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When You Topple the Statues, Don't Forget to Uproot the Pedestals

The Promise of Direct Action

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Courageous demonstrators pulled down a Confederate statue in Durham, North Carolina yesterday. In the face of state indifference and racist backlash, they took matters into their own hands; within minutes, they had demolished a century-old symbol of oppression. Now that the statue is down, what will it take to uproot the foundation it stood on? What can this defiant gesture tell us about how to take on all the other problems we face?

In Durham, protestors showed what anyone can accomplish with a ladder, rope, a few friends, and courage. Uprooting the base—the root causes of white supremacy and our powerlessness over our own lives—will take longer, but it demands the same fundamental principle.

Why had the statue stayed up for so long in Durham, a liberal city in which nearly half the population is Black? A local government spokeswoman cited a state law prohibiting them from altering memorials, saying, “I would assume that the only thing possible are steps to reverse the law.”

If you believe in the legitimacy of the state—if you believe the only way to make change is through representatives and laws—then yes, that’s “the only thing possible.” In that model, our country will remain as entrenched in white supremacy as our rulers decide it should be. What could illustrate our powerlessness better than being forced to see a symbol of our degradation every day, unable to imagine a way to change it ourselves?

But as anarchists, we believe that all of us deserve to determine our own destinies. We believe that there is nothing inherently legitimate about the actions of those who hold state power, nor anything inherently illegitimate about defying the government. We don’t accept that the only way to dismantle the physical legacy of white supremacy is to wait for the state legislature to do it. If we possess any sort of freedom today in this society, it is the result of all the times people defied and overthrew governments, not because of the times they were obedient. If not for disobedience, we would still be living under the rule of kings. This is why we believe

that the best way to make lasting change is by taking direct action to bring about the world we wish to live in.

This is true for any change we wish to make, from toppling a statue to toppling a president.

In response to their courageous action, the North Carolina governor tweeted, “The racism and deadly violence in Charlottesville is unacceptable but there is a better way to remove these monuments.” That seems unlikely, considering that after nearly a century of begging politicians, the statue remained in place—representing the very same racism and deadly violence we saw in Charlottesville. In Durham, even with a Black mayor and a majority-Black city council, the statue stood just as solidly as it had during the Jim Crow era of all-white government.

There are two ways to change an unjust law. You can ask lawmakers to amend it, or you can break it together in a way that makes it unenforceable. Which approach is more empowering? The former concentrates power in the hands of a few; the latter disperses it to everyone. The former frames leaders as the only agents of change; the latter enables all of us to determine the shape of our lives and our communities.

We can apply this logic of direct action to all the problems we face.

Rather than hoping that law enforcement will protect us from fascists, when all evidence suggests their complicity, we can organize networks to defend ourselves against both right-wing attacks and police violence.

Rather than begging Trump—or Obama, who oversaw more deportations than any previous US president—to adjust immigration policies, we can defend our neighbors against raids, establish sanctuaries, and tear down borders.

Rather than pleading for a leader to appoint a liberal judge to make decisions about our bodies for us, we can take control of the knowledge and infrastructure we need for reproductive health care and bodily autonomy.

What all of these approaches have in common is a commitment to struggling for freedom using methods that spread power rather than concentrating it. As former Black Panther and anarchist Ashanti Alston put it, we need “all power *to* the people and all power *through* the people.”

We shouldn't wait for presidents, governors, or bureaucrats to give us permission to change the world. We shouldn't defer to authority figures. From the civil rights movement to the Stonewall Rebellion, from Tahrir Square in Cairo to Gezi Park in Istanbul, freedom has always begun from the point at which courageous people broke the law and took their lives back from their rulers. The chief obstacle to these movements has not been the violence of the state, but the passivity and compliance of other citizens.

Anarchists desire for everyone to be free to decide how to live and relate with one another on their own terms, without coercion or enforced centralization. We want to tear down the oppressive legacies of the past to build a future based on autonomy and mutual aid. This means taking on Trump at the inauguration and fascists in Charlottesville; it means responding to disasters with grassroots aid; it means supporting prisoners, organizing solidarity as workers and tenants, and operating community centers. All of these activities are already going on all around the world.

As people rise up to tear down statues around the country, let's strategize about how to tear up the foundations of the system that prevents us from making the most of our lives. Direct action, without laws or representatives, isn't just a more effective way to win immediate victories like removing monuments commemorating a racist history. It can be the foundation for a free world beyond white supremacy, capitalism, and the state.