

# **The Riot or the Attack? — Solidarity and questions for US Anarchists after May Day**

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Since the disruptions in Pittsburgh during the G20, the Portland riots, and the coast to coast May Day smashings of 2010, anarchists in the US have proven they are a force. My beloved Glenn Beck even has to protect his wayward libertarians from us by insisting that we are communists, and that, laugh of laughs, we're working for the trade unions. The rightwing in the United States plays the curious role of recuperating a very popular anti-state sentiment, and as relatively weak as American anarchists are, they are starting to threaten this monopoly. That's the thing about non-vanguardist anarchists: when we speak and act honestly, we tend to have an influence far beyond our numbers.

Because we now have proven to ourselves that we can start shit almost whenever and wherever we want, anarchists in the US no longer need to be so desperate for a riot that they are willing to throw everything away just to get their game on. Less combative anarchists have intuited a weakness in this new direction, a potential for isolation and repression, but unfortunately for everyone they couched it in the tired old terms of a fetishization of violence. Articles like "Are we addicted to rioting" were correct in sensing a danger, but because their authors were not conscious of their own position nor empowered by the confidence that comes with rioting, they sounded the call to retreat.

A much better critique, written after the Strasbourg riots by honest to goodness Black Blockers, is "*And After Having Burnt Everything?*" The InvCom as well were on to something when they wrote, "the question of pacifism is serious only for those who have the ability to open fire. In this case, pacifism becomes a sign of power, since it's only in an extreme position of strength that we are freed from the need to fire."

Let there be no mistake. We had to come to this point. And if we back off now rather than charge across this line, we will deflate, putter around a laberinth of invective and disconnected bicycle repair workshops for a few more years, and then once we regain lost steam only have to face this challenge again. Rather than spreading recriminations as 11 comrades in Asheville and possibly some in Santa Cruz face heavy charges, let's spread lessons, or we'll only retreat and have to come this way again.

## The riot

What happened in Asheville on May Day was not a riot, and not because of its size or any matter of scale. A riot expands. It is spontaneous, or it takes hold amidst a backdrop of social struggle. Countersummits provide the unique opportunity of a planned riot, because there is a larger crowd of people assembled there among whom the riot can spread, and the mass protest situation already creates such a logistical nightmare for the police that the risk, normally idiotic, of trying to start a riot right where the cops are expecting it is often neutralized. Generally, however, riots occur as a spontaneous response to the violence of the state or the humiliations of capitalism, as in Portland, March 2010, and Oakland, January 2009. Riots can be and often are provoked by a couple of people with more confidence in their ability to fight back, but their necessary characteristic is their expansion.

The riot is good because it is a catalyst, a magical spark that allows high social tensions to turn into open social conflict. It is a step towards social war. If, in a certain neighborhood, on a certain day, there is no simmering social tension, there will be no riot. On the other hand, if the people are well trained in obedience, the tensions can be boiling over but the lid will not fly off.

The threshold for the transformation to a riot is lowered if people have confidence, if they have practice in fighting back. They can win these things through the attack.

## The attack

An attack should never mistake itself for a riot. Normally it never would because attacks traditionally take place at night or in swift, unobserved moments. A riot is a moving commune. It can dismantle the temples of the commodities with leisure, it can turn the smoke filled streets into zones of play. An attack does not have this luxury, and when it makes the mistake of thinking it does, it transforms quickly into a mass arrest.

The principal purpose of this type of action is to demonstrate that it is easy to attack capitalism, despite all the flaunted power of the state. An attack that does not get away is, at this principal level, a failure. A demoralization.

I don't presume that whoever carried out the May Day smashings in Asheville were trying to adopt a certain tactic that has been perfected by the comrades in Greece, or that they were trying to do anything other than what they ended up doing. But I will say that certain folks have been doing it much better, and it can be useful to understand how.

Certain anarchists in Greece and elsewhere have been perfecting the public attack. This deviates characteristically from traditional attacks in that it happens in the public eye: in the middle of the day, 20–40 trusted comrades gather punctually on a street where there are no surveillance cameras, mask up, run around the corner to their objective, smash it, and disappear, knowing in advance good escape routes and places where they can unmask and blend in. At least one person keeps time, down to the second, and lets everyone know when it is time to move on. Staying at the objective for more than, say, 30 seconds, is suicide.

The Greek anarchists are courageous, but they would not attempt a public attack when police were expecting it (e.g. May Day, in a city where something was also attempted the previous year). Additionally, and this point cannot be stressed enough, they were developing this tactic for years before they got to the point where they would attempt to smash 6 or more objectives, or objectives on entirely different city blocks, at the same time. I have no idea who shook things up in Asheville and how much experience they have, but one thing that is true for all of us is that if we act out of impatience, we are inviting imprisonment. We won't destroy capitalism through the amount or value of damage we cause, but by the significance of that damage and how it communicates itself. If there's one thing we can learn from the heavy blows we suffered with the repression and failure of the ELF, let it be that.

Many other types of public attacks have been developed that don't focus repetitively on broken windows. There is the supermarket expropriation, where 20 masketeers run into a supermarket, fill up baskets full of food, get out of there in under a minute (some of them make sure the doors remain open and unobstructed), and drop the food off in a park or other public place within a couple blocks where folks are gathered, and disappear. A similar group of people could open up a metro station to temporarily provide everyone who passes through with free public transportation. Another group publicly dismantles a surveillance camera. These and many other forms of public attack communicate themselves much better, and are more likely to win sympathy for illegality and anarchy.

This is not at all a denunciation of the broken windows. Without negation, we are nothing. But it is much easier to understand how healthy it is to make total destroy if it is connected to a more embracing practice rather than an almost ritualized, self-caricaturizing repetition.

The attack is good because it gives us strength and confidence, it helps us manifest as a material force in the social conflicts, it illuminates the rage and dissension brewing in the ranks of capital, it disrupts the illusion of democratic peace even at times of lower social tension, and it communicates that we have an enemy, and this enemy is easy to attack.

## Next time smash the template

A peculiar problem of US society is how televised it is, and I think this has a negative impact on the anarchists as well. The errant irony and generic behavior are pervasive. Just like a high school movie, the anarchist space also has its cool kids. They are certainly the vanguard in the changing sense of theory and strategy, but it seems that US anarchists in general participate in a general substitution of fads for tactics. It's no surprise. The spectacle has trained us to live in templates, and this extends to our struggles. Smashing windows can become and is becoming the signifier of belonging to yet another clique, little different from organizing Food Not Bombs or riding bicycles or holding mycology workshops. Make no mistake, the temples of the commodities must be smashed, but the templates for how we go about that must be smashed as well.

## Communication and society

Does a disdain for populist mass movements mean that we want to be alone in our struggle? That would certainly be a caricature of the insurrectionary. If the strongest motion of capitalism is the movement towards alienation, than the strongest attack would be the one that communicates, the one that connects us, the one that mixes us, the one that overcomes isolation. Burn everything but our bridges!

Where was the communication on May Day? Shattering glass has a voice, but only sometimes is it the one that speaks most eloquently. Where are the other voices to help add meaning to its words?

From a distance it seems that the provocations shouted by May Day's falling shards caused many people to take the side of property. There is something valuable in making people's alliances clear, but there is nothing valuable in refusing to challenge the alliances of capital, to instead defiantly occupy a lonely moral high ground as the only enemy of the system.

We are not Christians who take joy from the mouths of Roman lions. People who rallied around broken windows and damaged cars, in their own minds, were rallying around the false constructs they've been given of community, respect, safety, and so forth. Additional communication is needed to show what these things actually mean in the world we inhabit, to clarify what side they've actually chosen.

Social war means society against the state. *Homo sacer* is the most honest and honorable member of capitalist society, but also the weakest. For now, we will be the unpopular ones. To have the hope of seeing something different, there will need to be ten flyers for every flying brick, and many more of each.

## Solidarity

In *“Against the Corpse Machine,”* Ashen Ruins wrote how in the 1880s, US anarchists could stand fully in support of the Haymarket martyrs, but forget to show similar solidarity for all the sharecroppers and lynching victims in the South. It worries me immensely that within about a week, a half dozen comrades get killed or disappeared in Oaxaca, including anarchists, and a dozen comrades in the States get arrested on felony charges, and all the attention and solidarity goes to the latter.

This does not at all mean that solidarity with the arrested or the May Day smashings themselves come at the expense of solidarity with Oaxaca. Only a liberal would counterpoise international solidarity with attacking the bars of our own prisons. But if this new direction in the anarchist struggle here could ignore the Oaxaca massacre even at a moment of growing power, it is empty and doomed to pathos and narcissism. How we respond in similar situations in the future will answer the question: are we strengthening ourselves as part of a global struggle that truly believes in total destroy, or are we just pursuing the new fad?

Those arrested on May Day deserve our fullest support, regardless of things like guilt or innocence. The smashings should also be celebrated, because they mark an important expansion of the struggle in the US, showing that anyone in this country is powerful enough to attack this system. Only by taking this realization and moving forward can we come to occupy a terrain where we are not desperate or impatient to attack because we know we can do it at any time, and therefore choose the best moments.

## Your cooperative will sell your soul, your nemesis will save it

Anarchist bookstores, cafés, and social centers, squatted or rented, are a commonplace in our struggles worldwide, so it seems peculiar that in the States so many would be subjected to criticisms of being businesses, of selling out, of not deserving our solidarity. It seems even more peculiar that in the wake of riots or instances of repression, so many members of these spaces should in fact join the business owners in denouncing illegality and distancing themselves from the disturbances, from the bad protestors, from the masked ones.

The anarchist spaces, even if they are rented, even if they have to sell things to pay their rent, are our spaces, and they face the same compromises we do when we decide whether to get a job, whether to make use of state welfare, state infrastructure. And these spaces are meaningless without a connection to the anarchist struggle. Without the struggle, without the masked ones, without the smashings, they become just another business, and a poorly managed one at that. Running a cooperative threatens nothing. It does not provide an image of the future unless it exists to support a struggle capable of destroying the power structures that stand in the way of that future. Our spaces sustain us in the struggle and prevent our isolation, and our attacks give those spaces their true meaning, but only if they refuse to be separated.

After a bout of smashing, the local media will demonize the visible anarchists, the public anarchist projects, precisely to get them to denounce the invisible and illegal manifestations of the anarchist struggle, to divide us and weaken us all. The plan is for the public ones to scramble to portray themselves as upstanding citizens, which is to say, to defeat themselves; and for the invisible ones to lose and in fact deny themselves access to those few spaces where they can

show they are only a threat to those who are the enemies of all of us. In short, the purpose is to isolate those who attack. More often than not, the public ones and the invisible ones cooperate quite well in fulfilling this purpose.

## **Enough Words**

Let's not come this way again. There's so much to be done well, why do anything poorly? All power to the communes! Freedom for the Asheville 11! Freedom for everyone!

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