The anarchist travelling circus: reflections on contemporary anarchism, anti-capitalism and the international scene

Introduction

The phrase ‘anarchist travelling circus’ was uttered in stern tones by Tony Blair, as, after the European Union summit in Gothenburg, Sweden, in June 2001, he condemned the protests that have converged on every significant such gathering over the last few years. The unintentional note of joyfulness, play and spontaneity captured by this phrase was quickly recuperated by the movement itself, appearing on a banner, and reproduced for May Day 2002 in London. Here the May Day Collective called for an Anarchist Travelling Circus strand, a ‘mobile, spontaneous and collective performance, reclaiming the roots and culture of mayday!’ For future economic summits, more extensive itineraries, linking many cities and countries, are planned.

The echoes of play and pleasure evoked by the notion of the ‘anarchist travelling circus’ connect to the following discussion on the power of the symbolic to expose the hollowness of everyday capitalist existence by appropriating the spaces of power. The highly visible expressions of the Anarchist Travelling Circus at economic summits and beyond are analysed in terms of their significance in allowing a central drama to unfold; as examples of ‘modern pilgrimages’ with the capacity to defamiliarise the familiar; and as examples of an unlicensed carnival by inversion. Anarchism is a central characteristic of the ‘anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation’ movement, though much of the mainstream Left has had trouble acknowledging this. Another central feature of the anti-capitalist movement is the significance of grassroots movements of the global South, which have provided much of the inspiration for the movement, and with which networking and support are exchanged. The rural and ‘peasant’ dimensions of anarchist history and practice are often overlooked.

There is now a strand of anarchism which, as well as criticising hierarchy, capitalism and the State also opposes industrialisation, modernisation and the impact of technology. This strand is strongest, ironically, in the United States, expressed most coherently by theorists such as John Zerzan (1994, 1999) and the writers of the periodical Fifth Estate such as David Watson (1996, 1999). This
strand is growing in importance in the anarchist movement, and looks to the lives of people living in small-scale societies, including primitive and rural village/peasant societies, to learn how to reclaim autonomous ways of life with a low impact on the earth. A crucial aspect of this anti-technological and anti-civilisational critique is the need to reclaim a relationship with the land and local economies, not only in the global South as a means of alleviating poverty, but also in the global North, as a means of alleviating alienation, pollution and misery.

After 11 September 2001 (or ‘9/11’, to use the almost universally adopted American phrase), the anti-capitalist movement was declared dead by the mainstream. In reality, repressive bills had already begun to criminalise the movement and stifle dissent by intimidation well before 11 September 2001. This chapter considers the impact of the changing political scene in the last few years, and notes the way in which anarchism has come into its own in confronting the intensified alliances between states, corporate power and the military.

The anarchist travelling circus: summit hopping

Many mainstream commentators expressed consternation at the unexpectedness of the demonstrations against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in November 1999, at which protesters succeeded in derailing the conference talks despite being met by riot police and tear gas.1 Journalists scrabbled to find out who were the people who had converged in such numbers (‘Who are these guys anyway?’ asked The Times in London). A distinction was quickly made between ‘peaceful protesters’ and the apparently more ‘violent’ anarchists. As anyone who has watched even mainstream news footage of the summit demonstrations will know, those engaged in property damage (construed as violence) did so with a variety of insignia – Maoist, communist and anarchist, for example.

The reality is that those who call themselves anarchists organise and participate in all sections of these summit demonstrations. This is a continuation of anarchist presence in many of the most visible struggles of our times, from the Anti-Poll Tax campaign in the United Kingdom in 1990 to the radical environmental protest scene of the 1990s. The difference with the anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation movement (I use the terms interchangeably here) is that the overwhelming ethos of summit demonstrations is the commitment to non-hierarchical organisation, and also to direct action, which goes beyond such orthodox protest forms as letters, petitions and rallies. This is anarchism in action, and many of those peaceful protesters who do not explicitly think of themselves as anarchists are nonetheless enacting the spirit and principles of anarchism.

Stalwarts of the Left have not easily acknowledged this overwhelming imprint of anarchism on the anti-globalisation movement. This was underlined by an American anthropologist, David Graeber, writing in the Marxist journal New Left Review. Graeber, a professor at Yale University and a founder of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence, notes the gulf between participants of the emerging
movement and the old theorists of the Left who have for years been writing about ‘vast social movements that do not in fact exist’ (Graeber, 2002: 61). Such theorists find themselves confused or dismissive now that real movements are everywhere emerging. Graeber sees such theorists as either more liberal than they want to admit, or not entirely happy about having to accept that most of the creative energy for radical politics is now coming from anarchism – a tradition that they have hitherto mostly dismissed – and that taking this movement seriously will necessarily also mean a respectful engagement with it (Graeber, 2002: 61–2).

Graeber sees anarchism as ‘the heart of the movement, its soul’ (p. 62). He counters those critics who criticise the anti-globalisation movement for its lack of any central theme or coherent ideology. For him, the ‘ideology’ that connects those involved is the notion of reinventing democracy and daily life, with new forms of decentralised, non-hierarchical organisation. Graeber defines the anti-globalisation movement as a movement for global justice and against neoliberalism and corporate globalisation and he cites the following declaration by Subcomandante Marcos on behalf of the Zapatista movement: “Let it be a network of voices that resist the war Power wages on them. A network of voices that not only speak, but also struggle and resist for humanity and against neoliberalism” (Graeber, 2002: 63).

Selected highlights and raised stakes

I turn now at the highlights of the main summit events, and changes in the use of space in the last few years. This introduces the symbolic and direct action involved, and the way in which the stakes are raised at each event, as numbers grow and police repression intensifies.

Seattle, United States, November 1999

Tens of thousands of people converge to demonstrate against the WTO. There are 200 activists dressed as green-blue-black sea turtles, marching beneath a huge inflatable turtle. Others are dressed as business tycoons on stilts, alongside monarch butterflies, vegetables, fish and pigs. Drummers beat out the rhythms of resistance in what was to become a significant element in major summit protests. Messages on banners and placards highlight the diversity of those present, with radical environmental groups alongside indigenous rights groups and so on (Slyk, 2002: 56).

The Direct Action Network has co-ordinated nonviolent direct action by ten thousand people to stop delegates entering the convention centre. The delegates to the conference are significantly outnumbered and those caught on video (RIP WTO, 2000) look confused, as though for the first time having their power challenged and their legitimacy stripped away.

The protests succeed in winding up the conference early. The world, through
the media, sees people voice their concerns about globalisation, and sees the ‘Robocop’-style riot police attempt to crush them.

Prague, Czech Republic, September 2000

The conference centre where the World Bank and International Monetary Fund are meeting is heavily sealed off. The demonstration organises itself in different sections, identified by colours denoting the different tactics. For example, the Yellow section consists mainly of the Italian Tute Bianche and the Pink and Silver section consists of a samba band, then recently formed in London, with dancers and people mainly from Britain’s Earth First! and Reclaim the Streets network. One participant describes the Pink and Silver section as ‘like marching along the streets with the contents of your local nightclub crossed with It’s a Knockout and an anarcho version of Dad’s Army’ (Do or Die, 2000: 12).

Attempts to push through police lines to reach the conference are met with police repression and arrests (although some demonstrators are successfully ‘de-arrested’ by fellow activists). The Pink and Silver section finds an entrance to the conference centre guarded only by a few ordinary police who temporarily retreat as pink fairies flash wands and feather dusters at them. Moments later the police lash out with truncheons (Channel 4 News, 26 September 2000).

Gothenburg, Sweden, June 2001

The year 2001 sees escalations in summit protests, numbers of protesters and police repression. At the European Union summit in Gothenburg, police surround a school that, by agreement with authorities, is to be used as a convergence centre for protesters. Police refuse to let people out.

On the following day, thousands of protesters attempt to reach the EU conference centre down a narrow street. Police attack with dogs and horses. The tone then is set for the demonstration, with mounting anger in some of the protests. Police seem out of control, using live ammunition and shooting three protesters. The 19-year-old son of a member of Doctors against Nuclear Weapons is shot in the back while standing alone, many metres from police, from whom he was turning away. He fights for his life, recovering after losing a kidney and his spleen. Protesters charged with violence are given prison sentences of up to five years whereas, prior to the anti-globalisation protests, sentences averaged one month.

Demonstrators never get near the conference centre.

Genoa, Italy, July 2001

Three hundred thousand demonstrators converge for the ‘G8’ (Group of Eight most economically developed nations) summit. A thirty-foot high fence is erected around a large zone surrounding the conference centre. Attempts to get near the fence are met with police water cannon.
Protests around the city are met with the worst police brutality for many years. Hundreds of protesters are truncheoned by police, with the resulting head wounds caught on video by activists for the Indymedia group. There is footage of lone protesters, despite their pleas and cries, being mercilessly beaten by police. One protester, Carlo Giuliani, the 23-year old son of a trade union official, is shot dead.

In all this, amidst intense tear gas from canisters fired by police, the different sections attempt to carry on with their chosen themes, from the Pink and Silver carnivalesque to the hundreds of Tute Bianche with their white overalls, padding and makeshift armour.

Post-11 September and anti-capitalism

After 11 September 2001, and the severe repression of civil liberties, the media declares the movement dead. Nonetheless, a demonstration in January in Washington DC, at the World Economic Forum summit, attracts 30,000 people. This is in spite of media hysteria and demonisation of the protests in the run-up to it.

A European Union summit in Barcelona on 17 March 2002 sees a resurgence of demonstrators, mainly local people, numbering 300,000, despite the number of protesters, for example from Portugal, stopped at the border in a severe clampdown. The conference centre, well outside the city, is sealed off.

In June 2002, the G8 summit is held in a venue chosen for its isolation and impenetrability – in the wilderness area of Kananaskis, near Calgary, Alberta, Canada. This is as inaccessible as Doho in Qatar, chosen for the WTO conference the previous November.

In order to hold their meetings and further the agenda of globalisation, the holders of power have had to retreat further and further away from city centres into more and more inaccessible and fortified places behind higher and higher fences.

Interpreting summit demonstrations

These summit demonstrations can be usefully analysed by drawing on the works of the American anarchist, feminist and witch Starhawk and the American theologian Butigan.

Starhawk sees summit demonstrations as allowing a central drama to unfold which provides a key ‘teachable’ moment to emerge. As the author of numerous books on anarchism, spirituality and magic, she sees the summit demonstrations, of which she has been a prominent participant, as providing a moment of learning, of breaking through apathy. While local struggles are important, she argues, their gains can be erased in a moment by the WTO, World Bank, IMF, G8 ‘and all their alphabet-soup brethren’. She maintains that the places where
the system can be challenged as a whole are the summit meetings of the élite, where protesters can also build alliances that can strengthen their work (Starhawk, 2002a).

In Starhawk’s view, the summit actions create mass moments, where the shell of apathy that normally makes people resistant to news can be cracked. The drama, excitement and urgency of such actions draws attention and wakes people up. Without a central drama going on somewhere in the world, she argues, decentralised local protests draw only the faithful, and their impact can be magnified when a large action is taking place, concentrating media and global attention.

Butigan frames anti-globalisation demonstrations in terms of modern pilgrimages, which allow the familiar to be ‘defamiliarised’, exposing the brutality behind the juggernaut of globalisation. He refers to the Seattle events as a ‘pilgrimage of transformation’ – with pilgrimage as a process by which humans mobilise themselves in loving and relentless resistance, a process of ‘bearing witness’ to injustices and woundedness (Butigan, 2000: 46).

Butigan puts Seattle in a line of twentieth-century modern pilgrimages, from Gandhi’s 1930 march to the sea to challenge the British monopoly on salt to Martin Luther King’s 1965 pilgrimage to demand voting rights for African Americans. When tens of thousands of people journeyed to Seattle to protest against the injustice of the WTO, these modern pilgrims were drawn to

a place that momentarily intersected with history and challenged its crushing inevitability. The urgency of this journey came from a deep intuition that the great web of violence in which we are caught today is run by large economic and political forces, and that the instructions for this ‘web design’ were about to be codified in a very few short days. (Butigan, 2000: 46)

He argues that the concerns of these ‘modern pilgrims’ go beyond the political and are deeply cultural and profoundly spiritual: those travelling to Seattle also came to reclaim lost parts of themselves and to affirm the sacredness of the earth and the integrity of the earth and indigenous peoples. The events in Seattle, he argues:

broke the spell of the inevitability and unquestioned authority of global capital, and this in turn has laid the groundwork for a process of social and cultural transformation which has the potential to make the world more just, more ecologically sensitive, and ultimately a more peaceful place. (at p. 47)

The role of the symbolic: symbolic spaces and symbolic opposition

The insights of Starhawk and Butigan are also useful for understanding the power of the symbolic in this process of defamiliarisation.

The holders of power exploit, to a large extent unconsciously, symbolic forms in order to create, reinforce and legitimate particular systems. This is primarily
achieved through the control of space, and it is how these spaces are contested—both materially and symbolically—that makes the anti-capitalist movement such a powerful force.

It is important to remember that our daily experience of space is one saturated with capitalist social relations and premised on an exploitative relationship with the natural world. Many of us live in residential streets built when the railways allowed the suburbs to expand, enabling people to work further from home in urban environments designed to facilitate manufacture, business and trade. The concentration of capital in our city centres reflects a planning system that is more devoted to the speedy movement of goods and workers than to the health and survival of local communities. It is easy to forget that for tens of thousands of years of our existence as Homo sapiens we had the right to land, food, water, shelter, culture and community, simply by being born into that community. Bit by bit, the history of complex and State society has seen the removal of this autonomy. We now work to pay for all the basic constituents of our lives, and for those distractions (consumerism, entertainment) that rush in to fill the gaps left by capitalism’s rapid erosion of vital elements to our well-being—including a relationship with nature and the environment. We find ourselves in these built-up urban spaces or deserted agricultural monocultures, alienated from each other and the natural world which has been sanitised or concreted over.

This is the visible world we inhabit, and it is the ‘defamiliarisation’ and breaking open of these routinised ways of life which is so significant about contemporary protest strategies. One way of looking at these processes is through the symbolic challenges that took place on May Day in London during the years 2000 to 2002.

May Days in London

The theme of May Day 2000 is ‘Guerilla Gardening’. The aim is to plant seeds and plants anywhere and everywhere, but most people aim for one convergence point on the grass of Parliament Square, a patch of grass normally hemmed in by traffic and by vast buildings, and transform it into a muddy garden with plants and a pond. The police have soaked the grass beforehand to make it muddy and difficult, hampering gardening efforts. The police squeeze people into one place, tempers begin to flare and a McDonald’s becomes the scene of ‘hamburger liberation’. In what was to become a famous piece of détournement by turf, the statue of Winston Churchill is given a punk mohican hairstyle made out of grass. A moment of inversion is created in turf. Churchill, Britain’s leader through World War II, and responsible for the deaths of many thousands of German civilians in what many see as the unnecessary bombing raids on Dresden and other German cities, is transformed into a punk—the inversion of authority figure to rebel, powerful to powerless. The image lives on, used by anarchists on flyers and other literature (e.g. on the flyer for the Anarchist Book Fair in London, October 2000, with the caption ‘His finest hour’).
For 2001, the theme is May Day Monopoly, using the boardgame as inspiration. The idea is to converge on Oxford Street, London’s famous central shopping area. Expression is curtailed when police round demonstrators into a ‘Section 60’, a method increasingly used to contain protests, whereby police lines surround demonstrators and detain them. Demonstrators are trapped in Oxford Circus for hours without water, food, toilets or shelter from the rain. Symbolic action is thus limited elsewhere to smaller convergences, such as Critical Mass cyclists who take over certain roads, and a group of people with a samba band.

All plans for May Day 2002 are geared to minimising the risk of a ‘Section 60’ by police. The meeting point for the Anarchist Travelling Circus, and other carnivalesque themes, is Mayfair, a huge area flanked by some of London’s ‘ritziest’ streets – Park Lane, Oxford Street, Regent Street and Piccadilly. The idea is to keep moving to prevent the police trapping people. A thousand people manage to find each other and converge (though many wander about without being lucky enough to find the main congregation). The atmosphere is one of glee and mirth at setting the terms of the meander around the streets of Mayfair.

A ‘gameball’ theme is effected along Oxford Street; people throw inflatable balls up for anyone to catch and pass along. Traffic is held up wherever the march goes. Without the traffic and the hectic shoppers, the streets are quiet and serene. Onlookers look more bemused and curious than hostile: the raggle taggle mêlée of purposeful players reclaims the space on their terms – not for consumerism, traffic or capitalist bureaucratic administration, but for play, enabling the throng of people united in wanting transformation to experience being together in reclaimed space.

May Day analysed as carnival and inversion

‘Carnival’ as a tool of analysis is a popular form in contemporary academia, in which the work of twentieth-century Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his writings on Rabelais are mined for the last possible iota of relevance to contemporary phenomena. For Bakhtin, carnival offers the experience of utopian freedom, community and equality, with a challenge to officialdom which is a ‘contained subversion of dominant forces’ rather than a real threat (Edgar and Sedgewick, 2002: 15).

May Day anarchist carnivals – and, as I show below, the symbolic actions on large summit demonstrations – are ‘contained’ in the sense that they are temporary and exist for the duration of the demonstration. On the other hand, they are not licensed in the way that official carnivals are, and so the experience of anarchist and anti-capitalist carnival is less ‘contained’ and bound up with the world of officialdom. Authorities and officials do not prepare their way, although, in the case of large summit demonstrations, permission is sought to use buildings such as schools as convergence points.

A key theme in carnival is the notion of ‘inversion’ – the exchange of roles. In medieval times, the king played the fool for a day and the people donned the
king’s clothes. In the May Days, the inversion of Churchill by turf, from ‘states-
man’ to ‘punk’, continues the tradition of Rabelais’s carnival. For the 2002 May
Day meander by the Anarchist Travelling Circus, the space of one of the new
rulers of the world – the car – is inverted and reclaimed. The fancy dress and the
inflatable balls connote play, inverting the roles of consumer and the stereotypes
of ‘powerful bureaucrat with suit’. The people are back for the day of carnival,
and on their own terms, not those of capital. The May Day carnivalesque is not
‘contained’ and legitimised: it counters and steps outside of the conventional and
licensed format of parliamentary protest (i.e. in London, the march from Park
Lane to Trafalgar Square for speeches); and it goes beyond the licensed world of
official carnival. It challenges more deeply the routines of power and the use of
space. The disruption of the routine of modern existence is a moment in which
‘the familiar is defamiliarised’.

Extending the interpretation to the large summit demonstrations

Large summit demonstrations (Starhawk’s ‘central dramas’) contain the ele-
ments discussed above and more, with so many thousands of anti-globalisation
demonstrators converging from near and far (Butigan’s ‘modern pilgrims’). The
costumes and guises speak their message with rich symbolism.

In Seattle, November 1999, people converged dressed as turtles, butterflies,
vegetables and fish. This symbolism of other species was an affirmation of their
existence, and expressed opposition to the decimation of the natural world by
policies of trade liberalisation and globalisation. A grim skeleton with a gas
mask spelt out the effect of capitalism on its subject with the painted words
‘Pollution Casualty’.

Ludic parody is used to expose and ridicule the conventions of bureaucracy
and repressive society: tuxedo-dressed and evening-gowned ‘Billionaires for
Bush’ pressed wads of money into policemen’s pockets, thanking them for
repressing dissent in a situationist-style tactic designed to subvert and confuse
power and authorities. The Revolutionary Anarchist Clowns subverted the
police’s expectations of them by pretending to attack each other. They also sub-
verted and parodied the standardised chants of traditional Trotskyists and other
Leftists, shouting ‘Three word chant!’ and ‘Call! Response!’, satirising the con-
tained and predictable behaviour of orthodox demonstrations and marches
(Graeber, 2002: 66–7).

In Quebec at the ‘Summit of the Americas’, in April 2001, demonstrators built
a huge medieval catapult and lobbed soft toys from it. They also used hockey
sticks to return tear gas canisters back to police lines. The use of soft toys as
launcher ‘ammunition’, and the use of the tools of play (hockey sticks) in a
defensive role, subverts and inverts the roles of play and defence. Such carniva-
lesque inversions of weapons and toys are a well-established element of anti-glo-
balisation protests, with the Italian Tute Bianche and the related London
Wombles characteristically using inflatable weapons and makeshift armour made from cardboard, to protect themselves from the police. 

As Graeber notes:

Where once it seemed that the only alternatives to marching along with signs were either Gandhian non-violent civil disobedience or outright insurrection, groups like the Direct Action Network, Reclaim the Street, ‘Black Block’ or Tute Bianche have all, in their own ways, been trying to map out a completely new territory in between. They’re attempting to invent what many call a ‘new language’ of civil disobedience, combining elements of street theatre, festival and what can only be called non-violent warfare – non-violent in the sense adopted by, say, ‘Black Block’ anarchists, in that it eschews any direct physical harm to human beings. (Graeber, 2002: 66)

The last tactic referred to concerns property damage of key symbols of capitalism – banks, shop fronts, cars – carried out by the ‘Black Block’. The ‘Black Block’ has its origins in a number of European anarchist and Western anti-nuclear movements of the 1980s, and is a tactic and concept, not a group, since anyone can participate. Paul Hawken sees the smashing of windows by the ‘Black Block’ in Seattle as a tactic ‘intended to break the spells cast by corporate hegemony, an attempt to shatter the smooth exterior façade that covers corporate crime and violence’ (Hawken, 2000: 25). Here again is the image of breaking the spell, another symbolic act to disrupt and expose routinised ways of life. This is also echoed by Brian S., a participant in the demonstrations in Genoa, in July 2001. He describes locals out on the streets afterwards exploring the burned ruins of banks and cars:

People were picking at a melted/smashed banking machine, curious to see what one looks like from the inside . . . In a weird way, it seemed as if everyone was totally fascinated and unable to speak. No one was really condemning it or shaking their heads. It was more like bewilderment and curiosity. It’s not often that one gets to see what lies behind the sleek machines and walls that run our lives. (Brian S., 2001: 20)

Graeber stresses the way in which such tactics do not cause injury to people or animals and argues that what really disturbs the powers-that-be is not the “violence” of the movement but its relative lack of it; governments simply do not know how to deal with an overtly revolutionary movement that refuses to fall into familiar patterns of armed resistance’ (Graeber, 2002: 66).

The tactics of large summit demonstrations combine direct action with symbolic action. Direct action with the goal of shutting down the talks was successful only in Seattle. Since Prague (September 2000) police and military have prevented demonstrators from reaching the summit centres. However, a wide spectrum of symbolic acts serve to temporarily reclaim space for the people.

Many of the direct action methods which characterise the anti-capitalist movement have been inspired by and learnt from those in the global South, which is a theme to which I now turn.
The influence of the global South

Many people date the inception of the anti-globalisation movement to the uprising of the Zapatistas in 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) pushed through policies designed to open Mexico up for globalisation and US-subsidised food imports, destroying local indigenous economies. Direct action in the global North has drawn on techniques of resistance and nonviolent civil disobedience invented in the global South, from tree-hugging to Gandhian-style direct action against corporations.

The large summit demonstrations are organised by existing non-hierarchical networks local to each summit conference. Examples are: the Genoa Social Forum for the G8 Summit, July 2001; the INPEG\(^4\) in Prague, September 2000; and the Direct Action Network in Seattle, November 1999. These global networks are co-ordinated under the auspices of the People’s Global Action (PGA), formalised at the anti-WTO meeting in Geneva Switzerland in May 1998. Groups involved include the Southern Indian KRRS (Karnataka Raiya Ryota Sanghe) farmers, Bolivian movements against privatisation, the Canadian Postal Workers Union, and direct action and anarchist groups in Europe.

There is a strong input into anti-globalisation, then, not only in general from pre-existing grassroots movements of the global South, but also from agrarian, ‘peasant’ and indigenous peoples’ movements, each with their own protest histories and repertoires.

In the North, one prominent figure concerned with the agrarian dimension in anti-globalisation is José Bové, long-time oppositional activist, French farmer and producer of cheese. Bové is involved with the Confédération Paysanne, a movement of small farmers for sustainable agriculture. Bové made international media headlines in August 1999 when he was involved in an action to disrupt the building of a new McDonald’s branch in Millau, southern France where he lives. Although Confédération Paysanne does possess some nationalistic elements, it is broadly libertarian and Bové cites anarchism as a key influence, alongside non-violent action strategies as advocated by Martin Luther King, and Gandhi’s notion of powerful symbolic actions as part of mass struggle.

Another important global network, of which the Confédération Paysanne is a part, is La Via Campesina, an international movement co-ordinating peasant organisations and agrarian and indigenous communities in Asia, Africa, America and Europe. Delegates from both the Confédération Paysanne and La Via Campesina participate in large summit demonstrations such as at Seattle.

The Indian Karnataka farmers’ movement, the KRRS is also involved in La Via Campesina. It is a Gandhian movement that works to realise the ‘village republic’ – autonomous, self-reliant, fully participatory village communities. The KRRS have been active since the early 1990s in opposing neoliberalism and organisations promoting it, such as the WTO. Their formulations of direct action and civil disobedience against corporations such as Monsanto have been inspirational in the anti-globalisation movement. The KRRS physically dismantled the seed
unit of a plant of American corporation, Cargill, in Karnataka. They also occupied a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet.

In 1999, the Karnataka farmers organised a ‘caravan’ across Europe to protest against multinational and ‘free trade’ institutions, and to meet others involved in common struggles. The caravan consisted of twenty buses, restored and driven by European volunteers across eight countries, and supported by local host communities (including some squatting networks).

The significance of peasant, agrarian and indigenous peoples’ movements to anarchism and the anti-globalisation movement

The significance of peasant and agrarian ways of life to anarchism is sometimes overlooked. Marxists look mainly to urbanised working-class or national struggles for their ‘revolutionary subjects’, many despising peasants as much as they do anarchists. Anarchists, on the other hand, have often seen peasant and agrarian ways of life as examples of anarchism in action. Murray Bookchin, though devoted to modernity and municipalism, nonetheless stresses the communal and self-reliant basis of peasant communities in late medieval Europe (Bookchin, 1996b: 24–5) as well as better-known examples like the seventeenth-century English Diggers movement. Bookchin (1994: 10–11) also attests to the importance of agrarian pre-capitalist structures of the Spanish countryside as both vitally nourishing and being nourished by anarchism in the decades prior to the Civil War. This was also true of nineteenth-century Russia which boasted a considerable peasant populism based around the ‘mir’, followed by the Makhnovist-organised agrarian communes in post-Revolutionary Ukraine until they were crushed by the Bolsheviks. Interestingly, the relative longevity of the agrarian tradition in France is sometimes cited as being one of the reasons behind the extraordinary political mobilisation of ‘May 1968’. According to Bookchin (1998: 14–15) the redistribution of land after the French Revolution helped block industrial capitalist development, and maintained a decentralised, self-sufficient, agrarian-based peasant economy highly resistant to manufacturing and large-scale development. Thus even in the mid-twentieth century, France was still relatively backward in terms of the capitalist modernisation process. This has led some participants of ‘May 68’ to suggest that this facilitated a stronger reaction than in other countries in the world.5

Graeber has cited the ‘extraordinary importance’ of indigenous peoples’ struggles in the anti-globalisation movement, and notes that: ‘it almost always seems to be peasants and craftsmen – or, even more, newly proletarianised former peasants and craftsmen – who actually overthrow capitalist regimes; and not those inured to generations of wage labour’ (Graeber, 2002: 73). With new communication technologies, it is possible now, he argues, for indigenous peoples’ movements to be included in global revolutionary alliances, and they should play a profoundly inspirational role.
There is certainly a long history of radical peasant revolts in Europe, though many have been crushed and their gains have been limited. Graeber’s point that most of us in the industrialised world have been wage labourers for so long that we barely notice it and that this has narrowed our visions of future possibilities is an important one. However, I would extend this argument by highlighting the stark contrasts between the industrialised world and small-scale agrarian, peasant and other indigenous traditional ways of life, to ask whether the kind of critiques offered by anti-capitalists and anarchists go far enough.

**A critique of industrialism and modernisation**

Anarchists and anti-globalisation activists are united in their opposition to neoliberalism, and in their defence of the right of people to keep their indigenous, smaller-scale ways of life. What concerns me, however, is the problem of consistency, in that the majority of anarchists and anti-capitalists envision a more decentralised, more democratic, less environmentally destructive version of a large-scale modern industrial society. In their vision, the large-scale and urbanised structures created for the needs of capitalism, the machines, factories and roads for the (restricted) use of motorised transport would remain, albeit in a less rampant form.

This is a view shared by the Marxist writers Hardt and Negri, whose book *Empire* (2000) attempts to analyse the contemporary world system and to understand the rise of the anti-globalisation movement, or what they refer to as the politics of ‘the multitude’. Yet, here too, according to Los Ricos, is a clear position on ideas of progress:

> Tracing the corrupt roots of civilisation could have led to an anti-civilisation tendency within a Marxist doctrine. That would be heresy, though. The thought that civilisation was a wrong turn in the evolution of *Homo sapiens* is a blasphemy against everything progressive-minded people believe. Western civilisation is the logical, only possible course for human development. Never mind the rivers of blood and the spreading desertification, deforestation and homogenisation of ecosystems civilisation has brought to the world. (2001: 24)

Similar assumptions exist behind the ‘participatory economic’ theories (or ‘parecon’) of writers such as Michael Albert (2002), who envisions processes of democratisation of economics taking place within a large-scale industrial society.

This critique of modern Western civilisation and the ‘progressivists’ who take it as given, requires different relationships with the land by those in the global North and a more explicit critique of modern industrialisation. Such a critique intersects with the strands often referred to as ‘primitivist’, ‘anti-civilisation’ or ‘anti-technological’. These positions draw on the deep past as an analytic tool.

Radical anthropologists such as Stanley Diamond (1983) and Marshall Sahlins (1972) have argued that human existence is characterised for all but the last frac-
tion of its history by guaranteed access to all the elements of livelihood – culture, community, land, water, food and shelter. Hierarchical relations, ranging from the ‘big man’ to the ‘king’, result in differential access to the fruits of people’s work. As Sahlins has showed, left to their own devices, people will produce for their own subsistence needs unless forced to produce a surplus for the powerful. The more intensely hierarchical societies are based on slavery (a constituent of early ‘civilisations’ such as those of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, but also less bureaucratic societies such as those of ‘Iron Age’ Europe).

With the advent of industrial capitalism, imperialism and finally globalisation, there is a rupture, a breakout of what in non-capitalist societies is a fundamental connection between person, land and livelihood. Industrial capitalism began in England, where enclosure of land gathered pace from the eighteenth century onwards, and the number of landless labourers swelled rapidly. The pace was accelerated in the nineteenth century, when cheap food imports further threatened the stability of agriculture, and when agricultural labourers, no longer able to find work, were forced to seek employment in cities and factories. This process is the same one happening now in the global South, such as in the Chiapas in southern Mexico, where farmers are becoming wage slaves in tunacanning factories.

‘Anti-civilisation’ thinking extends the anarchist critique of capitalism and the State to include a critique of large-scale systems, industrialism and modern technology. Los Ricos (2002: 25), for example, suggests that a key motivation of people in the Russian, Mexican, Chinese, Vietnamese and American revolutions was the desire to grow their own crops and control their land rather than control the industry created by the imperial powers. Such an argument therefore has consequences for thinking about revolution and how it often depends on particular notions of ‘progress’.

**Reclaiming a relationship to land and livelihood**

The implication of the above position is that both the North and the South need to engage in a process of de-industrialisation, reclaiming land and reinstigating a direct and participatory relationship with the environment, with our livelihoods, from food to water to shelter, and smaller-scale communities with locally-based economies. A number of steps can assist this.

**Permaculture**

Since the human population in all but a few regions of the world is too dense to enable a return to gathering and hunting, we will require a form of horticulture and animal ‘husbandry’ to provide for our needs. Permaculture, a method of diverse crop-planting based on perennial plants and working in harmony with regional conditions, can enrich both monocultural agricultural land and urban-
ised spaces, and could play an important role both in the here and now and in a transitional period to social and economic transformation. It is a method of land use which can even enrich environments for other species, and, with its principles of multi-tiered cropping (including trees and shrubs), can facilitate the emergence of areas of wilderness, even in the most innocuous settings.

Technology

Technological ‘advancement’ and machinery are essential to capitalism, since competition between businesses to survive creates a dynamic of continual innovation. While some anarchists argue that technology is neutral, many now see technology as highly deterministic, as shaping and constituting a particular way of life and social environment. One of the main exponents of this position is David Watson (1999), long-time writer for the US journal *Fifth Estate*, which draws on the work of Lewis Mumford (1969) and Jacques Ellul (1965) to develop a critique of civilisation and technological society. Ellul (1965) argued that contemporary societies were technological rather than capitalist (see Millett, in chapter 4, for a full treatment of this position) and that they organised our consciousness in terms of the oppressive technological systems. Mumford (1969) contrasted ‘democratic technics’ – technology under the control of the craftsman or farmer – with ‘authoritarian technics’, the form of technology which predominates once the bulk of the agrarian population are forced from the land into factories in cities. Authoritarian technics allows a more complex suppression of pre-capitalist communities and their associated value systems, and the final ascendancy of the State-economic/technological complex.

Countering capitalist relations therefore means reclaiming our relationship with the land and each other; undoing the enclosures and reclaiming the commons and access to land and livelihood. Attitudes to technology must be consistent with this and must transcend commonplace arguments such as ‘it is not cars that are the problem, but car culture’. The emerging strand of anti-technological anarchism suggests that it is indeed cars that are the problem; and cars are but one aspect of the complex of machines, factories, mines, quarries that constitute alienated life and the degradation of the earth.

When so much is being taken away by the intensifying globalisation process, it is easy to overlook the genuine small-scale initiatives that have occurred. However, in the wake of the attacks on America on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent ‘War on Terrorism’ the opportunities and possibilities for these autonomous ways of living are by no means certain.

Post-11 September 2001 and the international political scene

The repression of dissent and curtailing of civil liberties – through legislation like the US ‘Patriot Act’ – that escalated after 11 September 2001, had, in reality,
already begun before. For example, in a report to the US Congress in May 2001, the FBI had earmarked the ‘carnival against capitalism’ as well as Reclaim the Streets as part of a potential terrorist threat. Yet 11 September successfully distracted attention away from issues that had previously been gaining ground in the months before, such as the US refusal to sign the 1997 Kyoto Protocol (intended to reduce the effects of global warming), even in its watered-down-to-ineffectual state and its embrace of carbon trading. Where the summer of 2001 had seen a growing disquiet about climate change, with numerous demonstrations in London, the aftermath of 11 September saw most energy diverted to ‘Stop the War’ (against Afghanistan) movements and the ‘human shield’ initiative by International Solidarity Movement activists in Palestine.

The principles of anarchist philosophy, however, are more relevant than ever, as successive summits revealed governments shirking any responsibilities towards maintaining peace and towards halting environmental and climate degradation. In the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, August 2002, there was a mass protest by those attending a speech by US Secretary of State, Colin Powell: his speech was met with continual jeers, and a banner proclaimed ‘Betrayed by Governments’.

The US military build-up and propaganda for the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq is redolent of German Nazi military build-up. An American television advertisement proclaims the US Army to be ‘the best in the world’. ‘America Über Alles’ is a slogan seen on the Internet in critical commentaries. The collapse of the former super-power rival, the communist bloc, and the integration of Russia and China into the global marketplace, is widely seen as leaving the United states with no constraints on its drive for economic and military domination. For one vice-admiral of the American military ‘the Cold War ended on September 11, and from now on the main fight will be over globalisation . . . the task for the US is to defeat the enemies of globalisation’ (Newsnight, 23 May 2002).

Globalisation has become a buzzword for modernisation, development and global market dominated by US and/or Western interests in the ‘free trade’ system of neoliberalism. Nation states increasingly show themselves to be acting in the interest of international finance and capital, even as they destroy environments and local indigenous and traditional cultures. The holders of power are increasingly exposed as having only the interests of power at heart. As Mr Social Control notes:

In a world governed by stock prices the buck stops nowhere. It passes from Tokyo to London to New York and back to Tokyo again. Why should they care if the whole world is turned into a radiation soaked desert? If no human beings can ever see the light of day with their own eyes? What does it mean to them if every beautiful and useless creature in the world is exterminated forever? If we are reduced to drinking our own piss miles underground, dependent on them for every breath of oxygen we take? And if they are willing to save the biosphere at this late hour then why do the greenest amongst them proclaim that the rainforests should be rescued only in order that the plants be used to make herbal shampoo? If they care about
the quality of life that their underlings lead, then why are millions starving in the south to feed the debts imposed by the bank in the north? The truth is that the ecological disasters would be a stroke of luck for those that benefit from the domination of our lives. (Mr Social Control, early 1990s – no specific date)

The more radical strands of the anti-globalisation movement recognise the force of domination that is destroying people’s autonomy across the globe. The alliance of primarily urban movements of the North with peasant and indigenous movements of the South is a significant innovation. The network recognises that people’s land, water and food is being sold to the highest bidder. The pursuit of power and profit by the few, always the leitmotif of industrial capitalism, now runs more and more out of control.

A recognition of the need all over the world to reclaim the elements of life, there for us humans for the first 100,000 years of our existence on the planet, is a vital element in all oppositional movements. This will inevitably involve the gradual recreation of more agrarian, more local and smaller-scale ways of life. Anti-globalisation and anarchist demonstrations of current years continually re-enact this reclamation of space in urban environments: examples are the UK anti-road protest movements of the 1990s, and those opposing genetically modified crops, quarries, mines, dams and other development projects. Grassroots movements for self-determination such as the Zapatistas in Mexico continue to give inspiration to similar struggles across the world.

Conclusions

Anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements, with their commitment to non-hierarchical organisation, symbolic action and carnival, and their direct action, are highly visible examples of anarchism in action. It is difficult for traditional theorists of the Marxist Left fully to acknowledge the significance of anarchism as the leitmotif of anti-globalisation, the most important oppositional movements for many years. Anarchist and anti-capitalist demonstrations reclaim, albeit temporarily, space and disrupt the routine of modern capitalist living, allowing moments that expose, delegitimate and challenge those routines.

Agrarian ‘peasant’ movements of the global South also form a significant component of the anti-globalisation movement, which recognises the importance of helping defend traditional and indigenous ways of life from the onslaught of globalisation. These can be usefully located within the rural and peasant aspects of anarchist history.

Anti-globalisation activists need to take on board the current commonality of all humans on the planet, whereby those of us who are not part of the financial elite are reduced to the status of wage slaves. What is happening now in the Chiapas, southern Mexico, is an accelerated version of the process carried out in Europe in the last few centuries. It is important to block these ‘development’ schemes driven through by globalisation, but it is also vital to ‘undevelop’ the
modernised, industrialised world and to create smaller-scale social relations and local economies. This is increasingly recognised within strands of anarchism that challenge the entire premise of industrial civilisation and modern technology, not just hierarchy, capitalism and the State.

Despite the post-11 September clampdowns and intimidation, anarchists and anti-globalisation movements have shown resilience and have continued to speak out and demonstrate. It is easy for the public to turn a blind eye to horror in the world and the threat to life from environmental degradation and global warming. Consumer and media lifestyle culture seduces them to console themselves with reading about celebrities, or purchasing new cars and mobile phones. The reality is that the worship of money, technology, consumer goods, modernisation and development is not creating happiness. The domination of nature and of humans has left a gaping void in people that no amount of spectacular glitter, speed and technology can fill.

As a contrast, here are the words of Luther Standing Bear, chief of the Native American Oglala Sioux:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with . . . tangled growth as ‘wild’. Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’, and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it ‘wild’ to us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was that for us the ‘Wild West’ began. (cited in Hoff, 1994: 297–8)

Notes

1 Contrary to many accounts, Seattle was not the first demonstration against the WTO; rather they began in Geneva, Switzerland during 18–20 May 1998.
2 It’s a Knockout and Dad’s Army are British television programmes from the 1970s; the former was a popular game show, the latter a comedy set during the Second World War.
3 These include Dreaming the dark: magic, sex and politics (Boston: Beacon, 1988) and Truth or dare: encounters with power, authority and mystery (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1988).
4 INPEG is a Czech acronym for the alliance Initiative Against Economic Globalisation, formed in September 1999 (see Chesters and Welsh, 2002).
5 This argument was offered by S. Hayes (2000).
6 The FBI Pressroom statement to Congress can be found at www.fbi.gov/congress/congress01/freeh051001.htm.