Bash Street Kids
A Mayday over MayDay
Third wave vs. third way
2004 / 2007

Scanned from: Mayday and Anarchism: Remembrance and Resistance From Haymarket to Now Edited by Anna Key.
Kate Sharpley Library, 2004, 2007
Bash Street Kids, from Reflections on Mayday [2000]

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scheduled, dates all taunting to be put in our diaries. These dates are their dates, they don't correspond to the ebbs and flows or strengths and weaknesses of our movement. Neither do they bear any immediate relation to wider popular discontent. (And if you start arguing about May Day being 'workers day' you haven't been getting out much lately.) Finally, if we disregard all this and show up anyway they're likely to be waiting for us with side-handled batons and a few old grudges. We may find the ground under our feet no longer our terrain.

(Of course many go further and argue that anti-capitalist days are themselves spectacular events, stunts that keep lazy journos in headlines and only reinforce how the other 364 days of the year are business as usual. There's no little truth to this. Nevertheless we must see it in context. There was a period where such methods did make for a progression for us, if not as the threat of a good example then as the temporary abeyance of a bad example.)

Ironically one successful action doesn't necessarily lead to another. It can even make things harder for next time, by combining a yardstick to live up to with a method that's already been used. It seems clear to us, in London at least, anti-capitalist days are numbered and new means of mobilising now required–ones which require us to again re-invent surprise and imagination. Let's set our own social agenda once more! We Kids don't have stacks of blueprints about how to do this piled up in our secret headquarters, in fact here and now we don't really have much of a clue! But that's what we need to stay one step ahead. We're not saying it'll be easy, but we've managed to reinvent ourselves before. The world will hear from us again!

Despite the Terrorism Bill, despite the boom and Blair's continuing poll-surfing, many of us have seen the last few years as something of an up. Since June 18th and a few other events it's even become possible to talk of a third wave. Those of us old enough to remember the early '80s, let alone the real oldies who were around in the late '60s and early '70s, are heartened to see so many of today's youngsters following our bad example. Three or four years ago people's main focus was on this or that tentacle of the beast while the terrain they fought on was largely moralistic ('roads are bad', 'CJA is wrong' etc.). Now many thousands will regularly turn up for events which do not ask for permission or reforms but simply contest capital itself. Seeing that the system can offer them at best lives of stifling mediocrity, they turn instead to the adventure of challenging it in its entirety.

However, let's not ruin our carefully cultivated image of bitter old cynics too quickly but look to the peculiarities of our situation. Not all waves, after all, are of the same shape and size. This wave may well be smaller than its predecessors, but that isn't necessarily an insurmountable problem. It's proven itself big enough to go tidal before, and besides we're not exactly asking for a public referendum on the future of capitalism anyway. But while we've been reinventing ourselves into smaller sizes the State hasn't stood still. Witness increased surveillance or the steady ratcheting-up of repressive laws which would have provoked mass outrage in the 'seventies. In short, while we've been getting littler they've been getting stronger. It's got plain harder to do that thing we do.

Compounded to this, there's virtually no wider movements for us to link up to. Militant workers are virtually extinct, and urban rioters an endangered species, to the point they can make sentimental TV documentaries about them. What's the point of a wave with no-one to wave to? What price a catalyst without the general chemical reaction? Our new-found fixation with 'globalisation' (international conferences, days of action

etc.) must be seen in this context. Like Tony Hancock we've got friends all over the world, we just don't know anyone down our own streets.

However, there's been parallel developments in the wider sphere which could cut against our isolation. Since Labour's fully-fledged embracing of neoliberalism and its almost total silencing of the old Left, 'mainstream' politics has closed up. The Third Way has taken the First and Second Ways off the menu. The new brutality is made to seem inevitable, as natural as it getting colder in the winter. Yet this strategy carries a risk for them–the globalised market is but one basket for all their eggs. Look at the recent elections where they reduced the choices on offer, then worried themselves into knots when fewer and fewer could be bothered to vote!

Faced with increasing levels of exploitation in their jobs, most people have developed an instinctive distrust of globalisation in all it's endless faceless acronyms. They may not necessarily know what GATT, WTO, IMF stand for individually, but they're aware that together they spell SHIT. Yet our movement is no longer the most radical end of some liberal spectrum criticising such things, we're now the only people seen to be doing anything about it at all! When our enemies take us seriously, it's not because they love old statues or see insurgency in a smashed McDonalds window. In fact it's not because of anything that we're actually doing, but because of a potential rendezvous with the 'apathetic' mass which currently remains latent. If there's seeds they fear growing from our good deeds, they're not the ones the hippies stuck in Parliament Square.

Divide and defuse

On to MayDay itself. Against Leftist notions that we can only be provoked into action by 'police brutality', it should be noted that the police tactics early in the day was so softly-softly as

ing is probably down to their tonic. After all, for a time they felt like part of a natural trajectory for us. For too long we'd been stuck in siege mentality. Whether occupying road protest camps or squatted social centres we were locked in a defensive war against the State–who are, in case you've never noticed, a superior force. They knew (pretty much) what we were up to, and had developed their rehearsed methods for dealing with it. Their main tactic was normally to wait until all the lightweights had pissed off and the rest of us had gone mad then just stroll in, and let's face it mostly it worked pretty well. (Especially the going mad part.)

The first Reclaim the Streets were a break from this. We weren't just escaping from the tunnels back into the daylight (which was welcome enough), we were reinventing the benefit of surprise for ourselves. We'd just get up and take over some shitty intersection somewhere. We would decide where. We would decide when. Short of guarding every crossroads and traffic light in the country, they were forced to wait on us! And of course we had the buzz of seeing a virus spawned in London spread across much of the world, as copycat parties happened from Finland to LA.

At first, international anti-capitalist days seemed like a step up from this. Not only did they put our politics on our sleeves, more importantly they were pushing the envelope of surprise once more. Just when the Cops were learning this new rule book of our actions we'd gleefully torn it up all over again. Trouble is we may have been too successful for our own good–or at least for our 'movement's' shaky structure to cope with. After June 18th, and particularly after Seattle, capitalism has been seen to be contested again. They're not likely to be too happy about that.

So what happens if we continue with this tactic? First, we should note we've partly stepped backwards–back into a timing no longer of our choosing. Between the IMF, WTO and European integration there's a bewildering array of conferences

off shaking hands with mass murderers to do a photo-op condemning us. While the scale of destruction at June 18th had to be played down, it was the very lesser achievements of MayDay (i.e. a few shops done in and a bit of graffiti on some statues) which made it perfect for them to blow up. Hence there's been more furore over a tuft of grass on a dead bigot's head than the storming of the LIFFE building.

What do we want to get out of such days? We'd argue 'British' participation in anti-capitalist days needs to have a positive domestic effect, not just join in a 'virtual community' of international activists like an anti-McDonalds trying to open the same branch all over the world. MayDay didn't have to destroy capitalism to be a success (thankfully), but it had to be big enough to float the idea that capitalism isn't as immutable as we're told. It wasn't and it didn't. The point isn't that they've made us look 'bad' or 'mindless' (like they'd ever do otherwise), so much as they've succeeded in making us look weak and irrelevant. Faced with a choice between such clear-cut winners and losers, most will remain apathetic or even actively embrace the winner for safety's sake.

This leaves us in a Catch 22 situation, unable to really achieve anything without wider participation but unable to get that participation without achieving anything. If our wave is beached from wider sympathy, it'll be harder to avoid our actions getting smaller as the passive mass stop turning up at all and the 'activists' get more insular, defensive and harder to join even if anybody wanted to. This seems like a cycle not to get into.

Out of siege mentality

Finally, let's look at the very concept of anti-capitalist days themselves. A lot of physical and emotional investment has been put in these, in fact the very 'up' people have been feel-

to earn them a ticking-off in the media! The laws already exist (as if they needed them!) to have prevented us meeting in Parliament Square. A few vans, some riot clobber and a bit of stripy tickertape might well have done it. Instead they opted for mere shows of force, not backed up by action until much later on. How come? As they virtually admitted afterwards, it was because they feared the consequences. Not necessarily immediately–after all they outnumbered us on the day!

But anti-demonstration tactics in Britain always revolve around separating the passive mass of onlookers from the activists or hardcore troublemakers. Police will try to impose this physically at the time. Then, regardless of their actual success, this story must be kept up in the media. How many times have we heard the line 'it was a peaceful enough event until the hardcore of troublemakers turned up'?, even most laughably after June 18th! Strong-arm tactics risk creating an antagonistic mob who, even if beaten at the time, may come back better-armed and more prepared. This is exactly what has happened in Germany and many other countries, and exactly what they want to avoid here. A few smashed windows and other bits of steam-letting can be fixed by the next day. It's keeping the liberal consensus which counts.

It should also be said that, contrary to June 18th, MayDay carried all the weaknesses inherent in Reclaim the Streets events at their worst. We'll leave others to describe the truly risible nature of the terrible 'Guerrilla Gardening' stunt, and to account how it came so soon after such inspiring actions. (But suffice to say even State stooge and upper class twit George Monbiot admitted 'Digging up Parliament Square to stop global capitalism is so futile, so utterly frustrating and disempowering that the more hot-headed protesters could almost be excused for wanting to do something more spectacular' G2 10/5/00).

In the spirit of positivity we'll concentrate instead on the potential moment of escape as we all left it to go up Whitehall. The whole mass of people stopped as McDonalds windows went in,

whooping and cheering. It seemed inspiring. Yet over twenty minutes later the same three or four people were still smashing up the same one shop, while the same mass took snapshots for the album or clapped like they were at the theatre! Some, through not wanting to be sitting targets or just bored at all the repetition, drifted on to Trafalgar Square. This allowed the cops to step in and split the crowd in two, drastically reducing our capacity for mischief. The rest of the day was downhill.

This is saddening, but not necessarily surprising. Since the start, Reclaim the Streets have been successful in bringing masses back out of doors after a very apathetic period. While some have condemned them for appealing only to bombed-out party heads, this is wide of the mark. Most attendees respond to the appeal of lawlessness, even if just the buzz of it. (Always a better place to start than boring papers.) But, brought up in an unprecedented 'apolitical' era, most respond to radicalism by consuming it. Instead of buying McDonalds they buy into opposition to it as a spectacle, as a show. The 'activists' do things while the rest of us cheer them on. The police do other things and we boo. Same difference.

Had we continued en masse to Trafalgar Square, would we have been in time to get beyond and go on a mystery tour through central London? We can't know. But we do know that in Whitehall we obligingly demonstrated our biggest weakness to our enemies, and helpfully separated ourselves into the necessary constituent groups for them to divide and defuse us.

We've said it before and we'll say it again. Despite what some people persist in thinking, capitalism doesn't live inside McDonalds signs or police riot shields. It's a social relation, and if we reproduce that social relation in our manifestations (by separating ourselves into producers and consumers of revolt) whatever the score we ring up on our negative cash registers we're not going to go anywhere. Our wave'll be for drowning.

We suspect some will try to snatch the phantasm of victory from real-life defeat by waxing lyrical how MayDay went beyond 'the plan'. In this way they fetishise anti-planning about as much as the Stalinists do planning, and betray their essential similarity. The point is not to fixatedly plan or refuse to plan, but in our relationship to that plan. Look at what the Cops do when their plans fail. They either a) lose it and go mental or b) stand around, awaiting fresh orders. They exist as a mechanism to bring about plans they are given. Our plans are made by us and for us. We can change them in a moment if need be, but need no phobias of making them in the first place. June 18th was successful largely because it was well planned. Yes, on MayDay the plan was particularly crap but failing to spontaneously generate anything better we floundered. If we've any sense left that should take us back to the drawing board.

Tearful Tony and the media deluge

Next let's look at the media response. Not because we assume that the media reports are more important than the actual event. And we'll leave it to the Trots and other wanna-be bourgeoisie to imagine people uncritically swallowing whatever they read. But neither do we think, as many seem to, that if good media isn't our aim then bad media should be and the worse the media the better the action. MayDay marks the limitations of such 'thinking'.

Truth is, the media can have an effect on people if it manages to insert itself into their already-formed perceptions. As we've already said, most people are sullenly dissatisfied by the state of things but currently see no possibility of alternatives. Mention MayDay and the like to real-life folk and you're not likely to hear the quizzical 'but what's wrong with capitalism?' or the outraged 'you should respect the rule of law!' so much as the cynical 'but what do you expect it to achieve?'

The most important feature of the media is the sheer scale of it. We're supposed to feel the width! Blair himself took time