

Anarchist Violence or State Violence?

Anarchists are portrayed as the boogeyman by the media, but governments are the real source of organized violence.

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

The question of violence as a revolutionary tactic is neither new nor unfairly associated with anarchists, although debate has recently emerged over its use by Black Blocs during mass demonstrations, including Occupy events. [See FE, Summer 2012; John Zerzan, "The Vagaries of the Left."]

However, many are quick to insist that breaking bank windows or torching police cars doesn't constitute violence but rather should more precisely be described as property damage or political vandalism [Hey, the original Vandals carried out a final blow to a pretty nasty empire].

Violence is what the cops employ against not just Black Bloc participants, who are usually fleet of foot enough to escape it, but frequently in random attacks against people at demonstrations who are committing neither violence nor property damage. Or, provocateurs are employed to unleash the cops on protesters. Violence from the official protectors of property has been so severe that demonstrators have been severely injured and even killed.

Black Blocs at large demonstrations, such as at anti-war rallies or meetings of the imperial chieftains of the G20 countries, are usually comprised of young people who either cohere spontaneously and are drawn to one another, or with some prior planning, attack symbols of the state and/or capitalism.

Upsurge of Militant Tactics

Sometimes, the actions of the Black Bloc are only a footnote to larger marches, but on other occasions, such as the 1999 Seattle anti-WTO actions, it was a relatively small number breaking windows at Starbucks that thrust them into public consciousness and launched the most recent upsurge of militant tactics against the institutions of capitalism.

While Seattle set in motion dozens of subsequent actions by black-clad militants, it also allowed the creation of an official hysteria which is conveniently used as an excuse for the militarization of the police and justification for brutal tactics of suppression of even peaceful demonstrators where no Black Bloc is present.

At a demonstration in Detroit in 2000 protesting a meeting of the Organization of American States across the border in Windsor, Ontario, one thousand marchers were met by almost as many police who were ordered to wear long sleeved shirts in the June heat claiming they had received intelligence that demonstrators were preparing to



1920. Wall Street bombing kills 38 and wounds 143.
Galleanist Mario Buda widely believed to be the perpetrator.

splash acid on their arms. The local papers featured headlines howling that “anarchists from Seattle” were coming to Detroit to “burn the city down.” All of the marches were peaceful.

During the 2003 anti-Free Trade Area of the Americas protests in Miami, the cops shuttered the entire downtown area for two weekdays and brought out armaments enough to fight off an army.

Bizarre Scene

The bizarre scene, in one case, of union retirees, some in wheelchairs and others using walkers, marching by armored personnel carriers manned by battle-ready helmeted cops with .30 caliber machine guns at the ready was almost laughable if it wasn't for the fact that this has become an acceptable stance for the cops and their state and media approved violence. Over-reaction though it may be, store owners and bankers expect the police to keep their shop windows intact while those who want to bust them up have a different perspective on the sanctity of property.

Some in the Black Bloc enter the streets with a specific political perspective, while others may be just expressing rage at the way society is constructed and think “busting shit up” is a relatively reasonable response to those institutions which are responsible for the current state of affairs.

All societies are governed by rules set by the dominate class and regulate what is permissible behavior regarding terms of social alteration. A political thrust, such as anarchism, that has as a goal the elimination of the basic definitions of this society and who sets them is obviously considered illegitimate in the eyes of the rulers.

One strand of thought, sometimes implied or stated, is that if you dare to break one rule--such as breaking a window--the perpetrator is that much more likely to have fewer qualms about breaking the fundamental rules.

Organizers of what are designated as “peaceful, legal demonstrations” rage against the Black Bloc or others who won't abide by their definition. They charge that the militants “hijack” their events, distort their message, give the cops an excuse to attack marchers, and cause the media to only focus on political vandalism rather than their calls to end a war or protest against some economic or social outrage.

There's undoubtedly truth in their complaints, but without the Black Bloc actions many protest events would have gone unreported and unremembered.

Organizers of the Seattle anti-WTO demonstration complained that the vandalism of a handful of anarchists overshadowed the 60,000 trade unionists, environmentalists and other peace and social justice activists that participated in legal marches and non-violent civil disobedience.

This is true and it's not.

Without the militant actions, it's doubtful whether the larger marches and actions would have even made the nightly news. Also, is corporate media coverage the ultimate goal? That somehow, if we appear on the corporate media for 20 seconds to present a usually garbled message of reform, let alone revolution, before the program goes to a commercial for vinyl replacement windows and the sportscaster returns with the scores, we will have had a successful demonstration?

The Timid Left

Criticizing the Black Bloc or independent anarchist trashing will most probably be ignored by those most likely to carry it out. To them, to do so, only marks you as part of the timid left who lets the state define what is permissible. Complaining about the Black Bloc is like shaking your fist at the rain clouds which have ruined your picnic; it's beyond our control.

However, it seems that some questions need to be posed to those who want to go beyond the prescribed limits at large marches: Do those who alter the nature of a “legal, peaceful” event by their actions bear any responsibility to the organizers or others attending a demonstration?

Do those who initiate militant actions have a responsibility to those who are unaware that the tactics of a few may lead to a violent assault by the police? Is there a responsibility when ratcheting up the use of militant tactics that they may increase repressiveness in general?

Also, when the state repressive apparatus weighs in against those taking part in militant actions--the cops on the street and the judicial and prison system--what are the effects on those who run afoul of them and on the communities from which they come?

Should those choosing militant acts consider the consequences and responses required of friends, family, and comrades?

Should everyone be advised to never commit acts that could bring about detrimental results? This is certainly contrary to the advice revolutionaries across the ages have heeded.

Only Damaging property

Actually, everyone from store owners to the cops and the politicians ought to be thankful that the Black Bloc centers its actions on property wreckage. In eras gone by, anarchists took a much greater toll on the guardians and owners of property and capital. The current Black Bloc, however, comport themselves with a dedication to only damaging property.

Think of the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Square incident where those fighting for the 8-hour day, led by anarchists, were urged in a leaflet, "Workingmen, Arm Yourselves and Appear in Full Force!" And, they did, including someone, now widely considered to be an anarchist, threw a bomb into the midst of the Chicago police where the blast and subsequent gunfire from both sides resulted in the death of seven cops and four civilians with scores wounded.

Throughout Europe, from the 1870s through the 1930s, anarchists often participated in Propaganda by the Deed, so-called exemplary acts of violence against tyrants both for retaliatory and agitational purposes. Kings, czars, politicians (including a U.S. president), religious figures, and capitalists were the frequent targets, and fell at the hands of anarchist assassins. These acts led to a vivid association, aided by a sensationalist press, between anarchism and violence.

In the U.S., the image of a dark, bearded man, dressed in black hat and clothing, carrying a round bomb with a lit fuse resonated with a native population fearful of foreign anarchists bent on violence. And, this stereotype wasn't entirely born of invention.

Followers of Luigi Galleani, mostly Italian immigrants who read his *Cronaca Sovversiva*, in which he advocated direct action and armed resistance against the state, acted on his theories in a series of bombings between 1914 and 1933. Galleanists fostered numerous attacks against prominent American ruling class figures and police, killing and injuring many.

The culmination of an intense bombing campaign around World War I and its domestic repression came when Mario Buda, a Galleanist, in 1920, drove a wagon filled with explosives onto New York City's Wall Street which detonated killing 38 and wounding 148. Later, into the early 1930s, revenge was sought for the judicial murder of Galleanists Sacco and Vanzetti with attempts on the lives of the trial judge, police, and prison officials connected to the case.

It should be realized, however, that those who perpetrated violence against the rulers and their minions weren't the madmen portrayed in the capitalist press during that period. They acted within a context of state violence much greater than any toll exacted by the assassinations and bombings listed here.

Inter-imperialist Slaughter

Anarchist actions were minor when compared to the repression, massacres, wars, imprisonment and other outrages carried out by the state against the working class. The body count from all anarchist bombings would barely fill a hospital ward when compared to the inter-imperialist slaughter of World War I.

Anarchists were condemned by the press and politicians for advocating violence to achieve their ends. However, one finds calls for violent repression of strikers in headlines and in speeches quite common place, and which were acted upon by cops, troops, and goons.

None of this is meant as a justification of either violence or vandalism; every person will have to decide the efficacy of such acts themselves. However, the late British anarchist Vernon Richards put forth the ethical imperative in *Lessons of the Spanish Revolution* that an unarmed person should never be harmed.

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Propaganda of the Deed

A chronology of anarchist violence

1892--Alexander Berkman attempts to kill American industrialist Henry Clay Frick in retaliation for breaking the Homestead Strike.

1893--Santiago Salvador throws two bombs into a Barcelona theatre, killing twenty people and injuring others.

1893--Auguste Vaillant throws a nail bomb in the French National Assembly. His last words before execution were "Death to the Bourgeoisie! Long live Anarchy!"

1894--emile Henry, to avenge Vaillant's execution, sets off a bomb in a cafe, killing one and injuring twenty. During his trial, he declares, "There are no innocent bourgeois."

1894--Geronimo Caserio, seeking revenge for Vaillant and Henry, stabs to death the President of France, Sadi Carnot.

1897--Michele Angiolillo shoots Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Canovas del Castillo, seeking vengeance for the imprisonment and torture of revolutionaries.

1898--Luigi Lucheni stabs to death Empress Elisabeth, the consort of Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria-Hungary, in Geneva.

1900--Gaetano Bresci shoots Umberto I dead, seeking revenge for a massacre in Milan.

1901--Leon Czolgosz shoots U.S. President William McKinley in Buffalo.

1902--Gennaro Rubino attempts to kill King Leopold II of Belgium.

1906--Mateu Morral tries to kill King Alfonso XIII of Spain and Princess Victoria Eugenie of Battenberg after their wedding by throwing a bomb into the wedding procession.

1909--Simon Radowitzky assassinates the Buenos Aires chief of police.

1912--Manuel Pardo kills Spanish Prime Minister Jose Canalejas in Madrid.

1913--Alexandros Schinas shoots King George I of Greece dead.

1914--A bomb being prepared for use at John D. Rockefeller's home in Tarrytown, New York explodes prematurely killing three anarchists.

1914--Followers of Luigi Galleani explode two bombs in New York City after police disperse a protest by anarchists at Rockefeller's home.

1916--San Francisco Preparedness [for WWI] Day bombing. 10 persons killed;40 injured. Attributed to anarchists but never proven.

1917--Nine policemen in Milwaukee killed when a time bomb left at a Catholic church by Galleanists explodes at a police station.

1917--Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson, receives a Galleanist mail bomb (defused).

1917--A servant of U.S. Senator Thomas W. Hardwick loses her hands from a Galleanist mail bomb.

1917--Galleanist Carlo Valdinoci blows himself up when his bomb explodes prematurely at the Washington DC home of U.S. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer.

1917--A New York City night watchman killed by a Galleanist bomb placed at a judge's house.

1921--Three anarchists shoot 3-time Spanish premier Eduardo Dato Iradier dead in Madrid.

1923--Francisco Ascaso, and Buenaventura Durruti assassinate wealthy Cardinal Juan Soldevilla of Saragossa as a reprisal for the killing of an anarcho-syndicalist unionist.

1924--Ascaso and Durruti attempt to assassinate the arch-reactionary King Alfonso XIII of Spain in Paris.

1924--Ascaso and Durruti organize unsuccessful attacks on military barracks in Barcelona. They flee to Latin America carrying out bank robberies in Chile and Argentina

1926--1928--Several bombings in Argentina organized by Severino Di Giovanni, supporting Sacco and Vanzetti and against fascist Italy's interests there.

1932-- A dynamite-filled package bomb left by Galleanists destroys Judge Webster Thayer's home in Worcester, Massachusetts, injuring his wife and a housekeeper. Thayer presided over the trials of Sacco and Vanzetti.

1933--Giuseppe Zangara shoots and kills Chicago mayor, Anton Cermack, missing nearby President Roosevelt.

Note: There are questions regarding McKinley's and Cermack's assassins as to whether they were actually anarchists. Still, both shootings had a profoundly negative impact on the anarchist movements of the times.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/388-winter-2013/anarchist-violence-or-state-violence>

Fifth Estate #388, Winter, 2013

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