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Reclaim the Cities: From Protest to Popular Power

Cindy Milstein

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“Direct action gets the goods,” proclaimed the Industrial Workers of the World nearly a century ago. And in the short time since Seattle, this has certainly proven to be the case. Indeed, “the goods” reaped by the new direct action movement here in North America have included creating doubt as to the scope and nature of globalization, shedding light on the nearly unknown workings of international trade and finance bodies, and making *anarchism* and *anti-capitalism* almost household words. As if that weren’t enough, we find ourselves on the streets of twenty-first-century metropolises demonstrating our power to resist in a way that models the good society we envision: a truly democratic one.

But is this *really* what democracy looks like?

The impulse to “reclaim the streets” is an understandable one. When industrial capitalism first started to emerge in the early nineteenth century, its machinations were relatively visible. Take, for instance, the enclosures. Pasture lands that had been used in common for centuries to provide villages with their very sustenance were systematically fenced off — enclosed — in order to graze

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sheep, whose wool was needed for the burgeoning textile industry. Communal life was briskly thrust aside in favor of privatization, forcing people into harsh factories and crowded cities.

Advanced capitalism, as it pushes past the fetters of even nation-states in its insatiable quest for growth, encloses life in a much more expansive yet generally invisible way: fences are replaced by consumer culture. We are raised in an almost totally commodified world where nothing comes for free, even futile attempts to remove oneself from the market economy. This commodification seeps into not only what we eat, wear, or do for fun but also into our language, relationships, and even our very biology and minds. We have lost not only our communities and public spaces but control over our own lives; we have lost the ability to define ourselves outside capitalism's grip, and thus genuine meaning itself begins to dissolve.

"Whose Streets? Our Streets!" then, is a legitimate emotional response to the feeling that even the most minimal of public, non-commodified spheres has been taken from us. Yet in the end, it is simply a frantic cry from our cage. We have become so confined, so thoroughly damaged, by capitalism as well as state control that crumbs appear to make a nourishing meal.

Temporarily closing off the streets during direct actions does provide momentary spaces in which to practice democratic process, and even offers a sense of empowerment, but such events leave power for power's sake, like the very pavement beneath our feet, unchanged. Only when the serial protest mode is escalated into a struggle for popular or horizontal power can we create cracks in the figurative concrete, thereby opening up ways to challenge capitalism, nation-states, and other systems of domination.

This is not to denigrate the direct action movement in the United States and elsewhere; just the opposite. Besides a long overdue and necessary critique of numerous institutions of command and obedience, the movement is quietly yet crucially supplying the outlines of a freer society. This prefigurative politics is, in fact, the

very strength and vision of today's direct action, where the *means* themselves are understood to also be the *ends*. We're not putting off the good society until some distant future but attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now, however tentative and contorted under the given social order. In turn, this consistency of means and ends implies an ethical approach to politics. How we act now is how we want others to begin to act, too. We try to model a notion of goodness even as we fight for it.

This can implicitly be seen in the affinity group and spokescouncil structures for decision making at direct actions. Both supply much needed spaces in which to school ourselves in direct democracy. Here, in the best of cases, we can proactively set the agenda, carefully deliberate together over questions, and come to decisions that strive to take everyone's needs and desires into account. Substantive discussion replaces checking boxes on a ballot; face-to-face participation replaces handing over our lives to so-called representatives; nuanced and reasoned solutions replace lesser-of-two-(or-three-)evils' thinking. The democratic process utilized during demonstrations decentralizes power even as it offers tangible solidarity; for example, affinity groups afford greater and more diverse numbers of people a real share in decision making, while spokescouncils allow for intricate coordination — even on a global level. This is, as 1960s' activists put it, the power to create rather than destroy.

The beauty of this new movement, it could be said, is that it strives to take its own ideals to heart. In doing so, it has perhaps unwittingly created the demand for such directly democratic practices on a permanent basis. Yet the haunting question underlying episodic "street democracy" remains unaddressed: How can *everyone* come together to make decisions that affect *society as a whole* in participatory, mutualistic, and ethical ways? In other words, how can each and every one of us — not just a counterculture or this protest movement — really transform and ultimately control our lives and that of our communities?

This is, in essence, a question of power — who has it, how it is used, and to what ends. To varying degrees, we all know the answer in relation to current institutions and systems. We can generally explain what we are *against*. That is exactly why we are protesting, whether it is against capitalism and/or nation-states, or globalization in whole or part. What we have largely failed to articulate, however, is any sort of response in relation to liberatory institutions and systems. We often can't express, especially in any coherent and utopian manner, what we are *for*. Even as we prefigure a way of making power horizontal, equitable, and hence, hopefully an essential part of a free society, we ignore the reconstructive vision that a directly democratic process holds up right in front of our noses.

For all intents and purposes, our movement remains trapped. On the one hand, it reveals and confronts domination and exploitation. The political pressure exerted by such widespread agitation may even be able to influence current power structures to amend some of the worst excesses of their ways; the powers that be have to listen, and respond to some extent, when the voices become too numerous and too loud. Nevertheless, most people are still shut out of the decision-making process itself, and consequently, have little tangible power over their lives at all. Without this ability to self-govern, street actions translate into nothing more than a counter-cultural version of interest group lobbying, albeit far more radical than most and generally unpaid.

What the movement forgets is the promise implicit in its own structure: that power not only needs to be contested; it must also be constituted anew in liberatory and egalitarian forms. This entails taking the movement's directly democratic process seriously — not simply as a tactic to organize protests but as the very way we organize society, specifically the political realm. The issue then becomes: How do we begin to shift the strategy, structure, and values of our movement to the most grassroots level of public policy making?

those few in power to holding power firmly in all our hands. Ultimately, this means moving beyond the question of “Whose Streets?” We should ask instead “Whose Cities?” Then and only then will we be able to remake them as our own.

tially replace capitalism and nation-states. Such directly democratic institutions are compatible with, and could certainly grow out of, the ones we use during demonstrations, but they very likely won't be mirror images once we reach the level of society. This does not mean abandoning the principles and ideals undergirding the movement (such as freedom, cooperation, decentralism, solidarity, diversity, face-to-face participation, and the like); it merely means recognizing the limits of direct democracy as it is practiced in the context of a demonstration.

Any vision of a free society, if it is to be truly democratic, must of course be worked out by all of us — first in this movement, and later, in our communities and confederations. Even so, we will probably discover that newly defined understandings of citizenship are needed in place of affinity groups; majoritarian methods of decision making that strive to retain diversity are preferable to simple consensus-seeking models; written compacts articulating rights and duties are crucial to fill out the unspoken culture of protests; and institutionalized spaces for policy making are key to guaranteeing that our freedom to make decisions doesn't disappear with a line of riot police.

It is time to push beyond the oppositional character of our movement by infusing it with a reconstructive vision. That means beginning, right now, to translate our movement structure into institutions that embody the good society; in short, cultivating direct democracy in the places we call home. This will involve the harder work of reinvigorating or initiating civic gatherings, town meetings, neighborhood assemblies, citizen mediation boards, any and all forums where we can come together to decide our lives, even if only in extralegal institutions at first. Then, too, it will mean reclaiming globalization, not as a new phase of capitalism but as its replacement by confederated, directly democratic communities coordinated for mutual benefit.

It is time to move from protest to politics, from shutting down streets to opening up public space, from demanding scraps from

The most fundamental level of decision making in a demonstration is the affinity group. Here, we come together as friends or because of a common identity, or a combination of the two. We share something in particular; indeed, this common identity is often reflected in the name we choose for our groups. We may not always agree with each other, but there is a fair amount of *homogeneity* precisely because we've consciously chosen to come together for a specific reason — most often having little to do with mere geography. This sense of a shared identity allows for the smooth functioning of a consensus decision-making process, since we start from a place of commonality. In an affinity group, almost by definition, our unity needs to take precedence over our diversity, or our supposed affinity breaks down altogether.

Compare this to what could be the most fundamental level of decision making in a society: a neighborhood or town. Now, geography plays a much larger role. Out of historic, economic, cultural, religious, and other reasons, we may find ourselves living side by side with a wide range of individuals and their various identities. Most of these people are not our friends per se. Still, the very diversity we encounter is the life of a vibrant city itself. The accidents and/or numerous personal decisions that have brought us together often create a fair amount of *heterogeneity* precisely because we haven't all chosen to come together for a specific reason. In this context, where we start from a place of difference, decision-making mechanisms need to be much more capable of allowing for dissent; that is, diversity needs to be clearly retained within any notions of unity. As such, majoritarian decision-making processes begin to make more sense.

Then, too, there is the question of scale. It is hard to imagine being friends with hundreds, or even thousands, of people, nor maintaining a single-issue identity with that many individuals; but we can share a feeling of community and a striving toward some common good that allows each of us to flourish. In turn, when greater numbers of people come together on a face-to-face basis to reshape

their neighborhoods and towns, the issues as well as the viewpoints will multiply, and alliances will no doubt change depending on the specific topic under discussion. Thus the need for a place where we can meet as human beings at the most face-to-face level — that is, an assembly of active citizens — to share our many identities and interests in hopes of balancing both the individual and community in all we do.

As well, trust and accountability function differently at the affinity group versus civic level. We generally reveal more of ourselves to friends; and such unwritten bonds of love and affection hold us more closely together, or at least give us added impetus to work things out. Underlying this is a higher-than-average degree of trust, which serves to make us accountable to each other.

On a community-wide level, the reverse is more often true: accountability allows us to trust each other. Hopefully, we share bonds of solidarity and respect; yet since we can't know each other well, such bonds only make sense if we first determine them together, and then record them, write them down, for all to refer back to in the future, and even revisit if need be. Accountable, democratic structures of our own making, in short, provide the foundation for trust, since the power to decide is both transparent and ever-amenable to scrutiny.

There are also issues of time and space. Affinity groups, in the scheme of things, are generally temporary configurations — they may last a few months, or a few years, but often not much longer. Once the particular reasons why we've come together have less of an immediate imperative, or as our friendships falter, such groups often fall by the wayside. And even during a group's life span, in the interim between direct actions, there is frequently no fixed place or face to decision making, nor any regularity, nor much of a record of who decided what and how. Moreover, affinity groups are not open to everyone but only those who share a particular identity or attachment. As such, although an affinity group can certainly choose to shut down a street, there is ultimately something slightly

authoritarian in small groups taking matters into their own hands, no matter what their political persuasion.

Deciding what to do with streets in general — say, how to organize transportation, encourage street life, provide green space, and so on — should be a matter open to everyone interested if it is to be truly participatory and nonhierarchical. This implies ongoing and open institutions of direct democracy, for everything from decision making to conflict resolution. We need to be able to know when and where citizen assemblies are meeting; we need to meet regularly and make use of nonarbitrary procedures; we need to keep track of what decisions have been made. But more important, if we so choose, we all need to have access to the power to discuss, deliberate, and make decisions about matters that affect our communities and beyond.

Indeed, many decisions have a much wider impact than on just one city; transforming streets, for example, would probably entail coordination on a regional, continental, or even global level. Radicals have long understood such mutualistic self-reliance as a “commune of communes,” or confederation. The spokescouncil model used during direct actions hints at such an alternative view of globalization. During a spokescouncil meeting, mandated delegates from our affinity groups gather for the purpose of coordination, the sharing of resources/skills, the building of solidarity, and so forth, always returning to the grassroots level as the ultimate arbiter. If popular assemblies were our basic unit of decision making, confederations of communities could serve as a way to both transcend parochialism and create interdependence where desirable. For instance, rather than global capitalism and international regulatory bodies, where trade is top-down and profit-oriented, confederations could coordinate distribution between regions in ecological and humane ways, while allowing policy in regard to production, say, to remain at the grassroots.

This more expansive understanding of a prefigurative politics would necessarily involve creating institutions that could poten-