

# Whose Battle?

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Many of the young people who fight today's oppression in its many forms call themselves activists. Although their action would usually be called political, most detest the term politician and the institutionalized, unimaginative, and oppressive power it connotes. In every activist meeting I have attended, a major concern of those present is the movement's own whiteness, its inescapable middle-class roots and base of power, and the privilege or hypocrisy that this apparent contradiction forces us to deal with. I hear of the futility of paying commercial airlines for the right to block traffic in another part of the world, and the inevitable response: we have to acknowledge our privilege and vast resources so we that can harness them for positive social change.

In the same breath as we deconstruct race down to a mangled stump—good for nothing but heightening our vigilance against our own racism—activists bemoan the absence of skin pigmentation at their meetings and rallies, often wishing privately that their "friends of color" would show more interest in activist politics or feel more comfortable at their meetings. There is an air of exclusivity that we can all sense, and it's clear that it must be addressed before the anti-corporate movement can step out of the margins.

Perhaps this exclusivity has little or nothing to do with the whiteness of the crowd or their latent racism, but stems from a fundamental problem with this mode of political action. For a bit of perspective, very few white people attended Black Panther or Young Lords meetings although many supported them from a respectful distance. These parties openly welcomed alliances with revolutionary white groups and were pioneeringly anti-racist. On the other hand, a famously large number of white people went to black nightclubs in Harlem regularly, many with overtly racist opinions, and people of all chromaticities had a good time.

I would like to address two facets of the problem we face.

## Organizing

Organizations are very good at accomplishing singular goals, such as registering voters in violently racist states or getting clean water to poor communities. The tasks to be accomplished are somewhat mechanical, and strategic planning sessions behind closed doors might be necessary to avoid police violence. This form of resistance makes less sense when the goals are amorphous, when a group

of people desperately wants freedom in so many ways for themselves and others. When this is the case, I can only imagine discussions in Hyde Park and agitation at work, thoughtful reflection on every aspect of our lives and truly open-minded listening, especially to the people we think we are helping.

At this point in history, most of us zany radicals have discarded any notion of a vanguard party, believing it to be a thinly veiled vehicle for one small group to take the reins and coffers out of the hands of another small group. If so, why would we persist in forming cells and coalitions to further the revolution? As I implied already, an affinity group is a sensible way to keep each other out of state hands during demonstrations, but what is its function once the immediate danger has passed? Like-minded individuals can get together and talk shop: discuss capital, exchange books, look for solutions, and to be fair these small groups do occasionally find solutions. A mass of people who can agree is certainly more effective at traditional political tasks than isolated individuals.

The ugly specter I see unmitigated by any of this activity, however, is that our parents still subscribe to the New York Times, and their neighbors think that sweatshops give people jobs in poor countries. While this situation persists, we as activists are going to be pushing against not only the weight of the world's most powerful corporations and their hired goons in the military, but against everyone we grew up with and often the very people that we might be trying to save.

Maybe this insight is untrue, but Howard Zinn makes an excellent case in his People's History that unions erected to help workers have done almost nothing but hinder the workers' own efforts to free themselves, and that the most significant and lasting victories have been brought about by wildcat strikes and other forms of spontaneous insurrection. I am convinced that organization will take care of itself as soon as a political consciousness adapted to the times has developed. Furthermore, I think that political consciousness can only be matured in a collective effort, or else we are left with Bolsheviks who despise agricultural workers, environmentalists who idolize Malthus, and revolutionary students leaving their half-eaten salads to be picked up by the Latino staff. In short, any time we stabilize on a certain group to discuss politics with, we lose some huge cross-section of human thought.

This doesn't quite mean that I am advocating ditching small groups in favor of trying to convince other people of my views. I often have to remind myself that I believed (and met other radicals who believed) in the existence of "the masses," people whose political vision is blunt and who for their own good need to be led out of their cave of shadows. The astounding difficulty I had engaging any of these masses in political conversations had to do with my own dogmatism and ignorance, not anyone else's. The result of this difficulty, of course, was that I only talked politics with people who were interested in Politics. Keeping my politics in a special place took it out of the rest of my life. Bringing it back into life taught me that the masses were discrete and intelligent, and quickly rid me of a few of the other wildly inaccurate ideas I had.

## Living

Returning to the failure of many political groups to expand or integrate, my second observation is already public knowledge. Dancing is fun and pitting yourself against the most vicious group of military expansionists that has existed to date is not. (Okay, it's a little bit fun...) Seriously, activists realize that tear gas, concussion grenades, and a few nights in jail with one wrist tied to the other ankle is not generally considered to be a successful vacation.

The organizers I've met (with very few exceptions) understand this and try to invent fun ways to smash the state. Asking people to do special activities once in a while is decent and all, but for me a central dilemma remains: if power is being maintained over all of us simply by people living their lives, shouldn't we be able to undo that power by living as well? Often, demonstrations and generally heckling those in power is more of a catharsis for the participants than anything else. It's a ritualized display of power, which is something that late capitalism understands and takes seriously, but as long as we return to our day jobs, any tangible victories will quickly erode. Soon we'll need a labor movement to win back the right to only work a sixty-hour week...

As with political thought, creating a special time or place for political action actually means divorcing it from our lives. It brings to mind self-help victims who set aside thirty minutes a day for relaxing and breathing deeply.

I am shaken by the idea that the activist movement must (for the sake of integrity) acknowledge the ways in which its members benefit from capitalism. This is what I see as the keystone of complicity, the idea that causes such a strange cross-section of the poor and even the rich to claim that they are middle-class, and paves the path from youthful radicalism to conservatism. Perhaps being middle-class is not an economic condition, but is this very assumption. If "we" are the ones reaping the rewards of injustice, our fight is against ourselves. If we "are" middle-class, it's okay to hold on to the paltry trinkets handed now from above as long as we try to atone for it in other ways. But if this is only a state of mind, we have no excuses, we can walk away from it and never look back.