

Bringing **Democracy** Home



Toward a Critique of Capitalism

Peter Staudenmaier
& Jay Driskell

The New Movement

Chaia Heller

Democracy is Direct

Cindy Milstein

On Radicalism and Reform

Arthur Foelsche

Beyond

Capitalism

Rea Uer Moral

Contents

Introduction / 1

Cindy Milstein

This is What Democracy Looks Like! The Revolutionary Potential of the New Anti-Globalization Movement / 2

Chaia Heller

Democracy is Direct / 8

Cindy Milstein

What is Our Political Power Today? / 14

Andrea del Moral

On Radicalism and Reform: Activism in the Post-Seattle World / 17

Arthur Foelsche

From a Critique of Corporate Power to a Critique of Capitalism / 21

Peter Staudenmaier and Jay Driskell

Beyond Capitalism / 26

Amoshaun Toft

Thank you!

The following organizations and individuals gave generously of their time and/or money, as did others who wanted to remain anonymous (our apologies if we've forgotten anyone else). Without their material and moral support, *Bringing Democracy Home* would not have been possible.

Institute for Social Ecology
1118 Maple Hill Road
Plainfield, Vermont 05667
(802) 454-8493 ise@sover.net
<http://ise.rootmedia.org/>

Rainbow Bookstore Cooperative
Radical booksellers since 1989
426 W. Gilman St.
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 257-6050 rbc@supranet.com

Jonathan Bates
Sam Clark
Paula Emery
Chuck Fall
Ian Grimmer
Walter Hergt

Brooke Lehman
Chuck Morse
John Petrovato
Gene Rodriguez
Corinne Wilson
& the authors

Illustrations: Tony Doyle, Eric Drooker, Clifford Harper, and Frans Masereel

Bringing Democracy Home ■ April 2000

The opinions expressed within are those of the individual authors. For more information on this booklet, or to inquire about additional copies, please contact *Bringing Democracy Home*, c/o the Institute for Social Ecology at 1118 Maple Hill Road, Plainfield, Vermont 05667.

Introduction



The streets of Seattle marked a defining moment: from N30 forward, all discussion related to the terrible trio—the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank—whether pro or con, will take place in the shadow of these protests. Seattle opened up a space for dialogue, and significantly, voices from across the leftist spectrum now have a rare opportunity to be heard. In that spirit, we offer our perspectives as social anarchists in hopes of radicalizing the content of this conversation.

What binds these essays together, in fact, is our belief in dialogue as the very basis for a new politics—a politics of confederated directly democratic assemblies, premised on the simple yet revolutionary idea that we all deserve control over our lives. You will also find a certain degree of continuity between our words. We all draw from those past struggles where people fought for and occasionally won new freedoms. We stand with the many who have opposed capitalism, the state, and other forms of domination, and who have offered utopian visions of a better world.

Moreover, we are connected through the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE) as faculty and students. The ISE attempts to develop a radical critique of current trends and an ethical, reconstructive approach to social change. We, too, strive to build a liberatory movement whose goal is nothing short of remaking society. The voices within this booklet, of course, ultimately reflect those of the individual authors, but each reveals an underlying debt to the ideals emanating out of social ecology.

These essays all try to confront the world *as it is* while simultaneously imagining the world *as it ought to be*. It is our aim, as part of the nascent social movement gathering in D.C., to enliven the debate both within and outside the Left. Democracy matters, both in how we speak with each other now and how we structure a brighter future—that is, a free and ecological society.

—Cindy Milstein

This is What Democracy Looks Like! The Revolutionary Potential of the New Anti-Globalization Movement

by Chaia Heller

International systems of power are bursting out of the single-issue framework. Confronted by the exponential expansion and integration of new markets, technologies, regulatory bodies, and ecological crises, activists are turning to "globalization" as a way to talk about the increasingly totalizing dimensions of capitalist and state power. Globalization-talk reflects a nascent and potentially growing popular awareness of the complex and transnational character of social and political systems, signaling a shift in the way people have been talking about societal transformation for the past twenty-five years.

The new social movements that began in the sixties were followed by an *era of the particular*: an era in which the causes of and solutions to social and political problems were largely framed in single-issue terms. The sixties widened the revolutionary lens, broadening the political agenda beyond questions of economics and labor to include a wide range of transclass social and cultural issues, including ecology, feminism, and identity-based movements in general. Yet, while rightly illustrating the subjective and social dimensions of oppression, these movements rarely generalized beyond the particular, failing to offer a panoramic vision of a new world that would be free of state and capitalist domination.

The emergence of globalization-talk signals a crucial historical opening. The idea of globalization, as a way to point to international systems of power and their accompanying cultural disruptions, carries within it the seed of a more universal analysis and critique. The growing concern with global systemic problems, rather than

just particular nation-bound episodal problems, reflects a move toward a more comprehensive and integrated analysis of the sociopolitical order. For instance, popular outrage against regarding the global implications of international institutions such as the WTO, or transnational corporations such as Monsanto, reflects a concern with increasingly universal systems of capitalist and state power.

A vital question, however, confronts us: Will the movement against globalization remain embedded within the social movement tradition of single-issue protest, alternatives, and reform—or will it offer a coherent and holistic analysis of global systems of power that will open the way for a revolutionary vision and movement?

There is an undeniable tendency toward the former. Rightfully disenchanted with a revolutionary tradition associated with authoritarianism and centralization, activists have largely abandoned the revolutionary question, turning instead to a particularistic focus on social protest, reform, and socioeconomic alternatives. The cold war and the failure of the communist revolutions, as well as the demonstrated irrationality of the supposedly "modern civilization" that created the Holocaust and other horrors, have all contributed to a collective sense of revolutionary despair. In turn, the postmodernist mood that pervades academia trivializes any theoretical coherence as "totalizing." All of these factors leave activists trapped within a paralyzing paradox: confronted by an identifiable and integrated global system of power that must be transcended, activists today are unable to create a theory or movement

coherent and comprehensive enough to analyze and remake the current global system.

Skirting the revolution question, anti-globalization activists rarely assert the need to abolish and transcend systems of state and capitalist power—the very systems they describe as “globalizing” themselves. Instead, activists tend to focus on particular issues such as the WTO, international labor, and environmental laws, or on regulating or banning new technologies such as agricultural biotechnology.

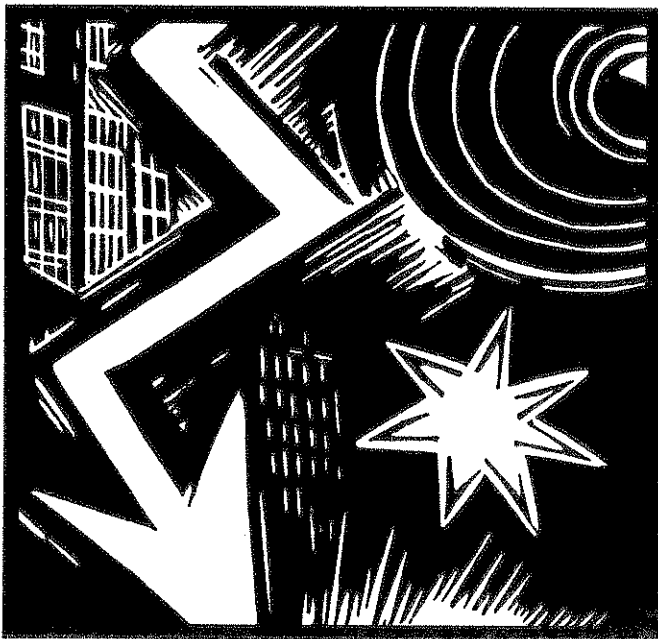
The movement against globalization will only fulfill its revolutionary potential when it challenges root causes: the universal logic of domination, hierarchy, and class exploitation that guides statist and capitalist institutions that continue to elaborate themselves on a global scale. But more than merely challenging such

institutions, this movement must propose a *vision and means* of achieving a good society; one that is universal enough to be coherent and principled, yet diverse and open-ended enough to be truly organic and *democratic*. Such a vision must inform and inspire, making the world comprehensible and remakable. A truly humane movement against globalization gives hope for the future as well as the knowledge and means to build a future worth fighting for.

Anti-Globalization Traps

As activists contemplate the current globalization problem, they often fall into a few analytical traps. In the reformist trap, activists often confuse *radical critique* with a *radical reconstructive vision and program*. In this trap, spokespeople for the new movement—ranging from leaders of environmental and citizen-oriented NGOs to consumer advocates—couple a crucial *radical critique* of capitalism and state power with a *reformist approach* to social and political change. While advancing an important radical critique of corporations and the WTO, for instance, these individuals often offer nothing more than reform as a reconstructive vision. As we saw in Seattle, pragmatic anti-globalization “realists” took up considerable space in a potentially critical and revolutionary movement.

Second, in the *state sovereignty trap*, activists call for a kinder, more citizen-friendly “socialist” state to act as a buffer between transnational capital and civil society. For instance, when critiquing international trade apparatuses such as the WTO, many anti-globalizationists merely



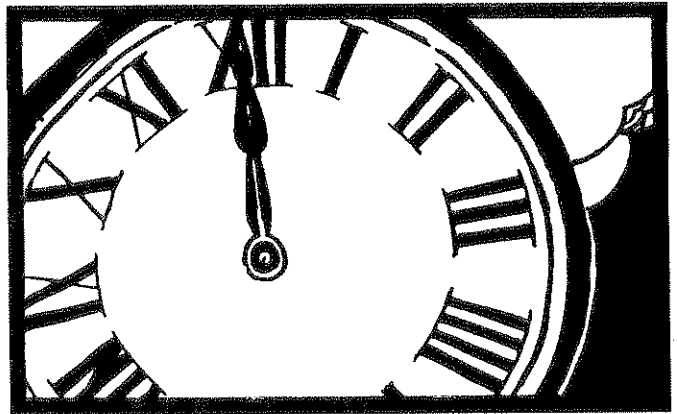
This is What Democracy Looks Like!

propose that we reform, democratize, or abolish the power of the WTO, while maintaining and even reinforcing state power. Holding a liberal or radical—rather than a *revolutionary* position—they never question the *legitimacy of the state* itself as a political institution, missing the vital opportunity to transcend the state's authoritarian and hierarchical logic and structure.

In the *anticorporate trap*, activists adopt an anticorporate rather than an explicitly *anticapitalist* stance. Citing multinational corporations, instead of the capitalist system itself, as the cause of social and ecological injustice, they seek to turn the “capitalist clock” backward to return to a kinder and gentler form of capitalism. Their critique also fails to recognize the need to move beyond a market economy that was born out of a logic of unlimited growth, accumulation, profit, and domination.

As history has always shown, high noon will always, eventually, turn into midnight. There is a logic to a clock: its gears, springs, or silicon chips modulate its movements in particular ways. Like a clock, capitalism and the state are constituted to move in a particular direction: toward ever greater levels of centralization, domination, exploitation, and hierarchy. When we look historically at the modern nation-state, we see that it rose in tandem with, and out of the same logic of domination and exploitation as, capitalism.

Rather than simply attempt to turn the clock of domination and exploitation backward, we must develop a new sense of time and history. Ours will not be built out of the dustbin of capital- and state-driven events but out of the



potential within the human spirit and the revolutionary impulse itself. We can think beyond what is immediately before us, drawing from the logic of a different “clock,” which has been beating in the heart of humanity since the beginning of time.

Redefining Power: Social vs. Political

This new logic is bubbling just below the surface of the movement against globalization. In the anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, a critique of state and capitalist power was nascent as the question of revolution was on the tip of everyone's tongue. Amid the sea of signs that floated above the crowd were calls for democracy and an end to the abuses of the capitalist system.

Yet, still embedded in the logic of social movements, activists in Seattle could not translate the dream for democracy into a concrete political or institutional form. Marching still to the particularistic beat of social movements, they had not yet begun to reach for the most general expression of power. It is time to seize the *general power* to determine each and every feature of our social and

everyday lives, ranging from the production and distribution of the common good, to education, health care, and housing.

In social movements, we have been fighting for decades for *social power*: for particular social freedoms such as sexual or cultural liberation, or for freedom from such social ills as poverty, prison, or ecological degradation. Today, we must begin to fight for *political power*: for the political preconditions of our own *freedom in general*. In order to be free in the most profound and general sense, we must be free as political beings. We must have the *political decision-making power* to govern ourselves in a way that is creative, meaningful, and responsible. Refusing to accommodate to a system we know to be foul, we must instead demand the power to create a society based on a new understanding of human creativity and potentiality.

It is the beginning of a new century. If we are going to commit ourselves to the long-term struggle for real freedom, why should we take a pragmatic or reformist approach? It is time to stop compromising and “negotiating” with those invested in maintaining the current system. It is time to go for *all* of what we really want.

Creating new forms of *collective self-government*, we may move beyond the logic of domination and exploitation on which the current “democracy” is built. Transcending a “representative democracy” with its political authorities and centralized state power, we may reach for a form of democracy defined as direct political power. The revolutionary potential of the anti-globalization movement emerges from a

logic of human freedom. We must recapture the original meaning of politics developed by the Athenians centuries ago: the power to assemble as citizens to govern our own communities. According to social ecologist Murray Bookchin, the political life of free citizens cannot be reduced to “statecraft,” nor to the managerial and authoritarian practices of the state that are so often confused with authentic politics. For Bookchin, true political power is the power of citizens to make *decisions in general* about their lives. It is the power to gather as *general members of communities* to discuss, decide, and determine the public policies that will shape how we work, produce, and live together. Until we have this power, we will be left only to stand on the sidelines of society, fighting for rights, choices, alternatives, and improvements within a system we know to be tyrannizing most of humanity and destroying the natural world.

From Economic Power to Political Power

We are so identified with the capitalist system that we can only see ourselves in economic terms. We confuse *general political power* with *particular economic power*: the power to consume, produce, boycott, or create episodic economic alternatives. Yet as the last several decades have shown, we cannot create a new society simply by seizing and recasting economic power. Indeed, it has proved insufficient to simply fight corporations, waging individual campaigns against WalMart or Monsanto, trying to keep chain stores out of our communities or ban genetically engineered food from our supermarkets.

This is What Democracy Looks Like!

The real challenge to capitalism is to refuse its tendency to translate the world into its own terms. We must free ourselves of "internalized capitalism": the belief that capitalism is "natural," inevitable, unstoppable, or a system that can only be reformed or complemented with economic alternatives. Seized by internalized capitalism, we see ourselves primarily as workers or consumers—as producers of or resisters to economic practice. The dissolution of the idea of citizen into the idea of consumer, with the new notion of the "consumer-citizen," signals the final collapse of humanity into *homo economicus*, or the economic animal.

But we are also, as Aristotle said, a *zoon politikon*, a political animal. We are beings with the potential to think, discuss, decide, and determine all aspects of our lives, including matters of economics. The fact is, we cannot fight capitalism with economic power alone. We cannot abolish capitalism by creating "economic" alternatives such as co-ops, just as we cannot boycott our way to a noncapitalist society. We can only bring the capitalist system to its knees when we can stand on our own feet, empowered *politically*. The enormous dislocation of peoples, capital, and goods throughout the world can only be countered by a global movement for a new kind of political locality based on principles of *cooperation, direct democracy, and confederalism*.

This is What Democracy Looks Like!

If we are to retrieve the notion of citizenship from the category of consumer and the category of the state as well, we have to ask ourselves *what*

kind of citizens, what kind of political life, do we want to retrieve? Can we only resuscitate ourselves as citizens bound by national borders and identities, passively represented by politicians and dominated by the nation-state? Or may we reestablish ourselves as a new kind of *free citizen* empowered to directly participate in the management of our everyday lives? It is time that we begin to build a *direct democracy*: one in which citizens meet directly, face to face, to democratically determine their own lives. Unlike a representative democracy, which exists to serve the state, a direct democracy is a form of government that serves humanity as a whole.

In the 1999 anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, the spirit of direct democracy was in the air. Direct confrontation with state military forces in the form of police and the National Guard led to a five-day period of radicalization among young activists, for many of whom this was their first encounter with militaristic repression. On the streets, the real yet more abstract fight against the WTO concretized itself into a struggle against the nondemocratic character of the state and capital. Activists found themselves beaten, injured by chemical weapons, jailed, tortured, and deprived of their civil rights in a "progressive" First World city—merely for engaging in peaceful protest and taking to the streets as citizens to express their freedom of speech.

There were countless marches that week as courageous activists risked their safety to take to the streets, rejecting the curfew and no-entry zones dictated by the city of Seattle in conjunction with the federal government. During one march, a

chant arose, poetically and spontaneously, that captured the imagination and passion of the other activists who were undergoing a life-changing transformation. After days of collective, democratic decision making and peaceful, intelligent protest, after days of seizing the right to think, decide, and take public action, activists came to understand democracy in a new way. They began to see democracy as a direct act, as the movement of real people participating in determining their own lives in a spirit of *cooperation*.

This chant, “*This is What Democracy Looks Like*,” repeated passionately, over and over, summoned a new way of thinking about political reconstruction. When taken to its logical conclusion, this chant means not only that we must take to the streets but that we must take to our communities, where we may demand the power to rebuild a vital and passionate political life. This chant inspires us to develop a new understanding of citizenship defined not in relation to a state or nation but *in opposition to nations and states*. It is time to redefine citizenship in relation to local communities and regional, continental, and even global confederations.

As we think beyond the state, seeing ourselves as free citizens, we must begin to ask what would be the local and translocal *political institutions* that would empower citizens to establish a direct democracy? Indeed, as we challenge the nondemocratic character of global capitalism and interstate apparatuses such as the WTO, World Bank, or the IMF, we must propose new political institutions that embody the principles of *cooperation* and *direct democracy*.

Marked by “internalized statism,” we often find it hard to conceptualize nonstatist forms of local and translocal self-government. Wanting to move beyond the authoritarian logic of national borders, we summon the idea of the “global” as the humanist counterpart to the “local.” We appeal to the local-global dyad in attempting to name the complementary units of political organization that will constitute the new society. Yet, while the idea of “thinking globally and acting locally” rightly asserts the need to rebuild local communities within a humanist and internationalist context, the idea must be elaborated in distinctly political terms.

While the term “local” could be translated into the political institutions of the city council, town meeting, or neighborhood assembly, the idea of the “global” remains an abstraction until we translate it into a concrete political structure. In this spirit, we may translate the “global” into the *confederation*, the next valid and complementary level of political organization that lies beyond the local level. A more meaningful way to *politically and institutionally* counter globalization is to counter “the global” (global capitalism, transnational governmental structures) with municipal and confederal forms of direct democracy.

This approach to the question of political reconstruction is called *libertarian municipalism*. Developed by theorist Murray Bookchin, libertarian municipalism is a way of thinking about political transformation that proposes a way to counter globalization by establishing self-

continued on page 30

Democracy is Direct

by Cindy Milstein

These days, words seem to be thrown around like so much loose change. *Democracy* is no exception.

We hear demands to “democratize” the World Bank, IMF, and WTO. Some contend that “democracy” is the standard for good government. Others allege that “more,” “better,” or even “participatory democracy” is the needed antidote to our woes. At the heart of these well-intentioned but misguided sentiments beats a genuine desire: to gain control over our lives.

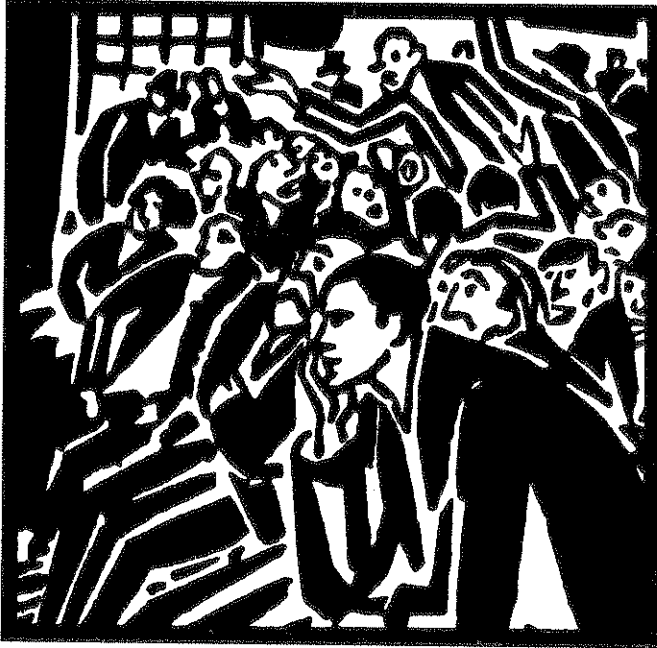
This is certainly understandable given the world in which we live. Anonymous, often distant events and institutions—nearly impossible to describe, much less confront—determine whether we work, drink clean water, or have a roof over our heads. Most people feel that life isn’t what it should be; many go so far as to complain about “the government” or “corporations.” But beyond that, the sources of social misery are so masked they may even look friendly: the Ben & Jerry’s ice cream cone of “caring” capitalism or the “humanitarian” gestures of Western superpowers.

Since the real causes appear untouchable and incomprehensible, people tend to displace blame onto imaginary targets with a face: individuals rather than institutions, people rather than power. The list of scapegoats is long: from blacks and Jews, to single mothers and gays, and so on. It’s much easier to lash out at those who, like us, have little or no power. Hatred of the visible “other” replaces social struggle against seemingly invisible systems of oppression. A longing for community—a place where we can take hold of our own lives, share it with others, and build

something of our own choosing—is being distorted around the globe into nationalisms, fundamentalisms, separatisms, and the resultant hate crimes, genocides, and ethnic cleansings. Community no longer implies a rich recognition of the self and society; it translates into a battle unto death between one tiny “us” against another small “them,” as the wheels of domination roll over us all. The powerless trample the powerless, while the powerful go largely unscathed.

We are left with a few bad choices, framed for us by the powers that be. In a *Nation* article, Slavoj Žižek termed this the “double blackmail” in relation to last year’s Kosovo conflict: if you opposed air strikes, you lent tacit support to Milosevic’s authoritarian regime of ethnic cleansing; if you condemned Milosevic, you stood behind a world molded by global capital. This choiceless choice applies to many other contemporary crises as well. Genocides seem to necessitate nation-state interventions; the excesses of free trade seem to call for international regulatory bodies. If the right answer, from an ethical point of view, lies outside this picture altogether, what of it? It’s all talk when people are dying or the environment is being destroyed. At least that’s what common wisdom purports, from government officials to news commentators to the average person on the street.

Even much of the Left can see no other “realistic” choices to control an out-of-control world than those that are presented to us from on high. Given this, the leftist horizon narrows to what’s allegedly achievable: NGO or Two-Thirds World participation in international decision-



making bodies; accountability and openness in nation-states; the rectification of the wrongs of capitalism. These and other such demands are bare minimums within the current system. Yet they are a far cry from any sort of liberatory response. They work with a circumscribed and neutralized notion of democracy, where “democracy” is neither of the people, by the people, nor for the people, but rather, only in the supposed name of the people. What gets dubbed “democracy,” then, is mere representation, and the best that progressives and leftists can advocate for within the confines of this prepackaged definition are *improved* versions of a fundamentally flawed system.

“The moment a people gives itself representatives, it is no longer free,” famously proclaimed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *On the Social Contract*.

Freedom, particularly social freedom, is indeed utterly antithetical to a state, even a representative one. At the most basic level, representation “asks” that we give our freedom away to another; it assumes, in essence, that some should have power and many others shouldn’t. Without power, equally distributed to all, we renounce our very capacity to join with everyone else in meaningfully shaping our society. We renounce our ability to self-determine, and thus our liberty. And so, no matter how enlightened leaders may be, they are governing as tyrants nonetheless, since we—“the people”—are servile to their decisions.

This is not to say that representative government is comparable with more authoritarian forms of rule. A representative system that fails in its promise of, say, universal human rights is clearly preferable to a government that makes no such pretensions at all. Yet even the kindest of representative systems necessarily entails a loss of liberty. Like capitalism, a grow-or-die imperative is built into the state’s very structure. As Karl Marx explained in *Capital*, capitalism’s aim is—in fact, has to be—“the unceasing movement of profit-making.” So, too, is there such an aim underlying the state: the unceasing movement of power making. The drive for profit and the drive for power, respectively, must become ends in themselves. For without these drives, we have neither capitalism nor the state; these “goals” are part of their body constitution. Hence, the two often interlinked systems of exploitation and domination must do whatever is necessary to sustain themselves, otherwise they are unable to fulfill their unceasing momentum.

Democracy is Direct

Whatever a state does, then, has to be in its own interests. Sometimes, of course, the state's interests coincide with the interests of various groups or people; they may even overlap with concepts such as justice or compassion. But these convergences are in no way central or even essential to its smooth functioning. They are merely instrumental stepping-stones as the state continually moves to maintain, solidify, and consolidate its power.

Because, like it or not, all states are forced to strive for a monopoly on power. "The same competition," wrote Mikhail Bakunin in *Statism and Anarchism*, "which in the economic field annihilates and swallows up small and even medium-sized capital . . . in favor of vast capital . . . is also operative in the lives of the States, leading to the destruction and absorption of small and medium-sized States for the benefit of empires." States must, as Bakunin noted, "devour others in order not to be devoured." Such a power-taking game will almost invariably tend toward centralization, hegemony, and increasingly sophisticated methods of command, coercion, and control. Plainly, in this quest to monopolize power, there will always have to be dominated subjects.

As institutionalized systems of domination, then, neither state nor capital are controllable. Nor can they be mended or made benign. Thus, the rallying cry of any kind of leftist or progressive activism that accepts the terms of the nation-state and/or capitalism is ultimately only this: "No exploitation without representation! No domination without representation!"

Direct democracy, on the other hand, is completely at odds with both the state and capitalism. For as "rule of the people" (the etymological root of *democracy*), democracy's underlying logic is essentially the unceasing movement of freedom making. And freedom, as we have seen, must be jettisoned in even the best of representative systems.

Not coincidentally, direct democracy's opponents have generally been those in power. Whenever "the people" spoke—as in the majority of those who were disenfranchised, disempowered, or even starved—it usually took a revolution to work through a "dialogue" about democracy's value. As a direct form of governance, therefore, democracy can be nothing but a threat to those small groups who wish to rule over others: whether they be monarchs, aristocrats, dictators, or even federal administrations as in the United States.

Indeed, we forget that democracy finds its radical edge in the great revolutions of the past, the American Revolution included. As we gather in D.C., it seems particularly appropriate to harken to those strains of a radicalized democracy that fought so valiantly and lost so crushingly in the American Revolution. We need to take up that unfinished project if we have any hope of contesting domination itself.

This does not mean that the numerous injustices tied to the founding of the United States should be ignored or whitewashed. The fact that native peoples, blacks, women, and others were (and often continue to be) excluded, brutalized, and/or exploited wasn't just a side-show to the historic event that created this

country. Any movement for direct democracy has to grapple with the relation between this oppression and the liberatory moments of the American Revolution.

At the same time, one needs to view the revolution in the context of its times and ask, In what ways was it an advance? Did it offer glimpses of new freedoms, ones that we should ultimately extend to everyone? Like all the great modern revolutions, the American Revolution spawned a politics based on face-to-face assemblies confederated within and between cities.

"American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life. . . . The township or some not much larger area was the political unit, the town meeting the political medium, and roads, schools, the peace of the community, were the political objectives," according to John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems*. This outline of self-governance did not suddenly appear in 1776. It literally arrived with the first settlers, who in being freed from the bonds of Old World authority, decided to constitute the rules of their society anew in the Mayflower Compact. This and a host of other subsequent compacts were considered mutual promises—of both rights and duties—on the part of each person to their community, a promise initially emanating out of newfound egalitarian religious values. The idea caught on, and many New England villages drafted their own charters and institutionalized direct democracy through town meetings, where citizens met regularly to determine their community's public policy and needs.

Participating in the debates, deliberations,

and decisions of one's community became part of a full and vibrant life; it not only gave colonists (albeit, mostly men) the experience and institutions that would later support their revolution but also a tangible form of freedom worth fighting for. Hence, they struggled to preserve control over their daily lives: first with the British over independence, and later, among themselves over competing forms of governance. The final constitution, of course, set up a federal republic not a direct democracy. But before, during, and after the revolution, time and again, town meetings, confederated assemblies, and citizens' militias either exerted their established powers of self-management or created new ones when they were blocked—in both legal and extralegal institutions—becoming ever more radical in the process.

We have inherited this self-schooling in direct democracy, even if only in vague echoes like New Hampshire's "live free or die" motto or Vermont's yearly Town Meeting Day. Such institutional and cultural fragments, however, bespeak deep-seated values that many in the United States still hold dear: independence, initiative, liberty, equality. They continue to create a very real tension between grassroots self-governance and top-down representation—a tension that we, as modern-day revolutionaries, need to build on.

Such values resonate through the history of the American Left: from nineteenth-century experiments in utopian communities, to the civil rights movement's struggle for social freedom, to the Students for a Democratic Society's demands for a participatory democracy in the 1960s, to the anarchist-inspired affinity group organizing of the

Democracy is Direct

1970s' antinuke movement and last year's Seattle action. In both its principles and practices, the U.S. Left has been inventive and dynamic, particularly in the postwar era. We've challenged multiple "isms," calling into question old privileges and dangerous exclusions. We've created a culture within our own organizations that nearly mandates, even if it doesn't always work, an internally democratic process. We're pretty good at organizing everything from demonstrations to counterinstitutions.

This is not to romanticize the past or present work of the Left; rather, it is to point out that we, too, haven't lacked a striving for the values underpinning this country's birth. Then and now, however, one of our biggest mistakes has been to ignore politics per se—that is, the need for a guaranteed place for freedom to emerge.

The Clash sang years ago of “rebels dancing on air,” and it seems we have modeled our political struggles on this. We may feel free or powerful in the streets, at our infoshops, within our collective meetings, but this is a momentary and often private sensation. It allows us to be political, as in reacting to, opposing, countering, or even trying to work outside public policy. But it does not let us do politics, as in making public policy itself. It is only “freedom from” those things we don't like, or more accurately, liberation.

“Liberation and freedom are not the same,” contended Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. Certainly, liberation is a basic necessity: people need to be free from harm, hunger, and hatred. But liberation falls far short of freedom. If we are ever to fulfill both our needs and desires, if we are

ever to take control of our lives, each and every one of us needs the “freedom to” self-develop—individually, socially, and politically. As Arendt added: “[Liberation] is incapable of even grasping, let alone realizing, the central idea of revolution, which is the foundation of freedom.”

The revolutionary question becomes: Where do decisions that affect society as a whole get made? For this is where power resides. It is time we opened the doors of that house to everyone. For only when we all have equal and ongoing access to participate in the space where public policy is made—the political sphere—will freedom have a fighting chance to gain a footing.

Montesquieu, one of the most influential theorists for the American revolutionists, tried to wrestle with “the constitution of political free-



dom” in his monumental *The Spirit of the Laws*. He came to the conclusion that “power must check power.” In the postrevolutionary United States, this idea eventually made its way into the Constitution as a system of checks and balances. Yet Montesquieu’s notion was much more expansive, touching on the very essence of power itself. The problem is not power per se but power without limits. Or to press Montesquieu’s concept, the problem is power as an end in itself. Power needs to be forever linked to freedom; freedom needs to be the limit placed on power. Tom Paine, for one, brought this home to the American Revolution in *The Rights of Man*: “Government on the old system is an assumption of power for the aggrandizement of itself; on the new, a delegation of power for the common benefit of society.”

If freedom is the social aim, power must be held horizontally. We must all be both rulers and ruled simultaneously, or a system of rulers and subjects is the only alternative. We must all hold power equally in our hands if freedom is to coexist with power. Freedom, in other words, can only be maintained through a sharing of political power, and this sharing happens through political institutions. Rather than being made a monopoly, power should be distributed to us all, thereby allowing all our varied “powers” (of reason, persuasion, decision making, and so on) to blossom. This is the power to create rather than dominate.

Of course, institutionalizing direct democracy assures only the barest bones of a free society. Freedom is never a done deal, nor is it a fixed notion. New forms of domination will probably always rear their ugly heads. Yet minimally,

directly democratic institutions open a public space in which everyone, if they so choose, can come together in a deliberative and decision-making body; a space where everyone has the opportunity to persuade and be persuaded; a space where no discussion or decision is ever hidden, and where it can always be returned to for scrutiny, accountability, or rethinking. Embryonic within direct democracy, if only to function as a truly open policymaking mechanism, are values such as equality, diversity, cooperation, and respect for human worth—hopefully, the building blocks of a liberatory ethics as we begin to self-manage our communities, the economy, and society in an ever widening circle of confederated citizen assemblies.

As a practice, direct democracy will have to be learned. As a principle, it will have to undergird all decision making. As an institution, it will have to be fought for. It will not appear magically overnight. Rather, it will emerge little by little out of struggles to, as Murray Bookchin phrased it, “democratize the republic, radicalize our democracy.”

We must infuse all our political activities with politics. It is time to call for a second American Revolution, but this time, one that breaks the bonds of nation-states, one that knows no borders or masters, and one that draws the potentiality of libertarian self-governance to its limits, fully enfranchising all with the power to act democratically. This begins with reclaiming the word *democracy* itself—not as a better version of representation but as a radical process to directly remake our world.

What is Our Political Power Today?

by Andrea del Moral

When people talk of politics, especially in this presidential election year, they most often talk about the Democratic and Republican Parties. Politics in this context is the politics of state government—on the national level and all of its subdivisions down through state, county, city, district, and precinct. We consider politics to be something different: the places in our society where we organize our lives, determine how we want to live, and put these decisions into action. This is a much broader definition than the standard party politics concept allows. It means that when we participate in community projects like free media, bike libraries, and gardens, we are—if we organize it so—political.

We seek decision-making power, power to act, power to create, power to spread and develop ideas, and the power to make our lives better. Our power within the structure of government partially addresses these. Voting in elections and voting with our dollars are the most common forms of power we use as citizens in the United States. These are choice-making powers. If we understand the scope of our voting and buying, we'll know how to use them better. If we know how to further our power by other means, we'll be even better off.

We seek tools for a liberatory political system. Voting can be such a tool, or a deceptive cover for undemocratic regimes. The distinguishing factor between these two uses of voting is the process surrounding it. The presidential election later this year, for example, is preceded not by a discussion of the values, needs, and desires of communities. All we see are campaign promises

and petty squabbles over nonissues that explicitly sidestep subjects of real importance in our daily lives. When it comes time to vote, the potential for inclusion and participation has passed, and the act of the vote is meaningless.

The problem with voting is not so much its limits but that we rarely recognize these limits. When we mistake it for action, voting replaces other forms of political power. Casting one's choice is only one component of a free society. Without democratic process based on nonhierarchical values, voting is a mockery of freedom. By believing so strongly in it as liberty, justice, and democracy incarnate, the powers of action, creation, and generation get crowded out.

Certainly, voting has a long and important history in this country. At first, only white men who owned a speck of dirt could vote. Since then, the campaigns to extend that right to wider populations have been hard fought on many occasions. Yet it is not the right to vote itself that we have so ardently struggled to defend and secure; it is the values that the vote and its process can potentially bring to life. What we are really after is the power of freedom and choice, and the freedom of choice. The choices put to a vote can come from the voters, after a thorough discussion process. As one step in a community decision-making process, it can be a fine way of exercising political power.

There is space—infinite space—in both daily life and mass actions, such as in D.C. against the IMF and World Bank and in Seattle against the WTO, for us to extend our political power. The power of action, to create better lives, to spread

and generate ideas, is beginning to take greater precedence. Several examples of this arose in Seattle.

Outside King County Jail, where many protesters were in custody, several hundred more gathered for three days to demand the release of those being held. A few of the detained activists still had cell phones on them, and they called people in the crowd. They told about their treatment in the jail and the lack of progress in the legal negotiations. The outside protesters who were in phone contact with those inside used a unique communication method to spread the information among the crowd. They shouted out the messages, one phrase at a time, and the crowd shouted them back, rippling the messages back to those farther away. After hearing the situation inside, the crowd of several hundred had to decide what to do: stay, leave, make demands, craft a plan of action. A proposal was made that the large group break down into human-sized ones that could communicate face to face, and that each group hold a consensus-process meeting to develop and decide on ideas for what to do. Since everyone wasn't familiar with consensus process, the human megaphone was once again employed to explain it. The gathering at the King County Jail is a prime example of liberating decision-making power. Equally important, the process was educational, spreading the skills of a new way of relating to each other. If we are to transform methods of oppression into methods of liberation, education and learning must be a continual part of our daily lives.

But what about our other political power



that often sits dormant in the shadows of our voting and protesting, demonstrating and campaigning? This is the power to act, create better lives, and spread and generate ideas. In the chaos and energy-intensive struggles of our campaigns, these powers often get neglected—but they are beginning to get attention.

The people who took over the 918 Virginia Street building in Seattle did so as a protest against the WTO and its favoritism toward capital and private property, and also to directly address the problem of gentrification and homelessness in downtown. They created a space and began organizing it in a way they wanted housing space to be organized in society. The group, called the Roofers, exercised political power in an unusual but compelling way: illustrating the structure they desired for society by creating it. Decision making happened by way of getting involved in the project; action itself was the focus. No representatives and no economic forces played into this equation. The Roofers organized themselves around this issue: There is no affordable housing in downtown Seattle,

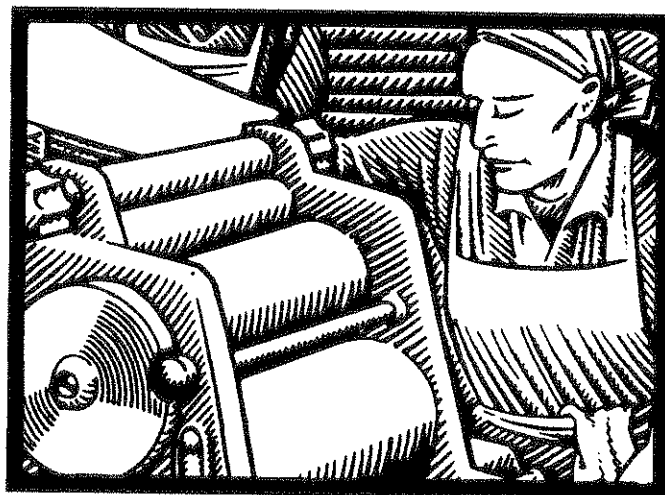
What is Our Political Power Today?

because all the housing buildings are being torn down for multinational corporations to set up shop. City laws are criminalizing homelessness. People need a decent place to sleep and live. Let's create that space.

So the Roofers set up housing, including plumbing and food, on a few vacant floors of a building. They also created some rules for themselves: no firearms, insobriety, or disrespect. Also, it was requested that everyone staying in the house gave some time to the basic functioning of the space. Politics by action doesn't have room in the state political system, so the homelessness action was illegal. To use a building without permission of the owner was the primary problem. The action manifested the clash between the values of a democratic society and the values of capitalism. Capitalism is dependent on private property, and the Roofers based their politics on social needs.

By putting politics into action—as the politics of the World Bank, IMF, and WTO have—we not only make the contradictions clear but begin to change the world around us into one we believe in and want to live in. The 918 Virginia Street building lasted a week. As we practice politics more and more as action, it has the potential to take hold for longer periods of time.

In some parts of society, there is virtually no popular power. The media is a prime example. In the months leading up to the WTO, independent media activists realized that corporate media was going to shape Seattle within their own agenda, not the agenda of the people in the



streets. They formed the Independent Media Center (IMC) as a political act. The IMC generated print, video, audio, and photo news from the perspectives of protesters, and distributed it via the IMC website (www.indymedia.org).

The way in which the IMC was set up was just as important as the fact that it existed. Anyone could become an IMC reporter, provided they donated some time to the general functioning of the center and left a copy of all their materials in the archives. This process is revolutionary in contrast to mainstream media. It was not only the content of news that would be different but the structure of power and decisions about the media. Articles were not censored or edited, and were made accessible to everyone who chose to go to the public library and look up the website. This form of political power was the power of action and creation. The IMC replaced, for those who wanted to listen, the voice of

continued on page 32

On Radicalism and Reform: Activism in the Post-Seattle World

by Arthur Foelsche

One of the most surprising images to come from the streets of Seattle during the WTO ministerial last fall was a blue steelworkers' flag flying against the backdrop of a dumpster engulfed in flames with hundreds of people holding a line of police back. The unity of opposition in the streets was unparalleled in the past two decades of issue-oriented activism. Building on coalitions that have begun to develop in the past few years, Seattle has created a profoundly new era of opposition.

As we move toward a new tomorrow, engaging in a multitude of "oppositional moments"—from the IMF and World Bank in D.C., to the Organization of American States in Windsor, to the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia—we must begin to examine how our opposition has the potential to change our societies.

In oppositional movements, there has always been tension between reform and root approaches to change, and the WTO demonstrations were no exception. From the street, a multitude of different and contradictory political positions could be heard. These different positions can be understood along a spectrum that encompasses four distinct ways of discussing change. These four categories are broad types of approaches; the intent of this analysis is not to pigeonhole groups but rather to create a broad way of thinking about how we approach change.

On one end of the spectrum, we have what could be referred to as a "traditional" or an "issue-oriented" approach to change. From this perspective, a problem is seen as a flaw in a process—

a bad or unjust decision. The solution, then, is found by rectifying the decision. For example, to apply this to the WTO turtle excluder case (where four nations successfully attacked a U.S. environmental policy mandating sea turtle excluder devices on fishing nets as a barrier to trade) is to overturn the WTO decision in favor of the turtles. This is a very intuitive approach as well as a very pragmatic one—the linkages between the problem, the demand, and the solution are clear. The issue-oriented approach also is a very focused approach, making it quite clear how to find solutions to problems.

The second category along this spectrum can be identified as a "reform" approach. Here, the solution to problems complexifies as well as broadens. This type of thinking goes beyond the identification of a problem as the result of a bad or unjust decision—it sees problems as a result of a flawed system. In the case of the turtle excluders, the reform position sees the WTO's decision as a result of a process that does not represent all interests at stake. If the WTO had included environmental (as well as labor, citizen representation, NGO participation, and cultural) considerations in its decision, it would not have made the decision that it did. The reform position seeks to improve the system itself, forcing the discussion into the realm of why the WTO makes bad decisions.

With the third position on the spectrum, we see a dramatic split from the two previous approaches. The "reactive" approach differs from the previous ones in that it takes an explicitly antisystems stance in regard to the WTO. This

On Radicalism and Reform

position rejects control of human behavior by external bureaucratic institutions as an infringement on the rights and liberties of individuals. The WTO is seen as an unaccountable institution whose existence jeopardizes individuals' ability to govern their own lives. From the reactive perspective, the WTO must be rejected outright as decisions it makes infringe on an individual's ability to make decisions on how, for example, we should safeguard turtles.

On the political Right, the reactive approach is often garbed in nationalism, xenophobia, and racism. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the reactive position is a rejection of governance systems in general. From this position, any type of governance is oppressive.

Finally, we have what could be referred to as a "reconstructive" approach. This approach to opposition is characterized by two fundamental elements: systemic analysis, and a vision for the re-creation of society with structures and institutions that do not create the types of problems we face today.

Systemic analysis impacts the parameters of how we talk about change on a fundamental level. No longer is the dialogue surrounding the WTO simply: "No to the WTO!" A reconstructive vision places the WTO within the context of the global economic system. From this perspective, the WTO is seen as an outgrowth of a logic that creates unaccountable institutions that make bad and unjust decisions.

The scope of a reconstructive vision widens beyond the WTO to understand the logic that creates these institutions. From here, all of the

free trade institutions—from NAFTA, to the FTAA, to CBI, to Free Trade Africa, to the IMF and World Bank—are seen as products of the same logic. A reconstructive vision seeks to alter the logic of the system itself; reconstruction means the re-creation of how societies function on a fundamental level.

Reconstruction forces opposition to point us where we want society to go. A reconstructive vision brings a dialogue of what our societies could and should be. When we focus on the reconstruction of society, we debate the systems that create misery in the world and how to forge a world where freedom is fundamental not a privilege.

Reconstructive politics are often dismissed as utopian and unobtainable. With the rapid economic consolidation and impending environmental disasters, the need for immediate action is pressing. Because of this immediate need, politics that argue for the future, a future in which humans have the potential to be good, are perceived as overlooking the short-term necessity.

The perceived need to compromise, abandoning long-term goals for short-term compromises, has silenced any real discussion of the future. Pragmatism has sacrificed our ability to talk about what could and should be for a mere reduction of short-term suffering. By limiting political opposition to short-term goals, addressing single problems, political pragmatism reduces liberation to reducing suffering.

Clearly, the need to reduce short-term suffering, the importance of addressing pressing problems, is necessary, yet it is not sufficient.

On Radicalism and Reform



Utopian thinking is dramatically different from pragmatic ideology, which ultimately must be understood as seeing humans as never being able to be good. Utopianism is fundamentally based on the principle that humans have the potential to be good.

The need to reject political pragmatism for a form of utopian thought that addresses both immediate needs and long-term visions of society is clear. Pragmatism will never elevate the debate on how humanity can be liberated—since humans cannot be good, there is no way to find liberation, no way for all humans to be free from misery. Our vision of the future has to inform our approaches to immediate needs by understanding how we want society to be in the future.

Opposition has to be understood as a process of social development. How we oppose institutions like the WTO has to be the mini-

mum aspect of a total reconstruction of society if we are to begin a movement toward social change. If we approach the WTO from a pragmatic perspective, we oppose it in the streets, and perhaps beyond that, we demand its reform. The reconstructive position calls not only for opposition but a social reconstruction that celebrates the potential of humanity to live free of the oppression created by the consolidation of wealth and power by governments, corporations, and individuals.

The danger of the call to reform the WTO is that the power generated by the activity in the streets of Seattle will be co-opted through the process of trying to infuse a corrupt system with supposedly better politics. The strength of the opposition to the WTO was not just the steelworkers dancing with turtles on top of buses; it was the potential of creating a truly democratic political space. When our opposition breaks down artificial walls between groups and unites us in the streets, we begin to create a new form of politics that is the voice of the people, not of a faceless institution that caters to corporations. If we sacrifice this power for the reform of an institution that will never serve the interests of the people, then we have wasted all that we have fought for. Our opposition is only as powerful as our faith that we can create a better society. When we lose hope that we can make a better future, we sign our future away to the institutions that perpetrate misery around the world.

For the first time in the past decades of quietism, a massive mobilization of people appeared on the political landscape, surprising

On Radicalism and Reform

almost everyone. This enormous anti-globalization movement is already becoming explicitly anticapitalist. The IWW marched with a banner that read "Capitalism cannot be reformed." Signs everywhere pointed to economic inequalities and environmental destruction as a result of the international financial systems. Never before have we seen capitalism so directly confronted on such a scale in this country, clearly pointing out that the political consciousness is changing. We are verging on the first potentially revolutionary moment in decades. This potential is, of course, nascent, yet it exists virtually free of entrenched political dogmas and with a clear absence of leaders.

It is absolutely essential to radicalize oppositional political theory. Our discussion has to rupture the single-issue focus. We need to see all

of our work as fighting against systems of domination. No longer will we just fight for Mumia or Peliter; we will force our critique to that of the long history of state-sponsored oppression. Dioxin and PCBs will be seen as outcroppings of environmental racism and an unaccountable market whose sole desire is the consolidation of wealth. Biotechnology will move out of the discussions of Frankenfoods and force the discourse into the realm of the political and social spheres that propagate the very ideas behind biotechnology. Our discourse has to become vigilant, consistently demanding, "radicalize the critique!"

This is merely the oppositional aspect—our vision has to extend to a reconstructive understanding. We have to understand that if we are rebuilding the world along ethical lines of what could and should be, we center the power of construction within our communities, where it can be decided by a process that celebrates both the individual and community. From our communities, we can reject the ideas of hierarchy and domination that so pervade not only our current understandings of politics but societal interactions as a whole.

We have entered an era where there is tremendous potential to bring social change to the forefront of political discussion. Reducing this moment to trying to reform institutions and not the systems that perpetrate human misery destroys the potential for creating societies based on liberation. Faith in the future, a true understanding that humanity has the potential to be good, will bring us to a new day unlike any we have known.



From a Critique of Corporate Power to a Critique of Capitalism

by Peter Staudenmaier and Jay Driskell

Note: This piece was originally written over two years ago, in those distant and difficult days before Seattle, at a time when anarchist and anticapitalist perspectives were still marginal within the movement against “globalization.” We’re reprinting it now because we think the ideas it contains still have some work to do.

With the recent wave of successes in the struggle against corporate control of our lives, many activists are beginning to assess the long-term goals of our efforts and the fundamental assumptions underlying our work. Anticorporate sentiment is on the rise in North America, and those of us organizing around the issue can play a much needed role by offering a coherent expression, as well as radical direction, to that discontent. We’d like to help move that discussion forward by offering a critique of some of the common assumptions within the movement. We don’t mean this as some sort of blueprint or definitive worldview; that’s been tried before. But we do think it’s worth spending some time reflecting on the vision of a free society that animates our hard work.

When we look at the experiences of our various historical predecessors, from the nineteenth-century Populists to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), one of the things that led to their eventual failure was the lack of a unified vision, one that couldn’t be compromised or co-opted. We need a coherent understanding of exactly what we’re fighting against, as well as what we’re fighting for: we want our vision to be both critical and reconstructive. That means developing both an analysis and forms of action that are appropri-

ate to our common goals. Otherwise, we leave our movement open to takeover by would-be vanguards waiting in the wings with ready-made ideologies—just what happened to SDS at the end of the 1960s.

Our contribution focuses on the discussion around corporate power. As the title indicates, we’d like to move this discussion toward a critique of the capitalist social system as a whole, the system that underlies corporate power. We want to make clear at the outset that we do not see capitalism as the primary, much less only, target of our subversive efforts. We’re committed to resisting domination and hierarchy in all spheres of life, from the smallest interpersonal interactions to the mightiest global institutions; and we consider patriarchy, white supremacy, and the state to be as crucial as capitalism—not to mention heterosexism and all the other oppressions we struggle against. The root problem is a society structured around domination and subordination; we’re simply focusing on one of those basic structures for the moment.

Why capitalism? Because it’s the unacknowledged source of so many of the barriers to a just and democratic future. We’re arguing for a principled opposition to capitalism as a complex and highly resilient social system, one that is profoundly hostile to human needs and ecological limits. Piecemeal opposition to those aspects of the corporate order we think are nasty isn’t enough; our eventual goal must be the elimination of the entire structure.

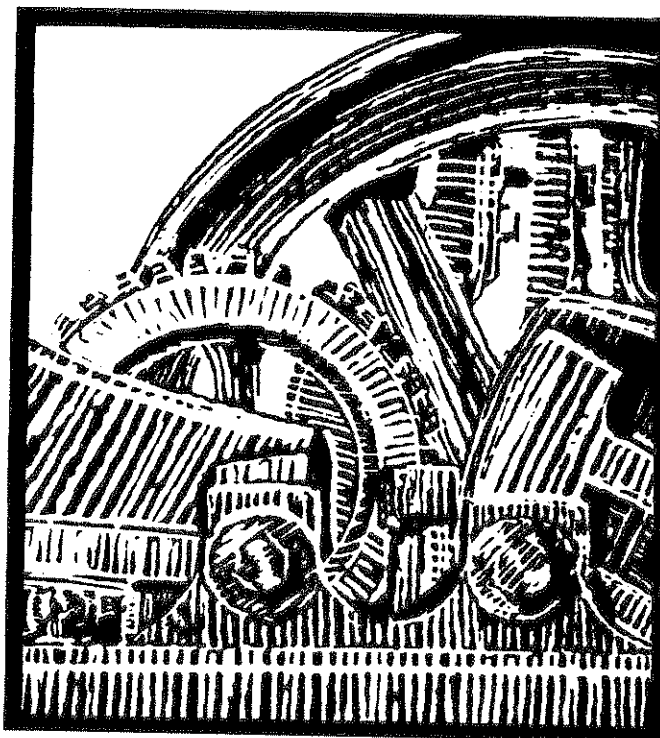
This step, moving beyond a critique of corporate dominance of various parts of our lives

From a Critique of Corporate Power

to a critique of the underlying system, is important for several reasons. First, it helps us see our local struggles, here and now, in a global and historical context: we don't simply want to shove corporate predators out of our backyard into someone else's, and we don't want to fixate on the most obvious current manifestations of corporate greed and destructiveness (after all, are a few huge profit-making corporations really worse than lots of small profit-making corporations?).

Second, one of the things that makes capitalism so resilient is its ability to present itself as natural, eternal, and inevitable. Consequently, many people who are outraged by particular instances of corporate malfeasance would never dream of questioning the capitalist system itself. We need to push them to dream that dream if their outrage is to develop into revolt. Capitalism has taken on enormous and unforeseen self-transformations in the past, and we can expect it to do so again. To be prepared for this, we have to understand its fundamental nature. Though it might seem hard to imagine, a world without corporations but still built on capitalist premises is not impossible; and that would not be a free world.

Third, we think it's important to keep in mind the political ambivalence of previous anticorporate movements. There was, after all, a powerful anticapitalist component to European fascism, and many North American versions of populism have evolved in a right-wing, pseudo-democratic direction. Much of this has to do with partial critiques of corporate power that fixated on its most palpable incarnations but didn't



touch its systemic roots. For example, "finance capital" was often scapegoated (or sometimes simply "Jewish bankers"), as if financial and industrial capital weren't inextricably linked. Or "consumerist lifestyles" were attacked, ignoring not only the immense class divisions that mark our society but also the central role of production, the heart of capitalism, in determining demand.

We want to avoid such mistakes. That means working to get clear among ourselves, as a movement, what our real targets are and why we oppose them. If that requires wrestling with some "theoretical" questions that sound abstract at first, it's a risk we'll have to take.

So what do we mean by capitalism? That's

difficult to answer, because the system itself is so flexible and constantly shifting. Capitalism has been developing for centuries, and has taken many divergent forms in various times and places. Still, we think there are some key characteristics that all forms of capitalism share:

Commodity production. Commodities are the basic unit of capitalist society. One way to think of them is as things that are manufactured for exchange (i.e., sale) rather than for use. That's not to say they're all useless by any means, just that the reason they're produced is to generate profit, not to fulfill some social purpose.

Markets. Conventional wisdom would have us believe that markets are naturally ordained; in fact, they are merely one way of coordinating the distribution of goods, and a peculiar one at that. Unless they're securely anchored within a non-market social context, markets have a basically totalitarian dynamic: once they're let loose, they tend to colonize every aspect of social life, eroding cooperation and instilling competition.

Private property. There's nothing wrong with everybody owning their own toothbrushes. But private ownership of those things that are necessary for living—like land, housing, the production of food and basic goods, and all that makes up a healthy and comfortable existence—only makes sense if private gain takes precedence over social needs.

Wage labor. Capitalism is the only social system that forces most of us to sell our labor in order to survive. This means our own bodies are

turned into commodities. The class system also divorces decision from execution: management decides what gets done and how, and workers are expected merely to carry out their orders—an elementary violation of democratic values.

Accumulation via exploitation. The things that we make and do at our jobs are taken from us and turned into capital, and we don't get a say in what's done with it. While executives, shareholders, and owners are the immediate beneficiaries of this process, the driving dynamic is the continuous accumulation of capital itself, which inexorably sucks people and the planet dry.

The growth imperative. In a market society, all economic units are eventually forced to grow or perish. This is a fundamental feature of capitalism that can't be circumvented by well-meaning entrepreneurs or attempts to foster local businesses. The system is structured such that these efforts will either be eliminated or entirely absorbed, no matter what the intentions of their founders.

Alienated relationships. Capitalism isn't merely an economic mechanism; it is a full-fledged set of social relations that warp human interests around the prerogatives of possession and material advantage. At the same time, capitalism systematically hides the very social relations it perpetuates, making it virtually impossible for people to interact in ways that are not somehow mediated by forms of capital.

If these are the essential building blocks of capitalism, then the conclusion is clear: capital-

From a Critique of Corporate Power

ism is incompatible with a free society and healthy planet. If we are serious about creating a just and sustainable world, we will need to uproot capitalism, replacing it with a system of production and reproduction that respects the natural environment and fosters human freedom. That is, we'll have to forge an economy that is subject to direct democratic control. We think there are two principles that can help guide this effort to overcome capitalism: *Return capital to the control of communities*; and *Put production decisions in the hands of the producers*.

If we think of capital as the social wealth produced by a community, then the community as a whole ought to decide—collectively and democratically—how that wealth is used. Local communities should have the final say in how surplus is invested, and all major decisions about production and distribution should be subject to communal approval. One way to institutionalize this process is by municipalizing the economy: property and production decisions are put in the hands of directly democratic citizen assemblies (not representative bodies) so that every adult member of a community is involved in cooperatively managing communal affairs. In this way the economy can be subordinated to popular control at the grassroots level, in order to make capital serve social ends rather than the other way around.

At the same time, the actual process of production must be under the immediate control of all those directly involved in it. This means that all the workers in a particular enterprise (to use a classic if somewhat outmoded example)

participate equally in determining how their workplace is structured and how the work itself is done. A democratic economy must be democratic at all levels. This process can build on existing institutions of working-class power, but must go beyond them to encompass all forms of labor, all productive activity, including those traditionally assigned to the sphere of “reproduction.”

Growing out of these participatory and grassroots structures of collective self-management, a network of confederated communities could then provide the democratic framework for cooperation across regions. In this way, economic decisions would be integrated into public life as a whole, becoming a vital part of civic engagement and communal deliberation. Such a scenario represents the negation of capitalism.

But what does all this mean for our organizing work today? We're not saying we should all immediately stop talking about “corporate power” and start talking about “capitalism” instead (much less focus on capitalism at the expense of racism, etc.). Rather, we'd like to see a radical critique of capitalism incorporated into our own analyses of corporate dominance, which will probably end up changing our public propaganda. The place to start, as always, is with education; and in this effort, we can draw on a large body of historical experience and theoretical insight from socialist, anarchist, and communalist traditions of resistance to capitalist encroachment.

Another possible emphasis is on building counterinstitutions (both creating new ones as well as strengthening, expanding, and radicalizing

existing ones). Counterinstitutions are projects like food co-ops, housing co-ops, community supported farms, collectively run businesses, alternative credit programs, and similar attempts to take back socially necessary functions from the clutches of a profit-oriented economy. Such endeavors face the dilemma of using market mechanisms to undermine the logic of the market, a difficult and risky prospect under contemporary conditions. Their ultimate objective must be not coexistence with capitalist institutions but their wholesale replacement.

None of this is a substitute for continual political struggle—we all need to remain active revolutionaries no matter where we live, work, or eat, or which books we read. The point is just that a dual strategy of education and concretely

contesting the structures of capitalist society offers a way to combine our critical and reconstructive visions. We think this only makes sense in the context of an explicit rejection of capitalism in all its forms.

Why is this move from a critique of corporate power to a critique of capitalism necessary? Because partial critiques run the risk of sending the wrong message. Focusing on huge multinational corporations can make small or locally based ones sound harmless. Highlighting corporate misdeeds can suggest that we simply need better managers and more sensitive executives. Faulting income inequalities leaves the class system intact. Pointing the finger at Wall Street neglects Main Street's complicity. Focusing on consumption lets production off the hook.

Talking about "industrialism" portrays our problems as essentially technical in nature and leaves the actual social causes unexamined. Targeting the concentration of capital ignores the possibility of a decentralized capitalism.

On the other hand, every one of these rhetorical strategies can become an effective and radical tool if it's situated in a broader anticapitalist critique. The lessons from our past show that this is a small but indispensable step toward creating a free, humane, and ecological society.



Beyond Capitalism

by Amoshaun Toft

We must recognize, and loudly proclaim, that everyone, whatever his grade in the old society, whether strong or weak, capable or incapable, has, before everything, THE RIGHT TO LIVE, and that society is bound to share amongst all, without exception, the means of existence at its disposal.

—Peter Kropotkin,
The Conquest of Bread, 1906

Corporate domination is a logical manifestation of capitalism. It is not capitalism gone bad but capitalism grown up, and it will continue to grow larger and more oppressive as long as it is allowed to do so. Because within the logic of capitalism is the grow-or-die imperative that shapes and drives all capitalist economic development, laying waste to anything and everything that stands in its path.

As our economic relationships became increasingly dominated by capitalism, we can identify a shift from a predominantly varied economy to a predominantly capitalist economy. Although capitalism has largely destroyed the variety of economic relationships that came before it, we still hold the potential, socially, to draw from that tradition and create economic relationships outside of, and in opposition to, capitalism. Indeed, there has been profound resistance to capitalism from its inception: from the Luddites of England between 1811–1816 to the indigenous tribes of the colonized world, those who have been on the receiving end of the sword of economic development have fought to maintain the political autonomy that has sustained their cultural development.

As we begin to understand that our struggles must challenge root causes, we will be confronted with the question of where to go from here: How will we organize our lives without capitalism? How will we be fed, housed, and clothed? These are very important questions, and the answers will vary tremendously from person to person and place to place. But it is a discussion that we need to have, and there is a long history of noncapitalist economic structures that we can learn from.

Fundamental to confronting capitalism in a reconstructive way is our ability to draw on historical examples of egalitarian relationships around material fulfillment. Our evolution has been cumulative, and we have the potential to draw on the rich and varied traditions to which we are heirs. From the strengths of cooperative usufruct relations to the strong democratic traditions of ancient Greece, we can leave behind the parochialisms and oppression that tainted their more positive qualities, and derive a utopian vision for how life could and should be.

What is now considered the economic realm has not always been economic in character. In fact, historically, land and labor were dictated by social (i.e., who will herd the sheep, and what land will be used), not economic, structures. For thousands of years before the creation of the market, concerns now relegated to economics—the production of food and shelter, the distribution of land and labor, and trade—were organized with regard to social norms, personal human relationships, and local political structures.

The earliest and most longstanding medium for the distribution of wealth is that of usufruct.



As described by Murray Bookchin in *The Ecology of Freedom*, usufruct is “the freedom of individuals in a community to appropriate resources merely by virtue of the fact that they are using them.” In this way, an item or a resource merely “belonged” to a user as long as he or she was using it. This is fundamentally different from our contemporary notions of possession. Possession, in this sense, was more a satisfaction held collectively by the entire community. More than a contractual agreement, usufruct is a sense of social responsibility, embedded in the minds and hearts of every member of the community. It is an unconscious willingness to share those necessities of life. There is a fundamental difference between the crops in the field and the clothes on our backs. Need or desire was the basis for one’s justification for using an object, not the quid pro quo relationship

of work and money that the market uses. Indeed, objects themselves are not independent from our need for them.

Similar in nature is mutual aid: the act of aiding another because you trust that you will be aided in return. It is essentially usufruct in a cognitive sense: a conscious embodiment of a previously unconscious social system of cooperation and egalitarianism. Kropotkin saw this in the very life of nature, and spent a great deal of time contesting and improving on Darwin’s theories. He stated that mutual aid plays a greater role in the evolution of biological life than does natural selection, inferring a level of participation and self-directiveness that directly confronts the homogeneous determinism of the market, and its accompanying institutions of power and control.

Another fairly common relationship is that of reciprocity: a system in which you give to another because that individual has given to you (i.e., to reciprocate for a gift given or to give back for something given to you). A reciprocal relationship can and has existed between more than just two individuals, laying the very foundation for the economic life of a community. In his essay “The Economy as Instituted Process,” Karl Polanyi asserts that “Aristotle taught that to every kind of community (*koinonia*) there corresponded a kind of goodwill (*philia*) amongst its members, which expressed itself in reciprocity (*antipeponthos*).” In ancient Greece, this was expressed in the process through which both production and distribution were allocated. Instead of relying on an authoritarian feudal structure of taxes and markets, or the all-encompassing homogeneity of the market,

Beyond Capitalism

Greek society would determine the way in which people would house, cloth, and feed themselves by engaging in a directly democratic political process of deliberation and decision making. Although liberatory for its time, the Greek polis institutionalized slavery and marginalized women—creating a kind of elite democracy, or democracy for the few.

There have existed examples of communalistic and egalitarian relationships throughout human history, often functioning alongside, and in opposition to, the existing institutions of domination. Throughout medieval Europe, the municipality was a constant source of autonomous rebellion against oligarchic control, the crux of which was often the ability to control the distribution of wealth, whether it be through the guilds or the local municipality. Murray Bookchin asserts in his book *The Limits of the City* that “Augustus and his heirs made the suppression of municipal autonomy a centerpiece of Roman imperial administration,” precisely because of the way in which a local city or municipality lends itself to the creation of autonomous decentralized systems of wealth distribution and the threat that it posed to the proliferation of the highly centralized Roman Empire.

Anytime that we highlight examples of freedom and cooperation in society, it is important that we also look at the time period in which they existed, and the oppressive forces that existed alongside them. Just as we may learn from those examples that we should emulate, we can also learn from those examples that we should not. Capitalism is not the only oppressive economic

system that we have encountered, and taking a close look at other hierarchical systems of wealth distribution is important in creating alternatives that are free from hierarchy. Similarly, seemingly liberatory moments of equality and democracy often existed alongside the oppression of women and minority groups, through relationships of slavery, indentured servitude, and societal hierarchies that left out large portions of society from otherwise participatory systems of governance.

Central to the question of where we can go from here is an analysis of where we are. Although capitalism is the dominant economic mode through which we function, it has always existed alongside a varied and often competitive assortment of economic forms. Even today, we can find relationships of barter in a working co-op, of gift giving in soup kitchens, of cooperation in the raising of a barn, and of selfless generosity between close family members.

These kinds of noncapitalistic relationships are undermined every day by the institutions within which they function. But the fact that they survive at all speaks to our ability to derive a moral framework for our actions that exists outside the dominant economic form. On an interpersonal level, we are all engaging in the creation of a moral framework for our actions.

But the existence of a moral framework of generosity and cooperation on a personal level does not guarantee its existence on a public one. In political and economic institutions (definitely public concerns), competition in the market is seen as “healthy” and, in fact, necessary for a

growing economy. Global trade agreements and decision-making bodies have been created as a means of ensuring that these values are upheld as the foundation of all economic life. David Korten points out in *The Case against the Global Economy* that this has resulted in the income of the richest 20 percent of the world's population increasing to 150 times that of the poorest 20 percent, and between 1980 and 1993, the sales of the Fortune 500 firms "increased 1.4 times, [their] assets increased 2.3 times, and CEO compensation increased 6.1 times." He goes on to say that "of the world's one hundred largest economies, fifty are now corporations, not including banking and financial institutions."

When looking at numbers like these, we must ask ourselves what we actually need from our economic institutions? Overwhelmingly, given our moral convictions on an interpersonal level, we would come to the conclusion that we need a system of distribution that leaves no one hungry, no one unsheltered, and everyone's material necessities provided for. As a social institution, capitalism is a complete failure.

Any form of locally responsive economics must be derived from an inclusive process of deciding directly, in a democratic manner, the ways in which we will engage in the production and distribution of the wealth that is ours. We cannot accept any form of economics that is outside of and above our political institutions. Just as nondemocratic government is not capable of including the concerns and ideas of the majority of its constituency, any economic form that is not subject to a directly democratic

political process will continue to function for the benefit of an elite few, leaving us in a perpetual state of struggle against ever changing forms of domination.

Our ability to determine, for ourselves, the ways in which we organize ourselves economically in society is completely dependent on our ability to reclaim the political autonomy that has been wrenched from us repeatedly by institutions of hierarchy and domination. Therefore, the creation of any revolutionary movement must be both oppositional and reconstructive: oppositional in its confrontation of the nation-state and capitalism, and reconstructive in the institutional structures that it uses to form this opposition.

The creation of economic and political institutions that are both oppositional and reconstructive is essential for any revolutionary movement because it forms an effective counterpower, where the voices of the powerless everywhere can find power in an institutionalized countergovernment to the existing structures of domination. This form of living-the-utopian-future-in-the-present is perhaps the most effective educational tool we possess for the fundamental transformation of society.

Rarely is history notable for its capacity to select and preserve the most virtuous traits of humanity. But there is still no reason why hope, reinforced by consciousness and redolent with ancestral memories, may not linger within us as an awareness of what humanity has been in the past and what it can become in the future.

—Murray Bookchin,

The Ecology of Freedom, 1972

This is What Democracy Looks Like!

continued from page 7

governing local towns, cities, and villages, linking them together to form confederations. Within libertarian municipalism, members of communities reclaim existing local political forums, such as city and neighborhood councils, gradually transforming them into citizens' assemblies. Creating local electoral campaigns as a way to educate the public about direct democracy, libertarian municipalism proposes that citizens begin to popularize the demand for direct political power. Such campaigns initiate a long-term revolutionary process in which citizens gradually wrest decision-making power from states, corporations, and metastates such as the WTO, politically reempowering themselves in the process. As members of municipalities form local groups engaged in the process of political transformation, they may confederate with other free cities, towns, and villages to establish a situation of dual power: a united and coordinated counterpower to the state and capital.

Talking about a New Revolution

What would it take to leave the "era of the particular," to regain our revolutionary nerve? We would have to rethink the revolutionary project, creating a *new* kind of universal theory and movement. In reapproaching the revolutionary question, however, we must transcend the limits of the marxist and anarchist revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drawing the best that these traditions have to offer. Indeed, we may move beyond deterministic, hierarchical, individualistic, and culturally biased

approaches to questions of social and political transformation. A new revolutionary vision must grow out of a logic of open-ended *potentiality* rather than crude determinism; *nonhierarchy* rather than hierarchy; *solidarity and organization* rather than rigid individualism; and a complex appreciation of the principled yet *diverse* institutional and cultural forms out of which we may forge a new idea of freedom.

First, we have inherited the revolutionary model of marxists who saw the revolution as a determined, linear, inherently progressive process with one single end. In contrast, we may move toward an open-ended view of revolution that sees the good society as multiple, ever evolving, and a product of human potential and creativity. Indeed, we may see the revolution as an unfolding of human potential for cooperation, sociality, and creativity—rather than the unfolding of a deterministic law of history.

Second, we have inherited the nineteenth-century view that authoritarianism, centralization, and hierarchy are necessary and inevitable features of the revolutionary process. In contrast, the new revolution may draw from the left libertarian tradition that demands that the revolutionary process itself be based on the same ethical principles as the good society for which we fight. Within this tradition, the revolutionary process represents an educational, transformational process that forms the free citizen who will manage the new society.

Third, we must draw from the best of the left libertarian tradition. While the anarchist tradition offers a crucial critique of state power and capital,

rightly calling for a more cooperative society, it also inherited an individualistic tendency from classical liberal theory. Notions of the autonomous individual, expressed through individual confrontations with authority, often end up reinforcing a sense of powerlessness and nihilism, rather than a sense of collective empowerment and a meaningful reconstructive vision. By contrast, we need to create a structured movement that empowers the individual *within a greater collectivity*. Such a revolutionary movement must have a sense of direction and political purpose with a respect for ideas as well as action.

Finally, the new revolution understands that we are not fighting to create one single universal model of the good society. Leaving the twentieth century, we see “the good society” as a unity in diversity: a confederation of diverse cultures and societies unified by a general, yet coherent set of ethical principles, such as nonhierarchy, decentralization, abolition of classes, and direct democracy. Such principles will always be general enough to permit a wide horizon of cultural interpretation and application, yet particular enough to allow for degrees of coherence and unity. “The good society” is the unified yet diverse expression of the human potential for freedom in all of its cultural forms.

It is vital to talk of humanity’s potentialities in an age in which a despotic minority of humanity dominates the majority. Yet we must work toward a new kind of humanism, one that is not based on an abstract universal understanding of national unity or a parochial ethnic understanding of “diversity.” Instead, we may recover a

humanism grounded on the idea of the *stateless citizen*, a member of a free community that stands in confederation with other communities. This new expression of humanism binds individuals and communities together through a general, common constitution based on such principles as solidarity, self-determination, and direct democracy. The spirit of this new *global humanism* will find its concrete expression through a common, confederal constitution that can be particularized, culturally translated, and “applied” to a diverse variety of lifeways.

The New Left taught us the relevance of culture to the process of social transformation. Focused on the universal historical subject, the revolutionary tradition of the past two centuries failed to link particular forms of social oppression such as sexism and racism to wider systemic processes such as the state and capital. Today, we know that we cannot dissolve particular identities or cultures into general, universal theories or movements. We know that the elimination of class exploitation, for example, will not inherently entail the abolition of racism or sexism. The question we face, then, is how to *generalize particular social struggles* in such a way that general movements may reflect the particular cultures and identities of real people dealing with concrete local and cultural problems. Otherwise stated, we must learn how to *particularize general struggles*, or how to speak to and support the particular subject within the general movement—as well as vice versa.

Drawing from the New Left, we have learned that general human freedom may only be

This is What Democracy Looks Like!

continued from page 31

won by working through particular forms of oppression. Indeed, within an authoritarian society, we are dehumanized in particular ways: the often overlapping effects of homophobia, sexism, racism, and classism, for example, will shape the lives of people in ways that are both specific and multiple.

As a consequence, the struggle to regain our humanity will always be particular as well as general. The new revolution will include a process of consciousness-raising and education, raising awareness of particular forms and effects of hierarchy. It will open the way for social groups to pursue particular paths toward recovery of a human potential understood to be *both* general and diverse.

A movement that challenges globalization is a movement that fights for each human being to fulfill her or his potential, by challenging a world. It is a movement that strides out of the era of the particular to reclaim our collective, revolutionary imagination and intelligence. Such a movement provides a critique not only of particular social issues but of a global and integrated system that has been in place for centuries. In turn, a truly humane movement against globalization does not solely help people cope with, or accommodate to, a system that is inherently dehumanizing and anti-ecological. Rather, it is a movement for *real political power* that will finally allow us to create our own everyday life, collectively, in all of its fullness. *This is what democracy looks like.*

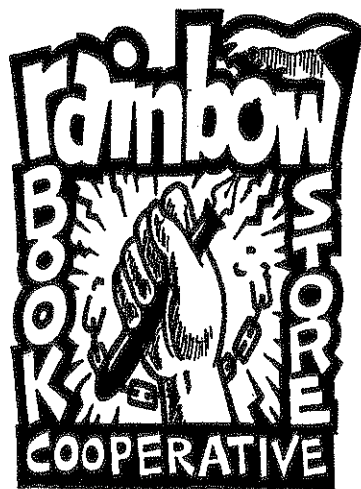
What is Our Political Power Today?

continued from page 16

corporations with the voices of individuals and groups of people.

In all these examples, the way in which the action occurred is critical in making it political action. A media center, a housing space, a meeting, all can be organized in ways that reinforce hierarchy, uneven distribution of power, and capitalist agendas. These three events were significant in that they were protests and daily life. They were situations that we encounter when we go home, where we continue our politics in the world immediately around us. They offer suggestions as to how we can confront and change problems of homelessness, media blackout, access to land, community organizing, and an infinite number of other issues that we care about.

We are already good at using some forms of political power. Opposition, the vote, the dollar, these are ways in which we change our society. Tapping into our active, generative capacities will only make our power more effective, more direct, and more immediate. Action and creation cross a critical line. We are no longer asking, pressuring, or manipulating politicians and businessjerks to do what we want. We are doing it ourselves. It is a revolutionary difference. As we learn to create and organize society ourselves, we become less dependent on politicians and big business, and won't have to appeal to them. Political power exists wherever we put it. Action and creation reclaim political power, placing it in ourselves and each other.



**Progressive Books,
Periodicals, and
Activist Resources
Community Owned &
Worker Run since 1989**

**426 W. Gillman St.
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 257-6050
rbc@supranet.com
(no catalog available)**

Institute for Social Ecology



For over a quarter century, the Institute for Social Ecology has served as an independent institution for popular education, research, and outreach in the field of social ecology. ISE has inspired individuals involved in diverse social change movements to work toward a directly democratic, liberatory, and ecological society. This summer, the ISE is once again offering its two widely acclaimed programs:

**Planning, Design, and Construction
for Sustainable Communities**
May 26-June 16, 2000

Ecology and Community
June 23-July 21, 2000

For more information or a catalog, contact the Institute for Social Ecology, 1118 Maple Hill Road, Plainfield, Vermont 05667 USA, (802) 454-8493, ise@sover.net, or <http://ise.rootmedia.org/>.

8105 54



Bringing Democracy Home

April 2000

c/o Institute for Social Ecology
1118 Maple Hill Road
Plainfield, Vermont 05667