Solidarity, Immigration and Border Regimes

Onto

2007

> "If it's a war the anarchists want, then damn it, it will start here."
>
> – Jim Gilchrist, founder of the Minutemen Project, quoted in the *Sacramento Bee*, 10/30/05, in reference to the anti-minutemen demo at the capitol building.

The Fire

There's a fire going on. It's destroying your home, your land. You want to stay and fight it, but you're suffocating, you need fresh air. You try to leave, but the doors are locked, bolted shut. There's a long line of other people waiting to get out too. You start waiting, but realize you'll never get there. Some people are breaking windows, jumping through; some make it, others die on the way out. There are men with guns waiting outside the windows, another obstacle. You make it out, past the gunmen, falling into another house, through another window. You are welcome here, as long as you don't talk, just cook and clean. Some people want you to leave, to jump back into the fire. Others want to help you, but they don't know how. They try talking to the landlords. They try fighting the people who want to kick you out. They try building another house within the house. You appreciate the help, but you're not sure who to trust, not sure what you want. Do you want to stay here, or go back home? The ground is familiar, but the house is different. The fires here are different, much slower then at home. But they are starting up again. In this house? Even here, you start smelling gasoline again. This time you see it coming, joining with others like you to call "FIRE" before it hits. Some people notice. The gasoline covers too much and splashes on some others; they're angry as well. People are saying that you started the fire, that we need more doors and locks, fewer windows, in order to stop more firebrands like you from entering. You know this is a lie. Now you're caught between fires, between doors, desiring the one thing that no-one is willing to do: to stop these fucking fires. But you can't seem to find who started them. Everyone has a different answer.

Today, the issue of immigration is a question of fire. Neoliberal free trade agreements, corporate globalization, race laws, exploitative labor markets, corrupt politicians, paramilitaries, civil wars are the fires burning down your house. Doors and windows are the borders and fences. The minutemen are the gunmen. Your new house is the new nation. The cooking and cleaning is the cheap labor and sweatshops. The allies are politicians, unions, churches, and activists, while the slow fires are racism, detention, and deportation. The new gasoline is the new wave of anti-immigrant laws and their renewed scapegoating. Fighting back is marching and striking, and you're caught between the fires of exploitation, alienation, fear, racism, and abuse.

Joseph Nevins calls this entire nexus 'global apartheid', but 'border regime' seems more appropriate. All of this activity is part of a larger project of the border itself, one that is decentralized, networked, controlling, productive and repressive, porous and solid. The border marks those who cross it internally, tagging them and replicating its structure with every individual it comes across. The border is a social project that can be realized in any number of situations; it is, in a sense, virtual. The minutemen are an extension of the border, immigrants that label "illegals"

as 'bad immigrants' reproduce the border. The border is referenced by politicians almost mythically as the end of the frontier, the last line in defense of the state. "Defend the borders!" they scream, although they're not actually talking about the physical borderlands, but a political construction, one that defines the limits of 'us' vs. the limits of 'them'. But that construction is used as a justification for war, and it spreads, and that's the border. The hierarchy of status (documented vs. undocumented) is the border as well, both a legal fact and a subjective feeling that can mold one's daily life. The reality of the border is not in question, but its actual presence is hard to pin down. For instance, immigration status makes it hard to organize in the workplace. The legal fact becomes a social feeling, the feeling becomes a political tool, and that too is the border. This border, composed of a matrix of physical walls and military technology, legal entities and social categories, and subjective feeling and political ideologies, is able to enter any space, divide it, capture it, burn it, and remold it.

In turn, anarchists are expressing solidarity with immigrants and the noborder movement today in six ways: anti-minutemen action, anarchist propaganda, sanctuary and mutual aid services, supporting anti-authoritarian or horizontal grassroots immigrant groups, creating relationships with anarchists in Mexico, and building a noborder network. The overall strategy that guides them is fighting against the fire of neoliberalism, the nation-state, and multiple forms of hierarchical domination; and moving towards a world with freedom of movement, autonomy of migration, and the freedom to stay. This vision is resolutely opposed to the neoliberal model of a world without borders for capital, where everyone is free to be exploited wherever they go. Anarchy and autonomy imply self-determined, fluid boundaries as opposed to state-imposed, solid borders, consensual practices as opposed to external systems, and horizontal communities as opposed to vertical societies.

Anti-minutemen work, fighting the gunmen at the window, is the most common anarchist solidarity strategy right now. Taking its cue mostly from anti-racist and anti-fascist tactics, the idea is to shut the vigilantes down wherever they operate, whether they are at the border, day labor sites, or Mexican consulates. Starting from southern California in the summer of 2005, these direct interventions are both concrete and symbolic. They concretely shut down Minutemen operations (especially at the border and day labor sites) and symbolically send a message that they are not welcome here (such as when Minutemen founder Jim Gilchrist was run off the stage at Columbia University in New York City). From San Diego to DC, Seattle to NYC, affinity groups have popped up to resist minutemen at every public appearance. From the 24/7 anti-minutemen camp at the border in Campo, CA in July 2005 to the Mexican consulate action in New York City on October 7th, 2006, anarchists and others have been inserting themselves in between vigilantes and immigrants, unafraid to call out the cover of their position.

This movement is not without criticism, however. You are fighting the extremists, the fringe of racism and borders, but what about the institutional racism and border regime itself, what about the daily violence? Aren't these just white anarchists getting off on action for actions sake? Although there is some legitimacy to these objections, they are too simple. The Minutemen are not just activists, they are also politicians. Their message resonates; and they are a part of America that spectators vicariously live through. To stop them is to stop the spectacle of anti-immigrant violence and border militarization that exists through them. Therefore, anarchist tactics have also included copwatch-style monitoring with video and cameras, clown army satire and sonic attacks, as well as the usual protest and demonstration.

From anarchy to solidarity

Between March 25th and May 1st, 2006, the largest street demonstrations in the history of the United States took place. They took the country by surprise, spontaneously spreading and building, until they could no longer be ignored. Or at least that's how the story goes. In fact, the immigrant demos of 2006 were preceded by waves of activity against Minutemen vigilantes across the country, most notably in LA, San Diego, and Chicago. Some of the organizers of the March 25th mega-march in LA which attracted around one million people came directly out of the anti-minutemen camp in Campo, CA the summer before. To ignore these connections is to miss the fundamental overall strategy of the border: to first contain, capture, and control bodies, whether at the border or in the city, and then to reproduce the nation-state within them, to naturalize them, 'liberate' them as citizens, so that the project of the nation can continue to replicate itself in all its myriad forms, especially within its victims. The minutemen

are an extension of the border, just as the immigration laws are; to see one as separate from the other is political suicide.

Anarchist analysis and propaganda which discusses the root cause of the fire, is key to our political success; yet it's definitely been lacking. For example, at every major immigrant rights demo in New York City of 2006 (April 1st, April 10th, May 1st, October 21st), the usual smorgasbord of Maoist, Trotskyist and Stalinist groups were there pushing their papers, reducing most of the discussion to one of racism vs. anti-racism. Anarchists were there too, but usually just with banners and energy. So far, only the fledgling deletetheborder network has managed to put out zines and pamphlets that specifically articulate an anarchist critique of borders and immigration law for the public. What is usually missing in most of these discussions is the context of globalization and free trade, the role of the state in controlling the movement of bodies, and the problems inherent in every solution that seeks to 'assimilate, normalize, and naturalize' the 'alien.' Coming from the anti-globalization movement, most anarchists know this all too well.

There are two main anarchist tendencies of mutual aid and direct solidarity with undocumented immigrant communities: humanitarian work at the border (a la Border Angels and No More Deaths), and providing sanctuary in the cities (such as Elvira Arellano in Chicago or Solidarity Across Borders in Canada). The catch is that they are not anarchist projects, at least not explicitly. In fact, the American versions are both fully religious, usually Catholic in nature. Nonetheless they are probably the most anarchistic projects concerning immigration in the entire country. The threat they pose is real; police in Tucson, Arizona arrested two No More Deaths activists, charging them with felonies for "smuggling" during one of their rescue missions (the charges were eventually dropped). There are anarchists involved in all these projects, negotiating the space between humanitarianism and direct action and between large coalitions and small scale relationships. The sanctuary movement of the 80's in the United States (mostly for Guatemalans and Central Americans) has receded, and is in dire need of a comeback. The examples of Elvira Arellano in Chicago and Abdelkader Belaouni (Kader) in Montreal — immigrants who fled deportation by taking sanctuary in a church — represent the tip of the surface of the need for a renewed movement. This movement must build houses within houses and temporary autonomous refuges within the encroaching virtual borders of the city.

Three other possibilities of direct and mutual aid are teaching ESL, doing childcare for immigrant mothers so that they can attend meetings, and supporting families of deported or detained immigrants. In New York City, the Immigrant Worker Justice Center in Hell's Kitchen takes volunteers to tutor ESL; the newly formed childcare collective "Regeneracion" has been providing childcare to radical women of color groups (such as INCITE, Pachamama, Center for Immigrant Families, and the Community Birthing Project); and numerous groups work on fighting detention and deportation, such as Families for Freedom, New Jersey Civil Rights Defense Committee, and DRUM. All of the above-mentioned groups are grounded in immigrant communities, focused on grassroots political education and emphasize direct intervention in social issues. If we understand one aspect of the border regime as a project of separation and classification, then these forms of anti-authoritarian solidarity based in education, care, and freedom are some of the first steps toward creating a world without borders.

When practicing solidarity with immigrant rights groups and coalitions, the question comes up as to where is the anarchist element in such a practice, i.e., how can our specific political relevance be useful? The answer comes not from how to critique and guide a certain coalition to achieve an anarchist end (an arrogant — and usually useless — approach), but rather in choosing which group or coalition to ally with. The obvious answer is to support those groups which are horizontal, anti-authoritarian, and interested in going beyond the game of appealing to the public as the 'good immigrant' vs. the 'bad immigrant', the American dreamer vs. the lawbreaker. There is no homogenous "immigrant community", not even within any specific nationality, ethnic group, or race. In New York City, for instance, the main organizing immigrant coalitions during the last year were the May 1st coalition, Immigrant Communities in Action, Break the Chains Alliance, as well as the large groups like New York Immigration Coalition, the newly formed New Yorkers United for Immigrant Rights, the No One Is Illegal coalition and more. Somehow I ended up getting involved with the May 1st coalition, a mostly people of color coalition of immigrant groups which (suspiciously) took credit for the May Day demo and helped to organize a June 17th strategy conference. I should have realized my mistake when the meetings were moved to the International Action Center, and the members discussed fighting imperialism through a vanguard that can lead the immigrants to revolution. Support-

ing the more grounded Break the Chains alliance and Immigrant Communities in Action would have been much more worthwhile, seeing as how the immigrant strategy conference I helped organize resulted in nil.

On the west coast, the most anarchic element of the immigrant marches were the high school walkouts. Massive, decentralized, spontaneous, radicalizing — the anarchy of the walkouts might have done more for the future of immigrants in this country than any of the massive marches will ever dream to. Whereas the walkouts were liberating and self-organized, the marches were controlled and resulted in unsure results. By supporting and facilitating the walk-outs as opposed to the massive marches (which the triumvirate of Democrats, unions, and churches were drooling over in its size and potential to help each gain power), anarchists are supporting the autonomous struggle of self-determined communities for freedom. Rethinking solidarity in this context allows us to be true to our political commitments, while pushing us to stay creative and effective in new ways.

Putting out the flames

Mexico is a special case. The majority of immigrants in the USA are Latino, and the majority of those are Mexican. To attack the border in all its elements means to prefiguratively act without it, to work with anarchists in Mexico as brothers and sisters in a common struggle. We can't just keep opening up windows and doors for people to escape the political and economic fires that are ravaging their homes; we must extinguish the fires themselves. Only in conjunction with social struggles in Mexico, particularly anti-authoritarian ones, can this happen. The Zapatista Other campaign has brought these communities on both sides of the border closer together, as well as the planning for a binational noborder camp in Calexico/Mexicali in fall 2007. The struggle in Oaxaca (which is carried on by numerous Magonista groups), the pirate radios, and all the other anti-authoritarian revolutionary projects of Mexico are beacons for the struggle against the border. But the difference between acting in solidarity with anarchists abroad and doing solidarity with immigrant communities here needs to be remembered. For instance, the Oaxaca call to shut down Mexican consulates comes into conflict with the need for Mexican immigrants to use these consulates on a daily basis. We should be wary of conflating solidarity abroad and solidarity at home as mutually supportive endeavors; we hope them to be, but can't be sure.

Finally there is the need to move beyond the logic of the house, the prison camp, and the nation-state itself. Building a noborder network is a step in this direction, but it will take a long time. How do we make sure it doesn't make the same mistakes of previous anarchist networks — problems which accompany horizontality and openness, which are some of the perils of membership and community. How do we deal with the lack of accountability and direction? We can communicate incredibly well, but can we be a force of change? Can we be a vector that carries the momentum of the movement right up to the fence, detention center, and the courtroom? Or will we stay behind as pure dreamers of a world we wish to see, but are not able to bring about? Next year, with Mayday, the US Social Forum, the Zapatista Intergalactic, and the No Border camp, we will put this to the test.

We should not forget that anarchism was born in the United States as an immigrant project, brought here by Russians, Germans, Italians, Ashkenazi Jews and other Europeans. When these late 19th century anarchists worked for social change, they fought directly for immigrant communities since they were immigrant communities, and their fight was for higher wages and shorter days for immigrant labor (but for roses, too!)

Today, that is no longer the case. Contrary to what ideologues of globalization and empire tell us, borders won't fall on their own (borders for capital excepted, of course). These six avenues of fighting the border regime and doing critical immigrant solidarity are complex and not always consistent with each other. There is no single project that will tear down the border, and some of our own actions strengthen it in spite of us. For instance, the more we attack the border, the more they build it up. But this does not mean we shouldn't do it. How effective we are is impossible to completely determine, and so we must make sure that no matter what we do, we leave openings for radical possibility. Even after the last wall falls, its threat will never truly be gone. As a network of control, the border's violence over and through immigrant communities must be resisted in all its locales, exposed in its various manifestations, and continually deleted as a mechanism for social organization. We can only hope that with sustained resistance we can create moments of excess that expand the gaps already present in the walls, laws, and ideologies of the border regime.

The cauldron is boiling, the fire is being started up again. Are we just opening more doors this time, or are we willing to put it out?

For more information:

http://www.deletetheborder.org
http://www.organiccollective.org (inactive)
No Border Camp: Calexico/Mexicali, Fall, 2007
Fifth Estate #374, Winter 2007
http://www.fifthestate.org/archive/374-winter-2007/no-border-camp/

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