

Police Lessons

By Starhawk

I've been doing a lot of thinking about Seattle and DC and the lessons both we and the police might learn from them. Just as we're able to organize internationally, so are the police. And just as we're drawing lessons from the last months of action, so will they be. Unfortunately, I think we can expect them to learn the wrong lessons from Seattle and DC.

In Seattle the police essentially ran amuck. They not only tear gassed and pepper sprayed us, they tear gassed whole neighborhoods of the city, rounded up and arrested people who weren't even part of the demonstration, and were still ineffective (probably their worst sin) in keeping the windows of downtown Seattle intact or making sure the WTO meeting could go on.

Why were they were unprepared for a blockade that was planned in open meetings for months ahead? My own personal theory is that our style of organization appeared to be so chaotic and was so different from what they see as organized that they just didn't see us as a threat. Both the Seattle and DC blockades were organized in a decentralized fashion, with affinity groups who could make autonomous decisions on the street. Affinity groups sent representatives to a larger spokescouncil before the action which could coordinate what we were doing and make larger decisions. We also had Tactical and Communications working groups who came up with the basic scenario -- to surround the Convention Center, to have affinity groups commit to a certain 'pie slice' of the map to defend, and to have 'flying squads' who could move freely as needed.

Believe me, this looked, sounded and felt chaotic while it was being organized, but in practice it worked beautifully. We had thousands of trained activists on the streets who knew just what they were supposed to do to begin with, and who had the flexibility to make decisions and change their plans on the spot to respond to what was happening.

From the police point of view, it was disastrous. They came off looking both brutal and impotent. The city of Seattle was outraged, human rights advocates condemned them, and other police departments wondered how they could screw up so badly and let a few ragged demonstrators run them around.

In DC, the police were more subtle and better prepared. The DC police include something like 50 different police departments, from the Park Police to the Secret Service, but they all share an attitude that "Hey, we're from DC, we deal with demonstrations all the time. No way do you scare us!"

In fact, we did scare them to the point that they essentially turned much of DC into a police state, blocking off 60 square blocks on A16 and 90 square blocks on A17. By then they had grasped the fact that we are actually extremely well organized, albeit in our own anarchic fashion, and that worried them. They were also extremely freaked out by the 'anarchist costume' - black with ski mask or bandanna - (simple, practical, elegant and slenderizing!) and seemed to think that any measures were justified in 'saving the city' from this invasion of dangerous terrorists.

They adopted the following strategies:

Surveillance: they read listserves and perused all the anarchist websites, undoubtedly tapped phones and infiltrated meetings, and probably used informants.

Pre-emptive strikes and illegal arrests: On Saturday A15 they arrested 600 people at a peaceful march, surrounded them, ordered them to disperse and then prevented them from dispersing. That morning they closed down the Convergence Center, just as thousands of new people were arriving to be oriented and trained, confiscated the giant puppets, our medical supplies, and lots of peoples' personal property. Both these actions were illegal. We did get the puppets back before the demonstration, but not the medical supplies. Police Chief Ramsay was quoted as saying the raid on the Convergence center had 'discombobulated' the protestors. In reality, we regrouped quickly and still managed to train thousands of people that day although I ended up doing one training in an alley.

The police also raided a private home and stopped cars, confiscating lockboxes and other blockading equipment.

Propaganda and paranoia: The more we look like terrorists, the more the police look like saviors and the more fancy equipment they can buy with beefed up budgets. So they claimed to have found a Molotov cocktail in the Convergence Center (our painting supplies), vats of homemade pepper spray (the soup for our lunch), etc.

Relatively restrained and localized use of force: The police did use tear gas, pepper spray and did beat people in DC, but mostly in smaller, more localized areas. They did not do vast sweeps through neighborhoods as in

Seattle or attack the general population. Nor did they attempt to clear us all off the streets. Their general strategy was to set up their own barriers, establish their area of control, and then wait us out.

Negotiation: At one crucial moment on A17, Chief Ramsay came down and negotiated a voluntary arrest scenario instead of bringing out the tear gas and nightsticks. He's received a lot of credit for this, and undoubtedly deserves some although in the light of the above I can't quite see him as a great defender of democracy, especially given the brutal treatment the arrestees received in jail.

The truth is, none of these strategies could have stopped a single window from being broken in DC if that is what people had wanted to do. But Chief Ramsay is now being heralded as having 'saved the city', presumably from acts of unspeakable terrorism. The police forces around the US and worldwide are going to be studying these two actions in preparation for the upcoming summer events—and most likely drawing the wrong conclusions: that surveillance, pre-emptive strikes and illegal roundups are the way to go.

What we can expect and what we can do:

Surveillance -- Assume that the police are reading the listserves. (Hello, police -- I hope you at least are getting paid to delete 57 messages a day about the protest in Thailand.) Assume your phones are tapped, and that anything planned in an open, public meeting is known. Classic nonviolent theory accepts this, says, 'Hey, we're proud of what we're doing, we're not afraid of the consequences, and we have nothing to hide.' I personally believe that most large actions are best organized around this philosophy, for a whole number of reasons, surveillance being only one. But if you do want to organize something that depends on surprise, don't do it on the internet, on the phone, or in an open meeting.

Pre-emptive arrests and disruption of our gatherings and meeting places: It may not be illegal yet to be an anarchist, but it may soon become extremely difficult to walk around freely if you look like one. I'm not suggesting you change your clothes or hairstyle—you have an absolute right to look however you want to look. But take extra precautions if you need to and do some careful strategizing about your visibility.

We also need to have backup plans of available spaces for trainings and gatherings (I know it's sometimes hard enough to find one space, let alone alternatives, but we should know what churches or union halls or schools might take us in in an emergency. That's what saved us in DC). We might also consider having several different puppet assembly sites, for example.

And not keeping all the medical equipment, blockading aids or other vital supplies in the same place.

Police overresponse: The Jubilee 2000 folks, the Unions, the Mothers Against Drunk Drivers may still be able to have a big march without police interference, but I think we can assume that anything that looks like a direct action on the Seattle or DC or Mayday model may call forth the nightsticks and tear gas on very little provocation. Again, we simply need to be prepared and alert. If you bring children to a demonstration or have health concerns around tear gas, stay especially alert and keep an eye out for an escape route. Have someone prepared to do support for people who unexpectedly get arrested. Know who you can call for emergency help or to mobilize legal support.

Negotiation: Whether or not we negotiate with the police, and to what extent, is a political decision. The wisdom of negotiation may vary from action to action, city to city, moment to moment. We should bear in mind that it is a possibility at least some police forces are likely to embrace, and know that it may be one of our options.

Our strengths:

One of the purposes of nonviolent direct action is to make the inherent violence of the system visible. Every time the police overreact or arrest us illegally, we have in some measure succeeded. We have many strengths in this movement that we can build on to resist police strategies and violence. Some of them are:

The affinity group model--I don't envy the forces of repression the challenge of trying to stop a movement based on autonomous affinity groups instead of centralized leadership. It's a bit like trying to clear Bermuda grass out of the garden—remove one clump and the others just send out runners and spread. The affinity group/spokescouncil process gives us just enough coordination to be effective while leaving room for great flexibility, spontaneity and creativity in responding to the situation of the moment. The decentralized model of decision making provides an experience of empowerment that can be life changing.

Affinity groups also give us moral, emotional and practical support in an action. And they make it harder for infiltrators and provocateurs to operate. While we've been forming them for these actions, we can build on their strengths by encouraging people to think of them as ongoing groups that might develop areas of special strengths and interests.

Trainings -- the nonviolent direct action trainings make a big difference in how well people stand up to repression. Besides doing them just before an action, we need to develop more networks of trainers and find ways to offer them on an ongoing basis, so people can arrive for an action already prepared. This would also make them harder to disrupt by closing down a centralized space, as in DC. More ongoing training would also help people better face police overreaction in local demonstrations. I'm personally interested in working on this.

Dialogue, consensus and diversity: All of us who have been activists for a long time have seen movements factionalize and splinter. Over the last actions, however, I've seen issues that could have resulted in schisms instead become something to discuss. I've seen a real commitment in people across the spectrum to dialogue about our differences and work out conflicts -- even in the midst of the action itself. If we can continue in this mode, we might be able to avoid some of the mistakes of the past, and we will make it harder for the police to divide us.

Consensus does not mean unanimous agreement. It means we create a forum where all voices can be heard and we can think creatively rather than dualistically about how to reconcile our different needs and visions. If you want a more militant action and I want to bring my infant -- how do we make that work? -- rather than who is right and who is wrong.

We need more ongoing forums for discussion. In the heat of preparation for an action, it's hard to sit down and have a philosophical discussion about what nonviolence really means, or what economic vision we support in place of globalization, or whether property damage is appropriate. And at least some of these discussions need to take place face to face, not just online, where we can actually see and hear the person behind the position.

Courage and commitment: I've been thrilled and moved to see this incredible uprising of people willing to take risks, put themselves on the line, face violence and repression, and not give up. As a middle-aged activist, I'm especially joyful to see so many younger people with such dedication and determination. So many of my generation gave up. If you don't, if you become lifelong activists, then it won't matter what the police do or don't do, we will change the world.

I love you all, Starhawk

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