

Is Destruction of Private Property Violence?

A communique from one section of the black bloc of N30 in Seattle

Acme Collective

2000

On November 30, several groups of individuals in black bloc attacked various corporate targets in downtown Seattle. Among them were (to name just a few):

Fidelity Investment (major investor in Occidental Petroleum, the bane of the U'wa tribe in Colombia), Bank of America, US Bancorp, Key Bank and Washington Mutual Bank (financial institutions key in the expansion of corporate repression), Old Navy, Banana Republic and the GAP (as Fisher family businesses, rapers of Northwest forest lands and sweatshop laborers).

NikeTown and Levi's (overpriced products made in sweatshops), McDonald's (slave-wage, fast-food peddlers responsible for destruction of tropical rain forests for grazing land and slaughter of animals), Starbucks (peddlers of an addictive substance whose products are harvested at below-poverty wages by farmers forced to destroy their own forests in the process), Warner Bros. (media monopolists), and Planet Hollywood (for being Planet Hollywood).

This activity lasted for over five hours and involved breaking storefront windows and doors and defacing facades. Slingshots, newspaper boxes, sledge hammers, mallets, crowbars and nail-pullers were used to strategically destroy corporate property and gain access (one of the three targeted Starbucks and NikeTown were looted). Eggs filled with glass etching solution, paint-balls and spray-paint were also used.

The black bloc was a loosely organized cluster of affinity groups and individuals who roamed around downtown, pulled this way by a vulnerable and significant storefront and that way by the sight of a police formation.

Unlike the vast majority of activists who were pepper-sprayed, tear' gassed and shot at with rubber bullets on several occasions, most of our section of the black bloc escaped serious injury by remaining constantly in motion and avoiding engagement with the police. We buddied up, kept tight and watched each others' backs. Those attacked by federal thugs were un-arrested by quick-thinking and organized members of the black bloc.

The Peace Police

Unfortunately, the presence and persistence of "peace police" was quite disturbing. On at least six separate occasions, so-called "nonviolent" activists physically attacked individuals who targeted corporate property. Some even went so far as to stand in front of the NikeTown super store and shove the black bloc away.

Such self-described "peace-keepers" posed a much greater threat to individuals in the black bloc than the violent uniformed "peace-keepers" sanctioned by the state (undercover officers even used the cover of the activist peace-keepers to ambush those who engaged in corporate property destruction).

Response to the Black Bloc

Response to the black bloc has highlighted some of the contradictions of the “nonviolent activist” community. Aside from the obvious hypocrisy of those who engaged in violence against black-clad and masked people (many of whom were harassed despite the fact they never engaged in property destruction), there is the racism of privileged activists who can afford to ignore the violence perpetrated against the bulk of society and the natural world in the name of private property rights.

Window-smashing has engaged and inspired many of the most oppressed members of Seattle’s community more than any giant puppets or sea turtle costumes ever could (not to disparage the effectiveness of those tools in other communities).

10 Myths About the Black Bloc

1. “They are all a bunch of Eugene anarchists.” While a few may be anarchists from Eugene, we hail from all over the United States, including Seattle. In any case, most of us are familiar with local issues in Seattle.

2. “They are all followers of John Zerzan.” A lot of rumors have been circulating that we are followers of John Zerzan, an anarcho-primitivist author from Eugene who advocates property destruction. While some of us may appreciate his writings and analyses, he is in no sense our leader, directly, indirectly, philosophically or otherwise.

3. “The mass public squat is the headquarters of the anarchists who destroyed property on November 30th.” In reality, most of the people in the “Autonomous Zone” squat are residents of Seattle who have spent most of their time since its opening on the 28th in the squat. While they may know of one another, the two groups are not co-extensive and in no case could the squat be considered the headquarters of people who destroyed property.

4. “They escalated situations on the 30th, leading to the tear-gassing of passive, non-violent protesters.” To answer this, we need only note that tear-gassing, pepper-spraying and the shooting of rubber bullets all began before the black blocs started engaging in property destruction.

In addition, we must resist the tendency to establish a causal relationship between police repression and protest in any form, whether it involved property destruction or not. The police are charged with protecting the interests of the wealthy few and blame for the violence cannot be placed on those who protest those interests.

5. Conversely: “They acted in response to the police repression.” While this might be a more positive representation of the black bloc, it is nevertheless false. We refuse to be misconstrued as a purely reactionary force. While the logic of the black bloc may not make sense to some, it is, in any case, a pro-active logic.

6. “They are a bunch of angry adolescent boys.” Aside from the fact that it reveals a disturbing ageism and sexism, it is false. Property destruction is not merely macho rabble-rousing or testosterone-laden angst release. Nor is it displaced and reactionary anger. It is strategically and specifically targeted direct action against corporate interests.

7. “They just want to fight.” This is pretty absurd, and it conveniently ignores the eagerness of “peace police” to fight us. Of all the groups engaging in direct action, the black bloc was perhaps the least interested in engaging the authorities and we certainly had no interest in fighting with other anti-WTO activists (despite some rather strong disagreements over tactics).

8. “They are a chaotic, disorganized and opportunistic mob.” While many of us could spend days arguing over what “chaotic” means, we were certainly not disorganized. The organization may have been fluid and dynamic, but it was tight. As for the charge of opportunism, it would be hard to imagine who of the thousands in attendance didn’t take advantage of the opportunity created in Seattle to advance their agenda. The question becomes, then, whether or not we helped create that opportunity and most of us certainly did (which leads us to the next myth):

9. “They don’t know the issues” or “they aren’t activists who’ve been working on this.” While we may not be professional activists, we’ve all been working on this convergence in Seattle for months. Some of us did work in our home towns and others came to Seattle months in advance.

To be sure, we were responsible for many hundreds of people who came out on the streets on the 30th, only a very small minority of which had anything to do with the black bloc.

Most of us have been studying the effects of the global economy, genetic engineering, resource extraction, transportation, labor practices, elimination of indigenous autonomy, animal rights and human rights and we've been doing activism on these issues for many years. We are neither ill-informed nor inexperienced.

10. "Masked anarchists are anti-democratic and secretive because they hide their identities." Let's face it (with or without a mask)—we aren't living in a democracy right now. If this week has not made it plain enough, let us remind you—we are living in a police state. People tell us that if we really think we're right, we wouldn't be hiding behind masks. "The truth will prevail" is the assertion. While this is a fine and noble goal, it does not jive with the present reality.

On the Violence of Private Property

We contend that property destruction is not a violent activity unless it destroys lives or causes pain in the process. By this definition, private property—especially corporate private property—is itself infinitely more violent than any action taken against it.

Private property should be distinguished from personal property. The latter is based upon use while the former is based upon trade. The premise of personal property is that each of us has what s/he needs. The premise of private property is that each of us has something that someone else needs or wants.

In a society based on private property, those who are able to accrue more of what others need or want have greater power. By extension, they wield greater control over what others perceive as needs and desires, usually in the interest of increasing profit to themselves.

Advocates of "free trade" would like to see this process to its logical conclusion: a network of a few industry monopolists with ultimate control over the lives of everyone else. Advocates of "fair trade" would like to see this process mitigated by government regulations meant to superficially impose basic humanitarian standards. As anarchists, we despise both positions.

Private property—and capitalism, by extension—is intrinsically violent and repressive and cannot be reformed or mitigated.

Whether the power of everyone is concentrated into the hands of a few corporate heads or diverted into a regulatory apparatus charged with mitigating the disasters of the latter, no one can be as free or as powerful as they could be in a non-hierarchical society. When we smash a window, we aim to destroy the thin veneer of legitimacy that surrounds private property rights. At the same time, we exorcise that set of violent and destructive social relationships which has been imbued in almost everything around us.

After N30, many people will never see a shop window or a hammer the same way again. The potential uses of an entire cityscape have increased a thousand-fold. Broken windows can be boarded up and eventually replaced, but the shattering of assumptions will hopefully persist for some time to come.

The full text of this is available at www.indymedia.org

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