There is nothing wrong per se with fighting for state concessions... there is no comparison to be made between the demand for a minimum wage, for example, and the hope for higher taxes (on us, not the rich), population surveillance and control, or carbon permits... [However] rather than building a movement from sand with state concessions that will inevitably crumble we have to develop our politics, be bold in our positions, and imagine the un-imaginable.” (Shift editorial, issue 7).

Indeed there are many lessons that the anti-cuts struggle can learn, both politically and organisationally, from the Camp for Climate Action and its decision to drop an organisational structure that was beginning to limit its potential. As many have said this is a brave move, and one that should be celebrated and embraced as we negotiate the role of the anti-capitalist left in the fight against the cuts.

“Now is a chance to team up with the anti-cuts and anti-austerity movements and play a crucial role in the revolutionary times ahead. Anything but co-ordinated action is doomed to fail.” (‘Metamorphosis’ Statement made by the Climate Camp after the ‘Space for Change’ gathering).

But how do we go about this? Many have already started to ask this question and highlight potential difficulties,

“Indeed the task of linking climate justice with anti-austerity measures needs to be taken up in more detail than the general call for green jobs.” (‘The Movement is Changing, Long Live the Movement’, Res0nance.)

Many attribute the camps move away from a more up front anti-capitalist position to the desire to ‘build the movement’ and make environmentalism ‘more accessible’ to the general public. In many ways the Camp for Climate Action has eventually ceased to exist (in its previous guise) as it no longer resonates with the ‘hardcore of anarchists’ whose creativity and passion gave birth to it, or with the ‘ordinary peo-

ple’ with whom they so desperately tried to appeal to (via ‘fluffy’ methods of protest, corporate style publicity and a savvy media strategy). As I consider this dilemma I think of the current arguments we are having about the role of anti-capitalists, particularly in their manifestation as ‘black bloc’ at the TUC march on March 26th. Anti-capitalist politics do not translate easily into ‘action’ but they do make sense and we do not need to water down the messaging to appeal to ‘ordinary people’. The media is not a tool for us to use and a reduction of anti-capitalist politics to direct action or over simplistic lifestyle politics loses us friends both inside and outside of the anti-capitalist movement. Instead of trying to ‘win people over’ by rose tinting our anger and rage we should speak honestly about the frustration that we all feel and recognise it in the less valorised forms of action that people take everyday, we should explain our choice of tactics, whilst being open to listen to other ways of creating change.

The climate camp was continuously responsive to criticism from all angles, accused of rejecting a more radical anti-capitalist position they responded with workshops, targets and banners that attempted to address the links between capitalism and climate change. The camp has set the path for many new people towards anti-capitalist politics and has proved itself to be an example of an open-minded and flexible experimentation towards radical social change. Asking we walk!

We consider ourselves to be climate campers, we were there from Drax to Edingburgh, heckling in the corner and washing up in the kitchen, getting shouted at in workshops and putting up the very marquees that housed them. The experiences that the Camp for Climate Action gave us are invaluable and we wouldn’t be having these conversations without the energy and creativity that many, many people, have put into these experiments. For this we thank you! See you on the streets!

what next?

Issue 13 of Shift Magazine will be published in September 2011. If you have an article idea, please get in touch.

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Thank you,

Shift Editors.

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