

Men in Black: Dynamics, Violence, and Lone Wolf Potential

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Since the turn of the millennium in particular, protest movements have often been characterized by Black Bloc tactics of confrontation and street fighting between anarchist militants and police forces. This article analyses the Black Bloc's philosophy, dynamics, organization, praxis, and goals. After discussing the relationship between the Black Bloc and violence, the article analyses dynamics within militant anarchism that open the way for the formation of autonomous terrorist cells, as well as the potential for lone wolf terrorism in the movement.

Keywords anarchism, Black Bloc, lone wolves, terrorism, violence

I am only an old man whose life is at the mercy of trifling accidents; but may I, before descending into my grave, see the humiliation of the arrogant bourgeois democracies, today shamelessly triumphant. —Georges Sorel¹

Introduction

It has become almost a truism to assert the importance of anarchist philosophy and tactics that are loosely associated with the alter globalization movement in many transnational protests, especially in counter summits against a myriad of targets ranging from global capitalism, to war, imperialism, poverty, and the destruction of the environment. If at its inception the anti-globalization movement (as it was popularly called) was highly dependent on specific organizations and their calls for action, it has steadily evolved into a fluid and decentralized network of autonomous groups. This has increased the movement's image, reflected by its nature, as being essentially leaderless. This combination of autonomist, horizontal, and anti-hierarchical traits gives the overall movement an anarchist image even if many activists refrain from calling themselves anarchists. This reinvigoration of anarchism² has increased both the visibility of anarchist direct actions, such as the formation of Black Blocs during protests, and the attention paid to anarchism by authorities.

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It is unlikely, in today's media-driven reality, even for a simple observer not to have at least a faint image of a Black Bloc: a tactic in which black clad people who are using defensive and sometimes offensive gear, confront and attempt to disrupt police lines that protect a security perimeter.³ Particularly since 1999's "Battle of Seattle," a much-celebrated event in activist circles, the Black Bloc has become a permanent feature of protests for a world free of oppression in its many forms. The assertion that "the re-born (post Seattle) anarchist movement is always going to be married to the Black Bloc tactic"⁴ provides an insight into the importance given by many (though not all) activists to this type of assertive direct action. Similarly, law enforcement agencies have singled out "anarchist extremism" as a threat and potential source of domestic terrorism. In the United States, the Department of Homeland Security defines it as "groups or individuals who facilitate or engage in acts of violence as a means of changing the government and society in support of the belief that all forms of capitalism and corporate globalization should be opposed and that governing institutions are unnecessary and harmful to society."⁵ According to the FBI, the Black Bloc is the embodiment of anarchist "violent extremism" and has become synonymous not only with a tactic but also with a group of extremist people.⁶ That is why, particularly in the mainstream media, the Black Bloc is often viewed as a collection of individuals. Or, as stated in a news report, "they're not Al Qaeda, but they are a type of home-grown terror group."⁷ Before we delve into the organization and *modus operandi* of these "men in black," let us take a look at the philosophy that informs their activities.

The Philosophy of the Black Bloc

Although its roots reach back to the squatting and Autonomist movement in 1980s Germany, the Black Bloc tactic (which owes its designation to the German media and police), only fully blossomed in North America and in Europe at the turn of the century.⁸ Black Blocs have now become a feature of protests and riots that extend to the Middle East (in Egypt, particularly in an anti-Islamic fashion during the "Arab Spring") and to South America (especially in Brazil). The geography of the formation of Black Blocs is not limited therefore to a specific territory, but it is essentially a geography of struggle. This is the reason why Black Blocs are pervasive in transnational protests, regardless of where they are held, because militants see themselves involved in a war that is global, against forces of global repression. Its existence and validity are rationalized as part of the diversity of tactics that activists must have at their disposal in mass mobilizations and demonstrations. This diversity of tactics approach signifies that protesters should engage in some forms of direct action of which the formation of Black Blocs is a powerful example.

The anarchist collective CrimethInc is at the forefront of the ideological and militant struggle against the rule of "oppressive" and "authoritarian" powers, advocating insurrection in North America and elsewhere. More than a conventional organization, CrimethInc is an umbrella for almost entirely anonymous activity, open to contributions from everywhere. Most of its cultural production is unsigned, heavily translated into several languages, and the use of pseudonyms is widespread.⁹ In *A Civilian's Guide to Direct Action: What It Is, What It's Good For, How It Works*, it becomes evident the centrality of action—do-it-yourself and unmediated action—for activists. The status quo is outright rejected. But the existence of a tyrannical and all-powerful system that is upheld by an all-seeing police, military, and secret services

is not an excuse for passivity. Instead, the *only* morally acceptable answer is to fight back, even against great odds and with the possibility of failure. “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,” the manifesto proclaims. “This is not necessarily an objection to it [direct action], however,” it continues, “on the contrary, when it becomes dangerous to act outside established political channels, it becomes all the more important to do so.”¹⁰ It is not terrorism either, because “while terrorism is the domain of a specialized class that seeks power for itself alone, direct action demonstrates tactics others can take up themselves, empowering people to take control of their own lives.”¹¹ Thus, this type of action results in the empowerment of the individual that wages it; crucially, the action is justified by the political context alone, owing to the fact that “in the face of an insufferable justice it can be more dangerous and irresponsible to leave it uncontested.”¹² The Black Bloc, by connecting people “committed to assertive direct action,”¹³ as stated by a militant, is the result of this self-empowering philosophy of action.

Not surprisingly, practice outweighs ideology in the narratives that emerge from the Black Bloc. It is action, not theory, that transforms anarchists into an insurrectionary army against the powers that be. Hence, activists invest “experience” (of combating, street fighting, destruction, etc.) and the rewarding emotional and psychological benefits that come from it with great importance. Experiencing becomes an instant of taking control of one’s life and putting desires, sensations, and lifetime goals into practice. First-hand accounts of street battles reinforce this perspective. The feeling of exhilaration is pervasive. “Changing worlds, we shift from malaise and misery to incredible joy and pleasure: finally, we are at home in our own skin, in our own environment,” says a militant about the 2009 Pittsburgh riots against the G20. “Charging down the street together rather than driving down it separately, fighting or outrunning police rather than submissively accepting their authority, we come to life. *No words can do justice to this experience, but it is real.*”¹⁴ Or, as stated by another about the Black Bloc strike on May Day 2012, in Chicago, “Here it is, finally, the power to defend a space beyond their control; inside it, all the rage suppressed beneath the veneer of imposed order erupts to the surface . . . the *excess* of rebellion. It’s chaotic, terrifying, exhilarating.”¹⁵ Crucially, these feelings commingle with a sense of a newfound empowerment. “I am irreparably transformed,” says an activist after participating in a Black Bloc action.¹⁶ Another activist refers to what was gained from the experience by singling out “the feeling of empowerment that participants took home with them [for] hundreds of people [who] now feel in their bodies that, should circumstances require, they can don masks and sweatshirts and become an unstoppable force of defiance.”¹⁷ Of course, one cannot underplay the role of bravado in these internal narratives. A more cynical and less sympathetic voice could point out the gap between rhetoric and reality, owing to the many confrontations that saw the overwhelming power of police over militants.

Moreover, the actions of this “force of defiance” are not unanimously welcomed in protests. From the very beginning there have been conflicts (sometimes physical) between militants and nonviolent activists when Black Bloc tactics have been used. If defenders of the Black Bloc postulate its necessity in the name of diversity of tactics, thereby transforming protest into actual resistance,¹⁸ opponents see its actions as detrimental to the overall cause of the manifestations, whatever they may be. This tension emerged yet again during the Occupy movement. “Cut it out,” wrote a critic,

“your tactics divide public opinion and turn it against the majority of those in the movement who don’t believe in violence of any kind, including property destruction.”¹⁹ Whether in physical protests or on the Internet, in blogs, social media, and forums, accusations are thrown back and forth between those who accuse non-violent protestors of acting often as “peace police” and those who denounce Black Bloc militants as “hooligans,” “thugs,” or “agents provocateurs.” At the same time, the ethic and social composition of the Black Bloc is disparaged as a bunch of mostly male, infantile white kids of privileged and bourgeois backgrounds. Although Black Blocs feature women (sometimes prominently²⁰), and also are more diverse than their detractors claim (largely given that many different groups coalesce at times), most members are in fact young (in their twenties, early thirties), white, and male, and these accusations have become sticking points in general criticism of the Black Bloc.²¹

Inside the Black Bloc

Although the action itself may turn out to be chaotic, the preparation and structuring of militant street combat is thought-out and organized. Activist circles circulate manuals that lay out protocols and guidelines that all those interested in participating must follow. *Fashion Tips for the Brave*, for example, gives a full range of precautions that militants must observe when forming a Black Bloc. These are important in order to preserve privacy, especially if Bloc members will be engaging in illegal activity. The goal is anonymity (“to become indistinguishable is to destroy identity, to overcome distinction”).²² Recommendations include the following:

- “If you’re going to wear a mask, keep it on at all appropriate times;
- Be extremely conscientious about where and when you change into and out of your mask and anonymous clothing . . . if possible, explore the area in advance to find appropriate spaces for changing.
- Wear different outfits . . . [and] then another outfit underneath so you can look like a harmless civilian as you exit the area.
- If you have tattoos that are or could be visible, cover them up! . . . Likewise, if you have visible piercings, take them out.
- Don’t just cover your face! Bandanas are popular and convenient, but they don’t conceal enough.
- If possible cover your eyes. . . . Contact lenses are not recommended in situations where you may come into contact with chemical weapons.
- Be careful not to leave fingerprints and DNA evidence! Wear cloth gloves—leather and latex can retain fingerprints. . . . Wipe down tools and other items with alcohol in advance, to clean fingerprints off them—you never know what might get lost in the chaos. Don’t forget about the batteries inside flashlights!
- Do not let any of this give you a false sense of security. . . . Make sure you know and trust the people you’re working with, especially when it comes to high-risk activities.”²³

This manual only mentions in passing the most important model of the organization of Black Blocs: affinity groups. Numbering between three and ten persons,²⁴ or in other accounts five to twenty people,²⁵ and ideally composed of a tight-knit group of friends, or at least people who know each other’s backgrounds and have relatively high levels of trust, affinity groups are seen as having more chance of holding

together in solidarity with each other. A larger Bloc ideally should be made of a cluster of affinity groups. *What is a Bloc good for?* emphasizes the importance of “self-sufficient” affinity groups that are capable of fending for themselves and of making decisions. These cells are supposedly more efficient because they “can make democratic decisions quickly, can split up into equally effective smaller groups, can handle stressful situations without the added stress of herding a flock of confused followers.”²⁶ Before an action, the affinity group must already plan for “escape routes, legal resources, [and] emergency backup plans,” and should develop “knowledge of the area.” Scouts equipped with hand radios or cell phones are crucial for each action in order to keep track of police whereabouts and establish safe routes when needed. Runners are often employed to communicate new information to other groups.²⁷ Regardless of all these preparations, however, it could be counter-argued that affinity groups are not really efficient as a combat force because of a lack of centralized leadership and command. The reluctance to obey hierarchical models may constitute, in practice, an obstacle to the efficiency of black blocs as fighting units, especially when on the other side is a well-organized, trained, intimidating, riot police.

The calls for action are publicized in many ways. Flier-ing is common, as is posting announcements in underground and alternative periodicals. E-mail lists and listservs were very popular initially, and mobilizations were posted and reposted in order to reach the greatest number of subscribers. With the development in communications technology, social media, including Facebook and especially Twitter (feeds are used during actions so that activists can communicate with each other), have become the most effective methods of communication. But the publicity given to calls for action depends on the goals of the action itself. As stated in *What is a Bloc good for?*, “If you’re trying to organize a massive but largely symbolic open Bloc, you might choose to circulate meeting times openly [but] if you’re preparing an entirely closed Bloc, not only should you only reveal the time and place of the meeting to your companions in the action, but you should also make sure they all know not to mention the existence of the project itself to anyone, and to have alibis ready so their other friends won’t wonder what they’re up to.”²⁸

This last preoccupation sheds light on the attention given by anarchist militants to security culture and a perceived need to insulate in order to protect activist cells from state interference, infiltration, and surveillance. *What is Security Culture?* is a how-to guide in this aspect. This document also gives advice not just to Black Bloc preparations but also to *all* actions, including those illegal or at least potentially criminal. Meeting location is crucial in this regard: “You don’t want a place that can be monitored (no private residences), you don’t want a place where you can be observed all together (not the park across from the site of the next day’s actions), you don’t want a place where you can be seen entering and leaving or that someone could enter unexpectedly—post scouts, lock the door once things get started, watch out for anything suspicious.” The document establishes “security levels” appropriate for each action. Security level 1, for example, rules that “only those who are directly involved in the action know of its existence,” while security level 2 states that “trusted support persons also know about the action, but everyone in the group decides together who these will be.”

Each security level has a corresponding channel of communication. In the highest level of security there is “no communication about the action except in person, outside the homes of those involved, in surveillance-free environments

(e.g., the group goes camping to discuss plans); no discussion of the action except when it is absolutely necessary.” Online communication is not allowed below security level 4, at which “communication by encrypted email or on neutral telephone lines is acceptable.”²⁹ Above all, the golden principle is not to make it “too easy for your enemies to figure out what you’re up to.” Activists “involved in serious clandestine activities” should be extra careful about their phones (because “federal agents can easily get access to the phone numbers dialed from your phone, and will use such lists to establish connections between individuals”), as well as “email, and the books you check out from libraries, and especially social networking sites.” They should take all measures to avoid leaving a trail: “credit card use, gas cards, cell phone calls all leave a record of your motions, purchases, and contacts.”

Attention is given to all details, so Bloc members are advised to “be careful about what your trash could reveal about you—dropouts aren’t the only ones who go dumpstering!”³⁰ Activities may affect one’s private life: “At the beginning of any relationship in which your private political life may become an issue, emphasize that there are details of your activities that you need to keep to yourself.” As with any revolutionary cell, the mission takes precedence over more mundane affairs.

Militants prefer to have the Black Blocs as *part* of larger protests as a way of making its isolation by police more difficult to handle.³¹ Even with all the focus on preparation and planning it should be noted that, particularly when the moment for the Black Bloc to act comes, the chaos that is generated and the cat-and-mouse game that plays out between militants and police create such an unpredictable scenario that flexibility and adaptability rather than adherence to preordained schemes make more sense. As an anarchist who participated in street fighting in Barcelona said, “The most fundamental precondition for action isn’t having a plan—as plans always fall apart in these situations, the most fundamental need is the ability to push back the police. Those who win a space directly from the police can subsequently do everything.”³²

It is important to note that, in the heat of the action, the dynamics of combat between the Black Bloc and police open space for other individuals and groups to join in. This seems to confirm research that shows that many times Black Blocs are “spaces occupied by a heterogeneous multitude.”³³ First-persons accounts confirm that a fusion of groups happens in some of these protests. For example, during the 2001 FTAA meeting in Quebec City, local residents coalesced with the Black Bloc in fighting the police.³⁴ At the 2012 G20 meeting in Toronto, “while anarchists debated for hours about how to avoid putting regular protestors and those with uncertain citizenship status at risk with confrontational tactics, *it was actually a group of mostly people of color, migrants, and their allies who were the first to charge the police* (emphasis mine).”³⁵ Similarly in Barcelona, where “in almost an hour of freedom on a street won by force, hooligans anarchists, and *indepes* [Catalans who want independence from Spain] smashed into and set fire to a Starbucks and a bank ... in most instances, hooligans and immigrant youth were at the front, with a handful of anarchists, and their bravery was inspiring. ... Those who were most effective in pushing back the police were young people from a mix of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds with little or no prior street experience.”³⁶ In many Brazilian riots of 2013, much of the street-destruction and fighting of the police was made by a heterogeneous crowd made of Black Blocs *and* youth from the poor suburbs and the favelas. An activist exulted: “This shows that the radical tactics and spirit had spread throughout the multitude, or that the anarchists had dissolved

themselves into the multitude.”³⁷ The capacity for “other people”—locals, minorities, immigrants, etc.—to act alongside the Black Bloc varies according to the national context, as well as to the degree of discontent and disaffection with the state of affairs in each city or country. However, these instances of fusion accentuate the dynamics of “leaderless resistance” of these movements of protest. Activists put a high value on this concept and, in some of these protests, even chant, “We are a leaderless resistance.”³⁸ As stated by a participant, “When a march is led by the leaderless, it is unstoppable. Movements without leaders cannot be beheaded; a march with a black bloc is not stopped by one arrest, or ten.”³⁹ The tradition of leaderless resistance⁴⁰ against tyranny and oppression is reenacted inside anarchist cells and activities.

Black Blocs and Violence

In the history of anarchism, there has always been an ongoing controversy about the role of violence in the accomplishment of objectives. In the words of a sympathetic writer, “most anarchists have made a distinction between the violence of the oppressor and the violence of the oppressed, and have justified the use of revolutionary violence as a legitimate weapon with which to resist and eventually overthrow the organized violence of the state.”⁴¹ In this vein, as a CrimethInc member states, “We reject the idea that any organization could have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force.”⁴² Ultimately, and this is obvious in current debates in anarchist circles, the discussion is centered on the *meaning* and *legitimacy* of violence.

Most militants do not see the destruction of property as violence. Both well-known ideologues and anonymous militants share this opinion. “Defensive violence is of course justified. A deeper question is what is meant by violence,” declares “Anarcho-Primitivist” John Zerzan. “I think that targeted property destruction is not violence, for example, and is in fact a needed tactic.”⁴³ As another activist states, “Smashing a window or fucking up a store is not violent. You can’t ‘hurt’ property. It is inanimate.”⁴⁴ Moreover, violence is not viewed as pointless or nihilistic. As stated by a Black Bloc communiqué, “Property destruction is not merely macho rabble-rousing... it is strategically and specifically targeted direct action.”⁴⁵ “There is a well-considered method to their seeming madness,” writes a Black Bloc supporter, for “black blockers [sic] know whose property they are destroying, and why.”⁴⁶ But if this kind of action, regardless of whether it is understood by its perpetrators and their supporters alike as violence, is justified, there is no “consensus,” in the words of a CrimethInc militant, on violence against individuals. However, “I think it’s a bit of a cop-out to draw a sharp line between property destruction and violence to people’s bodies—is the individual simply a physical body, or are one’s interests and desires an essential part of one? If the latter is the case, then by smashing the property from which an executive hopes to profit, you really are hurting him, not just objects.”⁴⁷ In any case, tactics of destruction put them at odds with “non violence fetishists.”⁴⁸ “Tailoring your tactics to avoid state repression entirely only works if your aims never conflict with the state’s,”⁴⁹ says an activist. Ultimately, nonviolence can lead, at best, to cosmetic changes, without constituting a threat to the rule of the elites.

But if the meaning of violence is still a subject of controversy, there is a growing consensus that the use of violence is bound up with the question of legitimacy. “Violence” is not a neutral word but is rather a “tool” used by the state to take the legitimacy out of opponents, making the punishment easier. The manifesto

The Illegitimacy of Violence, The Violence of Legitimacy states that “defining people or actions as violent is a way of excluding them from legitimate discourse, of silencing and shutting out.”⁵⁰ The dichotomy between violence and non-violence creates an opening for the suppression of those deemed “violent” by official discourses. This has consequences for Black Blocs because it ensures that “when people see a masked crowd that refuses to kowtow to coercive authority, they don’t think, ‘Good for them for standing up for themselves,’ but rather, ‘Oh no—a bunch of terrorist bombers.’”⁵¹ This is the reason why militants aim at establishing “our own criteria for what is legitimate”—which means, in practice, transcending, often by far, the bounds of what is acceptable by contemporary mainstream standards. The rationale for all militant actions should be not whether they are violent or not but rather “on the grounds that they are liberating” and thus advance the cause of freedom against the control and power of the powerful.⁵²

A similar discussion applies to the concept of extremism. In political theory anarchism has been ascribed the label “extremism” because it rejects the rules of the game and delegitimizes the constitutional state.⁵³ The late Joel Olson, an anarchist scholar, welcomed the term because “extremism is the unconventional, extraordinary political mobilization of the refusal to compromise” while recognizing the importance of “zealotry” as a historical political strategy aimed at transforming power relations.⁵⁴ But here again there is no unanimity, and CrimethInc views the designation as yet one more “tool used by the powerful to delegitimize rivals,” making repression against “extremists” sound and justified.⁵⁵ The deeper question is that, alongside street battles and physical confrontations, the terrain of struggle is also made of a discursive combat, with anarchists reclaiming their own interpretation of concepts and tactics to be more valid than the dominant ones.

The State Versus the Black Bloc

The state and Black Bloc activism uphold two antagonistic narratives about each other’s role in contemporary protest movements. On one hand, the state puts forth a law and order discourse aimed at defending the sanctity of public and private institutions, as well as defending the safety and the right to free speech of all peaceful protesters while keeping violent ones at bay. On the other hand, anarchist militants see the policing of demonstrations and the show of force involved as unadulterated intimidation, provocation, and repression. Between these two narratives (and mindsets) it is impossible to establish bridges.

Particularly regarding large-scale demonstrations on the occasion of international meetings, or political party conventions, states have been able to transform summit sites into inexpugnable fortresses with fences, well-established security perimeters, and a massive presence of police, including undercover agents, that in practice keeps all protesters (violent or not) at the margins. This creation of impenetrable spaces by the police is an adaptation to the heterogeneous, loosely-structured, and direct action-inclined dimensions of contemporary transnational activism.⁵⁶ At the same time, months before such events the police launch a public relations campaign that inculcates in public opinion and through the media the possibility of the disruption of public order, perpetrated by “violent anarchists,” and its resolve to suppress the threat. This has a “chilling effect” on activists *and* on local communities, afraid to aid or join in the protests.⁵⁷ At the same time, and as a way of countering Black Bloc activism, local and national authorities have started to ban masks during protests

(Canada, for example, in the fall of 2012, or the Brazilian State of Pernambuco in the summer of 2013⁵⁸), following on a trend already underway in Europe.

The security measures put forth by the state extend beyond the policing of manifestations, however. Law enforcement agencies such as the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have encouraged “community policing,” because, as stated by the DHS lead for countering violent extremism, “community members are best able to identify those individuals or groups residing within their communities exhibiting dangerous behaviors, and intervene, before they commit an act of violence.”⁵⁹ Security agencies have developed an intense surveillance of groups associated with anarchism and Black Bloc activism. The Brazilian Intelligence Agency, following the riots that rocked the country in 2013, intensified the monitoring of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp in order to identify violent individuals and groups and find criminal evidence.⁶⁰ Intelligence-led operations, whose need has been advocated by analysts,⁶¹ have included sting operations and the widespread use of informants, and have resulted in the arrests of some anarchist militants. Although it has been pointed out by analysts that “infiltration into radical revolutionary ‘cells’ is not” simple,⁶² the fact of the matter is that the FBI is one agency that has had some degree of success.

A covert operation in 2012 led to the arrest in Chicago of three individuals who were described in an affidavit as “members of the Black Bloc” group on charges of “Material Support for Terrorism” and “Conspiracy to Commit Terrorism.”⁶³ At about the same time, five “self-described anarchists” were arrested in Cleveland after undercover work revealed a plot to blow up a bridge; these would-be bombers were also being held on terrorism charges.⁶⁴ The harsh position of the state is part of the increased post-9/11 focus on national security (the consolidation of a “securitization frame”⁶⁵) that led to a revamping of anti-terror laws in the United States and in Europe. This included the expansion of the definition of terrorism that now comprises attacks that harm property and commerce.⁶⁶ The heavy hand of the state is not lost on militants. To the contrary, as a CrimethInc member states, to a certain extent, it is successful: “surveillance is universal and intense, and probably succeeds in suppressing a great deal of questioning among the general populace as well as specifically disruptive anarchist organizing.”⁶⁷

The fear of informants is particularly acute within activist circles. The arrests in Chicago and Cleveland, for example, were treated as cases of “entrapment” in which undercover agents instigated activists to radicalize their actions. “One thing that should be increasingly clear is that once we begin to live the life of an activist we must be very, very careful,” a writer posted on an anarchist forum. Care is especially necessary because “an agent of the security state could be anyone . . . They could be your friend, your mom, your dad, your lover, your sister, your brother, your teacher, your cleaning lady, the mailman—anyone. This is an extremely uncomfortable fact, but it’s one we need to process.”⁶⁸ It is significant to note that even the activists arrested in Cleveland, as the affidavits demonstrate, were reluctant to meet with people not vouched for, including the informant that would lead, ultimately, to their arrest.⁶⁹ Anarchist manuals, however, warn about the danger of paranoia, emphasizing instead the need to hold fast to strong and reliable security measures: “A good security culture should make it practically irrelevant whether these vermin are active in your community or not.”⁷⁰

After a riotous demonstration, a Black Bloc activist expressed his conviction “that this police state has also bred a tougher breed of anarchist, too, the way that

new strains of virus evolve that are immune to existing vaccines.”⁷¹ This is certainly the hope of many militants, even though the “police state” has certainly stepped up its game against its “enemies.” Further, it seems that in the strategy of inoculation against the anarchist virus, Intel work has proved to be, in many ways, efficient.

Into the Grey Area: Lone Wolf Terrorism

Terrorist operations conducted by lone wolves are characterized by the inexistence of ties to a formal organization. Nevertheless, the literature points out that underlying the lone wolf solo work is an ideological cause, be that secular or religious. In tracking the development of lone wolf terrorism, scholars have asserted the importance of movements that provide “ideologies of validation”⁷² or a “large intellectual movement,”⁷³ and point out that because “ideas may be more important for solo political action,”⁷⁴ they could trigger an individual’s self-perception as someone “involved in a global ideological battle . . . in which they can become quite actively involved in it in a manner that is dangerous to the society in which they are living.”⁷⁵ Ideologies are thus factors that may be conducive to lone wolf violent actions in the sense that they help shape the self-radicalization of the individual. Therefore self-radicalization does not mean that the lone terrorist was born in a vacuum, “produced solely in the dark vacuum of self,”⁷⁶ but gives enough space to the role played by literature or the influence of intellectual role models and like-minded individuals.

As has been shown, the ideology that feeds and shapes Black Bloc activism and related direct action activities is geared toward a cult of action that sees violence, no matter how it is defined, as a weapon for individual transformation⁷⁷ and social change. The narrative is far from homogenous, and there is not one single source but rather isolated comments, statements, and manifestos from which one can develop a fuller picture. In *Black Bloc and White Riot* this narrative blossoms.⁷⁸ Ecstatic action is exalted, and violence is seen as a necessary step to transform activists into political beings able to change the world: “Violence either writes a new law or preserves the one that exists. For those that feel the weight of the unbearable present, there is only one acceptable decision.”⁷⁹ “Modern life gives us countless reasons to despair,” writes the author, “under conditions like these, we would be well within our right to kill ourselves. But when we decide not to, when we pass through violence in order to discover the life that lies beyond it, we enter into an agreement in which our actions become the sole measure of our being.”⁸⁰

This emancipatory vision of violence, in which violence is *the* solution for individual despair, in one way or another, and not always spelled out this forcefully, pervades the ideology nurturing the actions of the men in black. At the same time, across the literature, the language is many times belligerent, with descriptions of street fighting as “battles,” and sometimes the dehumanization of enemies (cops as “pigs,” for example). A *Communiqué on Tactics and Organization to the Black Bloc* justifies the “militaristic tone” of the manifesto because “the reality of our militant struggle necessitates the language used in order to most accurately depict our objective circumstances and the methods we must employ in order to come closer to victory.”⁸¹ One focus of this document is the need to engage in clandestine operations. “If one of the primary advantages of the force of the State is their mechanized mobility, then we should strike out against these repressive tools by effective, clandestine means,” it states. “Separate affinity groups under their own direction should voluntarily coordinate such actions.”⁸² Sooner or later, the formation of

clandestine networks of cells will be unavoidable: “Such an underground force must entail, among other things, access to alternative identification, known and trusted safe houses, friends in strategic positions, access to materials of necessary subsistence, an underground means of communication, ways to pass unseen through international borders and the know-how to continue our militant activities underground.” It ends with a call for arms: “We must and will attack the leviathan head on, then from the shadows, and then again face-to-face. The only result can be social revolution. Here we would like to remind you that firearms are still legal, as of print, and easily attainable in the United States.”⁸³ For those who perceive themselves as being in a war, this is a pragmatic and logical scenario. A 2012 opinion piece posted on an anarchist forum written as a show of solidarity with the “Cleveland 5,” after praising all inspirational anarchist movements (like the Greek Conspiracy of Cells of Fire [CCF]) that take “violent action” against the state, reiterated the need to endorse “their war against the apparatuses of Control.” It also heralded a “new generation of American born anarcho-bombers” who realize “that this life is shit and choose to burn it up. We can’t stop these kids from exploding and burning their enemies (why would we want to?).”⁸⁴

The “cool factor” has been seen as one element that may help direct an individual toward violent radicalization.⁸⁵ There is little doubt that a sense of bravado underlies many of the statements about Black Bloc activism and confrontational tactics against the “enemies.” A lingering image that emerges from Black Bloc accounts is of an adventurous and edgy affair, with a thrill and excitement that are at the antipodes of the boring and controlled daily life (which incidentally is one of the reasons why Black Bloc activists reject the Occupy movement).

At the same time there is a tendency to romanticize violence that is not exclusive to openly Black Bloc militants. The popular and trendy anarchist magazine *Adbusters* advocates a revolution against the dominant plutocracy and, although it is as far as a clandestine publication as possible, portrays vandalism, or the destruction of property, glamorously, even publishing citations from the standard bearer of nonviolent resistance, Mahatma Gandhi, approving the necessity of violence under certain circumstances.⁸⁶ At the same time “riot porn”—images and videos of riotous actions and confrontations with the police—is a popular concept within anarchist circles and beyond. The argument is that such images appeal to human aesthetical senses. One site, for example, is even named “Black Bloc Fetish” because “resistance is sexy.”⁸⁷

Whether or not violent resistance is “sexy,” the question of whether it is “lethal” and how it can lead to lone wolf terrorism is certainly more complicated. It is not a black-and-white issue, and here we still enter into a grey area. Radicalization (which entails an absolute rejection of the status quo) by itself does not lead to terrorism. It could lead to non-violent radicalization or to violent radicalization,⁸⁸ but even in this last case, it should be pointed out, it is not synonymous with lone wolf terrorism. At the same time, empirical studies have shown that the existence of a broader ideological cause is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for lone actions of terrorism. Usually there is a psychological factor at work in the form of a disturbance or traumatic experience that compels one to embark on a lone wolf action or campaign.⁸⁹ Self-sacrifice for a cause is rare; maybe high levels of empathy, or emotional commitment to a group, would help to explain it. In any case, the political becomes personal.⁹⁰ These dynamics make prediction a very unreliable affair.

In regard to a correlation between insurrectionary anarchism and lone wolf terrorism, then, the priority should be to establish what is tangible. It is true that

other “anarchists of the praxis,” such as those belonging to the International Revolutionary Front (IRF), greatly influenced by the Greek CCF, have extended their battle against Power and Capital beyond mass protests and have decisively advanced toward targeting not just property (through sabotage and bombings) but also individuals.⁹¹ In any case, in respect to Black Bloc activism, one needs to emphasize the works of a totalist ideology that gives its members a full understanding of reality and of their role in it, establishes a clear division between friends and enemies, and aims at a complete reconfiguration of human affairs. From the apocalyptic present a new, redeemed future will emerge. As stated by a militant, the goal is “to save the world and society from slipping into the abyss.”⁹² Militants are true believers; hence, the righteousness and moral certainty that they are on the “right side” of history. This is the justification for their willingness to act, and, in some cases, even to sacrifice their public lives for secretive and underground missions launched against oppression, injustice, and an illegitimate system. Even the authorities that fight against them serve to reinforce group dynamics, making even more real the “under siege” mentality that is diffuse among militant circles. At the same time, state operations heighten the martyrdom mythology of the movement by giving them martyrs, comrades in prison (viewed as “political prisoners”), for the cause.⁹³ The term comrades is appropriate, for activists see themselves as a band of brothers, united by a political (but mostly existential) cause which is bigger than each one of them on his own. If, to all these dynamics, one adds the purifying role given to violence by many of the activists, the conclusion that we are in the presence of an ideology of validation sounds reasonable—and, it seems reasonable to say, will still be outside the bounds and powers of the realm of prediction.

Notes

1. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 293.

2. Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and Its Aspirations* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2010), 75–76; Leonard Williams, “Anarchism Revived,” *New Political Science* 29, no. 3 (2007): 297–312; Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 697–698.

3. It is important to keep in mind that the tactic of black blocking can also be used in a non-confrontational manner. Other groups have also used it, for example activists dressed in pink, or wearing carnival-esque outfits, known as Pink Blocs. They usually engage in street theatre and dancing in front of the riot police.

4. *Black Bloc Papers*, edited and compiled by David Van Deusen and Xavier Massot of the Green Mountain Anarchist Collective (Shawnee Mission, KS: Breaking Glass Press, 2010), 154.

5. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Statement for the Record of Principal Deputy Counterterrorism Coordinator and Senior Advisor to the Secretary John Cohen for a House Committee on Homeland Security hearing titled ‘The American Muslim response to Hearings on Radicalization within their Community* (Washington, DC: Author, June 20, 2012); Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Leftwing Extremists Likely to Increase Use of Cyber Attacks over the Coming Decade* (Washington, DC: Office of Intelligence and Analysis, January 26, 2009), <http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/leftwing.pdf>.

6. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), *Domestic Extremism—Anarchist Extremism: A Primer* (Washington, DC: Author, November 16, 2010). Already in the summer of 2001, Jurgen Storbeck, at the time director of Europol, the European Law Enforcement Agency, called Black Bloc anarchists “terrorists or proto-terrorists.” See Jean-Pierre Masse and Nathalie Bayon, “L’altermondialisme au Prisme de L’exceptionnalisme: Les Effets du 11

Septembre 2001 Sur le Mouvement Social Européen,” *Cultures and Conflicts*, October 6, 2004, 10, <http://conflits.revues.org/1069>.

7. “Men in Black With a Violent Agenda,” *FOX 13 News*, Tampa Bay, May 23, 2012.
8. For an inside account of the German Autonomist movement and its use of Black Bloc tactics see Geronimo, *Fire and Flames: A History of the German Autonomist Movement* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012). In North America, the first relevant example of Black Blocs happened during the protests against the Gulf War in 1991, in Washington D.C. But it is the “Battle of Seattle” (1999) that would witness the emergence of Black Blocs as a pervasive force in protests.
9. For an activist account of CrimethInc see Sandra Jeppesen, “The DIY Post-Punk Situationist Politics of CrimethInc,” *Anarchist Studies* 19, no. 1 (2011): 23–55.
10. *A Civilian’s Guide to Direct Action: What It Is, What It’s Good For, How it Works*, http://crimethinc.com/tools/downloads/pdfs/direct_action_guide.pdf.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Black Bloc Papers* (see note 4 above), 86.
14. “Breaking News From The Pittsburgh G-20 Protests,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Worker’s Collective*, 2009, <http://crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/g20.php>.
15. “May Day: A Strike Is a Blow,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Worker’s Collective*, 2012, <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2012/05/10/may-day-a-strike-is-a-blow/>.
16. “God Only Knows What Devils We Are,” *The Institute for Experimental Freedom*, February 20, 2012, <http://www.politicsisnotabanana.com/2012/02/god-only-knows-what-devils-we-are.html>.
17. “G20 Mobilization: Preliminary Assessment,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Worker’s Collective*, 2009, <http://crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/g202.php>.
18. *Black Bloc Papers* (see note 4 above), 88.
19. Carl Gibson, “Cut It Out: An Open Letter to Black Bloc Anarchists,” *Reader Supported News*, May 22, 2012.
20. For instance, the cover of the mainstream Brazilian weekly magazine *Veja* issue dedicated to the Black Blocs featured a woman activist (Emma), under the headline “the gang of the masked people.” See *Veja*, no. 34 (August 21, 2013). The title of this article does not want to reinforce a gender stereotype about Black Blocs. Therefore, the role of women must be acknowledged, even if the majority of activists are still young men.
21. See José Pedro Zúquete, “‘Hell Yes, We’re Fighting!’: Revolutionary Anarchism’s Call for Destruction and Creation,” in George Michael, ed., *Extremism in the United States: An Overview* (Gainesville, FL: Florida University Press, 2013).
22. “On the Black Bloc,” *Anarchist news dot org*, April 4, 2012, <https://anti-politics.net/content/black-bloc>.
23. “Fashion Tips for the Brave,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective*, October 11, 2008, <http://www.crimethinc.com/blog/2008/10/11/fashion-tips-for-the-brave/>.
24. *Black Bloc Papers* (see note 4 above), 350.
25. Luis A. Fernandez, *Policing Dissent: Social Control and the Anti-Globalization Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 55.
26. CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective, *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook* (Olympia, WA, 2004), 136, <https://we.riseup.net/assets/35370/crimethinc.recipes.for.disaster.an.anarchist.cookbook.pdf>.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. “What is Security Culture?,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective*, n.d., <http://www.crimethinc.com/texts/atoz/security.php>.
30. *Ibid.*
31. For example, *Black Bloc Papers* (see note 4 above), 139.
32. “The Rose of Fire Has Returned,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective*, April 2012, <http://crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/rosefire.php>.
33. Francis Dupuis-Déri, “The Black Blocs Ten Years after Seattle,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 4, no. 2 (2010): 50–51.
34. *Black Bloc Papers* (see note 4 above), 138.
35. “Toronto G20: Eyewitness Report,” *CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective*, July 2010, <http://crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/toronto2.php>.

36. "The Rose of Fire Has Returned" (see note 32 above).
37. "The June 2103 Uprisings in Brazil—Part 1," *CrimethInc. Ex-Workers' Collective*, August 2013, <http://crimethinc.com/texts/recentfeatures/brazilpt1.php>.
38. "Inside Sunday's Violent Clash between 'Black Bloc' Anarchists, Cops," *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 21, 2012.
39. "Dance for that Anarchy: My Love-Hate Relationship with Black Blocs," *Occupied Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 2012, <http://occupiedchicagotribune.org/2012/05/dance-for-that-anarchy-my-love-hate-relationship-with-black-blocs/>.
40. See Jeffrey Kaplan, "Leaderless Resistance," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 80–95.
41. Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (see note 2 above), 658.
42. Interview with "b," November 15, 2010.
43. Interview with John Zerzan, July 31, 2010.
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47. Interview with "b," July 2, 2012.
48. "The Colonization of OccupyOakland," *libcom.org*, May 1, 2012, <http://libcom.org/forums/theory/colonization-occupyoakland-01052012>.
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51. Interview with "b," July 2, 2012.
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57. Fernandez, *Policing Dissent: Social Control and the Anti-Globalization Movement* (see note 25 above), 161.
58. "Em Recife, Protestos Agora Só de Cara Limpa," *O Globo*, August 23, 2013, 9.
59. DHS, "Statement for the Record" (see note 5 above).
60. "Abin Monta Rede Para Monitorar Internet," *Estado de São Paulo*, June 19, 2013 <http://www.estadao.com.br/noticias/cidades,abin-monta-rede-para-monitorar-internet,1044500,0.htm>.
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62. *Ibid.*
63. *The People of the State of Illinois—vs.—Defendants*, May 19, 2012.
64. *The United States of America vs. Douglas L. Wright*, April 30, 2012, http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/granule/USCOURTS-ohnd-1_12-cr-00238/USCOURTS-ohnd-1_12-cr-00238-1/content-detail.html. Three of them, after pleading guilty to all charges, were subsequently sentenced as "domestic terrorists" to prison terms ranging from 8 to 11 years. See "Jury in Bridge-Bombing Conspiracy Case Begins Deliberations; Defendant Denies Guilt," *Cleveland.com*, June 13, 2013, http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2013/06/jury_in_bridge-bombing_conspir.html.
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69. See, for example, “The United States of America vs. Douglas L. Wright” (see note 64 above).
70. “What is Security Culture?” (see note 29 above).
71. “G20 Mobilization” (see note 17 above).
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77. See also Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: One World, 2005), 161.
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88. Bartlett and Miller, “The Edge of Violence” (see note 85 above), 2.
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90. Moskalenko and McCauley, “The Psychology of Lone-wolf Terrorism” (see note 74 above), 123–125.
91. For the IRF network see José Pedro Zúquete, “World War