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Stay The Course

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they must follow the same basic principle; otherwise, the groups that compose the networks will inevitably return to the isolation of focusing exclusively on local projects without outside support.

An analysis of the political climate following the election of 2008; a plea for anarchists to maintain vibrant networks and confrontational organizing even as Obama takes office; a discussion of what it takes for such networks and organizing to succeed; and a brief review of actions around the election, with a glimpse of what is to come.

As much as radicals have focused on bringing people together in public spaces over the past ten years, not all public togetherness is necessarily radical. On election night, when sports-riot-size crowds took to the streets of many cities to celebrate Obama's victory, the subtext was that representative democracy, long discredited under the Bush regime, had been rehabilitated as the populist spectacle it was always meant to be. The chants of "Yes We Can!"—appropriated, like most of Obama's shtick, from actual grassroots movements outside electoral politics—translated to "Yes *He* Can": in endorsing the transfer of power from one politician to another, people may feel powerful, but it is not *their* power they celebrate. It was exactly the kind of display that prompts young defeatists to declare that "the masses" don't want anarchy; to be fair, with hundreds of millions of dollars for publicity, anyone could probably have achieved the same results—even anarchists.

Obama has ridden to power on the same social currents that radicals have relied on to propel their organizing and outreach over the past eight years: disgust with the excesses of empire, longing for more fairness and sociability in daily life, optimism about vague alternatives. It is no coincidence that the liberal anti-war movement died out just as the presidential campaigns got underway; the race effectively subsumed the energy of all not explicitly critical of representative democracy. This cooptation of popular momentum is as essential to the disempowerment of the populace as the brutal repression associated with the right wing. The powers that be are equally willing to tear gas us or hire us to go door to door registering voters—whatever it takes to keep us from building our own power outside and against their structures. In that regard, Obama's

election marks a new phase of their efforts to keep their system viable—calculated to defuse discontent, further marginalize radicals, and maintain the essential power imbalances of our society while giving the institutions that perpetuate them a makeover.

Top-down structures obscure the motivations and individuality of the participants, but they don't necessarily neutralize them. Some of those who packed the streets on the night of November 4 must harbor desires too radical to be realized under capitalism, desires which might still bubble to the surface despite the veneer of social consensus. In Minneapolis, not far from September's bitter street conflicts outside the Republican National Convention, a mixed crowd of East African immigrants and predominantly white anarchists occupied a major intersection for several hours, blocking traffic and defying police until the authorities resorted to pepper spray and finally called in massive backup. Chants of "Yes We Can!" and "U-S-A!" mingled with "Smash the State!" and the traditional "Whose Streets?" as drummers pounded out rhythms, dancers filled the lanes, and multiracial lines of masked youth taunted and blocked police cruisers.

In one reading of this event, the anarchists were cynically endangering the less privileged immigrants by luring them into a dangerous situation; presumably, had the anarchists gone home, the immigrants would have had the sense to stop provoking the police and get back to pulling themselves up by their bootstraps—a challenge that can only be easier now that there is to be a black President, never mind the recession. In another reading of the situation, the anarchists and immigrants found tentative common cause in seizing public space, coming together on the basis of a shared desire to celebrate—even if they respectfully disagreed on the details of what was worth celebrating. Together, they were able to obtain a few hours of the visibility and jubilation normally forbidden to their class; and the inevitable confrontation with the police demonstrated to all that, Obama or no, we only get what we are prepared to defend.

Appendix: A Point of Departure

This year, with one exception, anarchist actions around the election were fairly isolated and predictable. There were the usual scattered acts of vandalism, presumably limited to small in-groups, and principled refusals to participate in the electoral spectacle, which attract an even narrower demographic; only one effort stood out as subversively combining public and clandestine elements.

The morning following election day, consumers around the country woke up to find that the newspapers in the dispensers on their streets, and in some cases even in their very driveways, had been provided with a spurious front page courtesy of local pranksters. This occurred in at least twenty cities, including Washington, D.C., New York City, Lawrence, Milwaukee, Duluth, New Orleans, and Chicago, not to mention several cities in Iowa, California, and North Carolina. One paper estimated that 1000 copies of their publication alone had been affected.

Presumably, one or two groups came up with this idea, then solicited the participation of others around the country. Because it involved comparatively low risk on the street level, it offered a perfect opportunity for newer groups to build up experience in an activity they wouldn't necessarily have had the resources to pull off alone and to invite new people to participate. This is exactly the sort of format that can enable a network to increase its numbers and capabilities. On top of all this, the action gave visibility to dissent precisely when Obama's triumph was obscuring it.

This action demonstrated the proper way to make use of the networks that remain after the convention protests. Had one group simply called for actions targeting corporate media, surely very little would have happened. The point of a network is to save organizers the trouble of duplicating groundwork, and to increase the scope of what can be achieved with the same tactics so it is possible to escalate conflict without increasing individual risk. Further efforts to utilize these networks need not take the same form, but

tinguish ourselves and our positions than it was when we were lumped in with the liberals under Bush.

And how can we organize popular resistance, when seems that everyone loves Obama? With the economy in shambles and global warming finally acknowledged as reality, the answers to this question should be obvious enough. Capitalism hasn't gone anywhere—on the contrary, its negative effects are only more and more apparent to all. Rather than entrenching ourselves on the losing side of the pro-or-anti-Obama debate, we should sidestep that trap to pose new questions. Here is one example of how this could play out concretely. The past two Presidential inaugurations have featured spirited liberal and anarchist protests questioning the legitimacy of the new ruler; this time, rather than simply repeating that equation with significantly diminished prospects of success, it would be strategic for an anarchist mobilization to focus on economic issues and economic targets, plenty of which can be found in Washington, D.C. As of this writing, a vague call to action for the inauguration has circulated, but it remains to be seen whether anything more concrete will materialize.

Above all, to repeat this once more, we cannot afford to withdraw into the shadows as we did after September 11, 2001; a world sliding swiftly into catastrophe cannot afford this either. But to urge anarchists to maintain confrontational organizing is not to endorse any and all action for its own sake; on the contrary, it is essential that we pick our battles carefully. The disaster of capitalism presents us with an endless number of fires to put out, and running around attempting to do so with no strategy can only exhaust us pointlessly. As our numbers and resources are currently extremely limited, we should start with the objectives that will best enable us to extend our networks and capabilities. Once we've done so, we'll be better equipped to put an end to mountaintop removal, thwart the racist deportations carried out by ICE, and so on.

We leave it up to you, dear readers, to sort out what this looks like in practice—though here's a hint.

The Obama years will doubtless offer us countless complicated opportunities such as this one. But bad advice abounds in radical circles as this new era looms. Some, afraid of being misunderstood, caution against confrontational organizing of any kind, forfeiting the initiative precisely when it is most important to maintain radical momentum. Others, in attempting to keep a principled distance from all things reformist, risk isolating anarchist projects, denying them the interplay with other efforts and milieus that makes them effective and infectious. How do we chart a middle course, staying connected to popular currents without subordinating our own priorities to those of the forces that exploit them?

What Now?

Unfortunately, there is a recent precedent for anarchists freezing up and dropping the ball, which too many have already forgotten. After September 11, 2001, radical projects and momentum collapsed around the country as anarchists, fearful of appearing insensitive and of running afoul of the anti-terror reaction, cancelled plans and stepped back from organizing. The resulting loss of impetus contributed to the decline of the anti-globalization movement in the US and enabled authoritarians to determine the character of the incipient anti-war movement; it took years for anarchist organizing to recover from these setbacks. The lesson is that, however inconvenient a particular historical juncture may be for anarchists, it's always easier to maintain organizing than to start over from scratch.

Yes, Obama is the first person of color to be elected President. His victory doesn't mean representative democracy is suddenly inclusive and egalitarian any more than the successful careers of Bill Cosby and Michael Jordan indicate that capitalism isn't structurally racist; it also doesn't mean that the inequalities of the sys-

tem are suddenly invisible to our neighbors. We can affirm others' enthusiasm at the shattering of this particular glass ceiling without endorsing the authoritarian structure that remains or giving up on our opposition to it being intelligible to those around us. Real relationships with people in adjacent communities are the best protection against the corporate media accounts portraying them as lockstep converts to liberal democracy; those who insist most stridently that confrontational organizing is now self-defeating may do so because they lack connection with their neighbors.

Make no mistake about it—more people of color are in prison in the United States than ever before in history. Obama will not grant them clemency or reassemble the communities torn apart by their kidnappings. Global capitalism continues to plunder peoples and devastate ecosystems, disproportionately affecting people of color worldwide. If anything is racist, it is failing to attack the roots of the system that perpetrates these injustices.

Some have expressed fears that any overt resistance to Obama's ascendancy will be misrepresented as racist, but these have already proved unfounded. Although there was considerable discussion on this topic before the protests at last summer's Democratic National Convention, not only did corporate media coverage fail to cast any such aspersions, locals on the street also seemed clear on the motivations of the predominantly white black bloc. Participants in the protests could certainly have done more to convey their opposition to white supremacy, but the precedent indicates that it is possible for anarchists to act against Obama without being misconstrued.

Coming out of the protracted mobilizations leading up to last summer's Democratic and Republican National Conventions, anarchists have actually built up some networks and momentum. It would be all the more tragic, then, for hesitation to erode those modest gains. Depending on what happens next, the clashes outside the Republican National Convention in St. Paul indicated either that anarchists have regained the initiative in the streets, or

simply that they were the last rats to leave the sinking ship of the anti-war movement. Either momentum will fizzle as ad hoc networks drift apart, or additional efforts will shift anarchists to the forefront of radical struggles now that the former liberal opposition occupies the highest seats of power.

A word is necessary on what it takes to maintain healthy networks, since anarchists in the United States have had so little success with this. Networks only persist when they offer something concrete and desirable to the participants. Were there an anarchist federation that could provide its members with free health care, this country would not lack for anarchists. The networks that developed in the buildup to the convention protests flourished because they offered the opportunity to participate in something exciting and historic; they are unlikely to endure unless people find other ways to use them to circulate useful resources. Otherwise, as has happened countless times already, most people will drop out in search of more productive uses of their time, leaving only the most tiresome individuals to play at bureaucracy as an end in itself. Some tentative attempts are unfolding to make use of the networks that linger in the wake of the conventions; if they don't take off, anarchists will have to start all over again next time a nationwide mobilization is called for.

So what are anarchists to do, at the opening of the era heralded by Obama's victory? First, we should maintain explicitly anarchist organizing. This doesn't mean refusing to work with non-anarchists, but establishing our own projects and organizing bodies, so we won't be stuck reacting to others' initiatives or lose ourselves in authoritarian structures that absorb our efforts without bringing real liberation any closer. The efforts of the RNC Welcoming Committee provide an excellent example of this, in stark contrast to the absence of any serious anarchist initiatives at the Republican National Convention of 2004. Now that the Democrats hold power in Washington, D.C., it should be much easier to dis-