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A Critique of Performative Politics & Symbolic Protest

**A call to action for shifting movement actions away
from symbolism and towards material disruption &
abolition.**

Anarchy in the 'Burbs

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Retrieved on 2021-05-19 from Anarchy in the 'Burbs

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We believe in healthy, constructive critique, and we think that movements and the individuals that make them up should be self-critical in order to improve practice and thought. But too many times, our community actions try to replicate the most visible/publicized actions, and try to follow models of organizing that carry the most social capital. Most of the time (there are some exceptions), this ends up reproducing ineffective political positions and actions.

In particular, we want to point out the issues of performative politics and symbolic protest.

Performative politics are exactly what they sound like: taking action through superficial performances. One of the definitions of performance is “a musical, dramatic, or other entertainment presented before an audience.” Thus, performative politics are a politic rooted in recycled scripts and uncritically repeating prescribed roles. By the nature of performance, people tend to not think for themselves and let others else dictate their moves. This politic detracts from the autonomous potential that lies outside of preordained or “acceptable” political/protest norms.

By symbolic protest, we mean the ways certain types of actions mostly (but not always) implement a performance that does not materially disrupt systems of oppression. These include (but are not limited to) taking a knee, yelling at cops, hashtags or Instagram “Blackout” posts, letters of opposition, taunting officials, parades, voting booths, etc. All of these things are about symbolism, which is more about “making a point” than actual disruption.

8. As mentioned previously, things like sit-ins, group-chaining, op-eds, etc. are purely performative. We'd also like to reiterate the problem with labeling protest actions as "peaceful" and the effects of the enforcement of peace at these actions. Demonstrators will lose interest if they see a call to action that does not result in material change. When an action is just a street performance that asks for political leaders to empathize, we should question who we're doing this for and why. (People who aren't ready to get rowdy should not feel forced to, but a protest should be a place that allows rowdy protestors AND peaceful ones. The absolutism and enforcement of the "peaceful" label is the problem here; P.L.U.R. is cool for music festivals, but not for shutting down the system.)

9. Create a power-map of your area and/or conduct a tactical terrain analysis with your squad, and share it with others in an assembly or discussion. These two methods of outlining local power relations allows communities to identify key material targets, suitable for subversive actions that lead to material disruption. Look for the openings where you can attain maximum rewards with minimal consequences.

Towards abolition and nothing less!

We want to center our main argument here: we should be gauging our power in terms of our material capacity to shut down material systems of oppression.

We want to say, Keep the actions and momentum going! This is NOT a diss to organizers who are new or folks who have just started taking the streets; everyone is still learning, and this is a lifelong experience. We also do not want to diss previous protest actions that were peaceful or youth-led initiatives for voting, etc. In fact, to qualify what we are saying about what causes changes, we'd like to mention that we will never know what effect these actions truly have because inspiration is not something tangible that can be calculated. However, we do know, based on decades of performative actions and symbolic protests, that those methods do not and have never dismantled systems of oppression. Otherwise, we wouldn't be where we are now.

We acknowledge that certain actions can be labeled performative or symbolic AND may still have been inspiring for some folks, and that's perfectly fine. That is all valid, and we appreciate the bonds and connections made through past actions because that is what liberation is all about. HOWEVER, we do want to be clear that we must abandon performative and symbolic action when we feel ready to take part in direct action or be a part of autonomous initiatives.

Imagine how many more people could be inspired if ALL of our protests and actions materially disrupted capitalism and state violence; how many more people could be inspired by a MATERIAL shift in their lives. Our main point is that symbolic action will never accomplish that material shift, even when it

feels better than doing nothing; that's the difference. We want to push for folks to get involved in projects that really disrupt oppression. Dismantling power materially is not just inspiring, but also directly affects our lives and disentangles our communities from the material strongholds of capitalism and white supremacy. We can only get rid of these systems once and for all when we shift away from symbolism and performance and instead, towards material disruption and abolition.

A few other points that we want to reiterate:

1. We want to push back on the predictability of protests and marches. If there is no element of surprise or an assessment of local power relations to act upon, these actions become easy to repress by cops and fascists. Instead, how can we intentionally channel these demonstrations to attack material targets of oppression (i.e. condos, warehouses, police precincts, frat houses)?

2. What does actual material subversion look like? We suggest looking up and learning these methods (look them up using DuckDuckGo search engine, on a Tor Browser, or on CrimethInc.'s website): sabotage, blockades, squatting, black blocs, monkey-wrenching, occupations, tree-sitting, expropriations, and other direct actions and autonomous projects.

3. We should stop over-directing community resources on bail funds for non-impactful "intentional arrest" actions. Let's save that for Black/queer/trans funds, where they are really needed.

4. If there's no foreseeable direct, material change as a result of the work being done, we should question its effectiveness. A good rule of thumb to gauge performativity is to ask

yourself who the action is for and whether it directly benefits them. For example, posting a black square in honor of #BLM but not doing any other work for Black lives does not benefit the Black community. (We are NOT equating relevant, behind-the-scenes work to useless, performative work. Keep educating yourself when no one is looking, joining reading groups, having low-key meet-ups with comrades, etc. even if the effects of these aren't immediate.)

5. Keyboard warriors would benefit from putting their phones down more often and meeting real people. Tweets and statements are valuable only when accompanied by action and change, and when they're written by people who are actually doing the work. The oversaturation of commentary online based on theory and opinion detracts from relevant anecdotal evidence and analysis provided by people who are actually on the ground. Practice is the best teacher.

6. Asking celebrities and people with accolades (i.e. doctors, lawyers, legislators) to co-sign your action literally does nothing except display an attempt to be palatable to the public. We don't need "distinguishable" acceptance for our demands to be valid and, instead, need to reject respectability in all forms.

7. Petitions do NOT guarantee anything because they appeal to legislators and politicians who already don't empathize with our struggles. Like statements, petitions are only useful when they're accompanied by other actions to legitimize them. In fact, online petitions (such as those Change.org petitions that have been circulating) can instead document/publicize your information (name, zip code) if you forget to sign anonymously.