

On Trashing & Movement Building

“Trashing had no positive effects”

Michael Albert

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This is a response to a post-Seattle debate troubling many folks regarding movement tactics. As a preface, it goes without saying, I hope, that we all understand that as far as violence is concerned, the violent parties in Seattle were first and foremost the President of the U.S., his entourage, the other major heads of state, the leadership of the WTO, etc. Poverty-inducing violence imposed with a pen trumps a brick breaking a window every time—not to mention that the former is to defend and enlarge injustice, while the latter is to fight it.

For that matter, in the streets of Seattle, mass media coverage aside, in a large public discussion for all statistical or moral purposes the only physical violence was that perpetrated by police and national guard at the behest of the state. Pepper gas, rubber bullets, and truncheons all directed at citizens attempting to dissent from vile economic agendas trump broken windows every time on any violence meter, much less on one that accounts for motivations.

Debate about movement tactics arises publicly therefore overwhelmingly because of a manipulative and distorting mass media. The issue of movement tactics as it arises inside social movements, however, gains attention because of potential implications on future attitudes of activists toward trashing, property damage, civil disobedience, and other possible demonstration tactics as well as participation in demonstrations.

Any useful discussion of movement tactics must be about their efficacy for movement building, winning short-term demands, and laying a basis for winning longer term aims. Assessing tactics means evaluating how they cause a movement to grow or decline and whether they enlarge or diminish immediate chances to win some goal.

I have been involved in demonstrations in which trashing grew organically from the event's logic and intentions—for example, clearly enunciated assaults on particular draft boards or ROTC buildings (during the anti-Vietnam war era). I have also been in demonstrations where trashing was counter-productive and irresponsible—for example endangering innocent folks and diluting the message and solidarity of the event. Which was true in Seattle?

Seattle was a massive event and those who tirelessly organized it were committed to legal marches and rallies and also to illegal but non-violent civil disobedience. Upwards of 70,000 people attended. In the first days success was overwhelming and mutually respectful ties developed between usually fragmented constituencies, (turtles and Teamsters, Lesbian Avengers and steel workers).

The prospect that civil disobedience would grow was extremely exciting and optimism was contagious. Movement participation was climbing and, amazingly, the official WTO gathering was already thoroughly disrupted. The police began to employ gas, clubs, and rubber bullets. At this point, the highly organized trashers broke off and attacked windows. Afterwards they celebrated that due to their mobility and organization none was arrested or harmed.

I remember all too vividly some sixties demonstrations in which over-eager dissenters would taunt and otherwise provoke police and then disappear, leaving others, often utterly unprepared families, to bear the brunt of the response. I was always far more impressed with the courage of knowing folks who could easily see what was coming and escape if they wished to, but who instead used their talents to help protect their less well prepared

co-demonstrators, then with the self preservation instincts of those who brought down repression and then fled the scene.

Does this mean, however, that there cannot be a time and place for confrontation and property damage? No, it doesn't mean that at all, at least not in my view. Instead, the time and place for such behavior is when it will meet widespread approval and increase the power of protest rather than providing an excuse for folks to tune out or become hostile to protest.

Up to the trashing, anarchists in Seattle added energy, creativity, art, music, and often greatly needed militancy, courage, and steadfastness to many demonstration venues. They uplifted participants' spirits and otherwise played a very positive role within the rubric of the demonstration's guidelines. It was only when some went off breaking windows against the demonstration's norms that a problem arose.

The events in Seattle had, before any trashing occurred, already entirely hamstrung the WTO. They had already evidenced militant creativity and creative organization and knowledge. They had already begun to generate new allegiances and ties among diverse constituencies. They had already combined many levels of creative and militant tactics in a mutually supportive mix. Speeches at rallies already in many instances made the obvious leaps from opposing free trade to opposing free markets, and from opposing global profiteering to opposing capitalism, *per se*. The ground was laid for the work we all now need to do. The addition of trashing had no positive effects.

It did not win useful visibility that would otherwise have been absent. It did not enlarge the number of folks participating or empathizing with the demonstration. It did not cause more substantive information to be conveyed either in the mainstream or on the left. It did not respect much less enlarge democracy.

What it did do, instead, was (a) divert attention from the real issues, (b) provide a pretext for repression which would otherwise have been unequivocally seen as crushing legitimate dissent, and (c) and arguably most important, cause many to feel that dissent is an unsympathetic undertaking in which instead of actors respecting one another, some feel that they have the right to undemocratically violate the intentions and desires of most others.

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