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Becoming Uncontrollable: An Anarchist Reflection on Occupy Seattle

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“Now we only have two options: allow this crack to close up, losing a unique opportunity for a veritable social change, or open it as much as we can, widening it until it reaches the very foundations of our misery and exploitation.”

-Excerpt from Catalan anarchist flier distributed at Occupy Seattle

Our struggle is social not political. We will not martyr ourselves as the urban guerilla nor compromise as the reformist. We make no demands and see our struggle reflected in the struggles of many others. It is from these beliefs that anarchists engaged with Occupy Seattle.

The beginning of Occupy Seattle was drenched in the misery of what it means to live in a place that has known so little recent struggle and in which the people have forgotten what it means to rebel. The first days were marred by sidewalk marches around the perimeter of an occupied Westlake Park, the serious consideration of constructing demands, and attempting to work with the City and the police. This trajectory continued persistently until the first break with politics was reached.

Seattle is known for its liberalism and passivity. Mayor McGinn continued this strong tradition by supporting Occupy Seattle. His strategy as a politician was clear to few but later learned by many. For the first several days he let the occupiers have their camp and sidewalk protests. The City's acceptance of a tent city in downtown's premiere shopping district was never meant to last. McGinn made a backhanded deal with self-appointed managerial occupiers for the camp move to City Hall, an irrelevant and isolated location.

His order was rejected after intense debate. People choose to fight for Westlake Park in an effort against the recuperation of their emerging movement. Those that conspired with McGinn were revealed as traitors and were among the few to camp at City Hall. From the disposal of these self-appointed leaders and the refusal to heed to the Mayor's demands, the first lines were drawn at Occupy Seattle.

The weeks to come taught the next lesson: the role of the police. The police were present every day and night at the park. They chatted with occupiers during the day and at night they would shine their headlights as the delirious campers attempted to sleep. They would rip blankets

off people and then crack jokes with protesters the next day. Their humanity tempted many occupiers. Forced into a battle against power and social control that we will likely never truly win, there are some among this society that prefer to let that fear infest them. They are those who whisper their deepest scorn against the police but smile and wave as Officer Friendly strolls by. At the camp they insisted upon negotiation and manners toward the police and chastised those that did otherwise.

As the days wore on the hypocrisy of people who would only obey orders from someone outside themselves was exposed to many. Open hostilities grew as the police became the clear obstacle between a very simple thing the occupiers wanted: a camp. An anti-police and 'cop free zone' proposal was brought to a General Assembly during this period. It passed with flying colors. Yet with no way to enforce this newly collectivized contempt, Occupy remained a pig ridden area. As the small battles over tents, sleeping, blankets, and even sitting down ensued, the tensions multiplied. Those that had never screamed were losing their voices from yelling at the police, several people were arrested, and many witnessed with tears in their eyes the brutality that is the Seattle Police Department.

In response to the harassment and repression of the camp hundreds of people returned with tents to reoccupy Westlake Park on October 15th. The evening was festive with the joys of our first collective act of refusal. Although it lasted only for the weekend, the memory became a reference point in the weeks to come. After the eviction, the camp continued as it had before, a place for the police's passive aggressive invasion and positively as the meeting point for occupiers.

On Halloween weekend, the Occupy camp decided after many nights of debate to move to Seattle Central Community College (SCCC). As anarchists, we viewed SCCC as a place to implement the lessons that were learned at Westlake Park. Over and over again we had insisted that without the clear intention of occupying and defending a space in defiance of the law and the police, any attempt at occupation would fail. The failure we spoke of was not limited to the material gain or loss of space but the struggle that is lost to power when we work within (and therefore for) the forces of domination.

From the lessons that we learned in October, November, and early December we created a momentum that has planted the seeds for future revolts. No longer marching in circles, we await, ready for the potential of our recent history of refusal and collective rebellion. Challenges also await us in the forms of recuperation, the largely unchallenged love of democracy, and the American psyche which so values the return of normality and fear of power.

“It is not easy, but it is possible. The path is long and as long as our dream of liberty remains alive, we will be more alive than ever.”

-Anarchist flier distributed at Plaça Catalunya

The first night at SCCC introduced the next lesson which is the biggest and most misunderstood of all: the failure of democracy. Three Nazis entered the camp walking through with their arms to the air. They were quickly attacked by anarchists and other anti-fascists and almost as quickly defended by pacifists or Nazi sympathizers. Once the Nazis were finally pushed to the street, bloodied and all, the internal fight commenced. Many spoke in favor of a policy that is nonviolent but still exclusive to fascists and racists, while a small group spoke for the inclusion of all members of the 99%. Still others, anarchists and anti-authoritarians, spoke against all dialog and inclusion of any oppressive individuals whether fascist, racist, cop, or rapist by any means necessary. The experience of facing real tangible enemies confronted occupiers with the reality of their own vulnerability which in turn shifted their views of pacifism; favoring in turn the tool of violence. It also revealed the less palatable side of their beloved democracy: unconditional inclusion and tolerance. This lesson is yet to be learned. The remnants of that night were reflected in the anti-fascist group which patrolled the perimeter of the camp with black flags as weapons for weeks after.

A few days later the passivity of the Seattle occupiers proved to be losing ground. On the day of the November 2nd General Strike in Oakland, people locked down at a Chase Bank that was chosen partially for its endurance of anarchist attacks in the last year. The lock down was the unsuspecting catalyst for the tensions that boiled within every occupier. Once each bank occupier was placed inside the police van, those of us outside the bank lost our restraint. Chaos ensued as cops launched pepper spray and occupiers pushed back as some threw themselves in front of the police vehicles and others landed several strikes on police bodies. We de-arrested our new comrades and pushed the police off the street. A small victory was felt amongst the hundred of us, one that was built from the lessons of the past month.

Like most Occupies, the camp quickly deteriorated into a cesspool of drugs and interpersonal violence. The reality of the camp was only a reflection of society; that which produces these conditions and then rejects or hides its own creation. By the middle of November the anarchist and communist presence at the actual camp deteriorated likely due to its condition. This came with little regret on my part as the intention

of occupying public space as a tent city is certainly not the best tactic nor strongest attribute of Occupy. We moved to focus more on street demonstrations and targets of our discontent.

On November 19th a demonstration was organized from the camp to an abandoned house in the Central District, which is an historically poor black neighborhood undergoing mass gentrification. It was unclear what the response from the crowd would be when they reached the occupied house nor were we sure what the police response would entail. Both were surprising. The occupiers immediately rushed inside the house and began plans of what to do with it. The police stood by unable to act without the owner's consent. This was the first manifestation of the next lesson: private property is not sacred.

Two weeks later the law of private property was again defiled under the Occupy banner. A huge warehouse on Capitol Hill was taken over at the end of a small march entitled, "You can't evict an idea!". A short write up from that night transcribed the moment:

"We have all dreamed of it. Some of have even seen it before, but never here, never in Seattle. They say it's too liberal, too clean, that our time has passed, that the city is theirs. Last night we shattered their mirage. We all felt the specter of our own possibilities as we ran through that empty vast building. What before was dead, we made alive. Those who entered acquaintances, left comrades."

During only 10 hours hundreds of people came and went from the occupied warehouse. The SWAT team destroyed the physical space we had gained yet they could not destroy the ideas that were won of individual and collective agency against the normality of all that capitalism deems sacred. The latter is a considerable feat when the innate values of private property within American society are considered. Revolutionary critics disregard these gains as miniscule and point to Europe's somewhat recuperated squatting movements as an example. They are correct to say that the occupation of property is not inherently revolutionary but they fall short when they disregard the mental barriers which are broken in these moments.

These moments were built upon as occupiers were confronted with the December 12th shut down. Occupy Seattle voted to unanimously

support the shut down. The ILWU heads and other representatives of unionized workers unanimously opposed the shut down. I will shift to the 'I' form to speak for myself as an anarchist who is against the romanticism of the worker, work, and unions. Motivated by their effort to maintain their salaries and their careers in the politics of work, union bureaucrats stifle and recuperate the budding struggles of many workers they claim to protect. The concept of an "other" amassing to effectively stop the circulation of capital at the Port (and therefore the workplace of many) is a concept that does not fit within the union framework. Union workers are allowed concessions for better conditions but their demands can never be that of the destruction of work or the elimination of their position in society. While individuals within unions can always act as their own agents of revolt, their union will never be that force. One lesson learned from the Port of Seattle shut down is that we must act as individuals against power but not as the roles power forces upon us if we wish to destroy those same categories.

This idea manifested in the actions of the day. Hundreds, including union workers, showed up to Westlake Park for the start of the march regardless of the media's dramatic Union vs. Occupy dichotomy. The shut down for occupiers was always about standing up for the movement and pushing it forward into a momentum that encourages diverse action and the connection of diverse struggles. In Seattle it was made clear that when we shut down capital at the port we were not acting simply in solidarity with the struggles in Longview and Los Angeles but also with the struggles that we choose to fight that are imposed on us by the same forces of capital that manifest materially at the Port.

When we built that barricade in the middle of the street, we were blocking the terminal but we were also demonstrating our ability to adapt. We did not form a simple picket line as the manuscript instructs us to. We accessed the situation for the most effective and inspiring tactic. The property of the Port was not viewed as sacred but as a tool, the police were not viewed as "us" but as a clear enemy, the politics of the unions were disregarded, and the methods of self-organization and small affinities were preferred over the democratic values of mass organization and representation.