

The Characteristics of the Occupation (Barcelona)

by anonymous

The first day I set foot in the plaza, I knew I was experiencing something unique. No one here had ever seen anything like this. Thousands of people, friends and strangers, crowding together, announcing their indignation, defying the law, calling for revolution. I had hardly ever spent time before in Plaça Catalunya. It was just a place for tourists and pigeons. Now I could pass hours here and have conversations with all sorts of people. A Pakistani man asks me to help translate what's going on. A young student comments on a flyer I'm handing out. Two grandparents argue about democracy and the best way to go about the struggle.

Once people saw that I was handing out flyers, they lined up to take them and soon I was all out. During the first week, everyone was excited, everyone was desperate for new ideas and perspectives. In a matter of days we distributed thousands of flyers, many of them new texts written just for this situation. On the other side of the city and in the metro, I often saw people reading our texts—not just glancing at them, but poring over them. That first week, I could go into any bakery or copy shop in town and request free bread or cheap copies “for the plaza” and receive at least a sympathetic response, and often a lot of free materials.

What we have experienced in Barcelona is a rupture—not so much in State control, in view of the democratic forms chosen by the occupation movement, but most definitely in people's affective reality. Society left its isolation cells and physically manifested itself in the middle of the plaza, and many people were feeling its presence for the very first time. They were recognizing how isolated they had been until now, in the plaza, where they encountered a force, a collective power, waiting to be reborn. In these unprecedented circumstances, people could begin to believe in the possibility of situations that were entirely new.

Before, when you handed someone an anarchist flyer, they might think about it for a while, it might improve their understanding of you, it might annoy them, but in any case they would only digest it at the level of opinions—because you were talking about something hypothetical, something unreal. But in the plaza, hearing our conversations or reading the literature we had on our table, people would really begin to debate: “But if we get rid of all the politicians, new ones will just come replace them.” “No, these kids are right! We need to get rid of all of them. If we're able to get rid of the first batch, we can get rid of the next ones too!”

People's aesthetics no longer marked their political niche. The most important thing was their bravery and sincerity. Many times I saw grand-

parents berating young punks for being too passive, or people dressed for work taking a more radical position than activist hippies. And everyone was talking about real possibilities. For at least the first week, these people meant it when they chanted “*Aquí comença la revolució!*” “The revolution begins here!”

So where did the so-called Spanish Revolution end up?

I remember yelling to a friend, high on the mass excitement of those first days, “This is our revolution! No barricades, nothing romantic like that, but what do we expect? It’s a piece of shit, but we already knew this is the world we live in. We have a lot of work to do!”

Within the complexity of the Spanish Revolution, one could find plenty to denounce. For a critical anarchist, it would be easier to reject the whole thing than embrace it. Fortunately, on the whole, Barcelona anarchists refused to take the easy road.

Most noteworthy in its long list of faults were its disappointed pretensions of being revolutionary. The Democracia Real Ya (DRY) activists did their best to place the whole movement in an ideological straight-jacket from the beginning. In Barcelona in particular, these activists were joined by a legion of minor league politicians, particularly Catalan *indepes*, as well as Trotskyists and dogmatic pacifists, all trying to get a piece of the pie. These in turn were aided by a great mass of well-meaning people who were simply reproducing the values of democracy and non-violence taught to them by the system, and no small number of highly skilled and no less well-meaning activists of the anti-globalization or student variety—including some anarchists—who cherished the processes of consensus and direct democracy.

This complex agglomeration of people formed a powerful recuperation machine that could not be neutralized with any simple approach. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The preamble of the DRY manifesto gives a good impression of their political brand:

We are ordinary people. We are like you: people who get up every morning to study, work or find a job, people who have family and friends. People, who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us. Some of us consider ourselves progressive, others conservative. Some of us are believers, some not. Some of us have clearly defined ideologies, others are apolitical, but we are all concerned and angry about the political, economic, and social outlook which we see around us: corruption among politicians, businessmen, bankers, leaving us helpless, without a voice.

DRY did an excellent job of formulating a mediocre politics defined by its populism, victimism, reformism, and moralism. By using common,

value-laden terms such as “democracy” (good) and “corruption” (bad), they created a discursive trap that garnered overwhelming support for all their proposals while deflecting or falsely including proposals that went further. Their stated minimums included revolutionary language and the highly popular sentiment that “we’re going to change everything,” while offering a ladder of demands that basically signaled the prices, from cheap to expensive, at which they would sell out. It started with reform of the electoral law, passed through laws for increased oversight of the bankers, and reached, at its most radical extreme, a refusal to pay back the bailout loans. Everything was structured around demands communicated to the existing government, but prettied up in populist language. Thus, the popular, anarchist slogan *Ningú ens representa*, “No one represents us,” was distorted within their program to mean, “None of the politicians currently in power represent us: we want better ones who will.”

However, to carry out this balancing act, they did have to adopt vaguely antiauthoritarian organizing principles inherited from the anti-globalization movement, such as open assemblies, no spokespersons, and no political parties.

Proposals centered on direct action or sentiments containing a rejection of government and capitalism were easily neutralized within this ideological framework. The former would be paternalistically tolerated as cute little side projects eclipsed by the major projects of reformist demands, and the latter would be applauded, linked back to the popular rhetoric already in use, and corrupted to mean an opposition to current politicians or specific bankers.

The only way to challenge this co-optation of popular rage was to focus critique on democracy itself. We quickly discovered that the idea of direct democracy was the major theoretical barrier that protected the existing representative democracy, and direct democracy activists, including anarchists, were the critical bridge between the parasitic grassroots politicians and their social host body.

By the fourth or fifth day of the occupation in Barcelona, it became apparent in practice what we had already argued in theory: that direct democracy recreates representative democracy; that it is not the features that can be reformed (campaign finance, term limits, popular referendums), but the most central ideals of democracy that are inherently authoritarian. The beautiful thing about the encampment in the plaza was that it had multiple centers for creation and initiative-taking. The central assembly functioned to suppress this; had it succeeded, the occupation would have died much sooner. It did not succeed, thanks in part to anarchist intervention.

The central assembly did not give birth to one single initiative. What it did, rather, was to grant legitimacy to initiatives worked out in the com-

missions; but this process must not be portrayed in positive terms. This granting of legitimacy was in fact a robbing of the legitimacy of all the decisions made in the multiple spaces throughout the plaza not incorporated into an official commission. Multiple times, self-appointed representatives of this or that commission tried to suppress spontaneous initiatives that did not bear their stamp of legitimacy. At other times, commissions, moderators, and internal politicians specifically contravened decisions made in the central assembly, when doing so would favor further centralization. This is not a question of corruption or bad form; *democracy always subverts its own mechanisms in the interests of power.*

Again and again in the plaza, we saw a correlation between democracy and the paranoia of control: the need for all decisions and initiatives to pass through a central point, the need to make the chaotic activity of a multitudinous occupation legible from a single vantage point—the control room, as it were. This is a statist impulse. The need to impose legibility on a social situation—and social situations are always chaotic—is shared by the democracy activist, who wishes to impose a brilliant new organizational structure; the tax collector, who needs all economic activity to be visible so it can be reappropriated; and the policeman, who desires a panopticon in order to control and punish. I also found that numerous anarchists of various ideological stripes were unable to see the crucial theoretical difference between the oppositions *representational democracy vs direct democracy/consensus* and *centralization vs decentralization*, because the first and second terms of both pairs have been turned into synonyms through misuse. For this reason, I have decided to rehabilitate the term “chaos” in my personal usage, as it is a frightening term no populist in the current context would use and abuse, and it relates directly to mathematical theories that directly express the kind of shifting, conflictual, constantly regenerating, acephalous organization anarchists are calling for.

After visiting another city where the encampment had basically killed itself through boredom, I realized that these antiauthoritarian consensus activists had also partially saved the day in Barcelona. Because radical anarchists are so extreme in our critique, we often lack social intuition; we have a hard time viewing the world from the perspective of “normalized” citizens. And while the #Spanish Revolution took everyone by surprise, it especially took us by surprise. Only a few of us had arrived by Wednesday, the third day of the occupation, and most did not come until Thursday or Friday. However, the consensus activists tended to be at the heart of it from early on. Many of them were experienced moderators, thanks to their participation in the great mobilizations of the antiglobalization movement, so they were often the ones facilitating the central assembly. And because they functioned as a bridge between the parasitic grassroots politicians and the masses, they also functioned as a shield for anarchist

ideals, because they were actors in their own right who had their own goals, quite distinct from the goals of the DRY activists or the Trotskyists.

In cities where this activist core did not exist, DRY activists or Trotskyists quickly homogenized the encampments and vigorously suppressed radical ideas. These encampments soon shrank like a desiccated corpse, with more parasites than host body. In Barcelona, on the other hand, anarchists enjoyed legitimacy and presence from the get-go, and the grassroots politicians generally had to pay lip service to anarchist organizational ideals, giving radical anarchists more room to work in.

One of the most repugnant features of the occupation, which ultimately caused many anarchists to stop participating, was the imposition of non-violence. Nonviolence was one of the original principles of the DRY platform, and in Barcelona the first antiauthoritarian participants either did not try to or were not able to reject it. Nonviolence was never debated, but always included in every action proposal, so the choice before the central assembly was always nonviolence or nothing. In the beginning, activists carried out a few peaceful sit-ins. For May 30, DRY announced an action to be carried out throughout the entire Spanish state: that day, everyone should withdraw 155 euros from their bank accounts (155 = 15-5, or 15 May), “a peaceful and subtle act, but sufficiently contentious and attention-grabbing to clearly demonstrate the indignation we feel, and also our strength and commitment to take this through to the end,” in their words.

But generally, their action plan was to do nothing, to stay in the plazas, to prevent people from seizing or blocking the surrounding streets, and to talk about another protest on the fifteenth day of the following month. When anarchists in Barcelona distributed flyers on the third day of the occupation, they quickly released a statement, not approved by any assembly, saying that the occupation was strictly pacifist, and that the police were trying to infiltrate and encourage violence; therefore all the good citizens should bring their cameras and take pictures of everybody and everything.

I believe it was the first Wednesday or Thursday when a group of activists dropped a huge banner from a major building alongside the plaza, reading “Politicians, Bosses, Bankers, CCOO UGT [the major trade unions] Fuck Off.” The crowds cheered exultantly. Two days later, another group blocked a street and cut open a section of the giant billboard covering another building, to reveal a large spray-painted slogan beneath; if I remember correctly, it said “No one represents us!” On this second occasion, some people cheered, but self-appointed leaders tried to stop the action and denounced it as violent.

When police carried out their hygienic operation on Friday, May 26, pacifists verbally or physically obliged everyone to sit down and to hold signs with the words “nonviolent resistance.” The police beat the pro-

testors with glee, opening heads and breaking arms. On a few occasions when people attempted to snatch away police batons, pacifists ran towards them to bring their message of peace. As thousands more people arrived to liberate the plaza, they overwhelmed police lines and surged towards the cops in the middle, shouting and starting to throw things. Pacifists formed a human chain to protect them. Police were eventually pushed back, not without completing their cleaning operation and allowing the sanitation trucks to depart with all the materials they had stolen. Even though the crowds generally pushed past the limits set forward by the pacifists—and they certainly didn't do it sitting down waiting for the legal team, as the pacifists had advised—the ideologues of nonviolence still claimed it as a victory. They also falsely stated that the police attempted to evict the plaza and were defeated. All this should come as no surprise, as pacifists have done the same thing with the Arab revolts—emboldening statist like Obama to do the same.

The following Saturday was the worst day, when the pacifists formed human chains to keep football fans out of the plaza and cheered police as they arrested hooligans. When there were still comrades in critical condition in the hospital, injured from rubber bullets shot by police officers, these same pacifists proposed going to support a rally the police were holding to protest their upcoming wage cuts.

There were other problems as well. Senegalese immigrants selling sunglasses and Pakistani immigrants selling beer and sandwiches moved into the autonomous zone we had created in the plaza. Selling things on the street, if you're not rich enough to have your own store or kiosk, is illegal in Barcelona, and the cops often amuse themselves chasing immigrant street vendors. Enter the *Convivencia* (coexistence, living-together) Commission. The CC formed with the explicit objective of not allowing *antisistema* to come and take over the plaza. *Antisistema* is a media term originally used to refer to anarchists in a depoliticized and delegitimizing way; it has since been extended to squatters and anyone else who falls outside the range of acceptable democratic opinion. In popular usage it is almost a synonym for hoodlum or hooligan. Consequently, the proposal to form the CC won popular approval in the assembly before any debate could be had, and despite the fact that many non-anarchist participants in the plaza had signs criticizing the media use of the term “antisistema.”

The CC police set themselves the task of kicking out the Pakistani *late-ros* (beer vendors). Their justification was that “they bothered people” by offering beers for sale every few minutes, and that they “created a bad image” for the encampment (in the media). Multiple times, anarchists confronted CC members, who often went around with name-tags and walkie-talkies, but to no avail. Despite accusations of hypocrisy and racism, they specifically refused to talk to the people who had the money to

buy the beer, and only focused on pushing out the people whose livelihood was based on selling it.

There was a heavy dose of legalism as well among the leading organizers. They attempted to get us to take down our signs against voting, claiming it could be used as a justification for a police eviction, even though the whole occupation was blatantly illegal. At another point they raised a stink when some people started an urban garden in the plaza; they complained that replacing the mulch beds around the fountain with plants was “uncivic.” For context, the *civisme* laws in Barcelona have been an aggressive tool to kill street culture and make things more comfortable for tourists. Anarchists in the plaza often had to argue against legalist mentalities; it helped that the occupation in itself sprang from illegality. On this front, we gained some ground; the garden, for example, was not suppressed.

There were also problems with certain junkies and drunkards who had taken up residence in the plaza and constantly harassed or even assaulted women. Pacifist organizers and the Convivencia Commission tried to prevent the feminist assembly in the plaza from organizing self-defense classes and taking care of the problem on their own, instead paternalistically offering to protect them. Anarchists had a hard time dealing with the junkies and drunkards who were being jerks. On the one hand, we were glad they were taking advantage of the autonomous zone to live without police harassment for a few weeks. On the other hand, some of them acted in ways we wouldn’t tolerate from anybody; in another context, only residual liberal guilt would have kept us from knocking them on their asses. Unfortunately, the situation was extremely complicated: any use of violence could have provoked a major confrontation with the pacifists, with totally unforeseen consequences. Worse still, it could have a conservative backlash that would have vindicated and demanded more of the CC’s policing activities.

On the whole, however, there was much in the plaza to value. It was an extensive, chaotic space of self-organization where people met their logistical needs—sometimes going through the official channels, sometimes not. There was a library, a garden, an international translation center, a kitchen with big stoves and solar cookers, and at any time there were a couple concerts, workshops, debates, and massage parlors taking place, along with innumerable smaller conversations and encounters.

And it was amazing to encounter a wider anarchist community there, to find that most comrades had the same idea to come down to the plaza even though the most visible discourses emanating therefrom were staunchly social-democratic. The comrades we met there were not always members of our pre-existing affinity groups, but also libertarians we had never worked with before. On the whole, comrades demonstrated an impressive commitment, agility of action, and a nuanced and incisive cri-

tique. It became clear again that the old stereotype of the anarchist ghetto is at best only partially true. At the first chance to join a collectivity and communicate with others, most of us were there, even though it was often an uncomfortable or even hostile environment. The very fact that we can speak of an “anarchist ghetto” indicates that we are less isolated than most people. This communality that we carry with us makes us stand out; the “ghetto” is formed less by attitudes on the interior and more by the imposition of a general social isolation on everybody else. In Barcelona, this has become truer in the last few years, now that many anarchists have distanced themselves from the tradition of squatting for the sake of squatting.

Not exactly on the turn of a dime, but within the space of a couple days, many dozens of us dropped our routines and threw ourselves wholeheartedly into the occupation—staffing the literature table, writing or finding texts and photocopying them, having conversations and arguments, joining the commissions, and organizing debates, talks, and concerts. It was an incredible feeling to find so many accomplices in the middle of a social singularity, to spend the night conversing, arguing, and analyzing the day’s events, to spend the following morning writing the next round of announcements and critiques, to pass the siesta printing, and then to go back down to the anarchist tent for an afternoon and evening of distribution, meetings, and the assembly.

Inevitably, we exhausted ourselves. Talking with comrades who took part in the December 2008 insurrection in Greece, it sounded like people reached their physical limits in three weeks. Evidently, debates and meetings are more taxing than riots and tear gas: most of us started to burn out after a week or two. Many of those who were most active in the first week were gradually replaced by a sort of second shift of those who had taken longer to be convinced of the need to participate.

A Note on Technology

A reader might notice that from the vantage point of the internet, it seems like the “#Spanish Revolution” was based almost entirely around Twitter and Facebook, virtual communication that doesn’t feature at all in my account. In reality, except for the occasional tech geek wandering by suggesting that we could solve all the world’s problems with virtual simultaneous internet democracy, that part of the revolution simply didn’t exist for me. Perhaps this is not surprising, in that I don’t have a cellphone and don’t use Facebook. In the end, these are just tools for spreading the word, and while they do change the terrain, from a certain point of view they are superfluous. I found it easy to be in the center of important happenings and to stay informed. Toting a cellphone around would have just wasted my time and left logs of all my movements and communications for the police to browse at their leisure. For the past

millennia, there have been occasions in which people gather together spontaneously in surprising numbers. As social isolation increases, networking technology helps overcome the growing distances, but it also plays a role in creating them in the first place.

I recall a talk in a Barcelona anarchist social center, in which we called an Egyptian anarchist in Tahrir Square via Skype. She laughed about the whole Twitter and Facebook obsession, explaining that those tools were useful but that their importance had been exaggerated by Western media.

Anarchist Strategies

After debating the matter with comrades nearly every day for weeks, I think those of us who chose to participate in the occupation with an anarchist critique made the right strategic choices. Our only errors come down to a question of finding the right balance between the various forms of activity.

The few anarchists who were there at the beginning were instrumental in blocking the signing of the DRY manifesto and in approving the decision not to produce any unitary manifestos. This allowed the Barcelona occupation to take on an independent character and develop according to its own needs, which endowed it with more vivacity. In Sevilla, by contrast, the occupation in Las Setas signed on to the Madrid platform from the beginning, never developed as much diversity or strength, and quickly lost what it had. And in Madrid, the assembly passed a law early on to allow no ideological symbols or ideological groups in the occupation, which was a decisive factor in preventing the anarchists there from ever setting up their own table to distribute propaganda. Accordingly, they had far less visibility, though they made a major effort to participate in the various commissions. We owe what we achieved in Barcelona in part to the fact that some anarchists went to the protest and occupation at the very beginning, despite the odious democratic rhetoric that predominated; and that they did not go as warm bodies only, but as fighters or activists with their own specific critique.

After more anarchists arrived on Wednesday and Thursday, there was a debate that ended in an impasse: do we participate in the assembly and the commissions, or do we stay at the margins? A couple of us argued that the place of the anarchists is always in the margins, and our role is to subvert the center and make sure the margins are more alive, more creative, and more interesting than the center. Fortunately, we did not win that debate, although subsequent events vindicated our position. In the end, most “radical” anarchists participated in various commissions, especially Content, where minimum demands and political programs were formulated. Anarchist participation basically made this commission explode, as the Trotskyists and social-democrats who previously dominated it found

it impossible, with us involved, to get approval for their populist programs. Subsequently, the commission broke up into about a dozen sub-commissions: these included labor, ecological, and other themed ones, and also “Self-Organization and Direct Democracy.” This did not prevent the Trots from subsequently speaking in the name of Content and trying to delegitimize the decisions of the sub-commissions.

Those favoring self-organization (anarchists and autonomists) and those favoring direct democracy (radical liberals) were lumped in the same sub-commission; the latter found this appropriate, while the former considered the two terms to be diametrically opposed. Of course, the former were right, but it was a good thing the two groups were lumped together because this allowed the two camps to debate, spreading a critique of direct democracy beyond anarchist circles and giving anarchists good practice in communicating. Not to sound arrogant, but the partisans of self-organization tended to win the debates, as the democrats had superficial ideas and generally less experience in any kind of struggle.

By participating in the commissions, anarchists achieved multiple victories. In a few instances, we changed the form of the occupation; in many instances, we held effective debates, crystallized our analysis, and gained contact with a broader antiauthoritarian community. We also blocked several attempts to pacify or neutralize the most beautiful aspects of the occupation.

However, within a couple weeks most of us realized that we had made a mistake by putting so much energy into the commissions. We had effectively sequestered anarchist ideas in a few useful but relatively small spaces; we had exhausted ourselves with daily meetings; and we had allowed ourselves to be seduced by the official organizational structures, which generally proved themselves impervious to decentralization from the inside. Meanwhile, we had only realized a tiny fraction of the occupation’s potential for self-organization. This is ironic, in that most of us were busy talking about self-organization in the appropriate commissions.

On a few occasions, we defied the central assembly and the commissions by organizing things on our own, starting projects in small affinity groups and working out conflicts with other projects on a case-by-case basis. We set up the literature tent, organized two or three talks, two or three debates, helped organize a concert, and helped organize an “es-crache” protest at a nearby workplace that had just fired a worker for being pregnant. If we had only put half as much energy into the commissions, those valuable debates still would have happened, but we could have organized ten times as many informal events in the plaza, making it a reality that the margins were stronger than the center.

As it happened, within a week the anarchist tent had become a place where people rested between meetings—this meant that we weren’t hav-

ing as many spontaneous conversations with random passersby. The margins, I should clarify, were not a lifeless place waiting for anarchist leadership. There was already a great deal of activity there, much organized by hippies, but little of it had any explicit political content; thus it was less contentious, and more easily delegitimized within a dichotomy of work/leisure or culture/politics.

On the first Friday of the occupation, the day we set up the anarchist tent with the literature table, a vital strategic decision had to be made unexpectedly. Someone from some commission came up to tell us that the plaza was reserved for commission tents, so we had to move to the edge, basically a sidewalk area outside the entrances to the inner plaza. The guy was very clever, and used a convincing argument: if we stayed there, then the Trotskyists and Stalinists and all these other parties could also set up their tents, and we didn't want to be responsible for that, did we?

At the time, there were only about six of us there. I don't want to make myself too much of a protagonist; everyone telling the story from their own perspective will remember analogous episodes, because we have all made heroic efforts in these days. But the fact of the matter is, I soon found there were only two of us who opposed moving the tent, and the other one was willing to accept the majority position. I argued forcibly: who cares if all the little Marxist-Leninist parties in the world move in? The commissions and the official structures are far more dangerous. Furthermore, we were fully legitimate in setting up this tent, because we were not a pre-existing political party but a spontaneous initiative that arose from the plaza itself. Most of the people in the tent at that point had never worked together on any project before, and a couple of us had met for the first time in the plaza. *Not only was it our responsibility as anarchists to defy the commissions and open up the plaza for all sorts of initiatives, but it was a good thing if they subsequently tried to kick us out in the general assembly. As anarchists, we want to make existing conflicts visible, not avoid them.* Let them try to kick us out, and then see where this democratic revolution goes.

We argued face to face with various commissiocrats, sometimes being nice, sometimes being outraged, until they were convinced or exhausted. We also built some common ground with another tent they were trying to kick out, one that had been set up by some performance kids from a circus squat. If we had not won that little battle and realized the need to seek conflict *not only with the State but also in the social movements, which also contain the State*, we would have been at a severe disadvantage in everything that followed.

Other strategic decisions were easier. We all agreed it was important to confront the keepers of order, such as the people from the Convivencia Commission. We started arguments where necessary, but remained willing to reconcile and be friendly if they stopped acting like cops or

politicians; this actually happened on a couple occasions.

Our propaganda efforts also didn't need any discussion, and they were modestly Herculean. It's impossible to say how many flyers we handed out, but it may well have exceeded 30,000, plus hundreds of pamphlets and posters. Surprisingly, it was all self-financed via a donation jar at our table. Especially in the first week, passersby tossed in huge quantities of coins and even bills so we could keep printing our supposedly extremist and alienating propaganda.

The final strategic conflict I'll detail involved criticizing allies who were involved in the centralization of the meetings. Our criticisms were harsh at times, and they strained more than a few friendships, but I think it was absolutely necessary. By widely posting the accusation that the assembly was being manipulated by Trotskyists and left Catalan politicians, we put these people on the defensive and limited their activity. The same approach was harder with the DRY activists, unfortunately, because they were previously unknown and they were in the middle of the whole thing from the beginning.

Meanwhile, by strongly criticizing the consensus activists for facilitating this manipulation and recreating the State, we made visible an absolutely vital line of conflict, deflating the various excuses that hid authoritarianism within questions of process and inefficiency. This latter group, the consensus activists, mostly had good intentions, and some were in fact comrades, so they were genuinely sensitive to criticism. The results of our attempts to criticize them will surface in the coming months as they evaluate their own intervention in this phenomenon and we continue criticizing them. It is necessary that as soon as possible, everyone who honestly desires freedom recognize that democracy must be destroyed in all its forms.

What We Learned

We can derive a number of lessons from this experience, many of which are still being digested.

For me, the first is this: *there can be no more excuses for mass assemblies moderated by consensus specialists*. It is important for collectivities to come together; when this happens, it is important. But the only mass organizational form that can exist without being imposed is that of an *encuentro*, an encounter, where people speak their minds or share ideas or ask for help on initiatives that they are starting without needing anyone's permission. Within this encounter, there can be individuals and affinity groups, people involved in formal (nonparty) organizations or informal federations, or whatever. The whole question of formality or informality is a distraction—it doesn't matter, it only comes down to personal taste. From an anarchist viewpoint, the only necessity is that there be no

decision-making body that has more legitimacy than all the others. A social movement is essentially an attempt by society to be reborn out of the void of capitalist alienation. We should not have to adhere to any single organizational form in order to fully participate in the social movement, because every single one will exclude certain kinds of people.

In the past, the CNT played this role. To participate in the struggle in Barcelona, you practically had to work within the CNT, and they screwed it up something awful. It would be a similar mistake to grant legitimacy to a mass assembly, regardless of whether it uses consensus or voting, because depending on the time and location of the meetings, how long they last, whether there are chairs to sit in or whether the space can be accessed by handicapped people, some people will be excluded. Even if you could design the perfect meeting form and rewind capitalist development to recreate a proletariat that all went to work and went to bed at the same time, there would still be exclusion, because some people just don't do meetings, while others have large crowds and speechmaking in their blood. The only answer to this is to recognize a web of decision-making structures and organizing forms with equal legitimacy, destroying once and for all the divide between public and private.

Secondly, we learned again what makes a good intervention: *presence plus critique*. Presence means being there, but it also means participating, becoming a material and integral part of what is going on. Critique means not leaving your brain at home because you think you're going to scare people off with your anarchist ideas; it means expressing yourself, and also listening, and evaluating your own behavior.

I had a chance to compare our experiences with a failed anarchist intervention in another city that confirms this point. Some comrades went to the encampment there just as warm bodies, without criticism. Others went provocatively, snubbing everything and everyone and leaving when they got a bad reaction, deciding not to come back because it wasn't a comfortable space for them. It strikes me that these two opposite approaches are complementary. Both are based on avoiding personal discomfort.

Some Further Lessons:

People are situational, not sovereign. This same idea seemed to be confirmed by the Greek experience. With the possible exception of a few Nietzschean superbeings, people are not sovereign individuals who live according to their opinions. Rather, people respond to their situations. Accordingly, the same person who has little time for an anarchist text on a normal day of the week will stop and read it and fantasize with you about overthrowing the State if you happen to meet them in the unexpected terrain of a spontaneous collectivity. The next question to explore is to what extent we can plant seeds, in the boring moments, that

will stay with people and have the chance to sprout when those people enter the unpredictable terrain of a rupture.

Collaboration between the various sects of libertarians was vital. Perhaps affinity groups are overrated: in the end it did not matter so much whether a fellow anarchist agreed with you on the question of the existence or nonexistence of the proletariat; it mattered more whether we could get along and communicate. It was a great advantage to have many different perspectives mixing, different strategies being developed, and different people being drawn to participate in different ways. The anarcho-syndicalists made a great effort to be present in many of the commissions, and it was funny and instructive seeing them participating in the same popular debates with nihilist and insurrectionary anarchists. They also brought with them the important tradition of the CNT, which granted legitimacy to anarchist participation on the whole.

Decentralization is not the same as dispersal. A mass gathering point such as Plaça Catalunya can give us a sense of collective strength, which dispersal would dissipate. Decentralization means not utilizing a unitary organizational structure with central nodes. It is a question of mode, not scale. Many people, including some anarchists, misunderstood the anarchist proposal for decentralization as a proposal to shift activity to the neighborhoods. While this was in fact part of what most anarchists were proposing, it is equally possible to transplant centralized structures at a smaller scale to all the neighborhood assemblies. Fortunately, the Barcelona neighborhood assemblies, which formed around the September general strike, had already defeated an attempt to centralize them within the umbrella organizing structure that arose around the strike. They preferred their autonomy. As such, they were a favorable terrain for anarchists, especially where we had already been participating in our neighborhood assembly. It was harder for grassroots politicians to take them over, and harder to impose an ideological unity, because we already had a point of unity: we lived in the neighborhood together, and we had no pretensions of all thinking the same way.

When we express anarchist ideas honestly, humbly, and passionately, it can reveal that many of those who remain silent are already partially on our side. Inertia and common values work against us and favor the populists and democrats, but anarchist ideas almost always win a debate because they speak to an inalienable impulse towards freedom that exists in everyone who still has a heart. The important thing, then, is to participate in the debate, as long as that debate does not legitimize official political channels but takes place between ordinary people. It is no coincidence that the dogmatic pacifists boycotted the debate we organized about nonviolence. They're not interested in a debate, but in imposing their practice.

Nonviolence is not a cultural peculiarity, but a real danger everywhere de-

mocracy exists. I thought that with its Mediterranean culture and its long, living history of forceful struggles, Spain would never have a problem with nonviolence. But in a period of a few years, it has appeared with a strength that could rival the pacifism in the UK or US. And these pacifists do not generally emerge from a trajectory of the historical nonviolent struggles in Spain, such as the antimilitarist movement. Rather, they have been created out of whole cloth by the democratic context itself; the ground was prepared, in my mind, by the tolerance of leftist, democratic, rights-based discourses in the antagonistic social movements of the last couple decades. People who identify as peaceful should be heartily encouraged to make themselves at home within our struggles. Nonviolence, on the other hand, must be treated with contempt until it is made synonymous with cowardice and snitching, and decent pacifists abandon ship to never again be confused with cop-lovers. By continuing to use the dichotomy of nonviolence and violence, and arguing whether or not our actions qualify as violent, we are only empowering them. Violence does not exist: it is a vague and moralistic category. Only nonviolence exists, and it means selling out, running away, and censoring other people's struggles.

Direct democracy is just representative democracy on a smaller scale. It inevitably recreates the specialists, centralization, and exclusion we associate with existing democracies. Within four days, once the crowds exceeded 5,000, the experiment in direct democracy was already rife with false and manipulated consensus, silenced minorities, increasing abstention from voting, and domination by specialists and internal politicians.

In a story worthy of Kafka, we were trying to schedule a debate and we wanted to let those at the Activity Commission know. The kid at the table looked down at his form, a crappy little piece of paper written up in ballpoint pen, and told us we couldn't have our event in the spot where we wanted. "Why?" I asked, getting ready to go ballistic. The response was far more pathetic than I had expected. "Because our forms are divided into different columns, see, one column for each space in the plaza, but that space over by the staircase, well that's not an official space." "That's okay, we don't mind, just write it down." "But, but, I can't. There isn't a column for it." "Well, make a column." "Um, I can't." "Oh Christ, look, which one's open—look, here, 'Pink Space,' just write our event down for the 'Pink Space' and when the time comes we'll just move it." Within two weeks, without any prior training, the Spanish Revolution had created perfect bureaucrats!

Some radical anarchists put too much trust in the commissions. They were only useful as spaces for debate and as spaces to subvert. For example, in the beginning, the assembly decided not to release unitary manifestos speaking for everyone. Subsequently, in the commissions, anarchists had to fight proposals for minimum demands and manifestos

every single night. Finally, there was a commission meeting with no anarchists present, and the minimums were passed through the commission and subsequently ratified by the general assembly, which ratified nearly every proposal passed before it. On the other hand, the anarchist proposal to decentralize the assembly was voted on twice, and each time achieved overwhelming support, but curiously was defeated on technicalities both times. This action demonstrated that we were right, we had lots of support, and the assembly was a sham—that, in itself, was a victory. But direct democracy cannot be reformed from within. It has to be destroyed.

In another example of the unsuitability of these organizational forms, the attempt to organize a simple debate about nonviolence almost failed because the Self-Organization and Direct Democracy Sub-Commission needed days to debate and consense on exactly how they wanted to do it. In the end, two people decided to ignore the commission, and joining with another anarchist who was not participating in Self-Organization, the three of them organized a successful talk and debate in just a day, accomplishing what a group of fifty people had failed at over the course of a week.

Finally, we learned our own limits. After two weeks of meetings, debates, and grassroots bureaucracy, some of us were ready to shoot ourselves. We were exhausted, and we had made the grave error of dropping all our other projects and actions. This demonstrated a necessary flexibility, but it also meant that during these most critical moments, radical anarchist actions weren't happening in the streets. It always felt vital to be in the meetings, in case something should go wrong, but we could have moderated our participation and devoted some energy elsewhere.

In this respect, it became obvious that we lack people who are comfortable with public speaking. This is a vital skill we need to develop collectively. Often, people with antiauthoritarian critiques made up a large proportion of a meeting, but we just sat through it all and listened to bullshit because none of us wanted to take the microphone. In the second open assembly in the Clot neighborhood, I started to get depressed because it was exhibiting none of the antiauthoritarian sentiment of the first one. Populist inertia was steamrolling us. Finally, I took the mic and launched into a ten-minute speech urging a focus on long-term revolutionary goals and self-organization, and slamming reformism, pacifism, and attempts at a homogenous unity. A huge part of the crowd cheered, and afterwards more people were motivated to get up and express similar sentiments, shifting the direction of the whole meeting. At the end, half a dozen people, from grandmothers to students, thanked me for my contribution, while others came over to start arguments that ended with them either convinced of or at least respecting the anarchist position. I didn't enjoy speaking or receiving compliments—it made me feel nervous and self-conscious—but I wonder: if I hadn't, would the meeting have run

its course with the uninterrupted illusion of a reformist majority?

Now that the Plaça Catalunya occupation is disappearing, the struggle will continue in the neighborhoods, in the radical unions, in preexisting affinity groups, and in the new relationships that have been formed during these days. Time will tell, but I suspect we have made a great leap forward by participating in the neighborhood assemblies, meeting new accomplices, and winning ourselves a great social visibility in spite of a hostile democratic environment. The real revolution is a long time in coming, but its sputtering attempts to come to life are plainly visible in these surprising, pathetic, exhausting, beautiful moments, as long as we have the fortitude to be there.