

# VOTING VS DIRECT ACTION

12  
MYTHS  
DISPELLED  
INSIDE!



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# VOTING VS DIRECT ACTION

from "A Community Non-Partisan Voters' Guide" published in 2004

PEOPLE IN THE U.S. ARE PREOCCUPIED WITH VOTING to an unhealthy degree. This is not to say that everyone votes, or thinks voting is effective or worthwhile; on the contrary, a smaller and smaller proportion of the eligible population votes every election year, and that's not just because more and more people are in prison. But when you broach the question of politics, of having a say in the way things are, voting is just about the only strategy anyone can think of—voting, and influencing others' votes.

Could it be this is why so many people feel so disempowered? Is anonymously checking a box once a year, or every four years, enough to feel included in the political process, let alone play a role in it? But what is there besides voting?

In fact, voting for people to represent your interests is the least efficient and effective means of applying political power. The alternative, broadly speaking, is acting directly to represent your interests yourself.

This is known in some circles as "direct action." Direct action is occasionally misunderstood to mean another kind of campaigning, lobbying for influence on elected officials by means of political activist tactics; but it properly refers to any action or strategy that

cuts out the middle man and solves problems directly, without appealing to elected representatives, corporate interests, or other powers.

Concrete examples of direct action are everywhere. When people start their own organization to share food with hungry folks, instead of just voting for a candidate who promises to solve "the homeless problem" with tax dollars and bureaucracy, that's direct action. When a man makes and gives out fliers addressing an issue that concerns him, rather than counting on the newspapers to cover it or print his letters to the editor, that's direct action. When a woman forms a book club with her friends instead of paying to take classes at a school, or does what it takes to shut down an unwanted corporate superstore in her neighborhood rather than deferring to the authority of city planners, that's direct action, too. Direct action is the foundation of the old-fashioned can-do American ethic, hands-on and no-nonsense. Without it, hardly anything would get done.

In a lot of ways, direct action is a more effective means for people to have a say in society than voting is. For one thing, voting is a lottery—if a candidate doesn't get elected, then all the energy his constituency put into supporting him is wasted, as the power they were hoping he would exercise for them goes

*Given that our lives and our world are occupied territory, that relations of struggle and competition exist on every level in our society because once introduced they tend to replace other relationships: everything then depends on whether we can find ways to reappropriate our own creativity and productivity from this cycle, and thus subvert and abort it.*

Revolution will never be bought at list price. Obviously, we're not going to get our "money's worth" for either our labor or our capital on the "free" market; we have to create situations, as fleeting as need be (for nothing can or should be sustainable, in an unsustainable world), in which we have power over resources that are otherwise out of our hands. We need to learn from those already adept at these practices: the bank robbers, the cheating high school students, junior high students who call in bomb threats in spring, workers who cheat the time clock or use company materials for private projects, office-supply pilferers, suburban adulterers, grill cooks who pull off workers' compensation frauds. With this precious contraband, we contra-bandid can rediscover the folk arts—which we can use both to create new, liberated environments, and to rescue our fellow human beings from the current nightmare.

**FOLK ART** murals, markers, spraypaint, stickers, posters, wheatpaste, stencils, bricks, gasoline and styrofoam . . . The reappropriation, by every individual, of the means (and "right") to transform the environments we live in. The realization that as the fashioning of the world is a collective project, the designing of it must be as well.

**FOLK LORE** stolen photocopies, broadsides, pamphlets, zines, phone trees, discussion groups, oral tradition, independent media networks . . . The circumvention of the mass media by direct, decentralized, and non-hierarchical means of communication. The rejection of History, any History, in the objective sense, in favor of myth and legend and storytelling.

**FOLK MUSIC** *d.i.y.*, punk rock and hip hop and techno music, pirate radio, drum circles, demonstration chants and songs . . . The demystification of the role of musician—the realization that anyone can create an aural environment, that anyone can shape the emotions of her fellows into fear or courage, love or sentimentality, rage or despair—and the subsequent insight that this must be done cooperatively, or else the result will be a dreadful, atonal mess. Thus, the recognition of music-making as the perfect analogy for human relations.

**FOLK SCIENCE** squatting, dampstiering, gardening, inventing, *d.i.y.*, building and plumbing and decorating and printing and repairing . . . The end of specialization—the end of expertise as a commodity in a scarcity economy. The rejection of technology as a deity mediated by an elite priest caste, and of linear "progress" as the sole and unquestionable principle of human history. The realization that each of us can do anything, that it is more valuable to make your own progress than to passively accept or even contribute to a "progress" beyond your control.

**FOLK LOVE** Food Not Bombs, local and international communities, communal living arrangements, community spaces, open relationships, loving friendships, affinity/infantry groups . . . The emergence of mutual aid and emotional support outside the exchange system, for their own sake rather than as a transaction, so that we can build communities which protect and foster individuality and cooperation at once.

**FOLK WAR** demonstrations, squatting, Critical Mass, Reclaim the Streets, the Black Bloc, wildcat strikes, spokescouncil meetings, topless federations . . . The collective establishment of means of defending our individual freedom and autonomy that do not endanger those in the process. The abolition of leaders and orders, even in times of war (like this one), in favor of radically democratic, decentralized or consensus-based strategies of resistance.

# DIRECT ACTION AND MUTUAL-AID SOUND WONDERFUL!

## HOW CAN I GET STARTED?

to someone else. With direct action, you can be sure that your work will offer some kind of results, and the resources you develop in the process, whether those be experience, contacts and recognition in your community, or organizational infrastructure, cannot be taken away from you.

Voting consolidates the power of a whole society in the hands of a few politicians; through force of sheer habit, not to speak of other methods of enforcement, everyone else is kept in a position of dependence. Through direct action, you become familiar with your own resources and capabilities and initiative, discovering what these are and how much you can accomplish.

Voting forces everyone in a movement to try to agree on one platform; coalitions fight over what compromises to make, each faction insists that they know the best way and the others are messing everything up by not going along with their program. A lot of energy gets wasted in these disputes and recriminations.

In direct action, on the other hand, no vast consensus is necessary: different groups can apply different approaches according to what they believe in and feel comfortable doing, which can still interact to form a mutually beneficial whole. People involved in different direct actions have no need to squabble, unless they really are seeking conflicting goals (or years of voting have taught them to fight with anyone who doesn't think exactly as they do). Conflicts over voting often distract from the real issues at hand, as people get caught up in the drama of one party against another, one candidate against another, one agenda against another. With direct action, on the other hand, the issues themselves are raised, addressed specifically, and often resolved.

Voting is only possible when election time comes around. Direct action can be applied whenever one sees fit. Voting is only useful for addressing whatever topics are current in the political agendas of candidates, while direct action can be applied in every aspect of your life, in every part of the world you live in.

Voting is glorified as "freedom" in action. It's not freedom—freedom is getting to decide what the choices are in the first place, not picking between Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Direct action is the real thing. You make the plan, you create the options, the sky's the limit.

Ultimately, there's no reason the strategies of voting and direct action can't both be applied together. One does not cancel the other out. The problem is that so many people think of voting as their primary way of exerting political and social power that a disproportionate amount of everyone's time and energy is spent deliberating and debating about it while other opportunities to make change go to waste. For months and months preceding every election, everyone argues about the voting issue, what candidates to vote for or whether to vote at all, when voting itself takes less than an hour. Vote or don't, but get on with it! Remember how many other ways you can make your voice heard.

This being an election year, we hear constantly about the options available to us as voters, and almost nothing about our other opportunities to play a decisive role in our society. What we need is a campaign to emphasize the possibilities more direct means of action and community involvement have to offer. These need not be seen as in contradiction with voting. We can spend an hour voting once a year, and the other three hundred sixty four days and twenty three hours acting directly!

Those who are totally disenchanted with representative democracy, who dream of a world without presidents and politicians, can rest assured that if we all learn how to apply deliberately the power that each of us has, the question of which politician is elected to office will become a moot point. They only have that power because we delegate it to them! A campaign for direct action puts power back where it belongs, in the hands of the people from whom it originates.



# 12 MYTHS ABOUT

Direct action—that is, any kind of action that bypasses established political channels to accomplish objectives directly—has a long and rich heritage in North America, extending back to the Boston Tea Party and beyond. Despite this, there are many misunderstandings about it, in part due to the ways it has been misrepresented in the corporate media.

## DIRECT ACTION IS TERRORISM

Terrorism is calculated to intimidate and thus paralyze people. Direct action, on the other hand, is intended to inspire and thus motivate people by demonstrating the power individuals have to accomplish goals themselves. While terrorism is the domain of a specialized class that seeks to acquire power for itself alone, direct action demonstrates possibilities that others can make use of, empowering people to take control of their own lives. At most, a given direct action may obstruct the activities of a corporation or institution that activists perceive to be committing an injustice, but this is simply a form of civil disobedience, not terrorism.

## DIRECT ACTION IS VIOLENT

To say that it is violent to destroy the machinery of a slaughterhouse or to break windows belonging to a party that promotes war is to prioritize property over human and animal life. This objection subtly validates violence against living creatures by focusing all attention on property rights and away from more fundamental issues.

## DIRECT ACTION IS NOT POLITICAL EXPRESSION, BUT CRIMINAL ACTIVITY

Unfortunately, whether or not an action is illegal is a poor measure of whether or not it is just. The Jim Crow laws were, after all, laws. To object to an action on the grounds that it is illegal is to sidestep the more important question of whether or not it is ethical. To argue that we must always obey laws, even when we consider them to be unethical or to

enforce unethical conditions, is to suggest that the arbitrary pronouncements of the legal establishment possess a higher moral authority than our own consciences, and to demand complicity in the face of injustice. When laws protect injustice, illegal activity is no vice, and law-abiding docility is no virtue.

## DIRECT ACTION IS UNNECESSARY WHERE PEOPLE HAVE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

In a society dominated by an increasingly narrowly focused corporate media, it can be almost impossible to initiate a public dialogue on a subject unless something occurs that brings attention to it. Under such conditions, direct action can be a means of nurturing free speech, not squelching it. Likewise, when people who would otherwise oppose an injustice have accepted that it is inevitable, it is not enough simply to talk about it: one must demonstrate that it is possible to do something about it.

## DIRECT ACTION IS ALIENATING

On the contrary, many people who find traditional party politics alienating are inspired and motivated by direct action. Different people find different approaches fulfilling: a movement that is to be broad-based must include a wide range of options. Sometimes people who share the goals of those who practice direct action while objecting to their means spend all their energy decrying an action that has been carried out. In doing so, they snatch defeat from the jaws of victory: they would do better to seize the opportunity to focus all attention on the issues raised by the action.

## PEOPLE WHO PRACTICE DIRECT ACTION SHOULD WORK THROUGH THE ESTABLISHED POLITICAL CHANNELS INSTEAD

Many people who practice direct action also work within the system. A commitment to making use of every institutional means of solving problems does not necessarily preclude an equal commitment to picking up where such means leave off.

# DIRECT ACTION

## DIRECT ACTION IS EXCLUSIVE

Some forms of direct action are not open to all, but this does not necessarily mean they are without worth. Everyone has different preferences and capabilities, and should be free to act according to them. The important question is how the differing approaches of individuals and groups that share the same long-term goals can be integrated in such a way that they complement each other.

## DIRECT ACTION IS COWARDLY

This accusation is almost always made by those who have the privilege of speaking and acting in public without fearing repercussions: that is to say, those who have power in this society, and those who obediently accept their power. Should the heroes of the French Resistance have demonstrated their courage and accountability by acting against the Nazi occupying army in the full light of day, thus dooming themselves to defeat? For that matter, in a nation increasingly terrorized by police and federal surveillance of just about everyone, is it any wonder that those who express dissent might want to protect their privacy while doing so?

## DIRECT ACTION IS PRACTICED ONLY BY COLLEGE STUDENTS/PRIVILEGED RICH KIDS/DESPERATE POOR PEOPLE/ETC

This allegation is almost always made without reference to concrete facts, as a smear. In fact, direct action is and long has been practiced in a variety of forms by people of all walks of life. The only possible exception to this would be members of the wealthiest and most powerful classes, who have no need to practice any kind of illegal or controversial action because, as if by coincidence, the established political channels are perfectly suited to their needs.

## DIRECT ACTION IS THE WORK OF AGENTS PROVOCATEURS

This is another speculation generally made from a distance, without concrete evidence. To allege that direct action is always the work of police agent provocateurs is disempowering: it rules out the possibil-

ity that activists could do such things themselves, overestimating the powers of police intelligence and reinforcing the illusion that the State is omnipotent. Likewise, it preemptively dismisses the value and reality of a diversity of tactics. When people feel entitled to make unfounded claims that every tactic of which they disapprove is a police provocation, this obstructs the very possibility of constructive dialogue about appropriate tactics.

## DIRECT ACTION IS DANGEROUS AND CAN HAVE NEGATIVE REPERCUSSIONS FOR OTHERS

Direct action can be dangerous in a repressive political climate, and it is important that those who practice it make every effort not to endanger others. This is not necessarily an objection to it, however—on the contrary, when it becomes dangerous to act outside established political channels, it becomes all the more important to do so. Authorities may use direct actions as excuses to terrorize innocents, as Hitler did when the Reichstag was set afire, but those in power are the ones who must answer for the injustices they commit in so doing, not those who oppose them. Likewise, though people who practice direct action may indeed run risks, in the face of an insufferable injustice it can be more dangerous and irresponsible to leave it uncontested.

## DIRECT ACTION NEVER ACCOMPLISHES ANYTHING

Every effective political movement throughout history, from the struggle for the eight hour workday to the fight for women's suffrage, has made use of some form of direct action. Direct action can complement other forms of political activity in a variety of ways. If nothing else, it highlights the necessity for institutional reforms, giving those who push for them more bargaining chips; but it can go beyond this supporting role to suggest the possibility of an entirely different organization of human life, in which power is distributed equally and all people have an equal and direct say in all matters that affect them.