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A Swarm of Butterflies: A Fierce Defense of Chaos in Direct Action

Curious George Brigade

2002

Despite the tremendous successes we've had in the past few years, several recent anarchist mobilizations have been hijacked by a shrill minority that wishes to impose permits, routes, parade marshals (e.g. peace police), zones of actions and other such nonsense, turning our rage and creativity into a well-ordered media spectacle, or worse, mass arrest. The constant and insincere calls for "solidarity" and protecting others have turned our once raucous resistance into an exercise of well-organized crowd control.

But it hasn't always been like this...

Just a few years ago the military's pet think-tank RAND organization wrote:

"Anarchists [in Seattle 1999] using extremely good modern communications, including live Internet feeds, were able to execute simultaneous actions by means of pulsing and swarming tactics coordinated by networked and leaderless "affinity groups." Rather it became an example of the challenges that

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Retrieved on June 11, 2009 from www.lahaine.org

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hierarchical organizations face when confronting networked adversaries with faster reaction cycles. This loosely organized coalition, embracing network organization and tactics, frustrated police efforts to gain the situational awareness needed to combat the seemingly chaotic Seattle disturbances.”

RAND concludes that there is little that hierarchical organizations like the police can do to deal with such chaotic tactics. In addition, they sound the alarm that our types of groups facilitate rapid evolution of tactics and promote greater recruiting opportunities than traditional demonstrations. They are afraid and they had right to be: we were winning. Fortunately, today, we still can win.

We gain nothing returning to the tactics of ten years ago: the scripted, bland and boring traditional leftist demonstrations of parade routes, leaders, speakers and marshals. What we need is creative, decentralized and, most of all, chaotic action.

One tactic used in Seattle and elsewhere that utilizes chaos is “pulsing”. Pulsing is the ability of groups of people to come together, disperse to safety and reform in new groups. While this is similar to guerrilla tactic of “absorption,” there is an important difference.

Che’s notion of “absorption” is simply when a “force attacks the enemy for a period of time and then breaks off the attack being absorbed into the community or environment” from where it came. Pulsing is a constant flow of people joining, breaking up and rejoining, often in new combinations of groups. The most successful way this can be done is through small decentralized autonomous groups (e.g. affinity groups) that have the decision-making power to decide for themselves when and with whom to interact with.

RAND points out that pulsing makes crowd control very difficult because it keeps “rearranging the threats” and that there is no prearranged pattern that police can analyze and neutralized. This is unpredictability is the cornerstone of chaos theory.

A biological example beloved by chaos theoreticians is bacteria. Bacteria function in pulses, creating ever-new patterns of connections. Chaos thinker Planc wrote “Each pattern is organic and results from random forces in the environment the ever-changing collection and density [pulsing] of bacteria makes their organizations very durable and adaptable.”

“Swarming” is another way we can inject chaos into our actions. Swarming is the tactic of hitting a number of targets at the same time without following a pre-set pattern. Decentralized swarming frustrates law enforcement’s ability to protect targets and disrupt our activities. They are forced into “reaction” as opposed to their goal of “controlling the agenda for protests”. Again, the only way for this to work with thousands of people is for us to organize in a radically decentralized manner. Decentralizing work and actions by the channels of affinity allows the skills and passions of small groups to be utilized best, so that the groups select actions that match their interests and abilities.

In demonstrations, hierarchical organizations are quickly overwhelmed when their central nervous system is confronted by the chaos caused by unpredictable, pulsing swarms. Anarchists can take advantage of these matrices of opportunity opened up by autonomous groups, giving us a huge advantage over slow reacting, hierarchical groups like the police.

Both pulsing and swarming inject the crucial element of chaos into our demonstrations. Police are repulsed by chaos, as are all hierarchical organizations, and thus are slower to react. These tactics provide affinity groups opportunities that they could have never planned for: like liberating unguarded dumpster next to a checkpoint that can be turned into a battering ram or finding an unlocked service entrance into a hotel where IMF delegates are staying.

Chaos also allows small actions to be multiplied and expanded on. Even small initial changes can accumulate quickly creating profound and unlikely changes — such as a butterfly

flapping its wings in Argentina may cause a hurricane in New York.

We are not robots, we are not pawns of organizers: we are a pulsing swarm of creative and free butterflies. We are fighting for our lives and dancing to be free.