An Anarchist Response to Seattle: What Shall We Do With Anarchism?

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Introduction

From November 28th through December 4th, 1999, tens of thousands of protesters converged on Seattle and temporarily shut down the World Trade Organization (WTO). Since then a number of protests have occurred including those in Philadelphia, Washington DC, and Prague, but anarchism's role hasn't changed substantially. Using the example of Seattle, this article is a beginning look at the role of anarchism within the revitalized political movement and possible contributions to an emerging movement against globalization.

I spent most of my week in Seattle in the street watching the events unfold. Occasionally I would take refuge from the terrible Seattle weather and sit inside a church or auditorium to hear distinguished experts speak on various aspects of the WTO. No matter what the topic, it was impossible to integrate what was going on in the streets with these carefully prepared lectures. One particular lecture promised a feminist critique of the WTO but the speakers never got beyond statistics and how the WTO can help increase the number of women involved global production. In contrast, earlier in the day, a women's march peacefully assembled at an intersection and, within five minutes, police began putting on their gas masks. So much for dialog.

At one of these lectures, I met a woman from Indonesia who, like me, was frustrated with the division. We left and walked through the rain to the center of town, ending up in the middle of yet another protest. In the distance, an environmental march could be seen running away from tear gas, while in front of us police with batons and rubber bullet guns chased state employee union members in their purple ponchos around the block. If you wanted to be chased by police all you had to do was walk to the other side of the street. Well coordinated with cell phones and walkie-talkies, the union members escaped by sneaking back around and standing behind a line of oblivious police. A Canadian union member standing next to me was shaking his head as he said he couldn't believe this was happening in the US. The Indonesian woman, a seasoned participant of many bloody protests in her own country, asked me if I knew where she could buy Levi jeans for friends back home. Meanwhile, I'm sure the lecturers were still calmly debating policy proposals to reform the WTO. As an anarchist, my goal was to make some sense out of what was happening, where we were going and what we want to have happen--then and now. Not an easy task.

The media said anarchy ruled the streets in Seattle, although I'm not so sure. I had hoped to see more anarchist activity if only because the whole event was touted as a blow to global capitalism. There were many anarchists in Seattle, although only one group, from Oregon, was prominent in the media. Other groups reflected anarchist ideas such as the Direct Action Network's call for an end to hierarchy and a new society free of oppression. Aside from these incidents, I didn't encounter any other specifically anarchist activities. Anarchists weren't on any panels, hadn't organized a forum to present an anarchist critique of the WTO and an anarchist critique was never presented that I knew of.
Anarchism and the WTO are well-suited opponents and anarchism is benefiting from this fight. The WTO is practically the epitome of an authoritarian structure of power to be fought against. People came to Seattle because they knew it was wrong to let a secret body of officials make policies unaccountable to anyone except themselves. A nonelected body, the WTO is attempting to become more powerful than any national government. In other words, the WTO is a political issue that has the exciting potential to galvanize a supposedly dormant public. For anarchism, the focus on global capitalism couldn't be more ideal. Yet, when the WTO mobilized tens of thousands of people, anarchism's visible high point was in the form of broken windows. Since Seattle, anarchist activity has become more organized and inclusive--utilizing the structures of affinity groups and spokespersons (Milstein 2000)--and there has been more favorable press in mainstream venues such as the New York Times. One can venture to say that anarchism is almost in vogue: a brief explanation of anarchism by Fred Woodworth, publisher of The Match, was published in the October issue of Playboy Magazine!

Obviously, the fight against the WTO (and subsequently the IMF and World Bank) has bolstered anarchism, but to what degree? Since Seattle, recent protests notwithstanding, anarchism still suffers from three pitfalls: an empty moralism, a practice devoid of theory, and as unwittingly giving energy to reformist politics. Anarchists need to move beyond these traps to formulate a theory of anarchism that will sustain a political movement.

**Anarchism as Empty Moralism**

Anarchism is a sense of injustice in our world, faith in humanity's potential to transcend social structures that produce injustice, and the obligation to do something about it. In a sense, it is a by-product of our society: as long as there is injustice, there will be anarchism. Anarchism is also the rejection of all political, social, and economic hierarchy. It is anti-statist because the state represents a professional bureaucracy removed from the control of the people and anticapitalist because capitalism is an oppressive economic system. These ideas survive despite the lack of a political movement.

One of the biggest obstacles anarchists encounter is the prevailing notion that anarchism is a failure as a political movement and therefore an unattainable utopian idea. Ironically, anarchists often perpetuate this thinking by failing to project anarchism beyond an empty moralism. How we think about anarchism directly influences how its actions are carried out.

Most histories of anarchism end abruptly in the late 1930s after the Spanish Civil War. George Woodcock ends his history of anarchism in 1939 because he believes that anarchism never constituted a credible movement afterwards. He either could not have foreseen or didn't take notice of continued low-level anarchist activities in antifascist, feminist, antiwar, antinuclear, and ecology movements, but he still would have viewed these activities as nothing more than scattered and isolated incidents. If anarchists scored political victories, their successes only reflect passing historical conditions, not an overriding political relevance. Woodcock also distinguishes anarchism as a political movement from the idea of anarchism. He finds that the idea, in various forms, has been with us long before any anarchist movement and continues to emerge every so often. Therefore the strength of anarchism lies in its ideas, not its political relevance since history gives us far more failures than successes. The idea of anarchism,
according to Woodcock, is an eternal resistance to any given society's tendency towards ever-greater centralization and uniformity. This resistance becomes a moral imperative, which we act upon against prevailing structures of power.

If anarchism can perpetually survive as an idea then we can legitimately be anarchists without taking into account our successes and failures. However, when left as an idea the moral imperative has a tendency to take over anarchism. If anarchism is to be thought of as an idea and not a viable political movement, then we can only act upon the strength of anarchist ideas as a sort of moral compass. We can project anarchism as an ideal but we need to remember that an ideal always runs the risk of becoming so elevated that it loses any relationship to real problems and social struggles. All too often, "one does not come down from the cross alive." (Cortazar 1984) The real issue becomes this: whether or not we want anarchism to be more than an idea and become a political movement. Do we want the phrase "smash capitalism and the state" to mean anything beyond the momentary fervor of a demonstration?

How and why anarchism is an alternative is what we must explain and act upon. Overtly anarchist activity in Seattle constituted acts of property destruction. Breaking windows of department stores can be momentarily exciting but also represents how an anarchist politics becomes empty moralism. Family owned businesses were intentionally not targeted but this only resulted in a vague distinction between good and bad business. These categories don't offer much in the way of educating the public about capitalism in general. Furthermore, we can't build a movement based on simple ideas of good or bad. Targeting Nike as a major contributor to the evils of capitalism is necessary, but how and why it is true cannot be explained by broken windows.

**Anarchism in Action**

At the core of anarchism, decentralization is the most popular way anarchism is put into practice yet also causes it to lose political momentum. Anarchism is more often than not put into action by groups practicing a decentralized leadership structure. Decentralized leadership is part of the idea of anarchism but is often confused with directly constituting a political movement simply because decentralized activity is present.

The Direct Action Network (DAN), largely responsible for the most aggressive protests that shut down the November 30th WTO session for the majority of the day, included many anarchists. Their website states: "Imagine replacing the current social order with a just, free and ecological society based on mutual aid and voluntary cooperation. A NEW WORLD IS POSSIBLE and we are part of a global movement that is rising up to make it happen." The majority of DAN's activities are credited as anarchist because of the decentralized nature of their actions. This follows the logic that in order to create a non-hierarchical society, anarchists must use non-hierarchical tactics in order to reach that goal. Traditional leadership was not present and instead people formed affinity groups and operated with a model of consensus decision-making.

DAN's activities were successful far beyond what anybody had imagined. On November 30th, before the police knew what was happening, four intersections surrounding the hotel where WTO delegates were staying were occupied by DAN members and protesters had locked
themselves down in front of the hotel itself. By the time the twenty or thirty thousand strong union march arrived downtown, police had already started firing tear gas and general chaos ensued but DAN members were able to hold the intersections for quite some time. The initial presence of DAN shut down the center of Seattle for the day and police essentially lost control of the city. Protesters continued to regroup and by the end of the week protests were still going strong. The WTO had to cancel the meeting altogether because they were unable to plan for a new round of talks. This was the major victory for everyone involved.

Ironically, DAN did not label itself anarchist despite its approach while the Black Bloc, (the explicitly anarchist group allegedly responsible for property destruction), marched in military formation and orders were given accompanied by a whistle to direct their movement. So who were the real anarchists? This debate continues to go on but the real focus should be on avoiding simplistic interpretations of anarchist ideas. The belief that decentralization or smashing Nike windows as a substitute for the state advances an anarchist politics is naive at best; at its worst, this approach says that we have already figured everything out. Apparently, if the means are the same as the desired end, then we will reach that end. My intention is not to denigrate the purity of heart of protesters who practiced anarchist ideas in their actions; however, it is crucial to point out what is missing: what occurs between the means and the end.

Aside from moral outrage, all anarchists currently have are demonstrations. We protest injustice and move from issue to issue. It is not enough that we do it in a decentralized fashion. We will go from protest to protest until we are tired or other obligations draw us away. We can also fall prey to disappointment over the commonly non-revolutionary outcome of protests. As a result of Seattle, Ralph Nader is running for president, unions are looking to Al Gore to meet their demands, and the hot topic is debt reduction for third world countries. Furthermore, non-anarchist groups have shaped the anarchist debate. Due to some broken windows, anarchists are forced to debate the role of violence because non-anarchists groups dubbed anarchists as vandals and looters. This is not what we want to put our energy towards. Can we avoid being foot soldiers for more powerful mainstream organizations and shape the anarchist debate ourselves? Anarchists must develop a theory of a free society with the intention of guiding ourselves from the means to the end, otherwise we will not be able to make the necessary step from idea to political movement and will end up fighting for things we do not believe in or will not be able to sustain.

Reform vs. Revolution in Seattle

It is necessary to point out the overwhelmingly reformist nature of the protests in order to establish a standard by which anarchists can act upon and think about what kind of political movement we want to work for. Because an anarchist analysis was never presented, reformist tactics in Seattle were accepted as part of the success of the week.

At one of many protest marches, I overheard a woman yelling at the protesters to either pay for what they were doing or go home. This woman was voicing the reality that we have to pay for free speech. Groups like Global Exchange want the Starbuck's coffee chain to give Central American coffee growers more money for their crops. If they don't then consumers will boycott. This type of activism accepts the category of consumerism, suggests that we control capitalism
with capitalism, and puts the burden of change on the individual no matter what their circumstances are.

When I looked for alternatives, I found little other than proposals dependent upon the state or that assumed the continued existence of the WTO. Consider this statement from Public Citizen: "Our task now is to fight for a global trading system that is democratically accountable and aimed at meeting the needs of people, not simply the world's largest corporations." (Statement by Lori Wallach of Public Citizen) It is uncritically given that a global trading system will meet the needs of the people if only it is democratic. This statement presupposes the acceptance of democracy as it is today: a centralized bureaucratic structure removed from people's control. What most people think of as democracy is a professional body such as the state that, in fact, acts as an intermediary to freedom. When we demand democracy, but not in a way that is explicitly anti-statist, we are calling on the very same body that needs the WTO to carry out trade policies because political control is never given to the people in the first place. The ability to affect change in the system is greatly diminished and makes revolutionary change impossible.

In contrast to the superficial reformist methods mentioned above, anarchists draw upon a refusal to reform with the idea that our society must be torn up by the roots and replanted with an ideal society in mind. Because the WTO represents the push for globalized capitalism, any resistance must be approached at the level of systemic change that will have widespread international effect. For anarchists, substantive political change is impossible without a utopian vision. A political movement that produces temporary successes by reforming isolated parts of the system is not revolutionary. These successes may even last for half a century or more but they often give way to oppression worse than the original. Anarchism's refusal to reform offers a chance to transcend a perpetual cycle of reform without revolution.

A Political Theory for Revolution

Anarchists are great at pointing out what is wrong with our society and various political approaches but we are going to have to offer more than critiques of other people's activism. We are going to have to enter the debate, be on the panels next time, and provide a forum for an anarchist critique. (Since Seattle, some attempts have been made to do so.) Most importantly, unless anarchism strikes out in a new direction, anarchism's limitations will make it very difficult to sustain an anarchist politics in a new movement. Anarchists frequently limit themselves by resorting to symbolic acts such as breaking windows that result in an empty moralism or limit the potential of anarchism to certain practices such as decentralization. When looked at more closely, much of the activism in Seattle actually revolved around consumer-based activism and acceptance of the status quo, to which anarchists gave lots of energy. Escaping these traps means we must begin to undertake the enormous task of understanding our world as well as projecting a vision for the future.

This also means we must have a political theory that draws on anarchist ideals yet is grounded in the experience of our world. If an anticapitalist political movement is really emerging then anarchists are presented with the unique opportunity to legitimately explain what is meant by a "just, free and ecological society based on mutual aid and voluntary cooperation." What our world is like, what our principles are, and how we go about developing this theory will determine
a political theory. Activism offers us the opportunity to temporarily see our thoughts result in action but can also narrow the vision to pragmatic concerns. Political theory enables us to act upon the best of anarchist ideals and the strength of a popular movement. However, this is dependent upon making sense of anarchist ideas as well as the world.

George Orwell stated that "Political language--and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservative to Anarchists--is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind." Even when lying or murdering is not on the agenda, sometimes there is no way around having to give "the appearance of solidity to pure wind" in anarchism. I often find this to be true when it comes to an anarchist political theory. Slogans such as "down with capitalism" and "smash the state" can feel empty when we don't know what type of capitalism we want to tear down or how exactly the state functions as a source of power. Anarchists also talk about social freedom and cooperation but we must give these terms a real political and theoretical context in order for them to be meaningful. These are just a few examples of what we must tackle in order to make sense of our beliefs and how they relate to society.

The amazing international coalition of unions, environmentalists, farmers, students, and intellectuals represented in Seattle is an inspiring beginning for a new movement. We must involve ourselves as anarchists in this emerging movement with a real sense of what we offer and what roles we chose to play. Woodcock contradicts himself when he states: "To acknowledge the existence and the overbearing force of the movement toward universal centralization that still grips the world is not to accept it. If human values are to survive, a counter-ideal must be posed to the totalitarian goal of a uniform world." Turning the anarchist ideal into a counter-ideal is very different from letting anarchism languish as an admirable yet prohibitive moral imperative or simplistic practice: it is an idea and a political movement. To pose this counter-ideal is to escape the clutches of anarchism's limitations and project a vision for a free society that we can believe in as well as act upon.

Works Cited


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