

Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow fifteen years on: A reflection

Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow are...inseparable activities, not in any abstract sense but as a concrete and real alteration of the concrete and real world of bourgeois society. (Karl Korsch; as cited in *Aufheben* inaugural editorial, Autumn, 1992)

The small group of people who first produced *Aufheben* back in 1992 had already been involved in a number of different struggles for some time before we even thought of publishing a magazine. In particular, the struggle against the poll tax (1989-1991) brought us together as a group of comrades, though some in the group had been active together from as long back as the miners' strike of 1984-5. The poll tax riot of March 31st 1990 was the biggest riot seen in London for a century, and it prompted the formation of a small group of like-minded people around the particular issue of support for poll tax prisoners. Meeting regularly, thrashing out our strategy in relation to the leftist-dominated official national anti-poll tax movement, jointly producing newsletters and leaflets, and participating together on pickets, demos and riots, we found an increased convergence in our ideas, as well as an interest in developing these ideas further, beyond the limits of anarchism and Marxism as we knew them.

After the poll tax campaign, we continued to work as a group in subsequent struggles, in particular the struggle against the Gulf War, while at the same time connecting and interacting with a wider circle of groups and individuals in resistance. The concern of all of those in the group in trying to understand what we were doing in these struggles, to reflect on and theorize our practice, and to develop constructive critique – to grasp the meaning of capital and its overthrow and our possible role in this – led us to set up a weekly reading group, eventually working through all three volumes of Marx's *Capital* and most of the *Grundrisse*.

We approached this reading through the lens of a shared interest in what we saw as the most valuable contributions of the historical ultra-left, in particular the Situationists and *autonomia*, as well as earlier important contributions such as those of Rubin, Korsch, Lukács, Pannokeok, and Bordiga, as well as the philosopher Chris Arthur, and at all times using our understanding of Hegel, the most advanced bourgeois philosopher, to enhance our grasp of Marx's ideas.

Our subsequent experience has led us to develop criticisms of some of these early (and to an important extent continued) influences on our understanding¹ as we have tried to interrogate and develop theory in tandem with our continuing practice as people involved in various struggles (e.g. anti-roads, 'anti-capitalist', welfare benefits reform, and anti-war again). The point was that, however valuable previous theoretical contributions are, theory which stands still is no longer living theory but ideology. Living theory is by its nature bound up with practice. Our first editorial back in 1992 stressed the importance of the unity of theoretical-

practical intervention, that is, the development of political theory in connection to practice, at a time when the two seemed to be split:

[In] the present situation... [t]he connection between the movement and ideas has been undermined. Theory and practice are split. Those who think do not act, and those who act do not think. In the universities where student struggles forced the opening of space for radical thought that space is under attack. The few decent academic Marxists are besieged in their ivory tower by the poststructuralist shock troops of neo-liberalism. Although decent work has been done in areas such as the state derivation debate there has been no real attempt [to] apply any insights in the real world. Meanwhile out in the woods of practical politics, though we have had some notable victories recently, ideas are lacking. Many comrades, especially in Britain, are afflicted with a virulent anti-intellectualism that creates the ludicrous impression that the Trots are the ones with a grasp of theory. Others pass off conspiracy theories as a substitute for serious analysis.

We publish this journal as a contribution to the reuniting of theory and practice. *Aufheben* is a space for critical investigation which has the practical purpose of overthrowing capitalist society.

In times of retreat in the class struggle this unity of theory and practice is not obvious. In such times, revolutionary theory appears increasingly less relevant, more abstract, and revolutionary ideas of the past seems to offer a noticeable tension with the present reality. Categories such as 'working class', 'class struggle', and 'proletariat' sometimes seems quaint and are routinely challenged by the chattering classes and would-be intellectuals.

There are two parts to the problem of the relation of theory and practice that arise in times of the retreat of the class. One is: how important are intervention and practice for the development of theory? How can theory develop when there is little in the way of struggle to nourish it? Do we simply 'preserve' it to be wheeled out again when struggle returns? Should we instead understand theory as much more than a series of 'hard won truths' and in what way?

The other part is: how important theory is for a practice of struggle that is effectively a process towards communism?

The past examples of struggles inspiring a thirst for theory and more theoretical work could seem to mean that theory essentially follows practice. Of course in an important way this is true. Marx's written ideas were the articulation of tendencies in the form of the developing working class and class struggle in the nineteenth century. Communism is the

¹ See our critiques of the Situationists (*Aufheben* #6, 1997) and some of the theory that has come out of *autonomia* (*Aufheben* #11, 2003; #13, 2005; and #14, 2006).

movement with the potential to destroy capitalism, not a set of ideas or a theory which inspires that movement. Ideas and understandings are the product of this movement. Hence Marx, by writing down some of these ideas and understandings, expressed its most radical theoretical achievement.

However we would suggest that this conception is only part of it. Theory and practice are two sides of the same dialectical coin. Although as we will see they make sense of each other only as two parts of a whole, they (can) present themselves as opposites, in competition. This apparent separation and opposition is exacerbated, we said, in those times of retreat in the class struggle, when revolutionaries without their revolution in view are tempted either to retreat into abstract more-or-less radical ideas or into ritualistic practice. In this separation, either ideas or actions become crystallized through deprivation of any potential for development. This is because such development would involve precisely the dialectical back-and-forth movement of theory and practice (struggles). We call this crystallization a fetishism² of either theory or practice because either one is considered (by the fetishists) to contain the solution in and of themselves – i.e. in their own nature - and not in their context. As we wrote in the editorial, ‘those who think do not act, and those who act do not think.’

This fetishism of pure action or pure theory gives rise to an experience of alienation and disempowerment, which is very common, and often frustrating. In the following, we will first identify various dead-end situations that arise in periods of retreat of the class. Two caveats are in order, however. First, although we seem to be describing ‘types’ of people or extreme cases, we do not see these as ideal types that reality approximates to; rather they are examples that we have actually observed. Second, although we seem to be speaking of people other than ourselves, all of us have had some past experience of such forms of alienating relations with theory and practice in concrete contexts, which to some extent are reflected in these examples. As we will explain in detail, it is only an involvement in struggle and a willingness to relate thought and experience that has created a critical awareness of these problems. Thus, in the next part of this article, we will look back at examples of practical experience and reflection, in particular two moments of struggle in Brighton: the campaign against welfare benefits reform (the Job Seeker’s Allowance) and the recent movement against the war in Iraq.

1 Fetishism and disempowerment: from the ‘activist’ to the ‘theoreticist’

1.1 Practice over ideas: ‘the ideological activist’ (or the ‘fetishism of practice’)

By ‘ideological activists’ we mean those fetishizing of particular forms of practice, and measuring of existing

² ‘Fetishizing’ here mean mistakenly (ideologically) holding up something as the (magical) key to something, treating it as a fetish – a thing with powers – when it is in fact only an aspect (or even simply an effect) of the phenomenon in question. See Part 4 of Chapter 1 of *Capital*. (Fetishism in Freud’s discussion of sexuality meant the endowing of an (otherwise non-sexual) body part or object with sexual significance – only this object has the power to provoke a sexual response.)

struggles against these fetishized ideas about practice. The (fetishized) practice arose from particular given conditions, where it was found to be necessary, appropriate or successful. But then the ideological activist clings onto that successful practice, understanding it as a general strategy, valid in and of itself. Thus, instead of continually testing the practice in a process that involves critical evaluation, there is only (mechanical) action.

In this perspective theory is seen as a hindrance since the process of critical evaluation of ‘what we do’ appears as an unnecessary interference with a practice that has been established as good and effective as it is and once and for all.

The upside of this ideological activism, that is its moment of truth, is a not unreasonable reaction against abstruse sectarian waffle and time-wasting theoretical debates, which are so common in non-revolutionary times, and which can effectively stop protesters getting on with action.

The downside is that, by failing to think and debate further about practice, practice gets fossilised within an uncritical loop. The fetishism of the ideological activist reveals its recuperative potential when practice becomes an endless repetition of (supposedly) ‘revolutionary’ acts. An example of this activist dead-end is the more predictable form of militancy exhibited by the black bloc, for whom the image of militant opposition can be more important than the development of a movement. The black bloc’s clashes with the police during demonstrations become rituals, which are expected by the police and get accommodated as an ongoing part of the status quo.

Ideological action has no potential to develop beyond an elite of activists. It therefore creates a gap between the activist ‘ghetto’ and ‘ordinary people’ who don’t seem to be interested or brave enough. Thus it becomes an endless repetition of radical actions that only serve to define the activists as ‘revolutionary’ and justify their difference from the rest of the ‘ordinary’ world.

1.2 Ideas over practice

The other side of the coin is the privileging of ideas over practice, of which there are a number of different types of examples.

‘The activist ideologue’

The ‘activist ideologue’ is the counterpart of the ‘ideological activist’: its other extreme. While the ideological activist fetishizes the ‘right’ practice, the activist ideologue fetishizes and proclaims the ‘right’ ideas – which are then treated as finished and fixed by virtue of their assumed absolute ‘correctness’.

Such ideologues may get involved side by side with activists, but for opposite aims, and are alien to each other since their interests don’t overlap. Indeed, the activist ideologue is not interested in actions, but in the purity of ideas diffused during actions, the correctness of words uttered at meetings or written in leaflets.

As in the case of the ideological activists, activist ideologues in effect separate themselves from what is perceived as ‘the ordinary world’. The activist ideologue inevitably faces a cold or even hostile reception to their

leaflets and preaching.³ But, having separated ideas from the living context in which ideas are true for - and make sense to - us, the ideologue can't explain why such 'right' ideas are not immediately acknowledged, why there is this lack of interest from 'ordinary people' or other activists. The cause that seems obvious to them is: *other ideological sources*, which brainwash individuals with recuperative ideas. Activist ideologues see themselves at the front of an ideological war. For them, class war is principally a war not against the bourgeoisie, the state or the police but what they understand to be their subtle means of recuperation - minor Trotskyist parties; the school; the mass media; etc.⁴

In fact, this ideological war is sterile. Critical ideas can't just be taught or preached: as activity can have meaning through theory, ideas can make sense only in a concrete context. The truths about capitalism can be realised only through our involvement in class struggle. The gap between the activist ideologue and the unenlightened can be bridged only through the common experience of struggle.

But this creates a vicious circle, since the activist ideologue separates himself with disdain from those who potentially can, or just start being, involved, and who still have half-baked, liberal, common-sense, confused ideas about justice, capitalism, freedom, rights, etc. Those people are, for them, hateful liberals, union militants, etc. i.e. class enemies. The result of this separation is an endless and sterile production or utterance of smug 'critiques' that have no other end but the definition of oneself as 'revolutionary' and provide a justification for the separation from a hopelessly alien world of 'ordinary people'.

The academic

The separation experienced by the ideologue between reality and his world of ideas is disheartening. This separation can in some sense be resolved, avoiding so much pain, by concentrating on making theory. The radical *academic* has solved this problem. She has turned the activity of making revolutionary theory into her job - the concrete basis of her own material reproduction.

The radical academic can enjoy practical activity outside her university library, which may include membership of a Trotskyist party, for example, or even involvement in some local campaign meetings. This activity however, is separated from any interest at work; the critical ideas developed at work do not connect with the political

practice outside of work - the academic ideas may be more radical than the political practice.

On the one hand, the academic may produce theory that is interesting and useful to those of us involved in struggle. Her practice is to do theory, and her (over-emphasis) on the moment of reflection gives her the opportunity to develop ideas. On the other hand, by having turned making theory into a job, she is obliged to adopt the mindset of production for production's sake, often in collaboration with colleagues or students who are not totally like-minded. The academic's theory thus enters into a compromise with academia that, in return, guarantees her reproduction. Academia is not a neutral realm. Its nature as the realm developed under capitalism as one of ideas outside the conflicting interests of classes or particular capitals itself produces distortions and constraints: constraints in the form of the time and energy given over to ideas which then take away from practice, and distortions in the form of elevating these ideas over practice. The academic then prefers to slog away on her papers instead of undergoing a real, active, critique of her status, which would initiate a conflict with her establishment that may ultimately cost her job and undermine her reproduction.

As a consequence of the radical academic's priority, that of remaining within and continuing to reproduce the academic world, her critiques are ultimately timid. Battles of ideas among academics are often empty of any political content and constrained by due respect for their academic peers and the usual polite bourgeois conventions of this world of ideas and arguments. The academic can do a good job, sometimes, but this is often partial or even defused of any real power (and, even when it is interesting, is normally very boring)!

The 'theoretician' (or 'anti-activist')

The theoretician takes the radical academic's 'solution' to the problem of the separation of theory and practice one stage further: he fetishizes theory as the most revolutionary form of practice.

Unlike the academic who makes theory his job then separates his '9-5' job (theory) from the rest of his practice (whether 'political' or not), for the theoretician making theory is itself the very definition of being a revolutionary. He therefore achieves the unity, or, more precisely, thoroughgoingness, absent in the case of the academic. His theoretical practice is thoroughgoing in that he applies (or at least attempts to apply) it to every aspect of his life - there is no compromise with his principles and thus no contradiction between work and life outside work as there is for the radical academic. In fact, however, the theoretician can have an academic job, or she can be a factory worker or a drop-out; what matters is his attitude to theory.

Theoreticism is the complete alienation from the concrete world. There is nothing outside a desk full of books. All life, all definition of oneself, is locked into making or understanding and following the most radical, the most pure, the most revolutionary theory, and being thoroughly faithful to it in every moment and aspect of one's life.

Theoreticism is consequently total immobilisation by theoretical purity. Any real struggle, movement, political activity, become anathema as in any struggle, movement, group there are always people who don't fit the theory, and

³ This is the problem noted by Guy Debord in anarchism. Anarchism, Debord says, 'leaves *the historical terrain* by assuming that the adequate forms for this passage to practice have already been found and will never change' (*Society of the Spectacle*, §92). This is behind the ideologues' 'certainty that ideas must become practice' immediately. As a consequence, Debord adds, the anarchists' 'intellectual activity consists of the repetition of certain definitive truths' (§93). What Debord calls 'the terrain of history' we here call the process of realization of ideas through praxis.

⁴ The apotheosis of such ideology is perhaps the notion put forward by Althusser of 'Ideological State Apparatuses', those institutions (such as education and the media) which, he argues, are the key to explaining the absence of revolution. In this conception, ideology is not a consciousness arising as a bi-product of alienated practice but the deliberate manufacture of false ideas by capitalist functionaries. Althusser's supposed anti-idealism (anti-Hegelianism) is thus a profoundly dualistic and idealistic ontology.



any contact implies the sacrifice of revolutionary principles. No campaigns or movements are therefore worth his while.

In this resistance to activism, there is an element of truth, which is the real risk of being recuperated in liberal struggles that reflect and enhance the power of the ruling class. But there is also a crucial drawback: the theoretician waits motionless for the purely and perfectly revolutionary moment, looking with disdain at any struggle that is actually happening around them - and, tragically, there is an irresolvable gap between the non-revolutionary present, and a revolutionary moment where it's okay to get into action.

Many theoreticians have found the perfect doctrine to contemplate, which justifies their condition.⁵ Some, for example, fetishize theories that explain that capital is bound to bring about the pure revolution one day through its own inherent development; and/or explain that the present struggles are not 'revolutionary' in nature. Some, instead, may fetishize theories that condemn practical intervention as an undue interference with the autonomous struggle of the proletariat. Others may be fond of theories⁶ which see culture, thought and actions as overwhelmingly shaped by capitalism, so that nothing can be done, except redeem oneself by reading lots of theory at home. Others may nurture themselves in the idea that we are irremediably victims of super-powerful lizards⁷; etc.

⁵ The theoretician can draw upon theories produced by non-theoreticians, such as old council communist theories, etc.

⁶ E.g., Adorno, Baudrillard.

⁷ One day when we were leafleting for the campaign against identity cards a supermarket security guard came out and informed us of a world-wide conspiracy, which had already completed and inescapable surveillance system covering the globe. The conclusion of this was that it was too late to struggle as everything was already bound to happen. Of course, the mouthpiece of this theory, the security guard, felt self-satisfied about this esoteric knowledge he possessed, thus also self-satisfied in his haplessness and powerlessness. In general, conspiracy theories are subtly (or not so subtly) conservative.

There is, in some of these versions of theoreticism, the implication that active political intervention in struggles is somehow artificial (perhaps because such struggles should operate without the interference of those 'people like us' who have esoteric knowledge of the true nature of class struggle). Yet it is the notion we should not get involved in the world that we theorize that is artificial, since it implies that we are not a part of this world. This separated world is, in the previous example, either capital as a quasi-objective structure which moves independently from us; 'the proletariat' which we should not interfere with; 'culture' or 'discourse' as something created in separation from us; or a network of conspirators beyond our reach.

For all these different theoreticians, there is, at least implicitly, a *choice* of inactivity. But there is also a great intellectual reward from this choice, as a kind of peace of mind or calm self-satisfaction is the consequence of being the exclusive recipient of exclusive knowledge. Like the ideological activist and the activist ideologue, the theoretician defines himself as revolutionary insofar as he is separate from, and somehow superior to, the 'common' world. His exclusive access to sophisticated theory that ordinary people can't understand is the glorification of his separation.

Politically and practically, 'theoreticism' is ultimately conservative; it is the ultimate enactment of a separation with the world and immobility. By ruling out involvement in struggles in non-revolutionary times as useless or worse than useless, it contributes nothing to change.

In each of these different examples above, there is a kind of dualism and separation. For the ideological activist, there is the refusal to allow current practice to feed back into a (changed) understanding of proper practice - the two are held apart. For those who privilege ideas over practice in different ways, the separation can be analysed as a matter of degree. Thus the activist ideologue has certain ideas but gets involved with practices and people which are alien to themselves, and experiences this separation or alienation and tries to overcome it (unsuccessfully) by mere assertion and repetition. For the academic, the separation is greater: ideas are his job, and he separates out his working practice (ideas, which may be radical and revolutionary) from his daily life, or even political practice, which may be reformist, counter-revolutionary or not 'political' at all. For the theoretician, extreme closure within pure theory is realized: being revolutionary means to limit one's practice to the realm of ideas, hence not be involved at all.

We now move on to two accounts of recent struggles in which we had some involvement. We use these to illustrate (1) the way the above separations⁸ operated potentially or actually to limit the potential of the struggles, and (2) how these ideological positions were challenged and the important consequences for theory as well as practice of this challenge.

2 The struggle against the Job Seeker's Allowance (1995-7)

⁸ By definition the academics and the theoreticians/anti-activists do not get involved, so these examples concern only the ideological activists and activist ideologues.

2.1 The background

In the UK, the mid-1990s saw a number of important reforms of the system for claiming benefits. Central to these was the introduction in 1996 of the Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), which replaced Unemployment Benefit, and included such features as increased sanctions for not 'actively seeking work'. The nature of the JSA and the struggles against it and other reforms and schemes introduced in this period, including 'Project Work' and the New Deal, have been detailed elsewhere.⁹ What we are concerned with here is the nature of the struggles against the JSA in Brighton – how and why those involved in this struggle, who included some of us, had to challenge crystallised ideas, which made sense in abstract as 'revolutionary' but were a hindrance for an effective revolt against the reforms. Also, we will show what this experience meant for us in terms of theoretical understanding.

The pre-existence of 'revolutionary' ideology at the beginning of the anti-JSA movement needs to be placed historically. In the UK, the early 1980s were a time when there was a rough consensus amongst the 'actual existing ultra-left' – i.e., all those groups and individuals inspired by left communism, the Situationists and *autonomia*. Democratic representation – the unions and leftism more generally – had been powerful, and there was no dispute that they were the 'left wing of capital',¹⁰ and that they should be denounced at every turn. With the defeat of the miners, however, the unions' power and their usual role was seriously undermined. As such, the critique of the unions as the recuperators of struggles became an ideology that was true in abstract but made increasingly less sense in practice. The working class were not being held back by the unions; indeed class struggle went into retreat and there was little for the unions to recuperate.

The anti-poll tax movement of 1989-90 and the riots of 1990, however, brought a sudden and unexpected, and extremely vibrant, resurgence of class struggle. The working class reared up against an arrogant and miscalculating Conservative government and incompetent police force, and the existing ultra-left was re-invigorated, with renewed interest in the old currents of the late 1960s and their modern counterparts – as expressed in the ICC, Class War etc. Within this re-invigorated ultra-left, the truth of the limits of the unions and the historical counter-revolutionary role of leftism seemed to be confirmed. First, the left was up to its old tricks – Militant¹¹ tried to control the movement and rein

⁹ See *Dole autonomy versus the re-imposition of work: analysis of the current tendency to workfare in the UK* (1998); 'Social democracy: No future?' (*Aufheben* #7, 1998); *Dole autonomy and work re-imposition: An epilogue* (1999); and 'Unemployed recalcitrance and welfare restructuring in the UK today' in *Stop the Clock!* (2000). Details of all articles are on the inside back page of this issue.

¹⁰ The well-known phrase 'left wing of capital' isn't meant to be taken literally, but is a shorthand for all those tendencies implementing or pressing for a reformed, progressive, less market-led (and hence, they expect, more legitimate and 'fair' form of capitalism – e.g. state capitalism, socialism etc.)

¹¹ Militant Tendency, now the Socialist Party, was, at one stage, a party within a party in relation to the Labour Party and the biggest of the Trotskyist factions.

in the most radical, and when it could not do this itself it openly sided with the police. Second, the struggle had operated and been won not through the moribund structures of the labour movement or even through strikes but through riots and action on the streets.

Indeed, the historic and successful struggle against the poll tax revived and demonstrated the continued relevance of the whole of the ultra-left analysis – not only the critique of the left and of the unions, not only the role of street collective action such as riots rather than institutionalized forms of dispute but also the central notion of proletarian spontaneity or autonomy more generally – the idea that the working class will naturally resist without conventional parties or formal, centralised organizational structures – and finally the crucial idea of the refusal of or revolt against work as a revolutionary act, which distinguished the ultra-left so sharply from the workerist leftists. As we will see, the revival of all these ideas informed debate about strategies of resistance in the anti-JSA movement in 1995-7.

But at the same time as the assumptions of the existing ultra-left seemed re-confirmed, so did the importance of some form of activism in relation to others not adequately captured in the positions of the actual existing ultra-left. The partial stranglehold by Militant of the anti-poll tax movement was challengeable, and many from the existing ultra-left got stuck in more than previously – attending meetings, pickets and demonstrations.

2.2 The campaign

With the threat of the JSA, different groups affected at first began organizing separately. Those of us who were living on benefits saw the JSA, which could deprive us of all the weekly money we needed to live, as a threat not only to our own immediate living conditions, but to the conditions of the wider working class, and hence ourselves again, as it provided a mechanism for compelling people to take the low paid jobs that no one wanted and thus push wages down at the bottom end of the labour market.

Across the country independent anti-JSA claimants' action groups appeared, eventually coalescing in a network of groups of claimants against the JSA, 'Groundswell'.

Many of those involved in this anti-JSA campaign were radical claimants, mostly anarchists, rather than having no political background or having a background linked to the labour movement or trade unions (whose officially sponsored unemployed centres were behind a smaller parallel network of campaign groups, in-turn linked to a leftist European network). Most of them came out of the experience of the poll tax. As we discussed earlier, they were influenced by the ideological context created during the 1980s and early 1990s, according to which they saw themselves to some extent as representatives of the 'real proletarians', ideally radical like them, ideally against work. So they saw the struggle against the JSA as a struggle between the claimants as this 'real proletariat' on the one side, against not only the government but also the dole workers, as the representatives of capital, on the other.

Yet the radical claimants faced the undeniable general inertia, atomization and powerlessness of the 'ordinary' claimant. They had to accept that the way 'common' claimants would react to the JSA (if they would react at all!) would be at the very best a strategy of scams or 'duck-and-

dive', i.e. attempts to go round the rules as an individual, feigning job-search, sickness, bluffs and other use of one's own wits. So at the beginning the radical claimants supported such 'ducking and diving' as a general 'radical' strategy against the JSA.

The strategy of 'duck and dive' in effect substituted the anarchists' and activists' perspective for the working class. Although 'ducking and diving' may be common among claimants who inevitably develop individual survival techniques, the radical claimants overlooked a tragic separation between themselves and the 'ordinary' world. Whether they liked it or not, most 'ordinary' claimants were not in principle against waged work. Most claimants wanted a job - although they wanted a well-paid job and preferred to 'duck and dive' only to avoid being pushed into poorly paid waged jobs or losing their benefits. The radical claimants could not address this separation, assuming, as activist ideologues, that their 'true' ideas, their 'true' critique of waged labour was obvious to all by virtue of its fundamental correctness.

Of course there is an element of truth in the radical claimants' analysis and hence their strategy. In times of less promise, 'duck and dive' may be a viable survival approach. But on this occasion we saw the potential for much more. We were able to start and carry out an effective strategy of collective attack. Eventually, however, recognising the need to up the ante, the radical claimants too proposed collective action - however, with a strategy of attack that had to be coherent with their ideology! So, in May 1996, they proclaimed the so-called 'Three Strikes' strategy:

The 'Three Strikes' strategy had previously been used to some effect in Edinburgh where a claimants group had been active for a number of years. They used the strategy in response to a government snooping campaign. In the Groundswell version of the 'Three Strikes' strategy, any Employment Service worker persistently reported as harassing claimants is sent two written warnings by the claimants' group. If these are not heeded, the claimants' group distributes a poster depicting the offender and prints it out on a poster describing what the person has done; the poster is then distributed in the local area.

(Dole autonomy versus the re-imposition of work: Analysis of the current tendency to Workfare in the UK, Aufheben 1998, pp. 27-8)

...the expectation being that the enraged local proletariat would then attack or at least harass the offending JobCentre worker.

The three strikes strategy was coherent with the activist ideologues' view of the anti-JSA struggle as open confrontation between idealized activist claimants, representing a wider antagonistic and anti-work proletariat, and stereotyped dole workers.

The Three Strikes strategy was based on the belief that, by proposing the 'right' radical idea, this would be followed immediately by the masses. Disappointment followed when the 'common' claimant didn't seem very excited about the strategy:

due either to lack of support for it among Groundswell-affiliated groups or lack of numbers in

these groups, the method has been implemented on only a handful of occasions, and only by the groups in Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol and Nottingham
(Dole autonomy, op. cit., p. 28)

The JSA was much more than an attack on 'dole autonomy' - i.e. the most radical (anti-work) expressions of unemployment. It was an attack by capital against the wider working class; it was the thin edge of privatisation of the welfare state administration, and a strategy to bring wages down. This was both a threat to the workers on benefit as well as to the dole (JobCentre) workers, as it immediately aimed to undermine their working conditions, wages, and job security.

The JSA seriously affected all JobCentre workers dealing with the claimants face to face. By changing the balance of any potential policing role (which they had previously the discretion to simply pay lip service to) and made it central. The JSA did not pretend, as in previous schemes, to offer 'make-work' opportunities, but was designed to be confrontational to deal with the ongoing problem of unemployed recalcitrance.

The dole workers' identification with their targets and orders was increasingly undermined by increasing proletarianization. These workers had increasingly lost the privileges that once made even the lowest civil servants a middle class worker separated from the working class. Their working conditions had declined, their pay was already low (many had to claim housing benefit). Hence there was mounting hostility to their own management, and this hostility was exacerbated by the JSA, which offered only a future of antagonistic relations with the claimants.

In the face of the JSA, the most combative dole workers, who also were those unionised, felt encouraged to take action, since it was officially the policy of their union (then the CPSA later the PCA) to oppose the JSA. Yet they faced the problem of their real fragmentation, powerlessness against their managers, and the resistance and hostility of conservative workers in their same workplace. Their struggle could not develop if limited only to their workplace, in the same way as our struggle as claimants could not develop further if limited only to fragmented and hapless claimants.

2.3 Rationale for BABC strategy

In Brighton the militancy of the local dole workers offered a chance for an alliance that had a real opportunity to develop a viable strategy against the new regime. Brighton Claimants' Action Group was one of the most active in the country but it was still tiny compared with the huge numbers of unemployed in the town. The militant JobCentre workers were keen to work alongside us and so Brighton Against Benefit Cuts (BABC) was born, an alliance of unemployed activists and militant dole workers who aimed to resist the JSA.

Our involvement in BABC was not simply a hope but based on an understanding of the potential of this particular situation. The militant dole workers were increasingly conscious of the contradiction of their position, not seeing themselves as opposed to the claimants, but opposed, instead, to their managers. This consciousness would potentially spread throughout their office if the conditions for this developed, if effective anti-JSA struggles effectively

undermined the power of their management, encouraged the workers, and marginalized the conservative elements.

An important catalyst for this alliance was the pre-existence of direct relations among us. Some of the most active dole workers shared our same social environment. This made us overcome any separation created by the relations we were supposed to maintain among us – we were not ‘claimants’ and ‘dole workers’, but friends who could trust each other without any feeling of separation created by their roles.

On the day the JSA came into force, all the Groundswell groups had decided to take action, but the biggest demo in the country was in Brighton; over 300 laid siege to the JobCentres, and dole-workers used it as an excuse to down tools, bringing the new system into chaos. This and subsequent Brighton demonstrations involving occupations of the JobCentres were based on a conscious co-ordination between claimants and JobCentre workers, with whom tactics were pre-arranged. JobCentre workers used the pretext of ‘health and safety’ regulations to close down the JobCentres for the whole day, something which we wanted to do but couldn’t have achieved on our own, since our crowds were usually relatively small and most claimants in even our biggest crowds were not as confrontational as they appeared. These tactics, and the regular sharing of information between JobCentre workers and claimants, were the basis of our continued effectiveness as a campaign.

The introduction a year later of a punitive quasi-workfare pilot scheme, named ‘Project Work’, in many areas of the country saw a re-invigoration of some Groundswell groups, which had otherwise fallen into a decline once the JSA was in place. The Brighton group held a small demo the day the ‘intensive job search’ component of the scheme began, in April 1997, again managing to close down the JobCentres, despite the meagre size of the crowd. When the job placements began, in August of that year, the group occupied the offices of the placement providers (the ‘training’ agencies who are paid for each placement they can find). The main tactic of the group, however, was to target the placement organizations themselves. The Brighton version of ‘Project Work’ involved the ‘voluntary’ sector, and therefore in many cases charity shops. Pickets of charity shops encouraging consumer boycotts forced some to pull out. The scheme in Brighton, poorly funded and vulnerable, was almost on the verge of collapse, prompting the Employment Service to draft in management reinforcements from London to shore it up. The police stepped up their harassment of claimants too, in a response that seemed disproportionate to the actual size of the campaign.

However, the viability of the small Brighton campaign appeared to be unrepresentative of what happened across the country as a whole, where Project Work continued despite the activities of the local claimants’ groups. Thus, even the introduction of a blatantly punitive workfare scheme which didn’t even pretend to provide jobs or give people training did not lead to the development of a movement of any significance.

Our intervention in the dole campaign was an objective-subjective experience, with both subjective and objective effects. First, we felt the excitement of the threat we posed to the bosses, as we closed JobCentres, forced them to involve the police, saw hundreds of claimants come together physically for the first time in decades and start

questioning their previously experienced haplessness. Generally we were seen as and felt ourselves to be subjects of a moving history.

Second, through their participation, the dole workers concretely challenged their already deteriorating view of themselves as ‘middle class’, and their identification with their management. This subjective development undermined the ‘truth’ of the ideologues, that is an assumed fixed separation of all dole workers on the one side, siding with their managers and the state, and all claimants on the other side. This ‘truth’, instead, began to be exposed as an aspect of the divide-and-rule mechanism on which capital had so far consolidated its power.

Thus subjective and objective are inseparable. Further, in Brighton subjective experience – such as excitement, understanding, and decisions – became objective *affordances* for the anti-JSA struggle. However, as we will see, the (subjective) ideology and choice of the radical activists elsewhere became an objective *hindrance* to the struggle against the JSA.

The Brighton radical claimants, who at the beginning shared at least in part the radical ideas of the radical claimants from other towns, started realizing a practical critique of those ideas, above all the separation of ourselves as ‘real’ proletarians’, from those at work, and the potential for struggle of this realization.

Despite the fact that our approach seemed to represent a viable strategy – we organized visible actions and were seen as a threat by JobCentre management – across the country, many of the other radical claimant groups in Groundswell seemed stuck in their activist ideology, and preferred to carry on their dual-track policy, paradoxically comprising of either covert ‘ducking-and-diving’ or extremely open threats of ‘Three-strikes’, which never appeared to us to be a viable strategy let alone one that could develop into something that could involve the wider claimant population.¹²

Besides the central problem of seeing us as separated from the dole workers, there was the continued hostility towards leftism, which, we have seen, had consolidated with the poll tax. The refusal on behalf of some radical claimants to get involved with the JobCentre workers as leftists and union activists was grounded in the ultra-left critique, but a critique which had crystallized into an ideology, to be repeated rather than engaged with.

In fact the most militant, the most reliable and the most willing to get stuck into the anti-JSA struggle in Brighton were leftists – members of Militant and other Trot sects. These organizations had been anathema to us, as they were for other radical groups; however, the way BABC was born had put this issue under question. Those workers who

¹² This is not to say that all the Brighton campaign tactics were viable while all those of the local groups that opposed our alliance with JobCentre workers were not. For example the Edinburgh group was one of the more vibrant and active for a number of years, with good links with the wider claimant population, while maintaining its dole autonomy. And some of the Brighton group’s tactics either flopped – such as our phone tree to gather people to lay siege to JobCentre management (not front line staff) whenever there was a sanction – or were not fully or happily endorsed by the whole group – such as our support for the Benefits Agency staff strike against the removal of screens from their counters. See *Dole Autonomy*, op. cit.

actively planned and plotted with us against their managers were rank-and-file union members, and were not interested in ‘recuperating’ anything. The context was new, and this context served to create a more and more radical class consciousness in these workers. It increasingly separated them from their union leaders as the struggle escalated.

The leftism of the dole workers was in fact less of a problem for these critics of the Brighton strategy than the fact that they were dole workers. In fact, however, a critique of opportunism – the fact that we were working with leftists - might have been a more worthy thing to argue over.¹³

2.4 Critique of the activist ideologue – material conditions and intervention

By failing to connect the radical claimants with the wider claimant population, ‘Three strikes’ served only to reproduce the gap between the activist ideologues and the ‘ordinary’ claimants and reinforce the isolation of the campaigners. At the same time, completing the vicious circle, the ‘Three strikes’ strategy served to confirm to the campaigners their being ‘revolutionary’, thus it glorified their separation from the ‘common’ world as being one with their practical haplessness.

To some extent, perhaps, ‘Three strikes’ also limited any alliance between dole workers and the unemployed in other areas of the country on the model of the one in Brighton. In those places where the (empty) threat of ‘Three strikes’ came to the attention of the JobCentres, it may have scared off those dole workers who might otherwise have linked up with claimants’ groups against their own management. At its worst, therefore, ‘Three strikes’ may have only reinforced the power and influence of management and union leaders, who were keen to demonstrate the most patronizing protective attitude to their workers in order to gain loyalty and in order to encourage their emotive separation from the claimants – functional to the implementation of the JSA.

The ultimate defeat of the claimants’ campaign, in the form of the successful implementation of the JSA, appeared confirmed in 1997 with the introduction of New Labour’s New Deal, which presented itself not as a punitive regime but as a series of claimant-friendly ‘options’ designed to get the ‘willing but unable’ unemployed ‘job-ready’ (and win over the TUC etc.) – though it created no new jobs (and certainly didn’t lead to the creation of any well-paid ones – in fact it boosted only low paid jobs) and itself was premised upon the iron fist of the JSA.

Yet the government success in implementing the New Deal was possible only because the anti-JSA movement had not been able to deliver a decisive and humiliating blow to the JSA and to the previous Tory ‘Project Work’ pilot scheme. One presupposition for the introduction of the New Deal therefore was the choices made in struggle by the various campaign groups across the country.

In defiance of the choice taken by those Groundswell groups who endorsed strategies of ‘duck and dive’ and ‘Three strikes’, rather than co-ordination with JobCentre workers, perhaps the material conditions in Brighton were

different than in other parts of the country. There was, it is true, an already existing militant mood among Brighton dole workers prior to the formation of BABC. We in fact do not know if an alliance between dole workers and claimants in other areas was so difficult because we don’t know how many of them seriously tried to do so – in fact we know that some didn’t seriously try. As such, this reconfirmed what was perceived as true beforehand. In a vicious circle, the fact that the dole workers could not count on any external solidarity contributed to their weakness and their apparent ‘need’ to stick to their managements. As mentioned, ‘Three strikes’ was in some sense a self-fulfilling prophesy in the way it assumed an opposition between claimants and JobCentre workers.

What one can understand as the ‘material conditions’ are neither purely objective or purely subjective conditions, but life in its entirety. This also includes, as we said earlier, choices and conscious thought – including the active interventions of elements of campaigners. A choice based on conditions assumed as inevitable is self-defeating, locks the subject up into a fetishism of already objectified relations, elevated as unchallengeable ‘material conditions’. Activist ideology then becomes a passive contemplation of the present relations.

As we mentioned earlier, our experience with BABC implied for us a rethinking of the ‘truths’ that we inherited from the past. This rethinking was a new moment, the moment of making theory – yet not a rumination of old truths but a reflection on the concrete reality that we had lived. This generated our pamphlet *Dole autonomy*.¹⁴

With *Dole autonomy*, a concept taken up by a number in the actually existing ultra-left, we were trying to describe (among other things) some of the more militant and radical effects of mass unemployment. The implicit (and perhaps unconscious) position of the majority of militant claimant activists who opposed our alliance with JobCentre workers and who wanted a separate unemployed campaign was that dole autonomy was the condition of the whole of the unemployed. They projected their own dole autonomy onto the recalcitrant unemployed, who were often individualized and subjectively powerless. This was reflected in the early suggestions on tactics – in particular ‘duck and dive’.

In writing *Dole autonomy* we developed a critique of the radical strategy of ‘duck and dive’ and of ‘Three strikes’, and the ideology underlying them. This critique of ideology, and our new understanding, was not based on simply applying a ‘more sophisticated’ theory, either Marx, Bordiga, Debord... or anyone else. It was not made of paper, but life - the experience of creating solidarity, building collective real power, the excitement of seeing the fragility of the state’s schemes in relation to our actions. But this critique was also based on the anger of losing this possibility, trying in vain to expand our viable strategy of resistance and coming up against brick wall made of perfectly ‘true and revolutionary’ ideas as we argued that the strategy should be more widely adopted if we had any chance of damaging the JSA!

Our critique of the activist ideologues in the campaign against the JSA was about their incapacity to see reality in terms of dynamic relations, not fixed in absolute.

¹³ It is true that getting involved in absolutely anything can be opportunism. We refused to get excited by the lorry drivers’ fuel; blockades; while these actions did cause some chaos, we did not see it as a struggle with radical potential.

¹⁴ The pamphlet is now out of print but is available on our website. See inside back page for details.

What the ideologues missed was, first, the acknowledgment that 'ordinary claimants' needed to be involved into a process in order to radicalize, and, second, the possibility of a radicalization of the dole workers.

In both cases what had to be challenged was the weakness of the class in itself, not yet constituted as a class for itself. It is the weakness of the dole worker that makes sense of their trade union consciousness and leftism. It is their weakness that makes sense of their antagonistic role face-to-face with the clamant. On the other side, it is the weakness of the claimant that makes sense of their inertia and feeling that nothing can be done. But the constitution of the class for itself is based on real experience of power, only realized by struggle, only by starting from the present conditions.

Our approach was in effect to start a process that would develop the dole workers' own contradictions, nurture their questioning of their policing role and consider direct action as part of a viable strategy – all this through practical involvement. Our approach also showed to the claimants that something could be collectively achieved.

Class struggle is the only solution to our 'objective' reliance on bourgeois representative structures (unions and parties), structure of power (the welfare state and eventually capital itself (the necessity of a waged job). All these 'objective' necessities can only be dissolved by building alternative direct relations of solidarity and by seizing material control of our reproduction. But this struggle can only start from the present conditions, involving those who feel, and are, limited by those 'objective' conditions.

3 Anti-war campaign actions 2002-3

3.1 The background and the campaign

The mass campaign against the Iraq war began in Brighton with the Halloween events of 31st October 2002. This unruly, unruléd and unpredictable event set the tone for the rest of the campaign. We described the event briefly in *Aufheben* #12 (2004)¹⁵. We now add some background and an analysis of why events happened as they did in Brighton but perhaps not in the same way in other places.

The uplifting Halloween actions were followed by a children's mass action, which involved along the way a (partial) critique of school itself, a further evening action in the town centre on the day the war broke out, in which the town hall was partially invaded, and then a weekly street march which was never agreed with the police yet which they had to accept, redirecting traffic as though it was a legitimate march. In some ways these street marches became in the end somewhat ritualized as the campaign ran out of steam and ideas, but for a while they were exciting and unpredictable, carrying their participants along to new ways of thinking and acting. Was this a typical 'direct action' involving a (small) group of specialists? No. Was it a traditional boring lefty march? No. Yet the actions seemed to contain some of the best elements of both of these things: large numbers of people coming together and feeling more confidence in doing so; a lack of control from hacks; the threat of doing something (occupying certain sites rather than just marching from A to B) – and perhaps above all a general sense of power and politicization, irrespective of the

issue, in that we were able to assert ourselves against the police – marching in the road instead of on the pavement without permission. This set of actions defined the tone for police-protester relations in future events, thus encouraging further actions (e.g. the campaign against the arms manufacturers EDO).

However, the background to Halloween and its aftermath was equally interesting. As we said in our earlier article, the way various elements organized and came together was very different than that in the case of the war against Afghanistan:

In Brighton, in response to the war on Afghanistan, a number of different (relatively small) protest groups were formed, reflecting different political tendencies. The most radical anti-war group (comprising anarchists, communists etc.) became a constipated direct-action group, in large part because of internal political differences. By contrast, in response to the threat of war on Iraq, a larger more inclusive group, ['Sussex Action for Peace' (SAfP)], emerged despite such differences... The national Coalition called for actions on Halloween (October 31st 2002), but local groups decided what form these might take. The Brighton group proposed a 'Stop the City, Stop the War' action, which was originally intended as a small group direct action. However, it subsequently became a mass tactic, endorsed by the Brighton group as a whole. In effect, the Halloween action served to resolve all the factional differences, and pleased everyone. It defined the identity of the group as a whole. ('A phenomenal anti-war movement?', p. 31)

The failure previously of the different factions to organize together was understandable, however - in particular, the refusal of the direct activists to link up with those liberal-leftists who sought to involve the wider popular. For a number of years, the broader 'direct action' movement has been able to claim with some justification that direct action, particularly that characterized by the participation of only small ('affinity') groups, often clandestine, has been successful. The anti-roads, RTS and anti-GM¹⁶ actions relied on such tactics, by contrast with which the traditional leftist march from A to B appeared boring and alienating, and was even more risky in terms of arrests. This then led to less emphasis on mass action and involving large numbers. But the truth and effectiveness of these small scale actions is in large part a function of the retreat of the working class, where, indeed, masses of people were less confident and willing.

However the retreat of the working class is not a constant. As we said in our original article:

The demonstration on February 15th 2002 against the threatened war on Iraq was the biggest protest march in British history. Almost unique in recent history, it was promoted beforehand by sections of the UK national media. The following day, the newspaper

¹⁵ See 'A phenomenal anti-war movement?' (*Aufheben* #12, 2004)

¹⁶ RTS = Reclaim the Streets; GM = genetically modified (crops). See 'The politics of anti-road struggle and the struggles of anti-road politics: The case of the No M11 Link Road Campaign' (*Aufheben*, 1994/1998)

front pages were dominated by pictures of all the thousands in the streets, such images being treated as far more eloquent than the accompanying hacks' commentary... The recent protests not only had a political impact, they also appeared to affect the subjectivity of many of those who took part in them. Many for the first time became interested in 'politics', and demanded to know more and to understand the wider world. This politicization seems to have been developing before the demonstrations themselves and was reflected in a general thirst for information. ('A phenomenal anti-war movement?', pp. 28-9)

The situation with the war against Iraq needed to be recognized as something different, and required reconsidering the nature of 'activism' and hence the kind of tactics we use - a process of 'thinking about' and reshaping aims and modes of action.



3.2 The grounds for a development of something new in Brighton – the background to Halloween

The anti-war movement of 2002-3 put into question again the separation of theory and practice for its participants. Our practical involvement in collaboration with a number of like-minded participants in SAfP worked toward a collective development of action based on practical theory, trying to challenge ideological limitations. Such a development culminated in a 3,000-strong mass action in Brighton, which broadened expectations and the consciousness of collective power in SAfP, and shattered the crystallized perspectives of both direct activists and leftists.

Yet, this development was missed by theoreticians and unrecognized by activist ideologues. Many theoreticians refused to 'mix' themselves up with non-revolutionary participants and missed the build up to the street protests, and the street protests themselves. Many activist ideologues participated in SAfP and at demonstrations as critical observers, standing in the sidelines, except for criticizing the words of some leaflets or, in some cases, producing some sterile critique.

As mentioned, a large group of activists with a background in direct action, were involved in SAfP. Initially, many of them were locked into the ideological understanding of involvement limited only to traditional clandestine, elitist actions, which had been for them, objectively, the only viable tactic until then, and which separated from 'ordinary

people'. At first they attended SAfP meetings only as delegates rather than full participants.

A number of leftists and liberals were involved in SAfP too, wrapped in their own ideology of practice, which saw the traditional march as the only possible kind of action to undertake.

Some of us from *Aufheben* also got involved, as we said, together with a group of like-minded participants. We shared a theoretical-practical background based on both the poll tax and the experience of BABC (see above), which had made us aware of the problems and potentials of working with those still limited by liberal and leftist perspectives. But our background also included our involvement with the new recent types of struggles based on direct action (in particular the anti-road movement), which had made us critically aware of both the importance and limitations of direct action. Importantly, those like us who had past involvement with the above struggles had also consolidated relations of trust with elements from both the leftist and the direct action sides of SAfP, which would be crucial later.

We accepted that direct action was an excellent answer to the leftist traditional kind of protest and could be of use in the anti-war campaign. However we could not accept the trap of separation between the ideological activist and the 'ordinary' world. Unlike the most ideological activists in SAfP, we tried to bridge the gap between ourselves and the 'ordinary world'. We got involved with the liberal-leftist side of the campaign, doing publicity and stalls with them, a kind of activity that ideological direct activists regarded as boring and useless. But it was not useless. By doing stalls and talking with 'ordinary people' in Brighton we realized a potential – a general readiness to get involved in something more radical than a traditional march. We then understood that the time was ripe to escalate the double limitation of the traditional leftists march and the small direct action into a mass direct action and actively worked towards this.

Some form of direct action was going ahead already – the direct activists in SAfP were already planning one for Halloween 2002. The liberal-leftist component of SAfP was also there, ready to do lots of publicity work and use their networks to build up a mass event. Those who had relations of trust with each of the two camps of SAfP and could see value in aspects of each of their approaches tried to act as catalysts. They convinced some of the activists that it was a good idea to give up clandestinity and open their direct action to the wider public, and they suggested to the liberal-leftists to do the work of publicizing this mass direct action as they would have done for a traditional march. These arguments worked because the conditions were there: both camps were potentially ready to overcome their initial scepticism, the success of Seattle (and, for the direct activists, J18) immediately coming to mind for all of them, an event at which different political elements (in this case black bloc and liberals) came together and complemented one another in one of the more successful and celebrated anti-capitalist actions.¹⁷ This way, the mass action of 'Halloween' 2002 became a reality.

3.3 Critique of and effects on the ideological activists

¹⁷ See 'Anti-capitalism as ideology... and as movement' (*Aufheben* #10, 2002).

Overcoming their own scepticism was not an easy step for the ideological activists. Many direct activists who had spent years learning painfully of the uselessness of marches and the necessity and effectiveness of small and/or clandestine actions only reluctantly accepted the general decision of the group. Even when the action had been publicized to the wider public, some still said they were going to turn up with their D-locks anyway. They did not expect large numbers to turn up, let alone to make a stand against the police in the way they did; they expected to have to do the militant action themselves. But in the face of so many people swarming the streets, stopping the traffic, resisting the cops, the direct activists' small scale approach was rendered irrelevant.

Importantly, however, the experience had affects on their own subjectivity. The real and exciting experience of outnumbering the police¹⁸ made them look again at the nature of 'the right kind of activity', and the fact of being a part of a large event with people as confrontational as them, yet not from the 'direct action' background. They thought again about the division in their mind between people like themselves and the broader working class.

For the liberal-leftists in the campaign group, who had argued against any form of direct action, and had insisted in the past on liaising with the police when traditional marches were organized (in line with the law), there was also a change in consciousness. The involvement of large numbers of 'the public' in a mass action which was successful and popular (both in its own right and in building the movement) served to question their ideological adherence to the sanctity of the traditional boring march. After so many years when demos before had been forced on the pavement by the police (without any appreciable resistance), the simple fact of being able to walk in the road delighted them. There was a real excitement in discovering that limits that one had accepted as 'inevitable' could actually dissolve. Also, barriers between them and others changed – this time that between them as 'law-abiding' and the 'violent anarchists', who were found to work well together.

3.4 The role of conscious intervention and material conditions

For all those involved in SAfP, the experience of mass direct actions the emerged with Halloween was not only a practical experience: it implied a dialectic of praxis and understanding, which was experienced consciously. A stage of conscious realization, in the form of a tense debate, was bound to emerge as the new conditions started shattering consolidated ideas and beliefs of the various camps in SAfP.

This moment came in the aftermath of the mass protest of the 20 March 2003, when some protesters were able to force their way past police into the town hall. Immediately after this occupation, SAfP was presented with

¹⁸ The police were outnumbered at this time due to a problem they were then having with their budget. This budget problem undoubtedly contrinuted in allowing us to feel empowered. Not only were the police outnumbered, they were also disorganised, and panicking. In particular, the mass street action that occurred on the day the war began was exciting because we walked along the streets with no police in view at all. There were only two or three police at the town hall when we arrived. Those involved commented on this day and on the regular street marches that followed on the generally permissive and hand-off approach of the police.

a complaint from the civil servants' union UNISON about 'violence' in the demonstration. Expressing the most unbelievable fetishism of the commodity imaginable, UNISON whined about 'violence' with regard to the fact that some computers (i.e. things with *value*) got sprayed with paint inside the town hall; but at the same time they made no mention of the fact that, the same morning, motorists deliberately used their cars as weapons to assault and injure protesters, including a teenager, on the anti-war demo.¹⁹

SAfP could have split up the – the liberal-leftists renouncing their alliance with the direct activists as indisciplined trouble-makers with no concern for 'public opinion', the direct activists seeing their initial scepticism about working with liberals-leftist apologists for 'official channels' vindicated. But it didn't. The collective experience in SAfP was a real, concrete event that involved understanding real violence against people (us) as a *collectivity* – this was enough to encourage solidarity among us, in opposition to UNISON's uncritical position on the City Council's valuable possessions. During the discussion about that day's 'violence', four or five members of both the direct action and liberal-leftist camps gave accounts of violence from the police against them, and one of us reminded the meeting about the motorists' assaults. Unanimously SAfP rejected the complaints of 'violence' from UNISON. The meeting later formally sanctioned a decision not to split up with a letter written by a member of the direct action camp and read at a meeting by one of the leftists.

In this unanimous decision the different factions that had come together to make up the group dissolved in taking ownership of what had been experienced collectively. Even the (neo-)Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) members in SAfP rejected their Party's criticism of SAfP which the SWP had expressed by setting up a rival group, Hove Action for Peace. They neglected calls to recuperate the group, pack the meetings, etc. from an SWP hack in Hove Action for Peace. They preferred the positive experience they had had of real power in collective action, in contrast to the sterile, artificial and alienating discipline and mechanical strategy of the party line. This was a real victory against the power of leftism and the SWP that no ideologue could have achieved by keeping himself away and 'pure' from all leftists – in fact this was achieved by working with them!

Crucially, it wasn't just the events themselves but the sitting down and discussing and arguing that led ultimately to a reflection on both forms of ideological activism – one which privileged direct action and one which privileged 'respectable' boring marches.

Union criticisms of the Town Hall 'riot' in another circumstance or in the past might have easily served to

¹⁹ In and around this period, despite the inability of police to hinder the mass street actionse, their repressive threats to 'law-abiding liberal pacifists' played a significant role in the latter's politicization. One woman involved in SAfP was harassed by the police after the Halloween events, by them for example threatening to cancel her children's carnival event. The significant point, however, is that this occurred because these 'law abiding liberals' had been successfully encouraged to get involved in what was in effect a mass direct action – thus they were defined by the police as a legitimate target of harassment in the same way as any other direct activist. They were positioned as, and became, radicals.

undermine any attempted alliance between liberal-leftists and direct activists, highlighting their ideological differences and divisions over the meaning of ‘activism’. As we have suggested, the ‘material conditions’ – the public mood for mass criticism and confrontation – were conducive to allow the ideological activists to transcend their own limitations. However in this context these ‘material conditions’ did not *determine* the events in and of themselves. The events would have not happened without the decision of elements of ‘the actually existing ultra-left’, to get involved, to go to the meetings and get involved in the arguments. In other places, in particular London, where radical groups such as ‘No War but the Class War’ opted not to get involved in the wider campaign but remained separate, the movement was bound to be controlled by the leftist SWP and their ilk by default.

3.5 Postscript and reflection on the anti-war movement

At the national level the struggle against the war remained a liberal-leftist one, dominated by a preference for tokenistic traditional marches, and the opportunity to capitalise on the upsurge in the ‘public’ anger and willingness to act was missed. In this context, the actions of the Brighton group, while exciting and promising initially, could not escalate into anything else, and eventually degenerated into an endless repetition of ‘mass actions’ that became ritualized and eventually shrunk.

However, although the movement did not evolve much further, Halloween meant a lot for Brighton and for our future struggles, as mentioned above. In terms of the leftist ideological activists, the SWP and their ilk (the national Stop the War Coalition) were able to recuperate the anti-war movement as a law-abiding and police-liaising thing only in new conditions – when mass participation had fizzled out. In terms of the direct action ideological activists, the direct action strategy lost its isolation. In the following year, the campaign against the arms manufacturer EDO developed into a struggle about protest itself. As well as radicalization and confidence developing amongst its participants who were also involved in Halloween and its aftermath, the anti-EDO campaign developed connections with other struggles around this issue of ‘the right to protest’ and the role and function of the police.²⁰ The anti-EDO campaign was in part fought (and won) in the legal arena, when the police and EDO tried to serve injunctions on just about anyone protesting about anything to do with the war, but the campaign could only win thanks to this vast political support. The anti-EDO campaign will no doubt influence the way other protests and campaign develop in the UK.

4 Towards a conclusion

All human activity is conscious. One of the defining features of being human is the reflexive ability to think about what we do, to debate possibilities, to make plans, to devise rationales, and to do things differently for different reasons. We can think about what we do beforehand, monitor it as we do it, and step back and reflect upon it afterwards. What Marx said of human labour applies to human activity in general – that it is more than ‘instinctual’, and involves the

concrete reproduction of ideas, as we reflect upon what we are doing and consider alternatives:

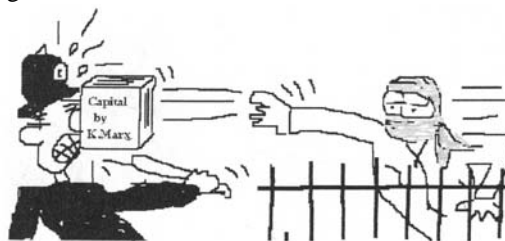
A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement.

(*Capital*, Volume One, Chapter 7, p. 284, Penguin edition)

While practice is always conscious, at the same time it can be more or less *ideological*. Theory - consciousness in living feedback with the acted-upon-world - becomes ideology when ideas become crystallized and ultimately mystificatory and self-defeating.

If these points have any truth, they must also apply to ‘political’ practice and ‘activism’ – i.e. the practice of people involved in struggles, campaigns, movements, ‘political’ activities. In fact, perhaps they apply even more so. ‘Political’ practice is intervention which entails not only such everyday practical organization activities as networking, meeting, building trust in relationships, confronting our enemies together, but also ideas and arguments – about how to approach our enemy, what kind of ‘campaign’ or group we are, and how we talk about ourselves to others outside the campaign to get them involved.

We therefore understand theory as part of struggle. It is indeed our rationale for our ends and means. Hence particular theories are bound up with particular political practices. But it goes deeper. How we understand theory itself interrelates with our practice. How far is it part of necessary intervention, a passive reflection of or just a crystallized understanding of intervention? At its most adequate it should go beyond a one-sided emphasis on holding on to theory as ‘correct understanding’ – i.e. it should be practical – but also beyond a one-sided emphasis where particular forms of practice are fetishized – i.e. it should be dynamic. Theory as theory is living not crystallized; it is a reflective moment of practical engagement with an intervention in the world.



²⁰ When the conditions for a mass action fizzle out, small direct action returns as a tactic that makes sense. However, after Halloween, this tactic was not considered as exclusive anymore.