

# The Tyranny of Democracy

“Consensus is a tricky issue”

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

2000

Check out the December 15, 1999, *San Francisco Bay Guardian* ([www.sfbg.com](http://www.sfbg.com)). Page 13 is devoted to a debate regarding property destruction in Seattle.

Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange, one of the organizations that formed the Direct Action Network, finally clarifies her position (along with a welcome apology for statements she made regarding calling the police on black bloc activists).

Medea states her position (and using the pronoun we, presumably the position of the Direct Action Network) clearly:

“The nonviolent part of the WTO protest was the culmination of a complex process of coalition building by organizations that did not initially know or trust each other. We finally agreed, through a collective and democratic process, that the banner that united the scores of organizations and thousands of individuals was a strict commitment to nonviolence, defined to include no property destruction. After that collaborative and democratic process, a small number of protesters who had boycotted those meetings took it upon themselves to break that solidarity...

“We think it was totally unfair for a small, unrepresentative group to use a massive, peaceful protest as a venue for destructive actions that went against the wishes of the vast majority of protesters. *We are far less concerned about the glass that they broke than about the sense of collective unity that they attempted, but failed, to shatter* [my emphasis].”

Translated into ordinary language, it is the tyranny of the majority that Medea represents. I no longer think that Medea (and others of the Direct Action Network) just don't get it. I think they are (unconsciously) authoritarian, hiding behind a mythical majority, which they have manufactured. This is mainstream U.S. politics crystallized, and not what I want to see for the movement or for a future society.

I agree with Medea, it is not about breaking windows—look at Medea's examples of approved criminal acts: The Boston Tea Party [!]; Zapatistas in their 1994 uprising “destroying army posts and other symbols of a repressive state;” members of the U.S. religious community destroying weapons of mass destruction; forest activists destroying engines of bulldozers. Medea rationalizes that “what these acts have in common is that they were the result of a long process of working with and gaining the support of the affected community. This was not the case in Seattle.”

She does not mention that the vast majority of the several hundred corporate smashers are from the Pacific Northwest, mostly from Seattle. Could it be that they did not simply accept the “democratic” decisions of the smart California organizations that invaded their community to call the shots?

I personally experienced and was troubled by the tyranny of democracy in the anti-Vietnam war movement; Students for a Democratic Society; the women's liberation movement; the American Indian Movement; the Central American solidarity movement. And, as an historian, I have studied past movements where this tyranny reared its ugly head, including the very founding of the United States of America, in which “democracy” was a process of genocide and exclusion.

Consensus is a tricky issue. What the democracy tyrants have to realize is that consensus means including everyone with common goals, not majority rule. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the majority to support the minority if that achieves consensus.

Knowing full well that the black bloc anarchists planned actions against particular corporate targets in Seattle, the Direct Action Network should have included that inevitable reality into their consensus and agreed to respond.

# fifth Estate

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