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Letter from Inside the Black Bloc

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Letter from Inside the Black Bloc

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Mary Black*, AlterNet, July 25, 2001

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I'm running as fast as my asthmatic lungs will allow in the midst of what can only be called a mob. My friend from back home and I hold hands so that we won't lose each other, but I'm holding him back a little. He's in much better shape than I am and he'd probably be out of range of the tear gas by now if it wasn't for me.

A phalanx of riot cops is getting closer and I let go of my friend's hand, so that at least one of us can get away. He darts ahead of me onto a side street. I'm small, and now I'm by myself, so I'm not attracting much attention from the cops. I raise my hands in the air to show that I'm giving in, and let the cops push me in the direction that they are pushing all of us — conventional protester and black clad rioter alike — down a blocked side street.

Probably there is no way out of this alley; it's a trap, but the tear gas is too thick at this point for me to resist. I'm fumbling for my gas mask, but I'm going where I'm being told to go. I'm aware that some folks I've been marching with are being picked out of the crowd and thrown to the ground. Folks are trying to pull people out of the hands of the cops. One guy gets yanked back from the police line and runs; he gets away, but the friend I came here with is tackled. The last time I see him that day he's face down on the cement, two big undercover cops straddling him. Like most of the folks around me, I run.

We're retreating, but only as much as we have to. And in a few minutes we'll find our group again and advance back toward the area that the cops have declared off limits to all but a small group of extremely wealthy, extremely powerful, mostly white, mostly men.

If words like "advance" sound militaristic in tone, that's probably because I'm a part of a group that at least appears paramilitary. Our clothes are uniform issue and intentionally menacing: black bandanas, ragged black army surplus pants, black hooded sweatshirts (with optional red and black flag or slogan-covered patches) and shiny black boots (or for the vegans in the crowd, battered black converse).

I'm part of a loosely affiliated international group of individuals known as the Black Bloc. We don't have a party platform, and you don't have to sign anything or go to any meetings to join us. We show up at all kinds of demonstrations, from actions to free Mumia Abu Jamal, to protests against the sanctions in Iraq, and at just about every meeting of international financial and political organizations from the WTO to the G8. Although most anarchists would never wear black bandanas over their faces or break windows at McDonalds, almost all of us are anarchists.

Most folks I know who have used Black Bloc tactics have day jobs working for nonprofits. Some are school teachers, labor organizers or students. Some don't have full-time jobs, but instead spend most of their time working for change in their communities. They start urban garden projects and bike libraries; they cook food for Food Not Bombs and other groups. These are thinking and caring folks who, if they did not have radical political and social agendas, would be compared with nuns, monks, and others who live their lives in service.

There is a fair amount of diversity in who we are and what we believe. I've known folks in the Black Bloc who come from as far south as Mexico City and as far north as Montreal. I think that the stereotype is correct that we are mostly young and mostly white, although I wouldn't agree that we are mostly men. When I'm dressed from head to toe in baggy black clothes, and my face is covered up, most people think I'm a man too. The behavior of Black Bloc

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protesters is not associated with women, so reporters often assume we are all guys.

People associated with a Black Bloc may just march with the rest of the group, showing our solidarity with each other and bringing visibility to anarchists, or we may step up the mood of the protest, escalating the atmosphere and encouraging others to ask for more than just reforms to a corrupt system. Spray painting of political messages, destroying property of corporations and creating road blocks out of found materials are all common tactics of a Black Bloc.

The Black Bloc is a fairly recent phenomenon, probably first seen in the U.S. in the early '90s and evolving out of protest tactics in Germany in the '80s. The Black Bloc may be in part a response to the large-scale repression of activist groups by the FBI during the '60s, '70s and '80s. It is impossible at this point to form a radical activist group without the fear of infiltration and disruption by the police and, for some, taking militant direct action in the streets with very little planning and working only with small networks of friends are the only meaningful forms of protest available.

Although there is no consensus among us on what we all believe, I think I can safely say that we have a few ideas in common. The first is the basic anarchist philosophy that we do not need or want governments or laws to decide our actions. Instead, we imagine a society where there is true liberty for all, where work and play are shared by everyone and where those in need are taken care of by the voluntary and mutual aid of their communities. Beyond this vision of an ideal society, we believe that public space is for everyone. We have a right to go where we want, when we want and governments should not have the right to control our movements, especially in order to hold secret meetings of groups like the WTO, which make decisions that affect millions.

We believe that destroying the property of oppressive and exploitative corporations like The Gap is an acceptable and useful protest tactic. We believe that we have the right to defend ourselves when we are in physical danger from tear gas, batons, armored personnel carriers and other law enforcement technology. We reject the idea that police should be allowed to control our actions at all. Looking at Rodney King, Amadu Dialo, Abner Ruima, the Ramparts scandal in Los Angeles and the Riders in Oakland, many of us conclude that abuse by the police is not only endemic, it is inherent.

We live in a society that is racist and homophobic and sexist and unless that is taken out of our society, it cannot be taken out of the cops who enforce the rules of our society. In an even larger view, we live in a society that has agreed to give some people the right to control what others do. This creates a power imbalance that cannot be remedied even with reforms of the police. It is not just that police abuse their power, we believe that the existence of police is an abuse of power. Most of us believe that if cops are in the way of where we want to go or what we want to do, we have a right to directly confront them. Some of us extend this idea to include the acceptability of physically attacking cops. I have to emphasize that this is controversial even within the Black Bloc, but also explain that many of us believe in armed revolution, and within that context, attacking the cops doesn't seem out of place.

There have been hours of debate in both the mainstream and left-wing press about the Black Bloc. For the most part, the media seem to agree that the Black Bloc is bad. The mainstream media's current consensus is that the Black Bloc is bad and extremely dangerous. The progressive media's most common line is that the Black Bloc is bad, but at least their aren't many of us. Everyone seems to call Black Bloc protesters violent. Violence is a tricky concept. I'm not totally clear what actions are violent, and what are not. And when is a violent action considered self defense? I believe that using the word violent to describe breaking the window of a Nike store takes meaning away from the word. Nike makes shoes out of toxic chemicals in poor countries using exploitative labor practices. Then they sell the shoes for vastly inflated prices to poor black kids from the first world. In my view, this takes resources out of poor communities on both sides of the globe, increasing poverty and suffering. I think poverty and suffering could well be described as violent, or at least as creating violence.

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What violence does breaking a window at Nike Town cause? It makes a loud noise; maybe that is what is considered violent. It creates broken glass, which could hurt people, although most of the time those surrounding the window are only Black Bloc protesters who are aware of the risks of broken glass. It costs a giant multi-billion dollar corporation money to replace their window. Is that violent? It is true that some underpaid Nike employee will have to clean up a mess, which is unfortunate, but a local glass installer will get a little extra income too.

As a protest tactic, the usefulness of property destruction is limited but important. It brings the media to the scene and it sends a message that seemingly impervious corporations are not impervious. People at the protest, and those at home watching on TV, can see that a little brick, in the hands of a motivated individual, can break down a symbolic wall. A broken window at Nike Town is not threatening to peoples safety, but I hope it sends a message that I don't just want Nike to improve their actions, I want them to shut down and I'm not afraid to say it.

The biggest complaint that the left has expressed about the Black Bloc is that we make the rest of the protesters look bad. It is understandably frustrating for organizers who have spent months planning a demonstration when a group of scary looking young people get all of the news coverage by lighting things on fire. Yet what is missing in this critique is an acknowledgement that the corporate media never covers the real content of demonstrations. Militant demonstration and peaceful protest alike are rarely covered by the media at all, let alone in any depth. Although I too wish that the media would cover all styles of protest, or, more importantly, the underlying issues inspiring the protest, I'm also aware that militant tactics do get media attention. And I think that is a good thing.

I started my activist work during the Gulf War, and learned early that sheer numbers of people at demonstrations are rarely enough to bring the media out. During the war I spent weeks organizing demonstrations against the war. In one case, thousands showed up to demonstrate. But again and again, the newspapers and television ignored us. It was a major contrast the first time I saw someone break a window at a demonstration and suddenly we were all on the six o'clock news. The militant mood of anti-globalization protests in the last couple years has undeniably contributed to the level of attention that globalization is now getting in the media. And although the Black Bloc is not the only reason for this, (a myriad of creative, innovative strategies have helped to bring the fickle eye of the media in the direction of the left), I believe that George Bush II felt compelled to directly address the protesters at the G8 summit in Genoa because of the media coverage that our movement is finally getting.

A second complaint that I have heard from the left, and in particular from other, non-Black Bloc protesters, is that they don't like our masks. I've been yelled at by protester and cop alike to take off my mask. This idea is impossible for most of us. What we are doing is illegal. We believe in militant, direct action protest tactics. We are well aware that police photograph and videotape demonstrations, even when they are legally disallowed from doing so. To take off our masks will put us in direct danger of the police.

The masks serve another, symbolic purpose as well. Although there are certainly those who wish to advance their own positions or gain popularity within the militant anarchist community, the Black Bloc maintains an ideal of putting the group before the individual. We rarely give interviews to the press (and those of us who do are generally frowned upon or regarded with suspicion). We act as a group because safety is in numbers and more can be accomplished by a group than by individuals, but also because we do not believe in this struggle for the advancement of any one individual. We don't want stars or spokespeople. I think the anonymity of the Black Bloc is in part a response to the problems that young activists see when we look back at the civil rights, anti-war, feminist and anti-nuclear movements. Dependence on charismatic leaders has not only led to infighting and hierarchy within the left, but has given the FBI and police easy targets who, if killed or arrested, leave their movements without direction. Anarchists resist hierarchy, and hope to create a movement that is difficult for police to infiltrate or destroy.

Some of the critiques of the Black Bloc by the left come from our own acceptance of the values of our corrupt society. There is outcry when some kids move a dumpster into the street and light it on fire. Most people conclude the

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protesters are doing this to give themselves a thrill, and I can't deny that there is a thrilling rush of adrenaline each time I risk myself in this way. But how many of us forgive ourselves for occasionally buying a T-Shirt from The Gap, even though we know that our dollars are going directly to a corporation that violently exploits their workers? Why is occasional "shopping therapy" more acceptable than finding joy in an act of militant protest that may be limited in its usefulness? I would argue that even if Black Bloc protests only served to enrich the lives of those who do them, they are still better for the world than spending money at the multiplex, getting drunk or other culturally sanctioned forms of entertainment or relaxation.

I have my own criticisms of what I'm doing and of the efficacy of my protest tactics. Property destruction, spray painting and looking menacing on TV is clearly not enough to bring on a revolution. The Black Bloc won't change the world. I dislike the feeling of danger or at least the fear of danger at protests for those who do not want to be in danger — particularly for the kids, pregnant women and older folks I see there. I really hate the annoying use of pseudo-military jargon like "communique" and "bloc" by my "comrades." But mostly I hate hearing myself and my friends trashed by every mainstream organizing group from the AFL-CIO to Global Exchange and in every left-wing rag from Mother Jones to the beloved Indymedia.org. Although this is not true for everyone in the Black Bloc, I respect the strategies of most other left-wing groups. At demonstrations I attempt to use Black Bloc actions to protect non-violent protesters or to draw police attention away from them. When this is not possible, I try to just stay out of the way of other protesters.

Despite my concerns, I think that Black Bloc actions are a worthwhile form of protest. And as I watch the increasingly deadly force with which the police enforce the law at demonstrations around the world (three protesters were shot dead at an anti-WTO demonstration in Papua New Guinea in June, two protesters were shot dead at an anti-globalization demonstration in Venezuela last year, and Carlo Giuliani, a 23 year old, was killed by police during the G8 summit in Genoa), I find it increasingly ironic that my actions are labeled as violent and dangerous while even the left seems to think that the police are "just doing their jobs."

I will continue to participate in protest in this way, and anyone who cares to is welcome to join me. Bricks are easy to find and targets are as close as your local McDonalds.

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